

Tradition and Transformation: The Changing Genre of the Short Story in Contemporary Hungarian Literature¹

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ABSTRACT

As a dynamic literary form, the short story offers literary scholarship a unique opportunity to explore the complex tension between tradition and innovation. The interplay between historical continuity and poetic variability becomes particularly evident in the genre of the short story cycle, which integrates the poetic logic of both the classical short story and the novel. This study examines how the short story cycle emerges as a literary form of fragmentation, intertextuality, and narrative openness through the analysis of two contemporary Hungarian short story collections: László Csabai's *Szindbád, a detektív* [Szindbád, the Detective] and Ádám Bodor's *Verhovina madarai* [The Birds of Verhovina]. The investigation focuses on the adaptive potential and cultural mediating function of the short story genre, with special attention to the world-building models, cyclic composition strategies, and meaning-generating structures of contemporary texts.

Keywords: short story cycle, short story, genre dynamism, poetic transformation, contemporary Hungarian literature

1. Introduction

In contemporary Hungarian prose poetics, the increased generic mobility and compositional openness of short prose forms have led to a re-evaluation of classical epic genre boundaries (Szirák 2021, 94). The transitional zone between the short story and the novel has become a particularly productive field, giving rise to forms marked by distinctive aesthetic and structural features. Within this context, the short story cycle occupies a transitional position between the short story and the

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novel, establishing itself as a distinctive poetic formation with its own compositional logic. Through its narrative structures, thematic cohesion, and network of motifs, it establishes its own generic identity.

The aim of this study is to examine the specificities of the short story cycle in both historical and theoretical contexts and, through the analysis of two contemporary Hungarian short story collections organized along differing aesthetic-poetic logics – László Csabai's *Szindbád, a detektív* (2010) [Szindbád, the Detective] and Ádám Bodor's *Verhovina madarai* (2011) [The Birds of Verhovina] – to interpret the narrative, thematic, and hermeneutic implications of cyclical composition. The starting point of the investigation is the hermeneutic recognition that the difference between the short story and the novel is not solely one of length or plot structure but is fundamentally poetic in nature. The short story is grounded in an aesthetics of condensation, symbolic density, and closure, whereas the novel is structured according to the logic of world-building, elaboration, and narrative expansion. The short story cycle is situated at the intersection of these two poetic paradigms: it retains the short story's conciseness and imagistic quality while, through compositional cohesion–recurring characters, motifs, spaces, and thematic patterns – it is also capable of constructing a novel-like world model.

My hypothesis is that the short story cycle constitutes one of the paradigms of postclassical narratology: a generic formation that relies on the aesthetic principles of fragmentation, intertextuality, narrative multilayeredness, and readerly cooperation. Cyclical composition functions not merely as a formal framework but as a dynamic mediator of meaning, activating interpretation through the latent or explicitly articulated relations between individual texts. The cycle is not a closed structure but an open system that does not prescribe but rather generates modes of reading.

The analysis builds on two representative case studies: László Csabai's *Szindbád, a detektív* [Szindbád, the Detective] exemplifies the spatial and temporal organization of cyclical narrative, as well as the mythical-symbolic recurrence of characters, while Ádám Bodor's *Verhovina madarai* [The Birds of Verhovina] constructs the short story cycle's dark, closed world model, in which recurring spatial and power structures, together with repetitive character configurations, offer a poetic reconstruction of an allegorical totalitarian space.

It is important to emphasize that this study does not undertake a comprehensive, exhaustive analysis of these volumes, nor does it aim to explore fully their novelistic or world-literary contexts. Rather, its focus is consciously and methodologically restricted to the poetic functioning of cyclical short prose – above all the short story cycle – within the framework of Hungarian literary scholarship and contemporary prose poetics. This targeted focus should not be understood as a limitation but as a methodological choice appropriate to the object of inquiry: the genre formation of the short story cycle. The aim of the study is not only to map the poetics of generic transitions but also to demonstrate how

the short story cycle has become one of the key forms of 21st-century Hungarian prose literature – an aesthetic formation that rethinks the relations of narrativity, composition, and reading at the intersection of epic tradition and postmodern formal sensibility.

