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“HOLD LIKE RICH GARNERS THE FULL-RIPEN’D
GRAIN”
ON THE SCHOLARLY HERITAGE OF
PÉTER EGRÍ (1932–2002)

Introduction

The late Professor Péter Egri’s contribution to literary scholarship, laid down in sixteen books, some edited volumes and nearly three hundred studies and shorter writings published in Hungary and in several other countries, defies convenient categorization. He belonged to the by our time fast decreasing number of scholars whose range of interests proved to be extremely wide and far-reaching, embracing aspects of Hungarian, English, American, Irish, French, German, Russian, Norwegian and Spanish literature, genre theory, music, painting and sculpture. Therefore, Egri was both an Anglicist and an Americanist, and even more: “scholar of comparative literary and cultural studies” appears to be the most appropriate description of his status in view of the scope of his achievement. The opening of his career as literary historian and critic already demonstrated this variety: after he completed his university doctor’s degree dissertation on the poetry of Attila József in 1959, in the following years up to 1966 he probed into the works of writers as diverse as Mark Twain, Aldous Huxley, Henrik Ibsen, G. B. Shaw, James Joyce, Tibor Déry, and Anton P. Chekhov in articles which appeared in journals and collections. 1967 saw the publication of his first two books, on notably different subjects. One under the title *Hemingway* is a slender volume which surveys the fiction of the American writer with a special focus on the genetic and generic connections between the

novelistic and the short story forms and the interaction of realism and naturalism. The other book, titled *James Joyce és Thomas Mann: Dekadencia és modernség* (James Joyce and Thomas Mann: Decadence and Modernity) provides detailed comparisons of the two outstanding writers' respective works in the context of the both diverse and diverging ambitions of modernism.

From the beginning of his career, the incentive to view genres and works in relation to each other, while also interrogating them against certain models, paradigms, and their representative artistic manifestations, has established its own creative tradition in Egri's scholarly activity. In an interview conducted with him on the occasion of his 70th birthday in January 2002, he outlined a periodization of his whole oeuvre himself, based on the nature and corollary of the issues he was intrigued by at the time of writing his major book-length studies (Kurdi 130–31). According to this thoughtful self-assessment and the testimony of Egri's works themselves, the roughly four decades of his activity as literary historian and critic can be divided into four periods. None of these, however, is clearly independent from the others, they are linked by acts of developing, refocusing and expanding the issues initially problematized. Egri's scholarly oeuvre is a firm construction that was gradually rising higher while growing in breadth and strength during his career. The roads and paths taken by his inquisitive scholarship can be seen as criss-crossing each other while all leading towards the "rich garners," to borrow from the lyrical vocabulary of John Keats' sonnet "When I Have Fears" (152), which now store the products of thought and ambitious inquiry in the form of individual essays, collections and books.

Interrogating Modernism

During the first period, which fell between 1959 and 1972, Egri claimed to have been interested in what ways and by what means of representation literary works addressed the crucial, often dissonant experiences of the twentieth century, so that they not just break with, but also transcend and renew tradition. As he argued, it was the synthesizing achievement of Béla Bartók's modernist music that provided some kind of model for him to pinpoint the possibility of this delicate balance in the domain of literature (Kurdi 130). Considered in this light, the similarity of the first two books is unmistakable: they

discuss shifts in the writing of the three authors, comparing as well as contrasting their varied artistic responses to the threatening outside world in terms of narrative structure and discourse. Both books have remained milestones in Hungarian scholarship, reviewed and cited by several Hungarian critics. *James Joyce és Thomas Mann* had Tibor Szobotka, the translator of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* into Hungarian among its first reviewers. In Szobotka's words, the book is "valuable both as a Joyce monograph and as a work [that] never fails to grasp the important connections, and sees all phenomena in the multiplied relation and reflection of parallel, precedent and consequence" (287). Closer to our time, in his analysis of Hemingway's *Fiesta* Zoltán Abádi Nagy refers to the significant artistic links between that novel and the preceding volume of short stories as first propounded by Egri's book on the writer (195).

The individual author and work renewing tradition is, of course, an idea discussed in T. S. Eliot's essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919), which Egri paid particular attention to already in his first writing on the poet, a contribution to the collection *Az angol irodalom a huszadik században* (English Literature in the Twentieth Century) (1970). Eliot's was another modernist achievement he could not possibly ignore in his dedicated investigation of how artists represented chaos and loss as aspects of twentieth century experience, and completed a further paper titled "T. S. Eliot's Aesthetics" for the 1974 issue of *Hungarian Studies in English* published by the Debrecen English Department. Continuing the same line of inquiry, in 1981 Egri selected and edited a collection of Eliot's essays in Hungarian, to which he wrote an introduction that expounds the nature of the various intellectual challenges demonstrated by the writer. Years later, in "Reflections on T. S. Eliot's *Vers Libre*," an article appearing in a volume of centenary essays published in England Egri contended that "The crucial problem of genre theory [...] is of a complex nature and therefore requires a complex approach. It is a remarkable thing that two such different authors as T. S. Eliot and G. Lukács show a conspicuous point of contact in tackling the problem" (164). This statement but highlights, in retrospect, that the marxist theoretical perspective characteristic of the early period of Egri's scholarship was by no means a narrowly understood and rigidly

applied set of critical tools and conventions, but kept on enriching itself, drawing from the thoughts of definitely non-marxist systems as well. Egri's studies of Eliot are also widely cited, for instance in the discussion of the kaleidoscopic method and non-linear progression underlying the structure of *The Waste Land*, which forms a seminal chapter of the 1986 *Tradition and Innovation in American Free Verse: Whitman to Duncan*, written by Enikő Bollobás (173).

