

Mystifications. The role of pseudonyms in postmodern Hungarian literature

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Received: April 1, 2022 • Accepted: September 8, 2022

Published online: January 13, 2023

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on literary mystification, which has become extremely common in Central European postmodern literature in recent decades. Mystification is essentially a game related to the authorial name, to pseudonyms, masks and various alter egos. The paper attempts to separate three procedures of postmodern text creation by considering the aspect of mystification: *early postmodern* text creation, based on the principle of *imitation*; *referential postmodernism*, based on *simulation*, and the *anthropological postmodern*, which is present through a *transitive strategy*. The study analyses the pseudonymised works, among others, of István Baka, Árpád Tózsér, Péter Esterházy, Lajos Parti Nagy, András Ferenc Kovács and Zoltán Csehy.

KEYWORDS

postmodern literature, postmodern strategies, pseudonyms, mystification, Hungarian literature, István Baka, Árpád Tózsér, Péter Esterházy, Lajos Parti Nagy, András Ferenc Kovács, Zoltán Csehy

Perhaps one of the most important tasks of literary history is to show the differences between literary modes of speech and thus to capture the categories of change that arise from the nature of literary processes. In the following, I attempt to separate these modes of discourse in a paradigmatic way, focusing on a single area: I try to formulate my claims in a relational system of masked lyrical and prose modes of speech which problematise the author's name.

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It is probably no coincidence that, unlike in postmodern literature, the mask-like way in which the poetics of the poetry and prose of late modernity problematises the author's name has never become a characteristic, trend-forming process.

In the poetry of late modernity, the crisis of the personality shook the lyrical self and led to its loss of identity: Lőrinc Szabó's dialogical poetry; the alienated lyrical selves we encounter in the poems of Dezső Kosztolányi and the disintegrating lyrical selves featured in the poetry of Attila József, as well as the apocalyptic identities which characterise the poems of János Pilinszky may be interpreted along the lines of a radically different treatment of the language.

The lyrical identities of the lyric poetry of late modernity, which expressed alienation and loneliness enhanced to a cosmic scale, and the lyrical selves which experienced the disintegration of identity as tragic, were organized into poetical subjects of along rather different goals than the selves of postmodern identity poetry. To cover only the most obvious and drastic changes: a whole poetic tradition was put into brackets by the dissolution of the crisis of personality based on a sense of the tragic in the postmodern era which played instead on the diversity of identity, leading, ultimately, to the temporary suspension of tragic poetry in the wake of parodistic-ironic forms of utterance.

Similarly decisive changes were brought about by the emergence of lyrical modes of speech based on mixing different linguistic registers, as well as by the prominence of depoliticised, under-rhetorised literary uses of language. We may also include here the kind of poetic-narratological play which erases and relativises originality when, after experiencing the uncontrollability of language, presents the literary text as an intertextual network (Kulcsár Szabó, 1993, p. 658). These changes in attitude were also evident in prose, as the postmodernist poetics of prose writing focusing on language play emerged in a prose space which was tuned to the parabolic and the realistic. Over the recent decades, a literary practice which has come to be known as literary mystification has become extremely common in Central European literature, by which we essentially mean a game related to the author's name, to pseudonyms, masks and various alter egos (Šrank, 2009, pp. 145–228; Machala, 2011, pp. 188–197; Pořízková, 2014). All this can probably be related to postmodern methods of text formation; more precisely, to the destabilising effects of postmodern literary works. Naturally, the concepts related to giving and wearing a mask generate an endless multitude of cultural metaphors that intertwine the notions of identity issues (Schein, 2010, pp. 22–30). The contradictory position of the authorial name has attracted new approaches in the wake of neo- and post-structuralist literary theory (mainly the work of Gérard Genette, Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida) (Genette, 1992, pp. 523–535; Foucault, 2000, pp. 119–146; Foucault, 2001; Foucault, 2002, pp. 396–409; Barthes 1996, pp. 50–55; Derrida 1993, pp. 112–147; Derrida, 2005).

From the seventies onwards, one of the most characteristic practices in postmodern Hungarian fiction became a mask-like identity game which problematised the author's name. However, it is precisely the examination of this poetic game that proves untenable the idea of trying to interpret and at the same time categorise literary works and place them within the processes of twentieth-century literature, starting from some monolithic concept of the postmodern. Thus, we attempt to separate the procedures of postmodern text creation by considering this aspect.

