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PRESENCE AND MEANING
The Thematization of Sport in Late Modern and Postmodern
Hungarian Prose

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I. Aim of the Thesis, Methods of Research

The dissertation wants to find an answer to the following question, both in a general, theoretical sense and in a more concrete, literary historical sense: what insights can those cases offer us in which probably the most indirect medium of the body, the literary text, thematizes the most direct and complex coding of the body, sport. As modern sport usually appears in the 20th century discourses of humanities and social sciences as something degrading, deplored and exposed rather than a socio-cultural phenomenon to be praised, the first part of the thesis analyses the conservative, leftist, and liberal critique of sport, then proceeds, using the insights of English-speaking sport criticism and the game theories of German Hermeneutics to provide an apologetics by highlighting the unique functions of sport in our high-tech civilization.

The second theoretical part of the treatise aims to explore the various medial aspects of sport, especially the relationship between the practical knowledge that materializes in the motion of the sportsman and the linguistic enunciations which set out to interpret this. Regarding the relationship between sport and literature, it is important to state that the practical knowledge, as a unity of skills and disposition which is gained through practice and the incorporation of the play area, can only be medialized in a limited sense, as it cannot be placed into a material carrier, thus it cannot be detached from the body. In a strict sense, the rhythm of the body carrying out actual motions cannot be described through a system of signs based on meaning, thus language proves inaccurate in this case. From a methodological point of view, this insight makes it necessary for the thesis to make use of the recent theories of culture (like that of Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and Gunter Gebauer) which isolate the production of presence from the production of meaning to focus on the nature of interactions between these two concepts.

One of the most important theoretical assumptions of the thesis is that literary texts can only relate stories with the price of disregarding their performativity, that is the unique nature of the events, the material and bodily elements in them – everything that proves to be an inseparable part of sports. From the side of reception we could add that, as opposed to taking part in sport or paying attention to it closely, the aesthetical effect of literary texts is much more indirect as it takes place only through complex medial transformations.

After addressing the ideological, cultural, medial and aesthetic differences between sport and literature, the thesis recapitulates the various possible reasons which explain their link in literary texts. For example the most fascinating moments of competitions are so momentary that for the sake of recording and recalling them later on, they have to rely on the more enduring, yet, as opposed to direct experience, “weaker” discourse networks of art. From the perspective of literature, the second chapter of the dissertation, with reference to the cultural-historical analyses of K. Ludwig Pfeiffer and the flow-concept of Mihály Csíkszentmihályi, argues that there exists a necessary link between contemporary literature and sport.

Given that after the Second World War, our novelists were concerned mostly with athletics (especially running) and football, the thesis, relying on the insights gained from sociological researches of sport, undertakes to compare these two kinds of sports from a historical and sociological perspective, pointing out their unique aspects.

The conclusions drawn from the introductory theoretical part of the dissertation are then contextualized in chapters dealing directly with the analysis of literary texts. From the Hungarian prose of the last fifty years I have chosen those works in which motifs taken from sport appear in conjunction with important questions of identity, language as well as with generic assumptions. In the time frame examined by the dissertation – as opposed to the first half of the 20th century – the number of works in which the language of sport plays a crucial role in the interplay of discourses, has risen significantly. Yet, the field of research represented by the thesis could not rely on similar inquiries in Hungary, so it had to utilize those works (that of Detlef Kuhlmann, Mario Leis, and the studies and monographs of Mark Bülles and Markus Kaminski) that explore the relationship between sport and literature in the context of major works of modernism. The background of the interpretive strategy at work in the textual analyses is given by a historical interest which also investigates what kind of similarities and differences, continuities and changes can be seen between the sport thematizing works which were written in the second wave of late modernism and postmodernism. In the course of the interpretations, the topical-motivical perspective chosen in the beginning is later enriched by narratological, transtextual, stylistic, rhetorical, medial and metafictional points of view in order to show the poetical function of the thematics of sport in these texts. Even though the dissertation does not claim to have comparative aims, in those cases when a comparative analysis proved to be insightful, the interpretation of Hungarian works happened parallelly with English and German texts (for example Allan

Sillitoe's *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*, Nick Hornby's *Fever Pitch* or Rainer Maria Rilke's "Die Turnstunde").

