

# Narrative and Metaphorical Discourse in Biographical Essays

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*This paper analyses the relationship of the narrative and rhetorical formation of a body of biographical essays written by a single author, Kálmán Mikszáth (1847–1910). The literariness of some authors' writing is described through various tropes and some examples are analyzed from the viewpoint of implied ideology.*

Keywords: Hungarian literature / biographical essay / metaphor / Mikszáth Kálmán

Essays often have a storytelling aspect, and their narrative component can be traced back to very beginning of the genre tradition. Many of Montaigne's late essays began with self-biographical narratives to inspire philosophical discourse. The essay as a display of a personal worldview may make good use of the narration of a personal experience that can or cannot be generalized (Stierle 37). Douglas Hesse wrote an impressive paper on the differences between narrative essays and first-person short stories that can contain long commentaries on the events narrated. According to Hesse, there is a gray zone on the border of the two categories where the characteristics of the texts do not help taxonomy; readers must rely on paratextual markers offered by editors to decide if they want to regard a given text as a narrative essay or a short story (85). However, I am not interested in taxonomy or genre. I referred to the approaches above in order to emphasize how important an aspect the narrative can be in an essay, and that an essay is not necessarily pure thinking. What I discuss here is the relationship of narrative and discursive passages in essays. For this analysis, I have chosen a body of narrative (actually, biographical) essays composed by a single author as introductions for a series of books.

This prestigious series, *Magyar Regényírók Képes Kiadása* (Illustrated Library of Hungarian Novelists), was published between 1904 and 1912 and was designed to demonstrate the history of the Hungarian novel from its very beginnings to its contemporary achievements. The publisher employed the most important novelist available, Kálmán Mikszáth, to serve as the editor of the series and to compose biographical essays on every author included. The series contained sixty volumes, published in

five-volume batches twice a year. Mikszáth wrote twenty-eight introductory essays, which can be (and sometimes actually are) regarded as a sort of literary history: the history of the Hungarian novel. Here I am interested in the techniques of display rather than in the general story that the body of essays together might comprise.

On the one hand, such an essay on a novelist does have a storytelling aspect because it narrates his or her life history; on the other hand, it has some argumentative structures because it wants to persuade readers while discussing the characteristics of the given novelist's writing and evaluating his or her literary achievement. It is true of literary history in general that one may have the impression of a contrast between the relatively flat language of pure narration and the highly figurative language of evaluating or analyzing passages. If one regards an essay's evaluative or analyzing aspect as its basic function, it will appear as a kind of rhetorical discourse; in this case one may explain that contrast through the notion of traditional oratory (i.e., *narratio*), which is the name of a narrative passage inserted into the oration. In his early work *De Inventione*, Cicero differentiated between narrative inserts of ornamental purpose and the passages that narrate the case itself being deliberated or some events strongly connected to it.<sup>1</sup> In ornamental digressions of delight, an orator should make use of his entire rhetorical toolkit, whereas the other type of narration should fulfill three requirements: they should be brief, clear, and probable.<sup>2</sup> The last two requirements actually mean that nothing should be said that deviates from everyday strategies of cognition. The events should be narrated in a simple chronological order; motivation and narrative and causative patterns should be conventional. An orator, while he is narrating, should not attract any attention to himself or to his achievement, or rather to the linguistic mediation. Roman Jakobson called this aspect of linguistic communication the poetic function. The orator should make the impression that the events appear in a transparent narration exactly as they really happened, and only after such display of "events as they were" is he allowed to mobilize the whole weaponry of persuasion.

Quintilian's suggestions were slightly different. He recommended the middle style for narration.<sup>3</sup> In the rhetorical tradition, it seems the general attitude requires that an inserted narrative should be concise and inornate, and it is for pedagogical reasons that Quintilian raises an objection against plain inornateness. After all, the topic of his work is not how to speak, but how to teach people to speak. He describes excessive ornamentation as a poetic aberration that cannot fit in an orator's behavior.

Another explanation for the contrast between plain narrative and adorned analyzing passages might be offered by the opposition of the two general methods of cognition; namely, narrative and metaphor. The aspect

of time may be decisive for the shifts between them. The carrier of an author, which is a process developing in time, can be understood (i.e., organized into an apprehensible scheme) through narrative thinking, whereas the deictic gesture of metaphor (as a master trope representing figurative language in general) can describe a piece of literature non-temporally by giving it a name. Just as one can describe man as a cruel creature by calling him a wolf, or one can describe the poetic potential of words by calling them flowers, Mikszáth could describe the nature of Alajos Degré's novels by calling them *papier-mâché* palm trees.

