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GÉZA GÁRDONYI, EGER AND THE LITERARY REMEMBRANCE¹

The novel *Eclipse of the Crescent Moon* by Gárdonyi has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage in Hungary. It refers to a significant place, the Castle of Eger, as well as a historical event and a famous novel. My paper focuses on how a literary product can become an element of the collective memory. Although this novel does not necessarily rely on historical facts of the events of 1552, it still lives in the collective memory of Hungarians creating the elements of historical and cultural remembrance. The *Eclipse of the Crescent Moon* determines the cultural memory and remembrance of the town of Eger and of the whole country.

„Memory and history, - says Pierre Nora - far from being synonymous, appear now to be in fundamental opposition. Memory is life, borne by living societies founded in its name. It remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived. History, on the other hand, is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer. Memory is a perpetually actual phenomenon, a bond tying us to the eternal present; history is a representation of the past. Memory, insofar as it is affective and magical, only accommodates those facts that suit it; it nourishes recollections that may be out of focus or telescopic, global or detached, particular or symbolic-responsive to each avenue of conveyance or phenomenal screen, to every censorship or projection”²

The present paper, then, intends to apply Nora’s conception of *lieux de mémoire* in the exploration of Gárdonyi’s novel. Consequently, I am going to consider the novel as a site of memory and analyze its role in the Hungarian cultural and literary remembrance.

Lieux de mémoire are strongly bounded to the town of Eger and are manifested in the novel, in the centre of which stands a symbolic building, the Castle of Eger, where the story takes place. The novel was written in 1899 and 1900, an era when Eger was not at all unknown in the Hungarian literature as a site of the memory, one can find references in renaissance and romantic literature.

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2 Pierre NORA, *Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire*, Representations, No. 26, Special Issue: Memory and Counter-Memory (Spring, 1989), pp. 7-24, 8.

One of the most known poets of the Hungarian renaissance is Bálint Balassi, who was probably the first to use the name of “Eger” as a topos in literature. He wrote poems on the life of the soldiers on the frontier, Balassi’s best-known soldier’s song is titled as ‘In Praise of Frontierlands’, is considered by many critics his greatest achievement.

The huge, wide fields, pleasant groves and woods
 Are their realm if they want a stroll,
 The ambushes by the roads, the place of hard fights
 Are their school for training,
 Hunger, thirst, heavy sweating,
 And tiredness provide their entertainment.

In the middle of the 16th century, Sebastyén Tinódi Lantos, the famous bard wrote two historical songs, the “Song on the Duel of the Castle of Eger” and the “Summary of the History of Eger”. Both of these songs played a significant role in the cultural remembrance, they are parts of the literary and oral culture and are the main source of Gárdonyi’s novel. These songs have a well-known melody, they have been very popular all over the country.

Let me mention an interesting meaning of the Eger-topos: in the 18th century, Károly Eszterházy, the builder of our university created a cultural center in Eger: the building and the faculties of the university, the huge Baroque Library, the hospital and the printing-house in the university made Eger, the pearl of Hungary, and it was named as “The Hungarian Rome” or “Little Rome”.

The new wave of the Eger-topos arrived in the Romanticism: Mihály Vörösmarty (the poet of one of our national songs) wrote a heroic poem with the title “Eger”, not to mention the most popular poet, Sándor Petőfi, who wrote about the wine and the heroes of Eger.

So, by the time, Gárdonyi thought of a heroic topic to write a perfect novel about that could tell us something about the heroism of significant characters who lived there, he had a diversity of literary sources to rely on. But this novel is more than a historical novel in the 19th century. In Gárdonyi’s time, historical novels were a popular genre, yet his novel emerged as a determining work by partly elaborating on a local topic. To understand the importance of the book, we have to investigate the novel’s canonical movement. *The Eclipse of the Crescent Moon* has been the most popular novel in Hungary, a laureated writing of the Hungarian literary canon, as well as a required reading since 100 years starting in the life of Gárdonyi. Today, it’s part of the open canon, appears in school books, and curiously enough Hungarian children meet this opus at the age of 12 despite the fact that it’s a long book and more than 100 years old. It’s an old conception dominating the curriculum since World War II: the literature has to be in harmony with and illustrate the history taught to the children in the same year. 12-year-old children learn about the middle ages and the Turkish era, so the selection of Gárdonyi’s novel is not an accident since it portrays the

great battle against the Turks in the 16th century. Nevertheless, it is still not enough for the book to become a cult novel. There are other factors that transformed the Eclipse into a cult novel: For a cult novel, it is important to be harmless and ideal for all age groups. Second, it can serve all of the literary school, for example, it can be read as a heroic poem, or a realistic, historical novel, a children's book, or as a romantic story. Third, it is an over canonized work – in an educational form – doesn't open up ways for new interpretations. Finally, the Eclipse... became a children's book, so – as a required reading became the part of the shared knowledge.

