

**"BABEŞ-BOLYAI" UNIVERSITY**  
**FACULTY OF LETTERS**  
**DEPARTMENT OF HUNGARIEN ETHNOGRAPHY AND ANTROPOLOGY**

**The Career and Oeuvre of a 20<sup>th</sup>-Century “Intruder”**

The Contexts of Poetry Writing and the Use of Poetry on the Miklós Szabó's (1907–1982)

Oeuvre

**SUMMARY**

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**Key terms:** occasional poetry, alternative poesies, intruding writer, peasant poet, popular writing, expert, poetry writing, use of poetry.

### **Summary, Conclusions, Theses**

The research conducted was based on the analysis of Miklós Szabó of Szilágyság's (1907–1982) manuscript legacy. Therefore, the research focused on an individual's career and the representation of the contexts providing the framework for his possibilities on the one hand, and on the other hand, a unique practice of creation, which was one form of writing; namely, poetry writing.

#### **1. The Interpretation of the Alternative Poetic Tradition in Different Disciplines**

Having completed the theoretical positioning of the research focusing on the individual, I conducted a scientific historical survey of a far-reaching tradition of poetry writing with the help of approaches of literary and ethnographic history. The use of the poetic form for ways of expression is not exclusive to literature but its considerably wider scope can be identified. As an explanation for the ambivalent judgements of artists representing the *alternative poetic* tradition, I identified the changes of the concept of literature, the institutionalisation process of literature, the thesis of collective creation established and promoted by ethnography as well as the idiosyncratic way of existence of this section of poetry (being bound by occasions or by the local/regional).

#### **2. The Functions of Biographical and Autobiographical Speech**

In the chapter entitled *The Use of the Autobiography and the Biography*, I compare the life stories written by Miklós Szabó in different situations and applying the forms of various genres; demonstrating how the process of self-definition as a *peasant poet* gained gradually more emphasis as literary references became part of the life story. Writing, and poetry writing in particular, was an activity defining a life strategy for him. Through his biographical knowledge, Szabó created a virtual community, identifying the linking points along which he integrated himself within the circles of the intellectuals playing a central part in the life of the local community on the one hand, and the representatives of literature on the other hand, legitimising the act of writing, which was unusual for someone in his social status.

### **3. Poetry Writing and Roles in Society**

I apprehended Miklós Szabó's activities related to poetry writing through the role of the *occasional poet* and that of the *peasant poet*. The texts related to the occasions of ecclesiastic life, the turning points of one's life as well as the celebrations of the historical events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century confirmed the religious, local and ethnic communities' need for poems and the expert of poetry writing. The identification of the contexts of the use of poetry made the functional richness of the use of poems visible. Poems mediate relationships, contribute to creating and maintaining relationships and foster a comprehensive experiencing of the turning points of life and celebratory occasions. However, the expert of *poetic writing* did not only satisfy the need of various occasions for poems but these events were the primary forums of performing his talent as well. The success of performances enhanced the consolidation of a poetic role interpretation. Regarding the expert referring to himself as a *peasant poet*, I analysed his opinion on literature, poetry and the poet's role in society. In the subchapter entitled *Performance Opportunities and Attempts at Integration in the Socialist Era*, I monitor what possibilities the person promoting the desire for acknowledgement as a poet used to have in a totalitarian system which provided workman poets and peasant poets with relative publicity. While regional cultural events, television broadcasts and news articles determined by the ideology of the era created a platform of performing his art, he faced a series of disappointments with regard to his attempts to integrate into mainstream literature. The failures of his attempts at publishing made the structures providing the framework for realising one's poetic ambitions in certain periods of the era become manifest.

### **4. Reading in a Rural Environment**

In the next chapter of the paper, I examined the role of reading in Szabó's life. The effects of randomly selected readings can be identified behind his roles related to poetry writing and writing works of local history. Reading meant the primary form of education to Szabó; he acquired his literary and historical knowledge – which was considered exceptional in his closer environment – by the regular act of reading. The evidence of his behaviour and aspects of interpretation as a reader as well as the signs of the active dialogue with the texts were preserved in his manuscripts. In his case, reading was not merely limited to personal use but he also took the responsibility to promote literature and mediate the contents with which he had familiarised himself in a rural environment.

