

ÁGNES MAJOR

„why did you leave me a message?”

The atypical cult of Géza Csáth
in the light of the adaptations

DOCTORAL DISSERTATION
THESES

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I. A BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

The assessment of Géza Csáth's literary career does not show a unified picture in critical discourse. Despite its brevity, the appreciation of this unique work has indicated both upward and downward trends during the years in Hungarian literature: his *œuvre* has already found a place in the center of the canon, near it, and on its periphery, as well. One of the characteristics of Csáth's history of reception is that the interest in Csáth's works and life over the last four decades has become assessable along with new types of reception acts. In addition to many dissertations—which are not limited to literary studies, but we can find a large number of works in the fields of medical history, psychoanalytic studies, music history, etc.—, various art forms draw from Csáth's work. The palette is diverse: poems, volumes of poetry, novels, plays, feature films, comics were born that process one or more Csáth texts. These frequent and constant references justify examining the phenomenon. The primary aim of my thesis is to present this discursive construct and that kind of specific reception that the reading and interpretation as well as the rewriting and processing of Csáth created, by analyzing the genre-wide understanding of Csáth's character and *œuvre*, however by focusing only on the reception history of the past few decades.

Due to the surprisingly large number of adaptations, we can risk that Csáth's *œuvre* seems more inspiring to contemporary interpreters in a sense (at least compared to its range and genre spectrum) than modern Hungarian authors with a more stable canonical position. He may be considered by many as a small master, a fog knight, or, horrible to say, even his significance in literary history may be underestimated as well, though, the rewrites and adaptations by many art forms of the last forty years, the intense intertextual and intermedial relations with Csáth's textual world deserve attention and explanations. In this dissertation, I try to explore the development, causes, and characteristics of this—not only reception-oriented—process through case studies and review chapters that provide more general insights.

II. METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION AND PROCESSING

The central question of the study and the application of the conceptual framework need to be clarified; therefore, the introductory chapter reveals whether it is relevant to talk about the cult formed around Csáth based on the theories of literary cult research. Respect, irony, alienation, and even pity, of which we can see many examples in the analytical chapters of the dissertation, are present in the ambivalent and complex attitude of the interpreters, adapters, and authors who turn to the life

and works of Csáth. To name this set of phenomena, I use the term *atypical cult*. In the introductory part, I contemplate the chapters on Csáth in high school textbooks besides outlining the key events of the reception history and presenting the concept of adaptation used in this study.

The introductory chapter is followed by two major units of text analysis. During the first one, I examine works in which Csáth becomes, in a sense, a character in fictional stories, and consequently these adaptations primarily (but not exclusively) focus on his biographical texts, diaries, memoirs, and letters. This also provides an opportunity to observe the difference between the various attitudes as a result of Csáth's biographical texts at the time of the official publication and of the previous period, and later when the mystery is already removed from the texts. When selecting works, I highlighted solid and complex pieces with their own concepts that focus on Csáth's life/work in their intertextual reference system. In the chapter, I mention the issue of bringing Csáth into public consciousness too, with an unquestionable role of Péter Esterházy's writings evoking Csáth in the 1980s. Dezső Kosztolányi's presence has also great importance in Esterházy's interest, so the part analyzing Esterházy's works mainly concentrates on this aspect. The will to formulate the local identity prevails in the poem cycle called *árvacsáth* by Ottó Tolnai and his other works analyzed in the study. The further writings discussed in the chapter approach Csáth from a different perspective: the works of János Dénes Orbán, Ildikó Lovas, and Zoltán Németh indicate that the adaptation of Csáth's works as a parody has a place in the discourse on Csáth, as well as the aspects referring to the contradictory moments of his life, which is also a part of Csáth's atypical cult—as stated in the introductory unit—like the sympathetic salute in other works. Finally, the chapter is closed by the presentation of a movie: János Szász's *Ópium* partly leads to the next analytical unit, which mostly concerns Csáth's fiction, since here, as the title of the movie indicates, not only his diaries (and a psychiatric case study of him) but also a short story of Csáth are the basis of the adaptation.

