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Literary Spaces of Péter Nádas

The Spatial Poetics of *Parallel Stories*

PhD Thesis Booklet

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(2019)

1. Goals and Objectives of the PhD thesis work

The dissertation aims to conduct a spatial-centered analysis of Péter Nádas *Parallel Stories*, published in 2005 at Jelenkor Publishing, Pécs. The main goal of this dissertation is to enrich the reception and aesthetic readings of the book with novel approaches that would also introduce new aspects of the reception of his oeuvre. *Parallel Stories* is not only a highlight of Nádas' works but also that of contemporary Hungarian and European literature. It also prompts us to review our traditional aesthetic and theoretical methods of interpreting literature. According to the central thesis of my dissertation, the foregoing reception of the book focuses mostly on the novelty of its narrative techniques, its body-philosophical and anthropological aspects, its historical, political and ideological themes, and its relations with Nádas' earlier books. This dissertation, however, aims to analyze the book according to complex architectural and spatial-poetical aspects that derive from the rhetorical and narrative structure of the book.

The viewpoint of the dissertation is twofold. On the one hand, it advocates the viewpoint of aesthetic

interpretation that subsumes itself of the indisputable uniqueness of *Parallel Stories*. On the other hand, the analysis cultivates a mellowing of the scientific parlance of literary analysis that considers itself a monocultural field of discourse. Therefore, our method seeks to enrich the traditional aspects of literary analysis with the perspectives of related scientific fields and related arts. The first viewpoint can be defined as close reading that is centered on the phenomenality (the moods, sensations, and associations triggered by the book) and the textuality (the grammatical, sentence-poetical, rhetorical and narrative structures) of the analysis. The latter aspect, however, can be described most adequately with a quote from Péter Balassa's *Nádas* monography that is central to this dissertation: "Here the theory and the history of thought is not really the internal problem of dealing with literary works; rather the problem appears on the surface of the unique philosophical questioning method of the book and on the apparent horizon of the author's philosophic interests and his previous readings." [1] This means that in the dissertation the artistic and interdisciplinary parallels and allusions will diverge or approach the text according

to these aspects that are based on this “unique philosophical questioning.” Just as in Balassa’s book and in the standard interpretations of Nádás that are central for this dissertation “the questions to the theory are given by Nádás’ art and not by the theory itself.” [2]

2. The Methodology of the PhD thesis work

At the same time, we can distinguish three main directions of interpretation with regards to the methodology of the dissertation. The first direction seeks to open the novel into itself, i.e. in order to find textual relations and interweaving narrative intersections and parallels that reveal the peculiar spatial structure of the novel. This can be achieved by putting the different “narrative layers” of the book, that are scattered both in time and space, together throughout unique spatial-poetical aspects that enable these parts to communicate with each other.

The second direction tries to open *Parallel Stories* towards other works of Nádás’ oeuvre that somehow relate thematically to the book. This analysis does not nurture the ambitions of a monographic investigation but seeks to rearrange the monuments of the oeuvre from the aspect of spatial-poetical analysis. This also means that the interpretational gestures towards the other texts of the oeuvre will always depart and return to *Parallel Stories*.

The third interpreting technique, encouraged by the exceptional knowledge of the author displayed on arts,

history, and humanities, will open the world of the book towards the literary, architectural, fine artistic, and movie-related parallels that are interfacing with Nádás' literary works or with the novel itself. On the other hand, the dissertation aims to enrich the book's reception via following the narrative of the *Parallel Reader* [*Párhuzamos olvasókönyv*] that published the documents that ensure the historical authenticity and atmospheric liveliness of the depicted events, epochs, venues and figures.[3] This is how, for example, the analysis of housebuilding scenes in the interwar period, the articles from contemporary architectural journals on the urban challenges of the era and the contemporary discourses on housing and accommodation can be legitimately lumped together. This means that the dissertation tries to broaden the possible interpretative horizons of the novel throughout Nádás' authorial methods and all-encompassing knowledge.