The books coming from Egri's pen in the latter part of his first creative period broadened the scope of scrutiny by examining further representatives and manifestations of twentieth century fiction. *Álom, látomás, valóság* (Dream, Vision, Reality) (1969) was the first in the line, which focuses on particular strategies of the modernizing tendency in a remarkable variety of major European novelists' works, expanding and complicating the analytical arsenal by parallels from the domain of music, the compositions of Benjamin Britten for instance. In one of the writer giants, Marcel Proust, Egri discovered yet another exemplary innovator of the novel's technique, whose influence on a range of later practitioners of the genre he found it both worthwhile and fruitful to take account of. Thus Proust, Tibor Déry and Jorge Semprun are treated together in the volume he published in French in 1969, under the title *Survie et réinterprétation de la forme proustienne*. His closely following 1970 book focuses on Déry alone, discussing aspects of the Hungarian author's modernity he found not only unique but also unorthodox in the context of mid-twentieth century Hungarian literary phenomena which were restricted by politically governed critical norms and expectations.

Avantgardism and Modernity appeared in 1972, as a kind of assessment of the several year-long, complex inquiry into what constitutes the modern, reaching back to the comparison of respective works by Joyce and Mann and the idea that it was the latter of the two who achieved modernity in its true essence. But isn't this an evidently dated view, we are inclined to ask thirty years later, when Joyce has become acclaimed as a leading master of modern prose everywhere in the world. In his contribution to " 'Nor shall Death brag thou wander'st in his shade': A Discussion Panel in Memory of Péter Egri" at the HUSSE 6 Conference in Debrecen, 2003, Aladár Sarbu gave a succinct summary of what remains as the lasting value of Egri's book:

Few people would today accept a comparative analysis of Joyce and Mann the upshot of which is that Mann succeeded where Joyce failed. We would say, rather, that Joyce succeeded where Mann succeeded, only they succeeded in different ways. Still, in more senses than one, *Avantgardism and Modernity* is an exemplary book: it rests on sound scholarship, presents its case in a lucid and lively manner, and most of all, because even if you do not always agree with the lessons it draws you cannot but acknowledge the perspicacity and the insight with which it explores the ways in which avantgard techniques operate in fiction. The most eloquent proof of this latter is that Professor Egri's analysis of stylistic variety in "Circe" is now part and parcel of any aspiring Joyce-scholar's education.

Though *Avantgardism and Modernity* can be regarded as a closure to the first period, the difference of the modernist narrative from its realist predecessors and also from its postmodern followers, at least in the case of Joyce, continued to be a challenge in some of Egri's later writings. In the 1973 essay "Natura Naturans: an Approach to the Poetic Reflection of Reality. The Aspect of Poetry in the 'Proteus' Episode of James Joyce's *Ulysses*," the scholar analyzes the poetic language of Joyce's modernist fiction as exemplified in the selected episode. "A Portrait of the Artist as a Caricaturist: Picasso, Joyce, Britten," first published in the journal *Comparative Literature Studies* in 1982, draws a parallel between different art works to chart strategies of parody and caricature. The part on Joyce probes into the double-edged nature of the "Oxen of the Sun" chapter of *Ulysses* as it keeps an ironic distance from both its source, Homer's epic, and the 19th century style of Charles Dickens. According to Egri, some elements of Chapter LIII of *David Copperfield* become playfully displaced and thoroughly caricatured in the Joycean text (107–09). Extending his comments on the shift between forms and styles further, in a 2001 essay under the title "(Per)chance: Joyce and Cage" Egri discusses how John Cage's postmodern composition *The Wonderful Widow of Eighteen Springs* (1961), which adapts a passage from page 556 of *Finnegans Wake*, increases the musical quality of Joyce's modernist text. The rhythmic ambiguities of the composer's work, achieved through the act of transposing Joyce's linguistic bravura, were even demonstrated by Egri to his professional audience when he was playing some of the music on the piano as an accompaniment to

his key-note lecture, the first version of the later essay, at the HUSSE 5 Conference in Eger, 2001.

There are certain hidden gems of Egri's scholarly heritage which did not find their way into any of the books for some reason and remained within the respective bounds of relatively isolated essays, participating in the process of the ongoing inquiry established by his work nonetheless. The 1980 article titled "The Genetic and Generic Aspects of Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*" unmistakably joins itself to the first period, by contending that the novel under inspection displays a "[...] many-faceted complex pattern [that] sheds explanatory light on the fermenting trends in American fiction at the close of the century, a period which gave birth to the American novel" (333). In a way the essay is a further extension of the research producing the book which discusses the modernist aspects of Hemingway's narrative form and discourse, since it critically engages with the cross-fertilization of genres as well as subgenres. As clarified by Egri's line of argument, the integration of naturalistic, impressionistic, symbolistic, and potentially expressionistic-surrealistic layers into the realism characteristic of Crane's method of writing is inseparable from the lyrical and dramatic modes enriching the fictional to enhance the portrayal of changing moods and conflicting perspectives.

Addressing the Nature of Poetry and the Poetic

The first period having focused on modernism chiefly in fiction, in the second one Egri's new direction was to address the nature of poetry, departing from and arguing with the relevant ideas of György Lukács and Christopher Caudwell. *A költészet valósága: líra és lirizálódás* (The Reality of Poetry: The Lyrical and Lyricization) is the title given to the 1975 book dedicated to the memory of György Lukács, Egri's eminent teacher and master. A theoretically framed volume, it seems to have evolved and become synthesized from the lectures the author gave about various English poets and poetic genres to his students at Lajos Kossuth University, Debrecen during the preceding years. The most detailed and thorough review of *A költészet valósága* was written by Ágnes Péter. Published in *Filológiai Közlöny* (Philological Review), her evaluation of the book points out that it engages with virtually all the significant questions having been raised

in the history of aesthetic speculation (110). While this in itself is a clear indication of the depth of the study, the reviewer finds that Egri discusses and uses the concept of *natura naturans*, which dates back to Samuel Taylor Coleridge, but does not redefine or develop it any further (109). Presumably not intending to set an aim of such proportions for his work, he does, however, examine the implications of the concept through the analyses of literary works written by authors of several countries ranging from Renaissance to modernism.

