

## **Imre J. Balázs: Multi-Level Discourse in György Szántó's Prose in the 1920's. *Changes in the Role of the Artist at the Beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century***

"I wrote about the tragedy of a generation that is disappearing. I tried not to hide any of its sins or merits, of its oppressive sorrow or chaotic arrogance, of its heroic efforts or disillusionments, having a burden that was superhuman: to summarize the whole world's moral, aesthetics, faith and to create a new humanity. [...] I say goodbye now to my former soul; I throw it behind me, like an empty envelope."<sup>1</sup> These are the concluding words of a quite well-received novel of the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: "Jean-Christophe" by Romain Rolland, the volumes of which appeared between 1904 and 1912. Rolland's novel is an interesting, and at the same time ambivalent attempt to recontextualize a type of novel that was quite well known by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century: the novel that tried to depict or summarize the essence of a whole period in a panoramic view. Rolland tries to achieve this through an artist-hero. This is not only a thematic, but also a structural shift: several critics point out the self-reflexive potentiality of the "Künstlerroman" – the artist-novel. The reception of Rolland's novel speaks for example about a "musical structure" of the novel that has as its main character a musician – and this is true in many ways, in connection with the mise-en-abyme structure of many modernist novels. For our purposes it is important to note also another aspect of Rolland's assertion: the fact that he sees the generation that he speaks about as a disappearing one. The artistic roles are changing, therefore the artist-novel coming from a romantic tradition could also be in a change. In the works of canonical modernist authors like Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, Hermann Broch, André Gide and others it is quite frequent the novel-within-the novel structure – thus, the Künstlerroman becomes an important part of the modernist project of the polyphonic prose, having a complex structure.<sup>2</sup>

The investigations concerning Hungarian modernism pointed out thoroughly how metaphoric and self-reflexive figures and fragmentary discourse became more and more emphatic in the mainstream prose of the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Less attention was paid, however, on how authors having avant-garde roots reacted to the changes that we could hypothetically identify with those signalled by Romain Rolland. It is obvious that in the attempt to dissociate the avant-garde from aesthetist modernism one possible starting point is to analyze the self-positioning of the narrator, also considering the roles that are in string connection with the narrative. In both views it is important the self-reflexive level of the discourse, the explicit "knowledge" about how the text works. At the same time it is important that several branches of the avant-garde (like futurism, expressionism, activism, constructivism) removed the artist from his isolation into which he was placed by the romantic tradition, forming an aura of secrecy around the act of creation. The avant-garde was a spectacular struggle of manifestos, debates, interpretations – the life of the artist being a public life, a constant presence in front of the audience.

If we accept the thesis that the basic conflict of the artist-novel is the clash between the individual truth and the collective truths (that is: the impossibility to generalize the individual, artistic, uncommon way of life), then there arises the problem whether the claims of the avant-garde for a large public, its generalizing, collective goals can preserve the basic conflict of the artist-novel. In his book about the Künstlerroman,

<sup>1</sup> Rolland, Romain, "Jean-Christophe", Budapest: Magyar Helikon, 1962. p. 1304.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Harkai Vass, Éva, "A művészregény a 20. századi magyar irodalomban", Novi Sad: Forum, 2001. pp. 49–51.

Herbert Marcuse speaks about a similar problem, in another context, however: he notices that within the great European literatures, only Russian literature lacks the typical form of the *Künstlerroman*, with the clash of the individual and the collective values. Marcuse argues that in Russian literature there is a strong emphasis on the organic structure of the different ways of life: the artist situates himself as an organic part of society, therefore there is less possibility to create a dichotomy between life and art.<sup>3</sup> This image of the relationship between society and the artist resembles very much the self-representations of several avant-garde artists from the beginning of the century, without being the same as the essentialist 19<sup>th</sup> century figure of the prophetic artist.

My following attempt is to investigate the possibilities of reinterpreting the artist-novel from an avant-garde perspective, including the above mentioned problem. The prose of György Szántó in the 1920s tries to create a new type of discourse by mixing different artistic genres, even in a sort of intermedial way: he also places within his novels several debates about arts, several self-reflexive paragraphs, showing a constant interest in the act of creation and reception of the works of art.

