

1. Prior Research and Thesis

The realization of correspondence between three novels provided the basic research for my dissertation: *Iszony* (published as *Revulsion* in English) by László Németh, *La Nausée* (*Nausea* in English editions) by Jean Paul Sartre, *L'Étranger* (*The Outsider* or *The Stranger* in English editions) by Albert Camus. Even though Camus's novel, considering its original title, is not in line with the other two, its general theme is parallel with Sartre's work (as the writer of *L'Étranger* has numerous referred to this similarity.)

The connections between Sartre's *La Nausée* and László Németh's *Revulsion* were pointed out on numerous occasions by scholars, particularly by Ferenc Grezsa in his monography *Németh László Vásárhelyi korszaka* (English translation: László Németh's Vásárhely Period.) However, considering the whole of scholarly discussion on these works, only passing comments were made in regard of the connection between *Iszony* (*Revulsion*) and *La Nausée*. Realizing the potential in this link prompted me to start my original research.

One of the main propositions in my original thesis (written in 2006) was that the analysis of Nelli Kárász' revulsion would uncover not only psychological but ontological interpretations in László Németh's novel, which would follow the transformation of the mind of

the protagonist from the „revulsion in the bedroom” to the desolation. Conclusively, this desolation relates to Sartre’s nothingness. My aim was to study: how the varying examples of consciousness are articulated through differing techniques and poetics of writing. Since both text told from a homodiegetic viewpoint, it is important to answer the question: what is mediated through the use of first person narrative in *Revulsion* and what is in *La Nausée*? What is the relationship between the time management of the quasi-journal style and a memoir style of writing? During this research I uncovered two concepts: Sartre’s concept of freedom and Németh’s concept of “*növésterv*”, which he borrowed from Frobenius (*paideuma*).

This research was, what I prolonged in my dissertation. While I expanded the texts involved in the analyses, the theoretical background was also extended. Beyond the *Revulsion (Iszony)* I used the *Utolsó kísérletet*, the *Gyász*, the *Bűn (Guilt)*, the *Égető Eszter*, as well the last novel of László Németh the *Irgalom (mercy)*. I have studied the emergence and development of poetics in the Németh’s novel form, which, tied in to my findings on *Revulsion* – I believe – can be connected to the poetics of the 20th century French novel form.

Therefore, in my dissertation I have traced the history of the relationship between Németh and the French novel form, from Marcel Proust to Albert Camus. My aim was to uncover as complete a picture

as possible. Thus attempting to be comprehensive I have considered the authors and works, previously discussed, thoroughly found in the reception of Németh's works as well as the novels the characters are reading in the novels.

Conclusively, I initially explore in my dissertation how, as Németh László was introduced to the modern French novel at the beginning of his writing career, did this knowledge influence his poetics of the novel form? Is this influence traceable in his late oeuvre, specifically in his last novel, *Irgalom*? What role does the novel form play in Németh László's oeuvre and which wave of the 20th century novel does the Némethian novel belong to? That's why the title of the chapters of my dissertation are the following: *László Németh and the novel form*, *László Németh's novel form and the french novel of his time*, and at least *The mercy and the contragravity*. This last chapter is to summarize, through the analysis of the *Irgalom*, the most important results of the dissertation.

2. Methodology

First and foremost, I have to state that we have to consider Németh's oeuvre as a consciously edited, continuously reorganized and annotated corpus; i.e., using the theoretical framework of Gérard Genette, a corpus rich with paratext and autotext. The dissertation, using this self-reflective quality, approaches the relationship between Németh and French literature.

While studying Németh's oeuvre it became evident how tight a bond existed between his and contemporary French writers' ideology. Meanwhile, there is a pronounced difference between Németh's novelistic form and the novelistic form of his French contemporaries. Discovering this discrepancy convinced me to broaden the focus of my research.

Predominantly I have to make it clear how Németh understood the novel form. This is the prevailing theme in the chapter titled *Németh László és a regényműfaj (László Németh and the Novel Form,)* which consists of four parts. The first part deals with the relationship between the author and Hungarian prose, the second part discusses Németh's own concept of the novel form, while I try to place Németh's theories on genre (and their analysis) in the history of literary theory. Continuing in the third part I considered the link between fiction and history, i.e.

the problem of narrating the experience of time passing. Lastly, in the final part of the chapter I specifically studied the effect of the use and analysis of „irony” had on the history and theory of the novel form. As the lack or the presence of irony (and the technique it is used) has numerous consequences in Németh’s prose.