3. Theoretical context of the PhD thesis work

By analyzing *Parallel Stories* with regard to spatial aspects, the dissertation seeks to bring about theoretical insights on the literary space itself and on the problem of the literal depiction of space. The analyses of artworks are neither concerned with the abstract spaces that belong to the realm of physics and geometry, nor with the engineering spaces of architecture. The spatial-poetic investigation seeks to discover venues and places of literature that are full of experiences and atmospheric allusions. As Gaston Bachelard wrote in *The Poetics of Space* (1957) natural sciences mostly deal with homogenous, quantitative abstract spaces that are without any preferred or special directions.[4] On the other hand, our everyday experiences reveal that the proper spaces of human life are divided into rather qualitative sections that are full of experiences, emotions, and atmospheres that are intermitted by designated points, directions and venues. The investigation of spaces depicted in literary works aims to reveal not the abstract space, but the spaces of experience that are manifested by the poetic imagination.

Beyond investigating the spatial-poetical aspects of literary text the thesis also relates to the discourse of the so-called “spatial turn”. Just as the “linguistic turn” in philosophy at the beginning of the 20th century and the “pictorial turn” of the postmodern, the “spatial turn” meant an all-encompassing scientific shift whose aim was to facilitate the interdisciplinary investigations of venues and spaces in the discourses of social sciences and humanities. Michel Foucault’s seminal study *Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias* can be considered a direct prequel of this “spatial turn” in which he depicts our era as the “epoch of space”, compared to the 19th century that was dominated by the concepts of time. According to Foucault, “our experience of the world is less that of a long life developing through time than that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein”. [6] The discourses of the “spatial turn” do not consider space as a mere abstract philosophical or scientific concept or as the practical field of architectural design. Space is rather becoming a social, psychological and linguistic construction in the intersection of theory and practice; a construction that blends the phrases of power and scientific

discourses with the personal desires, sensations, and experiences that characterize space.

The dissertation will analyze *Parallels Stories* in the light of these relations and implications and seek to enrich the spatial-centered literary and cultural scientific discourses that are currently gaining more importance in Hungary. Moreover, the dissertation is probably the first scientific work written in Hungarian that examines Nádas' oeuvre from spatial-poetic aspects with regard to the "spatial turn".[7]

4. New results of the PhD thesis work

The dissertation aims to conduct its investigations in line with the above discussed methodical and theoretical framework. In this section, we will present the new results of the dissertation, the main perspectives of its chapters and its logical cohesion.

4.1 Portraits of architects (Samu Demén and Alajos Madzar)

This first chapter of the dissertation, titled Portraits of architects in *Parallel Stories*, can be regarded as a thesis-chapter and will analyze the two architects of the book,

Samu Demén and Alajos Madzar, two central figures, from a spatial-poetic respect, as well as the descriptions of the buildings they planned.

According to the inner historic logic of the novel, the main goal of the chapter that describes Samu Demén, who worked in Budapest at the end of the 19th century, and the modernist Alajos Madzar, who was active in the interwar period, is to analyze the main spatial-poetic problems, the architectural works and the architects who appear in novel and to investigate the epochs and the architectural schools they were part of. The chapter also examines the architectural, conceptual, artistic and socio-historical questions of the portraits and their parallels within Nádas' oeuvre. The very first chapter already introduces some of the spatial-poetic aspects (from the micro-descriptions of interior designs and objects to the neighborhoods and to the topographical macro-descriptions) that will also appear in the later chapters.

Another aim of this chapter is to analyze one of the central narratological innovations of the novel that is creating a non-hierarchical relationship structure between the description and the narration of the plot, the characters,

the venues and the objects. The narrative cementing points or the conceptual focal points of the book are not constituted only by the intersections of the characters, but certain objects, venues, buildings, atmospheres and sensations that create equally important connecting points. These bonds, that transcend personal fates, are constituted in the everyday objects, furniture and the sensational spaces of the city and become a net of connections that create the cohesion of the book.

These latter aspects are actually pointing towards the questions of the second chapter of the dissertation that will treat these spatial and objective elements as the main connection points in the eerie spatial-poetic narrative of the book. Thereafter we are seeking to reveal the characteristic schemes of authorial consciousness that create the unique non-linear structure of the book that consists of associative transitions and topological connection instead of the traditional linear narration.

