

## The 19<sup>th</sup>-Century Beginnings of the Modern Hungarian Art Novel/Novella and the Emergence of the Modern Literary Profession

A new framework for a transnational cluster<sup>1</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

The article explores the emergence and significance of the modern Hungarian art novel and novella in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, situating it within a broader transnational literary framework. The genre, often overlooked in literary histories, reflects the socio-cultural modernization of the era and the professionalization of the arts. Through the lens of seminal Hungarian works like Pál Gyulai's *The Old Actor* and Júlia Apraxin's *The Diary of Ilma Szerendy*, the study delves into themes of artistic autonomy, emotional depth, and the societal challenges faced by artists, particularly actors and actresses. These narratives illuminate the paradoxical nature of artistic independence – intertwined with societal expectations and market constraints – while also addressing gender dynamics in the context of artistic creation. By linking Hungarian and global literary traditions, the paper argues for a reevaluation of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century art novel/novella/short story as a critical expression of artistic and intellectual modernity, emphasizing its enduring relevance in understanding the complex identity of the modern artist.

**Keywords:** art novel/Künstlerroman, Theaterroman, art novella, modern literary professionalization, Pál Gyulai, Júlia Apraxin

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## 1. The Great Unknown of nineteenth-century literary modernization: the genre cluster of art novel/novella/short story

The fate of the *Künstlerroman* (art novel) and the art novella in the history of Hungarian literature has been exceptionally unfavourable, but this is not at all far from the way in which global comparative literary histories treat this genre pair. Those who deal with it usually interpret its appearance as a branch of the 19<sup>th</sup> century *Bildungsroman*, as a relatively minor thread, a kind of backstory. Understandably, those who wish to rehabilitate it often focus on the number of times it presents the alter egos of well-known, world-famous artists, or on the complex intermediate works it produces, which straddle the boundaries of the visual arts, theatre, music and literature. In Hungarian literary history, moreover, the appearance of the art novel itself is typically dated to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (less frequently to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century),<sup>2</sup> ignoring the fact that decades earlier there were already interesting Hungarian art novels to be read and that the art novel and the art novella in the 19<sup>th</sup> century had a closely related history, organised around common problems of vision.

It is for this reason, embedded in the global history of the genre, that I argue that the sudden emergence of the art novel and its extraordinary popularity in the 19<sup>th</sup> century is not accidental and contingent, but the consequence of an important structural problem.<sup>3</sup> Both genres, in fact, describe an extraordinary turn of modernisation that fundamentally transformed and modernised the literary field; modern artists' novels were both a consequence of and a reflection on the emergence of the professional artist and writer and of professional literature and art, the artistic emancipation and autonomy that this entailed, and the limitations and illusions of these. This is why they play a special role among the various types of novels and short stories in the heyday of modern prose, and why they deserve much closer attention. Artists' novels and novellas are the heralds and barometers of artistic modernity, and through them we can understand the complex process of artists and writers becoming a distinct intellectual profession.<sup>4</sup> But with this emancipation comes not only the idea of artistic independence and autonomy, but also the frequent fear and anxiety about capitalism and the modern market that allowed the modern artist to articulate his

- 2 In her excellent monograph, basically interprets the art novel as a 20th century genre: Harkai Vass 2001; Gergye 2004; Kardeván Lapis 2015. Art short stories and the representation of art in prose works are interpreted in the frame of Romanticism in an excellent overview by Veszprémi 2015.
- 3 Some works from the international literature that are important to me, but which take a different path and focus their arguments on different issues are Blessing 2010; Krone 2016; Cobetts Miller 2019; Smith 2007; Zima 2008; Varsamopoulou 2002; Wolfe 2023.
- 4 For an interpretation of this process, see my several previous reflections in T. Szabó 2006; T. Szabó 2008a; T. Szabó 2008b; T. Szabó 2016; T. Szabó 2021.

identity. It is for this reason that I consider the paradigmatic case of the artist novel and the artist novella, from the point of view of this line of thought, to be the type of story in which writers and artists (visual artists, actors, musicians) reflect on their own and others' art, on the nature of artistic creation, on its specificity. As a result, they very often speak of the erosion of artistic autonomy, of the impossibility of achieving the desired artistic masterpiece(s), of the backwardness of the artistic market, of the confrontation between artistic success and artistic independence.

## 2. The Birth of the Modern Hungarian Art Novel: Pál Gyulai's *Vén színész* [The Old Actor]

It would be hard to say that Pál Gyulai of the 1850s did not consider everything carefully. The young but already very well-known writer and critic, who had made a name for himself in Hungarian literature, and later a renowned literary historian and university professor, was already weighing every publication and every sentence with concern, often worrying, almost desperately considering the possible damage to his reputation as a writer and critic. It is for this reason that almost everything he said at this time can be regarded as particularly conscious, deliberate and reflexive. And although literary historians traditionally consider 1851 to be the year for which Gyulai is remembered, not for his fiction, it is worth arguing that, whether in a narrower or broader sense, *The Old Actor*, written and published at this time, is an extremely important glocal work – embedded in both Hungarian and world literary processes – from which a new perspective can be opened on the social history of modern Hungarian literature.

It is telling that Gyulai first published this theatre-fiction about the experiences of being an artist in the *Losonczi Phönix*, a series of albums designed to help the people of the town of Losonc and alleviate their suffering, an important endeavour of the early philanthrocapitalist literary movement of the period. The novella is also about suffering, only more invisible than the suffering of a town devastated by the struggle for freedom: an ageing man, a former actor, recounts the derailment of his career and his suffering.

But these are not just any sufferings. They are the result of his sense of his vocation, his view of his profession, and the short novel grows out of this kind of 'professional suffering', and of his personal and private failures. It is the story of a young man who discovers his vocation in acting, elopes with her admirer who becomes an actress herself, together with her young lover, in a major city and company. But before they are married, she is seduced by the patron of the troupe, and her frenzied lover, discovering her infidelity, kills her on stage as Othello. The novella/ short *Künstlerroman* as a whole is a retrospective of the

past, but the former actor's passionate, self-mortifying monologue is not the result of some belated remorse, but a self-contradictory monologue of an actor re-enacting events of the past in front of his new imagined audience.

