

THE POTENTIALS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO LITERATURE

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Abstract The interplay of literature and psychology, the cross-section of these areas opens up vast possibilities for literary studies, but, at the same time, they cause just as many dilemmas: the reader enters an uncertain terrain when s/he endeavours to lay down the foundations for his/her reading at the cross-sections of the two disciplines. This paper sets out to answer a number of strategically posed questions: in what kind of conceptual discourse can we interpret the psychological representations of literary texts? What are at stake at such interpretations? Another aim of this investigation is to find a conceptual and discursive structure in which the novels of Mór Jókai can be analyzed within the framework of psychological criticism.

Keywords literature and psychology, psychological criticism, reader-response criticism, depth-hermeneutical interpretation, Mór Jókai

The interplay of literature and psychology, the cross-section of these areas opens up vast possibilities for literary studies, but, at the same time, they cause just as many dilemmas. These approaches are haunted by insecurities and prejudices: although the interpretational framework is not without serious antecedents, the reader enters an uncertain terrain when s/he endeavours to lay down the foundations for his/her reading at the cross-sections of the two disciplines. This is the reason why my paper sets out to answer a number of strategically posed questions: in what kind of conceptual discourse can we interpret the psychological representations of literary texts? What are at stake at such interpretations? The overt aim of my investigation is to find a conceptual and discursive structure in which the novels of the famous 19th century Hungarian novelist, Mór Jókai (1825–1904) can be analyzed within the framework of psychological criticism.

The Encounter of Literature and Psychology – Aversions towards Psychological Criticism

At a first glance it appears easy to map out the common terrain of literature and psychology, since both “selectively examine particular parts of the whole of human experience”.¹ From this

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point of view, literature can even be described as an alternative, psychological form of knowledge: the fictional texts are devoid of the protocols of the medical profession and the constraints of academic discourses; however, they create lifelike “observations” and “episodes,”² and they are able to bring up close such mechanisms of the human soul which metapsychology, in its own territory, cannot attempt to do. That is why “readers arrive at a more satisfactory understanding of characters from reading literary works than from reading works by psychologists”.³ This distinguished status of literature can mainly be attributed to the fact that it presents long-term models of changes occurring in individuals, in human relationships, and in social structures.⁴ It puts into perspective those phenomena which can be observed by psychology using merely the experiences of the scattered individuality of case studies as a basis.

The leading figures of psychoanalysis were also familiar with this feature of literary cognitive techniques. Sigmund Freud, for example, in his seminal “text interpretation” suggests that the uncanny appearing in works of fiction deserves special attention since “it is a much more fertile province than the uncanny in real life, for it contains the whole of the latter and something more besides, something that cannot be found in real life”:⁵ that is, the in-depth study of the archaic fear lurking deep in the human soul is only possible with the help of fiction (therefore Freud himself turned to *The Sandman* by Hoffman).

It is a trivial – albeit, in some cases, rather inspiring – fact: every work of fiction has some psychological dimension and knowledge; one way or another, it represents psychological processes, and therefore interpretations can hardly avoid references to psychological aspects.

The interrelations of literature and psychology derive from the inherently psychological dimensions of literature as well as from the uses of psychology in the interpretation of literary texts. Literary works carry their psychology within themselves, in the very structure of relations they embody [...]. [...] Where there is a literary, as opposed to a sacred or mythical, language of representation, we also find a historical concern with the nature and problem of individual existence in society, and hence some psychology of the individual, however schematic or rudimentary.⁶

¹ “More specifically, both psychology and literature adopt as one of their goals the better understanding of overt behavior and the mental life of individuals, and how these are related.” Fathali M. Moghaddam, “From Psychology in Literature to Psychology is Literature”, *Theory & Psychology*, 4 (2004): 505–525, 505.

² Cf. Ferenc Méri, *Művészetpszichológia* (Psychology of Art) (Budapest: Múzsák, 1986), 54–59.

³ Moghaddam, “From Psychology in Literature...”, 508–509. Cf. Méri, *Művészetpszichológia*, 70.

⁴ See also Moghaddam, “From Psychology in Literature...” 509.

⁵ Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny”, trans. Alix Strachey, In *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XVII, ed. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1955), 217–252, 249.

⁶ Murray M. Schwartz and David Willbern, “Literature and Psychology”, In *Interrelations of Literature*, ed. Jean-Pierre Barricelli and Joseph Gibaldi (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1982), 205–224, 205.

