

Biopoetics in 20th and 21st Century Hungarian Literature Research Plan

I. Biopolitics and Biopoetics: Some Preliminary Remarks

Over the past few decades, competing concepts and tropes of life have displayed a striking vivacity in the discourses of the human and social sciences. This still fairly recent development (no doubt partially fueled by unprecedented developments in biotechnologies) reflects the historical fact that the very meaning, the limits, and the unity of life, as well as the distinctions between life and non-life have become problematic to a great extent. In response to these often anxiety-inducing transformations that unfolded in the wake of the historical and political catastrophes of the 20th century, since the 1990s the terms “biopower” and “biopolitics” have emerged as two of the central categories used by the theoretical humanities to interpret the specificity of our historical present (for a concise overview of the most influential theories of biopower, see Lemke 2011). Today, the wide-ranging consensus that reigns across a number of sub-disciplines holds that, in the end, what is unique about our age will come to light only if we understand our changing relations to “life” itself.

The heuristic value of the two terms “biopower” and “biopolitics” lies in the fact that they provide total explanations of virtually all aspects of human existence. If the inherent teleology of the history of power puts it on a path toward an ever more efficient management of life (be that human or non-human), in the end practically all manifestations of human praxis will have to be understood in biopolitical terms. As a result, not only traditional political activities but even cultural production itself will have to be included in the sphere of biopower. In fact, as some would argue, cultural production was always one of the primary terrains of the deployment of biopower and not just one of its possible outlets (for discussions of various forms of cultural production in terms of biopower, see De Boever 2013, Nealon 2018). Seen from the perspective of these theories of biopower, literature is often interpreted in instrumental terms as a means for power to accomplish its own goals that, nevertheless, remain always external to literature itself.

In light of the extraordinary success of the terms “biopower” and “biopolitics” in the human and social sciences, it is an interesting fact that the category of “biopoetics” seems to have gained significantly less traction in the same circles until quite recently. In spite of the fact that the term appears to be an obvious permutation of the proliferating “bio”-discourses, its use has remained largely restricted to a set of clearly identifiable subfields (Strathausen 2017: 1-2).

One possible explanation for this discrepancy might be the fact that while biopower approached the question of life primarily from the fields of politics and economics, biopoetics was first appropriated by a set of scientific discourses like evolutionary psychology. As the name for a fundamentally Darwinian, evolutionary explanation of literary production, “biopoetics” remained a relatively isolated subfield within literary studies (Cooke 2001: 1; in addition, see also Cooke and Turner 1999 and Eibl 2004). Literary scholars who did not share the methodological presuppositions of evolutionary psychology were often suspicious of a field that, in their accounts, reduced literature to biological determinations. Consequently, the term “biopoetics” remained shunned by the larger discipline, as in the case of Andreas Weber’s “existential ecology” (Weber 2016: 120-123).

In contrast, the planned research takes up the question of biopoetics in a number of different contexts in order to invest the category with a new set of possible meanings. What appears to be of special importance to us is that the term “biopoetics” immediately raises the question of the complicated relationship between scientific discourses on life and literary representations of life in terms of a relation of mutual determination. Is there such a thing as a poetics of life? What would such a poetics consist of? Should we apply scientific categories of life to the interpretation of literature?

This understanding of the problem at hand also explains why we decided to present our central questions primarily in terms of a biopoetics rather than a zoopoetics. The latter term has also been quite widely used recently to designate a possible set of interactions between life and literary production. We can distinguish at least two dominant uses of this category in contemporary theoretical debates. On the one hand, one of the most common uses of this term today restricts its possible meanings to the study of the “poetic” dimensions of animal existence. In this specific sense, zoopoetics designates the semiotic aspects of animal communication that might be interpreted in “poetic” terms. As examples of this kind of understanding of zoopoetics, we could refer here to the classical works of Jakob von Uexküll and Thomas A. Sebeok as significant precursors (for more recent examples, see Martinelli 2010 and Parikka 2010). On the other hand, another popular understanding of zoopoetics defines it in terms of the literary representations of animals, animal lives, and animal communication. This approach, however, often goes beyond a mere analysis of literary representations in order to raise larger questions about the way animal behavior

might in fact have effects on literary representation in more general terms (Moe 2014: 10; Driscoll and Hoffmann 2018: 4). As we can see, the current debates about zoopoetics raise a number of important questions that are certainly relevant for our own theoretical concerns as well (for this topic see *Alföld* 2018/1, the thematic issue “Állat” (Animal) edited and written by members of the planned research). Our focus, however, is not exclusively on the way animal lives might influence our understanding of literature. Rather, our intention is to raise questions about the way literature and literary theory participate in shaping our conceptions of life and, vice versa, about the way our changing experiences of life influence the way we approach these texts.

