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Narrative modality in Magda Szabó's Novel 'The Door'^{1*}

It is frequently opened, frequently read, yet it looks like the door to understanding Magda Szabó's novels that would help situate them in their (new) canonical places is still closed. In this study, I do not intend to move the canon, neither do I intend to analyse the cult-creating work of the novels, however I would like to open a road and a portal to the formations of interpretation which would offer potential explanations for the all-time (or at least for the contemporary) reader and possibly afford space for re- and self-interpretation as well.

Starting my work with the problematics of understanding and self-interpretation is not by accident: *The Door* is a novel of remembrance, self-analysis and a search for identity. The only unclear feature at the opening is the person in question, whose identity takes part in this strange journey in the narrative space. The narrator of the novel, the writer herself, is in constant search for an explanation of her past actions. She keeps finding excuses for herself, she might even be yearning for absolution, for she herself is unable to comprehend the happenings of the past: who Emerence was, why she did not know her, who really knew her, how can the relationship between the two be interpreted and what they came to be through each other. Since she cannot act otherwise, she reconstructs and construes the signs and through this process she incorporates them and forms a point of view in which she – naturally – is able to find answers to her questions: „Thus far I have lived my life with courage, and I hope to die that way, bravely and without lies. But for that to be, I must speak out. I killed Emerence. The fact that I was trying to save her rather than destroy her changes nothing.”² The narrator thus solves her biggest problem right at the beginning, in the first chapter – which is very unusually titled *The Door* like the novel – and she tries to dissolve the metaphor: „Once, just once in my life, not in the cerebral anaemia of sleep but in reality, a door did stand before me. That door opened. It was opened by someone who defended her solitude and impotent misery so fiercely that she would have kept that door shut though a flaming roof crackled over her head. I alone had the power to make her open that lock. In turning the key she put more trust in me than she ever did in God (...)”³

Our task would be far too simple if we just wandered through that open door and settled ourselves

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2 Magda Szabó: *The Door*. Translated by Len Rix, New York Rewiev Books classics, 2015. Online resource (e-book). 7.

3 Szabó: *The Door*. 6.

amongst the explanations that affect the interpretations influencing the direction of the reading process: we already suspect that we need to get further, we should find new understanding of what is written down, for if the story was that uncomplicated, we would not need continuous reinterpretation.

As I noted above, the novel is itself the process and need of resolving, phrasing and writing it is the way that brings us closer to the possible interpretations, since that is how the secret reveals itself step by step. This only comes true if the writer can constantly redefine the character of Emerence and if us, readers also get the opportunity to go all along the way ourselves and while searching for meaning we give a chance to the identities that they metamorphose constantly.

The basic frames – which define the ego of the narrator – are already dissolved in the second chapter titled *The Contract*: Emerence positions herself differently in the hierarchy, she does not define herself as a housekeeper, and this reversed hierarchy shows itself not only in relation to the writer but in connection with the neighbouring people as well. There is no indication as to why and from what previous events this complicated characteristic of her personality evolves and the writer is unable to settle this persona who rejects all intransigence and command in her life. Emerence is unrelenting, she cannot be hired, she decides whether she chooses and gives a family the honour of being their housekeeper (for a very expensive price that no one dares to refuse). This deviation from the norm will be the hotbed of controversy and the misinterpretation of signs will generate the evolution of the secrets, the leading metaphor of the novel.

The secret is present in the very first lines of the novel in which the ancient themes appearing in the dream offer an allegorical interpretation: the text uses ancient topics such as dreading being shut, the picture of a closed door: it is unknown what is hiding behind that, it evokes inherent fear and presumes a past that must be understood, must be unravelled to get to the solution and dissolution of the secret. Emerence's identity is built from secrets: the more the door is closed, the more formidable and invulnerable she appears, but small pieces of information escape now and then – either deliberately, or by accident – and this makes the firm but empty persona more and more blurred and she is replaced by a vivid creature, even if this process makes her like the hero of a ballad and the fiction becomes ballad-like with its literary devices: omission, suspense and the lyrical interpretation of the final tragedy. As Emerence gradually turns from unknowable and out-of-reach heroine into a tangible persona, the space of the novel becomes more and more unrealistic and the writer's initial statements are called into question.

