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Mingled Minds and Transtextuality in a Contemporary Hungarian Young Adult Novel (And the Case of Compulsory Literature in High Schools)

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Abstract. Re-adapting classical works for Hungarian adolescents bridges the gap between the classic and the contemporary. This paper introduces Borbála Szabó's novel as an example in a larger project that establishes strong intertextual connections with early twentieth century canonical texts reflecting on the friendship of two literary figures, Dezső Kosztolányi, and Frigyes Karinthy. Fictional reality is parodied on several levels almost parasitically and in a hallucinatory manner. It is rearranged with metaleptic gestures relying on the tropology of the schizophrenic mindset. Living in a family of alcoholics, the protagonist, a sixteen-year-old girl is on the verge of a mental breakdown with psychotic episodes whose development is described through connections to literary texts and figures. *NoFather NorMother (Nincsenapám, seanyám)* is a complex and comic novel, a parody of caricatures. Its central image is the closed space. It is replete with transtextual, paratextual, and intertextual references explicitly discussing the status and meaning of literature and demonstrating strategies of interpretation. A *tour de force* of presenting narrative elements, citational techniques, critique, the novel stages the disturbing schizophrenogenic environment of a teenager and enters the debate around compulsory school readings.

Keywords: young adult literature, schizophrenia, intertextuality, metalepsis, canon, Borbála Szabó

> "How dare you speak to me like that! You see, I will not come here anymore and then it is all over for you! You will drop out of literary history"[1]

Besides the recent proliferation of books on taboo topics in the past decade two trends have (re)appeared and intensified in Hungarian young adult fiction: the historical novel and works that re-write classical Hungarian literature—a type of cultural adjustment of old texts to contemporary contexts bridging the larger distance between the classic and the contemporary. Among the latter, Borbála Szabó's young

1 Szabó, *Nincsenapám, seanyám*, 107.

adult novel is a provocative and brilliant text on the uses of literature for adolescent readers. Fictional reality is parodied on several levels almost parasitically and in a hallucinatory manner, it is rearranged with metaleptic gestures relying on the tropology of the schizophrenic mindset. So far, *NoFather NorMother (Nincsenapám, seanyám)* has appeared in three different media: in 2016 it was published as a book, the same year a play with the same title was staged at *Kolibri Pince*, Budapest. In addition, it also came out separately in a volume as a dramatic text, although obviously the play with its sixty-five pages and ten scenes gives a shorter, less elaborate version of the interactions, whereas the novel with its almost three hundred pages and eighteen chapters not only "fills up" the spaces "left behind" in stage directions but develops the relations of the characters much further, focalizing the events through the protagonist's perspective and introducing new scenes.[2] Here, I will focus on the novel, an exhilarating, conflicting, deeply emotional, disturbing, and playful text activating several aspects of reading strategies depending on the reader's literacy and erudition.

The plot speaks of a disturbed family's life, the mechanisms of developing mental illness, namely schizophrenia. It also addresses the question whether literature can do anything about this. The sixteen-year-old protagonist, this character-bound narrator lives with her divorced and alcoholic mother, an unreliable brother, and she is also bound to share her home with the mother's alcoholic partner and the infantile although benevolent grandmother—a productive context for a young girl to go insane. "And now what? Am I hallucinating? I hope I haven't turned schizophrenic!"[3] Regarding the development of personality, these years of puberty are characterized by great emotional turmoil, a developing mind and nervous system where imagination and reality mingle in the process of identity formation. However, due to the intensity of mental, behavioral, and emotional changes in puberty, psychiatric practice abstains from giving a diagnosis of any sort, aware that these extreme mental states are due to a period of rapid transition in brain development and will most likely be balanced over time.[4] However, schizophrenia and the accompanying psychotic states are mental troubles that most radically dissolve boundaries between imagination and reality. A key image is the closed space with various exits as possible escape routes. Centered around these mechanisms, the story also addresses issues discussed in connection with literary works, fiction, and their relationship to reality.

2 Further citations from the novel are marked by the page number of the 2016 edition. See also: *Nincsenapám, seanyám,* Kolibri Pince, September 30, 2016 (theatre performance).

3 Szabó, *Nincsenapám, seanyám*, 57. At a critical point, the grandmother suggests that Bori should go after her mother and give her a kiss (Szabó, *Nincsenapám, seanyám*, 52). A similar scene is evoked and analyzed by R. D. Laing as an example to unfold the mechanism of double-bind situations—leading to schizophrenia. Laing, *The Self and Others*, 127–29. The novel has many scenes that are typical of the double-bind, collision, or denial of reality.

4 Vikár and Vikár, ed., *Dinamikus gyermekpszichiátria*, 53–78.

Secondly, the novel is marked by densely woven intertextual references to canonical Hungarian literary works that are part of the curriculum. On the level of narration its major hypotext is the short story collection *Tanár úr kérem!* [Please, Sir!] written by Frigyes Karinthy and published in 1916, exactly a hundred years prior to Szabó's novel—therefore the young adult novel can also be considered a centenary celebration of Karinthy's oeuvre. Szabó deploys all forms of intertextuality to the extent that, eventually, the reader may no longer be certain which lines are quotes and what counts as authorial, self-identical or original texts, thereby turning the reader into a curious detective in the act of disentangling the two.

The third approach to Szabó's novel focuses on the ongoing debate over what to read in classrooms, how to teach literature to teenagers, how to develop young people into interested readers, how to teach them strategies of interpretation, and how to bring classical literature close to them. The ultimate questions are: What is the use of literature for teenagers? Can the strategy of connecting classical texts to contemporary issues, problems, language, and situations be successful? The recent decade long debate over compulsory readings in Hungary provides this third layer to the novel, an interpretation of its larger context—while avoiding the traps of infinite regression into even larger contexts. The arguments about the uses of literature and traps of interpretation are the explicit focus of several scenes. In this regard, Chapter Ten is perhaps the most symptomatic: as if they were flesh-and-bones characters, the two long-dead writers and lifelong friends, Frigyes Karinthy and Dezső Kosztolányi are obliged to refer orally about their own lives and work, conflicting the knowledge gained about them through textbooks and taught in class, i.e., via the education system. This clash of "authentic", self-identical and canonized information is funny, demoralizing, ironic, and subversive, as it shows the gaps between the production and reception sides, the displacements and absurdities in the process of any interpretation – especially when data about the writers' life are ambiguous. Therefore, the literature teacher is highly dissatisfied with the firsthand biographical data received through Karinthy's oral presentation: "I don't need your crap, Karinthy! We can all see how much you are uninformed about yourself!"[5]

Reading for the Plot: The Onset of Schizophrenia

"Not all who would can be psychotic."[6]

On the level of the plot, *NoFather NorMother* is a story about psychotic states, hallucinations and the mingling of realities; as the title of the book already refers to a

5 Szabó, *Nincsenapám, seanyám*, 139.

6 Laing, *Self and Others*, 38.

poem by Attila József, an early twentieth century poet who suffered from serious mental disturbances that eventually led to his death. The poem is also the cause for the protagonist's failure in her literature class, which ultimately triggers her psychotic states on 31 July 2016. And what exactly are psychosis and schizophrenia? What can trigger such a state? Ronald David Laing, considered one of the fathers of the anti-psychiatry movement—along with Theodore Lidz and Silvano Arieti—and a follower of existential psychology, whose founders were Ludwig Binswanger and Medard Boss, dedicated his life to describing and understanding psychotic states of minds. Working in the Glasgow Royal Mental Hospital Laing had direct experience with people suffering from mental illness of the most severe kind. However, instead of applying officially developed medical protocols—prescribing drugs, administering electroshock, performing lobotomy, etc.[7]—he investigated the nature of the illness as it develops in the context of family life. Laing's approach could be labeled a phenomenological-existential in as much as he openly criticized psychoanalysis and contemporary psychiatric practices, arguing that people's connection to reality constantly evolves during their lifetime in interpersonal relationships and has ontological consequences. Not only does understanding the consciousness of the ill person in the context of existential philosophies gives a map to the disturbances in spatial and temporal perception but it may explain what interferes with the person's social and cultural world, hindering the development of a fairly unified personality and identity.