In the reception of Mór Jókai's novels, this self-evident fact has been all but forgotten, when the mere supposition of the psychological context opens up the gesture of interpreting investigation: this is how I reached the topic of suicide, which was inspired both by recurring thematic motifs of autobiographical traces⁷ (*Mire megvénülünk* – Debts of Honour, 1865); or the description of socio-psychological tendencies behind the apparently unrealistic imitations of human fates, interpersonal relationships (*Rab Ráby* – The Strange Story of Rab Raby, 1879). In the development of the central character's fate, several Jókai novels present the stages of character development or disintegration based on the Jungian model (*Az arany ember* – Modern Midas, 1872; *Enyim, tied, övé* – It's Mine, It's Yours, It's His, 1875), while the autobiographical traces notoriously recurring in the novels leave behind a multitude of psychological implications in certain texts (*A tengerszemű hölgy* – Eyes Like the Sea, 1890). Of course, Ferenc Mérei's authoritative statement also applies to the Jókai oeuvre, according to whom "it would be pointless to conduct a psychological reading for every text. There are works which need more of a sociological approach, others a philosophical treatment or explanation. We should reserve psychological interpretation for such works in which the psychological events are of major importance, characterized by some sort of psychological metamorphosis or transubstantiation."⁸

And there is yet another important realization by the authors Murray Schwartz and David Willbern: "if literature in some sense always includes a psychology, it is also true that psychological assumptions always govern the interpretation of literary texts."⁹ In the broadest sense of the word, every criticism is psychological criticism, as every theory and interpretation finds its point of reference in human psychology, which either creates or experiences literature, or is depicted in it.¹⁰

Schwartz and Willbern are, however, right to point out that these interpretations should be kept in balance: "this type of research transcends naive adherence to ideas of influence' that claim to understand authors when some contemporary psychological theory is found to underlie their literary creations and instead seeks to formulate the mutual effects of psychology and literary expression, thus avoiding an unilateral subordination of one to the other."¹¹ Critiques questioning the legitimacy of psychological approaches were wary of this imbalance occurring in literary texts and their reception: pointless and didactic psychologising, attributing the vision of readerly or writerly readings to these interpretational strategies. Peter Brooks and Norman N. Holland, two outstanding figures of psychoanalytic criticism, listed these grudges against psychological criticism. Brooks suggests that the application of

⁷ See also the chapter "Images and Trees" in the travelogue *Utazás egy sírdomb körül* (Journey around a Grave, 1889) by Mór Jókai. Mór Jókai, *Utazás egy sírdomb körül* (Budapest: Unikornis, 1995), 153–162.

⁸ Mérei, *Művészetpszichológia*, 68.

⁹ Schwartz and Willbern, "Literature and Psychology", 205.

¹⁰ See also Norman N. Holland, *Psychoanalytic Psychology and Literature-and-Psychology* (New York–Oxford: Oxford UP, 1990), 29.

¹¹ Schwartz and Willbern, "Literature and Psychology", 206.

psychological aspects in the study of literature “continues to evoke reductive manoeuvres that flatten the richness of creative texts into well-worn categories, finding the same old stories where we want new ones”.¹² Besides, psychoanalytic interpretations have “regularly short-circuited the difficult and necessary issues in poetics”¹³ and the conceptual framework of psychology inevitably devours works of fiction, thus “the reference to psychoanalysis has traditionally been used to close rather than open the argument and the text”.¹⁴ Holland, on the other hand, finds the most vulnerable points of psychological criticism in analyzing fictional characters as living human entities, the excessive subjectivity of interpretations, and the uncritical use of extra-literary knowledge.¹⁵ In Brooks’ case, the listing of grudges leads to a revision of the interpretational practice of psychoanalytic criticism, while Holland sets up a model for subjective critical reading.

A similar dissonance can be found in the first comprehensive critique of the approach: Roman Ingarden’s text from the end of the 1930s (which entered the broader academic arena when it was published in English in *New Literary History*¹⁶) attacks the psychologising tendencies of literary studies from a formalist basis. Although it tendentially rejects the psychological approach, the paper does present a polyphonic view: although Ingarden stubbornly opposes psychologising experiments in literary studies, he duly reckons with the valid aspects of this approach as well. Most of all, Ingarden is concerned about the immanency of the literary text when faced with psychological approaches: “psychologism in literary scholarship is a *falsification* of the peculiar nature of the subject matter it investigates”, because it “poses the danger of inserting various factors into the literary work which it does not contain”.¹⁷ The dismissing rhetoric of the paper, however, becomes more lenient in the second half, and therefore – paradoxically – it has had a role in laying down the foundations for the discursive framework of psychological approaches towards literature: “the elimination of psychologism does not at all entail the elimination of psychology, particularly where we deal explicitly with psychological facts and problems. Therefore, it is beyond doubt that psychology is closely related to literary scholarship.”¹⁸ Ingarden is strict about studying the psychological phenomena staged in the world created by fiction, but his major tendencies are still part of the authoritative frame of reference in this field.

¹² Peter Brooks, “The Idea of a Psychoanalytic Literary Criticism”, In Brooks, *Psychoanalysis and Storytelling* (Oxford–Cambridge: Blackwell, 1994), 20–45, 20.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹⁵ Norman N. Holland, “Literary Interpretation and Three Phases of Psychoanalysis”, *Critical Inquiry* 3 (1976): 221–233, 223–224.

¹⁶ Roman Ingarden, “Psychologism and Psychology in Literary Scholarship”, *New Literary History* 2 (1974): 213–223.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 216, 220. (highlight in the original)

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 219.