For the adaptations of Csáth's fiction, I selected three works of different genres, a comic book, a movie, and a play (or a drama text), whereby the investigation of the adaptation operations that took place during the media change could come to the fore. As in the case of the chosen works of the first major unit, I am interested not only in what and how the adapters have transformed from the original context, but also what it has become during the adaptation process. The analysis focuses on the adaptations, though, examining the hypotexts of Csáth is also inevitable of course. As this unit focuses on short stories, the aesthetic-poetic aspect will prevail here, as opposed to the works discussed in the previous chapter, which relied primarily on the biographical texts of the *œuvre*, and consequently, the cultic relationship emerged more spectacularly in the forefront of interpretations. In these cases, I try

to explore the general representation problems, symbol systems, and horizons of intellectual history that appear through the works of Csáth.

The first analysis turns to the theater: Tamás Fodor's stage adaptation selects many from the fine literary texts of Csáth, the 1996 tragicomedy *Zách Klára* adapts Csáth's melodrama of the same title. But at the same time, the essence of the drama text can be grasped not only in the reinterpretation of Csáth's work but in the creation of a comprehensive artistic vision that focuses on him. The second analysis deals with one of Csáth's best-known short stories, *Anyagyilkosság*, and the movie *Witman fiúk* (1997) directed by János Szász and based on the short story and other Csáth texts. This section focuses on the question of the existence or possible lack of conscience for the development of psychoanalytic reading in terms of the short story and its adaptation. The last part presents the possible interpretation of his other short story *Fekete csönd*. The murder committed by the insane narrator and his self-duplication, like the appearance of the doppelgänger known from German romanticism, provide the opportunity of rereading and reinterpreting this early Csáth writing. Following the analysis, the 2009 comic book by István Lakatos comes to the center of attention. This adaptation uses texts excerpted from the short story, but in a way not always loyal to the source—in some cases, the texts contain additions that heavily influence the formation of the interpretation. During adaptation, Lakatos' *Fekete csönd*-remake thus becomes important as a recommendation to a particular reading opportunity.

III. RESULTS AND USABILITY

The analysis of the works adapting Csáth's œuvre and life indicates not only the literary importance of his poetics but also that the biographical writings and fiction texts serve as fertile ground for attempts that process, rediscover, and rethink them. The examined artistic interpretations can be understood as a part of Csáth's atypical cult, as a reminiscent ritual practice. For all this, of course, we have to accept that the different approaches, the gesture of turning to Csáth at all, i.e. the creation of the works are in fact cult-creating acts themselves, which even if involuntarily, but still, outline a specific tendency with atypical features. Although in principle there are cult works that lead to ceremonial practices of reverence caused by admiration and unconditional recognition regardless of the identity of their authors, experience shows that cults are still more for people, specifically for authors in the case of literature. Hence, I first examined the texts concerning and reinterpreting the life story of Csáth in the first unit of the text analysis of my dissertation. Then the argument of the unit examining the adaptations of literary writings was that certain

impersonal ideas and symbol systems came to the light by analyzing the aesthetic-poetic potential of Csáth's œuvre, whose rethinking and critiques lead the reader to the source texts written by Csáth, which gain recognition as previews or foundations of contemporary artworks.

Comparing the Csáth images examined in the study, the only common thing they have is that all adaptations see a source of ideas to be exploited in Csáth's life history. The readings created are fundamentally different from each other, even if there are overlaps between them. However, the motivations of Ottó Tolnai and Péter Esterházy share some similarities. This is also supported by the time of writing, as Csáth is not part of the common knowledge in the seventies and eighties; their common purpose might be to popularize Csáth and to draw the attention of both the researchers and readers to his œuvre and life. Obviously, this on its own does not explain why their art was encouraged by Csáth. Tolnai connects Csáth's cross-border artistic role with the cultural space of Bácska and the non-provincial, local image of modernity, which maintains a more direct relationship with world literature, foreign cultures and languages than the motherland. Esterházy discovers the original and brave utilization of the language of eroticism and corporeality in the Hungarian literary tradition in Csáth's fictional and autobiographical texts, and in his transcripts and adaptations, some appreciation can also be found in addition to the ironic presentation of the unreflected and narcissistic male character. Esterházy consciously contrasts the progressive canon of the literary policy of state socialism with the authors of the civil tradition of Hungarian prose (Mikszáth, Kosztolányi, Ottlik), and Csáth's nonconformity certainly fitted well into this literary endeavor—though, with smaller importance than the above-mentioned authors.