The flagship of masked poetic games in postmodernist Hungarian literature was certainly Sándor Weöres's *Psyché* (1972), published under the name of Erzsébet Lónyay. The text was written in a late-eighteenth-century, pre-language reform idiom. It is no coincidence that in his afterword, Weöres refers the reader to fictitious remark attributed to Ferenc Toldy: "I should



also recommend the development of our orthography to my Baroness". The volume consists of, among other things, the poems and letters of Erzsébet Lónyay, a.k.a. Psyché; the recollection of the last days of László Ungvárnémeti Tóth; his love poems written to Psyché; his tragedy entitled *Nárcisz* (*Narcissos*); the recollection of actress Marianna Csernus about Psyché; the chapter on Erzsébet Lónyay in the work of Márton Achátz, entitled *The Portrait Gallery of Great Hungarian Women* (Budapest, 1871); and Sándor Weöres's 1971 *Afterword*. Both the language of the volume and the meticulously selected material suggest that the main organising principle of the book is *imitation*, as a result of which the fictitious textual space seeks to function as a collection of real texts by a real poetess – by its very fictitiousness. The text comes to life on the basis of the fictitious-masked play principle, and can be interpreted in a postmodern framework based on a universalized play principle, on textual play, or on the representation of language as a tool, and the identity play that triggers the creation of the text. However, it is precisely because of imitation, the need for perfect replication and for authenticity, that this language avoids the problem of self-referencing. Although Erzsébet Lónyay, alias Psyché, never actually lived, she could have lived by all reasonable calculations based on the language that created her figure. Following the structure of the volume, an existing 18–19th century society emerges and the pages become populated by once-existing people such as Ferenc Kazinczy, László Ungvárnémeti Tóth and Miklós Wesselényi. The character of the fictitious, but very realistically stylized Psyché appears among the figures of writers, poets and aristocrats of the time. In other words, here the aim of the postmodernist play principle is the representation of a fictitious existence in a real social framework through using an archaic layer of the language. Therefore, Psyché stands before us not only as language, but also as a quasi-historical figure.

The same findings apply to the position of István Baka's volume of poetry entitled *The Testament of Styepan Pehotny'* (1994), insofar as the text tries in every possible way to imitate a world that can be associated with a foreign identity indicated by the mask-like name. Thus, for example, the "original" of the "translated" title appears in Cyrillic characters in an emphatic place, below the title, and the poems are enriched with *realia* that mimic a possible Russian reality: the Bochkareva Battalion, the Winter Palace, the Pravda, Trud, the Moscow metro, Shalyapin, etc. As a result, the figure of Styepan Pehotny does not think of himself as mere language, but also appears as a manifestation of emphatically referential markers. The play of dualities just outlined allows us to separate the works of István Baka and Sándor Weöres from both modernism and the literary discourses that preceded them, as well as from later developments of postmodernist textual composition.

In addition to the already mentioned, universalised play principle, such as the masked identity play built from archaic or translated languages seen in the case of Sándor Weöres's Psyché, we can also observe the appearance of the concept of the "end of great narratives": the patchwork of poems and correspondence by Erzsébet Lónyay and the series of recollections of her give rise to the possibility of a fragmented biography seen from multiple points of view, which resists interpretation from a unified perspective. It is precisely these characteristics that separate Weöres's work from the pen-named/anonymous novel *Fanni's Traditions* by the early 19th-century "great predecessor", József Kármán, and especially from the text-creating processes of late modernity.

On the other hand, masked, *early postmodern* text creation, based on the principle of *imitation*, can also be distinguished from the forms of utterance characteristic of *areferential postmodernism*, in which the aim is not to represent a fictitious figure as real, but to demonstrate



the performative and self-referential power of language. In the second, or areferential, wave of postmodernism, the mask-like lyrical and prose utterances that problematise the authorial name can be placed in an emphatically areferential model by their intentionally fictitious language and textual space. In other words, it is not an existing language (such as Sándor Weöres's 18th-century, pre-language reform Hungarian) that stands before the reader, but an auto-poetic system in which both the text and the author's pseudonym present themselves as fictitious from the very beginning, thus revealing themselves and their own fictitiousness.

The surface layer of the language used in Péter Esterházy's novel *Seventeen Swans* (1987) published under the pseudonym Lili Csokonai seems to resemble the language used by Sándor Weöres in *Psyché*. However, while Weöres's work builds a linguistic world that corresponds to our literary-historical knowledge, Esterházy's late Baroque-like language is dotted with twentieth-century *realia* (Jastrzębska, 1991, pp. 48–62). With some exaggeration one might say that this work explores how 17th-century language can mix with elements of 20th-century reality. Thus, the textual organization process of *Seventeen Swans* is not based on the principle of imitation, but on that of *simulation*, since the language put into operation no longer has anything to do with the reality that it evokes. To put it differently, what is emphasised is not any kind of recalled reference to reality, but the language itself and its power of performance.

