

HISTORY IN KÁLMÁN MIKSZÁTH'S SHORT FICTION

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Abstract:

Since short story theory describes the genre as centered around particular individuals, and its concept of time as defined by the moment, it seems rather impossible for a short story to do anything with history, which is a long term narrative of larger groups of people. This somewhat disinterestedness of literary critics in historical short narratives is surprising, because the rise of short story analysis goes back to the same time as the postmodern concepts of history. Problematization of history, the most important achievement of postmodern metafiction, might be performed by a short story too. This paper analyzes Kálmán Mikszáth's historical short fiction in this theoretical frame, first of all because he always makes his readers realize the story's epistemological frames, which in historical plots may hint at the doubts concerning the notion of history.

Keywords: History, Kálmán Mikszáth, short fiction, Lukács.

The representation of history in short fiction has been scarcely discussed. Literary theory has approached the problem of literature on historical themes almost exclusively through the genres of historical novel and historical drama. Dramas, however, have attracted less

attention and are given less weight in the discourse. It is characteristic of the situation that when György Lukács published a book in 1937, which contained four chapters and one of them was given to the comparison of "Historical Novel and Historical Drama," he called the book *The Historical Novel* all the same. One would expect that short story analysis would discuss the representation of history, but it does not. The usual questions about historical novels – such as the authenticity of the historical background, the approach to the dynamics of the historical process, or the representation of the past as it influences or determines the present – may be inadequate in the case of short fiction. There is not enough space in a short story to elaborate relevant ideas about such problems, i.e., about history. Short story theory and short story analysis tend to describe the genre as so much centered around particular individuals, its concept of time as so much defined by the moment, and its typical plot as so unique (cf. e.g. O'Connor, and Pratt) that it seems impossible that the short story could do anything with history, which is a long term narrative of larger groups of people. The above mentioned features are generally accepted characteristics of short stories (one can look through any issue of the periodicals *Studies in Short Fiction* or *The Short Story in English*), and a short narrative that does not fit that scheme is rather called a tale (which is a story that is also short).

The disinterestedness of short story theory in historical short narratives seems surprising, since some decades ago the attitude towards history experienced a radical change, and it happened at the same time when in the field of literary studies a new awareness of the importance of short stories developed, and short story analysis achieved some prestige, or to put it another way, when "short story studies" were emancipated. It is generally accepted that the change in the concept of history took place in 1973 when Hayden White's *Metahistory* was published (although there obviously were some antecedents). Since then one feels uncomfortable when facing the concept of history, which is so nicely condensed in Ranke's claim that events should be told as

they had actually happened (Ranke 33 - 7), which implies that the past happened in a given way (it has an objective way of existence), and it can be displayed exactly that way (an objective knowledge of it can be achieved). Parallel with the reorientation in the discourse on history and/or historiography, postmodern literature also tended to undermine the common views of the possibilities of historical knowledge. Postmodernism "reinstalls historical contexts as significant, but in so doing, it problematizes the entire notion of historical knowledge" (Hutcheon 89). The past is regarded as determining the present, but since historical facts can be known only through their textual traces in present narratives, what exactly determines the present cannot be defined. This paradox supplies the basic dynamics of postmodern metafiction, whose central topic seems to be the problematization of history.

This paradox, however, can be performed in the limited size of a short story too; and there may be some examples. Michael Orlovsky suggested that the postmodern technique of treating past persons and events should be denominated as *historiografiction*. He finds historiografiction different from traditional historical fiction mainly in that it "is primarily concerned with character; perhaps secondarily with theme; historical fiction, on the other hand, is activated by plot, setting, details, or lifestyle" (Orlovsky 47). I understand this differentiation as describing the tension between the common theoretical claims about modern short story and a historical subject. Since the central feature of a short story is supposed to be character or motive, and a historical narrative focuses on a plot and an overall view of a past world, a "real" short story with a plot happening in the remote past seems such a paradox that one needs to coin a special hybrid word for denomination. Orlovsky analyzed three short stories and he summarized his findings about one of them, Donald Barthelme's *Robert Kennedy Saved from Drowning*, which makes use of the technique of documentary montage, as follows: "each person ultimately is beyond understanding, be he famous or obscure" (Orlovsky 53). Therefore there is at least one type of postmodern historical short story that does problematize historical

knowledge, or to put it in another way, historiografiction can also be historical metafiction.

