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A Prosaic poetic Study of the Novels of Miklós Mészöly
Thesises

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Introduction

Mikós Mészöly is one of the most significant authors of Hungarian prose literature after 1945. The paradigmatic weight of his oeuvre and its indirect or direct influence on Hungarian prose is only comparable to Géza Ottlik. Most entrant authors at the turn of 70's and 80's named one of them as a foregoer. Miklós Mészöly gave the starting energy and inspiration for the refreshment of Hungarian prose literature. He could be suitable for such a title, because similarly to Ottlik, he was an author with a unique approach to his craft. We wouldn't be able to find two similar novels in his oeuvre from a poetical aspect, but he kept his original style. He was incredibly erudite: Mészöly knew the contemporary local literary trends as well as the German, French ones and was well-read in classical culture and philosophy. Through examining his working diaries, we can get to grasp his comprehensive knowledge, and his interesting philological views as well.

Since his oeuvre has received special attention in the last two decades, and his reception is diversified it is important to pick suitable analytical aspects from his body of work.

Material and Method

In my dissertation I chose four of Mészöly's novels as the subjects of analysis: *Az atléta halála*, *Film*, *Saulus* and *Családáradás*. My main concerns were prosaic poetic by nature, and I paid special attention to spatial poetics.

Spatial poetics is a reading strategy that analyses the representation of spaces in literary texts. Its roots are interdisciplinary, because it contains diverse discourses of humanities and social studies that thematises the cultural and artistic constructions of space in different ways. It took shape because cultural studies put space at the centre of interest. I chose other aspects of analysis as well, considering the texts' individual attributes along the way.

Regarding *Az atléta halála*, I used Roland Barthes' photo theory that he explains in *Camera Lucida*. I scrutinized the ekphrases and the spatial forms related to running. In the case of *Film*, I analysed the investigative narrative and history that is written into the space of the city. In *Saulus*, I examined metaphorical, visionary projections that the main character's inner world makes onto the outside world, from the angles of spatial poetics and narration techniques. Lastly, I analysed *Családáradás* with the help of a versatile spatial metaphor, the labyrinth. The dissertation also contains four excurses. These comparative intermediate chapters are about the influence of Mészöly on another authors' works, not primarily in philological but poetical aspects.

Results

In the analysis of *Az atléta halála* the main character was my centre of interest. The different analytical directions start from Bálint Óze's personal attribute and existential situations that are similar to Sisyphus'. These Sisyphean characteristics match Camus' interpretation: the struggle is hopeless and endless, but not meaningless. The athlete is as rebellious of a character as the mythic king. The finish line is as far from Bálint Óze as the top of the hill is from Sisyphus. Considering Camus' interpretation, the athlete is driven by the same effort as the king: struggle with their own burdens. Different spatial forms represent circularity and Sisyphean function in a metaphoric and metonymic way: the ellipse of the runway is the main character's authentic space and the blade thin strip of light in his teenager memories: both of them are the place of Sisyphean efforts to him. The ekphrases in the narration help Hildi, the primary narrator not only to understand the facts of Bálint's (as the secondary narrator's) teenage life that mostly (de)formed his personality, but to experience the atmosphere of his memories as well. This aspect of the text became accessible for me with the help of the photo theory of Barthes.

In *Saulus*, every remarkable phenomena ensue from the main character's unique point of view. The story cannot be positioned in the present or in the past, it is in a liminal time interval, in the partially reflected half past. It is a special trait of the novel's narration because there is no such verb tense in Hungarian. Mészöly loved to experiment with the attributes of narrated time. The experiences of the narrator happened in the recent time, his laconic, intimate manner is characterized by raw primacy, not by complete understanding. The events at the novel's ending part are beyond the limits of language, the narration becomes stuttering and enigmatic. The intermediary traits of narration are suitable to be projected onto the space of the narrator's actual

state of mind: the descriptions of the objects' forms and light conditions always form a close, but casual connection with the narrator's consciousness – with his understanding, feelings, premonitions, dreams and visions. The novel's another point of interest is how the reading experience functions in an encompassing, metaphoric way within the narration. Saul reads indeed everything in a metaphoric way: signs from the space around him, the language, the Torah and another persons' interpretations, their assumed or considered hidden thoughts and gestures, but his own inner metamorphosis as well. All of these aspects are summarized in the activity of the theoretical reader.

In the novel *Film* Mészöly creates a very strange space-time: its basic material is the city and its history. The space of the city is readable like a text, and the users of the space – regardless of their intent – also write this text. The material element of the city is always partially depicted: we can follow the changes of the man-made space in time. On the other hand, what are particularly readable, are the chaotic stories of the city. The investigation of the narrator is one of the basic storytelling methods, as well the ekphrasis-based, laconic camera-fiction. However, the narration contains its own self-revealing gestures too. It forms a new interpretative aspect of the text that thematises the hidden contents of the narrator's intentions, the questions of narrativity, the investigation as a narrative technique, and last but not least, the unsuccessful efforts of recognition.