The introductions can be characterized by an obvious contrast between narration of life history, which usually lacks rhetorical embellishment, and the highly figurative passages of description. The contrast is so sharp partly because as a belletrist Mikszáth avoided using the purely conceptual language of scholarship. As an example of his manner, I quote his reference to a novel, which is traditionally referred to as "the first Hungarian novel about society" in literary scholarship. Instead of applying this technical term, Mikszáth wrote: "the first Hungarian novel that bravely grasps the life of Hungarian society" (Mikszáth, *Tárcák* 522). The declaration is clearly based on a commonplace of literary history, but the formulation dissolves the terminology and invents surprising metaphors.

The introduction to the novels by Zsigmond Kemény (1814–1875), a political thinker and a major novelist that was most active during the 1850s, can clearly demonstrate the shift from the mostly non-figurative narrative of his life to the characterization of his writing, full of tropes. The biography contains the list of his novels and then a generalizing declaration about Kemény's activity as a novelist: "This man with a gigantic capacity for work wrote his novels as relaxation. Just like a tough warrior in the Middle Ages, when he had the opportunity to put down his heavy accoutrements and fight in some lighter ones, he thinks he is just lying about" (Mikszáth, "Kemény" vi).

This image implies that for Kemény journalism and belles-lettres are the same activity, but with different means. The implication, however, is too important to serve as occasional stylistic embellishment; it must have some consequences. In the first sentence of the next passage the simile returns in the form of a metaphor: "However, these lighter accoutrements were heavy too" (Mikszáth, "Kemény" vi)

The shift in the tenses indicates a shift from the present of the image back to the past of the main narrative; and this sentence does not tell us about the medieval warrior, but reveals the novelist. The metaphor also indicates a thematic shift from the author's life, the biographical background of literary production, to the texts themselves. However, the new

topic must be explained in a discursive manner: the paradox of the accoutrements that can be called both light and heavy needs an explanation. "The thorough knowledge of a philosophical mind with deep insight is displayed in his belletristic writing; the representation of historical ages and psychic processes compete with the most valuable European products in that genre" (Mikszáth, "Kemény" vi).

This laudation does not result in a high estimation of Kemény's literary achievement; what is praised here is the achievement of a thinker, immediately challenged by the shortcomings in literariness, narrative skills, and the requirements of genre conventions. "However, these novels are boring because he does not know how to narrate, his style is heavy and jolting, he makes long digressions, and the psychic explanations are extended to an eccentric amount" (Mikszáth, "Kemény" vi).

The description of Kemény's literary achievement is a discursive passage with accurate terminology. The tropes it makes use of can rightly be regarded as dead metaphors such as "deep insight" or "to compete." Only the expression "heavy and jolting style" might create a metaphorical meaning, partly because it retrospectively modifies the opening image of heavy accoutrements, which used to mean weighty intellectual content and now means ponderous style. Therefore, the vision of a heavy and jolting cart develops, which travels slowly towards its goal with long detours, which makes the entire journey boring. However, this image is no more than an option; and up to this point the passage instead solicits interpretations in a purely discursive manner. Nevertheless, the passage is to be finished with a summarizing conclusion in the figurative mode: "His works are colossi without form or proportions; he does not know how to build because he has too many bricks" (Mikszáth, "Kemény" vi).

When it comes to speaking about a given piece of literature, the dominant aspect is success, the public's reaction, which is the consequence of the discussion's embeddedness in the author's life story. Mikszáth rather frequently explains why a novel was successful in its own age, but every essay necessarily contains some kind of evaluation. Because the series was designed to be sold, it seems logical that the evaluations should have been laudations that compelled people to read the book. This requirement, however, which is related to the communicative situation or the topical speech act, is often countered by the intentional meaning of the utterance because Mikszáth does not seem to consider Hungarian novels to be particularly good. The genre of the introductory essay obliges him to say "this book is good and worth reading" whereas his own evaluative gesture suggests "this book is mediocre or bad." Mikszáth's essays make readers feel this evaluation too, but mostly through a modality that undermines

the declarations of praise. This tension, unusual in discursive genres but familiar in belletristic texts, might be explained through the trope of irony; the text declares something different from its suggestions. This tension solicits attention to the text's rhetorical formation. The textual strategies are governed by two contradictory purposes; on the one hand, by the purpose of persuasion (the reader of the introduction should buy and read the book), and on the other by the purpose of a literary evaluation that cannot always be in the positive. Such purposes usually require different rhetorical strategies, but in this case the same text must fulfill both. The problem does not appear in the passages narrating the life stories, which might contrast with the highly figurative mode of the descriptive ones.