Due to its nature, and to Egri's deep-rooted interest as well as inspired education in music, *A költészet valósága* treats the manifold subject and its ramifications by identifying and utilizing the subtle parallels and affinities between poetry and music. The third chapter is remarkable for following the journey of the sonnet in English from Shakespeare and John Donne to William Wordsworth and Elizabeth Barrett Browning through the Metaphysical poets and John Milton. Introduced to generic transformations from Renaissance plasticity to emotional integration through contrapuntal tension, here the reader is presented with a collection of both informed and sensitive close-readings of individual sonnets, whose analyses reveal their respective stylistic variations on this particular lyrical form. Addressing Wordsworth's "Composed Upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802," Egri maintains that it clearly distinguishes itself from the Petrarchan tradition. He accounts for the powerful emotional paradox at the heart of the sonnet as an effect produced by the pictorial description of the impression that the city wears the "beauty of the morning" and is "silent and bare" at the same time (139–41).

The reader finds that Egri's *A költészet valósága*, because of its analytical scope and use of a functional method, can boast of a radiating impact on many of the critic's later studies, especially those dealing with Shakespeare. "Whose Immortality Is It Anyway? The Hungarian Translations of Shakespeare's Sonnet 18," an essay first published in volume 17 of the *Shakespeare Yearbook* series in 1996, harks back to, draws from and relies on the observations concerning the development of poetic genres in the much earlier book. Doing so, the essay offers a both detailed and exciting comparative study of fifteen attempts to render Sonnet 18 into Hungarian, demonstrating through this representative series also the shifting ideas and ideals

which underpinned and shaped the theory and practice of translating poetry in nineteenth- and twentieth century Hungary. Completing the survey, “Whose Immortality Is It Anyway?” evaluates Dezső Mészöly’s outstanding translation from 1990 in relation to the progress of Shakespeare’s lyrical art itself, as a “revitalization, reinterpretation, and modernization of traditional translations [...] in tune with the prosodic context of Shakespeare’s own achievement in integrating, rejecting, rejuvenating, and recasting traditional ways of composing sonnets” (33–34).

A költészet valósága extends its inquiry also to the ways how fiction and drama may become imbued with the lyrical. In this respect, Egri’s examples range from the intricate poetic structures he discovers in the “Proteus” episode of *Ulysses* to the use of symbols and visions in especially the early plays of Eugene O’Neill. In his 1984 book about the ontology of drama discussed in comparison with that of other genres, drama theorist Tamás Bécsy pays credit to these observations (222, 312). The discussion of O’Neill’s plays in a comprehensive book about poetry like *A költészet valósága* is, offers certainly not a strange interlude before the third period of Egri’s scholarly work with drama in its centre, which was announced by the 1983 book titled *Törésvonalak: drámai irányok az európai századfordulón* (Faultlines: Dramatic Trends at the Turn of the Century in Europe). Researching O’Neill, Egri realized, the route first had to lead back to the theatres of Europe, to consider the roots of the American playwright whose intimate knowledge of his exemplary international predecessors is indispensable for a deeper understanding of his own work. Systematically, in *Törésvonalak* as well as in some corresponding essays, Egri constructed a both manysided and broad picture of the changes in theatre and the renewed playwriting practice that flourished across different countries and nations and inspired O’Neill later. Oscar Wilde comes first and Maxim Gorky closes the line in the survey of authors whose dramaturgical innovations within realism, symbolism, aestheticism, naturalism and symbolism Egri examines as milestones of the revolution taking place in the modern European theatre between the politically charged dates of 1871 and 1917.

A synthesizing book like *Törésvonalak* hardly ever comes to light without omissions as far as the list of analyzed writers is concerned,

and these may seem to be important ones on occasion. In this particular case John Millington Synge is such a missing author. His absence is all the more surprizing as William Butler Yeats, who made less direct impact on contemporary Irish drama than Synge, receives a comparatively lengthy treatment in the volume, despite the fact that a considerable bulk of his plays was written after 1917, beyond which date the book does not reach. The chapter on Yeats, however, has its own specific value in that it constitutes the first interpretative discussion of the poet-playwright's experimental dramatic *oeuvre* in Hungary. Referring to the late Ibsen as parallel as well as potential influence, Egri emphasizes the symbolism inherent in Yeats's work for the theatre. Thus a ground-breaking essay in its own right, it was soon followed by Csilla Bertha's comprehensive monographic study of Yeats the playwright, in the introductory chapter of which she quotes Egri's description of the Irish author as the writer of the "drama of possibility" in a future-oriented period characterized by the national and cultural revival of his native country (28).

Another of Egri's isolated essays from 1987, called "Synge and O'Neill: Inspiration and Influence," may serve to compensate for the absence of Synge from the book mapping the history of modern European drama. Claiming that during their first tour of the United States in 1911 the Abbey Players presented works by Synge, Yeats, Augusta Gregory, T. C. Murray and Lennox Robinson, it describes how O'Neill, at that time a young man cherishing dreams of writing for the theatre, attended all of those performances, and started his own playwriting career with Synge as a haunting presence behind the works of especially his early period. According to Egri's summary, the apparent influence can be detected "from typological convergence to parallels of theme, treatment, mood and motif," which constitute "so many good reasons to see the two dramatists' works in correlation" (268). Reading this well justified argument, one is invited to add that later in the twentieth century the direction of inspiration/influence between the drama of the two nations seems to have changed: a number of contemporary Irish playwrights engage in a refreshing dialogue with O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, Sam Shepard and David Mamet.