### *Framing effects in György Szántó's early prose*

György Szántó is one of the most prolific Hungarian writers of the interwar period. Born in Vágújhely, today belonging to Slovakia, he began his career as a painter: his early drawings and paintings show the abstractions of expressionism and cubism. In a battle of the first world war, his forehead was injured, and gradually he lost his sight – at first, only the sight of his left eye. He lived in Budapest, later on in Vienna. After the war he also worked as a stage designer at the Romanian Opera in Kolozsvár. When his other eye also began to have problems, he tries several types of remedy – about these and about the final stage he gives full account in his autobiographical novel, “Fekete éveim” (My black years): “the black wall was pushed up within my eye, between the sunlight and myself”.<sup>4</sup> Beginning with 1921, from his total blindness, his career as a painter ends. In some years, however, he becomes a well-known writer, with his early prose rooted in the avant-garde continuing the artistic procedures that he began earlier on as a painter.

Between 1925 and 1926 he even takes on the difficult task to edit an avant-garde review in Arad, a journal that stresses on the unity of different fields of art and everyday life: he reproduces paintings but also images of buildings, machines or sports events. With contributors like Lajos Kassák, Gyula Illyés, Tibor Déry, publishing translations from the new French, German, American poetry, *Periszkop* with its only six issues, but with an outstanding visual presentation (due to the financial support of Gusztáv Sonnenfeld, a well-known typographer) has an important role in spreading avant-garde culture at the time.

In the next years, Szántó writes also some novels of social and cultural criticism (“Az ötszínű ember” [The five Colours of Man], 1927, “Gáz” [Gas], 1932/33), that remained either unpublished during those years or were only published in newspapers as serial novels. Like many of his contemporaries, he experiments in these novels with the genre of reportage, having as his main characters reporters, but also engineers – breaking the linearity of “Gas” with excerpts from diaries, letters or public speeches of different characters, war reports and so on. Having problems with the publishing of these novels, his interest turns more and more towards the historical novel, and it is in this period, in 1929 that the Helikon Writers invite him to

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Harkai Vass, op. cit. 36.

<sup>4</sup> György Szántó, “Fekete éveim”, Bucharest: Kriterion, 1986. p. 6.

the Marosvécs meetings. His writings show nonetheless some avant-garde structural and discursive elements. His 1929 novel about Christopher Marlowe, "A földgömb" [The Globe] is written for example with the structure of a play, including dramatic dialogues and having at the beginning of each part a list of characters. His best known 1933 novel, "Stradivari" experiments with a musical structure far beyond Romain Rolland's "Jean-Christophe", breaking with linearity and with strict causality, placing the events of the different chapters in different historical times. Both of these rely very much also on the possibilities of the self-reflexive artist-novel, deconstructing the discourse of mimetic prose – which brings us back to his early artist-novels and short stories, that appeared in a volume in 1924.

His 1924 books, "A kék lovas" [The Blue Horseman, including short stories and poems] and "Sebastianus útja elvégeztetett" [The End of Sebastianus's Way, a novel] show a specific, first of all thematic link to the avant-garde. Most of their characters are avant-garde painters and artists. The way they perceive things can be traced back also in the texts, of course. There is much truth however in what one of Szántó's critics says after some decades: "in spite of the great stress on avant-garde issues, one will not meet in these texts the relativization of space and time, so characteristic in the avant-garde prose".<sup>5</sup> To be more accurate, we could identify the discourses, the proceedings specific to the avant-garde, but mostly within the inverted commas of framing effects. "The Blue Horseman", links for example figures or objects from different spaces and times within the modality of dreams or visions. A yoga master, after seven years of fasting, has a vision in which he sees himself during a very short period of time being among the Incas, then in Egypt, then in Rome or Mongolia, finally visioning also some moments of Jesus's life. In another short story, it is the description of different avant-garde paintings that creates the possibility of abandoning the logic of linear prose: "out of the blue smoke of the cigars rides out at full speed a blue horse, and gallops around the office in which the spaces of the earth are being modified". (p. 10., from "A kék lovas". Arad: Genius, 1924.) Elsewhere, a servant from a San Francisco opium house called Fu Tchen, sees on the faces of guests dreams resembling to the ornaments of Chinese art. The scenery of the short stories is also well-known at the beginning of the century: the world of the exhibitions and of the art galleries, the life of the sideshows, the coffee-shops of Paris and the worn out brothels.