4.2 “The architectural uncanny”

The second chapter of the dissertation will investigate materials, objects, qualities, sensations, and atmospheres.

As demonstrated above, instead of the relationship structures between the characters, the “narrative islands” that are scattered in space and time in the fictional world of *Parallel Stories* are rather connected throughout the buildings, objects and materials that surround the characters and by the sensations and qualities that are immanent in these objects.

In this chapter, we will analyze those architectural space-descriptions of the book that deal with the special spatial experience of the uncanny (*Unheimlichkeit*) that emerged in the late 19th century and reached its zenith in *fin de siècle* urban discourse.[8] The main thesis of the chapter is that the eerie experience of urbanity that can be grasped as a pathology of modernity also connects to the other central discourse of the novel, namely to the problem of the clinical viewpoint. As Anthony Vidler notes in his seminal paper on the psychopathological aspects of the *fin de siècle* urban experience, the discourses on the eeriness of architecture are mainly dominated by medical, environmental-psychological and hygienic topics. [9] Via analysis of the eerie spatial experiences depicted in the book the second chapter of the dissertation tries to

demonstrate how the spatial experiences of different atmospheres and the interrelated feelings of coziness and strangeness are becoming a non-linear narrative principle in the book. These connections create the wider sensational environment in which the characters, venues, and events constitute the eerie relations-network of similarities, parallels, repetitions, divergences and differences. All this will lead to the spatial-poetic insight that it is not only the acts that are happening in certain venues or around objects, but it is the linguistic event, the special textual act itself that reveal the sensational phenomenality of these venues and objects.

4.3 Poetics of cities (Mohács, Berlin, Budapest)

As we have already noted at the beginning of the first chapter, the spatial-poetic investigations of the dissertation range from the descriptions of the object-focused interior design to the ekphrasis of singular buildings and neighborhoods, to the descriptions of landscapes. However, these scales vary not only within the chapters of the dissertation, but they also structure the whole dissertation. While the first, thesis-oriented chapter

focuses on the description of the buildings, interiors, and furniture designed by the architects of the book, the second chapter dwells into the general environmental, atmospheric and spatial-psychological relations that outstretch the singular buildings and objects. The third chapter will analyze the spatial-poetic characteristics of geopolitically, historically and culturally more complex cities that can be considered as an even wider and more comprehensive architectural scale.

As Viktória Radics emphasized in her essay on *Parallel Stories* it is extremely difficult to subsume the book into a certain literary genre. The book resists being defined on the grounds of the structural criterion of homogenous novel genres because it contains several genre-types. [10] One of the constantly occurring genre-codes of the book is that of the “city novel” but it never unanimously prevails. There are three cities in the city-focused analysis of the novel: Mohács, Berlin and Budapest. Beyond the dramaturgical logic of the novel, all of these cities have unique identities and spatial-poetic statuses. This is the reason why we are analyzing the descriptions of these cities in the book and comparing them

to other city descriptions of the novel and that of Nádas' oeuvre.

4.4 “Other spaces” (Margaret Island)

The fourth and the fifth chapters of the dissertation will analyze two seemingly inclusive venues that are in fact structurally interconnected but are anti-theses of each other. Both of them are utopian literary spaces that oppose the status quo spatial orders of the book, be these official spaces oppressing, heteronormative political powers or biopolitical regimes with eugenic ambitions.

The fourth chapter will conduct the spatial-poetic and spatial-political analysis of the homosexual orgy scenes that unfold on Margaret Island in the second and third volumes of the book. The venue of events is being depicted via the narrative perspective of Kristóf Demén, one of the central characters of the book. The venues of the night on the island are interpreted in the dissertation as an “other space” that irritates and opposes the homogeneity of normative social spaces. The Margaret Island scene is a spati-poetic inclusion not only because it is isolated in geographical and urban aspects, but it is also punctuated

by the natural alternation of times of the day. The ambivalent relationship between the daylight and the night creates the separated viewpoints of social aspects, and it also duplicates the characteristics of Kristóf's self-representation.