Well, the very idea of this links theatre as an art form to emotions. The appropriateness, quality and sincerity of emotion is what distinguishes true art from amateurism. The difference between the artist and the non-artist, between the true artist and the not true artist, is that for one, art does not evoke emotions or does not evoke adequate emotions, and this confuses and distorts the artist, the artistic experience: "You don't know what it is. Only I know, I who have lived, rejoiced, suffered. How could you know! But who are you?

You expelled student who never shot Sophocles. You gravedigger, who only appears after the catastrophe, when the curtain has fallen and the tragedy has been obscured. You carpenter, who, planning the boards of the stage, have no idea that you are making a rack – and what a rack! He who weeps must laugh, and weep whose heart will burst with joy; and at these contortions of weeping and laughter, like a gladiator's tussock, the insolent raving audience amuses itself." (Gyulai 1851, 35) – says the narrator-actor who dominates the work. And although his failure is multifactorial, in the logic of the narrative and in his argument, virtually all of it can be traced back to an audience that is 'immature', 'ungrateful', that does not appreciate art at its true value and character – that is, that does not feel it in the right way. The understanding of emotion and art here go hand in hand, and the novella speaks in a very dense way, not shown in detail here, of this experience, that to experience and understand art requires both a way of dealing with emotions and an intense knowledge of emotions.

David, the hero of the art novella, cannot conceal and suppress his inclination towards art, even though it is a curse and a scourge for his mother who wants him to become a pastor and who is sick of her son's decision. Early on, too, after his first defining theatrical experience, a staged version of Schiller's *The Robbers* performed by a travelling company of actors, the son instinctively realises that he could do the play better than they could, but that, partly because of the dependence on the audience, the stakes of this vocation are life and death: "I had an instinctive, mysterious premonition in my soul, and I wanted to leap on stage, to speak like these painted people, but with more fire, with a bolder gesture, to make the audience cry, laugh, applaud like a fool. [...] Let me shine, let me reign, let me die among the applause and the cheers of the audience." (Gyulai 1851, 39) The mother, who fears and forbids him from becoming an actor, stifles the boy's ambitions as an actor in such a way that they burst forth in

the form of ghosts and temptations<sup>5</sup>, and this kind of depiction of the struggle with instincts, repressions and suspicions also undoubtedly makes this narrative one of the best solutions of early Hungarian psychological prose. It is in the wake of such a visionary scene, similar to the epiphanies, that he makes his grave decision leading to his mother's death, and even here it is the effervescent and fearful reactions and the uproar of the (imagined) audience that almost ecstatically proclaims to him the great decision ("I have no mother, I am the child of muses"), which is to grow up, and at the same time a radical break with his mother, a radical disconnection, a painful and sacrilegious gesture of the first great sacrifice for art, since from now on the mother cannot expect her son to protect and care for her in a somewhat secure job and status:

"When I fell asleep at such a time, with an exhausted body but a soul filled with visions and poetry, I found myself on a bright shining stage. The shadows took shape, spoke, suffered, until at last a storm of applause, a wreath of curtains, washed away from my eyes. When I awoke, the brook was roaring, the valley was roaring, like an excited audience; wreaths of flowers were open at my head; the sun, like blazing glory, shone dazzlingly in my eyes; but the whims of the old rocks seemed to mock me with their faces, and from behind them the echo cried ominously, 'Why are you late?!" – I was stupefied, I knew not that I had cried out these voices.

I will be an actor! away, away to the stage!" (Gyulai 1851, 40)

A huge part of the emotional regime of the novella is about the complex emotional world that the relationship with the audience can represent. Audience recognition is both a guarantee of unfolding, but also carries with it the risk of being helpless, of being stripped of one's own individuality, of being unable to conform to the world, truth, aesthetics and logic of the plays being performed: "What is to the gambler the intoxicating excitement, the tremendous fervour, the terrifying excitement which binds him to the mournful table of the game; what is to the hero the rattling roar of battle, the yells of the dying, and the raging triumphs of the living; what is to the man who wants to live, to enjoy, to live no more, to die, the laughing,

5 "I saw the bleeding Julius Caesar, the pale Cassius, the dark Macbeth, the grey-haired Lear, the thirsty Romeo, the angry Othello, the doubting Hamlet. Their shadows were drawn in the air, their voices whispered through the faltering foliage." (Gyulai 1851, 40)

teasing speech of wine, music and women who are eager to please. His god, his dream, his devil, his sweetheart, his poetry. [...] King and slave of the public, which he will have to adore and then despise. Seldom lifted to his feet, more often bowed under his feet. Oh, how often must he renounce his ideals, desecrate his genius, in order not to lose the fickle favour of the public, its arbitrary applause, to feel the excitement, the intoxication which animates, sustains, stupefies, digests." (Gyulai 1851, 50) David's lifelong question is whether art can exist without an audience (since even at the end of his life, it is the much-loathed, imagined audience – the readers! – whom he speaks to), but at the same time whether the audience can fully share the artist's higher ideal of art, whether the artist can remain faithful to this ideal despite the audience success. It is for this reason that the range of talk about the audience of art in the novella is astonishingly wide and intense: from anxiety, frustration, and deathly hatred to burnout and cynical indifference, ecstatic and epiphanic feelings. But at the same time, David's performance makes the audience experience something about themselves that more than once proves to be disruptive for them. For instance, the actor plays the role of a villain so convincingly that the gallery scolds him, the ground floor curses him, the women dare not look at him ("he who plays such roles should thank him if he is not chased"), and his landlord, likewise, does not appreciate the outstanding artistic performance, but immediately labels him as evil, dishonest and refuses to tolerate him in his house any longer.

It is this emotional roller coaster ride, moreover, that takes the actor away from the pursuit of popularity, from catering to the tastes of the audience, and sets him on the path of self-education, of becoming an autonomous artist. From this point on, he becomes truly reflexive about the cost of success, fame and the cost of serving the public to the full. Gyulai brilliantly portrays the birth of the modern actor, who is demanding of himself, who is dripping, who decouples art from public success, and the immense loneliness, asceticism (the *topos* of the 'priest' of art) and constant crisis that this kind of reflexive art entails: "[...] For the first time in my life I was satisfied with myself. How beautiful is a clear and deep artistic sense of self. Calm happiness, purified enthusiasm, virginal self-glorification. How much more than the noisy, dirty intoxication of applause and wreaths. Oh, if you would rather love the art than the audience" (Gyulai 1851, 55) – the aspiring actor says.