Mészöly's late novel *Családáradás* is the most different one from the others, because its narrative technique is based on Hungarian anecdotal prose tradition. This work is interesting not only due to its free-flowing and familial atmosphere, but its spatial, temporal and bodily representations as well. In the narration there are several archetypical characters and spaces. I found the anthropomorphic ideas related to the house the most interesting: the building named "ősház" ("primeval house") reflects the inner relations of the family, but its vertical points represent the levels of human consciousness as well. Besides the labyrinth-like structure of the family and their house, time also appears like a certain kind of maze, because the present is directly influenced by the long past. The narrator pays particular attention to the bodily representations of female characters, he explicates via metaphors, as well as the roles and age-specific positions of archetypical female characters. The family reproduces not only itself as an impersonal organism, but also its functions, sins, scandals and the mystery of dynamic balance of life and death.

In the excurses I tried to probe how Mészöly's artistic impact spreads out to the works of following generations. I decided not to search for philological matches among texts, my point was to generally recognise his poetical influences.

In the *First Excursus* I gathered thematic similarities between *Az atléta halála* and a novel by Attila Bartis, *A nyugalom*. There is a common trait of the two main characters' life story: both of their adulthood is determined by their childhood and adolescent traumas. It forms a connection to the classical bildungsroman, but instead of rewriting it, *A nyugalom* deconstructs this connection. However, the prosaic poetic similarity between the two texts is more important, since Bartis uses a typical technique of Mészöly: he creates a metaphoric-metonymic netting, made out of several elements from the text. It contains for example the symbolic meaning of blood and motherhood, and the unexplained connections among these elements. Both narrators try to create an order in their past through storytelling as self-therapy. But all in vain, there is not any comforting outcome in these texts, only the coerciveness of derailed lifepaths, leading both of them to the unavoidable decay.

The text of comparison in the *Second Excursus* is a novel by Iván Sándor, *A szefforiszi ösvény*, put next to *Saulus*. Sándor joined the new Hungarian prose tendencies as a mature author with his novel *Századvégi történet*. *A szefforiszi ösvény* falls in line with this trend as well. There is a fundamental similarity between the novels of Mészöly and Sándor: both of their scenes are laid in the ancient Judea. Additionally, both of them show an inconsistent, always altering world, although with a difference in scope. In *Saulus*, the transformation takes place in the inner personal world, but in Sándor's novel in the entirety of the late roman and Hebrew civilizations. However, these two types of decomposition are both connected with the religious textual tradition, that has an effect on the inner and the outside world equally. The main characters of the novels have a common experience: the expressivity of language becomes questionable. Moreover, in Sándor's text the characters eventually renounce the language. Speaking and writing does not provide support to interpret the world anymore, therefore causality begins to decay. Saul, Ruben and Simon are also alike in that they are restless characters who seek the limitations of the Torah. They have to face the phenomenon of time and space seemingly being fluid, therefore, orientation becomes impossible. For Saul there is only one support: the additional knowledge coming from his own inner visions, but as for the other two characters, their world is moving unstoppably toward disintegration. Nevertheless it is always pending, because time is not a straight line.

The *Third Excursus* follows the analysis of *Film*, but its context is applied to another novel by Gábor Zoltán, *Orgia*. A common problem is the correlation between the space of the city and its history: over time the signs of awful sins and atrocities disappear, but the memory of posterity can save them from oblivion. The novels thematise how violence can be depicted in different ways, for example through an emotionless narrative voice without stylization that could work as an alternative objectivity. Both of them take into account the dilemma about the purposes and limits of literature: does a work of art have the right to mediate an ethical-social message?

The *Fourth Excursus* has a narratological point of view in connection with *Családáradás* and a novel by László Márton, *Árnyas fűtca*. There is a parallelism between them in terms of the stylistic features of narration. They have the mood of pre-war peace, but are written into completely different contexts. In *Árnyas fűtca*, the mentioned peaceful manner radically decomposes, but in *Családáradás*, it only transforms. In the novel of Mészöly, there is no tragedy, because the family as a self-recreating organism vanquishes death. In contrast, the world of Márton's novel carries the burden of so much pain that it blocks the emergence of catharsis, therefore the narrator is forced to use a completely absurd manner of language. The time constructions of the two novels also show similarities: linear time turns into an indefinable temporal perspective that in the case of Márton's novel causes the duplication of some storylines, or intentionally contradictory decisions of the narrator.