MÁRTON SOLTÉSZ

Her Own Hero and Victim

Approaches to the Career History of Magda Szabó (1917–2007)

PhD thesis abstract

1. Objective

The purpose of my dissertation is to outline the genesis of **Magda Szabó**'s **(1917–2007)** creative method and writer/public life/intellectual role model.

I examine my subject from two directions: on the one hand, through—not only, even not primarily—the poetic analysis of **the writer's oeuvre** (using a complex, sociological, social-psychological, psychobiographical approach), and on the other hand, through the writing of **relationship history case studies**. This explains the threefold structure of my work.

Therefore, **I use approaches that have been classified as unscientific by literary studies for decades, but which historical studies use with success.**

2. Methodology

In the first chapter, entitled *The Magda Szabó Phenomenon*, I take into account the professional consequences and inconsistencies of the normative model(s) developed in Hungarian literary studies, clarifying and interpreting basic concepts that are essential for my work, such as "phenomenon", "model" and "source". Here follows the **historiographical approach**, which deals with the publicity, accessibility, and legal status of the oeuvre and legacy. The first larger unit is closed by a theoretical—philosophical, literary and art theoretical—problem-solving, which is meant to argue that, of course, my enterprise does not return to the positivistic school of literary history, which follows the principle of authorial intention and holds it to account. The final unit entitled *Strategy – message – cult. Medial Aspects* examines the so-called "Magda Szabó phenomenon".

The *Methods of Approaches* chapter of my work examines the goals, merits and flaws of the **genre theory**, **reception aesthetics**, **genetic-holistic poetics** and **psychological-psychobiographical approaches**. I present an example of the arbitrariness of the genre theory approach through the reception history of the novel and film *Abigél*—here "girls' novel" is the central term, and "youth literature" is the broader genre classification, which—in my view—for decades limited the emergence of the literary work's literariness and the novel's poetic qualities. In my study, I compare Magda Szabó's work with Géza Ottlik's magnum opus, *Iskola a határon* [*School on the Border*], in connection with contemporary research—Hargita Horváth Futó and the writings published in the "school issue" of Irodalmi Magazin (Literary Magazine

of Hungary). When analyzing the well-known and well-loved novel *Katalin utca* [Kathleen Street], I first give space to my own interpretive vision, I follow my own impressions like a diary, and then I get to know the opinions of the real readers (internet blogs), and the official (press)reception. After my own reading crystallized, reading based on a comparison of these two sources, I looked into the documents of the author's intention in the manuscripts and archival sources, and I was surprised to find that, unlike the former guild (pro-state) critics, the laymen and myself—the late reader—had a good sense of the author's intention: the heuresis effect (*catharsis*) planned by the artist occurred both in terms of the structural design and the "message" of the work—even if the modern literary approaches are not tasked with reconstructing the intention. In this way, **the philological research results assisted the reception aesthetic analysis as a control instance** (while they did not become a limiting factor).

The genetic-holistic approach tries to reconstruct the genesis of the development of Magda Szabó's characteristic creative method and text type through the examination of some—arbitrarily selected—books. On the way from *Ókút* ([The Ancient Well] 1970) to *Für Elise* (2002), the writer tried herself in many genres (poem, novel, autobiography, documentary novel, monograph, essay, study, radio play, play; lyric, prose, drama), but the quintessence of her oeuvre nevertheless, they represent the completed parts of his autobiographical saga, and in essence, all his other works gain their meaning and significance in their distance from this magnum opus. The novel and film *Pilátus* [Pilate] proved to be the most suitable to illustrate the psychological—psychobiographical—approach; more precisely, for this intermedial analysis, I was able to use the signified in a fruitful way (because under no circumstances did I allow myself the luxury of reducing Magda Szabó's works to illustration in the spirit of my own hermeneutic ambitions). I approached *Pilátus* from 1963 through the concept of therapeutic writing, from **the author's biography—as a collection of sources and narratives**. For my part, starting from the birth of *Pilátus*, the irreversibility of the relationship between fictional allegoricality and autobiographical self-certification in the lifework.

The third major chapter of my dissertation is entitled ***Relationship Stories***. I analyze the relationship of three literary historians and a cultural politician to Magda Szabó **in the light of surviving documents**—two of them are friends (Péter Nagy) and former suitors (István Király), the third is the writer's husband, Tibor Szobotka, and the fourth is György Aczél, with whom Magda Szabó maintained the friendship (of interest) until the politician lost his power. It seems that friendship with Péter Nagy also collapsed for similar reasons—if it existed and was not just a friendship interest association—: when the members of the critical generation of

the Kádár—Aczél era became “undesirable persons”, Magda Szabó tried to escape the accursed “Aczél-girl” role, and of course she turned away from her “home critic”, Péter Nagy, among the characters of his past. István Király, who after 1945 also asked Magda Szabó—who was still publishing as a poet—to marry her, due to his death in 1989, he could not live to see the turn of the writer, who had already been loved and protected as a comrade in the 1980s.