Such insights might create a theoretical frame in which Kálmán Mikszáth's (1847–1910) historical short fiction might be analyzed fruitfully. Of course, he was not a postmodern writer and did not invent historical metafiction at the end of the nineteenth century. But our present sensitiveness towards history makes us especially interested in some features of his writing; the most important of such features is that he always makes his readers realize the story's epistemological frames, which in historical plots may hint at the doubts concerning the philosophy of history.

As a starting point it is worth referring to an essay Mikszáth wrote on historiography in 1908. He formulated some ideas that seem both familiar and important from the viewpoint of current historical discourse. Of course, he was not a forerunner of the turn in historical thinking that happened nearly seventy years later; and I do not want to compare his ten-page-long sketch with seminal works of the philosophy of history. The current discourse on history, however, creates a frame of approach in which his ideas sound as fresh and almost directly understandable. I must say "almost," because the ideas actually should be understood as statements against their contemporary context.

The essay is called "Unprofessional Remarks on Historiography"; it starts as a critique of a historiographic work (Marczali), but after the display of general approval and some reservations it goes on to discuss basic problems of the historian's discourse. I would like to highlight four topics.

(1) He emphasizes the importance of imagination, first of all in creating connections between historical events, i.e., elaborating a historical narrative: "Imagination is really needed to give the facts a systematic framework" (Mikszáth, "Olvasás" 1).

(2) He defines historiography as narrative and he declares that it belongs to the same category as fiction: "They are very similar; what

both Macaulay and fiction writers do is narrating" (Mikszáth, "Olvasás" 2). The text, however, supposes some differences, which are situated in "reality" or "facts": "The difference is that Macaulay tells real facts with an artistry of belletrists, while fiction writers describe imaginary events and situations in a manner as if they were telling reality" (*ibid.*). Since the difference is situated in the way of existence of *what* is represented, it cannot be easily realized by readers. And Mikszáth is mostly interested in reading and discourse. If a belletrist's artistry means the manners that are mentioned in the second half of the comparison, one can contract both definitions to make the exemplary historian appear as telling real facts as if he was recounting reality. In this case, reality of the facts is a rhetorical achievement of the historical discourse. As Roland Barthes put it: "This type of discourse is doubtless the only type in which the referent is aimed for as something external [to] the discourse, without it ever being possible to attain it outside the discourse." (Barthes 16)

(3) He clearly explains that what historiography does is not telling the only objective truth about the past, but several competing, sometimes equally acceptable explanations, which are based on different selections and interpretations of historical evidence (cf. Ankersmit 12, Mink 196–197).

(4) For his short stories it is especially important — and at the same time familiar to the present trends in historiography — that in addition to, or as background and explanation of political history, i.e., the history of the elite, he wants to be informed of what was happening on the peripheries of a society, of the situation of the lower classes. This claim is not independent from the the history of the manners of life, which discipline was developing at the end of the nineteenth century and in which Mikszáth was enthusiastically interested. However, he also formulates the demands of intellectual history. And he makes some suggestions for the methods by which marginal histories, such as the history of folk mentalities can be learnt. In addition to diaries,

correspondences and memoirs one should study the records of old trials, and this is exactly the method microhistory developed in the 1970s. In his introductory remarks, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie wrote that at first he was looking for "direct testimony" of the medieval peasantry in memoirs, but when he tried to mine deeper, he found the documents of ninety-eight trials of Cathar heresy, "in the process [...] the peasants examined by Fourier's Inquisition have given an extraordinarily detailed and vivid picture of their everyday lives" (Le Roy Ladurie, "Montaillou, village" 9; Le Roy Ladurie, "Montaillou: The Promised" viii). All the seminal works of microhistory are based on trial documents (Ginzburg; Davis).