II. Antecedents and Aim of the Research

The most important antecedent of the research is the international conference organized by the research group, *Biopoetics. Constructions of Life in Literature and Theory*. This material will be published by Springer publishing house in 2019, under the title *Life After Literature*. We could measure the above described theoretical insights during the sessions of our conference. The present research plan concentrates explicitly on the previously mentioned aspects (namely, the way literature and literary theory participate in shaping our conceptions of life and, vice versa, about the way our changing experiences of life influence the way we approach these texts): it raises the question, on the one hand, how 20-21st century Hungarian literature contributed to the formation of the concept of life. While, on the other hand, it tries to explore, what effects the political, biological, and biotechnological discourses and developments had on the self-understanding, or even self-definition of literature. The above mentioned period is extremely rich in texts, that are relevant from this point of view. The research separates three focal points. 1. The analysis of the theoretical framework concerning biopoetics. 2. Decisive forms of biopoetics in lyric and the theory of lyric. 3. The contribution of biopoetics to the development of modern narrative forms. The aim of the research is naturally not to make a suggestion to rewrite the history of 20-21st century Hungarian literature, exclusively from this one chosen point of view. The research, instead, tries to make visible the emphatic, though mostly unexplored relations of biopoetics in the period – this way testing the notions of literary history that are present (developmental or genealogical rows, patterns of determining periods, etc.). Though the plan focuses on Hungarian literature, it is trying to approach its subject in a comparative context.

III. Areas of the Research

III. 1. The Concepts of Biopoetics: Critical Assessment of Theoretical Background and Recent Developments in Philosophy, Critical Theory and Cultural Studies

In our reading, the evocation of the category of biopoetics opens up three possible paths for inquiry. On the one hand, we can raise the question whether it is possible to apply biological perspectives to linguistic signification, to literary and philosophical texts, or to textuality in general. Going beyond the analysis of the evolutionary and biological foundations of literary production, one possible manifestation of this approach would be to examine categories of life as they appear in the languages of literary criticism and literary theory. For example, one could refer here to aesthetic and rhetorical concepts such as mimesis/imitation, mimicry or pretending, the attempts to distinguish between live and dead metaphors, the medical aspects of the Aristotelian concept of catharsis and the term's reception history, or even the linguistic paradigm of *Fort-*, *Nach-* and *Überleben* in Walter Benjamin's works. On the other hand, we could also highlight the central position of the problem of language in the very definition of the human being. If we consider language to be a constitutive element of human life, we have to argue that there is no concept of “life” available to us that is not mediated through language. To put it differently, it might be possible to argue that for the “speaking animal” pure biological life is never available without some cultural and linguistic mediation (Halász 2017; Lőrincz 2018). The ontological priority of language implies that any representation of life (be that scientific or literary) comes “after” the fact of language. The language of literature comes into question at this point as well, especially the planned theoretical investigation of its corporeal and atmospheric effects mostly coded into metrum, rhythm, iteration, and ‘sound’. This aspect became emphatic in the last decade in international research programs and in Hungary as well (Culler 2015; Kulcsár Szabó 2018). At last, on behalf of theory, the research has to take into consideration those tendencies of ‘post-’ or ‘transhumanism,’ that are based on more enduring grounds, not instrumentalizing the initiation of the critique of humanism by Nietzsche and Heidegger from an ideological point of view, but submitting it to a careful philosophical reflection (Derrida 2002; Agamben 2003). To consider these, we

are planning to take a closer look at the biopolitics of Foucault and Esposito as well, while completing a critical introduction of literary theory concerned with zoo- and biopoetics.