But one of the lessons of the novella is that this kind of experience of art, imbued with pure emotion, is not feasible: you cannot be without an audience. The net effect of the actor's helplessness is that even the private and artistic drama of Dávid and Kornelia is adapted to the theatrical expectations of the audience, Dávid's desire to take revenge on Kornelia, his director, his patron and the audience, is to commit the murder by playing on and exposing the audience's habitual reaction ("the whole

story is about to end. But now is the time for the good stuff, for which the audience is in a frenzy. There will be noise, cursing, killing.”), nor can he exempt himself from the fact that the less educated part of the audience (“the gaggle”) is enjoying his own artistic and private drama as cheap entertainment. In fact, even the afterlife of this drama becomes one; David feels misunderstood, ignorant of his true story, and feels an irresistible urge to tell the story of the stage murder of his lover and his partner from his own point of view.

However, retelling encounters the paradox of the actor’s profession. Dávid still needs an audience, and while he narrates himself, he is also vulnerable to it, misunderstood, and he is able to tell his own story only in a very theatrical, monologue-like way. In other words, he remains a prisoner of the tools of the theatre, dependent on his audience, their goodwill, empathy, literacy and, not least, their emotional intelligence. This is the shocking realisation of the first Hungarian art novel: that not only *artistic independence*, but also *personal independence*, does not exist. *The Old Actor* is thus one of the first modern Hungarian psychological novels, which, moreover, finds the driving forces of psychological tension in the stratification of modern artistic identity: Gyulai’s excellent narrative perceives the turn of the theatrical profession as a phenomenon with psychological implications.

However, the real weight of the very varied, expressive, poetically innovative solutions of art and emotions of the time can be attributed to the fact that Gyulai’s art novella – in fact a *Theaterroman* or *Theaternovelle*, as it was called in the German literature of the period – is surrounded by a very complex Hungarian and world literary textual framework. This has remained invisible until now because Hungarian literary modernity is still surrounded by literary historical repressions, taboos, emotions and admiration. Hungarian literary historiography was so passionate in its desire to see modern literature as centred around the magazine *Nyugat*, which was launched in 1908, that it spectacularly tried to detach modernity and modernisation, from 19<sup>th</sup>-century (‘classical’) Hungarian literature at all costs. The consequence of this was that the history of Hungarian literature insisted spasmodically that the art novel is a modern, i.e. “twentieth-century” work (and at most Zsigmond Justh’s *Művész-szerelem* [Artists’ Love] or János Asbóth’s *Álmok álmódója* [The Dreamer of Dreams] can be named as precursors of this type of history). But in world literature the emergence of the *Künstlerroman* and the art novella occurs suspiciously earlier and seems more diverse than this phenomenon. In Hungarian literature, we can also find warning signs that this narrow-mindedness may be a dead end. The most visible warning sign is the spectacular proliferation in the 1850s of stories about artists and thus about the nature of art, which make spectacular use of the *topos* of global art history (e.g. set in Venice, a place stylized by Romanticism as the city of the artist and also of decadence). Some of these have been spectacularly reconanised by Hungarian literary

history, but never placed in this context (Zsigmond Kemény's *A szív örvényei* [The Swirls of the Heart], set partly in Venice, the 'city of art'), and there are many portraits of artists, art novellas or short stories that we have overlooked because we have fetishised an alleged 20<sup>th</sup>-century emergence of the art novel.

So, it is the *Künstlerroman* from the late 18<sup>th</sup>/19<sup>th</sup> century. (Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Lehrjahre*, Jean Paul's *Titan*, Mörike's *Maler Nolten*, Novalis's *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, Ludwig Tieck's *Franz Sternbald's Wanderungen*, Mme de Staél's *Corinne ou l'Italie*, Benjamin Constant's *Adolphe*, or *The Unknown Masterpiece* from the pen of Balzac to Zola's *The Masterpiece*), one can really suspect the temporal dynamics and identity of this type of text, since these art novel/art novellas are also extremely diverse (often about very different art forms). And the suspicion about Hungarian works is not at all unfounded. If we look at the literary tradition of the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there is a very rich proportion of forgotten texts, texts on the margins of the canon, which have become invisible in the meantime and which therefore cause literary historical blindness in this matter.

These artist novellas/short stories are only a slice of the rich prose literature that unfolds from the early 1850s onwards, exploring the identity, fate and social perception of artists. Obviously, there is a huge difference in quality between these texts, and the real benchmark is undoubtedly Gyulai's *The Old Actor* and Zsigmond Kemény's *The Whirlpools of the Heart*. But the other texts are also interesting from the point of view of how, by the 1850s, original and translated prose of such a sweeping scale appears, which takes the artists' vocation as a given, and regards the artist as a special personality with a particular social status, identity and spiritual make-up. It is clear that from this period onwards, this type of story is not the exception but the new rule, and that the specific character and exponentially increasing variety of this prose is both a reflection of the growing status of artists and art, of curiosity about art, and that an ever-widening spectrum of questions about the artist's identity, his or her self- and social perception, and the relationship between art and society, become an integral part of the modern social imagination. The art novel is thus indeed an inherent, sensitive and reflexive product of social and artistic modernity, but the texts listed above may also suggest that the art novel, the art novella and the similar short stories should or could be seen as a coherent group.