The following has to be kept in mind: (1) In this case the *only* source is the text of a given work; (2) it is an investigation of certain components of the work rather than some independent thing; [...] Such a researcher also shuts himself off completely from those problems of literary scholarship which emerge at the time we already know not only the mind of the presented persons but also all the other components of a given work (and most of all its other strata, the structure of the sequence of its parts, etc.) and we are ready to determine *what artistic function the presented person performs in the work as a whole and what its experiences and conditions are.*¹⁹

Ingarden is right in his warning: every psychological reading must acknowledge the constructedness of the text, as well as the interplay of its poetic components. If not for anything else, than for the reason that the psychological phenomena under investigation are created in this register and this is where they can be grasped the best. Although, in my opinion, the involvement of metapsychological knowledge is essential in the interpretation of these phenomena. In this respect, I am following Norman N. Holland's intentions: "by literature-and-psychology, I mean the application of psychology to explore literary problems and behavior."²⁰

Reading strategies and approaches that focus on the author / the text / the reader

Theorists of the field tend to differentiate between three distinct fields of investigation in literary psychology: the relations between author and text, between author and reader, and the psychological relations of the literary text.²¹ This chapter discusses the most important theoretical aspects and reading strategies of these fields – which are rather far-reaching themselves.

(writerly reading: poetic implications)

Investigations regarding the psychological aspects of the coming about of a literary text – which go back to the first few decades of the 19th century – have been considered the most important trend in the research of psychological criticism.²² Psychologists have been interested in the mental mechanisms contributing to the creation of the text, that is, the psychological background of the creative process, as well as in the consequences which can be deduced from the texts concerning the author's personal psychological background. However, theories regarding the psychology of creation (particularly the theories of Freud and Jung) have such implications which can be turned into the discourse on the poetics of literary texts, and which might even serve as starting points for literary interpretations.

¹⁹ Ibid., 222, 222–223. (Highlights in the original)

²⁰ Holland, *Psychoanalytic Psychology...*, 29.

²¹ Cf. Csaba Pléh, "Pszichoanalízis, pszichológia és modern irodalom" (Psychoanalysis, Psychology and Modern Literature)

<http://villanyspenot.hu/villanyspenot/#!/fejezetek/SKFSXopdTiuUtsGAvn4exg> (accessed 01.06.2016)

²² See also M. H. Abrams, "Psychological and Psychoanalytic Criticism", In Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (Boston: Heinle & Heinle, 1999), 248–253, 248.

The main direction of Sigmund Freud's investigations in psychological criticism was psychobiography, the interpretation of the relationship between the artist's life and their oeuvre, the poetic creation, although a segment of Freud's writings indirectly reveals significant insights about the effects of literary texts. The main questions ("from what sources that strange being, the creative writer, draws his material, and how he manages to make such an impression on us with it, and to arouse in us emotions of which, perhaps, we had not even thought ourselves capable"²³) posed in *Creative Writers and Daydreaming* already open up two possible paths of investigation: the psychological mechanisms of creation as well as the effect mechanisms of literary texts (their reception and function) become subjects of examination. Freud discovers the mental roots of poetic creation in the adult projections of the playing child's fantasy world (projection of desires, compensation, pseudo-satisfaction),²⁴ while another of his texts becomes significant in the interpretation of Jókai's works. Freud – with his particular "literary approach" – basically describes the most significant poetic aspects of the romance novel, then immediately transforms this concept into the medium of other poetic models (two versions of the realist-psychological novel).

One feature above all cannot fail to strike us about the creations of these story-writers: each of them has *a hero who is the centre of interest*, for whom the writer tries to win our sympathy by every possible means and whom he seems to place under the protection of a special Providence. [...] The same is true of the fact that *the other characters in the story are sharply divided into good and bad*, in defiance of the variety of human characters that are to be observed in real life. The 'good' ones are the helpers, while the 'bad' ones are the enemies and rivals, of the ego which has become the hero of the story. [...] The psychological novel in general no doubt owes its special nature to the inclination of the modern writer to split up his ego, by self-observation, into many partegos, and, in consequence, *to personify the conflicting currents of his own mental life in several heroes*. Certain novels, which might be described as 'eccentric', seem to stand in quite special contrast to the type of the day-dream. In these, *the person who is introduced as the hero plays only a very small active part*; he sees the actions and sufferings of other people pass before him like a spectator.²⁵

The long passage quoted above – despite its author-centricity – not only explores the psychological driving forces behind Jókai's often criticised hyperbolic characters, but it can also serve as an example for the description of delicate transformations occurring in the Hungarian writer's romance novel poetics. It is quite distinctive that the heroes in novels built around one central character tend to retire from the midst of adventures: the life stories of Tímár (Az

²³ Sigmund Freud, "Creative Writers and Day-dreaming" trans. James Strachey, In *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey, vol. IX (London: The Hogarth Press, 1959): 141–154, 141.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 144.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 149–150. (italics mine)

arany ember) and Áldorfay (*Enyim, tied, övé*) are rather spectacular, yet they keep moving towards passivity, while Lándory, the hero of *A lélekidomár* (*The Trainer of Souls*, 1888–89) lives a significantly less intense life. However, what Freud described as the two main components of the realist novel is true for all three characters: firstly, only the hero is described from the inside, and secondly, the main character personifies the conflicts of his internal life in several characters. The late section of the Jókai corpus provides ample examples for the third version as well, especially in the novels staging the autobiographical self (*A tengerszemű hölgy; Öreg ember nem vén ember* – *An Old Man is not a Tottery Man*, 1899; *Asszonyt kísér, Istent kísért* – *To Follow a Woman, to Challenge God*, 1880–81), where the central figure is characterized by observation and by generally being on the outside. No matter how simplifying Freud’s theory is, the rough poetics of the central characters interpreted as the author’s fantasy projection gives a surprisingly correct summary of the progression of Jókai’s art.