Mikszáth, however, was no historian, and, in accordance with the emphasis laid on the role of imagination in historical cognition, he did imagine a medieval trial as an example of how trial documents can provide insight into past forms of life. A system of law can be regarded as a precondition of every historicality (Hegel 60-63), since legal subjects can be constituted only in relation to a system of law, and "historical self consciousness, the kind of consciousness capable of imagining the need to represent reality as history, is conceivable only in terms of its interest in law, legality, and legitimacy" (White, "The Content" 14). The continuity of law and order might show the past as the direct antecedents of the present, especially if the present can be characterized by anachronistic law, which fails to be harmonized with the present society's needs.

Representations of history, which are based on trial documents and problems of civil law, as Mikszáth rightly emphasizes, would abandon the grand narratives of the history of politics, diplomacy or military events; it would display the past at the everyday level of the conditions of personal life. Instead of military campaigns or political decisions on a national level, the focus would be laid on the possibilities a historical situation offers for the peaceful or not peaceful life of nameless or never mentioned minor characters in history. This attitude has two advantages for a modernist approach to history. It might imply

deheroization, since litigation is not what makes a hero, and it might model history as a set of alternative, competing stories elaborated from various perspectives. A legal trial is a drama of competition between narratives (Abbott 138–152), and therefore literature often makes use of it as a theme. Mikszáth applies legal themes quite frequently (Krähl 30), even if they are said to be ubiquitous in literature (Posner *passim*). Cognitive frames of a story are usually discussed in his writing, and interpretation of texts also appears as a motive of narrative; and both topics may be dramatized by a legal trial. History, of course, cannot be staged in the form of a trial, but a legal approach might undermine unequivocal evaluations, since in the representation of a historical conflict, the viewpoints, interests and truths of both parts should be brought to the fore.

As I mentioned above, Mikszáth refers to an imaginative litigation to suggest which kind of legal material could be the basis of the history that he would like to read. The example, however, is not his brand new invention for this purpose of 1908, but the plot of a short story he published in 1884, entitled "Mrs. Kürthy's Cucumbers." Mrs. Kürthy is mentioned only once in a baroque epic on the love of Mária Széchy and Ferenc Wesselényi. She is not even a minor character herself, but the employer of a minor character (Gyöngyösi 164). Mikszáth gives this marginal character of a canonical narrative an imaginative story of her own. The setting is Upper Hungary in a historical period in which Ferdinand III, the King of Hungary, and George Rákóczi II, the Prince of Transylvania, both established their governing and jurisdictional systems in the same counties. As a consequence Péter Detrik cannot recover his wife from Ferenc Kürthy, because when he wins a trial in Ferdinand's court, Kürthy goes over to Rákóczi, and when Detrik does the same and wins a trial in Rákóczi's court, Kürthy goes back to Ferdinand and makes a successful appeal.

This static situation is jolted into motion when another woman arrives in the neighborhood, Mária Széchy, who has left her husband in Transylvania and moved to the castle of her brother-in-law Illésházy.

The stories of Mrs. Kürthy's beauty make her jealous; and she persuades Illésházy to arrest her and to send her back to the first husband. After a time she discovers that the arrested woman was not Mrs. Kürthy, but her maidservant. This makes her angry, and she induces the prince of Transylvania to sentence Mrs. Kürthy to capital punishment, which, however, cannot be enforced, because Wesselényi, a general of King Ferdinand, starts a campaign against Illésházy's castle at Murány. One day during the long and boring siege a young man brings a gypsy girl to Murány. He wants to get the reward for turning in Mrs. Kürthy. The girl denies that she is Mrs. Kürthy; and she says that she only wanted to sell cucumbers, which would be a novelty in the castle. With a strange emphasis the girl asks Mária to open the big yellow half rotten cucumber (which cannot be eaten, but contains useful seeds) only when she is alone. Mária is certain that the beautiful girl is Mrs. Kürthy and is very interested in discovering what the girl wants. Finally she opens the yellow cucumber and finds in it Wesselényi's love letter to her. As a reward for the service of delivering the letter she gives the girl, Mrs. Kürthy, the document containing her death sentence so that it will not be executed. The last scene of the short story describes the first encounter of Mária Széchy and Wesselényi in the woods, where he confesses that he was the young man who brought Mrs. Kürthy, disguised as a gypsy, to Murány.