This is not just a question of dating or textual typology, but a deeper and more complex problem of the possible functions of this type of narratives. By all indications, this early boom in literary narratives on art and the artistic professions, is both a consequence and a cause of the modern professionalisation of literature and art. The art novel/novella/short story is therefore not the beginning of something, but in fact an organic continuation of a colourful and complex world of artists' stories that are part of the basic experience of artistic professionalisation. The

great art novels/Künstlerromane such as János Asbóth's *Álmok álmodója* [Dreamer of Dreams], Zsigmond Justh's *Művész-szerelem* [Artists' Love], Zoltán Ambrus' *Midás király* [King of Midas] or Pál Jámbor's *A művészkek* [The Artists] (1869, first published in French in 1856, rarely mentioned in the secondary literature), Antal Váradi's *Hamis istenek* [False Gods] (1893), Árpád Gabányi's *A művészeti nyomorultjai* [The Miserables of Art] (1894) or Árpád Abonyi's somewhat disintegrating *A halászló gladiátor* [The Dying Gladiator] (1898), Sándor Bródy's *Színészvér* [Actor's Blood] – to name but a few more or less well-known Hungarian examples from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The experience of the same literary-artistic modernity frames them, even if they give very different responses (for example, texts written in the earlier period of professionalisation sometimes have a very different worldview than those that can be interpreted in the context of aestheticism or decadence at the turn of the century).

But what type of art novella is *The Old Actor*? What does it say and how does it speak about the fate of the actor-artist, the relationship between the professional artist and artistic professionalism and dilettantism beyond what I have shown so far?

Let me show this through a *topos* of this cluster of texts. A recurring 19<sup>th</sup>-century *topos* in the art novel/novella/short story is the narrative of Pygmalion and Galatea, but it is telling what could and will become of the master-disciple relationship that embarrassingly overgrew its creator. It could be an inspiring and liberating story of a female artist surpassing her master, but this is rarely seen in our Hungarian texts: such is the case with Madame de Staël's *Corinne*, and an important forgotten piece of Hungarian literature, the almost never analysed but later examined theatre novel, Ilma Szeréndy's *Diary of Aprixin* (Batthyány) Júlia. Because a huge part of European and Hungarian art novels is socially strongly gender-coded (one might say deeply macho) stories about artist-men and the women who are attracted to them and to art, and who are distracted from art, the (usually male) artist cannot reconcile his private life with his artistic ambitions, and the great love of his life and his hopeful muse become the stifler of his artistic fulfilment. In other words, the Pygmalion and Galatea *topos* is often rewritten as a male artist/female inspirational and creative relationship from which the male artist comes out badly. It is portrayed as an emotional trap in which the artist becomes too much of a man, and can no longer pay enough attention to his art, unable to create the masterpiece that will crown his life's work. It is worth recalling the representation of this cultural pattern in Gyulai's novella to see the importance of the emotional web that permeates the world of art in this type of *Künstlerroman*.

Kornelia in Gyulai's art novella drifts into the world of the theatre almost by accident, unable and unwilling to see her own role, talent and preparation, swept away by the magic of easy audience success, giving up and betraying her love for the man who had made her run

away from her mother and introduced her to the world of art. The postponement of the marriage and then, following the discovery of the infidelity, the relationship's culmination in murder, is a dark vision of artistic marriages, which, according to the logic of the novella, are threatened by a multitude of factors, from different artistic outlooks and preparation, to artistic and social publicity, different artistic talent. The chosen woman here outgrows the self-sacrificing role assigned to her, willing to follow her lover even to death, and inspiring in her art, and she also outgrows her artist-master-lover. She becomes her own will, her own story, she herself wants to become an actress-artist against David's wishes and demands, and she does not so much complement him as compete with him on stage. She takes over the role of the audience favourite, she conquers the audience instead of David in a way that threatens the stage position and the private life of her acting partner, and David frames this with violence.

It is not only Gyulai's reservations about female intellectuals and artists, which in many situations make Kornelia – but also the wife of the theatre director of the novella – look like a light-blooded woman: there are many episodes from the era that can be cited to illustrate the vulnerability of actresses, and there is also a transnational *topos*, which portrayed actresses as prone to prostitution (and in a figurative sense, *artistic* prostitution). Of course, what Gyulai adds to this – precisely to the prejudice that stigmatises the emancipation of women writers and artists – is that the actress-girlfriend is unable to rise above the level of dilettantism, and it is from her lack of education, preparation, spiritual depth and reflexivity that the novella derives her private life's turnaround. Of course, it should be added immediately that in Gyulai's art novel we see the events exclusively from the point of view of the murderous man who is wounded to the point of blood; just as the bitter actor in love does not ask the woman to explain his suspicions and the gossip he has heard from the whisperer, so the reader no longer knows why and how the lovelorn teenager became a heartbreakening diva.

This male point of view partly explains why murder is never called a name, i.e. murder, in this art novel. Even in old age, *The old Actor's* protagonist does not feel remorse for his deed, and this is also connected with the way he remains a prisoner of the aestheticisation and textualisation of life that often characterises nineteenth-century art novels and short stories. This is why he combines his meeting with Kornelia and the story of Pygmalion and Galatea with the story of Romeo and Juliet, and is surprised when she does not fulfil this role. And for the same reason, the story of Othello replaces the story of Galatea and Romeo and Juliet (and her relationship with the protagonist who reveals the events is therefore characterised by the story of Mephisto) when he rewrites his life after his great private disappointment. He is constantly trying to understand and frame his life through plays, through famous theatrical heroes, and because of this it all becomes textualized, a

theatrical performance with a dramatic framework.<sup>6</sup> For him, death and its retelling in old age also become a work of art, creating a powerful narrative and a grand, summarising dramatic monologue at the end of his life, in the twilight of his life. In fact, he not only acts it out, but also narrates it, turning the actor into a writer who tries to legitimise and explain his act to himself and others with a desperate end-of-life gesture: a little as if he had not killed an innocent young woman after all, or if his passion for art made this murder forgivable. But the kind of Pygmalion and Galatea *topos* that *The Old Actor* evokes is also clearly a response to a very contemporary dilemma and pattern that preoccupied many in the period: it also questions the fate of intellectual and artist couples, their relationship to each other, their perception of each other, the risks of their relationships.

