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Turn-of-the-Century Aestheticism in the Early Articles of Dezső Kosztolányi

Anna Fuchs

- 1 Dezső Kosztolányi (1885-1936) is one of the greatest Hungarian writers in the first third of the 20th century. However, his early articles have not been sufficiently examined in Hungarian reference literature. It is understandable that, in comparison with such masterpieces as the *Esti Kornél* [*Kornél Esti*] short stories or the volume of poems *Számadás* [*Final Account*] (1935), these articles do not stand out. These articles, however, deserve more interest, since the aestheticism of the turn of the century stands out in such a significant way, something which this paper tries to prove. Although they are journalistic writings, they can be discussed as literary texts as well. Mihály Szegedy-Maszák, in his study on the early articles of Kosztolányi – although he primarily discusses the intellectual interest of the writer – also mentions the literary aspects of these texts¹. Mihály Szegedy-Maszák emphasizes that, in these early articles, there are thematic similarities to the novels of Kosztolányi and also underlines – referring to Miklós Szabolcsi² – that the short stories of the turn of the century were influenced by the feuilleton genre. It also shows that the Kosztolányi's articles can be examined from a literary point of view.
- 2 In Kosztolányi's early articles, it is remarkable that pieces of the material culture very often appear as decorative elements. Kosztolányi compares the ice drifts of the Danube to things like “glass beads, [...] white ice-cream, cake-decoration” (*Duna* [Danube], 1914).³ He describes well-mannered speaking as “bonbons” the function of which is to “sweeten the bitter taste we sometimes have in our mouths and to express our real opinion with them” (*Jó emberek* [Good People], 1908).⁴ I also find it important that interiors frequently occur in these articles.⁵ The pieces of the material culture show strong influence of the turn-of-the-century literature, since these objects are such decorative elements that are also typical of the short stories of Gyula Szini, Károly Lovik and, of course, Kosztolányi. This cannot be unrelated to the cult of artificiality, which emerged at the turn of the century as a reaction against naturalism. E.g. Huysmans' hero, Duke Des Esseintes distinctly

prefers artificial things. According to him, electric light is more enchanting than moonlight, artificial flowers are more beautiful than real ones, and there is no woman, who could be more glamorous than his favourite locomotive. He buys a pet tortoise which he thinks will look nice on the carpet, but he is not fully satisfied with its shell, so he gilds it and takes the pet to a jeweler to get its shell ornamented with precious stones.⁶ Vivian, the hero of Oscar Wilde's *The Decay of Lying* (1889), says that "All bad art comes from returning to Life and Nature and elevating them into ideals."⁷

- 3 Artificiality is greatly appreciated in Kosztolányi's article *Fürdői emlék* (The Souvenir from the Spa, 1914), where things are praised from the aspect of art: "Have you noticed the colours of this place? The Rippl-Rónai idyll of villas, the Szinnyi-Merseian scarf of the girl walking across the clearing and the Mednyánszkyan sunsets?"⁸ Because everything only counts from the aspects of art: "Nowadays, those who write view life from the aspect of writing. [...] What is called life, they do not understand? for them, life is of secondary importance. Things are writing topics for them" (*Heti levél* [Weekly Report], 1905)⁹
- 4 The cult of artificiality was also related to the aesthetic character of religion at the turn of the century. The idea of artificiality connected to religion in the conception of the defeat of nature. It is not by chance that the decadents liked magic. The conception came to the front that artists can mediate between the earthly word and the powers above, moreover, as creators, they can have divine characteristics. The poetry of Jenő Komjáthy gives numerous examples of this conception. According to Joséphin Péladan, it is art that takes the place of traditional religion, which lost its former position. According to Schopenhauer, art is the modern consolation for earthly sufferings.¹⁰ In the early articles of Kosztolányi, the religion of art also occurs. "I am a believer. Of course, I trust you, my taciturn darling, my white faced bride, Poetry?" (*Karácsonyi ének* [Christmas Carol], 1904).¹¹ Accordingly, the aesthetic aspect of Catholicism is coming to the fore, too. Like in Kosztolányi's poem cycle, *Fasti?* in his Christmas articles, this phenomenon is also present:

In the scented semi-darkness of the room, a Christmas tree emerges with its heavy branches. It looks at itself in a silver mirror, rustling mysteriously, and swings her gorgeous waist like a self-esteeming woman. [...] In the evening, small children are pressing their ears to the windows while their hearts wildly beat and they can clearly hear the big white angels' wings whirring. In an instant, the skyborne tree appears with its brilliant glitter, glass icicles, colourful candles. The innocent can see the silver powder of the rime which fell down in the dark night. (*Karácsonyi ének* [Christmas Carol])¹²

I am looking at these bare trees, and I feel that they are becoming more and more beautiful, growing bigger, golden and bright, as children's arms are waving towards them while their desire [...] ripens big golden apples, walnuts and lights pink candle flames on the frosty branches. [...] The coloured smoke of the candles makes me drunk. In the woods, a deep symphony of poetry is trembling [...]. Gold dust is flying, silver powder is flashing. (*Karácsonyfaerdő* [Christmas Tree Forest], 1909)¹³

- 5 When Kosztolányi calls the Christmas tree a "golden tree of poetry",¹⁴ it is again an occurrence of the aesthetic aspect of religion.
- 6 Christmas is also associated with childhood: "I feel that Christmas is a children's feast. Everyone can recall [...] a Christmas, which is the greatest symbol of the solemn mood, which, with its flaming [...] splendour resides in our memory, a song which sounded from Heaven, a Christmas which was the Christmas" (*Csengettyű* [The Bell], 1913).¹⁵ No wonder that Kosztolányi shares the view of crepuscular poets that the poet is a close relative of the child: far above the working human is the playing, child-spirited, creating and

thinking one, who does not take life seriously, just [...] plays with it like a child" (*A játékról* [About Play], 1905).¹⁶ He writes that "All of our precious memories are buried in our childhood" (*Tavaszi gyász. Jegyzetek egy kisgyermek naplójához* [Mourning in Spring. Notes to the Diary of a Little Child], 1909).¹⁷ It is in literature that childhood continues. "I have found the naive dreams of my childhood in a short story of Chekhov? I found those strange, profound [...] moods that had disappeared with the time and hardened into conviction or deepened into knowledge".¹⁸

- 7 The poet is not only a relative of the child's but also that of the ill. "All poets are ill" – he writes (*A betegekről* [About the Ill], 1905).¹⁹

This time, everything is nicer. The weakened and refined senses are wandering in otherworldly spheres. Never ever have I seen a flaming, ruby red rose like my medicine bottle. The blue book on my duvet seems to be the blue sky. [...] Some drunkenness is pressing my throat. I would like to cry, shout alleluia, be filled with the serenity of life, with laughing optimism towards everything. (*Toroklob* [Sore Throat])²⁰

- 8 In other articles, he writes about the cult of sickness with aversion.

In Budapest, [...] our poets keep on pouring large gushes of the murderous verdigris green absinth into their glasses. Uneducated, mentally empty poets are boastfully selling the junk of decadence in the hope that can cheat somebody. [...] These gentlemen, who advertise themselves as ill and neurotic, are actually healthy, sly and selfish persons, who exercise the tragic gestures of distress in front of the mirror. And this pose does not suit them well. (*A józan franciák* [The French on the Moderate Side], 1906)²¹