2. Genre Diversity and Structural Experimentation in Contemporary Hungarian Short Prose

The genre diversity and structural experimentalism of contemporary Hungarian prose do not merely call for the registration of new phenomena but demand a radical rethinking of traditional categories. The classical definitions of the novel, the short story, and the tale – once stable points of reference in 19th and 20th-century poetics – have proven inadequate for interpreting the hybrid, fragmented, self-reflexive, and intertextual poetics that characterize much of recent prose (Luchmann 2011, 1091). Theoretical attention has therefore shifted toward recognizing that genre is not a timeless or closed entity, but a construction shaped by historical and cultural conditions, deriving its meaning from its relation to literary institutions, modes of reception, and social representations. Consequently, the very concept of genre has become a matter of debate: the question is not merely what qualifies as a genre, but what function it serves in mediating aesthetic experience and how its meaning shifts in tandem with transformations of the cultural canon.

In the historical development of genre theory, two major paradigms can be identified. The first conceives of genres within a normative, taxonomic framework: from Aristotle through classical rhetoric and poetics to the literary histories of the 19th century, genres were distinguished according to pre-established rules, formal features, and aesthetic functions. By contrast, the twentieth-century structuralist and poststructuralist paradigm interprets genre as an open, historically variable, intertextual, and discursive construct. Gérard Genette's concept of architextuality defines genre as a relational network; Tzvetan Todorov highlights its historical mobility; Alastair Fowler introduces the notions of "genre families" and "genre patterns" as flexible formations responsive to changes in literary communication; and Jacques Derrida's *La loi du genre* [The Law of Genre] dismantles the illusion of pure generic belonging – works both do and do not belong to genres, and transgression and liminality become the very essence of the generic experience (Derrida 1994, 260–261).

This conceptual framework is particularly productive in examining transitional forms between the short story and the novel. Traditionally, the short story has been defined by brevity, conciseness, and a focus on a single conflict, in contrast to the novel's broader temporal and spatial dimensions, multiple storylines, and extended cast of characters. Yet as Beáta Thomka notes, the short story has always displayed remarkable adaptability, readily incorporating lyrical, dramatic, essayistic, and

documentary registers, thereby reinterpreting its own boundaries (Thomka 1986, 42). Péter Hajdu emphasizes that the short story cycle cannot be subsumed under a single taxonomy: it may function both as an autonomous structural logic and as a loosely interconnected corpus of texts. The tension between autonomy and novelistic coherence represents one of the enduring dilemmas of genre theory (Hajdu 2003, 163).

Numerous works of contemporary Hungarian prose exemplify this permeability and instability of genre. Ádám Bodor's *Verhovina madarai* [The Birds of Verhovina], Nándor Gion's *Ezen az oldalon* [On This Side], András Müllner's *Kőrösi Csoma Sándor*, András Cserna-Szabó's *Puszibolt* [Kiss Shop], Tóth Krisztina's *Pixel*, and László Csabai's *Szindbád, a detektív* [Szindbád, the Detective] all blur the boundaries between the novel, the short story, and the narrative cycle. Yet such tendencies are not uniquely contemporary. At the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Kálmán Mikszáth's *A jó palócok* [The Good Palots] and *Tót atyafiak* [Slovak Kinsmen], Gyula Krúdy's *Szindbád* stories, and Dezső Kosztolányi's *Esti Kornél* collections already pushed short prose toward novelistic expansion. Later, Viktor Chelnokov's stories, Iván Mándy's prose cycles, and Central European authors such as Bohumil Hrabal, Bruno Schulz, Danilo Kiš, and Mircea Cărtărescu each developed distinct forms of genre hybridity (Radics 2020, 30).

Many contemporary authors engage with established genre codes – such as detective fiction, the grotesque, science fiction, or autofiction – not in their original form but in reflective, alienated, and reinterpreted ways. László Csabai's *Szindbád, a detektív* [Szindbád, the Detective] (Csabai 2010) appears at first glance to follow the conventions of classic detective fiction: a novice detective, a murder, an innocent suspect, and an early-twentieth-century milieu create a familiar genre world. Yet these conventions are gradually deconstructed: the typical crime-genre structure loosens, expected twists are absent, and the narrative transforms into a poetics of prose imbued with cultural-historical and intertextual references (Benyovszky 2018, 279). The title itself evokes literary tradition, signaling a self-conscious play with genre conventions that become both quoted and ironized.