The poems of the volume are even closer to the avant-garde discourse, with their expressionist hyperbolic images or abstract, inorganic associations.<sup>6</sup>

As a whole, the early prose of Szántó resembles very much to Hugo Ball's 1918 novel, "Flametti", the stories, scenes of which show the experiences of Cabaret Voltaire and its antecedents. Ball, although being one of the central figures of Dada, does not follow in this novel the dadaist lack of coherent structures. In some episodes, however, he uses as grotesque elements a montage of different levels of signification. Framing is also present here: Flametti, the director of a wandering cabaret group, prepares himself for the premiere of a new show called The Delawares. The text plays with the role assumed by Flametti: "One morning, when Flametti had come out of his wigwam in his best war-clothing, with poisoned

<sup>5</sup> Pál Sőni, "Avantgarde-sugárzás", Bucharest: Kriterion, 1973. p. 128.

<sup>6</sup> "Krétaszagban tanyáznak az első nők: iskolapadokban kemény lábikráik. / Növénygyűjtések erdeit parasztleányok rémítő kacagása veri. / Gerince kis diáknak a visszhang, szédülve keringő, remegő visszhang. / Vidéki városka szurtos szállodájában szobaasszony: ez a nagy Sphynx." – in an approximative translation: "The first women are at home in the smell of chalk: their strong shanks stay in the school desks / The woods of the plant-collections are beaten by the anxious laughs of country girls, / The backbone of a pupil echoes it, like a vertigo, / And he sees the landlady of a small-town hotel: the great Sphynx." ("Zoé")

arrowheads and puffing the smoke of his pipe into four directions, he heard such a shrieking and laughing and cooing out of the wooden separ  that he decided to state a moral example. And there went boldly Flaming Fire in his shirt to the noise. The women were tumbling about in the bed. Flametti entered and firmly raised the blanket. 'And the Moon and the gondola were twinkling in the night / Being pale, very pale, extremely pale.' And Flametti started, the room was shaking. And the tall guy jumped off the bed. And the fat girl with the shy breasts was screaming. And the one he found, Rosa, the slave girl tried to resist in vain to the strong arms of the chief."<sup>7</sup> This kind of episodes do not stretch very much beyond the linear structure, do not produce a radical shift in the discourse of prose. We could notice, however how the aesthetist framework or the picaresque tradition refresh themselves from the typical moments and scenery of the avant-garde.

Flametti is in a way also an artist-novel, with openings towards the role of the clown, often used as a self-portrait at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. "The End of Sebastianus's Way", the 1924 novel of Sz nt  is also an artist-novel: the main conflicts of the novel are rooted in the clash between the young artists of the time and the "Academy". Contrasted with the typical artist-novels, "Sebastianus" has at least one important characteristic that could differentiate it from the aesthetist tradition: here the artist-figures are no longer "feminine", nor even "demonic" ones (which is frequent starting with the romantic novels), but they have an accentuated masculine identity. Power and strong will are quite frequent in Sz nt 's male figures. They want to have all women and they succeed most of the time. They see embracing as a way to get to know the world itself, without feeling very "mythical" about it. In this sense, there is a sort of resemblance in the art of love and art itself in the novel: "The elements have the same value. (...) Not the means are important but the freedom that leads the means into new battles." (p. 42., from: Gy rgy Sz nt , "Sebastianus  tja elv geztetett", Arad: Reclam Printing House, 1924.) The "combinatorics" of bodies is carried out consistently, without having a teleology in it. The male characters change their partners many times among each other, they have orgiastic evenings with exotic women – no matter if their exotic nature consists of their culture or their bodies. Lesbian or sadistic sexual acts also appear in the novel. It is important to note a sentence that concerns the central character of the novel, Sebesty n the painter: "The human body as a means of expression: this was the main thing that Sebesty n brought home from the war." (p. 71.) The reproduction of his paintings (in fact: Sz nt 's paintings) in the book seems to support this view. Although the textual level of the novel does not use abstract bodies like the ones in the paintings, the constant thematizations of the sexual acts and of the bodies have a similar effect, making the problem of the body one of the main issues of the book, far from the aesthetist neglecting of the body. It is not a naturalist view on man – it is not the man who is "determined" by his body, but the man tries to live his freedom also through his body. There are also moments in the novel, where the body becomes textually abstract: when the world of the dance penetrates the world of the prose.