Existential psychology states that man has an existence in the world, an existence constantly forming through relations with others who in fact make up this world: therefore, ultimately any disturbance can be traced back to disturbed interpersonal relationships. Accordingly, Laing's *Self and Others* is divided into two parts: 1) the modes of interpersonal experience, and 2) the forms of interpersonal acts bringing into focus such concepts as fantasy, delusion, illusion, double-bind situations, lies, identity, elusion and pretense.[8] Laing uses numerous literary examples citing Sartre, Genet, and Dostoevsky—looking into the etiology and logic of mental illness in which these concepts or functions play a crucial part.

Rather than regarding schizophrenia as the biological malfunctioning of the human brain due to some dysfunction in the mind, the body, the environment, some inherited features, or an illness that should be controlled mainly by medication, "Laing conceptualized schizophrenia as an acute attempt to survive irrational and dehumanizing demands made by an insane world".[9] Thus, schizophrenia is

7 Laing, *Wisdom, Madness and Folly*.

8 These concepts overlap with those frequently scrutinized and analyzed in literary or cultural studies.

9 Stolzer, "Early Childhood Experiences," 2.

not a biological malfunction but a response to the socially constructed conflicting and incompatible set of realities during the development of the child or the young adult.[10] As Krámská puts it: "common conflict means ambiguity of the situation, pathological conflict means the ambivalence of the experience".[11] Therefore, schizoid states can no longer be regarded as incurable, chronic, and biogenetic of which there is no escape. Although the dynamics of the medical treatment often reinforce the experience of having no exit from the untenable situation that made the person sick in the first place by diagnosing the disease as incurable. In a sense, schizophrenia as a medical diagnosis is a closure: "Once a 'schizophrenic' there is a tendency to be regarded as always a »schizophrenic«."[12] The label then excludes the ill person from the family, from legitimate or legal discourse, the world of work, and ordinary interpersonal relationships, it makes them scapegoats and finally closes them up in (mental) institutions or locks them up in their homes performing simply another exclusion called "treatment".[13] The contemporary Hungarian young adult novel juggles these exclusions and the closures both physically and mentally—in fact a succession of double-bind situations. Szabó's published book is part of a series for teenage readers called "Vészkijárat" [Emergency Exit]. Thus, the series title already refers to the key element of the narration and the possible resolution.[14]

10 There are several approaches to explaining the etiology of schizophrenia and accompanying psychotic states. The double-bind hypothesis and the dopamine hypothesis (biological model) are the most accepted but from the perspective of existential analysis, psychosis is due to unsatisfied existential needs (the need for the integrity of the self, autonomy, acceptance, love, spirituality, and especially meaning). "Viewing psychosis as a coping mechanism allows one to see positive symptoms as part of the coping process: positive symptoms are the construction of an alternate reality that allows the individual to escape from reality as it actually is. Similarly, negative symptoms are reflective of a withdrawal from reality." Shields, "Psychosis as a Mechanism," 145.

11 Krámská, "The Phenomenology of Insanity," 213.

12 Laing, *The Politics of Experience,* 101. Laing makes quite radical statements elsewhere as well: "A child born today in the U.K. stands a ten times greater chance of being admitted to a mental hospital than to a university, and about one fifth of mental hospital admissions are diagnosed schizophrenic. This can be taken as an indication that we are driving our children mad more effectively than we are genuinely educating them." Laing, *The Politics of Experience*, 85.

13 Foucault, "Madness and Society."

14 Some other books in the series include—by their original publication date—Eve Ainsworth: *Seven Days* (2015), *Damage; Everybody Hurts* (2017), and *Crush* (2016); Neal Shustermann: *Challenger Deep* (2015); Jónina Leósdóttir: *Upp á lif dauða* [A Matter of Life and Death] (2011); Anikó Johanna Nagy: *Egy szót se szólj!* [Don't Talk!] (2019); Erna Sassen: *Er is geen vorm waarin ik pas* [There is No Form I Would Fit] (2017); Eric Lindstrom: *Not If I See You First* (2015); Stefanie Höfler: *Tanz der Tiefseeqalle* (2017); Anna Woltz: *Talking to Alaska* (2016), etc. dealing with problems such as sexual abuse, depression, bullying, abusive relationships, and mental illness. The publisher lists Borbála Szabó's novel under the topic 'panic and anxiety'. Not all books in the series carry the logo. https://www.pagony.hu/minden-amit-tudnod-kell-a-veszkijarat-sorozatrol

The protagonist in Borbála Szabó's novel is a teenager in trouble, who cannot find the way out of a suffocating, delirious, and threatening situation: flunking her literature class and confined to her room during the summer vacation in order to prepare for the end term exam, this sixteen-year-old is hindered from leaving her space, neither can she change the situation in her family. Following her birthday celebration full of pretense and tensions, she would like to go to the bathroom, but the drunken male body of her mother's boyfriend blocks her way—he falls asleep at the door after attempting to sexually abuse her. Unable to control her movement in her physical and mental space, she begins to hallucinate related to the literary topics she studies. Her perception of the space changes: she feels her room is gradually shrinking, and to make matters worse, her two cats start acting and talking like the two literary figures she is studying, Dezső Kosztolányi and Frigyes Karinthy.

Laing states that when people feel good in the systems of fantasy of their relationships, their situation is sustainable. But when diametrically opposing situations occur, impossible to adjust to one other, they arrive at unresolvable and untenable situations—ultimately it will be a door, an emergency exit that ensures escape.[15] "The way out is via the door," and Laing continues by saying "[b]ut within the phantasy of the nexus, to leave is an act of ingratitude, or cruelty, or suicide, or murder. First steps have to be taken still within the phantasy, before it can be apperceived as such. Herein is the risk of defeat and madness."[16] Szabó's protagonist makes attempts to leave her room, but the blockage is all-encompassing: lies from her mother, father and brother, and the drunken body physically creating a barrier in front of her room all contribute to her confinement. Furthermore, the irresponsibility of the father and the mother's boyfriend defines the female space in general: not only Bori but, in her fantasy, her mother also wants to flee this untenable situation.

If there is any literal tragedy in Szabó's novel, it is the blocked door whose materiality and the blocking agent embody the most frequent sickening state in Hungarian families, the so-called "dinosaur in the living room"—obvious, central, and large but denied—and moved to the threshold of the teenager's room: the alcoholic adult. This blockage is a literal and embodied obstacle devoid of any symbolism or metaphoric meaning. It stinks, it is dangerous, it is abusive, it is non-addressable, non-responsive, unconscious, and unmovable at the same time. With its problem presented on the level of the story, the text connects to the tradition of "alcohol literature": Émile Zola, Viktor Yerofeyev, Péter Hajnóczy, Peer Olov Enquist, and Sergei Dovlatov can be listed here, to name just a few. However, even though alcohol addiction has been an all-pervading issue for many families in Hungary, works in Hungarian children's literature hardly ever face the topic. The first story appeared as

15 See Laing, *Self and Others*, 25.

16 Laing, *Self and Others*, 28.

late as 2015. Dóra Elekes' autobiographically inspired children's story, *A muter meg a dzsinnek* [Mum and Her Genies] is a narrative text from the child's point of view about an alcoholic mother. Szabó's novel also addresses the effects of addiction on teenagers living with alcoholic adults.[17]

The opening of *NoFather NorMother* is metaleptic in nature and, in fact, the entire novel is defined by metaleptic configurations. As metalepsis conflates the reality plane with the fictional plane, it presents the issue already at work in the mechanisms of communication in the schizophrenogenic family.[18] The story is characterized by a constant transgression of boundaries, the mingling of fiction, illusion, and reality. This entanglement is evident on the level of the characters and the narrative technique; metalepsis is everywhere—the author's biographical data and those of the fictional character are identical, including their names. Metalepsis as a figure of speech or rather narrative technique here is at work as a series of transgressions dissolving and overstepping boundaries. When the author intrudes in the world of fiction, as it is the case in *Tristam Shandy,* or when the director-actor role is conflated in the final scene of Charlie Chaplin's film, *The Dictator*, metalepsis eliminates the rule, i.e., the domination of fiction. It subverts and questions mimetic immersion in fiction that invites the reader to 'get lost' in the fictive world at the cost of giving up her own reality.[19] It modifies the relationship of the reader to fiction and reality while rejecting the illusion of being able to gain knowledge about the world in a framework defined by unity. *NoFather NorMother* is a story where the family constructs a fiction about their own realities whose power is subverted by the protagonist with ironic gestures. Metalepsis is almost always ironic[20]—the ironic tone of the entire novel is rooted here.