Similarly, Ádám Bodor's *Verhovina madarai* [The Birds of Verhovina] follows the principle of genre hybridity (Bodor 2011). Although its individual texts can be read as autonomous stories, they also function as fragments of an absurd, fantastic universe. The closure typical of the classic short story is undermined by spatial and temporal indeterminacy, the relativization of narrative perspective, and the recurrence of motifs across episodes. The blending of grotesque, fairy-tale, absurd, and lyrical registers creates a texture that reflects on its own construction while resisting canonical classification.

In such works, genre does not operate as a prescriptive structure but as a poetic and citational component of contemporary prose. The alienation of genre templates, the rearrangement of literary language, and the play with cultural codes generate a dynamic horizon of meaning

formed through the interaction between text, reader, and cultural field (Pilař 1994, 12). Genre hybridity thus represents not merely a formal experiment but a defining self-reflexive feature of contemporary literature—the foundation of the polyphonic poetics and open forms characteristic of modern Hungarian prose (Szirák 1998, 97).

The development of the short story genre in Hungarian literature is closely intertwined with the literary, social, and institutional transformations of modernity. Although early antecedents—such as the anecdote, exemplum, morality tale, and folk narrative—were already present in the late eighteenth century, the true poetic and institutional consolidation of the genre occurred in the second half of the nineteenth century. The short prose emerging at the intersection of Romanticism and Realism—particularly in the works of Kálmán Mikszáth, Mór Jókai, and later Sándor Bródy—laid the groundwork for the short story's rise as a central form of modern Hungarian prose (Dobos 1995, 32–40).

In the early 20th century, the *Nyugat* generation—most notably Zsigmond Móricz, Gyula Krúdy, and Dezső Kosztolányi—elevated the short story to the status of high literature while expanding its stylistic and poetic range (Dérczy 2012, 19–21). Móricz's works offered acute social observation, Krúdy's explored dreamlike temporality and nostalgia, and Kosztolányi's exemplified psychological depth and ironic aesthetics. During this period, the short story emerged as a distinct poetic universe with its own formal, thematic, and rhetorical features.

The interwar and postwar decades brought further transformation. In the 1950s and 1960s, the short story often served as a social “mirror” under official literary politics, while simultaneously providing space for formal experimentation and allegorical depth. Writers such as Géza Ottlik, Péter Lengyel, and Péter Nádas foregrounded fragmentation, the interplay of memory and experience, and linguistic reflexivity, thereby extending the poetic scope of the genre. After the political transition, postmodern and postclassical tendencies intensified: fragmentation, irony, self-reflexivity, intertextuality, and media interpenetration became defining features.

Contemporary authors including Ádám Bodor and László Csabai continue to rewrite and reimagine the genre's conventions. Their short prose simultaneously preserves and deconstructs tradition, transforming the short story into a form that not only embodies brevity and concentration but also questions the very limits of narrativity. As such, the short story becomes not merely a literary form but a medium through which cultural memory and identity are articulated—a dynamic reflection of its historical moment, its readership, and its evolving aesthetic horizons.