It would be false to say that Mikszáth's narrative makes its protagonist someone from the periphery of the society. Mrs. Kürthy belongs to the aristocracy as Mária Széchy does, and she is not the protagonist. The narrator follows the steps of Mária Széchy, while the unknowable character of Mrs. Kürthy haunts the story from the background. Mrs. Kürthy is merely the target of Mária Széchy's actions; she appears only once, and even then in a disguise, while speaking someone else's words. The story, however, evolves in a space determined by two competing female figures. They appear as two poles of a mythical structure, and if myth can be said to be "fundamentally a classification" (Durkheim and Mauss 77), they are two main characters

signifying two classes, but one of them has the characteristic of passivity, which prevents her from any continuous presence in the narrated events. Although both belong to an elite, which plays a central role in history, their equality disappears in the presentation. Mrs. Kürthy seems a defenseless person of lower status. She wears disguises of the lowest classes; once she is said to "have been watering flowers in peasant costume in the yard" and once she "looks rather like a gypsy woman in rags" (Mikszáth, "Kürthyné" 51 and 53), and such garments perfectly express her vulnerable situation. Mária Széchy, who also got bored with her first husband, simply moved to one of her own castles, and when the man tried to follow her, she used artillery to repulse him. In contrast to this confrontation of historical grandeur, Mrs. Kürthy tries to move back and forth between different competing authorities in order to avoid responsibility, which is more similar to the petty prevarications of the subjects than to the history-forming acts of the rulers. Mária Széchy likes long rides and she thinks it is fun inspecting the besieged bastions in armor and heavy boots. As a contrast, Mrs. Kürthy's activities belong to a peasant's realm; she waters flowers or harvests cucumbers.

The legal case, which supplies the starting situation of the story, shows that the rivalry of two powers undermines the legal system. Since both sides are interested in extending their influence at the other's expense rather than establishing reliable courts, their sentences are always biased. Those who do not have the force and power to impose their will in delicate situations must make use of petty tricks to outwit the dual sovereignties. In this world nobody cares about the grand political, social or ideological issues of the historical moment. People are trying to avoid the various threats and claims of the rivaling centers of power in order to secure their survival on an everyday level. This is more or less true of General Wesselényi too, who starts his campaign "unwillingly" and "reluctantly," because he is much more concerned about his friendly terms with the major aristocratic families that are his opponents at the moment than about the whole war. From this perspective the big historical contests of power, ideology and religion seem completely empty.

When Mária Széchy divorced, she adhered to the letter of the law, but she offended its spirit no less than Mrs. Kürthy. With the confidence provided by this legal formalism, she tried to use the letter of the law to kill a rival beauty. Therefore she appears as a rigid, warlike, aggressive power. (It is characteristic of her that she usually spurs her horse until it draws blood.) As a contrast, Mrs. Kürthy represents the peaceful values of life and vegetative renewal. She avoids confrontation, first through cheating, then through offering a compromise, which from many respects means inviting the other into her own realm. Mária Széchy is said to be fed up with the sterile life of war, increased by the "religious and rigid lifestyle" of her brother-in-law; she says, "I am so desperate that if a man just as big as my little finger proposed to me, I would marry him" (Mikszáth, "Kürthyné" 49 and 52). What Mrs. Kürthy offers her is a man, and one much bigger than her little finger. This personal offer of peace invites her to regain her femininity in a peaceful fertility.