### **Global Art**

The tendencies of Sz nt 's novel towards global art show themselves in multiple ways. First of all by the intertextual or rather intermedial play with his former paintings (Prometheus, Polyphemos and others), these being reproduced in the book. The paintings are not simple illustrations of the linear text, they create a sort of visual element that accompany and in a way comment on the text, but also has its own

<sup>7</sup> Ball, Hugo: "Flametti". P cs: Jelenkor, 1998. pp. 64–65.



discourse. A somewhat similar procedure is that Szántó introduces into the text some of his poems that appeared in "The Blue Horseman" – in the novel these are not Sebestyén's poems but those of his friends. They become an organic part of the novel, just like some letters or some debates about the new artistic trends. Thus, the text of "Sebastianus" takes its part from the avant-garde attempts of the 1920s to create an art that is intermedial and inter-artistic discourse,<sup>8</sup> that can be seen besides Lajos Kassák's review called "Dokumentum" also in the works of Tibor Déry or the review "Periszkop" edited by Szántó.

In a sort of self-reflexive paragraph, Sebestyén's friend, Pál, who is a writer, speaks about how he imagines his novel to be written: "The prologue as a poem, without rhymes or traditional rhythms of course, in free verse. Like beats of horses let loose, that are chasing each other. The first chapter would be a movie, the second would be prose, being read aloud, of course, the third a pantomime, the fourth a film again, the fifth a musical play, the sixth a poem, the seventh a musical pantomime and so on, perpetual change in everything, not only thematically but also in forms – this is the true nature of the Cosmos." (pp. 224–225.) A sort of "soft" variant of this would be Szántó's novel itself, with the reproduction of paintings, poems and other artistic events. (Another book of Szántó from 1925, consisting of a poetic cycle, "Schumannal a Carnaváln" [In the Carnival with Schumann], of musical notes and of the drawings of Nándor Korber is somewhat more radical in this sense.)

"The End of Sebastianus's Way" has some scenes in Budapest, later on in Vienna and finally in Moscow. The Moscow part has as its central issue the building of a hall that would be the home of art in the global sense. The endeavours of constructivists that aimed in the 1920s at a synthesis of the different avant-garde experiments, is materialized in Szántó's novel in the hall where film, dance, theatre, music, painting and sculpture are at home at the same time, and where all these artistic genres can become an organic part of the culture of the masses: "Next month we begin to build the hall the plan of which I have been carrying with myself for years, the Hall of Revolutionary Labour. Here all branches of arts will be united, even those that were not considered as arts until now, the film for example." – writes Sebestyén in a letter. (p. 220.) The quotation (besides which we could place several others showing the same orientation) reflects the problematization of the borderlines between different artistic fields – which is, of course, one of the main issues of the avant-garde art of the time. Kassák and his group discovered in 1926, during the "Dokumentum" project that the different artistic discourses do not "fit" without problems and tried to use also the discrepancies of different genres to produce inspiring effects. Szántó is somewhat more optimistic a few years earlier in succeeding. However, there are also signs in the novel that "global art" would not work in an ideal way. A thorough analysis of the implied reader of the text would show this more precisely. At this point I would like to stress only on a Moscow episode. Sebestyén imagines the opening ceremony of the gigantic hall with the nine symphonies of Beethoven on different evenings, in the context of constantly changing, monumental paintings. Some progressive musicians find Beethoven's music obsolete, however, in the 1920s. The possibility of the global art, of the "Gesamtkunstwerk" is therefore the asynchrony of artistic genres. This thesis is stated also by Adorno, saying that Wagner's idea of the "Gesamtkunstwerk" was a failure because the different senses work in a historical

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Kékesi, Zoltán–Schuller, Gabriella, "Művészetközöttség és jelszerűség", in "Literatura", 2003. nr. 4. p. 427.

context: while the eye was able to adapt itself to the present – said Adorno –, the sense of hearing still preserved an archaic character.<sup>9</sup>

The Hall is finished in the end, but the typical conflicts of the artist-novel do not cease to exist. The problems of Sebestyén are accentuated by the loss of his sight, and after the opening ceremony of the Hall, where Beethoven's Ninth Symphony is played, being already blind, he commits suicide. The success and failure of global art is therefore represented by the same moment: the plan is carried out but cannot be "evaluated" by the one who traced it.

