

On the purpose of the thesis and its links to Mészöly studies

Miklós Mészöly was eighty years old, when he died and the writer's death has given a touch of severe and sorrowful topicality to our recently completed Mészöly interpretation. We find it painful to realize that the career of the man and the writer has ended, even though we know that past tense becomes Mészöly less than anything. His oeuvre and his wide intellectual horizons are commentaries about the present world which is in a state of constant creation, and his "final versions from the legacy" will also continue to act as a witness through their mediators in the ever-existing present..

Mészöly's oeuvre, which has been taking shape for over half a century now, is an organic part of 20th century Hungarian narrative, a chapter in mid-position in the history of prose fiction, and a bridge between the early and the late periods of the century; a preserver and creator of traditions. Mészöly's art provides a model for creating a fictitious universe which is operated by the principles of continuity and modulation. It awaits its readers and interpreters now.

Due to lack of distance in time and wider perspectives the critical evaluation of a contemporary writer is not an easy task. It is equally difficult to meet readers' expectations when confronting Mészöly's prose. That is partly because the ever experimenting writer, who also expresses his views on the theory of verbal presentation, brings newer and newer variants of his investigations into existence.

Mészöly is respected by many but read by few. The greatest authority on his works Beáta Thomka¹ says that even the attempt to interpret Mészöly's prose requires desperation, patience, strong intellectual effort and spiritual as well as psychological identification. One might also say that any attempt at a dialogue with Mészöly's corpus is a "monomaniacal enterprise", and like all such attempts, it is of dubious value.

¹ THOMKA, Beáta: A saját történeten kívül, belül. Mészöly Miklós: Párbeszédkiérlet. (In and out of a story of one's own. Miklós Mészöly: Attempt at Dialogue). *Jelenkor* 1999. 10. 1070-1071.

What makes someone become a Mészöly reader and deal with texts which are hard to follow and understand? Perhaps it is the trying nature of the task and a desire for intellectual adventure, the "call" and the "challenge", in which the reader has to face refashioning and provocation. The exploration of such terrains of consciousness and the subconscious are exercises one would not be able to make on one's own. The "notion" of such intellectual horizons are alluring to a mind in search of knowledge, a "radiation" of such sensibility and sensuousness as opens a window on the dimensions of a fuller type of human existence.

The process of canonization of Mészöly's works has been going on since the 1970s, and the number of works aimed at interpretation has increased significantly. These readings of specific works, which represent different standpoints, approaches and responses, might raise intriguing ideas about the distinctive features of Mészöly's art and creative method. There are, however, comparatively few theoretical works which focus on the development of the writer's oeuvre.

Those playing a significant role in forming the readers' value horizon in relation to the Mészöly canon have been the essays of Miklós B é l á d i², the evaluations by Péter Balassa³ of recent Hungarian prose fiction, and Péter Szirá k's⁴ novel approach to the narrative of the period of the 1980s, which provides a survey of the Mészöly tradition. An important stage in the history of interpretations is Beáta Thomka's⁵ "alternative monographic draft", which aims at mapping the whole oeuvre of the writer (Mészöly's poetics, short stories, short novels, novels, essays, dramas, etc.)

A rarity in literary history, L á s z l ó S z i g e t i's⁶ volume of interviews, may well count as special interest with Mészöly-readers. The personality of the writer, which is ever hiding or is only indirectly revealed in the works, is now without a disguise and becomes directly tangible in these personal confessions to life. There is a strong feeling that the writer's abstract reasoning, his proneness to meditation, and to balance this, a sensibility for

² BÉLÁDI, Miklós. Érintkezési pontok (Points of Contact) Szépirodalmi Könyvkiadó. Budapest. 1974. 533-563.

--: Válaszutak (Crossroads) Szépirodalmi Könyvkiadó. Budapest. 1983. 288-323.

³ BALASSA, Péter: Észjárások és formák (Ways of Thinking and Forms). Tankönyvkiadó. Budapest. 1985. 37-127.