### **5. The Expert of Local History**

In the chapter built around the key terms history, local history and personal history representing several analytic aspects, I addressed the richest part of Miklós Szabó's

manuscript legacy. On the one hand, I grabbed in their context the occasions and forums which – related to the historical events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – created a need and performance opportunities for alternative practices of poetry writing and their representatives' performance. Poetry and the use of poetry were present in a minority position in secret public spheres, in the series of celebratory occasions of the period between 1940–1944, in the unique microcosm of labour camps as well as on the public and hidden stages of socialism. In his local community, Miklós Szabó was considered to be an expert on historical knowledge. His history-sensitive perception, the abundance and sources of his historical knowledge were documented by his poems and works on local history. He is the proof of the fact that thinking and writing about history had a place and time in everyday life, in the peasant culture. The poetic form proved to be suitable for incorporating historical knowledge; a textual context in which the time of the past is intertwined with local time and the time of one's life. The use, reading and performance at various occasions of poems comprising knowledge related to national history contributed to shaping the knowledge of the past. Miklós Szabó's poems of historical themes documented the passing time of the 20<sup>th</sup> century from a bottom-up perspective. However, his texts are more than mere documents. He observed the events governing his own career as well through the filter of his historical knowledge originating from eclectic sources. This knowledge determined how he interpreted contemporary events and the evolution of his own career. In addition to the phenomenon of documenting events by poems, my interpretations also point out that poems and their use may become the catalysts of events as well. As an expert on historical knowledge, Miklós Szabó did not only contribute to the local-level distribution of the representations of the nation's history, but he also undertook the structuring, preservation and transmission of local history. His works on local history, his memoir and part of his poems had the role of representing local events and landscapes, distributing components of local knowledge and exhibiting the local identity.

## **6. The Functions of Writing in the Life of a Peasant Poet**

Departing from the analysis of one's oeuvre in manuscripts, I established the presence of a unique form of writing, primarily poetic writing manifested in the creation of poems and the versatility of its use in a 20<sup>th</sup>-century local and regional context. The research conducted confirmed the presence bound by person, space and time of the paradigm of *alternative poesies*, of occasional poetry. On the basis of Miklós Szabó's volumes of poetry, the reconstructed contexts of the use of poems, it can be concluded that poems are present in everyday life, at the turning points of human life, at family occasions and those of the community of friends, at the celebrations of ecclesiastic life, in memorial ceremonies, on the

front lines of wars, in labour camps, in training courses for farmers, among local narratives, in works on local history, personal records offices and legacies as well as on the columns of regional papers; due to their versatile nature, they seem to be suitable for contributing to the creation and consolidation of real and virtual relationships, helping the comprehensive experiencing of emotions, expressing feelings and attitudes, documenting the passing time and the significant events of the individual and communities, fostering the processing of traumatic historical experience, incorporating historical, literary and farming-related knowledge, refining historical narration, expressing individual, denominational and ethnic identities, giving voice to reading experiences, societal problems and offences affecting the individual and the community as well as becoming a life-style-determining practice.

As an expert on poetry writing, Miklós Szabó was the representative of literature in a 20<sup>th</sup>-century rural community; he satisfied the needs for poems of institutions and communities organised on the basis of various aspects and shaped the existing preconceptions about literature. Within the scope of his works and in a rural context, as a writer of poetry and the expert of historical knowledge, he defined the organisation of historical knowledge, created and recorded narrative representations referring to the local past, and – by the application of different genres – he made them publishable. Identifying the versatile roles of the farmer acquiring his knowledge – regarded as exceptional within the community – by self-education made the individual establishing the local-level organisation of culture apprehensible.

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