In discussing Mikszáth's subverting metaphors, I do not intend to offer a complete typology of metaphors in his introductory essays or in his literary scholarship in general,<sup>4</sup> but I do want to mention that gastronomic metaphors are remarkably frequent. They can be connected with the viewpoint of success; that is, with the discussion of the public's customs of consumption. The essays very often refer to the taste, scent, or color of a literary text. Let me quote from the description of the success that the first historical novel by Miklós Jósika achieved: "It was phenomenal. A sweet read, full of honey. It made the eyelashes sticky like slumber" (Mikszáth, "Jósika" 603).

The image of a novel that pours sweet honey on the readers' eyelashes solicits another gastronomic metaphor: "Jósika imitated Walter Scott, no doubt. There was no originality in his writing, no taste. But who is looking for taste in the first strawberry of the spring?" (Mikszáth, *Tárcák* 603).

A metaphor of taste does not necessarily imply negative evaluation, not even in the dialectical manner of discussion that is obvious in the example above: *a strawberry – but without taste, or very early in the spring – but already a strawberry, or honey – but on the eyelashes*. The "colorful language" of Sándor Baksay is described as follows: "He produces as little as a noble tree, but the rare fruit that is produced has an inviting, moreover sublime taste" (Mikszáth, *Tárcák* vii).

The simile of the fruit tree concludes in the antithesis *few – but good*; such praise, however must be followed by new restrictions: "The composition of his writing is not creative, and the contents are a bit monotonous. Whereas others go abroad for themes, he does not even leave the circle of his parish; he has little imagination, but a strong talent for observation" (Mikszáth, *Tárcák* vii).

The figurative movements become slower, but they do not stop. The antithesis of *few – but good* is completed with an antithesis of *good – but monotonous*, which is explained by the image of the author's movement in space that is proved to be metaphorical by the notion of imagination; it is the

realm of imagination where one can go to collect themes. The literal declaration about the biographical author, who does not leave his parish but remains there keenly observing everything, is connected with metaphorical declarations about what one is possibly allowed to call the author function.

One of the few essays that is strongly characterized by figurative discourse from the very beginning to the end is written about Ferenc Herczeg, a rather problematic figure in Hungarian literary history. Herczeg's relation to Hungarian is displayed through a detailed prosopopoeia, which is introduced by a refusal of the commonplace metaphor of language as mother tongue. The mother/child relation is inappropriate in this case: "Oh this Herczeg! He destroys all our well-construed theories about the language that we should imbibe with our mother's milk" (Mikszáth, "Herczeg" vii). Because Herczeg's native language was German, this theory of metaphorical nature cannot explain his achievement in Hungarian writing. Therefore, prosopopoeia comes into play. Hungarian is represented as an attractive woman; and she is made to deliver a speech, which describes his relation to language with an erotic imagery. "For him she disclosed her veil, her honey, her secret beauties, her delightful forms, because she wanted to be more tender with him than to other foreigners, as though she said: 'Since you were such a fool, my dear son, as to become a Hungarian writer, although you could write in a world language too, I give myself to you completely.' And she gave. He penetrated all the secrets of Hungarian" (Mikszáth, "Herczeg" vii).

The address "my dear son," which brings back the refused image of "language as mother," gives the erotic scene a drastically oedipal air. One year later, Mikszáth offered a more explicitly erotic description of language in another introduction: "It might be useful to know several languages, but this has not been proven yet. Because the mother tongue is a real lover of those she has bewitched, and I think she takes off her clothes and shows her secret charms and sweet beauties only to those that kneel only before her and are not attracted by others" (Mikszáth, "Előszó" 385).

But I digress. After the penetration, one more sentence describes the result (i.e., Herczeg's style), and it offers an almost full catalogue of the metaphors on the topic: "His style is fresh and flexible, sometimes it is real music, and it has the scent of a Hungarian geranium" (Mikszáth, "Herczeg" vii).

