

ABSTRACT OF DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

*„...it lives upon reality, still it's poetry” —
The possibilities of autobiographical
(re-) reading in Zsigmond Móricz's novels*

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I. Object of the thesis

My thesis undertakes the interpretation of Zsigmond Móricz's prose through detailed analysis of his four novels. During recent years quite little attention has been paid to Móricz's works by literary scholarship, which gives grounds for this choice of topic, as apart from some re-reading studies, no real comprehensive work has been done on the survey of his prose. The discourse aims to prove that Móricz's works have not lost their topicality and they pass the test of reinterpretation even in the mirror of new observations of literature theory.

Accordingly, the dissertation sets a number of closely related aims. First, it undertakes to answer the question why there was a decrease in receptional interest in Móricz's prose at the end of the century. With reference to this, the thesis reckons with the question how style-historical and poetic concepts related to Móricz's prose can become timely for contemporary re-reading. These aims are mainly dealt with in the first chapter of the thesis (I. Life- Work- Reading — possible ways to reinterpret Móricz and starting points for reading the text), although the succeeding units analysing the novels keep getting back to these aims while adapting to questions raised by the particular work.

The thesis does not focus on the monographic survey of the whole life-work, but rather on textual analyses. As a consequence, it aims to re-read each novel. It is not, however, restricted to the autobiographic interpretation drawn up in the title of the thesis, as each chapter is to explore other possible meanings lying hidden in the texts. The reason for choosing autobiographical features to be analysed can be explained by the reception historical judgement of the texts being examined: I have chosen to reinterpret novels which have been awarded attention by (auto)biographic ways of reading as well, thus, could become pillars of previous decades' canon. In the beginning, I was planning to point out how the interpretative questions significant throughout decades had hidden the poetic complexity of the texts. This argumentation emphasizing the timeliness of Móricz's works might not appear very new —

due to re-readings which have been published in the meantime — but it is definitely not useless to underline the several meanings of the texts, so statements about it are included in these analyses.

This analysis focusing on the texts assumes that the points of view being applied do not only concentrate on approaches of specific works but on the possible aspects of reading works and a life-work. In this way, each interpretation's argumentative strength is significant considering both the works examined and the whole life-work, since the interpretative questions of a convincing reading could be used while re-reading other pieces of his life-work. Accordingly, it is emphasized in this thesis several times how a train of thought, which is only partly connected to the topic, could be driven further. As a summary of these, the last chapter (Possibilities of further thinking) sums up sketchily, without demanding entirety, the possible hidden ways in the proposals of the thesis to re-read Móricz's works.

II. Methods of research

According to the aims, the discourse is broken up into six major parts. The introduction, which clears up the most important reception theoretical questions and summarizes fundamental questions and aspects of interpretation, is followed by four interpretative chapters. Then I attempt to reinterpret the four novels, using a similar starting point for each but striving to throw light upon the meaning of the texts from different aspects. With reference to all the four novels, I intend to draw attention to the observation that Móricz's prose includes such complex meanings that the perfect presentation of reality cannot be seen in it.

The basic methodological aim of the dissertation is to direct attention on the act of reading, setting out from a linguistic-rhetoric analysis and laying stress upon problems of

reception. This, however, does not necessarily mean distancing ourselves completely from interpretations of other perspectives. We cannot ignore the endeavour of readers to interpret the texts with regard to the correlation between reality, the author and his biography. It is not only because reception of this kind is demanded even today, but also because this system of aspects — put on new grounds and in a way reinterpreted — can play a key role in understanding Móricz's works. Consequently, the first chapter of the thesis – besides surveying reception history — undertakes to look over concepts (realism, reality-fiction) which determined reception of Móricz's epic poetry for long decades. The theoretical clarifying is beyond doubt limited by the basic aim of the thesis, thus, this chapter concentrates mainly on theories productive in re-reading Móricz's prose while only referring to possible further problems sketchily.

Each of the four novels I have chosen to analyse represents a specific version of autobiographic features. Here, autobiographic feature is not a generic technical term, it is rather a way of reading or a function which interprets pieces of work in an „autobiographic space”. That is why my choice fell on *Életem regénye*, which is considered to be an autobiographic work, on *Árvácska* and *A boldog ember*, both based on interviews, and on *Légy jó mindhalálig*, which is thought of as a fictitious novel with autobiographic inspiration. As each chapter is intended to re-read a text, I have decided to interpret the novels in the chronological order of their being published.