In Jung’s case, we can directly observe how the psychological analysis examining the mental processes of poetic creation becomes a discussion about the “psychological structure” of works of fiction. According to Jung, works of literature carry evident psychological messages: they either make the represented mental processes directly accessible (he calls these “psychological novels”), or their unusual content or avant-garde features elicits confusion, surprise, rejection, or disgust from the reader, therefore they practically provoke psychological readings.²⁶ As opposed to Freud, Jung from the very beginning denies the fact that the author’s personal psychology should give an explanation for the work of art: in two of his seminal writings he focuses on the terrain of aesthetics, on examining the psychological structure of the creation, and he seeks to discover which mental and life contents are expressed and made directly accessible in works of art. A literary text is an ancient image emerging from the depths of the soul, a message, and it carries such information which is inaccessible to the everyday individual-collective consciousness: the unspeakable transforms into a literary image, a symbol in works of art, and it affects the deep structure of texts. A work of literature is therefore not a carrier of direct, rational knowledge, but a true symbol, in which the unknown, otherwise inexpressible “essence” reveals itself.²⁷ “The work presents us with a finished picture, and this picture is amenable to analysis only to the extent that we can recognize it as a symbol.”²⁸

This is where Jung offers an interpretation of the effect function of works of art: they carry such messages to contemporaries which remain hidden in the world of the everyday, or they endeavour to compensate the dominant yet one-sided processes: “Every period has its

²⁶ See Carl G. Jung, “Psychology and Literature”, trans. W. S. Dell and Cary F. Baines, In *The Creative Process: A Symposium*, ed. Brewster Ghiselin (Berkeley–Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1954, 217–233, 217–218.

²⁷ “For a symbol is the intimation of a meaning beyond the level of our present powers of comprehension.” Carl G. Jung, “On the Relation of Analytical Psychology to Poetry”, trans. R. F. C. Hull, In Jung, *The Spirit of Man in Art and Literature, The Collected Works*, vol. 15, ed. Herbert Read and Michael Fordham (New York: Routledge, 2014), 65–83, 76.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 79.

bias, its particular prejudice and its psychic ailment. An epoch is like an individual; it has its own limitations of conscious outlook, and therefore requires a compensatory adjustment. This is affected by the collective unconscious in that a poet, a seer or a leader allows himself to be guided by the unexpressed desire of his times and shows the way, by word or deed. [...] A work of art is produced that contains what may truthfully be called a message to generations of men.”²⁹ Jung attributes a social mission to works of literature, a role in forming individual and collective consciousnesses.

The characteristic features of the “psychological structures” of Jókai novels can be described in the Jungian aesthetical system. The defining elements of the poetics of the romance novel (a mythical-archaic referential system, visual imagery; characters as spheres of action; widening the limits of the empirical worldview etc.) validate the presence of psychological representations in symbolic forms for a segment of the oeuvre, just like the archetypal way of seeing, the “psychological structure” coded in poetic structures, which we can encounter in some of Jókai’s outstanding novels. In the background (“unconscious”) of the metaphorical system of references abounding in *Az arany ember*, or the adventurous plotlines, the rich texture of relationships between the characters depict the development of the heroes in the form of a symbolic flow chart involving almost all of the components of the novel.

(text-centric approaches)

The second line of investigation in psychological criticism aims to grasp the works’ psychological structure and knowledge in the inner mechanisms of the text: the involvement of psychology differentiates it from the presuppositions of structuralist-formalist theory, but it is not concerned either with the psychology of the author or with the consequences of reception. Mostly the endeavours of psychoanalytic criticism can be lined up under this label, but since I do not apply this strategy in any of my interpretations, I am going to introduce another model in this context. The “system of psychological mechanisms implied in the text” and its interpretations have been explored in a versatile and fertile manner in Ferenc Mérei’s writings on the psychology of art.

Although, as a psychologist, Mérei tends to turn to literature as a rich “collection of documents,” his approach to literature does not regard texts as mere devices, and he suggests some remarkable reading strategies, illustrated with text analyses. “Psychological analysis does not attempt to measure the work of art using a predetermined set of categories, but it aims to *set the events taking place in the universe of the work in a system of mostly uncontroversial psychological events*. The aim is: to explain the human navigational system in which the author defines his/her characters; to map out the psychological network in which the characters’ decisions and actions can be understood. In the contemporary language of psychology, the analysis of implied mechanisms examines *in what sort of conceptual systems the characters’ motivations and behaviours can be read in the analysed work*.”³⁰

²⁹ Jung, “Psychology and Literature”, 227.