Although the deep structure is based on an antithetical logic, it is "tamed" at the level of elocution by a peaceful attitude, which is willing to accept different aspects simultaneously. The figurative discourses of description and evaluation are also able to suggest contradictory qualities simultaneously. A contrast between the narrative discourse of process representation and the figurative discourse of evaluation might be character-

istic of literary history in general, but this creates an opportunity to display a highly personal view on literature. Mikszáth's own intellectual attitude can be characterized as a special sort of relativity, which is described by a major Hungarian literary historian as follows: "He did not want to answer the question 'what is man?'; his question was 'what is *not* man?' or 'what is man *too*?'" (Németh 209–212). I would rather say that his answer was that there is no exclusive answer; that man can be defined many ways. The metaphorical discourse, the figuratively tamed antithetical logic, is a useful method to display this "relativizing" attitude, to say and not to say something or to say something and suggest at the same time that it is not necessarily true, or rather that many other opinions can be also true about the given object. The language is a mother and a lover. It is impossible to tell what it means that a read is sweet as honey. Is it delightful or boring? No definite evaluation can be given about literature. The self-conscious leveling of contradictory aspects or values results in a unique discussion of literary history, a personal one, which is appropriate in the genre of essay.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Cicero suggests three types of *narratio*, but from the formal or linguistic viewpoint there is no difference between the narration of the case and the events connected with the case.

<sup>2</sup> 1.28.1: *brevis, aperta, probabilis*. The treatise *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, which was formerly also ascribed to Cicero, uses similar expressions: *brevis, dilucida, veri similis* (1.9.14).

<sup>3</sup> "The rhetorician therefore should begin with the historical narrative, whose force is in proportion to its truth. I will, however, postpone my demonstration of what I regard as the best method of narration till I come to deal with narration as required in the courts. In the meantime, it will be sufficient to urge that it should be neither dry nor jejune (for why spend so much labour over our studies if a bald and naked statement of fact is regarded as sufficiently expressive?); nor on the other hand must it be tortuous or revel in elaborate descriptions, such as those in which so many are led to indulge by a misguided imitation of poetic licence. Both these extremes are faults; but that which springs from poverty of wit is worse than that which is due to imaginative excess. For we cannot demand or expect a perfect style from boys. But there is greater promise in a certain luxuriance of mind, in ambitious effort and an ardour that leads at times to ideas bordering on the extravagant" (*Initium sit historica, tanto robustior quanto uerior. Sed narrandi quidem quae nobis optima ratio uideatur tum demonstrabimus cum de iudiciali parte dicemus: interim admonere illud sat est, ut sit ea neque arida prorsus atque ieiuna (nam quid opus erat tantum studiis laboris impendere si res nudas atque inornatas indicare satis uideretur?), neque rursus sinuosa et arcessitis descriptionibus, in quas plerique imitatione poeticae licentiae ducuntur, lasciuat. Vitium utrumque, peius tamen illud quod ex inopia quam quod ex copia uenit. Nam in pueris oratio perfecta nec exigi nec sperari potest: melior autem indoles laeta generosique conatus et uel plura iusto concipiens interim spiritus*) *Institutio oratio* 2.4.2–4; English translation by Harold Edgeworth Butler.

<sup>4</sup> For the dangers of such an enterprise see Derrida (28).

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## Narativni in metaforični diskurz v biografskih esejih

Ključne besede: biografski esej / literarna zgodovina / metafora / Mikszáth, Kálmán

Biografski esej je narativno in diskurzivno besedilo. Razprava obravnava razmerje med narativnimi in retoričnimi elementi v biografskih esejih, ki jih je napisal Kálmán Mikszáth (1847–1910) kot uvodne študije v zbirko knjig, ki je izhajala med letoma 1904 in 1912 ter vsebovala reprezentativni izbor madžarskih romanov v 60-ih zvezkih. Mikszáth je napisal kar 28 uvodnih esejev, za katere je značilno ostro nasprotje med preprosto pripovedjo in vmesnimi analitičnimi odlomki. To nasprotje si lahko razložimo s tradicijo klasične retorike (*narratio* mora biti preprosta) ali z različnimi metodami spoznavanja (narativizacija vs. metafora). Toda biografska predstavitev mora bralce tudi zabavati; če ni pripovedi, ki bi v njih vzbudila zanimanje, potem jim ponuja nekaj užitka vsaj nezaustavljiva lepota tropov.



Razprava analizira antitetične strukture Mikszáthovega literarnega vrednotenja, ki se včasih končajo s sintezo, pogosteje pa težijo k nekakšni ohlapnosti. Literarnost nekaterih avtorjevih esejev je opisana z različnimi tropi, in razprava – ki sicer ne ponuja izpopolnjene tipologije tropov v obravnavanih besedilih – se osredotoča na nekaj primerov, ki jih analizira s stališča nakazane ideologije. Dokaj pogoste so gastronomske metafore, skozi prozopopijo materne jezika pa se lahko včasih prikrade tudi erotična metaforika.

Maj 2010