Despite the obvious differences, the interpretations of the novels are built up by a similar logic. Each analysis is preceded by an introduction which outlines questions of reception theory and takes into consideration all the interpretative aspects related to the specific text. In spite of the general survey of the first chapter, the approach based on reception history does not seem unjustified, as the reception of each novel was influenced by specific factors which need to be taken into consideration in order to form interpretations. I

consider the establishments of the introductory chapter as a starting point in the course of text reading. In order to avoid constant repetition, I omit to keep referring to them. However, certain questions will inevitably reoccur in the course of analysing the novels — though they will move from the theoretical horizon into the space of reading.

While interpreting the texts, I follow a principle which does not necessarily relate to one single school of theory. I believe that the texts being examined have to determine the questions which can provide basis for establishing the interpretative dialogue. Accordingly, I make equal use of ideas characterizing hermeneutics, narratopoetics and myth criticism. Besides, I intend to assert a „method” of deconstruction which helps me demonstrate how the structure of meaning in the texts include contradictory discourses. As for me, the texts are attributed with various meanings because the (artistic) language results in endless reading possibilities of Móricz’s works, due to creating ways of interpretation beyond the meanings intended by the text. However, it should be emphasized that this experience comes alive in reception: while reading the texts, language lets obvious readings be exposed against more complex structures of meaning. This way, reading the texts can make readers face questions which put reinterpretation of Móricz’s prose in the horizon of basic questions of modernity.

I intend to carry out the examination of these works as a dialogue of genre’s discourse. Accordingly, in connection with *Légy jó mindhalálig* I try to disprove that the novel can only be approached as a juvenile novel. In order to prove this, I take into account the possible meanings and roles of parables and biblical motives in the text and their connection to the genre of an education novel. In the survey of *A boldog ember* the subject-matter of the analysis includes two apparently distant genres; the documentary autobiography based on interviews and the genre of a tale create a specific alloy. I wish to point out that due to the parabolic meanings of the text, the narration of the protagonist’s life story can also be read as the author’s self-interpretation. I approach *Életem regénye* as a rewriting of autobiography,

saga and sociography, in which I strive to examine the relationship between referentiality and linguistic foundation, as well as the connection between memory and the narration of past in the novel. Finally, I interpret *Árvácska* as a prayer of lament on the basis of comparison with biblical psalms, I go round the aesthetic features of expressing suffering.

III. Results of the research

The reception historical summary of the introductory chapter proves that despite the differences in world views of marxist and people's ideologies, they both contributed to plundering Móricz's works at the end of the millenium. Still, the theoretical reinterpretations and conceptual clarifyings let us conclude that in the course of re-reading Móricz's prose, the aspects previously considered significant are not necessarily void in the mirror of new theoretical findings. Realism proves to be useful when exploring the complexity of the works as it is a historical technical term related to romanticism. In this context the texts can be viewed as the area where the different style historical discourses can argue with each other. It makes use of the concept of realism through emphasizing the possibilities for Móricz's prose to become timely. Examining reality and fiction proves that, instead of the old method of contrasting, it could be more practical to adapt theories which emphasize the conditions of crossing between the two media. Thus, the fundamental question of reading will be how a meaning thought to be autobiographic is created. Raising this question is especially meaningful in Móricz's novels, where the issue of autobiography becomes unusually obvious, leaving the reader full of doubts concerning autobiographic and fictitious reading.

The chapter reinterpreting *Légy jó mindhalálig* starts with the statement that the work being read as a juvenile novel in the course of reception history should rather be reinterpreted as an education novel. The self-reflexive metaphors query the obvious meaning in the text,

which emphasizes that giving texts with multiple meanings (just like the novel) a one-way reading can restrict their semantic abundance so much that it becomes an arbitrary (mis)understanding of the text. Accordingly, while examining meanings of biblical intertexts, the analysis concludes that they represent the anxiety, loneliness, alienation of the protagonist separated from his home. The transcendental experiences of the personality and the possibilities of misunderstanding them create the tragical interpretation of existence, which is a basic recognition of Móricz's novel. Thus, the text bears a complex meaning related to the basic questions of identity (understanding existence, recognizing one's mission, accepting the world around us), and this lets the reader decide whether to take the text as a hopeful parable or as its failure.