³⁰ Mérei, *Művészetpszichológia*, 82. (italics mine)

Mérei suggests three approaches: firstly, he closely examines the system of the narrator's psychological "observations," descriptions, and those "episodes" which can sensitively model a psychological situation. Secondly, he concentrates on the representation of psychological processes in the whole of the text or in the imitated life story of one of the characters, and thirdly, he pays special attention to the socio-psychological registers of texts, and to reading strategies attempting to explore these registers.³¹ It is to Mérei's credit that he points out such text-organizing strategies which are usually banished into the background in the context of literary studies. In Jókai's case, for example, both focusing on observations and episodes, and the socio-psychological approach seem to be fruitful, just like exploring the psychological flow chart drawn up by the whole of the text and by the fates of the characters.

It is true, however, that the latter case raises some concerns regarding literary studies. One of the neuralgic points of literary interpretations is the characters of fictional figures and their psychologies. If we set the psychological registers of the characters as the focal point of our investigation, the question, regarding the extent to which we attribute an actual existence to the characters, becomes radicalized. The opposition of the two extreme views – a fictional character is merely a sum of linguistic signs, or s/he can be regarded as a living entity³² – is not overly fruitful in the practice of literary analysis. Therefore, Barthes differentiates between "character" and "figure," and he attributes the illusion of "real existence," personality and self to the first, and the terrain on which the signifiers come into play to the second.³³ Peter Brooks embraces a similar duality, and even though he discards the investigation of "the putative unconscious of characters in fiction," a few sentences later he calls attention to the fact that "the identification and labelling of human relations in a psychoanalytic vocabulary were the task of criticism,"³⁴ which suggests a compromise of sorts. I am also leaning towards this idea: when an interpretation fulfils the ultimate condition set by Ingarden (and Mérei), that is, the interpretation of the psychology of fictional characters always takes place in the context of the constructedness of the text, then attention should definitely be paid to the characters' psychological processes – not as a collection of psychic symptoms but as created carriers of psychological events.

(reader-response criticism)

The reader-response approach is not concerned with the psychic mechanisms or effects of reading: these theories that openly attach themselves to the aesthetics of reception aim to establish psychological approaches to reading. I will introduce three models in detail: the hermeneutical reading of analytical psychology, the analysis of depth-hermeneutics, and the registers of subjective criticism. The common aspect in all three is that they attempt to access

³¹ See also *Ibid.*, 56–70, 117–144, 145.

³² See also Peter Lamarque, "How to Create a Fictional Character" In Lamarque, *Work and Object: Explorations in the Metaphysics of Art* (Oxford–New York: Oxford UP, 2010), 188–207, 188–189.

³³ See also Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 67–68, 190–191.

³⁴ Brooks, "The Idea of a Psychoanalytic Literary Criticism", 21.

unconscious contents coded into literature (or called to life during reading), and to bring them into the space of interpretive discourse.

The Jungian therapist, Marie-Louise von Franz claims that the psychological approach to and the description of literary texts are actually special hermeneutical acts, which have specific tasks and stakes: to interpret and explore the “archetypal pattern”, the literary images called into being by the collective unconscious,³⁵ which results in the critical extension, the making visible of the compensatory-healing act. “What the psychologist does is a kind of hermeneutics which can naturally be deep or shallow, to the point or beside it. If it is good, it will help the artist's work get its message over to the public and in this way, remaining tactfully in the background, promote its healing impact.”³⁶ The independent hermeneutical performance of psychological interpretation is therefore capable of opening up those symbolic, visual layers of meaning,³⁷ where this message can be coded, the therapeutic effect can be accessed.

This approach starts out from Jungian dream analysis and from the model of psychoanalytic therapy. As a first step of dream analysis or psychoanalysis, the therapist asks for associations from the patient and then expands these with the associations of humanity, opens up the mythological and religious associations linked to the dream. The method of amplification had a significant role even in the creation of the work of art; therefore, it can be introduced into the hermeneutical act of interpretation as well. The associations occurring during the process of reading, then the expansion of these associations are followed by a third step, in which the interpreter of the text turns the expanded material – to apply psychological terminology – into interpretation performance. The acts of interpretation can be accompanied by the revelation, the catharsis of recognition-realization.³⁸

Alfred Lorenzer and Achim Würker’s “depth-hermeneutical” idea³⁹ is analogous with Franz’s concept from several aspects, as they think about literary communication as a process of visual understanding: they claim that it is the responsibility of art, and therefore that of literature as well to turn the unconscious objects of reality and experience expectations into

³⁵ “In such cases his work has a kind of double nature: psychologically, there is an immediately comprehensible surface, a perfect drama of human passions and experiences, but underneath one can detect an archetypal pattern as well, a dimension in depth which reaches into the realm of the eternal, numinous, forever mysterious powers.” Marie-Louise von Franz, “Analytical Psychology and Literary Criticism”, *New Literary History* 1 (1980): 119–126, 121–122.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 123.

³⁷ “The more a work of art is dictated directly by the unconscious, the more it tends to take on a dreamlike form, namely a symbolic, visionary character.” *Ibid.*, 120.