I already spoke about re-framing the canons of the body-representation in the novel. The explicit eroticism is just one side of this pursuit. Dancing plays also an important role in the novel and in the plan of the Moscow Hall. In these sequences we can recognize the anti-ballet efforts of artists like Isadora Duncan. The second part of the book begins with the dance of Salomé, as it is visualized by Sebestyén. By the end of this part we can witness the dancing performance of one of their friends, Regina – who dances with no clothes on, breaking the rules of artistic dance. The reaction of Sebestyén shows that he sees in fact an abstraction, what he is looking for also in painting: "He was astonished as he looked at the picture: his own picture. How, he thought that the movements he constructed in a schematic dynamism on his painting, cannot be produced by the contingencies of nature: he tried to give the psyche of nature in the moves, that do not appear in reality." (p. 215.) It is probable therefore that the aspirations of the novel towards a global art are in a strong connection with constructivist abstraction.

### *The Art of the Masses*

Sebestyén's plan about the hall show a lot of similarities with those of Tatlin's project about the Monument of the Third Internationale. (In Szántó's anti-utopia, "Gas", written in 1932 and having its action in an imagined 1970, the main governmental institutions are placed in Tatlin's Tower.) Tatlin's ideas are not all kept unchanged, however: he wanted a synthetic work also in the sense of the synthesis between the practical and the spiritual levels of life.<sup>10</sup> In the period of the 1919 Republic of Councils, many of the young artists from Budapest have similar ideas in Szántó's novel. We can sense however that the enthusiasm here is due first of all to the new possibilities of art to reach the audience. One of the main concern of avant-garde artists was at the time to find new means of reaching large audiences, because otherwise their project to change the artistic tastes of the people could not succeed. This hope for a change can be seen in an episode that is placed in one of the main squares of Budapest, and can be considered a sort of visual "translation" of the political revolution (presented in fact with a lot of scepticism in the novel): "The Hall of Arts and the Museum of the Arts had their fronts covered with huge cardboards. They recognized immediately the gigantic symbolic figures of their colleague József. [...] Sebestyén took a deep breath into his chest, like someone who can breathe for a first time in months fresh, mountain air that penetrates the lungs deeply. This was achieved in spite of all! And now anything would happen, those cardboards were seen by millions. Even if they laughed at them or did not understand them yet." (p. 165.) The hypothetic audience of millions can be seen as a materialization of the strong desire of the artists of the time to make the avant-garde the art of the masses, this desire being connected of course also with the desire to emancipate the masses.

<sup>9</sup> Adorno, T. W., "Die musikalischen Monographien". Suhrkamp Verlag, 1986. pp. 92–97. See also Weiss, János, "Az esztétikum konstrukciója Adornónál", Budapest: Akadémiai, 1995. p. 76.

<sup>10</sup> See Punin, N., "A III. Internacionálé emlékműve". pp. 345–347. In: Alekseevna, J. L., "Tatlin", Budapest: Corvina, s. a.

In the novel, this emancipation is only partly social: it means also the distribution of informations, of artistic taste, it means even formation in the sense of "Bildung". "The proletarians are coming with their huge magic boots, throbbing their feet, and having clear, white, intact souls. White souls on which one can write as on a virgin piece of paper." – says the painter whose cardboards can be seen later on on the Hall of Arts. (83.) The ironic reversal of the statement can be read on the next page, where Sebestyén wants to take away the virginity of a girl that is quite experienced nonetheless in sexual affairs.