The first chapter is a game of intertextual metalepsis parasitically built on a short story by Karinthy. It introduces the main character, Bori, who is late for school, and upon her arrival she whispers her dream to her classmate. In her dream that takes place in 2038 when she would be thirty-eight years old, she is an established writer, married to a nice man, and has three kids. The novel appeared in 2016

17 Naturally, there are also several contemporary novels about growing up in the alcoholic household and told from the child's point of view, but they often speak to the adult reader. See, for example, the Booker Prize winning book, *Shuggie Bain* by Douglas Stuart from 2020, a dark and sad story, or *Bólébál* [Punch Party] by Tamás Paulinyi from 2008, a deeply ironic, autobiographic Hungarian novel on the bestseller lists at the time of its publication.

18 The metaleptic structure can be manifest in presenting the troubled connection between the real, the fictional and the technologically operated in the context of mental disturbances, as we could see in the 1998 Japanese animation series, *Serial Experiments Lain* (dir. R. Nakamura), a milestone in its kind.

19 Shaffer, "Métalepse et immersion fictionelle," 323–34.

20 Baron, "Éffet metaleptique," 295–310.

when Borbála Szabó was thirty-eight years old. The plot is dated in 2016 when the protagonist is sixteen and would be thirty-eight in 2038—this is a displacement of time to match the time of the future told in the narration to the present time of the author when her text is published. The first chapter in Karinthy's short story collection *Tanár úr kérem!* [Please, Sir!] (1916), the hypotext to this chapter is a retrospective narration about the older author meeting his younger self—the narration of *NoFather NorMother* penetrates into the reality of Karinthy's fictional text. However, Szabó swaps time around and meets her older self projectively in a dream conflating the author's true life and the protagonist's fictional life which is autobiographically sunk within the narrative structure to the level of a *mise en abyme* that is ultimately connected to the present reality of the author. This downward spiral structure entering ever deeper levels of the narration throws the author's present reality to the surface—as if it followed the workings of a maelstrom, a proper image to describe the protagonist's experience in her family—is a recurrent narrative technique in the novel.

The story centers around the question of identity not only on the level of the constructed fictional world and narrative techniques identifying the narrator and focalizer but also on the level of the fable. Family ties and relations described call forth the problematic nature of reality and identity construction in a schizophrenogenic environment. Bori's mother as well as the mother's boyfriend, Kálmán, are alcoholics. They live in the delusional world of addiction, whereas Bori's father is physically absent undermining in the eyes of his daughter all his credit as a reliable parent. Bori's brother[21] only uses her to have access to her money while the grandmother is dedicated to maintaining peace at any cost, denying even the brutal and abusive reality of the home. Having no good choices, only bad ones has dire consequences: "Together with research workers in California, Bateson brought this paradigm of an insoluble 'can't win' situation, specifically destructive of self-identity, to bear on the internal family pattern of communication of diagnosed schizophrenics."[22]

Laing argues that when there is a fantasy system in the family that everyone accepts as the truth, whoever attempts to exit this fantasy is called a mad person—it seems a better choice to label somebody insane than to admit what the reality of the family is, such as massive alcoholism, abuse or destructive irresponsibility and neglect. Historically children and teenagers were not allowed to enter the

21 Curiously enough, the character of the brother is not autobiographical. It was first inserted in the play upon the request of the theater director who wanted an actor in the company of *Stúdió K* to receive a role, as he was the only member of the crew that was left out. Therefore, Szabó added an extra character that found its way into her novel as well. See the conversation conducted when her book was launched on November 23, 2020. https://youtu.be/KMQZFX0Cv9Q.

22 Laing, *The Politics of Experience,* 95.

public sphere consequently their fantasies or inner experiences were confined within household walls with nobody to listen to them. Similarly, Bori, this character-bound narrator is left alone with no ontological security, no public voice of any sort, only her two cats accompanying her in this closure.

Chapter Seventeen explicitly starts with the image of the room as a coffin. There is a knock on the door: "Who is it? — I utter in a hoarse voice and keep thinking where the door should be in this coffin. If the window is straight across, perhaps it is behind me."[23] The chapter is about death but also depicts an extreme scene of parentification—in the footnotes a dramatic dialogue over a game of chess runs parallel to the narrative. The name of the game is "Alcoholic", a life game labelled as such by Eric Berne where the character is bound to play the role of the parentificated Rescuer.[24] However, when the mother articulates her disbelief about what Bori told her, i.e. she acknowledged her as a very good mother, the mother bursts out: "Bah, and I should believe it, right? You always think of yourself. You only use people for your own purposes. But it does not matter for you what is going on with me, eh?"[25] She curls into Bori's lap to be a child. With her mother in her lap, Bori confesses how Kálmán, the mother's partner wanted to sexually abuse her—but she gives no credit to her words, then a few pages later the reader becomes aware of the daughter's view of her mother: "My mom has a dreadful feature and she can alter and modify reality: I simply cannot believe my truth as opposed to hers. She tries it again and she is very close to achieving this aim."[26]

The scene ends with Bori's mother trying to throw herself out of the window instead of admitting the truth about her alcoholic and abusive partner—as did Frigyes Karinthy's wife, Aranka Bőhm, a mentally unstable woman trying to resolve issues of jealousy and cheating, a detail we spot when studying Karinthy's life. Bori has conflicting feelings for her mother, hovering between wanting to toss her out to end all suffering and wanting to save her. At this point, the scene is frozen, all of a sudden time stands still with Frici and Dezső, the two cats discussing the situation. However, they cannot provide any sane answer, only a pastiche, a riddle using the text of the canonical revolutionary poet, Sándor Petőfi about whether one should

23 Szabó, *Nincsenapám, seanyám*, 252.

24 Berne, *Games People Play*, 72–80. As a note on the autobiographical data: Borbála Szabó grew up with a mother demonstrating similar behavior towards her daughter following her divorce.