After discussing the theory behind Németh’s novel form I have searched for novels that I can show, how developed the structure of Németh’s novel form. Which we can see through the evolution from one of his early short stories *Télemakhosz* (no English translation exists) and his last novel *Irgalom (Mercy)* The protagonist of the short story, Pali Horváth is writing a play on Telemachus, the son of Ulysses, while he is waiting for his father to return from captivity after World War II. Pali is living with his mother and has to endure seeing his mother courted by a younger man. When his beloved father finally returns from captivity Pali feels that it is high time for his father to dispose of the suitor. However, his father is still exhausted from the long journey and the drawn-out years in captivity and falls asleep while Pali recites him his play.

Télemakhosz is not only essential in Németh’s oeuvre because of its employment of irony but because it serves as a prefix for Németh’s last novel *Irgalom*. Needless to say, the plot has gone through numerous revisions, as the short story became a novel. The most

significant alteration to the plot might be the changes made in the character of the protagonist; the main heroine of *Irgalom*, Ágnes Kertész, a medical student, is the female alter ego of Telemachus. Using Ágnes Kertész's emotional quest Németh rewrites the wanderings of the father. The four decades between writing *Télemakhosz* and *Irgalom* exposed Németh to different literary influences. The primary and most vital from these influences was the prose of Marcel Proust.

Since, the basic unit in Németh's prose is the sentence. He tries to place his observations on the previously discussed ontological issues on the linguistic level of the sentence. With this method, he certainly ties into the Proust's legacy he imagined. This method is presented to its fullest form, sometimes over emphatically, in *Irgalom*. His sentences make Németh able not only to overstep his own experiences but to employ the legacy of the novel form. Specifically it enables him to display in some of his scenes and characters Camus' Godless sanctity, the existentialist man suggested by Sartre's oeuvre, Mauriac's heroes striving for mercy or Dostoyevsky's inner freedom.

3. The new results

The Hungarian author is directly linked to the legacy that came to age in the big social novels of the 19th century. However, Németh significantly expanded this legacy. Németh's prose could simultaneously connected to the prose style of Dezső Szabó, Móricz's realism and to the wider circle of *Nyugat*. Stylistically and in terms of style Németh's prose can be a bridge between Zsigmond Móricz and Miklós Mészöly, one of the most important figures of the Hungarian prose of the 20th century.

Németh turned with a natural curiosity to the questions of the novel form as well. Since throughout his whole oeuvre he was concerned with the problems of the novel form he wrote a relatively big amount of shorter and a smaller amount of longer essays on the issue of the form. From the writings that deal with the issue (aside from the numerous reviews, from which I naturally employ some while incompletely reconstructing his theory of the novel) seven texts constitute the marrow of his theory of the novel form.

The three-part Proust study, published in 1932 in *Tanú* (Hungarian literary journal,) a review turned essay *A Glastonbury Romance és a huszadik századi regény* (English translation: *The Glastonbury Romance and the 20th Century Novel*) and the short

analysis from 1939 *A Mítosz emlőin* (which a small journal note, written in 1939 by Németh, hints at being originally planned intended to be longer: “*Perhaps in the On the Breast of Myth, into which I plan to melt the whole of literary history of Europe.*”¹): these three writings explore the connections between myth and reality. *Regényírás közben* (English translation: While writing a novel,) *Korrektúra után* (English translation: After corrections,) *Tolsztoj inasaként* (English translation: As Tolstoy’s apprentice) and *Az író és modellje* (English translation: The writer and his model) quartet could be considered the second series of volumes belonging to Németh’s work on the novel form.

In these writings while unequivocally favoring realism László Németh further details his ideal form of novel’s relations to myth. This is how Németh narrows down his methodology into two ways (while conducting research from Proust to Tolstoy:) the myth and the analysis, both of which are crucial components in creating a healthy Cosmos. While the myth offers and holds together knots of concepts the aim of analysis is to untangle these knots.

The foundation for László Németh’s concept on the form of novel, as others have claimed before, is the faith that the world is interpretable and describable. However, with the discovery of myth in essence he opens to the possibilities hidden in self-reflective literature. Since with the mythical method he was able to recognize a material,

which frames a permanent (but not static) legacy around the act of recognition. Thus he approaches the theory that claims that the novel form is founded on the constant parabasis that is the figure of irony. Irony is not at all uncommon in the early writings of the author.

The short story titled *Horváthné meghal* (English translation: Mrs. Horváth Dying) brought him the long awaited recognition, as through its success he was able to get in touch with the contemporary literary scene. The same short story offended Németh's relatives with its bitter irony and exposure of the family. Naturally, I cannot avoid the fact that in the case of *Emberi színjáték* (English translation: Comedy of Men) he chose not to pursue his original intentions. Irony, thus lost its dominant role in the world of Németh's novels, but the form of irony, as the ability of refuting necessary for recognition, remained.