3. The Genre Transition Between the Short Story and the Novel: The Poetics of the Short Story Cycle

Building on this historical-poetic framework, the genre transition between the short story and the novel becomes particularly significant. While this genre permeability is often interpreted as a characteristic of postmodern narrative modes, its roots trace back to the late 19th century, when the works of Mikszáth, Krúdy, and Kosztolányi already exhibited the novel-like expansion of small prose forms and the development of intertextual and compositional connections between individual stories. A prominent example of the blurring of genre boundaries is the short story cycle, which, as a transitional form, simultaneously preserves the condensed, epigrammatic structure of the short story while opening towards the novel-like unity, thematic coherence, and world-building. Three main interpretative directions have emerged in the scholarly literature in relation to this issue: the philological approach (e.g., István Vadai) focuses on the genesis of the text and authorial compositional strategies; the hermeneutic approach (e.g., Mihály Szegedy-Maszák) emphasizes the role of the reader's activity; while the compositional approach (e.g., Péter Hajdu) concentrates on the narrative and motif-related connecting elements (Radics 2020, 31). The synthesis of these three directions enables the recognition that the short story cycle, as a genre, becomes a paradigmatic figure of post-classical prose through the foregrounding of poetic openness, fragmentation, and readerly activity. In Mihály Szegedy-Maszák's interpretation, the genre definition itself functions as a mode of reading, which does not prescribe the interpretation of the text according to pre-existing norms but instead structures itself from the text's perspective (Szegedy-Maszák 2013, 163). This is confirmed by Tibor Elek, who interprets the genre's "intermediate" positions not as a lack but as a productive instability (Elek 2009, 169). Based on this perspective, it becomes clear that the formal fissures, absences, or inconsistencies in short story cycles—using Zsófia Szilágyi's words—are not flaws but rather create the interpretative space and the possibility of co-authored readings. The cyclical arrangement is not merely a structural form but a meaning-field that restructures itself in the process of reading, creating the illusion of novel-like continuity through poetic breaks, silences, and repetitions (Szilágyi 2005, 22). Sándor Olasz, in his discussion of Iván Mándy's prose, identifies the causes of genre transition in the historical transformation of the novel canon and changes in reader expectations, while applying Gérard Genette's paratext theory to highlight that genre classification is itself a result of a reception act (Olasz 1998, 460). Péter Hajdu, on the other hand, systematizes the typology of cyclical cohesion following Forrest L. Ingram (1971), Susan Garland Mann (1989), and Maggie Dunn & Ann Morris (1995) emphasizing the importance of spatial and temporal frameworks, narrative perspective, shared motifs, and thematic unity. This system is further complemented by Ágnes Gereben in her analysis

of Isaac Babel's cycles, focusing on the role of the title, opening text, and conclusion in structuring the cycle (Gereben 1985, 290–307). Although the difference between the short story and the novel is often defined in terms of length or plot differences, according to Árnika Veréb's formulation—building on Cortázar's famous analogy – this is a deeper, poetic difference. According to Cortázar, the short story is the equivalent of a photograph, while the novel corresponds to a film: the short story presents a scene enclosed within a frame, the intensity of which lies in its condensation and the multifaceted illumination of a single moment, while the novel, like a film, builds its world and meaning through narrative unfolding and gradual revelation of details (Veréb 2019, 77). Extending this analogy further, the difference between the short story cycle and the novel can also be grasped: while the film (novel) unfolds through a dynamic sequence of images, the short story cycle is more akin to capturing a single scene from different angles – like a series of photographs placed side by side, which form a whole not through narrative unity but through their compositional and perspectival differences. Thus, the short story cycle finds its genre character not in linear storytelling, but in shifts of viewpoint, thematic resonances, and the mobilization of reading positions.

4. Cyclical Poetics and World Models in Contemporary Hungarian Prose: The Novella Cycles of László Csabai and Adám Bodor

The theoretical approaches outlined above can be exemplified through contemporary works that consciously explore the boundaries of the short story cycle. Among them, László Csabai's *Szindbád, a detektív* [Szindbád, the Detective] offers a particularly revealing case. László Csabai's *Szindbád, a detektív* [Szindbád, the Detective] (2010) is one of the most distinctive novella-cycle experiments in contemporary Hungarian short prose. The volume integrates the micro-topography of small-town existence, the fragmented experience of history, and the ironic rewriting of the detective genre within the poetic framework of cyclical composition. It simultaneously offers autonomous short stories and the illusion of a larger world model: the reader encounters both the closure of individual narratives and the fragmented yet connectable unity of the whole composition. This duality most clearly highlights the generic particularities of the novella cycle and situates Csabai's work firmly within the focus of this study – the exploration of how short prose forms expand toward novelistic structures.

One of the most important poetic principles of the collection's organization is spatiality. Nyárliget, the fictional small town in Eastern Hungary, combines the features of realist topography with those of an allegorical microspace. The town's narrow streets and its emblematic institutions—school, police station, pub, hospital – jointly contribute

to a setting that functions as an autonomous poetic entity. Nyárliget is not merely a backdrop but an organizing principle in its own right: the stories continually return to it, while its extension, boundaries, and closure define the possibilities of narrative movement. A second key space, Baghdad, becomes a locus of historical experience and personal memory: fragments evoked from a distant wartime past enter into dialogue with the events of Nyárliget. The tension between these two spaces—the permeability between local provinciality and global history—constitutes a central element of the cycle’s spatial poetics, signalling in the deeper narrative layers the interweaving of collective and individual memory. According to Katalin Bódi’s interpretation, these spaces not only connect but also “interweave” the separate stories, enabling a dynamic of cyclical re-reading and re-contextualization (Bódi 2011, 82–83).

