THE THESES OF THE PhD DISSERTATION

Lívia Érfalvy

**Language and textuality: the modes of
self-construction in the artistry of Dezső Kosztolányi**

Pázmány Péter Catholic University Faculty of Humanities
Doctoral School of Literary Studies
Modern Hungarian Literature and Literary Theory Program
Piliscsaba
2009

**Topic and Objectives**

In the field of Hungarian Literary Studies, the journal entitled *Nyugat* is presently regarded as the main forum and record of the birth of Hungarian Literary Modernism. The group of writers who belonged to the Nyugat circle outlined their artistic program as to struggle for the autonomy of art, recognize and define the distinctive and internal principles of artistry, and to create a unique literary language, which resulted in poetic paradigms that were realized through various poetical processes and in some cases considerably differed from one another regardless of their common goal. Through offering *a linguistic-poetic study* of some of Dezső Kosztolányi's texts I consider particularly significant and which at the same time also enter into dialogue with one another, my dissertation explores the main poetic features of Kosztolányi's oeuvre who is considered as a decisive author of literary modernism and due to his attitude to language also as a forerunner of the late-modern lyrical paradigm shift. Therefore I did not study the author's oeuvre within the framework of a classic monograph but rather through *the linguistic arrangement of particular texts* in order to explore his semantic universe in *a monograph on poetics* which offers a view on the whole oeuvre. The findings based on the experience of textual analysis show that in Kosztolányi's case regardless of the date of inception and genre of texts one can discuss certain *poetic principles that underlie the whole oeuvre*, which outlines a unique poetic universe.

One of the reasons behind this can be explained by Kosztolányi's theoretically grounded poetical thinking that significantly determines his artistic activity and creative methods as revealed by the interpretation of his texts. His approach on language and literature is based on a motivated view of language that derives from sensual impressions. The idea that linguistic signs are motivated means that the semantic memory of the word preserves its iconicity that in everyday use becomes transparent or conventional. Kosztolányi finds the core of poetic activity in *the renewal of the conventional relationship between the signifier and the signified* in other words the revival of the semantic memories preserved by the inner form of the word and thus the activation of the semantic potential carried by the historical meanings of the word. This approach to the linguistic sign regards the historical aspect of language as a substantial constituent of the word and devotes special attention to the acoustic nature of the word that revives its historical semanticity.

**Approach and method**

The approach to language and poetry described above determines certain methodological assumptions the first of which is that the interpretation of literary texts focuses on the acoustic correspondences, their semanticity and *the text generating force* of the inner forms they recall, in other words the interpretation also questions the acoustic and inner formal motivation of the meanings

that can be conveyed on the higher linguistic levels of the text. In the poem entitled *The Game*, the discursivity of the text arranges the game definitions that provide a thematic ground to the work into a coherent whole through the semantic feature of circularity (*körkörösség*) thus the acoustic form of the word mirror (*tükör*) and the activation of its semantic memory ('a certain round object') provides linguistic motivation for the emphasized circularity of the game in the poem. The reflective function of the mirror and the historical semanticity that the inner form of the word preserves engages the myth of Dionysus with the construction of meaning within the text similarly to the short story entitled *Miklóska* in which both the acoustic feature of the proper name and the meaning of its inner form, that is the ka-ak palindrome (*Miklóska* – **Ak**hillész) and the meanings of 'victor, dictator and tyrant of the people; the victory of the people' make the literary and mythological figure of Achilles an integral part of the generation of the text. Thus the poetic text can activate not only the historical semanticity of the words paramount in the construction of meaning but also all the mythologems, rituals, and motifs of oral and written works of literature that these words evoke.

Consequently, the literary text is well-structured even on the level of linguistic constituents smaller than words or in other words sound sequences that recall the inner form unlike in the everyday communication. The acoustic metaphorization created by the repetition of these sound sequences, in other words the semantic connection between the words with similar acoustic form, becomes