For Tolnai, Bácska is the space of Hungarian modernity and intellectual life that resists the centralized idea of culture. The exciting and open world of Csáth's active years, his widespread awareness and receptivity to contemporary art and philosophical ideas are metonymically transferred to his homeland, which, despite its doubly marginal position (Budapest / Belgrade), does not become provincial. Tolnai turns to Csáth with trust and empathy, and interprets the controversial events of his lifetime with compassion and understanding. The difference between Tolnai's and Esterházy's readings can also be noticed in the role of the Csáth-Kosztolányi duo. It is important for both of them to include the cousins together (which resonates with Zoltán Dér's 1980 idea of "twin stars"), but while in Tolnai's œuvre Kosztolányi is less prominent than Csáth, the opposite is true for Esterházy's.

The later works consider Csáth as an accepted and well-known author of modern Hungarian literature, who needs no more justification, and consequently, these adaptations often evoke Csáth by seemingly marginal aspects. The short story of János Dénes Orbán adapts Csáth's autobiographical writings as a parody, which

points out that the famous and infamous “Csáth Diary of 1912–13”, that had been already published several times by then, is considered as a common reference base for certain communities, so the parody requires no commentaries, but its hyperbolic adaptation comes to the forefront. The metaphoric and transcendent image of Csáth was not that dominant for the partly professional audience of the 1990s and 2000s. The references to Csáth’s philosophy of art and his literary works miss from the parody of János Dénes Orbán, as a matter of fact, the focus is only on the scandalous nature of autobiographical texts, and thus there is an emphasis on this scandalous side of the writer’s character. During this time, several re-editions of the texts from the period 1912–13 appeared that were not based on an approach of fine literature—commercial interests probably played a more important role in the publications. By the time the parody appeared, the compulsion to think of significant figures in literary history as moral role models of impeccable life had already ceased. Of course, this led to the tabloidization of literary historical figures, and parodies of biographical texts may also have played an important role in legitimizing this type of interest. Similarly to Ottó Tolnai, the local connection is a key element in Ildikó Lovas’ writing, however, the novel *Spanyol menyasszony* approaches Csáth by choosing Olga Jónás as the narrator, which is a new perspective for presenting his life story. Zoltán Németh extends the interpretation in a way that includes the issues of language and communication, however, I discuss the two works in the same subsection because both of them finds potential in Csáth’s life events in a similar way: they both thematize passionate love and the complex male-female relationship that experiences the greatest heights and depths. The interpretation of János Szász has a similar topic too, but he is more interested in the issues of addiction, insanity, the loss of sobriety, and writing as an act of creation.

Regarding the fictional works, we can state the following. Tamás Fodor’s *Zách Klára* has not only adapted Csáth’s melodrama of the same title as he inserted several quotations of other Csáth texts into his play. Fodor emphasizes the validity of the psychological approach when he expands the text of his tragicomedy with lines from other works. The excerpted and transformed hypotexts, which were inserted into the drama text, include popular and representative motives of Csáth’s contextual world. Fodor intensifies the topics of Csáth’s textual universe like violence, sexuality, conscience, or defense mechanisms with the quotations from other short stories so that his work becomes a vision of Csáth’s artistic ambitions. This is also supported by the fact that he chooses such a genre from Csáth’s œuvre that refers to styles that dominated the first decades of the 20th century like Art Nouveau, impressionism, or expressionism, as Csáth is presented as someone who thinks in multilevel expressions and sees music, image and history together as a whole. So attention is not only drawn to the title character, but the writer who would like to express his

own inner world gets also a crucial role during the interpretation. In the case of the film adaptation of *Anyagyilkosság*, we can also observe that the director of *Witman fiúk*, János Szász did not adapt the act of narration in his movie, therefore, the metaphorical characteristics of the mother's character have faded compared to the short story. Furthermore, if the short story is read from a psychoanalytic perspective, every little detail can be traced back to these theories, and thereby the Witman boys cannot have a real conscience due to their father's death and the lack of the superego, while the opposite is seen in the movie. The narratological analysis of the short story *Fekete csönd* and its comic book adaptation focuses on the formation of interpretations. The generally accepted interpretation reads the story as a narration by an insane person: the narrator murders his younger brother because of his delusions and jealousy. However, rethinking the narrative role leads to new possibilities of interpretation, just as the self-duplication multiplies the meanings of the short story.