Nineteenth century is not only a time of emancipation of professional writers and modern intellectuals, but also of the first *modern intellectual marriages*, be they writers, artists, actors or musicians. If we look only at a fair number of Hungarian examples from this period that made a big impact on the public, the relationship of Sándor Petőfi and Júlia Szendrey (or later Júlia Szendrey and Árpád Horvát), Mór Jókai and Róza Laborfalvi, Miklós Jósika and Júlia Jósika (Podmaniczky), Károly Szász and Polyxéna Szász (known as Iduna), Sándor Vachott and Sándor Vachott's wife Csapó Mária, the relationship between Lilla Bulyovszky and Gyula Bulyovszky, Lenke Bajza and Gusztáv Heckenast, Emilia Kánya and Mór Szegfi show nuanced and diverse patterns of professionalisation, from canonisation as a star couple (as in the case of Petőfi–Szendrey and especially Jókai–Laborfalvi) to the situation of the four-handed creator (in the case of the Jósika couple).

6 “I look up, and behold, there it is. If then, like Juliet, she ask, »Who brought me here?«” (Gyulai 1851, 56.) Then, “I did not move, I waited for him to return, like Juliet, and bid me good night once more” (Gyulai 1851, 56). And later, after the girl’s elopement: “Ah, he soon understood and even sooner learned the science of love. The first week he called me uncle and clung to my neck, the second he played Romeo with me and kissed me, the third he fell in my arms, innocent as a lamb to be sacrificed, smiling and trembling like Io when he felt the kiss of the cloud.” (Gyulai 1851, 56) And in the emended version: “Oh, she soon understood and even sooner learned the role of Juliet in love, and without Lorenzo’s blessing she fell into my arms, fair, innocent, like a lamb for sacrifice, smiling, trembling, like Io, when she felt the kiss of the cloud.” (Gyulai 1911, 115) Or later still: “Seeing her books, the first moment Othello’s words echoed in my soul: if the earth were to fall with a woman’s stones, every drop would give birth to a crocodile; but in the second I fell at her feet and recited the most beautiful passages of my role, where atonement, fidelity, love come forth. Tear down the curtains from the windows, that curious folk may look in, we are playing a glorious comedy tragedy. Shame on Shakespeare and Molière, shame on Garrick and Rachel.” (Gyulai 1851, 60) But in the same way, Kornelia plays a part, for, seeing her lover’s jealousy, she convincingly and deceptively plays the part of travelling and being mistaken for him in the first city. And in a similarly theatrical way, the director’s wife makes an offer – albeit a very cheap and transparent one – to the young, handsome man who would like to seduce her immediately.

In the case of actors, moreover, the situation is quite specific from an early age, since professional marriages, joint contracts and contracting, a family lifestyle that socialises children to the stage at an early age, and as actresses, these types of marriages often mean protection and recognition, but also extreme bondage.

There is also a particular nuance of *The Old Actor*, also related to the literary-artistic profession: the insight and empathy with which it speaks, in this early period of professionalisation, about artistic success and failure, and about issues of vulnerability and power-social relations within the art system. The art novella shows how the art world is extremely burdened by a lack of professional solidarity. The protagonists of the story live from one month to the next, the protagonist's mother falls ill and dies because her son has chosen acting despite the somewhat secure pastoral careers that both of them had been promised, Dávid and Kornelia's tragedy is partly caused by a wealthy patron who abuses their vulnerability, who sees the artists as tools rather than equal intellectual partners, and both the director and the cast conspire against David and for the wealthy patron. But the world of acting is also internally divisive, and the companies suffer from a lack of solidarity: the acting director withholds his company's rightful fees, sees David as a tool, and turns a blind eye to his girlfriend, while his wife tries to get even with the actor. Under such circumstances, mutual respect and solidarity cannot be established, and this undermines the common artistic minimum that would allow talent to be truly recognised and promoted, artistic harmony to be established, and artistic hierarchies to be formed within the company on the basis of common criteria. This is why, in David's case, disillusionment with the profession, *professional burnout*, is intertwined with existential problems and the actor's vulnerability. The actor is vulnerable not only because he is professionally ahead of his time, but also because he realises this particular situation, his own artistic truth, its limited validity: "To die on the threshold of a career that we still believe to be beautiful, to fall asleep in the holy moments of enthusiasm without disappointment and disillusionment (Gyulai 1851, 49), without hatred and without cynicism. Not to bear the bitter memory of a life gone astray; not to feel that the blessing of heaven has been cursed by our limitations" (Gyulai 1913, 97). In the later, rewritten version of the novella Gyulai adds another year, and in the meantime "our company roamed a few counties, and by winter had returned to the small town where I first appeared". The new version further caricatures the new, mature, self-conscious, reflexive, less audience-friendly and more demanding of the audience's attention and patience as the reason for artistic solitude: "Because I played with more restraint and artistry, I was rarely received with applause" (Gyulai 1851, 105).

In the *Old Actor*, pioneering professionalism and the proud sense of the role of the autonomous artist are combined with a recognition of

vulnerability and a deep sadness. Gyulai is very sensitive to this already at this time, after the Revolution and the War of Independence, and it is telling that he organises one of the first modern art novella in Hungarian literature around this theme, incorporating the issues of vulnerability, lack of solidarity and social inequality into the discussion and thinking about the artistic profession very early on, and partly deriving the failures of the actor's vocation, preparation and empathy from these. Gyulai's insight is also important because the development of the social dimension of the literary profession and the new institutions of literary solidarity in the coming decades can be very much linked to him.

### 3. A Hungarian protofeminist *Künstlerinroman*/art novel by a woman author? Júlia Apraxin: *The Diary of Ilma Szerenyi*

In the history of Hungarian literature, Júlia Apraxin is remembered primarily for her life story, which is a twisty tale of adventure: the aristocratic lady of Russian origin, related to famous Russian aristocratic families, brought up in Vienna, after a decade and a half of marriage and four children, decided or was forced to break up, left the marriage, and for a few years pursued an artistic career, then disappeared from the Hungarian public eye, and later in her life became famous as the first Spanish female freemason.<sup>7</sup> She has never been taken seriously in Hungarian or international literary or theatrical history, with the possible exception of her novel written late in her life, although there is much to be learned from a closer look at her novels, her newspaper business, her plays and her brief career as an actress, all written largely around the early 1860s.<sup>8</sup> There are at least three important reasons to take this oeuvre seriously. First, because the Countess, raised in Vienna, with her complex ethnic and cultural identity, undergoes a unique and interesting multiple cultural and linguistic transition in the wake of her marriage and afterwards. Often written in French and then translated into Hungarian (or partly written in Hungarian), her multilingual theatre work in Hungary and Paris results in very particular situations of multilingualism and interculturality. One of the striking traces of this is the variety of author names he uses in different cultural contexts: Julie Batthyány, Julie Apraxin, Nixarpa Eiluj, Yuliya Apraksina (a variant of which is Yuliya Aleksandrova Apraksina), Júlia Budai (Apraxin). Secondly, because the themes and characters of her works are sometimes very provocative in the Hungarian context: for example, she portrays

7 Unfortunately, there is no detailed monographic treatment of his life's work, the most thorough and comprehensive of the short biographical overviews is Kovács 2013.