⁴ SZIRÁK, Péter: Folytonosság és változás (Continuity and Change). Csokonai Kiadó. Debrecen. 1998. 10-33.

⁵ THOMKA, Beáta: Mészöly Miklós. Kalligram Könyvkiadó. Pozsony. 1995. 222.

objects, landscapes, details of human environment, and a broad intellectual horizon, supported by respect for fact, make these interviews an important element of Mészöly's oeuvre.

Any attempts at interpreting the deeper layers of Mészöly's works can be effective only through a strong modification in the reader's attitude.

II

On the method of investigation and on the critical approach of the thesis

Mészöly's art has many unexplored areas, and perhaps immeasurable, dimensions. One of the most exciting aspects is the continuous modification of point of view and narrative situation in the individual works. No matter which standpoint is taken for a survey by the reader (space and time relations, plot, character, composition), a change of perspective and position always has to be faced. It seems therefore that this can become a focus of investigation allowing an illuminating interpretation of some characteristic features of composition, the writer's method and the world view of the writer. Ernő Kulcsár Szabó⁷ sums up the significance of this kind of narrative in the history of literature as follows: "... from Kosztolányi to Eszterházy, in the history of Hungarian prose narrative it is only in Mészöly's work that the renewable nature of point of view depends logically on the adequate selection of narrative situation. (...) The modern experience of inaccessibility of objects and personality leads Mészöly to raise the question of whether a narrative – linguistic speech situation could be formed which would give a chance of conveying certain meanings."

Theoretical research over the last two decades has directed attention to the examination of how point of view and narrative situation are reflected in a literary work.

⁶ MÉSZÖLY, Miklós: *Párbeszédkiértelem*. A kérdező: Szigeti László. (Attempt at Dialogue. Interviewer: László Szigeti) Kalligram Könyvkiadó. Pozsony. 1999.

⁷ KULCSÁR SZABÓ, Ernő: Az epika irányai az 1960/70-es években. (Trends in Narrative in the 1960s and 1970s). In: KSZ: *A magyar irodalom története* (The History of Hungarian Literature). Argumentum Könyvkiadó. Budapest. 1993. 101-102.

G y ö r g y i P o z s v a i⁸ says that the history of fiction can also be grounded on point of view. Philosophy, both epistemological and ontological, as well as theories of art, language and literature are linked to the exploration of various aspects of this complex and far-reaching set of problems. For literary critics who were educated in the spirit of traditional aesthetic principles and literary criticism, it is indeed difficult to find a solid foundation and new strategies of interpretation based on an ontological approach and suggested by the latest theories in linguistics. I believe, however, that from the modern theories studied I have tried to incorporate in my approach and system of reasoning what seemed adaptable and acceptable. My readings are perhaps of a hermeneutic nature; all the more, because the effect of Mészöly's works on the reader is the power to instigate newer and newer, and therefore, continuous self-interpretation and interpretation of existence. This is what lends special importance to the dialogue between the individual works and their reader. However, I have also made use of the experience of the pragmatic aspect of explicating, because I found this method more practical and well-formed, and in critical works of this type I came across more precisely elaborated terminology, sometimes even model explications (e.g. Tátrai⁹). This focus of investigation has proved interdisciplinary, touching as it does on the frontiers of various disciplines. The synthesis of their achievements will be made, if necessary, by the next generation.

The approach and focus of this study are novel; they are not supported by a distinctly worked out methodology and the subject matter is also a less explored area in contemporary Hungarian literary criticism. The thesis is a continuation of its author's previous research, which aimed at investigating a specific area which has not been in the focus of detailed scholarly description. The present research attempts to provide tentative models for interpretation. Beyond the intellectual efforts of the author of the thesis and the personal dimensions of modification in her own world picture, the major purpose of the thesis could be, perhaps, inviting the students and future readers to a sophisticated intellectual adventure, by easing the difficulties in the reception of Mészöly's works.