Similar text-organizing procedures come into play in Lajos Parti Nagy a.k.a. Jolán Sárbovárdi's short novel *The Angel of the Body* (1990, 1997), in which the text goes far beyond the imitation of a so-called dilettante language. In this case, too, the text develops its own unique language, which contains some issues arising from the social changes of the 1980s and some elements of the narration of romance literature characteristic of a low-competence author's language use. However, beyond all that, the aim of *The Angel of the Body* is not to imitate some dilettante text, but to expand the possibilities of language and to grant language play absolute validity over all else – that is, to create its own unique poetics. Even for a potential low-competence reader of the novel it would be clear that the text was not written by a true dilettante, but comprises the specific poetics of a professional 'text-creator' working with language omissions and errors and confronted with the possibilities of twisted language (Gács 2002, pp. 171–172). In other words, in the case of Parti Nagy's novel, the aim of the text is not that it should be interpreted as a believable imitation of a dilettante text – instead, the performing power of the language is being tested in every line.

Most pieces of postmodernist, mask-like poetry and prose that problematise the author's name belong to what we refer to here as the second postmodernist mode of text composition, characterised above. In addition to the procedures of textual composition already described, these texts mainly follow ironic-parodistic-comic speech patterns. Typically, some of the works in this group no longer even try to maintain the appearance of secrecy and authenticity; what is more, the ironic-parodistic-comic voice very often exerts its effect in advance, through the name, at the same time undermining the authenticity factor inherent in the possible imitation of a real author. Such comic names are, for example, Sándor Tsúszó created by Zoltán Hizsnyai; Attila Sántha's Árti Székely; Mihály Virágos (or Rudolph Virágh) and Endre Dumpf, shaped by Lajos Parti Nagy; or Hümér Troppauer, known from the novels of Jenő Rejtő and endowed with the function of a lyrical author in the poems of Lajos Parti Nagy and János Dénes Orbán. In these cases, the name pre-interprets the texts attached to them as paratext, and the fictitious authorial mask only functions as a simulacrum – the reader already knows that the aim of the text is related not to the author's person represented through a fictitious name, but to the unique



referential language use of the process of text formation. The language use of René Sándor Lázary, Jack Cole, Calvus and Cavafy, belonging to András Ferenc Kovács; Pacificus Maximus of Zoltán Csehy and Borbála Martossy of Zoltán Hízsnyai, may also be interpreted from this point of view: these names act as indices of a well-defined language play.

In this second class of postmodernist texts, the mask-like poetry and prose problematizing the author's name gained an extremely important position, especially from the mid-1980s onwards. This type of text formation peaked in the 1990s, and the impact of the resulting works on Hungarian literature was so significant that traces of their features occur even in texts not exhibiting postmodern modes of speech. In addition, we may observe an incredible variety of forms. As regards the uniqueness of the authorial mask, the works belonging here often display a collective authorial function. For example, dozens of authors published texts under the name of Sándor Tsúszó, created by Zoltán Hízsnyai; moreover, quite a large number of studies and essays were also written about Tsúszó's fictitious volumes. In the anthology entitled *Már nem sajjog* (*It Throbs No More*, 1994), the name of Attila József became a collective authorial mask for Zsófia Balla, Béla Bodor, Péter Kántor, Ádám Nádasdy, Lajos Parti Nagy, Zsuzsa Rakovszky and others. Such a use of an individual mask may be further divided into cases when 1.) the author uses the fictitious author's name for a single text (for example, Péter Esterházy's *Lili Csokonai*), 2.) an entire cycle may be linked to the name represented by the mask (János Orbán's *Hümér Troppauer*, Lajos Parti Nagy's *Endre Dumpf*), or 3.) the same masked authorial name appears over multiple works. What is more, we can even find an example when the name of the mask covers more than one fictional personality: the Jolán Sárbogárdi of *The Angel of the Body* can by no means be identified with the Jolán Sárbogárdi, author of a 'huseretta', found in the stageplay *Ibusár*.