One of the reasons of improbability is the narrative technique: everyone has different knowledge, every speaker understands Emerence differently, each of them creates a distinct face for her, that makes the narration comparative (just like in *Freskó*, Magda Szabó's novel). With this technique Magda Szabó creates a unique genre and the technique also helps us to determine the genre itself – on the one hand, its place among all Magda Szabó's works, on the other hand its space within the international world of

novels.

We can distinguish two categories in the works of Szabó: fictional and fictional-autobiographical writings. The former category includes *The Fawn*, *Freskó*, *Abigél*, *Pilátus* etc. while the latter encompasses *Régimódi történet*, *Ókút*, *Megmaradt Szobotkának* and *The Door*. The most distinctive difference between the two categories is that the fictional-autobiographical novels include realistic elements that – pointing beyond their meaning – become signs and they can be found in greater numbers (especially regarding their power of textual cohesion) in these novels than in her fictional writings. Szabó Magda's fictional novels also include realistic elements, but these appear to be less demonstrative in a fictional story.⁴ At the same time, the realistic elements turning into signs in the fictional-autobiographical novels create the imaginary sphere that works with a special set of rules, thus redefining the concept of reality.

We can find a difference and transition between the imaginary worlds as well when we compare the novels belonging to the two categories. While the realistic features of *Régimódi történet* are not always destined to point beyond their meaning, they stay within the realm of being simply referential, in *The Door* however we can find that the novel serves as a bridge between the above mentioned two categories: it is not deliberately autobiographical, but contains unique autobiographical elements from the writer's life (people, places, events) that can turn into reference points. However, referential features are erased here and now since the purpose is to redefine them in this new imaginary sphere. The narrator loses her name most of the time (the name Magdus is rarely present), she defines herself as the writer, the Mariska of her reality will become Emerence, the fictional places Nádori and Csabadul will turn into a countryside locality in the Great Plains of Hungary. This way, the game becomes bidirectional: the realistic elements turn into signs through entering the borders of categories multiple times and by this they also blur the layers of meaning connected to reality. At the same time, the autobiographical genre goes through a change in definition: autobiography here can only be fictional autobiography, existing within the walls of the imaginary sphere, the word 'fictional' becomes an attribute and we define the novel as a fictional autobiography. It already reflects on this autobiographical nature when the writer keeps redefining the past events for the sake of interpretation and understanding. Magda Szabó uses the process of fictionalizing in *Régimódi történet* as well. In the first chapter (*Kanna, hattyúkkal*) she creates the narrator and recreates memories: there is a persona, who forgets, and there is another who remembers.⁵ Only this way can a diffuse, constantly changing past and its definition come into existence, making the elements of reality more and more uncertain and symbolic. This is similar to Virginia Woolf's ambition: "If I were rewriting history".⁶ Fictional autobiography rewrites past and history too – the past that only exists within its narrative quality, therefore it is fictional and this is how the novel claims it of its

4 Wolfgang Iser: *A fikcionálás aktusai*. Translated by Katona Gergely. In: Thomka Beáta ed.: *Az irodalom elméletei IV*. Pécs, Jelenkor Kiadó, 1997. 51–84.