The deconstruction of grand national narratives and the focus on the biological aspect of the human being is even more eye-catching in the short story "The Fifth Prophet." The setting is Central-Hungary under Ottoman occupation in 1545. Catholics and Protestants sue for a church in the court of pasha Ibrahim. The trial, however, is centered around religious and not legal questions, and therefore it is completely alien and uninteresting to the judge. The theological controversy seems never to end, and the cook of the monastery is getting increasingly upset about it, since the lunch he has been making is in danger of becoming cold and dry. Therefore, he enters the court and asks the protestant speaker what are the names of the Major Prophets. The answer is, of course, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel, but the catholic cook says "casting an edgeways glance at the pasha: " "You have forgot the fifth one, the greatest prophet of God, namely Mohammed." With this gesture the cook wins the trial: "The pasha laughed. He was glad for the joke and the opportunity to have lunch" (Mikszáth, "Az ötödik" 53).

The laugh and the denomination of the event as a joke make it clear that the affair is not to be taken seriously, and nobody thought that

the cook had really won the theological controversy. He only offers the pasha an excuse to make a decision in a case that cannot be decided. And the cook's sideways glance at the pasha suggests who his superior is. He displays an inclination to cooperate with power. He is willing to take into account the Turks' point of view. His attitude is more flexible, since he understands the context of the Christian theological controversy, while the others disregard the Islam. However, this means submissiveness in front of a conqueror that is described in all of Hungarian literary tradition as the most terrible enemy. The success of the cook puts the grand narrative of a many centuries long, implacable fight against the Ottoman Empire into brackets. The pasha's other motive, the lunch, might be even more important, since it creates a community of interest between him and the cook. The cook does not care about the content of the theological controversy or the goals of his own monastic community, namely the ownership of the church. He is interested exclusively in lunch. The lower perspective, which the majority of Mikszáth's historical tales applies, has the consequence that attractive characters mostly appreciate values of biological nature. Grand ideologies of wider communities are not appreciated from this perspective, and their content cannot be understood. Non-material values, like justice, cannot be realized in front of the arbitrariness of despotic powers. A happy ending does not necessarily imply an affirmative attitude towards the represented world. In many cases the narrative displays a depressing view on the long term situation of a community from the aspect of mental and spiritual values, but in spite of that, it suggests that material, biological values can be realized for a moment in an individual life.

The microhistorical attitude and the undermining of national grand narratives are important features of Mikszáth's historical short fiction, but from the viewpoint of historical thinking some other features – questioning the authority of historical evidence and the claim for authority through the impact of narrative imagination – might be even more insightful. In the beginning of short stories with historical theme,

Mikszáth often refers to sources, which are sometimes real, sometimes non-existent. Let us see examples of both cases. The first sentence of the story "Mrs. Szontágh" reads as follows: "The historical data of the following short narrative I have taken from József Mikulik's book *Everyday Life in Provincial Towns in Hungary 1526-1715*" (Mikszáth, "Szontágh Pálné" 31). The second sentence imparts the information that the case of Erzsébet Grünblath is mentioned on page 131. This reference to the source is correct; there one can read of a girl who broke off her engagement with the mayor's son and was seriously punished for it. But no word is written either of a man called Szontágh (whom the girl is in love with, which makes her break off her engagement) or of the "world famous" church-clock, which supplies a leitmotiv to the narrative. Exactly those elements cannot be found in the historical source, which make the short story's plot evolve and allow it to be solved. A reader, however, does not need to look up a rare historical monograph to see the relationship of the short story and the declared source so clearly, since the third sentence shifts to an imaginative level:

One can imagine how fast the rumor of that case spread in the town and what a sensation it made. Of course! If even now, 250 years later, a historian writes about it among big events. (*ibid.*)

The fact that one should imagine the reaction of town people clearly signals that it is not written in the source: the world, in which the plot is set, must be created by imagination. The basic case (a legal process, by the way) is described in historiography and is known from archive documents, but the exact circumstances, the human intentions and emotions, which made it evolve, and the accidental circumstances, which influenced the denouement, can only be imagined. The fast break with the source and the shift from historiography to fiction is not naïve or unconscious. The playful vicious circle indicates conscious reflection on the epistemological bases. The playful *argumentum a*

fortiori literally says that if a historian regards the case important, it should have made even bigger sensation among directly involved people 250 years earlier. Historians are supposed to write about an event because they find it important. But how do we know that an event was important? From the fact that historians write about it. Historians seem not to find but to create their object; they do not simply record that an event was important, rather they are the source of every historical importance. One cannot reach the past directly, and what historiography can do amounts to inciting imagination.