Temporal configuration is equally crucial to the volume’s poetics. The stories do not follow a linear chronology but are organized along fragmented and recurrent temporal planes. The past linked to Baghdad, the present of Nyárliget, and the continuously recurring event-motifs form a cyclical pattern. This cyclical handling of time is not merely a structural device but a poetic equivalent of mnemonic experience: the rewriting of time, the constant return of the past, and the monotonous repetitions of the present all contribute to the reader’s perception of the book as not a mere sequence of juxtaposed stories but as parts of a larger narrative organism.

The characters also contribute essentially to the cyclical organization. The figure of Szindbád – evoking both Krúdy’s legendary wanderer and the archetypal detective – is the central protagonist of the book. Here, however, Szindbád is no longer a nostalgic voyager of desire but a small-town detective whose presence is marked by mythic recurrence: he reappears and transforms, assuming different roles in various stories while preserving the same core of identity. Alongside him, Inspector Csonka appears as a grotesque and ironic companion, reducing the process of investigation to a series of banal situations and thereby reinforcing the parodic rewriting of the detective genre. The secondary figures—the townspeople, officials, and local authorities—are typified characters whose recurrent appearances underscore the closure of the communal space. The repetition and variation of characters form one of the fundamental principles of the novella cycle’s poetics: the figures are never confined to a single story but continually exceed the boundaries of autonomous narration. This fragmented, non-linear narrative mode corresponds to István Vadai’s concept of the “wandering character,” which envisages the cycle’s cohesion not through historical continuity but through the repetition of characters and their world-creating presence (Vadai 1997, 68).

The collection’s generic intertextuality deserves particular attention. Csabai’s volume openly plays with the conventions of crime fiction: the logic of crime, investigation, and resolution is present, yet constantly

subverted, diverted, or rendered grotesquely uncertain. Instead of the detective novel's linearity and logical closure, fragmentation and ambiguity prevail. Szindbád's investigations never yield clear solutions; the mystery remains unresolved, proliferating into new enigmas. At the same time, Krúdy's literary heritage undergoes an ironic reinterpretation: the superimposition of the name and the character functions both as homage and deconstructive gesture. Through this genre play, the volume both aligns with and departs from the detective tradition, creating – through the form of the novella cycle – a novel-like yet perpetually destabilized world.

The narrative strategies likewise reinforce cyclical functioning at the level of readerly cooperation. The disrupted chronology, fragmentary information, and recurring motifs are all poetic devices demanding active reconstruction from the reader. The open structure of the book offers not a linearly traceable plot but a textual space where connecting details, interpreting mysteries, and recognizing recurrences are indispensable components of the reading process. The novella cycle thus emerges not only as a formal structure but also as a reception-aesthetic configuration: the reader's experience becomes integral to its poetic organization.

The problematics of history and memory are equally fundamental. The criminal enigmas are not merely genre motifs but metaphors for the unassimilable experience of history. The evocation of Baghdad refers to the traumas of past wars and to the historical burden of East-Central European small-town life. The detective plot is thus transformed into an ontological and mnemonic mystery: the investigation exemplifies the impossibility of reassembling temporally dispersed and fragmented experiences. The cyclical composition of the volume therefore functions not only as a formal device but also as a historical-poetic statement: history is rewritten not in linear continuity but in repetitions, absences, and distortions.

Overall, *Szindbád, the Detective* [Szindbád, the Detective] exemplifies how the novella cycle operates as a transitional generic formation. The collection simultaneously relies on the closure of the autonomous short story and on the illusion of a novelistic world model. The cyclical poetics of space and time, the repetition and variation of characters, the generic intertextuality, and the narrative strategies all function as organizing elements that expand short prose toward the scope of the novel. This dual operation renders Csabai's volume especially relevant to the present study, serving as a case in point that demonstrates how the novella cycle can transgress the boundaries of the autonomous short story and create complex, polyphonic, novel-like world models within contemporary Hungarian prose. While Csabai's *Szindbád* illustrates the cyclical and intertextual dynamics of the detective novella cycle, Ádám Bodor's *Verhovina madarai* [The Birds of Verhovina] demonstrates how similar poetics can be mobilized to represent the allegorical world of totalitarian experience.