³⁸ See also *Ibid.*, 124–126.

³⁹ Alfred Lorenzer and Achim Würker, “Depth-Hermeneutical Interpretation of Literature”, trans. Ruth König, In *Comprehension of Literary Discourse*, ed. Dietrich Meutsch and Reinhold Vienoff (Berlin–New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1989), 56–73.

sensual-direct symbols, thus bring new ideas about life into the discussion, and therefore abolish fossilized life plans.⁴⁰

The visual symbolization of texts stages some sort of “unconscious life plan” in literary texts, and the unravelling of these plans is the primary aim of depth-hermeneutical readings. “We direct attention to the fact that [...] the root of depth-hermeneutical interpretation of literature doesn’t just base upon the assumption of the unconscious, formed only by repressions; it does not aim at de-symbolization caused by individual conflicts. These assumptions stress the meaning of life projects not any more as consciously but collectively meaningful projects of interaction which are not yet able to be linguistically named.” So, the main goal is “to reveal the unconscious life projects with its close attention to directly sensual symbolization”.⁴¹ The reader dissolving into reception faces such situations which s/he does not encounter in everyday life, but the constructed worlds of fiction make them vivid. And this is the point where the mechanisms of unconscious-interactions enter the picture: as, during the process of visual interpretation, the reader attaches associations to the text, at the same time “he must turn to his own unconscious like a receptive organ”,⁴² that is, s/he involves his/her unconscious premonitions in the interpretation as well.

The tension between unconscious contents arising during the process of visual understanding creates irritation in the recipient,⁴³ which then becomes one of the major motives of hermeneutical activity. “Endeavouring to solve such conflicts which are evoked in the recipient as tensions and insecurity and which consequently irritate him, the next step of understanding aims at the comprehension of congruities in the structure of such scenes that illustrate points of irritation resp. of such scenes and other ones up to now registered as possibly being not so important.”⁴⁴ The termination of this irritation will lead to the opening up of the manifest meaning of the text, and, as a last step, to turning it into the practices of everyday life.⁴⁵

At this point we arrive at the third model of reader-response criticism, the terrain of “subjective criticism,” mostly attributed to the work of Norman N. Holland. He found the

⁴⁰ Cf. Walter Schönauf, “Kirajzolódnak egy pszichoanalitikus irodalomtudomány körvonalai” (The Contours of Psychoanalytic Criticism Emerge), In *Pszichoanalízis és irodalomtudomány* (Psychoanalysis and Literary Studies), ed. Antal Bókay and Ferenc Erős (Budapest: Filum, 1998), 31–41, 38.

⁴¹ Lorenzer and Würker, “Depth-Hermeneutical Interpretation of Literature”, 61.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 67. “The specificity of scenic understanding makes it quite evident that the unconscious in literary texts cannot be grasped in one single step but comprehension is an extended and complex process.” *Ibid.*, 68.

⁴³ “The conception ‘irritation’ aims at a persistent and after exact studying intensified precariousness resulting from heterogeneous contradictions: the conflict between practical-to-life premises on the part of the reader/interpreter and the scenes of the text; the contentions between scenic figures of the text and their manifest interpretation in the text or contradictions within the manifest sense of the text, i.e. between a figure of the text and another one or among several others.” *Ibid.*, 68–69.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 69.

⁴⁵ See also *Ibid.*, 71.

anthropological focal point of his theory in a text by Heinz Lichtenstein.⁴⁶ Lichtenstein attempted to negotiate the dilemma of the continual changing and sameness of the self by introducing the concept of the identity-theme. According to this concept, we can observe a unique style, a recurring motif in the multitude of choices that an individual is forced to make either in significant or in everyday moments, which motif is present in every situation where a decision is made and it functions as the “continuity core” of the personality. “We can understand another person as a continuing sameness within change, while we understand change itself as change only by presupposing an underlying sameness. In effect, we can read one another like music, hearing ourselves play our lives like variations on a melody, an identity theme, which is, quite simply, our very essence.”⁴⁷ According to Holland, the identity theme provides the subjective core to every instance of reception and interpretation. “I can speak about a person as about a poem, achieving rigor but retaining uniqueness. I can talk fully and rigorously about the individual – person or poem – provided I remember that I am talking. [...] Not only do we perceive, we also perceive ourselves perceiving. We become able to understand how our perceptions are themselves acts that express our identity themes.”⁴⁸ This approach, on the one hand, strengthens the hermeneutic aspect of self-knowledge: when understanding works of fiction, we symbolize ourselves, and as such, we recreate ourselves. On the other hand, he answers the open question regarding why readers and professional critics occasionally interpret the same text or passage in radically different ways.⁴⁹