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It is a hermeneutical cliché that the influence of literary works and œuvres belongs to their meaning, as well. Yet literary essays often forget the afterlife of the analyzed works, or at best they mention the changes in their interpretation, their development in critical approaches, or their appearance in school papers, textbooks, adaptations, and in cultural-professional public discourse only as a supplementary curiosity. Interpreting Géza Csáth's œuvre, we cannot exclude the analysis of its influence. In his own time, Csáth was one of the fog knights of the artistic-journalistic culture, until the 1960s few people thought that his works would be published on pages of literature syntheses or textbooks. The becoming of Csáth-œuvre into a literary fact is itself a result of an atypical literary process. But more importantly, Csáth's texts are among the few works of the past to which the wider audience has a living connection and which are not only read by literary scholars. How can we know that? Research on the history of reception cannot directly access the imagination of the readers, moreover, it is purely a hypothesis that we imagine the ideas of a period on certain literary works or authors to be homogeneous. But analyzing their afterlife is not impossible because the actuality of works of the past can be discovered in newer ones, in adaptations, or even in practices of the cultural life (e.g. prizes, stipends, institutional names, commemorative issues of journals, anniversaries, or exhibitions). The afterlife of Csáth's œuvre is a particularly spectacular example of this process. The imaginative world of his works, the themes of his autobiographical texts, his lean yet passionate writing style, his adventurous and tragic life story have inspired many artists and philosophers since the 1970s. The adaptations and creative artistic reinterpretations provide an extraordinary opportunity to examine the

aesthetic, poetic, social and political ideas that are activated when (re)reading Csáth's works. It is obvious, of course, that the Csáth images thus revealed differ significantly from the objective, primary context-based Csáth image of literary history, and the creative, artistic transcripts and adaptations use his works and biography according to partial and arbitrary considerations to express their own artistic or philosophical ambitions. Yet the examination of the diverse and unceasing interest in Csáth is such a rare occasion and opportunity that—in my opinion—would have been a mistake to miss.

IV. LIST OF PUBLICATION RELATED TO THE TOPIC OF THE DISSERTATION

1. MAJOR Ágnes. „(Re)konstruált Csáth-alakmások két Esterházy-műben”. In *A varázsló kertje konferenciakötet* [on press].
2. MAJOR Ágnes. „Egy befejezetlen melodráma utóélete: Csáth Géza és Fodor Tamás Zách Klárája”. *Literatura* [on press].
3. MAJOR Ágnes. „»A háború halottjának tekintem magam«: Csáth Géza (és a háború) végnapjai”. In *Üdvözlét a győzőnek: Tanulmányok 1918 mikrotörténelméről*, szerkesztette KAPPANYOS András, 261–268. Budapest: Bölcsészettudományi Kutatóközpont, 2020.
4. MAJOR Ágnes. „Titoktalanítás: Szajbély Mihály: Csáth Géza élete és munkái. Régimódi monográfia”. *Irodalomtörténet* 101 (2020): 228–232.
5. MAJOR Ágnes. „Papírról vászonra: Sághy Miklós: Az irodalomra közelítő kamera. XX. századi magyar irodalmi művek filmes adaptációi”. *Jelenkor* 63, 9. sz. (2020): 1009–1012.
6. MAJOR Ágnes. „Adaptálatlan leírás, kibillentett értelmezés: Csáth Géza: *Anyagyilkosság* – Szász János: *Witman fiúk*”. In *Leírás: Elmélet, irodalom, kép*, szerkesztette HAJDU Péter, KÁLMÁN C. György, MEKIS D. János és Z. VARGA Zoltán, munkatárs MAJOR Ágnes, 423–432. Reciti konferenciakötetek 5. Budapest: Reciti Kiadó, 2019.
7. MAJOR Ágnes. „Az írás örülete és az örület leírása: Szász János: *Ópium – Egy elmebeteg nő naplója*”. *Ars Hungarica* 44 (2018): 481–485.