25 Szabó, *Nincsenapám, seanyám*, 254.

26 Szabó, *Nincsenapám, seanyám*, 260. In an interview, Szabó spoke of her mother being an alcoholic, who from time to time she had to have detoxed. As she admits, growing up with alcoholism meant she had to act as an adult at home taking care of her mother while in school, she constantly misbehaved to have the attention and control of other adults that made her feel a child. The very first interview in the podcast series about contemporary Hungarian children's literature and young adult fiction writers was conducted with Borbála Szabó (series editor: Katalin Vinczellér); https://www.pagony.hu/ezt-hallgatjuk.

be a prisoner or a free man—using literature as a storehouse for ideas replacing the hypnotic discourse of a troubled family heritage. After discussing the necessary distortion of reality and facts, Frici the cat whistles approvingly: "Mum is a professional player!" referring to the massive life-threatening game of emotional blackmail and manipulation involving Bori but also referring to the game played in the marriage of the Karinthys.[27]

As we move further, in this last chapter, about the delirious hallucinatory existence, the story reaches a double end—an idea introduced by John Fowles on the last pages of the 1969 *French Lieutenant's Woman*, one of the first postmodern historical fiction novels with three possible endings.[28] By saving the mother, Bori needs to withdraw from her reality and succumb to the illusionary lies maintained by her family, especially her mother. Again, she runs ahead in time to 2038 and sees a scene from her life as the mother of a young teenage boy who repeats his grandmother's act. Upon seeing the possible future effects of her choice, Bori changes her mind and refuses to take part in her mother's game. As soon as she acts according to the reality she experienced and expresses her love for her mother, the room changes:

> "And then all of a sudden the room slowly begins to expand, my small, dark, collapsed room. It becomes light, airy, and large, even larger and brighter. And Mum in the window glides far away like a ship upon which she is the one steering the wheel. Her hair is blown by the wind. I take my coat and grab my books. I will be back soon, I tell her and step out of the door."[29]

But this is not the ultimate end of the novel. Bori goes back to school when her novel is finished—the novel we read and hold in our hands making the last chapter perform another transgression—and she finds that the students in the benches are her family members and characters from her life, a surreal scene set in the context of a school environment. They all recite poems of their choice that eventually reveal their feelings, views, and relationships. The very last image closing the book transforms the intertextual polyphony and the maelstrom-like narrative technique into a dream-like scene of simultaneous voices reciting their favorite poems and displaying various discourses on an "auditive surface":

> "Everybody murmurs, buzzing and humming their own poems to themselves. They sound like a strange orchestra or choir to me. The Choir of Angels, haha, I laugh to myself. Then I close my eyes and keep listening."[30]

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27 Harmos Ilona, *Karinthyról.*

28 In children's literature Gianni Rodari was the first to experiment with multiple endings in 1977 in a series of tales.

29 Szabó, *Nincsenapám, seanyám*, 270.

30 Szabó, *Nincsenapám, seanyám*, 283.

Closed Spaces

> "He went to the bathroom and forgot his name. When he remembered he thought he was locked up. He started to twitch the doorknob and kick the door."[31]

The book cover is designed in shades of grayish blue by István Orosz, an emblematic Hungarian graphic artist and animation director. It shows the image of a room from above through which we see the face of a young girl as well as her back as she is lying over her desk. Her eyes are a pair of shoes—symbols of movement and tools for escape—her mouth is the pencil that holds a bun together over the female head; one might think it is a symbol of writing or literature in general that might pull her mind together. Her two cats and other belongings lie scattered around on the shelves and on the floor. The letters in the title are set in yellow, as well as the emblem—framed by a black arrow pointing to the outside world, beyond the book—in the bottom right corner. The last page that follows the content page is dedicated to the credo of the series as a peritext:

> EMERGENCY EXIT BOOKS
>
> "They are books of the "Trespassers will…" series addressing tough topics or invisible problems. Look for the sign!
> Your problem is like a room where you are locked up. But there is an exit, you just need to know where to look.
> The emergency exit is there within arm's reach. The emergency exit may be an adult, a friend, a brother or sometimes even a book. There is always an emergency exit in every situation, go and look for it!"[32]

The emblem depicting the emergency exit on the cover and the back of the novel visually mark the central idea. The text as a written credo established by the series editor, Dóra Péczely, creates a profile controlling the diversification of the publisher's activities, setting the clear aims of the *Emergency Exit* series[33]. The peritext demonstrates the intention of supporting teenagers in times of danger and trouble, but this wording also contains the central image of the narrative text of *NoFather NorMother*. Besides, Chapter Five, in which unspeakable things happen, including the unwanted visit by Kálmán and his abusive behavior, culminates in the command: "The door!!!" Normally, adolescents shut their doors to express their autonomy by creating their own space, however, here this is not the case. Chapter

31 *A halál kilovagolt Perzsiából* [Death Rides Away from Persia], a short novel by Péter Hajnóczy published in 1979, mixing autobiographical elements of his alcoholism with fictional scenes.

32 Szabó, *Nincsenapám, seanyám*, 288.

33 Genette, *Paratexts*, 22.

Six with its subtitle: "In which a door is closed but another one opens" pushes the story further along the image of the exit, conjuring the dramatic texts we know from the so-called "Theatre of the Absurd", specifically Jean-Paul Sartre's *Huis clos* (1944) and Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party* (1957).

According to Laing, "*Huis Clos* reveals the agony of failure to sustain identity when the project of one's life is such that a tolerable self-identity requires collusion."[34] Contrary to the two dead women and a dead man in Sartre's play retrospectively discussing their lives, in Szabó's novel this sixteen-year-old girl with her two male cats is involved in a dramatic situation set in a hallucinated world from which she tries to step out in order to start living her adult life and perhaps to construct her identity. But first she must overcome identity patterns constructed by the mechanism of collusion. Collusion—when two or more people agree to deceive themselves, an identity formation process among family members in agreement with a false reality and identity that they sustain by verifying this identity or reality for each other—is only possible for her through the connection to her two male cats whose identities are already intertextually embedded into fictional worlds.

In Szabó's novel, there is yet another exit through another, unreal door, a threshold between the reality of the shrinking material world of the room and the hallucinatory fictional world. Finally, Bori enters this hallucinatory space, a space of psychosis—or imagination—physically completely immersed in the world of two dead writers residing in the early twentieth century cafés in Budapest. However, Szabó's novel is not a story where reality is almost completely lost, as is the case in Venedikt V. Yerofeyev's *Moscow-Petushki* or Péter Hajnóczy's writings.[35] *A halál*

34 Laing, *Self and Others*, 94. Laing not only uses Sartre's play to demonstrate the difficulties in human interactions, he also analyzes Genet's play, *The Balcony* at length to discuss the issue of false identities. He often refers to Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* to understand the onset of psychotic states in the light of Friedrich Nietzsche's famous story with the horses that eventually triggered Nietzsche's mental breakdown.

35 V. V. Yerofeyev's cult novel about the trip from Moscow to Petushki is an alcohol trip full of allusions to Russian literature, including Gogol's *Dead Souls*—a novel about the world beyond reality. *Moscow–Petushki* merges the tragic with the comic, the perspectives of above and below, it presents drinking scenes, discusses in detail basic biological functions such as urination—it is collective laughter over our problems. The narrator carries the same name as the author. All of this might place Yerofeyev's work as a hypotext to *NoFather NorMother*: Goretity, "Töredékesség és teljességigény."

In 2011, András Jeles, an experimental Hungarian director often transgressing genre conventions, adapted the novel onto the stage in a small black box theatre (RS9) tightening up the space even more to create a claustrophobic, jammed scene which is too packed to stay within but impossible to get out of (Cf: Darida, "Belső színpad," 149–52). Although unintentionally, this trip becomes a round trip taking the narrator back to the starting point and creates a circular movement in life, an endless return for nothing. V. V. Yerofeyev's cult novel about the

kilovagolt Perzsiából [Death Rides Away from Persia] by Hajnóczy was considered to be a key text in the prose turn of the late 1970s, introducing a narrator struggling with his own alcoholism while trying to establish himself in society. In the hallucinatory scenes, he depicts delirious states of mind that by now have turned out to be instances of ekphrasis. In contrast to the musical tone of Péter Esterházy's novels, or Péter Nádas's sensual writings, Hajnóczy's visionary prose heavily relies on many sorts of images and photographs.[36] In Szabó's narration, psychosis is a state of mind where resolution is possible through other texts, through the understanding of literary characters and through dialogues with the literary field. Even her psychosis, the effect of living with alcoholic caretakers, is intertextual.