the main principle of text generation not only in the early writings of Kosztolányi but also in his later works as it is evident in the pieces like the poems *Game with my First Pair of Glasses* and *Kornél Esti's Song* as well as the short story *Eyelash* from the collection entitled *The Adventures of Kornél Esti*. The *Game with my First Pair of Glasses* presents the generation of the lyrical text as a process inseparable from the transformation of the initial object of the game that becomes metaphorized and invoked then its sound sequence *em / me* is anagrammatically "rearranged". The poetic act is to face death, which can be interpreted as experiencing and crossing the most radical existential threshold of the *self* with the help of writing or more precisely through *being transcribed into another world*. In the short story *Eyelash* (*Pilla*) the repetition of the sound sequence *illa*, which in the last paragraph arranges the lexemes *pilla, pillanat, rápillantok, villan, csillan, illan, pupilla* and *dies illa* in line, serves an active role in generating the metaphorization process of the text. Thus the repetition of the sound sequence jointed by apostrophe in the Cullerian sense (*Ó, dies illa. Ó ez a pilla…*) becomes the auto-poetic signifier of the poetic presence or the birth of poetic identity represented in formation. Therefore my dissertation describes the formation of poetic identity as a process inseparable from linguistic creation which is manifest even in the operation of linguistic constituents smaller than words and it draws attention to the natural connection between language and subjectivity, and language and artistry or in other words the linguistic conditioning of the *self* which is particularly emphasized in the theoretical writings of Kosztolányi.

Kosztolányi's views on art as they appear in his novels due to their auto-poetic nature also shed light upon the text generating role of rhythm. According to the 'ars poetica' that could be traced in *Nero*, the mission of art is to capture beauty, which can only be accomplished in the literary text through *defying strict conventions* and diverging from rules. The rhythm of Britannicus' 'poems' becomes artistic by individualizing the use of meter as opposed to Nero's poems in which applying the learned metrical rules forms the core of poetry. The practical realization of this poetic principle can be seen in the meter of the radically significant line of the poem *The Game* (*"s a nap – óri | ás aranypénz – / hirtelen ö | lembe roskad"*), in which the rhythm losing its beat due to rhythmic anomalies regains its musicality.

The interpretive strategy described above in accordance with Kosztolányi's views on literature as discussed in his essays considerably relies not only on language but also on the cooperative role of the interpreter as it understands the construction of meaning in art as a constant dialogue between the author, the work of art and the interpreter all of which mutually determine the others.

Each text selected for interpretation exposes *a series of questions regarding the self-identity of the subject* as they emerge in the unique and various forms of textual construction of subjectivity. In the short story *Miklóska*, the lack of reflection upon the main character's childhood deed leads to the crisis of the character's self-identity for which the only solution is to recall and recreate the past events. Therefore the recollection process, which is the prerequisite

to the self-understanding of the main character, presents the problem of the subject's identity and integrity as Miklóska's personal story. The narration describes the character's self-discovery as a progress from visual perception through verbal utterance to the metaphorical reshaping of the uttered word during which the impersonal narrator swaps its place with the main character who also acquires his narrative competence. Thus the generation of text as narrative also involves the birth of a *narrative subject* who finds his self-identity in the narrative function. A similar conclusion can be drawn from the interpretation of the short story entitled *Couching* as far as its Mikszáth pre-text and the intertextual rewriting of the poetic conventions that provide a background to the text also demonstrate the way in which a new narrative subjectivity is born in the text. A piece of the Kornél Esti corpus entitled *The Recovery of the Doctor* also raises the question of narrative identity as it narrator, Kornél Esti, becomes a clearly distinct narrative subject independent from the narrator of the frame story due to his use of language. Esti's linguistic behavior, characterized by repetition and focusing on the re-semantization of words and thus the reconstruction of linguistic conventions, turns the short story into auto-poetic text demonstrating the operation of poetic language. The following excerpt from the short story *Eyelash* (*Pilla*) offers an excellent example for Kornél Esti's narrative voice orientated to sayings, proverbs and set phrases: "If it knew the proverb *Go slow and you will get further* then it would perhaps get further but *it would go slower that is it would run behind*. Or if it knew the one *You'd better*