Historical remembrance cannot create either the cult, or the place of the memory by itself. We need something else – and it's a poetic-rhetorical method. We can't tell if the castle of Eger could have become a historical place of remembrance without the novel. The songs of Tinódi Lantos aren't so popular as they were 400 years ago, and to tell the truth, their form, and genre are aren't up-to-date for the readers today. People didn't find a historical song too modern either in the 19th century, in 20th, or 21st century. What can a writer do to create a living history, a living remembrance? He or she has to find a new, modern form but an old and familiar poetic to make an old story survive.

Aleida Assmann differentiated three generally recognized and honorable roles for a nation to assume: the winner, the martyr and the victim. Gárdonyi's novel chose the role of the winner, despite the historical fact, that the Hungarians couldn't defeat the Turks in the long war. Since Gárdonyi depicted the battle of Eger to represent a successful battle – just a part of a long history, his attempt corresponds to Assmann's notion of selective memory. "Psychoanalysts speak of "screen memories" that suppress other memories and serve to protect a positive self-image."³ Why is it so important, why do we need a positive self-image? It is not a form of nationalism but rather a deeper and more poetic question related to psychology.

The Eclipse of the Crescent Moon expresses a very common, uncomplicated story: there is a 7-year-old little boy, Gergő Bornemissza, who is able to fight the strong and shabby Turk who is similar to evil. This boy grows up, falls in love with a brave and beautiful noble girl from the village, and then becomes the smartest soldier. During the novel he and his lover, Éva, have to cope with challenges and have to prove they are good and true people. At the end, they play a very important role in the battle of Eger and fight against not only one Turk but a whole troop. Is this story very simple? Yes, it is. But in an allegorical sense, it can show something important to the readers. The poetic form is like an epic song or like a tale. Gergő Bornemissza is very familiar hero because he is like a tale's hero. He is the youngest and orphan boy who needs to fight against an evil enemy, the father of the lover, the foreign power. The enemy is

3 Aleida ASSMANN, *Europe: A Community of Memory?*, Twentieth Annual Lecture of the GHI, November 16, 2006, 15. https://www.ghi-dc.org/fileadmin/user_upload/GHI_Washington/Publications/Bulletin40/011.pdf (17.03.2019)

really strong but not invincible, because our hero has a big heart and is very clever. The adventures are various, we travel with Gergő through the land and even to Turkey, we follow him to the battle, into the court of the king and we support him in his love. The heroes of the novel are symbolic, we know these figures, as the story becomes more symbolic and tale-like. So we get a familiar and beloved poetic form, the tale, which can construct our identity and can give us advice in the subconscious mind. But this novel is not a simple tale, so it can configure beside the personal identity another one, the we-identity. It's not only a national identity, it depends on the cultural remembrance, on the cultural tradition of a remembering community. The tale's poetic here locks into the historical novel's poetic, and they build a genre which is bounded to the literary remembrance.

The influence of a novel like this is so huge, that it can build a town and create the place of remembrance. There are a lot of castles in the country which have an interesting history but none is so famous as the castle in Eger. The novel and its heroes – thanks for the canonic position – live everywhere in the town. The castle of Eger and of course the town are the most frequented sights in the country. Children – maybe after the reading the novel – come for school trips to the town to find the imprints of the glorious battle. The castle has been transformed into a place of cult – thanks to the narrative achievement of the novel. The sentences of the novel are today proverbs, all the schoolchildren know the vows of the defenders of the castle, the heroes are archetypal, the heroism of the women of Eger is known throughout the country, even portrayed in the painting of Bertalan Székely. The names of some characters became a common name, for example the evil Turk, Jumurdsak, is one-eyed in the novel, and jumurdsak as common name means one-eyed man. And it's more than important that the characters in the novel aren't similar to the real people who lived in the town and in the castle. We know of historical source that the captain, Dobó, was not so heroic as he is in the novel, Bornemissza had two wives but never married Éva Cecey, like in the novel. Strangely enough, there are a lot of streets or squares' named after the characters of the novel, even Éva Cecey's name was used, who is a fictive person.

And the cult lives its private life. In this process one cannot explore the past based on historical facts but create a different one, an imaginative past. The writing lives not only in the language, the text becomes a place in the castle. The tourists are looking for the places in the novel, they examine the dungeons, climb the bastions or wonder on the fire-wheel of Gergely based on the novel. There are groups who guard the tradition of the heroes of Eger, they organize traditional events and play in the castle. An extraordinary place of the remembrance is the statue of Zsigmond Kisfaludi Strobl, *The Heroes of the Frontier*. (4 years ago, the statue got an own square with the same name.) Before moving the statue to its new place, it stood on the main square, Dobó square. In its old place it was located on a high pedestal, but now it's nearer the visitors who can feel closer even a part of the statue.

But not only the heroes and the text can occupy the place of remembrance, but even the writer. His house (today a house of remembrance), the statues in the town (one in the Bishop's Garden – with his friend and colleague Sándor Bródy, the new one in the middle of the town) and the new Gárdonyi square are the places of remembrance. A spectacular place is even his tomb in the castle of Eger with the emblematic writing: "Only his body".

We can conclude that literature can place memory in the present, and a literary work can determine not only the direction of remembrance but even the creation of the places of remembrance. We need places to remember but we need virtual or imaginary places which can bring the past back, relocate history in the present and create an eternal present for the recipients.