A reference to really existing evidence does not exclude that the short story undermine the notion of historical knowledge. Mikszáth, however, often refers to non-existent evidence, and inscribes the fictionality of the source into the text. In the short story "A Frivolous File" he mocks historiography by staging an omniscient narrator as the source of scientific-historical knowledge. Mikszáth presented that short story in an inaugural lecture when he was elected a member of a literary society. The event took place in the building of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, an important organization promoting letters and scholarship. References to the context and circumstances of the first verbal presentation, however, came to be included in every printed version of the short story; such references are in a footnote indicating where and for what occasion the text was presented and in the narratorial discourse that creates the air of a verbal presentation to a physically present audience. The story itself might have been elaborated in accordance with the requirements of written communication, but that should have absolved the romantic tale from the problems of academic discourse and historical knowledge. This connection is established by the context of a presentation in the building of the Academy of Sciences.

The title refers to a mysterious old file found in a county archive. It is a receipt in which a county notary acknowledged that he had received a brown-haired girl from the county administration and that he was obliged to return her the next day. Since nobody knew and nobody could imagine what could have been the situation described in the file,

the county administration finally decided that the file should be sent to the Academy of Sciences. At this point of introduction the narrator shifts to a personal mode:

I do not know if the file has been sent; but it is certain that the county was right, since this interesting event is certainly going to be discussed, if not by the Academy, then in the building of the Academy. Please, listen to it. (Mikszáth, "Frivol akta" 87)

What we have is historical evidence, but that piece of paper does not supply historical knowledge; it needs interpretation. And it is explicitly stated that nobody can interpret it. In the physical environment of historical scholarship, however, a belletrist delivers an interpretation, which is narrative and imaginative. And after this statement, the narration shifts to an impersonal, omniscient mode with an unquestionable authority; it can be considered unquestionable, because it is based on a narratorial technique; but from the viewpoint of historiography – which viewpoint is obviously present – it is shockingly baseless. Moreover, the narration evokes the problem of (or the lack of) evidence.

...The situation was that Sir Gábor Bezerédj, captain of the noble town of Esztergom had a beautiful daughter. I cannot refer to surviving eyewitnesses or reports of balls, since it was such a long time ago that my grand-mother might have been a small child in short skirt that time. But I think she must have been beautiful, since István Dézsy, the son of the mayor in Losonc was madly in love with her. (*ibid.*)

The narrator explicitly states that there is no historical evidence of the girl's beauty; he can only make a guess on the ground of a young man's emotions. But is there evidence of those emotions? There

obviously is not. From the realm of possible historical evidence (eyewitnesses, written sources) the narration shifts to the realm of romantic fiction; when mentioning the love of young people, the narrator does not need to refer to evidence any longer, since the literary genre supplies its own epistemological foundation. The narration, however, playfully mingles both cognitive frames. If one wants to present a historical narrative, one must depart from evidence and rely on imagination. At the end of the story, the narrator ironically foresees another file to be found on the highest shelf of the county archive; the imaginative story that is supposed to interpret a (fictitious) piece of historical evidence might make another piece of evidence materialize.

The example of Kálmán Mikszáth's short stories shows that ideas about history can be explained in that genre – and especially such ideas that seem familiar for readers reevaluating the approach to history around the beginning of the new millennium. Short stories focus on individuals in their personal life conditions, and this focus offers an opportunity to represent people not as forming history, but as trying to avoid its impact on their personal life. A short narrative cannot explain or represent long-term historical developments, but it can successfully undermine a national grand narrative. And it can challenge concepts of historical knowledge.

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