Acknowledging the impossibility of exiting through the door to face the reality of her family and beyond, to the world of schoolmates, she enters another door opened in the corner—a gesture well known from children's literature, more specifically from *Alice in Wonderland, The Chronicles of Narnia,* etc. However, as opposed to the portal-quest fantasy literature where a new world is revealed and explored, Bori enters the world of another literary text, namely Kosztolányi's short story and the historical space it refers to. The idea of the writers as cats is, at the same time, an allusion to Karinthy's oeuvre; in his short story listing all the prohibitions imposed upon citizens, instructions on how to live a practical life within new rules, he closes the text by writing "Moreover I was two cats in my dream".[37] If due to institutional constraints or familial hallucinations, hard core social reality is untenable, perhaps literary fiction and literary imagination are there to heal—as a tool, so to speak, Binswanger lists among the three possible paths when meeting the Dreadful. These three paths are (paranoid) madness, poetic vision, and the phenomenological view on the essential. For the madman, the Dreadful becomes his destiny with no way out, his existence being a closure with infinite regressions, a suffering existence immersing her in anxiety. The other two, the poet and the phenomenologist, are tortured by this grimness, but they are familiar with the anxiety, and they are able to retain the freedom of returning to existence, to the realm of their existential possibilities and their natural experiences. The Dreadful for the poet is an annihilating power, a power that eradicates trust, however the poet examines it in its existential structures and the changes of its structure. Both the poet and the existential analyzer have to

trip from Moscow to Petushki is an alcohol trip full of allusions to works of Russian literature, among them Gogol's *The Dead Souls*—a novel about the world beyond reality. Moscow to Petushki merges the tragic with the comic, the perspectives of above and below, it presents drinking scenes, discusses basic biological functions in detail such as urination—it is a collective laughter over our problems. The narrator of the text carries the same name as the author. All of this might place Yerofeyev's work as a hypotext to *NoFather NorMother.*

36 Győri, "Hajnóczy és a prózafordulat."

37 Karinthy, "Ötórai záróra."

walk the path of the structural change of their full existence. [38] Existential analysis however relies on communicated existence and regards the encounter of two people as a free encounter between free people. Therefore, literature is one option of leaving the door open for this return to the Dasein of existence, a communication, a mapping of the significant and intermingled paths of one's life story. Opening the door to literature guarantees the freedom of choice to communicate and exit.

The door is a key element in the theater as well. As Szabó has worked for stage productions as a dramatic advisor and has produced plays herself, no wonder her novel relies on basic theatrical images. Family dramas presented at the turn of the nineteenth century by Ibsen, Strindberg, and others used the door with a special emphasis: the door was leading out of the space of the bourgeois family dramas, while in the mid-twentieth century, Harold Pinter rendered the door almost mythical. In his second full length play, written in 1957 and considered a masterpiece of absurd theatre, Pinter stages two intruders that mess up the quiet life of a couple, Meg and Stanley. *The Birthday Party,* with its scenes on menacing forces, the rape attempt, the party with a tremendous amount of alcohol consumed again serves as an intertextual reference to the birthday scene presented in Chapter Three in *NoFather NorMother.* Pinter's play stages a door behind which Stanley disappears when menacing forces are approaching.[39]

Just like Pinter's *The Birthday Party,* Bori's birthday party in Chapter Three is also a mess, a calamity, a tense scene of lies, denial and deceit, characters calling each other to account, a clash of realities, declaring each other "not okay".[40] The early reviews of Pinter's plays were replete with summarizing the story as critics had major difficulty describing the plot. Pinter simply did not provide any biographical data for his characters—as opposed to Szabó, whose work is fully autobiographical. The identities of Pinter's characters are not just vague but deliberately hidden—and they only "pretend to be themselves".[41] The tremendous amount of mendacity inherent in the play, as well as in Szabó's novel serves the avoidance of identity, which most of Pinter's plays are about.[42] However, at one point, *NoFather NorMother* exposes the supposed true intentions, feelings, motivations, and thoughts of the characters in Chapter Fourteen so that we, the readers—together with the teenagers learning

38 Binswanger, "Az ember helye a pszichiátriában," 262.

39 "Stanley slips on his glasses, slides through the kitchen door and out of the back door." Pinter, "The Birthday Party," 21.

40 From the perspective of transaction analysis, the life position of "I am okay, the others are not" gives way to massive projections, and a superiority position, obviously to compensate the unbearable.

41 Almansi, *Pinter Idioms of Lies*, 74.

42 Almansi, *Pinter Idioms of Lies*, 73–75.

about the human character—understand the false, pretended identities, and the motivations behind the games people play.

Bori declares in the lit class that literature is a heap of shit.[43] Students are not supposed to read "toilet paper literature",[44] as their teacher warns them. The protagonist is concerned about being able to urinate—which she eventually does during the hallucinogenic scene when she enters the New York Café of the early twentieth century Budapest through an imaginary portal located at the cat loo in the corner.[45] Much literature in general, but Szabó's novel especially is centered around the body, its menial functions, and secretion—literature has much to do with secretion and madness. In fact, in the context of her interpersonal relationships, the character bound narrator-protagonist of the novel has two unmediated bodily experiences: one is Kálmán's attempted rape in her loft bed, a perverse male body touching her[46] and she kicking his body. The other one is her mother's whining body begging for security and protection curled up in Bori's lap. Not only is her physical body as an object of possible damage or injury exposed to and abused by others but her existential body is also at risk: entering the world of other bodies, the intercorporeal dialogue manifested in movements and connections is either misplaced or aggressive (Kálmán trying to connect to Bori instead of her mother, Bori tensing her sole against Kálmán's chest to kick him off the bed) or inverted and manipulated (she needs to cuddle her own mother as if she were the child). Both of her unmediated bodily experiences are perverse in the tensions they create.

According to Medard Boss, perversions are the consequences of the tension between the loving existence-in-the world and some kind of finite-earthly narrowness, the disconcerted, alternately tuned coercive existence constrained into boundaries.[47] Due to the limits of this coercive existence giving way to the quest for love through which this loving existence could be experienced and transmitted to the next generation, i.e., to teenagers, becomes impossible for adults. Therefore, it is the adult that is perverted. Any search for a loving existence is an impasse, it is the adult who plays (life) games. The teenager is both a witness to and a victim of the massive failure in this quest for a loving existence. This impasse, a model not worthy of imitation, depending on the sensitivity and predisposition of the person and the seriousness of the existential double-bind can be overcome by various strategies: denial, escape, suicide, hypomania, depression, psychosis, addictions, etc. Or identification

43 Szabó, *Nincsenapám, seanyám*, 27.

44 Szabó, *Nincsenapám, seanyám*, 34.

45 "Thank you for being able to pee into your loo" she says to her cats, after urinating into the cat litter box (Szabó, *Nincsenapám, seanyám*, 114).

46 "Take your hands off me, you perverse moron!" (Szabó, *Nincsenapám, seanyám*, 85).

47 Medard Boss, cited in Condrau, *Freud és Heidegger,* 80.

with great idols, maybe a dialogue with literary characters who discuss the meaning of existence and the meaning of experience.