The concluding chapter of *Törésvonalak* proves to be a thought-provoking commentary on and intervention in contemporary Hungarian critical debates about the drama, with Tamás Bécsy's theory of identifying the "situation" as a key-element of the genre (*Drámamó-dellek* 33–50) in the centre of its attention. Egri stresses the view that the "situation" can be found too general a category for the purpose of theorizing drama, as it is also present in musical genres like the fugue and the sonata. Rather than enhance the status of one undoubtedly important element, he suggests, referring to what he calls György Lukács's "hidden drama theory" (432), that the concept of conflict should be broadened to encompass the latent tension and opposition between characters in plays where there may be no open clash of antithetical intensions or ambitions. As expected, Egri's thoughts in the conclusion generated a continuation of the theoretical debates. Bécsy responded in a review of the book, which misses a more detailed elaboration of a broad and flexible concept of conflict to give shape to the ideas of Lukács. At the same time, he identified the value and originality of the book by pointing out that its author analyzes the generic development of modern drama in relation to style (Bécsy, "A műfaj: stílus" 1575).

Challenges of the Drama

Egri's many-sided inquiry into modern drama was leading toward and converging into his in-depth study of one giant playwright, Eugene O'Neill's work. By the 1980s he had become an internationally known O'Neill scholar, commissioned to contribute to important and influential collections in the field, which came out in the United States, Canada, Germany and Japan. His work is quoted, for instance, in Virginia Floyd's extended assessment of the playwright's career (52). The same decade saw the publication of three books on O'Neill by Egri, primarily interested in the role of form articulating the American experience as it influenced the playwright's imagination. 1986 was hallmarked by completing the comparative analysis titled *Chekhov and O'Neill: The Uses of the Short Story in Chekhov's and O'Neill's Plays*, which addresses the interaction between short story and drama in respective works of the two playwrights. Chekhov's apparent influence on O'Neill forms the starting point to placing generic questions, again, in the centre of the

book. The author looks at several of the two writers' short stories to trace how they anticipate the short plays, while the short-story-like narrative and dramatic units in some of the full-length plays of both oeuvres are identified as important structural principles contributing to what Egri calls, justifiably, the "mosaic design" (68).

While a fundamentally comparative study in its own right, *Chekhov and O'Neill* succeeded in achieving what *A költészet valósága* did not yet do: it developed an original theoretical conception and framework for an illustrated scrutiny of the working of the drama and the dramatic. Probably Egri's best book, its good reception and informed appreciation in Hungarian professional circles and also abroad were testified by the great number of reviews dedicated to it in journals and various other forums. Sampling these, the one from the pen of Frederick C. Wilkins contributed to *The Eugene O'Neill Newsletter* appears to be most thorough and comprehensive in both its synopsis and appraisal. The American O'Neill scholar writes:

This is a rich and rewarding book, and if I begin with the comment that it is misrepresented by its title, I do so only to emphasize that Professor Egri's study extends considerably beyond its officially announced confines. [...] there are frequent and fruitful digressions into the relations between O'Neill's work and that of other writers as well, especially Conrad, Gorky, Synge and Ibsen; and the author's deep familiarity with the whole course of social and cultural history permits him to broaden his canvas periodically and show the origins and intricate evolution of the literary genres he is discussing [...]. *Chekhov and O'Neill* is not an easy book, either to read or to summarize. It defies immediate comprehension or glib recital. But the careful reader will, I know, share my gratitude to Professor Egri for adding a major volume to the O'Neill bookshelf. (32, 34)

Another reviewer, Joyce Flynn for *Irish Literary Supplement* is similarly respectful of the analytical achievement of the book. Characteristically, he finds it appropriate to contextualize his comments by referring to Chekhov's popularity with Irish writers, especially playwrights. Regarding details he continues: "[...] the resemblances Egri highlights are persuasive: the most useful to teachers of O'Neill's drama being the allusions to Chekhov's *The Seagull* and the insight into Edmund's self-concept as an artist in his speeches late in *Long Day's Journey Into Night*" (30).

The next book of Egri's on O'Neill, *The Birth of American Tragedy* from 1988 was written with the intention of introducing mainly university students to the evolution of the drama in America, including a critical summary of the various theories why the genre had come of age so relatively late there. Beginning to map its national history, the analysis of the unmistakably derivative but heroically accomplished pioneer work *The Prince of Parthia* (1759) by Thomas Godfrey in the first chapter qualifies as exceptional in that it revives a long-forgotten work for scholarship. On the other hand, this part of the book turns out to have a strategic function as well, it becomes the basis of further investigations and conclusions: Egri establishes a delicate balance of respect for something starting with *Parthia* though obviously still in the shadow of Shakespeare, and the necessary critique of this being not quite the right thing yet. The story of the difficult birth of the genre in America, however, leads from origins to maturity as well as originality: the last chapter in the book discusses O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, appreciating "the fusion of the epic, lyric and tragic" within the drama. Lending a firm structure to the analysis Egri distinguishes four types of conflict as they unfold among the characters, which affect the artistic approach and entail variations of style in the text in turn.