- 9 Kosztolányi often criticizes the dark side of decadence. "Decadent poets [...] are ascetics. Have you seen how the red mask of Nietzsche or Wilde slides sideways and have you seen behind the red cloth the bitter ballads of asceticism?" (*Körbe-körbe* [Round and round], 1908).²² In the early journalistic work of Kosztolányi, there are contradictory conceptions concerning the cult of sickness. These contradictions are present in his entire oeuvre. Many poems of the volume *Szegény kisgyermek panaszai* [Laments of a Poor Little Child] (1910) are typical examples of the cult of sickness and death. In his letters, however, he often criticizes the cult of death. According to him, French decadents "blacken" our worldview.²³ In short the stories *Halál után* [After Death] (1905) and *Vékony Pál élete és halála* [The Life and Death of Pál Vékony] (1917), he mocks the cult of suicide. Serenity is a very characteristic feature of Kosztolányi's oeuvre. The short stories *Esti Kornél* are the best examples of this. In connection with serenity, the influence of feuilleton literature must be mentioned. Not only belles-lettres influenced journalistic literature but belles-lettres were also influenced by the press which flourished in Hungary around the turn of the century. Hungarian authors' amusing short stories, which dissolve decadent disharmony with some serenity, or even with the comic, are not independent of the practice of feuilleton-writing. The short stories of Kosztolányi, or the prose of Gyula Szini and Gyula Krúdy show the effect of the amusing, conversational feuilleton style.²⁴

- 10 Not only their topics or moods, but also their linguistic forms show that these early articles are part of the turn-of-the-century literature. Art nouveau style accumulation of adjectives is very typical. In *Jégarabeszkek* [Arabesques on Ice] (1909) Kosztolányi writes about "superficial, perfumed, beautiful life".²⁵ In *Két professzor* [Two Professors] (1906), he writes: "A pale, rosy glimmer of hope appears on the black window of the sighful sick-room."²⁶ Kosztolányi also likes employing art-nouveau-style tendril-like syntax: "The springs of the sofa are twanging, ringing sweetly and painfully, singing Shumann-songs" (

Nyaraló bútorok [Furniture on Holiday]).²⁷ It is important to emphasize that sometimes these early articles are in accordance with the perfectionism of the turn of the century. Kosztolányi, who considered poetry the mother tongue of mankind, and thus, being metaphysically superior to prose,²⁸ said the following about his own journalistic writings: “I wrote the most important parts of my articles in verse, and it was later that I gently transformed them into prose”.²⁹ We do not know whether this story is true or not, but in any case, there is something very interesting: He assumes that poetry is more valuable than prose, but at the same time, he allows prose to have such a noble origin. This concept matches well with perfectionism. For symbolists, the perfectionist poem was the object of the cult, but they did not exclude the idea that prose can be in par with poetry. The most vivid examples of perfectionist poetry are Mallarmé’s poems with their musical effects and with the entire elimination of superfluities. According to Mallarmé, when creating perfectionist poems, it is important to do calculations, and then to hide away this “intellectual structure” of the poem.³⁰ This rule can also be applied for writing prose: “In the genre called prose, too, there is poetry,”³¹ wrote Mallarmé. Attila József made a comparison reflecting on perfectionism: perfectionism is varying the elements of the work as long as to cease their independence. The perfectionist poet

takes you by the hand at the foot of an unknown hill. He leads you upwards on a serpentine path in continually tightening circles. Even after the first step, you can see a landscape. Proceeding upwards, another landscape comes, since you went from north to east, south and west. So we return to north. [...] From the high summit, you can see in every direction. [...] The [...] passenger finds himself in the middle of a circle [...]. And the path disappears in the vegetation.

- 11 For this perfectionist way of creation, Attila József gives an example as well. This is just the prose of Kosztolányi, which Attila József describes as “the most beautiful Hungarian prose”.³²
- 12 This perfectionist way of writing already appears in the early articles of Kosztolányi. In *Tengerentúli romantika* [New World Romanticism] (1907), he applies the same perfectionist literary technique about which Attila József wrote the comparison cited above: First Kosztolányi uses different motifs separated from each other, then he fuses them together. First, while writing about the 105-year-old Mrs Hunt, who wants to divorce her second husband, he keeps her at a distance: “the mummy-like woman” “holding a crook in her veiny hand, she looked for the judge’s office with her mouse eyes blinking, and her old mouth panted with fatigue”, “she belligerently jams her glasses on her nose”, because “she doesn’t need Josuah any longer, she is fed up with the continual arguments.”³³ The article has an other motif, too. To counterpoint Mrs. Hunt’s behavior, Kosztolányi inserts an idyllic scene: “The marquis and the marquise are sitting in their spacious armchairs, withered flowers are scenting the room, fire is burning in the fireplace. They are talking about nice old things. Then the old couple stands up, and thinking of the past, they kiss each other with youthful passion.”³⁴ At the end of the article, however, the contrast between the story of the idyllic couple and that of Mrs. Hunt disappears. Kosztolányi turns Mrs. Hunt’s story harmonic, too, which is emphasized by the conventional scenery:

Now, at the end of her life, she draws a conclusion from her marriage experiences, and harmony arises in her. Remembering the face of a man who has been dead for many-many years, she picks old photos out of worn out drawers, dusts off withered flower bunches, and, from yellowed letters, she reads the stories of a harmonic life, which makes her feel calm and happy and brings back true love again. Her last husband did not deserve her. The first one loved her truly.³⁵

- 13 The separation between the motifs disappears, thus making the article on Mrs. Hunt's divorce fulfill the strict requirements of perfectionism.
- 14 Naturally, many articles of Kosztolányi have a looser structure than this, all of them are not perfectionist texts. With their syntax, scenery and ornaments, however, they are typical pieces of the literary works of the turn of the century. What Kosztolányi writes about his contemporaries, i.e. they view life from the aspect of writing, is characteristic of him too. As a journalist, too. Whatever he writes about, his topics are "writing topics". Thus, his articles are not only important in the history of ideas, but in the history of literature as well.

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Oscar Wilde, *The Decay of Lying*, <http://books.eserver.org/fiction/the-decay-of-lying.html> on 05.07.2010

NOTES

1. Mihály Szegedy-Maszák, *A fiatal Kosztolányi újságírói értékrendje*, in Szegedy-Maszák, *Kosztolányi Dezső*, Budapest, Pesti Kalligram, 2010, pp. 116-148.
2. Miklós Szabolcsi, *Wandlungen im ungarischen Feuilletonstil um die Jahrhundertwende*, in "Kakanien". Aufsätze zur österreichischen und ungarischen Literatur, Kunst und Kultur um die Jahrhundertwende, ed. by Eugen Thurner, Walter Weiss, János Szabó, Attila Tamás, Budapest, Akadémiai, 1991, 101-115.
3. Dezső Kosztolányi, *Füst*, ed. by Pál Réz, Budapest, Szépirodalmi, 1970, p. 11.
4. Kosztolányi Dezső, *Álom és ólom*, ed. by Pál Réz, Budapest, Szépirodalmi, 1969, p. 323.
5. See *Nyaraló bútorok* [Furniture on Holiday], 1908; *Mécs* [Candlelight], 1908; *Toroklob* [Sore Throat], 1909, *Csendes, szeptemberi esték* [Quiet September Evenings], 1909.
6. Joris-Karl Huysmans, *A különc* [A rebours], translated by Dezső Kosztolányi, Szeged, 2002, pp. 42-44.
7. Oscar Wilde, *The Decay of Lying*, <http://books.eserver.org/fiction/the-decay-of-lying.html> on 05.07.2010
8. József Rippl-Rónai, Pál Szinnyi Merse and László Mednyánszky: major Hungarian painters of the turn of the century. Kosztolányi, *Füst*, p. 41.
9. Kosztolányi, *Álom és ólom*, p. 85.
10. "Der Genuß alles Schönen, der Trost, den die Kunst gewährt, der Enthusiasmus des Künstlers, welcher ihn die Mühen des Lebens vergessen läßt, dieser eine Vorzug des Genius vor den Anderen, der ihn für das mit der Klarheit des Bewußtseins in gleichem Maaße gesteigerte Leiden und für die öde Einsamkeit unter einem heterogenen Geschlechte allein entschädigt, – dieses Alles beruht darauf, daß, wie sich uns weiterhin zeigen wird, das Ansich des Lebens, der Wille, das Dasein selbst, ein stetes Leiden und theils jämmerlich, theils schrecklich ist; dasselbe hingegen als Vorstellung allein, rein angeschaut, oder durch die Kunst wiederholt, frei von Quaal, ein bedeutsames Schauspiel gewährt." A. Schopenhauer, *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, München, R. Piper & Co., 1911, p. 315.
11. Kosztolányi, *Álom és ólom*, p. 37.
12. *Ibid.* p. 35.
13. *Ibid.* p. 328.
14. *Ibid.* p. 328.
15. *Ibid.* p. 671.
16. *Ibid.* p. 67.
17. *Ibid.* p. 353.
18. *Ibid.* p. 356.
19. *Ibid.* p. 111.
20. *Ibid.* p. 344.
21. *Ibid.* p. 136.
22. *Ibid.* p. 294.
23. Mihály Babits, Gyula Juhász, Dezső Kosztolányi, *Levelezése*, ed. by György Belia, Budapest, Magyar Tudományos Akadémia Irodalomtörténeti Intézete, 1959, p. 25.
24. On conversational feuilleton-style: Gizella Lovrich, *A tárca a magyar irodalomban*, Budapest, 1937, p. 16-27.
25. Kosztolányi, *Álom és ólom*, p. 332.
26. *Ibid.* p. 153.
27. *Ibid.* p. 298.