Intertextual Games

> "Those who address the problem of the autobiographical or fictional character of a literary work pose the wrong question."[48]

NoFather NorMother is a novel whose hypotext is Frigyes Karinthy's 1916 *Tanár úr kérem!* [Please, Sir!] series of humoresques about school life. Szabó's first three chapters are straightforward parodies of Karinthy's introductory chapter and the chapters called *"I am Late"* and *"The Bad Student Tested"*. The title, *NoFather NorMother,* however, is an intertextual reference to a canonical poem by a mentally troubled Hungarian writer, Attila József.[49] The poem itself is the cause of the character-bound narrator-protagonist's failure at school. Although Bori cites the interpretation of the poem provided by her textbook, her teacher Ms. Rózsa Vörös is deeply dissatisfied with the answer calling her and the entire class complete idiots. What is going on here? Is it simply a scene staged so frequently in young adult literature about the horrid, rebellious, or ignorant student, or perhaps something more? Obviously, it is both the authority of the textbook and that of the teacher that are challenged: with her abusive remarks about the class misfiring due to the parodistic nature of the situation, her status as an authoritative voice fails irretrievably already by the time, she questions the authority of the textbook.[50]

When later the same literature teacher, Ms. Rózsa Vörös, tests her students again in an ordinary school situation—a scene full of allusions to canonical Hungarian literary characters—she openly prefers Kosztolányi, a writer and poet of aesthetic modernity to Karinthy, a techno-optimistic writer producing many short satirical and parodistic pieces. Kosztolányi is given forty pages in the textbook, while Karinthy is allocated only fifteen lines. The two writers evoked in person start arguing about

48 Szegedy-Maszák, *Kosztolányi,* 327.

49 His father left the family when he was three, his mother struggled to provide for the children, fell seriously ill a few years later, and died of ovarian cancer when Attila József was fourteen. The poem, whose title is *With a Pure Heart* [*Tiszta szívvel*] addresses the issue of being an orphan, excluded, with no social or human values to adhere to. See translations at https://www.babel-matrix.org/works/hu/J%C3%B3zsef_Attila-1905/Tiszta_sz%C3%ADvvel/en

50 "Well, she does not really believe me, she asks me where I get these stupid ideas from?! Now she bursts out screaming at the top of her lungs and then I respond: from the textbook. She begins to flap the desk madly and along with the rhythm of the flapping moves she says: the quotations from the textbook should only be used, my son, when you truly understand what they are talking about!!!" (Szabó, *Nincsenapám, seanyám,* 33).

their own significance and, finally, Karinthy succumbs to Kosztolányi, accepting his status in the canon. In return, Kosztolányi consoles him: "Do not grieve over your career, my friend. Even if your oeuvre happens to sink into some misty oblivion, your name will continue to live on in my works, my dear Kaniczky".[51] This last sentence alone may sum up the rhetorical and discursive technology inherent in the novel and its relationship to other literary works. The irony of the sentence lies in the literary achievement of the function of the aesthetic effect replacing intertextuality that would provide the basis for the connections between two texts or oeuvres.

Karinthy called his parodies *caricatures*. Parodies tend to retain the discursive technique while changing the subject, they are a form of philosophical deconstruction, while caricatures are based on the parodied writer's style. They bring forth what is strange and special in the works—Karinthy wrote caricatures in his seminal 1912 volume published under the title *Így írtok ti* [This is How You Write]. The caricature is not an imitation but an exaggeration of a few characteristic features.[52] Szabó's novel uses both parody and caricature as discursive techniques. It also dissolves the settings and scenes presented in classical works into contemporary and ordinary situations while using the colloquial language of adolescents. Her novel as a parody rewrites earlier texts; therefore, it attempts to rearrange the tradition with an ironic tone.[53]

The citation technique in *NoFather NorMother* varies greatly. We find direct quotes, for example, from Kosztolányi's existential poem "Dawnstruck", that in 2001 received the most votes for being the most beautiful Hungarian poem. It might not be the best poem, however, but its popularity is due to its anagogic closure: "with its closing lines it promises the hope for certainty".[54] Chapter Four is about a dialogue between the text of this poem and the girl in the room, a dialogue joined by the two cat-writers. Instead of interpreting Kosztolányi's own work they quarrel over the status of writers in literature, their attitudes and complacency: "you intellectual bloodsucker, you, who steal even those lines that have not yet been written" Kosztolányi blames his friend, Karinthy for his parodies when he criticizes "Dawnstruck" for not being an original work.

Chapter Seven quotes some lines from poems by Kosztolányi, but also "borrows" entire passages verbatim from one chapter of his *Kornél Esti* cycle of short stories, "September 10, 1919". By Chapter Eleven, the reader is uncertain about the true or hallucinatory nature of the scenes. The threat inherent in the confusion of

51 Szabó, *Nincsenapám, seanyám*, 131.

52 Balogh, "A paródia mint az erőszak és a szeretet formája."

53 Bónus, "1912 – Megjelenik az *Így írtok ti.*"

54 Szegedy-Maszák, *Kosztolányi*, 410.

time and space is even more drastic when the father arrives to save her daughter. Chapter Eleven ends in a Beckettian tone: "Everything is alright, everybody loves you. We are all here, we are all here for you—he says—and leaves".[55] This is when the protagonist's world begins to completely fall apart; one of the cats refers to a short play by Frigyes Karinthy, *Teknősbéka, vagy ki az őrült a csárdában* [The Turtle, or Who is the Mad Person in the Bar?] set in an insane asylum where "it is not so obvious at all who the nurse and who the patient is".[56]

From this point, references are becoming more numerous to writers and their work; complete poems are cited as if indiscriminately. Chapter Thirteen and Fourteen provide counterexamples to the lies and deceit narrated so far. A walk to a city where everybody says what they think, a utopian city described in Karinthy's style, and by introducing a truth telling chair at home allowing all family members to admit their true intentions, the reader senses the absurdity of the full truth, the grotesque nature of naked honesty—a perfect topic for teenagers to discuss ideas about authenticity and social masquerade. Chapter Fifteen is a pastiche of Karinthy's novel, *Mennyei riport* [Celestial Report], therefore Frici's complaint to Didus (Kosztolányi's nickname) is ironic: "I would not have minded if, to finish with, we had quoted some lines from my work too",[57] as the lines do not, but the tone, the genres, discursive techniques, and the situations repeatedly evoke Karinthy's oeuvre. Parody and caricature are never a mechanical repetition or reproduction but an innovative literary approach to other texts, inviting readers to position themselves and look at them from a critical point of view—comparisons are critical through their relationships to tradition. In this respect, the main achievement of Szabó's novel is its parody: this travesty of the oeuvre, and the personal relationship to the greatest caricature writer in the Hungarian literary canon.

NoFather NorMother is not only a reference to a poem by Attila József but, as mentioned before, it is reference to its author and his life: mental issues, possibly schizophrenia, leading to his death. Kosztolányi also experimented with the double self; the Doppelgänger, the split self appears in literature for example in the works of E.T.A. Hoffmann, Dostoevsky, Oscar Wilde, Stevenson, Paul Valéry, etc.[58] In fact, the very name Kálmán, the alcoholic boyfriend of the protagonist's mother, might be considered a reference to the names of Kosztolányi's son, Ádám, whom his father called Kornél when he was a good boy, but Kálmánka when he misbehaved.[59] The *Kornél*

55 Szabó, *Nincsenapám, seanyám*, 169.

56 Szabó, *Nincsenapám, seanyám*, 174.

57 Szabó, *Nincsenapám, seanyám*, 271.

58 The first summary of the double was published in 1925 by Otto Rank on the *Doppelgänger*. This book is a psychoanalytic approach to the appearance of the "divided self" in literature.

59 Szegedy-Maszák, *Kosztolányi*, 328–29.

Esti collection of stories also goes back to the problem of the double self. Moreover, the cycle with its seventeen chapters—published in forty-one self-standing variations prior to the book format—raises questions about the identity of the text; editors also varied the number of chapters.[60] In the case of Szabó's novel, the reader is getting increasingly more suspicious of references to other literary texts. For example, upon seeing her birthday gift, Bori finds an alternative way to use the colorful hair bands: "I will just shoot her eye with a neon green rubber band",[61] she says. A situation the reader might link to the opening scene of László Garaczi's second novel in his Lemur series; the scene introducing the narrator who just shoots a woman with a U-shaped nail by accident through the window only to be punished severely for his act.[62]

Compulsory School Readings

> "Canon formation is a two-faced phenomenon. On the one hand it requires us to bring the past into balance with present interests with the help of interpretative processes, on the other hand it urges us to push the historical nature of works into the background."[63]

Young adult literature, a genre distinguished from children's literature since 1957, the year when the Young Adult Library Services Association was established creating a new category of books addressed to an adolescent public, can be used as a scaffold for teaching classical works. Scaffolding is a method introduced to support students in reading complex texts. It has two basic techniques. "Reading ladders" means moving from simple texts to more complex ones; book series for beginner and young readers are a case in point as they serve the gradual development of the level of reading from basic to more sophisticated texts. "Bridging", a teaching methodology developed about twenty years ago, is a more complex issue whereby two texts, a young adult novel and a classical piece, are connected through their theme, characters, plot, or setting; these novels are usually considered entry texts to high complexity classical works. Secondary school students tend to connect more easily with contemporary works addressing issues that serve as clues to their lives and use a language reflecting their own.