As for *A boldog ember*, the „silent reception” having surrounded the work for a long time is probably due to a consensus. First, the thesis examines the rhetoric-poetic structure of the text, based on autobiography and sociography. The seemingly autobiographic narratives of the protagonist and the narrator turn out not to fulfil the reader's demand to recognize real events. Instead of giving a credible reconstruction of the life-story, *A boldog ember* intends to show that the protagonist / secondary narrator wants to turn his life-narration into a parable, and transfer an exact message to the readers. The autobiography tries to convince readers that the youth of Joó György as the secondary narrator meant happiness for himself and for his community, too. The protagonist builds up his story with narrative and rhetoric schemes of a tale in order to implement his parable of happiness in the frame of a mythical narration. Consequently, *A boldog ember* re-establishes the imperfection of the world with the productive act of story-telling. However, the multiple meanings of the text are proved by the fact that despite the narrative aims, the dialogue fails to represent the carefree period. The reader can't help feeling that meanings intended in the narrative cannot be created automatically, as language gets out of the narrator's control, due to the multiple meanings of

words. If the narrator wanted to make the message obvious, it would require endless reflexive comments, which would seize the autobiographic story itself. *A boldog ember* can be looked upon as a work of outstanding significance in Móricz's life-work, because it uses a form of narration which is considered as a genre fulfilling reality referent reading habits even today.

Besides enumerating reception historical features, the reinterpretation of *Életem regénye* is preceded by an introduction of genre theory, which goes round the possibilities of autobiographic reading. The novel's poetic world makes obvious reception uncertain, which is supported by a more general analysis of the novel. This analysis can convince us that the novel maintains both the fictitious and the autobiographic reading. As a consequence, *Életem regénye* seems to narrate the act of remembering, the way how the autobiographic narrator's rambling memory transmits and creates his own life for himself. This is followed by three chapters that examine scenes of the autobiography. The detailed description of the three social media (family, village, nation) could make the reader feel that the author put self-understanding in such real frames that they can guarantee a wider perspective for the analysis of his biography. However, this readability is only partly supported by the novel, as the spacial contexts are rather fictitious spaces created through remembering, which become parts of a mythical world-interpretation in the text. The last chapter of the interpretation of *Életem regénye* tries to state how the autobiographic identity is formed through narration. Accordingly, Móricz's novel can be read as a story of seizing writing: recalling memories helps the narrator understand the past but prevents (or, at least, restricts) the possibility of confession. While the narrator is trying to create his own story of identity, he realizes that it is just what contributes to the annihilation of self-identification. The notion of subject in *Életem regénye* queries the unity of personality and poetic ideas on problemfree narration.

The survey of the reception of *Árvácska* enumerates the reasons for the ambivalence of appreciation and the „silent” interpretation accompanying the reading of the novel. The fact

that the novel can be interpreted referentially and mythically is shown by the „close reading” concentrating on the text at the beginning of *Árvácska*, where marks of place and time, together with the introduction resembling descriptions of the 19th century poetry and the biblical story of creation provide us with two different approaches. Based on this, the novel makes its readers read itself as a parable which focuses on questions of existence. Accordingly, the text can make its readers share *Árvácska*’s torture and this shared experience is created by the way the events are narrated. The protagonist’s name can strengthen the parabolic meaning: the name becomes a manipulative device of power, due to which *Árvácska* thinks of the human subject as someone whose only concern is for universal orphanage, loneliness and defencelessness. This interpretation, however, is shattered by the psalm marks of the chapters, which make us read the text as a prayer of lament. It can be said that in *Árvácska* it is the narrator’s story-telling that formulates the prayer of lament and not the child unable to speak and produce linguistic reflection. Thus, the narration can be interpreted as a text which tries to re-establish the world’s imperfection in a dual sense. On the one hand, it tries to stop unhappiness outside the text by having a great impact on the reader. On the other hand, it wants to stop the re-establishment of divine world-system by uttering complaint and narrating torture. The meaning of the text becomes complex as it presents us with doubts which question the efficiency of this strategy.

The last chapter is an outlook, but its sketchy statements consider the aspects used in the course of interpretation suitable for other texts, too. As the last consequence of the novels’ analysis, it can be concluded that Mórícz’s art includes many questions that guarantee a special place for the author’s works in Hungarian literary canon.