*hurry, you may be late* then it would not be late but it would definitely be ahead. Thank goodness, it is an absolutely ignorant but wonderful clock. So it *always perfectly goes round*. And as *some news went round* I decided to buy it. And it was worth is as my clock has never let me down." Referring to the clockwork, the proverb *Go slow and you will get further* recalls the original meaning of its verbal constituents which being a constituent of a set phrase in a proverb has already detached from the semantic field of *going* to a certain extent. Alluding to the ordinary mechanism of the clockwork, the text re-interprets the phrase *go slow* and adds a new semantic reference to the idea of *going* (*always perfectly goes round*). Bringing further meanings of the verb *go* into the semantic field of the text (as *some news went round* meaning 'a lot of people heard it and talked about it') the expression *go (round)* becomes interpreted as the demonstration of a semantic progress from the meaning of a particular spatial movement referred to by the previous forms of the word to its use in a figurative sense. The etymological pun of *go slow-go round-went round* demonstrates the fading away of the originally motivated nature of the phrase and at the same time the abstraction of the figurative sense of the word. The "poetic feature" of Kornél Esti's diction means that it recalls the semantic memory of words faded away in everyday use which is in this case the physical constituent in the semantic field of the word *go* or, in other words, it brings to light the 'hidden metaphors in words'.

In *Kornél Esti's Song, the problematization of the self-identity of the lyrical voice is analogous to the way the prose texts constitute*

*their narrator*. The poetic voice identifying itself as *I* emerges in the form of apostrophe in the first line of the poem but later on further voices appear in the text and seem to start a dialogue with each other, which may account for the distinction between the "song" (*ének*) referred to in the title and the "song" (*dal*) addressed in the poem. If we attribute the voice speaking in the seventh stanza to Kornél Esti from the title, the entire stanza becomes an "embedded song" he is singing. Consequently, the first person singular speaker of the poem enters into a dialogue with Kornél Esti.

The poem entitled *The Game* represents the early stage of the poetic oeuvre. By emphasizing the self-reflective nature of the gaming process described, it addresses the questions of *game and subjectivity*. The interpretation of the poem and the Nero-novel indicate that the *lyrical I* can only be born if the empirical-biographical author gives up his self-identity. The subject's attempt to interpret itself is always linked to a disclosure situation, a threshold of existential change, and does not necessarily lead to a self-understanding that derives from the experience of self-identification. Using the language of textual interpretation, it means that in the poem entitled *The Game* the attempt of the lyrical I to interpret himself cannot be reduced to the use of symbols. Rather, it is linked to the abundance tropes (like the child, the game, the mirror or the dream) that function as the signifiers of the disclosure situation or existential change. The poem displays the state of the child not as a *role* but rather as a *disclosure situation* of language which, in return, becomes the metaphor of the activity of the poet.

In Kosztolányi's novel, the artistic attitude Nero represents also exemplifies that artistic activity demands giving up the empirical self, which in Nero's case means abandoning his life as emperor or in a figurative sense it means his dissolution in the act of giving voice. In Nero's case the disintegration of the empirical-biographical self does not lead to the emergence of poetic subjectivity but on the contrary it results in an identity crisis. Therefore in the novel as opposed to the other texts we can see not the construction but rather the deconstruction of subjectivity. Even the textual transformation of its central trope, the metaphor-cluster of the words *levegő-lélegzet-lehelet-lélek*, articulates the impossibility of a poetic identity within the novel: at the beginning the trope appears as a metaphor of *creation* but later on it becomes the figurative expression of *domination* absolutely incompatible with creation.

Although the texts selected for interpretation can obviously represent only a portion of Kosztolányi's oeuvre, each one of them is a representative piece of a particular artistic period or collection yet mostly ignored by scholarly reception. The explicit auto-poetic features of the texts I studied and supported with ample arguments in the interpretations make them highly suitable for drawing general conclusions about Kosztolányi's poetic world based on the findings of textual analysis.

**Results**

The most significant achievements of the dissertation can be summarized as follows. The dissertation undertakes the study of Kosztolányi's use of language in his poems and prose alike. As previous researchers discussed his lyrical and prose works separately from one another, so far the synthesis of the conclusions drawn from the findings of a language-centered approach has not taken place or only partially has been attempted. The most illustrative example of this problem is the text corpus of *Kornél Esti* in which the figure of the main character connects both lyrical and prose texts. Kosztolányi scholarship has not attempted to present a parallel reading or a juxtaposed textual study of Esti poems and short stories even if both the lyrical and prose pieces are regarded central to the oeuvre. Therefore the dissertation does not focus on the difference between Kosztolányi's use of language in poetry and prose but rather on the *linguistic operation* that lies behind both of these different modes of diction, and also on the consequently *common features of textual arrangement*. This innovative approach to the oeuvre requires the 'genre' of *a monograph on poetics* that does not primarily present Kosztolányi's oeuvre within the context of contemporaneous literary or the author's biography but rather discusses his works in a linguistic-poetic study. As the methodological principles of textual analysis harmonize with Kosztolányi's theoretically founded poetical views, the approach relying on the historic aspect of language and the acoustic feature of words proves to be productive while interpreting both lyrical and prose texts. With the exception of the novel analyzed in the dissertation, it can be stated that there has not been any separate text-centered study written on the works I interpreted so my dissertation outlines a new canon of Kosztolányi's works slightly rearranging the focal points of earlier scholarship.