28. Dezső Kosztolányi, *Ábécé a versről és a költőről*, in *Ábécé*, ed. by Gyula Illyés, Budapest, Nyugat, 1942, p. 116.
 29. Dezső Kosztolányi, *Vészi József*, in *Egy ég alatt*, ed. by Réz Pál, Budapest, Szépirodalmi, 1977, p. 31.
 30. Stéphane Mallarmé, *Charles Morice-nak* [A Charles Morice] (1893), translated by Judit Tóth, in Aladár Komlós (ed.), *A szimbolizmus*, Budapest, Gondolat, 1965, p. 187.
 31. Cited by Komlós, *A szimbolizmus*, p. 214.
 32. Attila József, *Az Istenek halnak, az Ember él. Tárgyi kritikai tanulmány Babits Mihály verseskötetéről*, in *Tanulmányok és cikkek, 1923-1930*, Budapest, Osiris, 1995, pp. 219-220.
 33. Kosztolányi, *Álom és ólom*, p. 233.
 34. *Ibid.* p. 233.
 35. *Ibid.* p. 234.
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ABSTRACTS

The early journalistic writings of the Hungarian writer, poet, translator and journalist Dezső Kosztolányi (1885-1936) can be discussed as literary texts as well. The aestheticism of the turn of the century is spectacularly unveiled in them. It is remarkable that pieces of material culture very often appear as decorative elements in these articles, something related to the cult of artificiality emerging at the turn of the century as a counter-reaction to naturalism. This cult was also related to the aesthetic nature of religion of the time. Not only their topics, but also their linguistic forms (e. g. art nouveau style accumulation of adjectives, tendril-like syntax) show that these articles are part of the literature of the period. Most importantly, several of these writings are in accordance with the perfectionist trend prevailing around the turn of the century.

Les premiers écrits journalistiques de Dezső Kosztolányi (1885-1936), écrivain, poète, traducteur et journaliste hongrois, peuvent être lus en tant que textes littéraires. L'esthétisme du tournant du siècle s'y illustre de façon spectaculaire. Les objets de la culture matérielle jouent souvent le rôle d'éléments décoratifs, phénomène à mettre en relation avec le culte de l'artificiel qui émerge dans la littérature du tournant du siècle en réaction au naturalisme. Ce culte est aussi à relier à cette époque avec le caractère esthétique de la religion. Les thématiques, mais aussi les formes du langage (l'accumulation des adjectifs et la syntaxe complexe qui renvoient au style de l'art nouveau) montrent que ces articles font partie intégrante de la littérature de l'époque. Plus important encore, plusieurs de ces écrits suivent le courant perfectionniste qui prévalait dans la littérature du tournant du siècle.

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