Sebestyén himself tries to separate firmly the hall of his own from practical issues: the hall is being built outside the city, and can only be reached through a bridge: "Let this bridge lead through the water of Lethe, the river of oblivion, leaving behind the practical life." (pp. 226–227.) The artistic roles represented in the novel range therefore from the aesthetist painter staying in his art gallery, and from the activist artist to the constructivist one. Anyway, it is obvious the strong interest in the book towards monumental compositions and towards the art of the masses. It is interesting to note, however, also how people react to the different kinds of art in the novel – in this sense, the reception of jazz (the musical form that Adorno considered paradigmatic as far as mass culture is concerned) in the novel shows some similarities with the reception of abstract paintings.

### *Implied readers in the text*

As far as its poetics is concerned, the novel – as I mentioned before – cannot be considered avant-garde in its structure: it presents the same framing effects like the short stories of "The Blue Horseman". Therefore we can place it somewhere on the borderline of aesthetist and of avant-garde discourse (from the perspective of the body-perception or its relationship with social/sexual taboos is rather avant-garde, however). It is important to see in this sense how different "readers" react to the works of art presented in the novel. This is not a poetical issue, of course, but can be linked to the perspective from which we can see the different works of art in the novel. In this sense, the modality of the narrator's discourse can be seen in a strong connection with the reactions of the implied readers of the text.

In the first part of the novel there is a great stress on the novelty of the artistic forms, specific in the avant-garde art. The young painters and poets discuss a lot about the new trends of art. In a typical moment of the novel, Sebestyén tries to "explain" the painting of Seurat called "Dancing Girl" to his friends, while looking at a new issue of "Kunst und Künstler". The reaction of the audience is quite intensive, even in the physical sense: "The girl was blushing, that was what she hoped for, what she wanted beyond love. On her hysetrical, white back she felt a little heat wandering about. Mátyás sighed and stood up, stretching his arms. – I can feel a new taste in my mouth. It seems that new horizons are coming to take me." (24.) This type of (over)reacting is frequent in the novel. Later Sebestyén receives the most important "critique" of his paintings from a woman, the observations having again physical dimensions: "I could not tell in fact what your paintings are about, they are so strange. I am afraid when I look at them. As if I would see giants appearing in front of me, and I feel small as an ant in their shadow. But their shadow is refreshingly cool, and being small is also pleasant there. Sometimes, when I watch the colours, I feel warmth on my back, it is like hot, wet kisses from the lips of a man I like." (149.) Here the interpretation of the painting is an emotional reaction in fact that cannot be rationalized. The fact that this way of reception is valued by Sebestyén (and the other avant-garde artists of the time as well) is shown by Sebestyén's immediate reaction to this confession: he starts crying.

Similar fragments could be quoted at length from the novel, but what is interesting is that at a certain point the reactions become less and less approving: in the Moscow scenes there are several episodes when instead of the positive wonder of the first pages comes the doubting astonishment – for example in the scene that I mentioned above, when Nastasja, a Russian poet expresses her feelings about Beethoven being obsolete. (pp. 230–231.) There are instances therefore, where the artist figures would not follow the novelties: in this way, the book shows also a sort of exhaustion of the avant-garde, or at least the fact that the synthetic idea of art where different media and artistic forms intermingle is in fact a point where Sebestyén and his comrades feel that they arrived and from where they do not want to go further. In spite of Nastasja's opinion, in the Hall, at the opening ceremony, Beethoven is played, and this is a firm option in the world of the novel.

"Arriving" means also arriving to death for Sebestyén. Before going blind, he stands in front of a mirror, watching the pupil of his eyes: "the blackness of the pupil is emptiness: we have to look into this great abyss, into this abyss that is the deepest for us." (p. 271.) The possibility of options should end, in the best case at the end of our lives, suggests the novel.

The presence of different artistic genres – paintings, poems, dance etc. – in the text creates a sort of multi-level discourse. The different levels have their own contributions to the polyphony of the novel. At the same time, "Sebastianus" uses a framing structure: does not deconstruct totally the linearity of discourse, but places the different types of assertions within the gaps of discourse. The basic conflicts of the artist-novel remain possible also in the context of avant-garde art, the artists meet resistance in all of their attempts to create a new type of art. Among other of his works, "The End of Sebastianus's Way" is a valuable experiment of György Szántó to show the possibilities of inter-artistic and intermedial trends during the 1920's.