As if intended to be Egri's personal celebration of the O'Neill centennial in 1988, with which its publication coincided, *The Birth of American Tragedy* also enjoyed an enthusiastic international reception. Michael Hinden for *Comparative Drama* introduces the book as an informed study, whose author, a "distinguished Hungarian scholar," is found well equipped to offer a history of the genre once the term tragicomedy enters his critical narrative. Concerning the chapter on *Long Day's Journey*, Egri is said to "demonstrate[s] a patience for intricate linguistic notation that has no parallel in American commentary." About the usefulness of the book Hinden's summary runs as follows: "Students of O'Neill will be impressed with the book's thorough scholarship and intellectual sweep. *The Birth of American Tragedy* is a formidable resource whose gifts may be extracted by judicious skimming" (402-03). Frederick C. Wilkins, in *The Eugene O'Neill Review*, equally emphasizes the merits of Egri's both detailed and thoughtful discussion of *Long Day's Journey*,

adding that his “analysis of the family dynamics and his delineation of the playwright’s ‘concept of relative determinism’ rank with the best.” At the same time he makes a note of what is usually ignored in the majority of reviews, namely that the well researched contents of the book are “buttressed by extremely thorough notes” (86).

Elidegenedés és drámaforma: Az amerikai álmom társadalomtörténete és lélekrajza O’Neill drámaciklusában (Alienation and Dramatic Form: The Social History and Psychological Portrait of the American Dream in O’Neill Drama Cycle), Egri’s third book on O’Neill published still in 1988, is a highly specialized work of scholarship. Focusing on *A Tale of Possessors Self-Dispossessed*, the playwright’s monumental cycle, it regards it as central to the *oeuvre* in highlighting the nature of O’Neill’s experimentation to dramatize the tension between American dream and American reality. The introduction details the experience of alienation in the playwright’s life, which gave him the impetus to begin the cycle. Yet *A Tale of Possessors Self-Dispossessed* remained incomplete, Egri argues, because the spatial, temporal and historical dimensions of the unfolding and ramifying concept spilled out of the dramatic form. In the bulk of the book three surviving plays of the cycle (originally planned to contain eleven parts) come under scrutiny. *A Touch of the Poet* is viewed as a play which integrates short story features, demonstrating affinity with Irish drama and its oral traditions on the one hand, and with the structural layout of Chekhov’s *Uncle Vanya* on the other. Considering aspects of character and form, Egri contends that both O’Neill and Chekhov staged a double view of their respective “heroes,” Melody and Vanya, resulting in tragicomedy. *More Stately Mansions* is treated under the title “Novel in the Drama,” signalling how the play grew into the epic picture of a family’s self-dispossession. From another angle, the analysis points out that the three main characters display features of split selves, deeply marked personal distortions, and also a wish to regain their autonomy by merging themselves with another personality. Finally, the unfinished play, *The Calms of Capricorn* (whose 1983 Hungarian translation by Ágnes Gergely was its first ever rendering into another language, Egri informs his readers), appears in a chapter that sets it against various drama models preceding the work of O’Neill, highlighting thereby the heterogeneous

nature of its style. The cycle, left in torso as it happened to be, is worthy of attention the conclusion of the study runs, because it constitutes the probably most authentic dramatic “witness” to the author’s struggle with form on the way toward creating the stylistic synthesis which will distinguish *Long Day’s Journey*.

From Comparative Approach to Interdisciplinarity

1988 was also the year when the fourth (and, unfortunately, the last) period of Egri’s scholarly career started, with the publication of *Literature, Painting and Music: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Comparative Literature*. The comparative approach frequently present in his earlier works remained very much characteristic of the unfolding final creative period, though with a difference: from the above book onwards the related and shared aspects of literature and the other arts become viewed together. It is in the later book, *Value and Form: Comparative Literature, Painting, and Music*, published in 1993, where a kind of “program” for the period gains elucidation, along with the description of a perspective the new studies tend to deploy:

The most promising and rewarding type of comparison between literature and painting or literature and music can conveniently be termed axiological parallel. This is comparison based on shared values. Since this method implies the systematic collation of values outside and inside the works of art, and since the two spheres are connected by form which is instrumental in selecting, condensing, reordering, generalizing and assessing primary experience, axiological parallel is concerned both with matter and manner, attitude and form. (9)

Turning toward the contextualization of literary works with the help of certain achievements in the domain of the sister arts, Egri redefined the strategy of interpretation and evaluation when emphasizing the need for a sharpened focus on the cultural embeddedness of literature. By its nature, this kind of interdisciplinary approach ignores the limits of time and space, and the subsequent books and essays of the author lead their readers across a range of countries and centuries. Parts of *Literature, Painting and Music* remain unique in applying Stephen Spender’s categories of “modern” and “contemporary” to the works of Hungarian poets Sándor Petőfi, Endre Ady, and Attila József, while looking for parallels in Hungarian

painters like Mihály Munkácsy, Tivadar Csontváry Kosztka, Aurél Bernáth, István Dési Huber and Gyula Derkovits.

Varying the strategy, in *Value and Form* Egri appears to be even more conscious of the idea of Walter Pater that the “various forms of intellectual activity which together make up the culture of an age, [...] partake indeed of a common character, and unconsciously illustrate each other;” as it is claimed in the preface to *The Renaissance* (xv). Besides summing up the research of many years, the book is the work of a scholar teacher who was in the habit of entering the classroom with not only books but also art albums and pieces of recorded music. Instead of abstract theorizing and using the works as mere illustrations, Egri’s method in *Value and Form* continues to be a detailed analysis of its subject without any rigidly imposed pattern, seeking answers to the questions the material itself raises. Chapter IV of the book, for instance, is memorable for exploring one particular theme (the storm) and some corresponding images/symbols in Shelley, Turner, Field and Chopin. According to Egri, it is the Romantic artists’ imagination-governed attraction to the unusual manifestations of nature which seems to be the shaping force behind the magnificence of their works. The joining of distant poles and diverse elements produces linguistic contrasts in poetry, “large-scale modulations” in music, and “masses of whirling colour” in painting (185). In the same chapter the Irish-born and relatively unknown, even neglected Romantic composer John Field is resurrected as an inventor, that of the musical genre of the nocturne, and his influence on Chopin becomes duly recorded. Continuing to intrigue the author, the ideas presented here are further expanded by the book *Érték és képzelet: Shelley, Turner, Field és Chopin* (Value and Imagination: Shelley, Turner, Field, and Chopin), which appeared in 1994.