III. 2. Lyric

The second focus point of our research is in connection with the biopoetic contexts of lyric and the theory of lyric. The assumption of the ‘functional wholeness’ (Coseriu 1971: 184-185) in the language of poetry has to consider the question, what is the role of the experience provided by the corporeal-sensual operations of language in this respect. It is generally known, that these are present even in the theories of reception determining the later concepts of poetry following antiquity (Simon 2019). Which means, that while one of the strongest paradigms of lyric poetry, that is present between Romanticism until the theories of deconstruction, is determined by the fiction of the ‘voice-from-beyond-the-grave’, the forms or presuppositions of knowledge about the corporeal, or even biological vitality are equally significant, as far as the state of lyric poetry is concerned.

To make the quite wide concept of the ‘poetics of the body’ – that has been virulent over the past few decades in literary theory and, in Hungarian poetry – more concrete, at this point we have to highlight two directions. One of them could be the exploration of those non-discursive, or non-rational territories, without which the concept of modern poetry could not have come into being, and which are rarely missing from the descriptions of poetry’s origins, and from the modality of reception. In the center of these, there are the explorations aiming at the relations of the poetic language and the affects (and at the relating, multi-layered semantic domains: pathos, emotion, passion, sensibility, temper, experience, etc. – but in some versions of modern lyric poetry the negation of these domains belongs here as well): these made a contribution to different research programs promising serious results even in interdisciplinary relations in the last few decades (e.g. the program *Languages of Emotion* at FU, Berlin; Mészáros 2017).

The other, maybe even more emphatic direction could simply be determined by the question, in what ways did poetry contribute to the production of knowledge about (human or even non-human) life. What results can the biopoetical perspective provide concerning the language of poetry and its performance? From the perspective of such an exploration, even a simple – though so far mostly incomplete – inquiry about the history of motives can have considerable results. For example, regarding the question, how ‘life’ (not understood as an allegory, symbol or concept) is performed, in what relations can it become with the animal, vegetative or objective existence, or even with non-existence in pieces of 20-21st century Hungarian lyric poetry that can be examined from this point of view. From the motive of ‘Life’ by Endre Ady, through the insects, reed-grass, beautiful inhumanity, and hearts flapping and trembling outside the body in the poetry of Attila József, the travels in the ‘inner infinity’ by Lőrinc Szabó, and the trees by Ágnes Nemes Nagy until the different hybrids and cyborgs of contemporary poetry swarming on the horizon of the ‘posthuman’, and until the different versions of corporeal poetics from Zsuzsa Takács till Szilárd Borbély, we can mention many examples. This part of the research can rely on many immediate antecedents, mainly: Kulcsár Szabó, Ernő – Kulcsár-Szabó, Zoltán – Lénárt, Tamás (eds.). 2017; Kulcsár Szabó 2018; Kulcsár-Szabó 2018; Kabdebó et al. 2019.

III. 3. Prose

It is important to explore in the frame of the present project, what was the impact of life philosophies, connected even to the 19th century vitalism, marked by the names of Bergson, Nietzsche, and Dilthey, on prose writing around the turn of the 20th century. From this perspective, we could examine works that are rather different in character: e.g. the naturalism and psychological interest of Géza Csáth, the ‘Life’-concept of Dezső Szabó and its typical effects (e.g. the representation of the body and women, suggesting biological determinism); how the structures of meaning in *Úri muri* (*Very Merry*) or *Kivilágos kivirradtig* (*Till the Bright Daybreak*) are determined by the notion of vitality or how the notion of vital force is interpreted by Kosztolányi’s *Aranysárkány* (*Golden Dragon*).

In biopoetical investigations the notion of the body plays a crucial role. The present research could provide an overlook on the formation of literary discourses in connection with the body and corporeality in the 20-21st centuries and on its major intersections. We can mark out a possible context of interpreting the work of Péter Nádas from the point of view of Foucault’s notions of body, power and ideology: it would worth seeing the passages of *Párhuzamos Történetek* (*Parallel Stories*) focusing on the characters of von der Schuer and Professor Lehr summoning typical formations of eugenics and the biology of species. The question is tightly connected to the problematics of bio-power,

how force as a corporeal experience and as linguistic-rhetoric effect is presented by the texts of the chosen period. The romance-like, pseudo-mythical setting of *Fuharosok* and its narrated story of defloration are remarkably divergent; it can be explored what are the similarities and differences organizing the representation of collective and individual violence (the Russian soldiers and the husband) in *Asszony a fronton* (*Wartime Memoir*), or the interrelations of desire and aggression in the works of Attila Bartis.