The works belonging to this group can also be classified in terms of the way in which the fictitious name of the mask becomes resolved. There are cases where the real author's name behind the mask is revealed at the moment of publication (for example, Lajos Parti Nagy's and János Dénes Orbán's *Troppauer Hümér*-poems or Orsolya Karafiáth's *Lotte Lenya*). In other cases, the process of resolution may take a longer time (such as the medially constructed characters of "pairs of authors" such as Laura Spiegelmann and Lóránt K. Kabai; Dávid Barna and Gábor Lanczkor or Sándor Petrence and Gábor Ádám Nyerges). There are also cases (Jake Smiles, Aletta Vid, Centauri, Fulvia, János Rosmer) when the real author's name has not yet 'peeked out' from behind the mask until the time of writing this paper.

Another way to classify the name related to the mask can be whether it is a fictitious name created by the real author (such as Zoltán Hízsnyai's Sándor Tsúszó and Lajos Parti Nagy's Jolán Sárbogárdi) or the author uses an already existing name as a mask (such as the name of Cavafy in the poetry of András Ferenc Kovács or the name of Hümér Troppauer in the poetry of János Dénes Orbán). In this respect, it may also be relevant whether the name used is that of a fictitious character (such as Jenő Rejtő's hero, Hümér Troppauer) or the name of an existing person functions as a mask (such as Cavafy or, in the case of Dániel Varró, the names of canonical Hungarian poets, who "wrote" the items of the cycle *Variations on a Children's Song*: Bálint Balassi, Mihály Csokonai Vitéz, Dániel Berzsenyi, etc). The latter category also includes Árpád Tőzsér's poem *Letter to Hungary*, written under the mask of Sándor Petőfi, which was allegedly written by Petőfi in Russian and translated into Hungarian by Tőzsér.

The identity of the mask is closely related to the language play that created it.



It is especially interesting that in most cases the poetic play around masks varies two identities: that of a high-brow, scholarly poet and another of the popular dilettante. Based on this, we may talk about the mask representing the professional literary identity (including András Ferenc Kovács's Cavafy, Zsófia Balla's, Zsuzsa Rakovszky's, Szabolcs Várady's and others' Attila József, Zoltán Csehy's Pacificus Maximus and Tözsér's Petőfi) and the mask of the supposed dilettante author (such as Lajos Parti Nagy's Jolán Sárbogárdi, Hümér Troppauer, Mihály Virágos and Endre Dumpf; Zoltán Hízsnay's Sándor Tsúszó; Attila Sántha's Árti Székely and Gábor Ádám Nyerges's Sándor Petrence).

In a particular set of cases in postmodernist mask-like poetry and prose that problematise the author's name, mask wearing is accompanied by gender-change. This possibility has been present since the very beginning of this literary usage: male authors such as József Kármán, Sándor Weöres, Péter Esterházy and Lajos Parti Nagy wrote under the female pseudonyms of Fanni, Psyché, Lili Csokonai and Jolán Sárbogárdi, respectively. Gábor Nógrádi created a whole imaginary biography for Anna Moll, who allegedly wrote the animal epitaphs of the book entitled *Itt éltünk köztetek [We Lived Among You]* between 1945 and 1970. The works of Zsófia Balla, Ágnes Gergely, Flóra Imre, Zsuzsa Rakovszky and Zsuzsa Takács, written under the mask of Attila József, can be mentioned as a case of a pseudo-andronym, in the volume entitled *It Throbs No More*, which contains "the most beautiful poems of Attila József written in his old age". The name of Vid Aletta appears as a peculiar androgynous pseudonym, which can be interpreted as both a male and a female name, depending on the reader's decision.

The language variant from which the language play is generated has important implications for the mask. The most common variants are archaic (Lili Csokonai, René Sándor Lázár), dialectal-parodistic (Árti Székely), parodistic-dilettante (Jolán Sárbogárdi), parodistic-archaic-dilettante (Mihály Virágos), scholarly (Pacificus Maximus), as well as what has become known as translation language (Styepan Pehotny). Examples of the latter are pseudonymous texts which were allegedly written in a foreign language by authors such as Stepan Pehotny (István Baka), Vasily Bogdanov (László Bogdán), Anna Moll (Gábor Nógrádi) and Pacificus Maximus (Zoltán Csehy).