In Holland’s understanding, as the self loses its boundaries as a response to love and mystical experiences, similarly we immerse ourselves in works of fiction.⁵⁰ The dissolution and transformation of our raw fantasies undoubtedly have their limits, though: Holland points out that even an interpretation paying attention to the inner mechanisms of subjective reading cannot lack the basic criteria of professionalism, what is more, these two aspects are often inseparable. The relationship with a work of fiction includes the reader’s emotions, but also includes the characteristics arising from the interpreter’s literary skills and knowledge. An interesting reflexive moment of interpretation can be observing how the choices urged by critical hypotheses are linked to the pulse of personal experiences.⁵¹ This interpretational model shows not only what the critique says, but also “it tells you [...] how it came to be me who said it.”⁵² Holland argues that risking intimacy strengthens the role of a critical medium as well, since the self-interpretational patterns behind interpretation can provide navigational points for the reader: “the best interpreters will speak from self-knowledge as well as from the

⁴⁶ Heinz Lichtenstein, *The Dilemma of Human Identity* (New York: Jason Aronson, 1977)

⁴⁷ Holland, “Literary Interpretation...”, 230. cf. Holland, *Psychoanalytic Psychology...*, 69–71;

⁴⁸ Holland, “Literary Interpretation...”, 231. (highlight in the original)

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 231–232.

⁵⁰ See also Norman N. Holland, “Unity Identity Text Self”, *PMLA* 5 (1975): 813–822, 817–818.

⁵¹ “In fact, skills and feelings about skills and what the skills are being applied to are always inextricably interanimated.” Holland, “Literary Interpretation...”, 231.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 232.

knowledge of literature.”⁵³ Holland’s views can encourage interpretations in the face of the reflectional brakes generated by excessive professional expectations, although too frequent applications may also raise doubts.

Historicity and therapy

One of the – so far untouched – neuralgic points of psychological criticism is the relation between the reader and the historicity of the interpreted text. How can we give a valid and authentic reading with such a metapsychological apparatus, which is embedded in an entirely different historical and cultural context than the text under analysis? Moghaddam calls attention, though indirectly, to this phenomenon, when summarizing the results of a sociological criticism survey: “This across-time, within-society exploration revealed fascinating shifts in emotional experiences, and highlighted the importance of historical context in the construction of personal experience. [...] There is a need for caution, however, as regards the consideration of literature as a source of ‘data’. What exactly do these ‘data’ indicate?”⁵⁴

Moghaddam’s observation is to the point, and I feel this dilemma pertinent to my own research as well, as methodological problems arise when the theories involved may have come about as late as a century after the formation of the Jókai corpus; while psychoanalytical theories and the proximity of the medical practice face us with the problem of asynchronism. The psychoanalytic school neutralizes this issue to some extent by turning the basic principles of Freudian theory into literary terminology. This dilemma is, in fact, a dual one: the development of psychoanalytical metapsychology shows us that the changes in interpretive metaphors and anthropological references follow the historical changes occurring in the human psyche. The hysteria and neurosis dominant in Freud’s times have been banished to the background: Heinz Kohut’s self-psychology or Eric Berne’s transaction analysis and games theory sensitively react to the changes having occurred in the given period of time, both in the medical practice and in the field of theoretical reflections. However, it is also indisputable that the human psyche (both in its individual and collective aspects) has permanent mechanisms as well, overarching historicity. These mechanisms involve the above mentioned theories about identity themes, or Kohut’s ideas about the self-core.⁵⁵ It is not only the collective unconscious that represents some sort of permanence, but some aspects of certain, psychically defined phenomena as well. Moghaddam’s argumentation is somewhat similar, although his suggestion regarding classical masterpieces existing above time is not necessarily convincing. “Indeed, the reason why we continue to pay such close attention to *Hamlet*, *Crime and Punishment* and other great literary works, the reason why such works are timeless, is exactly because they unearth important universal characteristics of human behavior. Thus, it is too

⁵³ Ibid., 233.

⁵⁴ Moghaddam, “From Psychology in Literature...”, 508.

⁵⁵ See also Heinz Kohut, *The Restoration of the Self* (New York: International Universities Press, 1977), 63–139.

simplistic to depict such works as exclusively or even primarily concerned with local, unique cases.”⁵⁶

Once again, I can refer to my own interpretations: if we browse through the cultural history of views on suicide, we can find that theorists of different times applied rather similar patterns to their approaches to the topic. What is more, there is a paradoxical point that almost each and every attempt has encountered: this is the ambivalence of judging the phenomenon. “The best thing which eternal law ever ordained was that it allowed to us one entrance into life, but many exits. [...] Live, if you so desire; if not, you may return to the place whence you came.” “The most voluntary death is the fairest. Life depends on the will of others; death, on our own”⁵⁷ – claim Seneca and Montaigne, then they also propose: “The executioner is upon you; wait for him. Why anticipate him?” “Not all troubles are worth our wanting to die to avoid them.”⁵⁸ These, of course, do not justify the historical permanence of suicidal tendencies, what is more, the first works in sociology that attempted for the first time to bring this phenomenon into the context of academic research, focused on the important aspects of suicide’s social determination.⁵⁹