In his study on diverging spaces Michel Foucault explains that a heterotopia is not only the inverse sphere that is excluded from the hierarchized spaces of normative society, but it “can be written on it”, since it is “capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible.” [11] To illustrate these counter-space structures thickly layering onto a certain physical space, Foucault applies the theatrical space-metaphor of a revolving stage. This effectively evokes the staging of sensuality in linguistic-spatial composition with regards to the events on Margaret Island. In her study, *A néma test diskurzusa* [*The Discourse of the Silent Body*] Enikő Darabos also stresses that the events on the Island actually represent the grammatical and theoretical dimensions of “theatrical sensuality” in a thematic sense since for Kristóf “the homosexual theatre on the Margaret Island starts to work as a language whose

signifiers are the wallowing, elated bodies that are communicating with each other during the unfolding of their relationship.”[12] The next to last section of the dissertation will explicate the spatial-poetical aspects of this “sensual theatre”.

4.5 The laboratory of a perfect life (The boarding school in Wiesenbad)

The last chapter of the dissertation will analyze the spatial realization of another significant social utopia of *Parallel Stories* that is the other inclusive “diverging space” of the book. The Nazi eugenic research laboratory, that was set up in a medieval castle in the interwar period, is located near Wiesenbad in Germany. The castle is a key venue of the book and was already alluded to in earlier volumes. The last section of the dissertation will investigate the venues of the racial-hygienic institution that is disguised as a boarding school for boys and the Kaiser Wilhelm Racial Biological, Racial-Hygienic and Hereditary Institution.

The main goal of this chapter is to interpret the spatial-configurations of the Nazi racial-hygienic theories

beyond the individual and intersubjective interactions that operate as a backdrop of power-related and ideological discourses. The Wiesenbad boarding school is one of the key places of the eerie spaces depicted in the spatial-poetic structure of the book since it manifests the mutual and bi-directional interaction and pervasiveness that stretches between the concrete physical structure of architectural venues and the language of power that organizes its discursive spaces. The last chapter of the dissertation seeks to analyze those anthropological aspects of the novel that also have spatial-poetic relevance: from the control that exaggerates the classical humanist education concept to the hygienic observation that is motivated by natural sciences and political concepts, to the dehumanizing aspects of Nazism.

4.6 Endnotes

[1] BALASSA Péter, *Nádas Péter*, Kalligram Kiadó, Pozsony, 1997. pp. 12-13

[2] Ibid.

[3] NÁDAS Péter, *Párhuzamos olvasókönyv* (Szerk. CSORDÁS Gábor), Jelenkor Kiadó, Budapest, 2017.

[4] Gaston BACHELARD, *The Poetics of Spaces*, (Trans. Maria Jolas) Beacon Press, Boston, 1994.

[5] See: Barney WARF, Santa ARIAS (ed.), *The Spatial Turn: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, Routledge, London, 2009.; Jörg DÖRING, Tristan THIELMANN (Hrsg.), *Spatial Turn. Das Raumparadigma in den Kultur- und Sozialwissenschaften*, 2008 transcript Verlag, Bielefeld, 2009.

[6] Michel FOUCAULT, *Of Other Spaces* (Trans. Jay Miskowiec), *Diacritics*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (Spring, 1986), pp. 22-27

[7] See: BAZSÁNYI Sándor, WESSELÉNYI-GARAY Andor, „... olykor egyetlen műfogás...” (*Nádas Péter: Párhuzamos történetek*), In. Uő. *Kettős vakolás*, Kijárat Kiadó, Budapest, 2013.323-370.o.; BAGI Zsolt, *Az emlékezet ellen. A hely körülírása a Párhuzamos történetekben*, *Élet és Irodalom*, LVIII. évfolyam, 49. szám, 2014. december 5.

[8] Sigmund FREUD, *Das Unheimliche*, In. *Imago. Zeitschrift für Anwendung der Psychoanalyse auf die Geisteswissenschaften* V (1919). S. 297–324. Online: <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/34222/34222-h/34222-h.htm> (Accessed: 2018. május 29)

[9] Anthony VIDLER, *Agoraphobia: Psychopathologies of Urban Space*, In. Anthony VIDLER, *Warped Space: Art, Architecture, and Anxiety in Modern Culture*, MIT Press, Massachusetts, Cambridge, 2000. 25-50.o.