3. Conclusions

Whether Magda Szabó was a **hero** or a **victim** it cannot be clearly decided, as, in my opinion, this is not the task of the (literary) historian. On the other hand, it can be said with good heart about Tibor Szobotka: he was at least a victim (to Magda Szabó), insofar as he sacrificed his health, his career—ultimately himself—for the sake of his wife’s success as a writer. Without advocating the rooting a kind of counter-cult against the Magda Szabó cult, I will attempt to reconstruct the spiritual—relational situation of which Tibor Szobotka’s diary kept between 1953 and 1961 is an exciting document. This would be a serious contribution to **understanding the compromises of an artist with a traumatized personality who was searching for her place and role as a writer in the middle of the 20th century**.

4. Publications in connection with the theme

Blanka regénye?! Az újraolvasott Katalin utca, Irodalomismeret, 2017/4., 61–71.

Debreceni Georgikon: Közelítések Szabó Magda Abigél című regényéhez, Kortárs, 2017/10., 77–89. = KÖRÖMI–KUSPER, 2018, 145–159.

Két „szakmabeli”: Adalékok a Király István—Szabó Magda-vonal történetéhez = Tiszatáj, 2017/10., 71–80. = SOLTÉSZ–V. GILBERT, 2019, 49–66.

Szabó Magda korszerűsége: Adalékok egy írói gyakorlat geneziséhez, Kortárs, 2019/12., 83–93.

Szenzáció vagy kanonizáció? Megjegyzések Szabó Magda újrainduló életműsorozatához, Irodalomtörténeti Közlemények, 2019/1.

Szabó Magda száz éve, szerk. SOLTÉSZ Márton, V. GILBERT Edit Budapest, Széphalom – Orpheusz, 2019.

Megmaradt Szobotkáné?!: Gondolatok az író feleségéről és az írónő férjéről, NOE Levelek, 2020/330–331., 32–33.

Szélkakasok és széplelkek: A Nagy Péter—Szabó Magda-vonal, Irodalomtörténeti Közlemények, 2020/1.

Ecsetvonások Márquez portréjához, Országút, 2021/11., 23–25.

Egyik a másikban, avagy a forrás kritikája: Szobotka Tibor naplójáról, Literatura, 2021/4., 431–446.

Pilátus udvarában (I.): A terápiás írás mintázatai Szabó Magda regényében, Korunk, 2021/6., 93–104.

Pilátus udvarában (II.): A terápiás írás mintázatai Szabó Magda regényében, Korunk, 2021/9., 101–108.

Szabó Magda: Az ajtó = Magyar irodalmi művek 1956–2016, szerk. FALUSI Márton, PÉCSI Györgyi, Budapest, MMA, 2021, 514–515.

Szabó Magda: Erőnk szerint = Magyar irodalmi művek 1956–2016, szerk. FALUSI Márton, PÉCSI Györgyi, Budapest, MMA, 2021, 389–390.

Szabó Magda: Régimódi történet = Magyar irodalmi művek 1956–2016, szerk. FALUSI Márton, PÉCSI Györgyi, Budapest, MMA, 2021, 319–320.

A semlegesség illúziója: Közelítések az Aczél György—Szabó Magda-vonalhoz = Batthyány Lajos Alapítvány Doktori Ösztöndíjprogram Tanulmánykötet 2020/2021, szerk. DEZSŐ Tamás, PÓCZA István, Budapest, Batthyány Lajos Alapítvány, 2022, 710–750.

A Szabó Magda-jelenség = Batthyány Lajos Alapítvány Doktori Ösztöndíjprogram Tanulmánykötet 2021/2022, szerk. DEZSŐ Tamás, PÓCZA István, Budapest, Batthyány Lajos Alapítvány, 2022, 418–426.

Szabó Magda médiaszemélyiségének protestáns gyökerei = Batthyány Lajos Alapítvány Doktori Ösztöndíjprogram Tanulmánykötet 2022/2023, szerk. DEZSŐ Tamás, PÓCZA István, Budapest, Batthyány Lajos Alapítvány, 2023, 254–262.

A látható és láthatatlan Szabó Magda („nekem is csak maszkjaim voltak”. Tanulmányok Szabó Magda életművéről), Új Forrás, 2023/10., 82–87.