In his essay *Történetírás* (English translation: Historiography,) which he wrote in 1932, in a period when he turned to Western European literature, he sketched one of history's, or more precisely historiography's key dilemmas that neither, in his words, naive historiography nor historiography are capable of drawing a comprehensive picture on the issue at hand. Closely inspecting Németh's claim two circle of questions are materializing behind his thinking. One is connected to (history's) concept of time, i.e. from how long the distance the observer investigates, which closely relates to De

Man's temporality. The other is concerned with the form of language used for the study of the subject.

Proust's poetics of the novel form affected Németh's style on several accounts. Predominantly, it reassured the directive for the encyclopedic, a necessity that followed the Hungarian author throughout his oeuvre. On the other hand, Proust's influence also changed the aim and the structure entirety of Németh's synthesis. This generated the classic Némethian sentence, where Németh attempts to collect every conceptual element into one network in order to be able to depict every element explicitly. Thus he attempts to compress event, experience and comprehension into one single sentence. Through the analysis of some particular novels of Németh we discover the gradual integration of the learnt characteristics of Proust's prose into the writer's poetics of the novel form. Naturally, Proust's impact on Németh's prose was combined with other literary influences.

Among others André Gide's was crucial in the formation of Németh's literary style. Gide made Németh discover Dostoyevsky's works; moreover, through Gide did Németh uncover existential philosophy. Németh considered Camus's and Sartre's prose with the help of the previous knowledge of Dostoyevsky and existentialism, while he created his own narrative style.

In his reception it is often considered Németh as a novel writer with two character (e.g. Lajos Grendel Lajos or László Fúzi writes about this). Since there is a contradiction between Németh as a novel writer and as a theoretical. The modern concept of a novel can be found in his theoretical essays, but it is hard to find this concept in his novells. So the results of the modern poetic, well-knowned and recognised by Németh aren't used in his art of writing. I tried to refine these beliefs.

As I have described it in my introduction, as well as it is clear from the study of different French authors' texts, the inner logic of the oeuvre of Németh developed parallel to the effects of Western, mostly French, literature. Even after it has been completed, this oeuvre, has attracted these effects. As an evidence, one can draw attention to the fact that in his last years, when Németh lost his ability to speak foreign languages he started to relearn them from the basics.

It is more important though that Németh's prose reshapes itself to the effects of his writings on French literature. Thus creating a possible interpretation that comments on the important moments in his oeuvre, from the metaphysical aspect to the religious experience. As we can see, the Hungarian author and his contemporarz French counterparts often deal with the same subject, with the same level of passion (although sometimes to opposing directions.)

It is obvious ever since Aristotle (and Tzvetan Todorov) that the method is the subject, and a subject of intellectual inquiry cannot be given from the outset. This dissertation's goal was to uncover, before the analysis of *Irgalom* (English translation: Mercy), the intricate and many-layered relationship existing between László Németh and contemporary French prose. First, it was important to obtain the mutual point on the surface; with the help of these points deeper connections can be unearthed. This way the novel almost directly corresponded to one another.

Essentially, I have followed three concepts. It is not a coincidence that the analysis of 20th century novels lead to a continuous re-articulation of the themes present in the dissertation along the concepts of myth history and personality. Since, after the 19th century, which wanted to destroy mythicism, came an era in which authors rediscovered mythology for the purpose of fitting new results from positive science into a bigger comprehension and to reformulate the relations between the individual and history. Namely, they did not strive for sociological or psychological analysis, but to outline part of ontological history. Clearly, it is not by chance that the image of the 20th century author preexists the 19th century. Thus it comes naturally to relate Gide, Proust and Németh to Montaigne.

We cannot forget that the previously mentioned motifs are all closely related to the modern novel, as it was created for a better comprehension. The genre of the modern novel, which is open ab ovo, originally preexists the 19th century, but it also encompassed the attainments of Balzac's era. Then in the last century it resurfaced from its narrow frames creating many variants. This is why it was necessary to outline, interpret and analyse Németh's concept of the novel form.

We also shouldn't forget that all these concepts are susceptible to the inner games of language (and the tropes found in language, which according to Vico are remains of the mythological.) This susceptibility is exacerbated, in the case of the dissertation, by the fact that two very divergent languages' words and cultural network interact. Thus the three basic concepts essentially withhold again every exact definition and it only could be approached as a fieldphrase, while taking into consideration the context that it is surrounded by, i.e. tied to the analysis of the rules of the novel form.