II. Summary of Results

Taking works of fiction as its focus, most of the literary historical chapters of the dissertation are analyzing the sport-thematizing techniques of the oeuvres of prose writers whose works we can safely call canonized nowadays. Besides works of fiction, the thesis interprets relevant essays, journalistic pieces, interviews, statements as well. Some of the chapters contain the interpretations of the texts of such authors in whose works the thematics of sport surfaces rarely, yet, from the perspective of the dissertation, most insightfully.

Dealing with the works of Géza Ottlik, Miklós Mészöly and Iván Mándy, the first bigger part of the chapters devoted to analysis seeks to answer the following question: what kind of dialogue can be established between those works of these three late modernist writers, in which the thematic and discursive appearance of sport can be linked to significant questions of being and identity. The Ottlik-interpretation first examines the hierarchy which the writer set up between athletics and football by showing the difference between them in following way: while the former, being objectively measurable and being separated from the sphere of everyday world, means real competition, but the latter cannot be regarded as such, because it not only does not provide equal conditions for each participant, it cannot even work as a counterpart of the injustices of the real world, as it acts as a representation, rather than the suspension of the outside world. After taking a close look on the significance of this opposition in Ottlik's *Továbbélők*, *Iskola a határon* and *Buda*, I demonstrate what functions do the mechanisms of sport have in *Iskola a határon* by calling attention to how the body under such conditions can loosen the control of the mind, thus enabling man define himself not solely in the acts of the cogito, as a subject always anxious about itself. From this perspective, Ottlik's novel can be interpreted as an acting out of the conflict between the concept of the bodiless observer presupposed by Cartesian epistemology and the act of bodily exercise which results in involvement and identity loss.

The Mészöly-chapter analyzes *Az atléta halála* in relation to the main work of Ottlik, and points out those poetical-rhetorical mechanisms of the text which carry out the constant metaphorizations of the referentially relatively closed language of sport. In Mészöly's novel, the semantic re-tuning of the signifiers pertaining to sport create a complex allegorical system

which refers to an existential situation, the loss of freedom, the inner processes of the personality, the story of love as well as the relationship to transcendence. Through a mise-en-abyme, the vocabulary of competition can help us shed light not only on these anthropological aspects, but the workings of the novel, too.

The equivocation of the language of sport through various metaphorizing processes appear in *A pálya szélén* with such narrative techniques which are unlike the ones we find in the works of Ottlik and Mészöly. For Mándy, storytelling – regarding its intention – does not evolve in the relationship between, on the one hand, a reconstructive mnemotechnics, and, on the other hand, a verbalization made possible while at the same time limited by the means of language. Through an analysis of the short stories and the novel of the author (who has also worked as a sports commentator) the dissertation explores the network of relations that exists between the thematics of sport, the dynamic position of the narration, and the medial aspects of the texts. The analysis of *A pálya szélén* from this point of view offers such insights which also reflect on the significance of the work from a literary historical perspective. It becomes obvious not only that Mándy's novel destructs the continuity that we find in Ottlik's Bildung-like processes, and which for Mészöly guarantees the stability of the individual, but that, as opposed to the works of Mándy's contemporaries, the writing technique at work in *A pálya szélén* exposes to a greater degree the shaping of the text to the interplay of semantic automatisms of non-mimetic origin.

In the next chapter I demonstrate how sport can become a basis for a satirical representation of the world in the short stories of György Moldova. The motivational center of the eleven (!) short stories published in *Ferencvárosi koktél* (1974) is an unusual character. In relation to this, the recurrent humorous feature of the texts is discrepancy: of the sportsman to his sport or situation, for example by having peculiar eccentric habits, which results in various conflicts. In the case of the better pieces of the collection, the critical distance and value judgement that characterizes the genre of the satire runs parallel to hiperbolic, strange and nonsensical elements (that later became a commonplace in Moldova's writing), creating a balance between the dynamics of storytelling, jokes, journalistic features and literary forms of expression.