8 After three decades of silence, in 1895 she published another major literary work, a novel in French (*Deux Passions*).

strong, pro-active, rebellious women who stand up for themselves, make decisions or behave in a subversive way. Thirdly – and for me, in this argument, partly related to the first two – Júlia Apraxin is the first woman author in Hungarian literature to write an art novel, and one whose protagonist is an emancipated woman with a tragic fate, who, following her talent, becomes an actress. Although uneven in quality, the novel, relatively successful in its time, offers an unparalleled insight into what the revolution in literary and artistic professionalism of the period might have looked like from the perspective of a woman author who was radical in many respects and well acquainted with European literary and artistic life. Is it the same as in Pál Gyulai's pioneering novel about artists? Are the emphases the same, are the artist protagonists facing the same difficulties, is the way of thinking about the theatre the same? Is this the same type of *theatre novel/Theaterroman* as the work of the renowned Hungarian critic, literary historian and fiction writer?

*Szeréndy Ilma naplója* [The Diary of Ilma Szeréndy] was originally published in Paris in 1861 under the title *Journal d'Ilma Szerendy*, and was translated into Hungarian almost immediately by the very young son of the renowned literary historian, the later eminent Francophile writer István Toldy, who was only 16-17 years old. It was published in Hungarian in 1862 and is the third in a series of Apraxin novels which appeared in rapid succession, first in French, then in Hungarian and partly in German, in parallel, at the turn of the 1860s.<sup>9</sup> These novels, the plays she produced and performed in parallel with them, and her short-lived but substantial cultural journal, *Budai Lapok*, advertised as the first Buda newspaper, can be seen as both the intellectual quest of an aristocratic woman leaving or being cast out of her marriage and part of a large-scale nation-building project with a female perspective. All of her texts and cultural enterprises emphasise the new roles of the *honleány* (patriot woman/daughter of the homeland) and recurrently speak of the scope for manoeuvre that various groups in Hungarian society (especially the aristocracy and the intelligentsia) could have in a transitional period when Hungarian parliamentarism and social life were spectacularly re-launched in the early 1860s during the late period of absolutism. This is why many of his works include a spectacular critique of the aristocracy, emphasising that the traditional aristocracy can only earn its leading position if it takes an active social role, follows the path of the modern intelligentsia, learns

9 Conte Bathyány 1860a, Conte Bathyány 1860b, Conte Bathyány 1861a. All of these are signed under the name of Conte Julie Bathyány, and published by the Ferdinand-Fleurus Amyot, a Parisian publisher and bookseller. A parallel German translation of *Ilona* is being produced directly from the French original: Nixarpa 1861.

from it or becomes an ‘aristocracy of reason’ itself.<sup>10</sup> From this point of view, what is special is that, in many respects, her own rebellious, self-righteous life is also incorporated in many of her works, which tell of the world of women who are attracted to intellectual careers and who see a truly social stake in literary and theatrical creation. It is also this broader context that makes the work of her magazine significant, since, in addition to the (short-lived) *Euphrosine*, and the highly influential *Családi Kör*, both launched by one of the first European women editors, Emilia Kánya, *Budai Lapok*, launched by Apraxin in 1863, is the second (or third) Hungarian magazine to be published by a woman journalist. Her journal places her among a number of prominent pioneering international women journalists who, as editors and owners of newspapers in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, contributed in a pioneering way to the emancipation of the role of cultural entrepreneurs and to the rethinking of the role of women.

This is reason enough to read and interpret the Apraxin oeuvre, which has unfolded and come to an end in less than half a decade, and within it the *Diary of Szeréndy Ilma*, with much more discerning eyes, attention and understanding. Written in the form of a diary, the novel follows the tradition of the “found manuscript”. It is the struggling diary narrative of a girl orphaned and raised in a Parisian foster home, far from her homeland, who returns to Hungary at the age of 18. Ilma finds herself back in a vacuum, having lost her best friend, and the only living member of her family, her cold uncle who adopts her, regularly and unabashedly insists that if she cannot find a rich husband for herself, she will marry his elderly (and rich) friend in short order. She falls in love with a young, educated, attractive aristocratic young man, but the situation is made hopeless by the fact that the half-orphaned young man’s mother despises the lady, who inherits only modest wealth, and intends to find her son a much richer aristocratic wife from her circle of acquaintances. The situation is complicated by the fact that the young man’s brother is hopelessly in love with Ilma, and is self-sacrificing in his efforts to help his brother and Ilma fulfil their hopeless love. Clinging to his love, openly embracing the idea of marriage, openly appreciating and cherishing the arts, defying social hierarchies and wealth prejudices, Elemér’s conflict with his mother ends in tragedy. His mother’s rage proves fatal, she becomes sick with her agitation, but before she dies she curses the marriage and makes her son swear never to marry her. Although she considers the vow of vengeance unjust, neither the young man nor Ilma can get over the vow of vengeance, forged on her deathbed. Ilma immediately travels to Paris, where she has a resounding success and, after her debut

10 It is a recurring idea in her literary works (for example, it is at the heart of her comedy *Országgyűlési beszéd* [Parliamentary Speech]. She spoke about it so explicitly in a lengthy essay (*Gombostű* 1862, 1 January and 4 January 1862) that it clearly contributed to the break with the aristocratic milieu in which she grew up and spent the first third of her life.

performances, is immediately signed on for a whole decade. But she is devastated to hear that her lover has collapsed, half-mad at the news of Ilma's departure, and so she actively helps to nurse and recover the man she has brought to Paris. Ilma considers her lover to be extremely talented, she sees in him one of Hungary's future leading statesmen, and desperate to see him torn between their unfulfilled love (in Paris) and service to his country, she takes it upon herself to save the day with the most magnificent and tragic stage performance of her life. In her favourite role, Juliet in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, she intoxicates herself and fails to wake up at the climax of the play. It is the greatest, the most frightening role, the one that will occupy audiences for a long time, the one that will be immortalised in a novel, the one that will become a work of art, the tragic pinnacle of theatrical art, and one that cannot be forgotten.