Ádám Bodor's *Verhovina madarai* [The Birds of Verhovina] represents a unique literary construction in which the poetics of the novella cycle serve the allegorical representation of a totalitarian world model. The world of the text is governed by closure, cyclical composition, and internal repetitions. The thirteen novellas of *Verhovina madarai* [The Birds of Verhovina], though seemingly separate tales, form a poetically tightly interwoven, unified textual world (Radics 2023, 33–34). The individual chapters can be read as autonomous novellas; at the same time, recurring motifs and a variational mode of narration organize them into a coherent macro-composition. This duality produces the poetic feature by which the volume appears simultaneously as a novella cycle and as a novel: a series of self-contained stories from which an overarching world model emerges.

The dominant experience of the textual world is that of repetition and variation. Numerous motifs reappear throughout the book, yet never in identical form: multiple versions of Anatol Korkodus's death, differing accounts of Nika Karanika's injury, or the two distinct names of the women's penal camp all emphasize the poetic uncertainty of narration. Repetition here is not merely rhetorical but the organizing principle of the world-view: the truth of events never unfolds in a single version but in multiple, mutually contradictory forms. This mode of operation recalls the essence of the novella cycle, which gains its poetic power from the coexistence of variants. The chapters of *Verhovina* do not build upon each other linearly but are arranged as variations, becoming a literary model of totalitarian experience. Within dictatorship, official histories are perpetually rewritten, the past is never stable, and meanings and facts are incessantly destabilized. Through the organizing power of repetition and variation, Bodor constructs the poetic counterpart of this condition.

The world of the collection is defined by the closure of a hermetic space. The settlement of Jablonska Poljana is an isolated community cut off from the outside world, where everyday life is regulated by the administrative and disciplinary mechanisms of power. This space evokes both archaic and postmodern dimensions: the coexistence of primitive modes of life and modern allusions lends the textual world an anachronistic character, enabling it to transcend specific historical time and function as an allegorical spatial model. One emblematic sign of totalitarian order is the boarded-up window of Augustin's house, through which food must be delivered while questions of guilt and responsibility remain uncertain. Such motifs operate as metaphors of confinement, discipline, and secrecy, drawing the entire settlement into the logic of the prison.

Narration reinforces this worldview in a distinctive way. Adam's first-person account conveys the experience of the world's end not as a linear story but as a series of divergent, repeating, and variant chapters. The first-person narration often becomes neutralized: the detached tone, impersonal detailing, and shifts in perspective suggest that any version

of the story may be possible, yet none can be deemed definitively true. This linguistic indeterminacy forms part of the totalitarian model itself: responsibility blurs, and the meaning of events remains perpetually relative. The reader thus receives not a coherent story but the illusion of a fragmented yet self-contained world. According to Zsófia Szilágyi, one of the most important genre-poetical features of Bodor's texts forming into a cycle is that the creation of unity "will largely be the reader's task, meaning the construction is built in the reader" (Szilágyi 1998, 515).

One of the book's most significant poetic innovations is the complexity of its motif network. The recurring appearances of stench, water, ice, lightning, birds, the cookbook, and the reversed letter "N" create an increasingly dense web of meanings. The variants of Anatol Korkodus's death, for example, simultaneously illustrate the disintegration of the world and the inscription of the body into the landscape: in one version he is preserved as a crystallized statue within a spring, in another he gradually merges with the earth. This network of motifs serves as an allegory of the totalitarian world's collapse and self-annihilation: power disintegrates not through external attack but as the consequence of its own internal logic. Emese László draws attention to this structural feature, emphasizing that the individual stories stand on their own, as the narrator does not allow "the reader to wander off into the tangled forest of the plot" (László 2012, 210).