However, one of the most significant narrative passages in *Mire megvénülünk* (“Because the self-inflicted bloodshed is such a terrible tradition! It spatters onto the sons and brothers. That mocking temptress, who led the father’s hand holding the sharpened knife towards his own heart, stands behind the backs of the descendants and keeps whispering: Your father committed suicide, your brother brought death upon his own head: your sentence is hanging over your head as well, you can run but you can’t run away from it, you carry your murderer in your own right hand!”⁶⁰) not only rhymes perfectly with the concept of the book of fate introduced in *What Do You Say After You Say Hello? (The Psychology of Human Destiny)* by Eric Berne, but both the plotline of the novel and fates of the two main characters feed back into this idea. Another example can be *Rab Ráby*, which can be read in a socio-psychological context. As I was reading it, I had the feeling that this novel traditionally read as a political novel or *roman engagé* (and therefore tied to a certain era) not only puts the backward social formations of its represented world into critical perspective, but the democratic institutional system as well, which appears as a desired alternative, and also its modern versions, which are in function even today. I also found it fruitful to include the strongly psychologising trauma theories in the reading of *Forradalmi- és csataképek* (Hungarian Sketches in Peace and War, 1850), as this short story cycle – in the realistic situations of its fictional world or in symbolising

⁵⁶ Moghaddam, “From Psychology in Literature...”, 515.

⁵⁷ Lucius Annaeus Seneca, “Letter LXX” (“On the proper time to slip the cable”), In Seneca, *Moral Letters to Lucilius*, vol. II, trans. Richard Mott Gummere (London–New York: William Heinemann, 1920), 56–73, 65; Michel de Montaigne, “A Custom of the Island of Cea”, trans. Donald M. Frame, In Montaigne, *Complete Essays* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1958), 251–261, 252.

⁵⁸ Seneca, “Letter LXX”, 61; Montaigne, “A Custom of the Island of Cea”, 255.

⁵⁹ See also Émile Durkheim, *Suicide: a Study in Sociology*, trans. John A. Spaulding and George Simpson (Illinois: The Free Press, 1951), 145–151, 297–392.

⁶⁰ Jókai Mór, *Mire megvénülünk* (Debts of Honour), ed. László Orosz (Budapest: Akadémiai, 1963), 27.

its rhetorical tropes – presents several aspects of this phenomenon: the dialogue created by the collective and cultural trauma narratives made several tendencies of the otherwise not easily decipherable Jókai text narratable.

In the encounters between literature and psychology, in every instance of psychological criticism the question inevitably poses itself: to what extent can we talk about (or can we talk about at all) the “therapeutic” effect of literary texts, an effect that can alter the reader’s worldview or way of life?⁶¹ This phenomenon is hard to verify scientifically, but I consider a momentum significant in this context: it is the revelation of recognition or realization in the act of literary reception. If a work of fiction allows psychic problems to enter its field of vision, then it grants the reader the opportunity for more absorbed, more conscious self-examination. However, it is not necessary for the text to provide a comprehensive model about a psychologically defined situation: a reference or an analogy can be sufficient. Ferenc Mérei used the term “imperative quality” to describe the dynamics of this effect factor, while Norman N. Holland called it “feedback.” “In several cases, to grasp a specific constellation of roles, a few similar traits are enough between the situations occurring in my own life and the situations the fictional character found himself in. This similarity is sufficient for me to transfer my own emotional tension [...] to the fictional character and thus bring him to life. [...] Lewin calls this attractive and repulsive, helpful or hindering feature of things and characteristics in the psychic field imperative quality (valence).”⁶² Holland, on the other hand, suggests that works of fiction create such “potential places” whose liminality makes it possible for the reader to oscillate between inside and outside, past and future, inner self and social self, while at the same time s/he receives feedback regarding his/her own life and mental state.⁶³

And there is yet another aspect of literary reception, which implies a “therapeutic effect.” Similarly to the methods of psychoanalytic treatment, a work of fiction can also trigger long-term changes in the reader. Walter Schönau, for example, summarizes Freud’s “seminal discovery” this way: “an individual can only understand the inner world, if they try to change it, if they try to alleviate the pressure of pain with medical treatment.”⁶⁴ The result of every actual long-term process is the following: overwriting fruitless mental and lifestyle habits requires conscious reflection and perseverance. Attributing meaning to literary texts is an infinite process: this hermeneutical truth can be complemented by the fact that the real effect of literary texts is an immeasurable phenomenon. And if they have some sort of substantial

⁶¹ “In connection with this arises the question as to how creation contributes to the maintenance of psychic balance.” Hartmut Kraft, “Bevezetés a pszichoanalitikus művészetpszichológia tanulmányozásába” (Introduction to the Study of the Psychoanalytic Psychology of Art), In *Pszichoanalízis és irodalomtudomány*, 13–30, 27. Creative products “are generally compensatory to some ruling collective attitudes and are meant – as dreams are meant – to have a healing effect on the society. [...] The healing effect might also consist in calling one’s attention to dangerous, sick constellations in the unconscious.” von Franz, “Analytical Psychology and Literary Criticism”, 122.

⁶² Mérei, *Művészetpszichológia*, 123, 126.

⁶³ See also Holland, *Psychoanalytic Psychology...*, 71–72.

⁶⁴ Schönau, “Kirajzolódnak egy pszichoanalitikus...”, 38.

influence on everyday life events, than it must be that on the long run they can help achieve change in the individual, help shake off mental burdens or release certain mental energies.