The part devoted to the analysis of György Ferdinandy's writings focuses on a process of difference producing repetition which is created by the recurrence in the author's texts of the theme of Hungarian football in the 1950s. On the one hand, the repetition of similar fabular elements appearing in many narratives, chronotopes and extratextual references, and,

on the other hand, the narrative structure, stylistic shaping, and tones of storytelling can be regarded as an iterative structure that draws the reader's attention to the ways of rewriting, the linguistic and modal articulation of the story. While for Ferdinandy, the football field becomes an area of symbolical clash which has political as well as social meanings, it bears witness to the demagogical mechanisms dictatorship, yet it also provides a possibility for the expression of a critique of the political system; the more recent works make use of a figurative technique through which football, collective history and individual history can intertwine in a semantical network of connections. From the perspective of the dissertation, one of Ferdinandy's works entitled "Hosszútávon" stands out, in which remembering the emblematic moments of life are narrated through sometimes diverging, sometimes merging layers of time, the use of discursive functions with differentiable time index, while the rhythm of the text, the alternation of shorter and longer (parts of) sentences, the typographical and grammatical ellipses, the repetitive textual pieces closely resemble the description of running that we find in the work.

Analyzing György Spiró's "Apámmal a meccsen," the chapter entitled "Football and Social Critique" traces the narrator's relationship to sport as it undergoes a process of change from an emotional identification to a critical distancing, or even the creation of a position from which its inner workings can be dismantled.

The next section of the dissertation comprises of two parts. The first focuses on how in Péter Nádas's oeuvre, the thematizing of sport contributes to the representation of the relationship between the body, perception, mind, thinking, and language. In the "October-November" part of *Évkönyv*, running appears as a solitary and natural form of movement, the telos of which cannot solely be reaching the finish line, nor the training of the body, as its significance lies in its eventlike nature, which causes the interaction of the I and the world to *happen* unlike what we can experience in everyday conditions. The interpretation proposes to give a close reading of those narrative and semantic features which contribute greatly to how the reflective-confessional discourse of Nádas's text provides – in the sense that Gumbrecht uses this word – a hermeneutic interpretation of the performative experience of running, which relies on presence.

In the next chapter, I read a short story entitled "A futás napja" as a counterpoint to the Nádas-text. Ferenc Sziij's text represents the cultural topoi related to running, and the system of clichés surrounding a stately organized occasions for sport, in such a way that it directs the reader's attention to the limited perspective offered by the narrator/protagonist. The life of the

characters in the short story stands in a grotesque contrast to (the dream of) participating in the competition, and the narrator/protagonist can be regarded as the inversion of a sportsman's virtues, yet, as metaphors of sport frequently appear in the textual self-narration, the possessive phrase that we find in the title refers both to the running competition framing the narrative, and the narrated part of the life of the protagonist as his self-reflexion is oriented by conventional metaphorical concepts that are related to running. For the confessional subject, reaching the finish line would mean that he becomes able to interpret his life story as a parable, but here the language of sport, originally rich in connotations, seems like a decontextualized pile of quotations, which, in such a context, loses its multi-layered semantic structure. "A futás napja" in this respect can be interpreted as a critical narrative that strives to dismantle the tropological system that exists between running and life.

The dissertation then goes on to explore the most recent "sports books" of Hungarian fiction. The first chapter traces that literary interest in sport that has been continuously at work in Esterházy's writings for nearly three decades now, from *Fancsikó és Pinta* on to his novella that was published in 2006. In the first collection of the author's short stories, the football field becomes a significant locus, a point of concurrence of fictive verisimilitude and creative imagination. The sociolect of football takes part in the interaction of discourses in a way that reflects how the characters of the fictive world linguistically relate to each other.

In my interpretation of *Termelési-regény*, I propose to prove my claim that the valorization of the textual interaction of lexical, phraseological, and stylistic levels of language, the signifying mechanisms of which constantly elude control, can only partly be attributed to the biographical or thematic appearance of football. For Esterházy, this sport is a figurative analogy of the birth of the text itself, the postmodernist attitude to writing. In my analysis I also address how the field becomes the area for the clash between various discourses in the novel, and how this contributes to the production of meaning through the different layers of language at work in the roughly unified sociolect of the teammates and their rivals.

The Esterházy-chapter does not forget about the author's essays either. In these works, the frequent stylistic reference to the language used in sport-journalism, and the ironic commentaries aimed at these clichés not only signify textually the inevitable nature of linguistic antecedence, but also show how the pragmatic situation of literature enables the author to speak about sport in a way that is not possible in its primary commentaries. Meanwhile for Esterházy, football carries a cultural and socio-historical significance: the

decline of Hungarian football is contextualized by public dilemmas. The narrator speaking in these pieces is concerned with the collapse of communism, with the local peculiarities stemming from the change of the political system, as well as with the mental state of the country. Such an argumentation can also be shown to exist in the novella entitled *A tizenhatos mélyére*. Given that it is mostly comprised of the earlier, seemingly forgotten football pieces, the volume can be regarded as a canonizing gesture which collects those essays which have received less critical attention so far.