[10] RADICS Viktória, *Kritika helyett*, In. Holmi, 18. évf. 5. sz. 2006. <http://www.holmi.org/2006/05/251> (Accessed: 2018.04.20)

[11] Michel FOUCAULT, *Of Other Spaces* (Trans. Jay Miskowiec), *Diacritics*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (Spring, 1986), pp. 22-27

[12] DARABOS Enikő, *A néma test diskurzusa. A saját mássága mint az individualitás kritériuma* Nádas Péter Párhuzamos történetek című regényében, *Jelenkor*, 2007, 50. évfolyam, 4. szám, <http://www.jelenkor.net/archivum/cikk/1222/a-nema-test-diskurzusa> (Accessed: 2018. május 11.)

5. List of publications related to the PhD thesis work

2011. Miklósvölgyi Zsolt – „*Minden tér szűk nekem*” – *Beckett klausztrófób tereiről* In. Nagy Világ 2011. VII-XIX.

2011. Miklósvölgyi Zsolt – *A bensőségesség terei* – *Gaston Bachelard: A tér poétikája* In. Műút 2011/XXX.

2013. Miklósvölgyi Zsolt – *A városi tér képnelyve*, Structzine, Vol.4.

2014. Miklósvölgyi Zsolt–Nemes Z. Márió – *Az élőködő terek boldogsága*, Műút, 2014. XXXXIV.

2015. Miklósvölgyi Zsolt – *Építészet-kritika-írás. Az építészeti kritika mediális és diszciplináris kihívásairól* – In. Miklósvölgyi Zsolt (Szerk.), *Építészet-kritika-írás*, Új Forrás Kiadó, Tatabánya, 2015. 7-19. o.

2015. Miklósvölgyi Zsolt – *Az atmoszféra mint irodalmi tárgy. Az affektív tér problémája* Nádas Péter

Párhuzamos történetek *című regényének tükrében* – In. Ádám Anikó, Radvánszky Anikó (Szerk.), *Térzékelések-térértelmezések*, Kijarat Kiadó, Budapest, 2015. 303-311.o.

2017. Miklósvölgyi Zsolt – *Kisérteties rétegek. A spekulatív építészet és tétjei* – In. Magyar Narancs, 29. évf. 4. sz. (2017. 01. 26.)

6. List of conference papers related to the PhD thesis work

Miklósvölgyi Zsolt, *The Map as Allegory, as Medium and as Form*, Geoartistic and Geopolitical Borders – International Scientific Conference, Kassa, Szlovákia, 2012

Miklósvölgyi Zsolt, *Az atmoszféra mint irodalmi tárgy. Az affektív tér problémája Nádas Péter Párhuzamos történetek című regényének tükrében*, Térérzékelések – Térértelmezések/Espaces sensibles – Espaces lisibles: A Pázmány Péter Katolikus Egyetem Irodalomtudományi Doktori Iskolájának nemzetközi konferenciája, Budapest, Magyarország, 2013

Miklósvölgyi Zsolt, “*A place where life is created.*” *The Scenes of National Socialist Biopolitics within Parallel Stories by Péter Nádas*, X. Annual Convention of the Austrian Centers, Hebrew University, Jeruzsálem, Izrael, 2016

Miklósvölgyi Zsolt, “*Visions and Mimics: Interwar Architectural Modernism in Budapest*”, Central European Talks, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Kanada, 2017

Miklósvölgyi Zsolt, “*The Libidinous Geographies of Parallel Stories by Péter Nádas*”, The Idea of Place: 20th Anniversary Conference of *Space and Culture Journal*, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Kanada, 2017

Miklósvölgyi Zsolt, *Designing Everyday Urban Life: Adolph Loos and the Viennese Architectural Modernism*, 35th International Visual Sociology Conference – Framing/Reframing: Visual Sociology, Goffman & the Everyday, University of Concordia, Montréal, Kanada, 2017