The comprehensive nature of *Value and Form* lies also in the fact that besides the artists focused on more closely many others are called to mind, and as a “by-product” of the analyses, this results in enriching the text with further thought-provoking remarks. *Value and Form* treats several connections or just resonances between artists and art works which have received little or no attention by other scholars earlier. The respective manifestations of the 18th century novel of education (exemplified by *Tom Jones* in the book), and the classical

symphony dating back to the same age are found to represent a “panoramic broadness [...] combined with a measure of dramatic quality” (23). In its assessment of the structural correspondences between the Romantic sonnet, landscape painting and sonata, the originality of Egri’s investigation is signalled by defining the pictorial phenomenon that is meaningfully termed as “visual enjambment” (80). The chapter on modern artists, on the other hand, makes a convincing distinction between types of the caricature, terming them occasional, trend and universal. The last of these, so forcefully and memorably practised by the major artists of the twentieth century, the author claims to be directed against no less than “*the* human predicament” (191).

Modern Games with Renaissance Forms: From Leonardo and Shakespeare to Warhol and Stoppard (1996), and *Text in Context: Literature and the Sister Arts* (2001), the last two books by Egri, reveal axiological parallels in literature and the other art forms with increasing complexity. In both, though not equally, there appears an interest in contemporary drama which is a relatively new field of interest in the scholarly oeuvre. An isolated essay, “American Variations on a British Theme: Giles Cooper and Edward Albee” from 1994 can be seen as introducing it, included in *Forked Tongues?: Comparing Twentieth-Century British and American Literature*, a collection published by Longman. The main question explored by Egri here is the fate of the absurd in the American theatre, its origins and originality in the work of Albee, the acknowledged American representative of the form, whose rewriting of a play by the Anglo-Irish Cooper serves as an example for the theoretical discussion. A comparison with Beckett, the European father of the absurd appears to be unavoidable. Different from the latter’s creation of an “openly absurdist universe,” Albee’s art is found to unite “realistic and absurdist aspects, [continuing] this achievement of modern American drama, and places his dramatic art in the mainstream of the dramatic movement.” This is “a characteristically American fusion,” Egri continues, which can be traced back to O’Neill (145). Only a few years apart from the publication of Egri’s essay, American drama critic Linda Ben-Zvi examined O’Neill and absurdity as part of another collection featuring international scholarship (33–55).

Modern Games continues the scrutiny of contemporary drama in a both interdisciplinary and international context and neighbourhood. As their general strategy, the analyses confront Renaissance works of art with their twentieth-century replicas and echoes to study the changes in reconstructing form and rechanneling meaning that such alterations are found to involve. Necessarily, iconoclasm, subversiveness, parody and irony become key-terms as well as vantage points throughout the volume. First the book examines the various avantgarde, pop art and postmodern transpositions of Leonardo's paintings, mainly *Mona Lisa* and *The Last Supper*. Testified by Egri's elaborate discussion, the twentieth-century re-workings result in fundamental shifts and disruptions in the system of established values. Robert Rauschenberg's four-piece *Pneumonia Lisa* (1982), for one, fits the analytical scheme of the author as "a work of artistic deconstruction eliciting acts of critical deconstruction" (23). Another example, Andy Warhol's notorious *Thirty Are Better Than One* (1963), which consists of a set of irregularly composed silkscreen prints of Leonardo's *Mona Lisa*, is interpreted here as thoroughly questioning the uniqueness of the original by foregrounding the commercialization of art, a more than contentious "achievement" of our era.

A considerable part of *Modern Games*, however, focuses on the intertextual presence of Shakespeare in Stoppard's drama, bearing in mind, usefully, the parallels with Leonardo's fate in twentieth century painting and pop art. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1966) easily lends itself for a closer examination, being a play that carries double parody, that of both *Hamlet* and Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. While elaborating on the interaction between Renaissance and (post)modern drama, the author traces the caricaturing of Hamlet's soliloquy in the Stoppard text, and points out that it ventures to omit the very substance of Shakespeare's words. Language and structure play a significant part in the re-writing process as Egri's argument clarifies:

And to top it all, Shakespearean high blank verse is replaced by comic, contemporary, petty, if witty, prose. Order is also meaning: if Ros's prosaic pondering and blundering precede the parodistic fragment from Hamlet's soliloquy, they also prepare the spectator for the comic reinterpretation of the soliloquy. (60)

Notably, *Modern Games* incorporates the first extended discussion of several aspects of Stoppard's dramatic work by a Hungarian scholar. Later plays like *Travesties* (1974), *Dog's Hamlet* (1976), and *Cahoot's Macbeth* (1978) are also examined in the book, the author finding in them other echoes of Shakespeare which contribute, in a variety of ways, to the artistic effect of disruption and ironizing.

In addition to the thoughtfully defined inquiry into the exciting spectrum of the modes of treating Renaissance texts in the twentieth century, *Modern Games* draws attention to cultural and theatrical self-reference producing layers of fictionality in Stoppard and his contemporaries, which destabilize fixed meanings and provoke a number of new questions. Regarding Egri's method, intertextual parallels are identified by him in order to facilitate the differentiation between the dramatic strategies involved. In his interpretation Rosencrantz and Guildenstern invite comparison with doubled figures in Gogol, Dürrenmatt and, of course, Beckett, to negotiate the politics of the theatrical reconstruction of identity problems. The relationship of doubles is seen as basically complementary in Stoppard's play with clear resemblance to how Vladimir and Estragon are linked, already pinpointed by Martin Esslin (46). At the same time, Egri's analysis highlights that psychological pairs (for instance the ones in certain relevant plays of O'Neill and Brian Friel), do differ from the personality patterning both Beckett and Stoppard operate with, in that they serve the process of internal characterization. Branching out from its original vantage point, thus the argument in this section gains wider theoretical implications by connecting itself to the current international discussion about the ideologically as well as dramaturgically elusive boundaries of the conventionally used category of the dramatic character.