The bird motif in the title deserves particular attention. Initially appearing as a promise, it is repeatedly revoked throughout the chapters, only to be realized in the closing section. The return of the birds signifies both fulfillment and illusion, for even within the framework of a disintegrating world it offers no genuine redemption. Thus, the motif of the birds may be read as an allegory of cyclical organization: the poetic movement of the volume likewise promises and retracts, varies and repeats, culminating in a single encompassing illusion.

Onomastics likewise plays a key role in constructing the world model. The grotesque and foreign-sounding names, as well as their variations and distortions, evoke the logic of totalitarian record-keeping. Names simultaneously denote and destabilize, serving both as markers of identity and as instruments of its erasure. This dual function mirrors the operation of totalitarian systems: everyone is accounted for, yet no one possesses a stable, individual voice.

The world model of *Verhovina madarai* [The Birds of Verhovina] is therefore dual in nature: it is organized by the poetic principles of the novella cycle and at the same time offers an allegorical representation of totalitarian experience. The two dimensions reinforce one another: cyclical repetition and variation are not merely aesthetic devices but correspond to the temporal and spatial experience of dictatorship. The closed settlement, the disintegration of power structures, and the destabilized narrative variants all serve as instruments for the poetic reconstruction of totalitarian space. At the same time, the autonomy of

chapters and the connective force of the motif network jointly sustain the illusion of both the novella cycle and the novelistic world model.

In this respect, Bodor's volume is simultaneously a generic-poetic experiment and a literary model of political experience. Through the compositional logic of the novella cycle, it constructs a world that conveys the self-dissolving, apocalyptic experience of totalitarian order. A focused and selective analysis thus does not narrow but rather captures the essence of the work: *Verhovina madarai* [The Birds of Verhovina] emerges as a poetic construction of both the novella cycle and the totalitarian world model.

5. Conclusion

The analyses of *Szindbád, a detektív* [Szindbád, the Detective] and *Verhovina madarai* [The Birds of Verhovina] demonstrate that the short story cycle in contemporary Hungarian prose operates as a complex and dynamic genre formation situated between the traditions of the short story and the novel. Both Csabai and Bodor mobilize the cyclical principles of recurrence, variation, and fragmentation not merely as compositional devices but as means of constructing distinctive poetic worlds. In Csabai's work, cyclical composition functions as an aesthetic experiment in narrative openness: the intertwining of mythic recurrence, intertextual play, and spatial duality generates a poetics of ironic destabilization. In contrast, Bodor's cycle transforms repetition into an ontological and political condition, creating an allegorical representation of totalitarian experience where closure and dissolution coincide.

In both cases, cyclical composition serves as a mode of world-making that transcends the formal boundaries of short prose. The autonomy of individual stories coexists with the illusion of an encompassing totality, allowing the reader to experience the tension between fragmentation and continuity, between discrete narrative units and their cumulative world-model. This duality—of openness and enclosure, difference and recurrence—constitutes the defining aesthetic paradox of the short story cycle.

From a theoretical perspective, the novella cycle exemplifies the postclassical narrative paradigm grounded in intertextuality, multiplicity, and readerly cooperation. Its coherence is not imposed by authorial authority but generated through interpretive activity: meaning emerges from the interplay of gaps, echoes, and repetitions across the textual network. In this sense, the short story cycle functions as an open system of narrative relations rather than a closed compositional form.

Within the broader context of twenty-first-century Hungarian prose, these works confirm that the short story cycle has become one of the most vital vehicles for rethinking narrative form. It mediates between epic continuity and postmodern fragmentation, between

historical memory and aesthetic experimentation. The genre's capacity to combine the autonomy of the short story with the expansive world-building of the novel renders it a privileged site for exploring the poetics of transition – between forms, temporalities, and modes of experience.

Ultimately, the novella cycle emerges as both a structural and hermeneutic paradigm: a genre that not only reflects but actively theorizes the conditions of contemporary narration. Through the cyclical reconfiguration of time, space, and character, works such as Csabai's *Szindbád, a detektív* [Szindbád, the Detective] and Bodor's *Verhovina madarai* [The Birds of Verhovina] articulate how the modern short prose form can accommodate complex, novel-like world models while maintaining its fragmentary and self-reflexive character. The study of these texts thus contributes to a broader understanding of how Hungarian literature continues to negotiate the intersections of memory, history, and form within the evolving landscape of postclassical narrative poetics.

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