These three basic concepts are intimately linked to the concept of sin, which can be studied from all three perspectives. In a mythological framework the concept of sin attracts symbols like shadow, mud, garden or tree. The texts analysed in this dissertation are strongly present completed with other notions. Moreover, these units permeate the poetics of these novels, porving further the mythological

foundations of the 20th century novel. In the status of the fate of the individual, employing László Tengely's definition, sin is the contradiction stemming from the deed of the individual that fits into the fateful chain of events.

Emerging from the sphere of mythological and personal fate into history the referential network of the concept of sin expands both in space and time. The works that we can consider from this perspective, in Németh's oeuvre, are *Utolsó kísérlet*, *Égető Eszterben* or *Irgalom*. In Camus' *The Plague* characters step from the status of the fateful events of the individual into an apocalyptic, i.e. a historical, vision. Sartre attempts to change Roquentin's character, who faces contingency to a personality of a historical figure.

If we follow the changes in Németh's concept of sin we can journey from Gide as far as Simone Weil. In Németh's essay on the previously quoted from Gide passage where the French author writes about desire manifested in the form of an eagle: "Who knows, what will the person be capable of, who dared to eat his own eagle." Later, he built into *Emberi színjáték* the form of the eagle symbolizing desire or sin. However, we read in Simone Weil's essay: „Ego is nothing other than the shadow sin casts that stand in the light of God's way.” Németh measures both of these authors to his own ideas, it's his reliable

method. However, one should not forget how much Németh's own comprehension changed about sin.

The eagle appearing in *Emberi színjáték*, which refers to Gide's work, appears transmittently in the picture of self-destruction in *Iszony* as well. The reminiscence of Dostoyevsky's novel in *Irgalom*, which, as we have seen, also connect Németh to Sartre's universe; Irma Kertész' sin in *Irgalom*, are all stops in this process. In *Bűn*, Németh's novel from 1936, a similar concept to Camus' appears: "*Sin are above the sirs, only some do not feel it and dance others fall into ruins.*"

This is how the paradigm of the novel takes form. Parallel to the intertextual space, where we can find the work of Dostoyevsky, Gide, Proust etc. Those authors, who reshaped the complex structures of recognition, registering and interpretation with the method of rewriting. This outline of the history of the novel form could be broadened. While writing the dissertation I had to respect that the legacy to which both Németh and French writers of the 20th century relate to obviously overstep the boundaries of the relationship existing between Németh and French literature (sometimes touching on mitopoetical and philosophical questions.) Therefore the study of the relationship of French literature to László Németh can only be an introduction to discover a broader, Western European network of reference. However, from here one can trace the outlines of more comprehensive relations,

which by close inspection not only uncover László Németh's dialogue with World Literature but it draft the large mental and spiritual shipwrecks of the 20th century.

4. Publications in this topic

Review

- A fénynyaláb és a tükör, (*Fejezetek a francia irodalomelmélet történetéből*, szerk., Szávai Dorottya. ford. Ádám Anikó, Lőrinszky Ildikó, Martonyi Éva, Papp Ágnes Klára és Szávai Dorottya. Kijárat, Bp., 2007.) , *Élet és irodalom*, 2007/ 42.

Books

- Egy hasonlóság nyomában, Németh László: Iszony, François Mauriac: Thérèse Desqueyroux, = Novum, Az Újraírások Nemzetközi Konferencia Junior szekciójának tanulmánykötete, szerk., Hoványi Márton, Eötvös József Collegium, 2009.
- Introduction to the French connections in László Németh's novels,= La littérature et ses marges = Literature and its Margins: Rencontres doctorales franco-hongorises = Franco-Hungarian doctoral conference, szerk. Joanna Nowicki, Catherine Mayaux, Dorottya Szávai, Kornélia Horváth (szerk.), Université de Cergy Pontoise, 2011.
- The historical experience in László Németh's prose: towards the mercy (Le regard sur l'histoire dans le roman européen 1960-2011) – megjelenés előtt

Conferences

- Egy hasonlóság nyomában: Németh László Iszony François Mauriac: Thérèse Desqueyroux – Újraírás Konferencia 2009. január únius 24. (r.: Cathérine Mayoux, Szávai Dorottya, Horváth Kornélia)
- Hintsch György: Iszony, egy 1965-ös irodalmi adaptáció és a francia újhullám – Új hullámok – Nemzetközi film- és médiatudományi konferencia Kolozsvárott) (r.: Pethő Ágnes)
- The historical experience in László Németh's prose: towards the mercy (Le regard sur l'histoire dans le roman européen 1960-2011) 2011. június 29.(r.: Cathérine Mayoux, Szávai Dorottya, Szávai János)