The significance of *Modern Games* in the very oeuvre of Egri and for scholarship in general is underscored by its enthusiastic reception abroad. In *Theatre Research International* Thomas F. Connolly, understandably, concentrates on the sections dealing with drama. The beginning of his review strikes a note by referring to the sophistication of Egri's analysis, and considers it necessary to remark that "superficially it would seem to be a postmodernist scholarly discourse. This is not the case, however, since Peter Egri's readings are far too

learned and genuinely engaged to be merely trendy.” The reviewer concludes his sympathetically sound appraisal of *Modern Games* by recommending it as “essential reading for dramaturgs, critics and theorists” (90). Günter Walch, writing for *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik*, welcomes Egri’s comparative subject elaborated in what he calls a “lively book,” an “exception to the rule [...] at a time of overspecialization” (79). Furthermore, Walch calls attention to some other valuable details that the study offers on Stoppard, for instance concerning the writer’s “personal involvement in political activities [which] changed his social and moral commitment,” which results in the rediscovery of “lost values” in a certain segment of his oeuvre by Egri (80).

As if sharing and enjoying the Yeatsian “fascination of what is difficult” (Yeats 104), Egri continued to deal with Stoppard in other interdisciplinary essays. “From Painting to Play: Magritte and Stoppard,” included in *Text in Context*, undertakes a kind of literary detective work, somewhat in the spirit of Stoppard himself, exploring the paradoxical presence-in-absence of the surrealist painter in the drama. The painter’s method being identified as “substantiated absurdity” by Egri, the playwright is said to enhance, exaggerate, and ironize its model (241, 246), replacing the mystification of the world by its demystification. Another essay in the same collection, “From Painting to Play: Duchamp and Stoppard” is as much of a study of the painter as that of the drama *Artist Descending a Staircase*. Egri is surveying the painter’s work to contextualize the picture *Nude Descending a Staircase*, which obviously inspired the playwright. By writing the drama, Egri summarizes, “Stoppard’s dual position results in a spirited insight into, and a witty ironization of, Duchamp’s *Nude Descending a Staircase*, and broadens into a dramatic discussion of the situation of art in modern times” (237). Its content and method of argumentation combined in an original way, Egri’s essay itself presents a spirited insight of its own into the postmodern playwright’s intellectually provoking and teasingly intricate artistic endeavours.

The other contemporary playwright Egri found equally intriguing was, evidently, Beckett, perhaps also because the writer had absorbed so much from his master, Joyce, who fascinated Egri throughout his career. *Text in Context* includes an essay which discusses *Act Without*

Words I and *Catastrophe*, elaborating on points of interaction between drama and painting, but now approaching the subject from the angle of parallels. Like the other of his great Irish masters, Yeats, Beckett had a strong visual imagination, manifest in his portrayal of sensation as well as inner trauma on stage by an inventive composition and co-ordination of facial expression, gestures, and bodily movements. According to Egri, *Act Without Words I* dramatizes the genesis of the absurd drama by visualizing it, which is a hardly surprising act from a playwright who had written insightful criticism on several painters including Jack Butler Yeats, the poet-playwright's brother (268–69). The discussion of *Catastrophe*, while it underscores its thematic concern with, and reflection on the political situation as well as the concomitant limitations of intellectual life in pre-1989 Eastern Europe, points to parallel images in the sister arts. Dublin-born Francis Bacon is referred to as the first example, on account of some of his paintings carrying a Beckettian sense of claustrophobic isolation and nightmarish constraint in the distorted human faces portrayed. Next Henry Moore's sculptures are found to present similar effects of grotesque depersonalization to the humiliation suffered by the character called Protagonist in Beckett's drama *Catastrophe*—tellingly dedicated to Václav Havel at the time of its writing, in 1982 (270–73).

To the question whether he cherished one as a favourite among his own books, in the already cited interview Egri answered that it had always been the last one (Kurdi 131). Looking at *Text in Context* with this in mind, we find the book dominated by an undoubtedly great favourite of the scholar, Shakespeare, whose poetry and drama feature in as many as seven essays of the volume. The one titled “One Man's Ambiguity Is Another's Ambivalence” stands out being a both sophisticated and witty scrutiny of Gothic and romantic re-presentations of certain Shakespearean figures and themes, demonstrating a keen sense of how the tone and poetic ambiguities call for their equivalent in the other arts. Egri highlights Henry Fuseli's deviation from Shakespeare in his painting *The Three Witches*, which “needed a specifically pictorial-spatial means to reach Shakespeare's group effect and to replace the poet-dramatist's magic metre,” as well as attempted to match “the parallel phrases, and prophetic greetings of the witches”

with “the strictly lateral view of the three profiles” (164). Another example is Felix Mendelssohn’s “Overture” to the opera *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, which endeavours to transmit some of the subtleties of Shakespeare’s dramatic characterization by purely musical means. The artist’s work is appreciated for meeting the challenge through his choice of E major as the basic key of the piece, “a magic key” which seems to be able to evoke “the magic of nature” in the wording of the analyst (169). In this part of the essay a considerably detailed and appropriately illustrated discussion pays due attention to the romantic composer’s efforts to create a kind of musical ambiguity to serve as an authentic counterpart of Shakespeare’s verbal art. All in all, this last volume of Egri’s scholarly oeuvre has the unique feature that while it re-deploys the viewpoint of axiology it succeeds in discovering an even broader range of intrinsic connections between literature and the sister arts than the previous books.