For the areferential-self-reflexive text creating processes of the so-called second postmodern era, the mask-like poetic play became an area of liberation from an identity bounded by the problem of referentiality and an area of connecting virtual-fictional identities with intertextual-meta-fictional linguistic elements. From this point of view, a fundamental difference can be perceived between the desire of the second postmodern to focus on language play and the nature of the so-called third, or *anthropological postmodern* which reaches out into the wider world. The third postmodern era thinks of itself as political in the sense that it is preoccupied with the power issues of an existing society and the problems of identity coded in otherness and marginality. Its strategy goes against the fixed hierarchies of power, and its texts speak out against patriarchal, totalising, assimilating, homogenising and globalising tendencies in order to preserve diversity and different traditions. Through language, one reads the identity, media, social forces, and techniques of power that create it, assuming that no text is the result of a sterile language play, but is always created by the interests and strategies of the identity behind it. One of the characteristic strategies of the anthropological postmodernist trend is that it gives a voice to the subordinated and the oppressed through the literary work of art (such a shift in Hungarian literature can be traced back to 2000). It is due to this transitive relationship that a connection is established with identity, reality and social issues in the fictional works belonging here. A marked example of the difference between the second and third postmodern era is the



way in which Péter Esterházy or Lajos Parti Nagy, who are known to be extremely tolerant and liberal in their journalistic writings, appear as patriarchal, sexist and seem to be mocking the language use of marginal social groups from intellectual heights (Molenkamp-Wiltink, 1994, pp. 533–543; Horváth, 1998, pp. 417–427; Hock, 2002; Zsadányi, 2003, pp. 221–234). The root of the problem lies in the fact that the authors of the second postmodern, in their passionate commitment to language play, in a way seem to have ignored the question of who it is that uses this language in their texts. One might say that in the texts of *Seventeen Swans* and *The Angel of the Body*, the main character is the language itself rather than Lili Csokonai or Jolán Sárbogárdi and, from the point of view of the areferential postmodern, this is certainly the case. However, following the approach developed in the anthropological postmodern era, the reader can also see in Parti Nagy's novel that, standing on the ground of traditional, sexist–patriarchal thought, the female author is stigmatized as a dilettante and thus deprived of her right to write. According to this logic, the protagonist of Esterházy's novel exhibits the kind of sexual behaviour that is characteristic of male fantasy, which degrades the woman to a sexual object.

On the surface, Zoltán Csehy's *Hecatelegium* (2006) also declares itself to be a case of poetic play based on an archaic, scholarly language whose aim is merely linguistic–aesthetic. This layer of the volume is best interpreted within the framework of the second postmodern era. On the other hand, certain pieces in the *Hecatelegium* also envision themselves as parts of the processes of contemporary literature, and thus represent a very marked strategy. In these poems, the unscrupulous publisher appears, who presents himself as the patron of female poets and keeps a 'harem' of authors. This way we get to discover the "unmarked critic of our time" whose ears are deaf to valuable literature. We can meet the dilettante and corrupt university professor, as well as the author of poems similar to "watery excrement". From behind the ancient scenery, there emerges the context of a marginal literature; that is, the conditions of Hungarian literature in Slovakia are outlined as the object of relentless ridicule, and from behind the Latin names, prominent representatives of Hungarian literary life in Slovakia pop up before the eyes of the initiated reader. In this respect, some poems of the *Hecatelegium* present themselves as parts of a strategy that exposes dilettantism and the lack of talent, and pulls the veil off the anomalies of so-called literary and academic life, the manipulative dynamics of a power behind which there is no real value.

The brutally homoerotic poetry of János Rosmer's volume entitled *Hátsó ülés* (*Back Seat*, 2000), has also quite logically, found its way to a manner of speaking under the mask of a pseudonym, since in this case, the pseudonym is not only a game on identity, but also a hiding place, a refuge. In Rosmer's sense, the body, driven by desire, always connects to the identity possibilities characteristic of a marginalized, eroticised gay subculture, but its subversive power does not derive from this alone. Rather, it springs from the experience that the language given to gay identity and obscene–erotic poems also raises political issues and articulates an open critique of the system applicable to the whole social structure. The biographical author behind the name János Rosmer has not come out to this day; according to some scholars, it may also be Zoltán Csehy (Németh, 2016, pp. 63–69).

To sum up, mask-like poetry and prose that render the author's name problematic have been one of the most characteristic methods of postmodernist text formation in Hungarian literature since the 1970s. Early postmodernism is present in masked lyrical poetry and prose through *imitation*; areferential postmodernism is present through *simulation*, whereas the so-called third, anthropological postmodernism is present through a *transitive strategy* which is often



political and refers to actual power relations. These three strategies can help us take a differentiated approach to the rhetoric of different eras and assign each text its own place in the system of the literary historical processes.

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