The novel is not just an art novel, but a *Theaterroman*/theatre novel, as it depicts theatre as a prominent art form on multiple levels, but at the same time frames the entire novel through the theatrical roles. As in the Pál Gyulai novella, the theatre becomes the interpretative framework for tragic love and life, and it is *in relation to* the world of the theatre, the plays and the theatre roles – i.e. the *theatre as a vocation*, a longed-for, meaningful new identity – that the other, non-artistic, intellectual roles and life stories are interpreted. From the very first pages of the novel – and his diary – Ilma refers to theatre as the most noble art form, but he also looks at the new intellectual vocations and elites in general as the ones to which the traditional elite must grow up. His unconventional vision – confirmed by his young aristocratic love – is that the aristocracy is of value in a new, modernising world only if it bases its public service on its own sensibility as a connoisseur of literature, the theatre and the social arts. Of course, this also shows that, for him, the theatre is not an end in itself, but a form of public service – even if indirectly. For example, the novel's protagonist clearly no longer sees his forced career in Paris as a service not to the Hungarian homeland but to some higher art (and so it is even more tense and tragic that he renounces both this and his love by a voluntary death).

Let us recall some of the key points in the novel where culture, and theatre in particular, functions as such a complex artistic medium. “— Oh!” said Elemér, “if you only knew how disheartening this emptiness, this total lack of interest in serious things, is! This insufferable idleness would have killed me, had I not created for myself an existence unlike that of my peers. These people think to do an incredible thing when they touch a book and turn the pages for an hour a day; it is a race of idiots which, if it does not change, will be doomed to perish. [...] If things remain as they are, the aristocracy must perish in its inactivity and ignorance, and the nobility will lose all its advantage over the bourgeoisie. Nowadays the sons of all merchants are more learned than the counts and dukes. They cannot then be surprised if the others feel their superiority over them.” (Batthyány 1861b) – reveals Count Elemér,

the novel's protagonist, in one of their first deep conversations. It is from this confession, which treats meritocracy, education and the arts as the new general social yardstick and framework, that their love affair unfolds.

The art-loving girl herself is inspired by this relationship to realize her passion for the theatre, the superiority of the theatrical profession, and contrasts this realization with the lives of men and women (!) lived without meaning or purpose. In the Hungarian context of the turn of the 1860s, these are undoubtedly surprising and strong, relatively novel statements, which name the female analogy of the male partner's public engagement in the profession of actress: "What order, what clarity in this head! This man will make a name for himself in our country. Sooner or later, he will shine like a bright star in its sky. I myself am not well here, and this idle life is not my nature. If I had the strength to leave this land where Elemér lives, I would follow my vocation and take up a full career. I have a talent for acting. I have so far only acted in French, but I have no doubt that I could also perform successfully in my native language." (Batthyány 1861b, 39) – says the increasingly assertive Ilma in a chastened inner monologue. It is here that the later decision, postponed by her love, which she had already taken, to commit herself for life to acting, which she considered one of the noblest and most meaningful of all vocations, is made. This apologia for intellectual life, this framing of intellectual occupations as the top professions of the social elite, is also exciting because it indirectly outlines the extraordinary possibility that women can be models and leaders of society in the new society organised around the modern professions: "What happiness in itself is to be surrounded incessantly by talents and flames of all sexes. The poet, the musician, the painter, the actor are one being. Behold, this is the life I want!" (Batthyány 1861b, 40) – says Ilma.

In an important scene in the novel, which uses theatre play and role in a reflexive way, interpreting human relationships and social relations, a large-scale family theatre performance is planned for Ilma and his young companions, who are guests of his lover's family, to entertain the family and the visiting troupe. For the girl, however, this is far from being entertainment, but a life-and-death matter of strength, and through the role she reveals and announces her love affair with Elemér, rivals the fiancé already chosen by Elemér's mother,<sup>11</sup> and displays her intellectual superiority through her acting and preparation. This is why it is significant that Elemér is the "director" of the play, i.e. it is through their common interpretation of art that

11 "Elizabeth wants me to accept the Margaret that was meant for her. I took it, because Elemér asked me nicely to agree to it, and encouraged me that I would play it well. Elizabeth does not wish to portray anything else than Christiene, which makes the two mothers very annoyed, as they seem to wish to see the intended marriage between their children contracted with equal fire." (Batthyány 1861b, 98)

they rebel against parental arbitrariness, against a planned marriage based on dishonest relationships. It is through theatre as a medium through which they send a message to the haughty aristocratic female head of the family, who always imposes her will. And it is also this fateful play that will seal their fate, foreshadowing the maternal curse, that is to say, in this sense, it will also have an existential effect, as if mediating reality.

The choice of the play itself is also an exciting and telling intertext, a self-reflexive theatrical moment in the novel. The family's choice of a play based on one of Octave Feuillet's popular novels turned into a play, *Le roman d'un jeune homme pauvre* [The Story of a Poor Young Man], written shortly before the novel's publication. The play, however, turns out to be in reverse casting, a kind of mirror, telling the story of a pair of lovers whose relationship is hindered by the wrong-thinking. As in the Feuillet novel and its dramatic transcript, one of the important questions in Apraxin's novel is what is the true social value, who is truly rich and whether what is visible in wealth is permanent, whether it is the only basis on which long-term family and emotional decisions can be made.