⁸ POZSVAI, Györgyi: Nézőpont és közlésmód. (Point of View and Narrative Voice). *Literatura* 1993/2. 130-148.

⁹ TÁTRAI, Szilárd: Szöveg és narráció (Text and narration) *Magyar Nyelvőr* 1997/2. 177-187. Az elbeszélés határai. Kosztolányi Dezső: Esti Kornél, (különös tekintettel a kilencedig fejezetre) (The borderlines of narration Dezső Kosztolányi: Esti Kornél with a specific focus on chapter Nine) *Magyar Nyelvőr* 1997/3. 325-338.

III

The concepts and focal points of the thesis

The thesis comprises explications of Mészöly's novels. These detailed interpretations of the four novels in the Mészöly oeuvre (**Saulus**, **Film**, **Forgiving** and **Family Flow**) are regarded as representing a possible alternative form of interpretation, which could serve, both in its view and general attitude, as a model for newer and newer readings. Besides the subjective motivation of the author of this thesis, the selection of works was inspired by the intention to trace in the novel corpus the modification of point of view and narrative situation. The explications also discuss dilemmas related to the method of reading. How can a standpoint be found, both psychological and intellectual, which allows a consistent and objective description of the characteristic features of Mészöly's art in such a way as conveys also the atmosphere of this created universe, with its "general feeling" and immense variety of images and verbal wit, psychological and intellectual meanings, at least in their recognized forms?

The explications of the novels aim both at subjectivity and objectivity. Following the track of these interpretations, making use of their experience, ideas and findings, the author of the thesis also tries to create constructions of meaning within her own emotional and intellectual interests. When investigating narrative situation in the novels, besides narrative forms she has also looked for a spatial form which could have been the model for a particular composition, and for those motifs that mark the circle of the interpreter's associations.

The narrative forms are arranged in the four novels in a new way. The first novels, up to the early 70s, are variations of the 1st person narrative form, whereas the novels dating from the period between the mid 70s and late 90s are modified varieties of the impersonal narrative form. The novel called **Film** seems to take these two forms to their extremes, thus both separating and linking the two phases in the writer's career.

The classic example of the first person narrative form is **Saulus**, a novel whose central hero tells about his crisis, looking for its origin in the past and present, thus hoping to

existence, built around family chronicles and legends. Mészöly's view of life is in some wayssimilar to Camus': "There is no love of life without the hopelessness of life."¹⁰ The writer is more attracted to the tableaux of suffering, so the chronicler regards it as his primary goal within and beyond the family circle, to commemorate "the history of small and great crucifixions" and whereby "*the beauty of misery will not pass without a witness*" – as the writer claims in the concluding part of **Forgiving**.

From parabolic presentation to non-linear forms and polyphonic structures – from **Saulus** to **Family Flow** – the Mészöly novel also reflects on its own techniques, point of view and narrative situation, when it allows a glimpse into the dilemmas and doubts of the narrator. Questions of fact and fiction and presentation come up now and again in the investigations and revelations of **Saulus**, the self-reflective film-making of **Film**, the reconstructive attempts of **Forgiving** and the collage-like Book of Times in **Family Flow**. Photographers, keepers of diaries, readers of court records are variants of the narrator, who through contemplation modify, alter and shape the world presented by them in the works.

The spatial forms of contemplation – circle and screw or spiral forms and labyrinth – are tangible in each of the works interpreted in the thesis. These forms provide a borderline for contemplation and cognition.

"*This is all that can be known, but there is not much more to be known about the chronicler either. Or even less,*" – the closing statement of **Wimbledon Hyacinth** can be quoted in conclusion.

¹⁰ MÉSZÖLY Miklós: A világosság romantikája. In: M.M. A tágasság iskolája. (The romanticism of light. In: The School of Spaciousness) Szépirodalmi Könyvkiadó. Budapest. 1977. 112.

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