Coda: Values in Balance

A not at all insignificant aspect of Egri’s scholarly heritage is how his writings present research findings, new ideas, and make comments. The prose of his critical works can be found exemplary for its subtle and witty use of language and sharp logic of argumentation. It is with extraordinary verbal precision that he expounds the merits of literary works and describes the manifold results of artistic cross-fertilization. His books and studies testify that the value of his awesome erudition and thorough understanding of the essence of the arts has found its appropriate expression not only in chiselled argument and finely structured syntax but also in style. In her contribution to the Discussion Panel in Memory of Péter Egri at the HUSSE 6 Conference in 2003, Krisztina Szalay chose to speak about the scholar’s very last volume, *Text in Context*, and took special care to remind the audience of the richness of humour complicating as well as colouring the discursive and analytical arsenal characteristic of the essays. “From Painting to Play: Duchamp and Stoppard” begins with a highly comic question-and-answer game, alluding to the *par excellence* artistic, non-mimetic origin of the painting the playwright was intrigued by:

Is it conceivable that a Futuristically multiplied Cubist nude is descending a winding staircase? It is, if one can explain where the nude is coming from and going to. Marcel Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase* (No. 1 1911, No. 2 1912, No. 3 1916) is coming from the experimental studio of a witty and restless artist who liked to surprise, baffle and shock the spectator. (227)

The critical style matches the subject most wittily here, as part of the challenging introduction of the reader to the work of a writer of intricate verbal talent and enormous intellectual sophistication, and revealing, at the same time, that the critic, *pace* Wilde, can aspire to become a kind of artist too.

At the ESSE 4 Conference in 1997, hosted by Lajos Kossuth University Debrecen, a round table session was dedicated to the life and work of professor László Országh (1907–1984), the outstanding and highly influential lexicologist, Anglicist, as well as founding father of American studies in Hungary. An assistant professor of Országh's English Department at Kossuth University in the 1960s, Péter Egri participated in the event along with a selected group of other scholars. True to his interest in drama, and in tune with his own performing talents, it was with an admirable mixture of deeply felt respect and warm humour that he presented a vividly dramatized picture of Országh as scholar and senior colleague in four acts, which began and concluded with the train journeys between Budapest and Debrecen and back the same route that both Országh and Egri had to take every week. In his introductory words to the published version of the round table discussion Zsolt Virágos, convenor of the session claims that Országh "has left many tracks in the profession and [...] has bequeathed a legacy that is both impressive and unique" (369). It is well justifiable to apply similar terms in an assessment of Péter Egri's work all the more so as he was selected to be one of the first two recipients of the Országh László Award in 1997, which recognized the quality of his academic and scholarly achievements in the fields of study that Országh himself had cultivated and excelled in.

The present essay does not intend to ignore the fact that Egri's scholarly progress is inseparable from, though not at all directly dependent on the context provided by the contemporary political, social and cultural changes and processes. Written by a scholar of a highly individual talent, his works, taken as a whole, offer a particular

kind of insight into the discontinuous and shredded history of Hungarian literary criticism during the last four decades of the twentieth century, a period of paralyzing restrictions and then considerable transformations in the intellectual life of this part of Europe. They show a pervasive interest in generic and comparative studies combined with the influence of a liberal form of Marxism at the beginning, which gives way to an axiologically based approach and interdisciplinary-oriented cultural criticism later. Without totally erasing the precedents though, which is fortunate from the point of view of organic development remaining a main characteristic of Egri's scholarly oeuvre. If "the magic hand of chance" (Keats 152) had allowed him more years to live, Péter Egri may have continued his work in the field of contemporary English-speaking drama, perhaps writing a monographic study of Stoppard or Beckett, or both, but it is difficult to surmise. Certain it is, however, that to the very end he retained the remarkable versatility of his scholarly interests: in fall 2002 he was to participate as speaker in a conference dedicated to the fiction of Tibor Déry, an important subject of Egri's research at the beginning of his career. Sadly, death intervened in September of the same year, causing a great loss to the professions of literary study and academic education in Hungary and also outside Hungary. His paper, planned to revisit and most probably re-evaluate Déry so many years after the publication of his book about that writer, was never presented.

Having become complete by his yet untimely death, the "full-ripen'd grain" of Egri's literary scholarship is now held by the studies and books he published. Through their analytical strengths which point into several directions while they present new findings, his works reflect and build on the rarely achieved unity of scholar and teacher in one person, who possessed an exceptional confidence in the analysis not only of literature, but also the other arts. The knowledge the writings incorporate and store informs and enriches the readers as well as challenges them by enhancing awareness of undiscovered or uncharted territories in scholarship, worthy of further exploration and analysis. Undeniably, considering certain trains of thought, assertions, examples or conclusions in the books and studies the reader may disagree with the author and feel it necessary to turn toward modes of

inquiry or approaches different from Egri's. But as his works have no intention to disseminate unquestionable truths and convert the reader to their point of view by any means, they invite responses which can be as varied as the challenge itself. Inspiring others in several ways is, therefore, a principal value of Péter Egri's scholarly heritage, taking shape in the present and future achievement of his fellow researchers, younger colleagues and students. His work remains alive and influential through its original findings as well as its untiringly inquisitive spirit.

Note

Parts of this essay rely on the ideas and insights appearing in my reviews of several of Péter Egri's books, which were published by *Filológiai Közlöny*, *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies*, *Irish Literary Supplement* and *Literatur in Wissenschaft und Unterricht*.

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