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60 Szegedy-Maszák, *Kosztolányi*, 339.

61 Szabó, *Nincsenapám, seanyám*, 42.

62 Garaczi, *Pompásan buszozunk*. It is not just the topic and the reaction but also the style of the discourse that might connect the two texts. Anyhow, Garaczi relied heavily on Kosztolányi's poetics in general, therefore the young adult novel refers to another "user" of the Kosztolányi heritage (Szegedy-Maszák, *Kosztolányi*, 362).

63 Szegedy-Maszák, "A bizony(talan)ság ábrándja," 199.

This scaffolded transition into classical texts makes it much easier for teenagers to learn ways of interpretation and facilitates their love for books and their enjoyment in reading. Young adult literature in general stages adolescent heroes and their coming-of-age story, which does not usually reach a happy ending. Contributing significantly to the intellectual stimulation of the reader, the main topic of these novels is often controversial, and the text engages the reader with much humor. Both "bridging" and "reading ladders" need at least two texts, but whereas "bridging" is a method usually comparing two novels, "reading ladders" utilizes a series of texts, moving from simple language to more complex texts. While "reading ladders" is useful for beginner readers, "bridging" is productive for teaching teenagers. "Bridging" can be a very effective method with young adult literature because teenagers might become deeply involved, they learn to judge the aesthetic qualities of various literary works that expose them to the controversial world of their own, and it introduces topics that are quite common in classical literature.[64]

Besides its intertextual connections, Borbála Szabó's novel can be used as a young adult novel for bridging – albeit not in comparison with one single text but with entire oeuvres. In this respect, it is hardly possible to link it with one specific novel from the canon of Hungarian literature, but it definitely offers itself for discussions about the *Nyugat* period in the first half of the twentieth century, and about reading literature in general. In this respect, *NoFather NorMother* reflects on the methodology of "bridging" and performs comparisons within the narrative. Anyway, rewriting the classics for young adult readers has become a notable tendency in the past decade: most recently, a new adventure book series has been launched by the Atheneum Publishing House, rewriting classical Hungarian works into interactive book formats, a new subtype of the genre emerging today.

Szabó's novel does not only contribute to understanding how we construct meaning in literature; it is also a book for adolescents about emotional distress, the effects of addiction, conflicts at school and at home, about moral issues, and although at certain points it occasionally uses vulgar language, it offers a large spectrum of registers. It is an entertaining, funny but, at the same time, shocking narrative; reading it is engaging, while it activates our ethical attitudes to the world, to questions of identity formation and responsibility and, in a way, suggests that literature can save lives. But how does it fit into the debate over compulsory readings in schools? What do canons do? What do caricatures and irony have to do with them? Why are they important? How does Szabó's novel answer these questions?

Obviously, texts need to be read at school, they are part of the curriculum. Nevertheless, "teaching" canonical literature can be performed through popular literature. This is not a new technique, as a hundred years ago Frigyes Karinthy's

64 Rybakova and Roccanti, "Connecting the Canon," 31–45.

caricatures already contributed to his contemporaries' popularity. Laughing at European and Hungarian authors with Karinthy, the wider public started to read the original texts that were caricatured.[65] However, ironically, Bori cites Karinthy in *NoFather NorMother* as an antithesis to the creativity required for learning about the world: *"I had no time to learn because I was constantly taught."*[66] Learning to establish connections freely through the enjoyment of reading may be a very productive teaching method and should be used at school.

Since around 2014, the standardization of textbooks together with the fixed national curriculum and agenda to be taught in elementary, middle, and high schools have triggered a fierce debate about compulsory readings. In a chapter on the normality of canon change, Herbert Lindenberger, professor at Stanford University reports on discussions over reading lists for university students due to the continuously developing literary field. As canons need to be occasionally revised, he looks somewhat deeper into the rules and history of canon formation, listing three different models: 1) the selection of texts as exemplified by the canonization of ancient Greek plays; 2) the institutionalization and ideologies that formed the German literary canon in the nineteenth century; 3) the game of chess played on the table of contemporary cultural tendencies.[67]

Besides these strategies of canon formation, available technologies also play a crucial part in experiencing art and reality leading to the appearance of narratives about the loss of tradition by the end of the twentieth century; nevertheless, cultural canons and the medium of transmitting knowledge continue to be the responsibility of written texts. However, film adaptations, the spread of television and other media technologies replacing literature intensified the process. In sum: "Optical media is blamed for the dangerous shrinking in the size of the corpus of canons of erudition and schooling."[68] The film as a new *psychotechnology* supports the distinction between inner and external experiences, whilst it might not entirely replace the book or other forms of art, always leaving some space for what Ludwig Pfeiffer called the absence of performance in literature.[69]

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65 Kosztolányi's work has been repeatedly accused of being a too light, carefully stylized, ironic, superficial prose, lacking the description or approach of social or aesthetic depths, all in all, a literature of manners. Although Kosztolányi was fascinated with music, radio, and moving images, Karinthy was a great admirer of science and technological inventions of all sorts, and had a utopian thinking—in many ways he was more progressive than his friend even though criticism repeatedly accused him of never publishing his grand narrative, only shorter pieces.

66 Szabó, *Nincsenapám, seanyám*, 152. This is another quote from Karinthy. Originally running "we had no time to learn as we were constantly taught."

67 Lindenberger, "The Normality of Canon Change", 132–37.

68 Hansági, "Kanonizáció és medialitás," 135.

69 Hansági, "Kanonizáció és medialitás," 143; Pfeiffer, *The Protoliterary*.

The canon is a continuous rearrangement of the selective tradition, and institutions are the main guards of this tradition where classical works can never be completely replaced by contemporary ones. The linguistic and cultural horizon of classical works tends to be at a larger distance from the horizon of the present; they tend to be experimental pieces of their times with a complexity resisting easy and light reading for pleasure.[70] In the 1990s with the liberalization of the book trade and publishing activities after the decades long censorship operated by the Socialist and Communist government, having been historically and linguistically distanced, many canonical and classical works no longer seemed accessible for children and teenagers. The idea of replacing them with contemporary works emerged, endangering some items on the old reading lists. A replacement of this sort, however, may create a rift, a gap in the continuity of tradition.

According to Ágnes Hansági, recently the status of children's literature has changed considerably, its prestige has diminished, in the same way as literature in general. Growing distrust towards the school system and the core knowledge it transmitted and the introduction of digital learning did not help either. However, the ability to read works of the past ensures access to language and the opportunity to learn one's own mother tongue at a high standard, while it also guarantees access to familial, community, and national tradition. Consequently, not being able to read classical works leads to the impairment of cultural memory. The act of reading as a cultural technique—an idea dating back to Zsigmond Kemény, a nineteenth century Hungarian writer—contributes to the ability to act in general, especially in times of rapid technological changes when access to information, on which decisions and acts are based, is vital.[71]

Keeping the continuity of tradition, making the readability of cultural memory available ensures literacy for the next generations. The debate is not so much about the contrast between contemporary and classical works, it is more about choices and proper ratios. Canons are necessary as Mihály Szegedy-Maszák argues, but we have to keep in mind that any canon is the product of imagination, nevertheless, no interpretation can exist without them. Eliminating tradition is only an illusion, and we can never be free of the influence of the prejudice of earlier times. Each work can and should be read in relation to other works—as it is demonstrated in *NoFather NorMother*. What matters is not the history of the development of individual works but the influence they exercise on each other—and this is a liberating perspective, which the bridging method actually introduces to the classroom. After all, the canons formed and the interpretation of the works are established by institutions and taught in schools but, at the same time, they are robust tools in the hands

70 Hansági, "Kánonon innen és kánonon túl," 210.

71 Hansági, "Kánonon innen és kánonon túl," 208–25.

of power that can appropriate them.[72] Reading contemporary works that rely on classics involves acts of reinterpretation, re-attribution, and recreation but it can also be regarded as their thorough critique.