8. MAJOR Ágnes. „Tű és töviskorona: Tolnai Ottó árvacsáthja a kultusz jegyében”. *Híd*, 6–7. sz. (2018): 128–134.
9. MAJOR Ágnes. „Kanonizációs törekvések és a Csáth-kultusz megalapozása a Függőben”. *Irodalmi Szemle* 61, 11. sz. (2018): 41–49.
10. MAJOR Ágnes. „Egy kultuszrombolási kísérlet(?): Lovas Ildikó: *Spanyol menyasszony*”: *Irodalmi Szemle* 60, 1. sz. (2017): 71–80.
11. MAJOR Ágnes. „Kultusz és paródia”. In *Miskolci Egyetem Doktoranduszok Fóruma, Miskolc, 2016. november 17.: Bölcsészettudományi Kar szekciókiadványa*, szerkesztette KÁLI Anita és MAJOR Ágnes, 47–52. Miskolc: Miskolci Egyetem Tudományos és Nemzetközi Rektorhelyettesi Titkárság, 2017.
12. MAJOR Ágnes. „Kultuszrombolás vagy kultuszépítés? Lovas Ildikó: *Spanyol menyasszony*”. In *(Kon)Textus*, szerkesztette BARTÓK Boglárka, MAJOR Ágnes és SCHÄFFER Anett, 33–42. Pro Scientia Füzetek 5. Miskolc: Könyvműhely.hu, 2017.
13. MAJOR Ágnes. „Lelkiismeret nélkül(?): A pszichoanalitikus értelmezés lehetősége Csáth Géza *Anyagyilkosság* című novellájában és Szász János *Witman fiúk* című filmjében”. In *Átjárások–áthallások: Az Eötvös Collegium Magyar Műhely 2014. évi konferenciájának előadásai*, szerkesztette HANTÓ Réka, MUNTAG Vince, MELHARDT Gergő és VARGA Nóra, 241–255. Budapest: ELTE Eötvös József Collegium, 2016.
14. MAJOR Ágnes. „Csáth-kultusz az adaptációk tükrében: Németh Zoltán: *Boldogságtelep, vetélőgéphez – Csáth szeretője*”. *Literatura* 42 (2016): 361–367.
15. MAJOR Ágnes. „Koncentrált Csáth-világ: Csáth Géza és Fodor Tamás Zách Klárája”. In *Szöveg, hagyomány, interpretáció*, szerkesztette ÁDÁM Enikő, BARNA László, BARTÓK Boglárka, MAJOR Ágnes és SÁNDOR Kitti, 41–46. Pro Scientia Füzetek 4. Miskolc: Könyvműhely.hu, 2016.
16. MAJOR Ágnes. „Kimozdított identitás: Filmre vitt Csáth-szövegek”. In *Miskolci Egyetem Doktoranduszok Fóruma, Miskolc, 2015. november 19.: Bölcsészettudományi Kar szekciókiadványa*, szerkesztette FEKETE Norbert és MAJOR Ágnes, 45–50. Miskolc: Miskolci Egyetem Tudományos és Nemzetközi Rektorhelyettesi Titkárság, 2016.

17. MAJOR Ágnes. „Az orvos tekintete: A csáthi szövegvilág megjelenési formái Parti Nagy Lajos *A fagyott kutya lába* című novellájában”. In *Miskolci Egyetem Doktoranduszok Fóruma, Miskolc, 2014. november 21.: Bölcsészettudományi Kar szekciókiadványa*, szerkesztette FEKETE Norbert és MAJOR Ágnes, 55–60. Miskolc: Miskolci Egyetem Tudományszervezési és Nemzetközi Osztály, 2015.
18. MAJOR Ágnes. „»Csak én voltam ébren«: A *Fekete* csönd értelmezési lehetőségei”. In *Babits és kortársai*, szerkesztette MAJOROS Györgyi, SIPOS Lajos és TOMPA Zsófia, 212–222. Kútfő bibliotéka 15. Budapest: Cédrus Művészeti Alapítvány–Napkút Kiadó, 2015.
19. MAJOR Ágnes. „Valós(?) keretbe foglalt fikció: A narratív határátlépés lehetősége Csáth Géza novellisztikájában”. In *Határátlépések*, szerkesztette BARNA László, EGERER Lilla, KAPUSI Angéla és MAJOR Ágnes, 56–60. Pro Scientia Füzetek 3. Miskolc: Könyvműhely.hu, 2015.
20. MAJOR Ágnes. „Az *Anyagyilkosság* lelkiismeret- és bűnérzet-képe”. In *Sokszínű jelentés*, szerkesztette BARNA László, EGERER Lilla, KAPUSI Angéla és MAJOR Ágnes, 62–66. Pro Scientia Füzetek 2. Miskolc: Könyvműhely.hu, 2013.