As a part of the research, we have to touch upon the representations of illness in 20-21st century prose: this way the different figurations of uncontrollable tumours can be considered in Karinthy's *Utazás a koponyám körül* (*A Journey round my Skull*), or in Péter Esterházy's *Hasnyálmirigynapló* (*Pancreas-diary*) and in *Luther kutyái* (*Luther's Dogs*) by László Szilasi. *Sorstalanság* (*Fateless*) by Imre Kertész confronts with the radical experience, how the borders of the body and identity are disintegrated, where it can be examined, how the narrator reflects on becoming a „Muslim”, that is, on the processes of total physical and mental degradation. The interrelations of body and mind, control and loss of control can be a main aspect while interpreting works by Dezső Kosztolányi: we can think of the anthropological relations of crying and laughter in *Pacsirta* (*Skylark*), or we can mention the significance of mimicry and theatre in *Esti Kornél* (*Kornél Esti*).

The research of biopoetics should draw from the insights of contemporary animal studies as well, because readings focusing on the relations of the human and the animal can point at especially exciting interrelations as far as reception history is concerned. Here, we can examine many texts by Zsigmond Móricz, for example the emphatic animality of the characters in *Isten háta mögött* (*Behind God's Back*), the chain of motifs around the smelling of the main character in *Édes Anna* (*Anna Édes*), or the communication between the domestic animal and its owner presented in *Niki* by Tibor Déry. In Miklós Mészöly's *Pontos történetek útközben* (*Precise Stories on the Way*) the foreignness of animals, that can not be domesticated, foreshadows the inscrutable nature of death; in *Sinistra körzet* (*The Sinistra Zone*) mixing the names of human beings with animal names takes place, the most determining feature of which is the rhetorical operation mingling human and animal attributes. While eliminating, or at least questioning the difference between the two life-forms, these pieces of contemporary prose are evoking the ancient tradition of metamorphosis: besides Ádám Bodor, the short fiction of Edina Szvoren and *Hősöm tere* (*My Hero's Square*) by Lajos Parti Nagy can be examined from this perspective.

IV. Members of the Project

The main principle of the selection was to have a balance between members regarding the territories of literary history and literary theory. That is why we decided to hand in our application as a consortium. The Institute of Literary and Cultural Studies of University of Debrecen as the principal participant is one of the leading institutes in the fields of literary history and especially of the exploration of prose writing (besides that, we count on their contribution to the the other two topics of the research as well). The Institute of Literary and Cultural Studies of Eötvös University, as the associate participant of the consortium will primarily have tasks concerning theoretical questions and the history of lyric poetry. The principal investigator (Péter Szirák) is a scholar working on Hungarian literature of the 20th century; established scholars represent research in 20th century Hungarian literature (Csongor Lőrincz, Gábor Tamás Molnár, Péter Fodor, Péter L. Varga), and in theory (Attila Simon, Péter L. Varga, Péter Fodor). As for the younger members (PhD or MA): some of them are working on poetry (Gábor Mezei, Adrienn Pataky, Gergő Balogh, Levente Vigh), others on prose (Ágnes Balajthy, Gergő Balogh, Tamás Lénárt), and on theory (Levente Vigh, András Előd Énekes). In case of a successful application two researchers would share one research fellow position. One of them, Gábor Mezei would write a monography, in which he would work out in detail, how the access to natural or urban landscapes happens in 20-21st century Hungarian poetry, especially concerning the possibilities of describing the living and inanimate natural objects and creatures. Péter L. Varga would examine in his monography the mediation of the 'living', as such from the perspective of the theory and history of poetry, focusing on the (cultural) techniques, that make it altogether possible. Besides that, he would examine the effects of language's materiality in modern and postmodern Hungarian poetry together with contemporary theorists. It is our aim to provide opportunities for the younger members for conducting and discussing their research in international context by helping them attend international conferences and make research trips.

V. Summary

The focus of our research is the typological and historical analysis of biopoetics in 20-21st century Hungarian literature. It concentrates on three territories. The examination of the theoretical discourses around the concept of biopoetics, together with its historical backgrounds (with special regard to philosophy, critical theory and cultural studies). The formations of biopoetics in poetry and literary theory, and finally, the biopoetical connections in modern and postmodern narratives.

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