On the last pages of Borbála Szabó's novel, we find a list of directly quoted authors to guide readers. The plot is universal enough to offer itself for reading without necessarily having to observe the dense intertextual character of the narrative, although the game of identifying the quotes, the echo of other texts speaking to the reader is the novel's definitive feature. Szabó imitates Karinthy' gesture, but her novel is not a 'simple' caricature or parody but a caricature of caricatures. By parodying high school classics, teenagers may return to their compulsory readings cited in contemporary texts, read them closely and in dialogue with the book that, on the level of the plot, addresses many of their personal problems.

NoFather NorMother keeps classical texts alive. It also centers around a question about identity formation: if there are no acceptable identities provided in the family or in one's closer environment, how can culture show the way out? Literary texts may contribute to one's identity formation; providing implicit models is one function of literature.[73] Literature may become an addiction to this dialogic nature, opening up an endless line of conversation. At the end of the novel, with texts talking simultaneously around the protagonist's head, this hyperreality blurring the boundaries between fiction and reality offers Bori a selection of choices or a compilation of something new in terms of the attitude underlining the possibility to escape sickening narratives of family systems through the availability of other discourses.

By writing a contemporary novel heavily relying on works of the early twentieth century, Szabó responds to this debate and looks at the classics from a contemporary point of view. She does not carve out an official space for her viewpoint in the field of literary studies publicized in professional forums, journals, online magazines, or educational publications. By choosing the novel as her genre, she locates herself in the field of literature, her response to the debate is formed through the very medium the debate addresses. With this small but brilliant book perhaps too heavily condensing contemporary issues in the literary field, as well as compressing all three major genres, the drama, the lyric text, and the narrative,[74] Borbála Szabó presents a private problem around literature: her fiction may be regarded as a witty

72 Szegedy-Maszák, "A bizony(talan)ság ábrándja," 183–201.

73 See the chapter on identity and subjectivity in Culler, *Literary Theory*.

74 A similar "condensation strategy" is used by another book: Varró and Szabó, *Líra és epika*. In this illustrated book, the authors chose to use the genre of drama to discuss issues concerning lyric texts and epic narration. The work is full of self-referential remarks, extra-textual references, the conflation of character, writer, author, who are in argument with one another most of the time.

demonstration of how to talk about literature filtered through the literary canon, the public debate around the uses of literature and private issues choosing the genre of autobiographical parody as a framework for her story. Certainly, the main character declares ironically at the beginning:

> "It will not be an autobiographical novel and the main character is a fictive girl who in fact does not think of her love and is not called Borbála, since she is not called by any name at all. This girl could be anybody. Even you, Sir, you could be her."[75]

The fact that Szabó is deeply committed to conveying to teenagers the transformative experience of reading classical literature in contemporary contexts is quite clear from her second young adult novel. *A János vitéz-kód* [John the Valiant Code] narrates a school story where, after winning a math contest, a group of four kids is forced to be involved in a literary task. One of them sits in the library and is literally engulfed by the epic poem of Sándor Petőfi, a compulsory reading for fifth graders. Although the engulfment scene evokes Michael Ende's seminal novel, *The Neverending Story* from 1979, where an eleven-year-old boy is lost in fiction when visiting a used bookstore and sitting down in a secluded corner, Szabó's novel is not a travel adventure into the land of fantasy. It is a novel set in the tone of Gianni Rodari's short book, *Gip Inside the Television*, originally published in 1962, translated and printed in Hungarian in 1976, the year of Borbála Szabó's birth. Rodari's hero, the eight-year-old Gip is sucked in by the television set, and his adventures are followed by viewers around the globe as he appears at various locations, only to be brought back from space—a cosmic trip aired by the media.[76] Rodari's book was very inventive introducing the effects of media technology in children's literature some sixty years ago, while it also pointed out the interference of mediatized and direct bodily experiences.[77] Szabó's second novel plays with the interference of texts and bodily experiences, the metaleptic jump to a narrative poem, and the effect this jump exercises on the text. This jump allows a notable ironic critique of contemporary official views on the national curriculum, along with a satiric introduction to

75 Szabó, *Nincsenapám, seanyám*, 14.

76 Rodari, *Beleestem a tévébe.* In Rodari's futuristic and surreal story Gip is in trouble because of his math grade. While watching tv in their living room, he is sucked in by the tv set. He appears at different locations depending on the events reported in television. When space travel is introduced on screen, of course he travels to space. The content of the media reports define his whereabouts whereas Szabó's novel is defined by the textual structure of the classical narrative poem and its content – the lines are changed according to the adventures of Berti, the hero who crosses over into the fictive world followed later by his fellow group members and friends.

77 Szabó admits in an interview that the situation of the eleven-year-old boy who is not willing to understand literature derives from her own teaching experience.

literary theory and teaching literature at universities—thus, criticizing Hungarian institutional education at all levels.

Recent centenary celebrations have given way to dedicating a full year to various authors—an occasion to organize festivals, conferences, exhibitions, publish books, and to focus on a specific oeuvre.[78] The year 2023 is dedicated to Petőfi, as he was born 200 years ago. March 16 was the date of a book launch: fifteen contemporary young adult literature authors contributed to a volume of short stories, evoking aspects of the Petőfi cult. Many authors chose to write about his wife, Júlia Szendrey using her point of view on her husband and the status of literature in the nineteenth century from a feminist perspective. The book launch began with Borbála Szabó spontaneously staging the historic events, the outbreak of the 1848 revolution commemorated each year in schools—turning her metaleptic jumps in fiction to a performative jump manifesting the parodistic gesture and effects of address.

In the hilarious scene that undermined the pathetic atmosphere of school commemorations, writers of the short stories in the volume that attended the book launch also subverted the regular script of the event: there was no critic to introduce the volume, instead the authors themselves interrogated each other. Contemporary Hungarian authors thus borrowed their voices to rewrite the canon—they were no longer single writers dedicating themselves to bringing the past close to the present but a whole set of writers in dialogue with each other, a multiplicity of voices conversing with tradition and their contemporary fellow writers. The danger that the authority of classical literature might soon be overshadowed by those who are willing to "re-digest" old texts for their contemporary audiences can clearly be seen. Despite the fact that this kind of performative act seems to threaten the dignity of old texts and the obligatory respect to be paid to them, the case is not lost: the Hungarian canon focusing so far mostly on the sublime and the tragic can be rearranged to incorporate the humorous in larger proportions. Humor might become a potential force to redirect the attention of younger readers towards classical works as reading remains essential: "only continuous rereading and actualization, the ability to understand and interpret can protect us from the cultural amnesia of our mother tongue."[79]

78 Criticism of the centenary celebrations, i.e., institutionally mediated culture notes that financial support can be of great help but a one-time infusion cannot replace the continuous and systematic work of literary scholars in preserving tradition. Literary commemorations have been moved to new platforms, campaigns, and festivals that apparently attract larger crowds now, a new phenomenon to be hailed by the profession. However, these events tend to focus on the author and his life that cannot replace the reading of their texts: "transmitting the literary tradition can only be realized eminently via the primary reception of the readers, via the experience of art." Hansági and Mészáros, ed., "Előszó," 11.

79 Hansági and Mészáros, "Előszó," 8.

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