But an equally reflexive theatrical element is the choice of the protagonist's stage name. Ilma, who realises that if she stays in Hungary, she will only hinder her lover's public actions by maintaining a love affair, consciously chooses the Parisian stage and her stage name also marks her new identity. The theatre is her new family, the theatre world is her new life, she becomes the "priestess" of art. But her stage name, Lélia, is a very evocative one, and it is not just a reference to her personality but to the world of the novel, since it seems to be a reference to George Sand's famous 1833 proto-feminist novel, which shocked her contemporaries by redefining the role of women. Its protagonist rejects the conventional social roles ascribed to women and lives her emotions and her gender at the cost of tragedy. The past of Lélia in the novel is also unknown, and like the 1839 version of the novel, which was reworked and, in many respects, reinterprets the original, the Lélia – or Ilma – of the Hungarian novel chooses to commit suicide in the wake of her ordeal. To give a sense of the multiple meanings, it is also worth recalling that Sand herself left a marriage she perceived as stifling, a gesture that was both extraordinary and scandalous because, like Apraxin, she already had children and found herself in new relationships, claiming for herself a freedom of choice similar to that of men.

As we have already sensed, Apraxin's novel is also groundbreaking because it intertwines acting – and art in general – with the question of modern women's vocations, women's emancipation, women's self-expression. It is a reflexive Künstlerroman/art novel in the sense that it also becomes a framework for early emancipatory women's thought, and this is an indication of the extraordinary scope for manoeuvre in the worldview of the art novel, art novellas and short stories that emerged

in response to the emergence of artistic professionalism and modern intellectual roles in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century.

In Apraxin's novel, unlike Gyulai's, we see the story not only from the female protagonist's point of view, but she is inherently a more sensitive, innovative, dedicated artist. In comparison, her male partner seems more passive and weaker. It will take strength and determination without her for a fledgling male public career to unfold in the distant future. But at the same time, it is also thought-provoking that here too it is a young woman who foresees the future greatness of the young man in a determined, visionary way. It is through her will and sacrifice that this can be achieved, and so even after his death she determines his future life, she sets a good, sensible direction for it. Paradoxically and indirectly, according to the logic of the novel, a woman's 'artistic sacrifice', a formidable force and decision, through the theatre and the arts, is needed even for the world outside the theatre and the arts to function well (for example, for a prosperous nation to emerge in the not-too-distant future, thanks to such female sacrifices). Art and the sacrifice performed through art will be, as in the Gyulai art novel, what gives life a framework, a contour, a direction: it is not art that imitates life, but life that can take off in some nobler direction in the wake of art.

Apraxin's novel is difficult to read, sometimes turgid, sentimental. This is due both to the inexperience of the young translator, barely in his mid-teens, and to the fact that Apraxin's writing career took her only 3-4 years, without any preparation, without any prior sign, and that he was experimenting in a multilingual, intercultural environment that did not facilitate the rapid canonisation of such works. This small and unusual oeuvre deserves much more attention, especially the first Hungarian art novel written by a woman. Not only by right of being the first, but also because of the way in which it responds reflexively to the modern history of professionalism, sometimes in dialogue with Gyulai's work, and speaks in a particularly sharp and thought-provoking way about the position and scope for action of women artists, including their multiple vulnerability in the meritocratic revolution of emerging modern literary and artistic professionalism.

#### **4. Why read 19<sup>th</sup> century artists' novels/novellas? A methodological proposal**

The interest in writers and artists is not new. One need only recall the influential world of Renaissance artists' anecdotes to see that there is a long tradition of stories about artists, their creative world and their private lives. Only that in the 19<sup>th</sup> century this interest was transformed into important, paradigmatic stories of such great volume, so varied and so defining their own genres, that it would be foolish and inattentive not to notice it. This is why this paper has argued that we should

reconsider not only the narrower question of whether the tradition of the Hungarian art novel can be dated to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, but also how the 19<sup>th</sup> century stories told about artists in the art novel, the art novella and the short story are the outgrowth, the representation, and often the reimagining of a larger, globally intelligible new worldview.

The art novel and the art novella are a glocal genre cluster of 19<sup>th</sup> century world literature. Obviously, there are many different versions of this cluster. But one of its important, novel paradigms, innovative in the whole literary field and within the genre of the novel/novella, makes the new, modern (isolating and modernising) nature of creation and creators, of art and artists, through the stories of writers-artists, a central problem. The heroes of these works – writers, actors, musicians, painters, sculptors – are at once the beneficiaries of the new social turn of modernity, which marks the emergence and the valorisation of the modern intellectual. They characterise and experience literature and art as the noblest, most important, most worthy, most profound human and social experience, but at the same time they are constantly confronted with the human and social limits of creation and creative existence, with tragic consequences. These stories are characterised by masterpieces that will never be created, by the collision of private life and creative existence, by the recognition of the benefits of the modern market and, at the same time, by the extreme vulnerability and limitation of the creator to capitalism and, as a corollary, to success and to the public. It is for this reason that art becomes a reflexive figure in these works, for they are artworks in which attention is drawn to new forms, possibilities and limitations of art in a multiplied and complex way through other artworks.

In both of the pioneering Hungarian art novels and novellas of the 19<sup>th</sup> century – similarly to texts like Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*, Madame de Staël's *Corinne*, Balzac's *The Unknown Masterpiece*, Zola's *The Masterpiece* and many other fascinating works of the period – literature, theatre, opera, music, painting are a dubious, complex, often tragic and terrifying field of identity, self-reflection and cognition. In the art novels/novellas I have recalled, it is through the theatre that the characters come to know and construct themselves and the world, through it that they form and reformulate their interpersonal relationships, and often through it they come to realise that art is something deep and troubling, and that the artistic vocation is different and more complex than other vocations. The unveiled terrain of art novels, novellas and short stories is therefore the cult of the artist, but it is much more ambiguous and layered than the well-known cults and celebrations of the artist from the 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>12</sup> – in fact, it is another, darker, more ambiguous, multifaceted and more reflective side of them. This is what makes them particularly important; they can show us the great turning point of the great new

12 On these see, for example, Dávidházi 1989; Dávidházi 1998; Leerssen–Rigney 2014.; Dović–Helgason 2017 – and my own interpretations: T. Szabó 2016; T. Szabó 2023.

era of artistic modernity, the emergence of the global modern literary-artistic-theatrical-musical vocations, and at the same time the darker, more reflective, more ambiguous face of this fundamental process of literary and artistic modernity.

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