Since my research intentionally focuses on the exploration of the poetic universe of Kosztolányi's texts, it discusses only briefly the author's relation to modernity. The detailed study of Kosztolányi's works in the context of European literature or the legacy of the poetic tradition he represents in contemporary Hungarian literature falls beyond the scope of my dissertation, a short-coming which could promote a further research into extending its historical context. I believe that *the interpretation of the texts I present here could provide new grounds for such a research* since 'to become good literary historians, we must remember that what we usually call literary history has little or nothing to do with literature and that what we call literary interpretation – provided only it is good interpretation – is in fact literary history' (DE MAN, Paul. 'Literary History and Literary Modernity.' *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*. Minneapolis, Minneapolis UP, 1983. 142-165.) As my argumentation focuses closely on textual analysis, the results of my research could be valuable in both secondary and higher education.

**Publications Related to the Dissertation**

1. GYŐRFI Lívia: *A szubjektum önkeresése - Hős, elbeszélő és diszkurzív alany viszonya Kosztolányi Dezső* Miklóska *című novellájában.* In: *Tudományos diákköri dolgozatok.* (Pázmány Irodalmi Műhely - Opuscula Litteraria I.). Szerk. HARGITTAY Emil. Piliscsaba: PPKE BTK 2003. 97-122.

2. GYŐRFI Lívia: A *szubjektum önkeresése - Hős, elbeszélő és diszkurzív alany viszonya Kosztolányi Dezső* Miklóska *című novellájában.* In: *Szó - Elbeszélés - Metafora. Műelemzések a XX. századi magyar próza köréből.* Szerk. HORVÁTH Kornélia, SZITÁR Katalin. Budapest: Kijárat 2003. 99-123.

3. GYŐRFI Lívia: *A tükör által születő szubjektum. Kosztolányi Dezső* A játék *című verséről.* In: Alföld 2005/ 8. 88-101.

4. ÉRFALVY Lívia: *Az önértelmezés útjai. Kosztolányi Dezső:* A játék. In: *Vers-Ritmus-Szubjektum. Műértelmezések a XX. századi magyar líra köréből.* Szerk. HORVÁTH Kornélia, SZITÁR Katalin. Bp.: Kijárat 2006. 189-208.

5. ÉRFALVY Lívia: *A humor szerepe Kosztolányi prózájában.* In: Eruditio-Educatio 2007/ 3. 67-73.

6. ÉRFALVY Lívia: *Szövegváltozatok egy témára. (Kosztolányi Dezső:* Hályogműtét, *Mikszáth Kálmán:* A hályog-kovács*).* In: *Próza és poétika.* Szerk. HORVÁTH Kornélia. Piliscsaba: PPKE BTK 2009. (Accepted for publication)

7. ÉRFALVY Lívia: *Haláltudat és alkotás. A szubjektum egzisztenciális határhelyzete Kosztolányi Dezső* Játék első szemüvegemmel *című versében.* In: Mester és Tanítvány 2009. május. (Accepted for publication)

8. ÉRFALVY Lívia: *A motivált szójelentéstől a konvencionális megnevezésig. Kosztolányi Dezső és Friedrich Nietzsche nyelvelméletének analóg vonásai.* In: *Retorika - Literatúra - Poétika.* (Pázmány Irodalmi Műhely - Tanulmányok). Szerk. RADVÁNSZKY Anikó. Piliscsaba: PPKE BTK 2009. (Accepted for publication)

9. ÉRFALVY Lívia: *Ki beszél kihez? A lírai beszélő az* Esti Kornél éneké-*ben.* In: ???

10. ÉRFALVY Lívia: *Kosztolányi tanulmányok, kritikák.* (Az Országos Széchényi Könyvtár Magyar Elektronikus Könyvtárának kiadványa.) http://mek.oszk.hu/06500/06547/html/index.htm

The whole dissertation is available at the following website: www.erfalvy.hu