Football as a theme, a language, and a discursive system frequently appears in Endre Kukorelly's writings. It is part of the speaker's story of life; the area and medium of his socialization; an event that gives him an opportunity to exist as "an other"; it is inalienably part of the personal and collective identity; and it is a topic handed down by earlier generations of authors. A "thing," which always appears in the media of social communication, thus it has a distinct role in the language universe which antecedes and partly creates the subjects of Kukorelly's texts. In the essays of the author, we can "find" an interpretation of football, which leads to various insights in game theory as well as in sport theory. On the one hand, for Kukorelly, football offers a controlled and thus limited way of acting out our conflictual instincts, in which we can show our individual skills that would go unnoticed in everyday existence. On the other hand, by accepting and observing these arbitrarily created rules, we can create a frame of reference for the contest, which is much more just than "real" life. In the concentrated structure of the game, the player is always pressed to carry out actions and make decisions, through which he continuously acts out his own identity, much like laying himself bare in front of himself and others. Kukorelly's interpretation of sport carries hermeneutical insights inasmuch as the game is connected to *aletheia* and revealing/being revealed. It follows that for the author the primary value of sport lies in that it enables us to participate in the experience of the hermeneutically defined truth of our world.

In *TündérVölgy*, a novel using the generic features of autobiographical-, historical-, family novels as well as the Bildungsroman, football is linked to articulating questions of identity, socialization, collectivity, but, at the same time, to the inevitable loneliness of man as well. In this text, the crucial function and significance of sport comes from the fact that in the universe of the novel, apart from football there is no other choice to measure (even provisionally) different sets of values against each other, or working out a dialogue between self and other.

As opposed to Ottlik, Esterházy or Kukorelly, in the background of István Darvasi's interest in sport we do not find game theory, even though his works show a complex motivistic and metaphorical network surrounding football. He breaks with the common interpretation of the game field as an insulated area, as the cause and effect of the events that happen there are to be found outside the field. Darvasi's works give a metaphysical interpretation of football, which – as opposed to those cultural-historical approaches which read it as a performative “area” for the production of presence that escapes the oppositions of surface/depth – reads the events happening in the field as signs pointing beyond themselves in a self-cancelling manner.

In the final chapter of the dissertation, I provide an interpretation for Lajos Parti Nagy's short story entitled “A hullámzó Balaton,” focusing on the merging of registers, metafictional mechanisms, narrative schemes and anagrams. The most important aspect of the text seems to be the contradiction that exists between the work that establishes itself with reference to sportsman's biographies and the unusual nature of the fictitious “sport” thematized in the story. In the case of this text, the reader experiences at the same time the closed rules of parabolistic social critique, stylistic variation and the unfolding of a complex anagrammatic network. Parti Nagy's multi-language story does not, however, relativize radically the significance of literary language, as, being the transfigurative device that governs all the other discourses, it becomes the key to the readability of the text. The way Parti Nagy makes use of the conventional narrative and figural inventory of sportsman's biographies, the ingenuity that shows in his re-tuning of the discourse of sport could hardly happen anywhere else but in a literary text.

III. Publications on the Topic

1. *A közvetítés kódjai. (Esterházy Péter: Hahn-Hahn grófnő pillantása).* Alföld 2003/3. 54-60. és Biczó Gábor - Kiss Noémi (szerk.): *Antropológia és irodalom.* Debrecen: Csokonai. 2003. 414-420.

2. *Lebont, építkeznek. (Parti Nagy Lajos: A hullámzó Balaton).* Alföld 2003/8. 66-76.

3. *Célra futó véletlenek. (Játék és sport néhány magyar regényben).* Alföld 2004/8. 74-86.

4. *A sport aktualitása.* Debreceni Disputa 2005/3. 4-8.

5. *Sport és irodalom: ellentmondás vagy szükségszerűség?* Magyar Műhely 2005/3. 6-13. és Menyhért Anna – Vaderna Gábor: *Amihez mindenki ért. (Kultúratudományi tanulmányok)*. JAK - L'Harmattan, 2006. 163-172.

6. *Sport - kultúra - medialitás*. Mediárium 2007/tél, 15-24.