5 Szabó Magda: *Régimódi történet*. Budapest, Európa Könyvkiadó, 2006. 13.

6 Virginia Woolf: *Saját szoba*. Translated by Bécsy Ágnes. Budapest, Európa Könyvkiadó, 1986. 84.

own. Personal past this way becomes fiction at first and the story originating from it – due to the constant self-reflection and self-interpretation – becomes allegorical. A possible example for this allegorical reading could be the narration that appears in *Für Elise*, in which the narrator defines *The Moment* as an autobiographical work: „Even as a child I accepted the dissonance of the Creusa-episode with doubt (...) it had taken time, long decades to conceive the idea of my perfect autobiographical novel, the only one I felt genuine, my novel, *The Moment*.”⁷ If we intend to approach this fictional autobiography from the direction of different genres, in the case of *The Door* we need to give a rather wide space to it, so much so that we must step out of the world of the novel and to head towards other epic genres and we might even need to step through the borders of other literary forms. The novel can take up the features of epic poetry (through its intertextual and hypertextual references), although it does not contain the classic epic conventions, but apart from the pragmatic level of the story, it becomes cosmic and grandiose through its metaphors. Neither the setting, nor the characters’ roles in society lift the novel to its level of grandeur. The system of references on the allegorical level and the meanings of the rhetorical layer are the causes of this magnitude. On the textual level, the subject of tragedy is an organic part of the epic features since the crisis of the figure and personality of Emerence qualifies as a tragic Greek heroine. We face permanent, significant punishments and we cannot always find the nexus between cause and effect: Emerence often seems to be the plaything of gods and through this, her relationship with God becomes quite peculiar: she constantly denies his existence but she gives space in her system of belief to an afterlife.

Evoking the epic is not by chance: there are numerous mythological references in the text which have organizing roles within the textual and the semantic realm. The wandering Aeneas, representing divine wrath, or Medea who eats her own children are Greek references, this latter is like Emerence who has her past eaten up (the character of Évike who was invited to the feast) by Viola (the mythical animal) because of not attending the event.

The central metaphors of the novel are also present in mythology: the door (or gate) is an ancient theme, which in *Aeneid* is the metaphor of the gateway to life after the escape from Troy and at the same time, the forbidden city earns its secrecy and forbidden nature from the closed doors. The door hides the answers from the unworthy but simultaneously it incorporates the possibility of openness: as long as we cannot find the key to it, it can serve as a wall, but it is not a wall since it has got a way to open it up. The door keeps the intruders out but it affects the people on the inside: they are closed by it; they cannot keep in touch with the people stuck outside. We have already seen that the narrator’s fear is not to be unable to enter the door, but not being able to exit, being left alone inside without anyone knowing the secret of opening the door. If we look at the novel from this point of view, we might find a new meaning to Emerence’s character: it is possible that it is not the writer who is left outside the door, but it is Eme-

⁷ Szabó Magda: *Für Elise*. Budapest, Európa Könyvkiadó, 2002. 16.

rence who becomes more and more closed behind her own door, in her own inner world, her fears, her traumas. The others only assist, only a few gets close and no one gets the key: Emerence closes herself and makes herself the being that she fears of most.

In Emerence's world all is magnified, mythological like the notion of death: in her childhood her siblings not simply die, they become carcasses and her own death precedes her biological passing: she is alive, but she is not herself, she has been stripped of that stable frame that held her in within the walls of secrets. In this state she becomes one with her adopted cats, the life of which she could draft in advance and her death would mean their end too – by the hand of the writer. Emerence becomes the master of life and death here, a certain profane god but we are on mythological grounds for a reason: there is something grander than gods: it is fate that is unfathomable.

We get to know the story and Emerence's character through tales and relationships and this also employs the dynamic of the unfathomable. Everyone gives interpretations, not just the writer: people (and animals) that are in connection with the housekeeper as well, and the final picture is everything but unified. Like putting together the pieces of a puzzle a face and a voice emerges from the waves of the narration which is sometimes clearer, sometimes more blurred, either close or seems very remote.

Emerence's relationship with the writer's husband is superficial. She calls him the master, signifying that it is a man's world in which the man is the master of the house, ruler of all. At the same time, she instantly deconstructs this inherited value system: she accepts the master only on a traditional grammatical level, but the text rhetorically shows exactly the opposite: she treats him like a child, she brings him presents only a child would be happy to receive and most of the time she considers him powerless and incapable. However, besides the initial offensive and derogatory treatment there lies something positive, for she connects childhood with purity, naivety, honesty and the master himself will be the one who really understands the tragedy of Emerence and the sin of the writer and he is able to see through the chaos that resides after the death of the housekeeper.

The relationship between Emerence and the colonel also adds important aspects to Emerence's character. The colonel mediates between the woman and the prevailing authorities, he is a kind of conflict zone and he is very much needed to the existence of this unique world view. This patron can be the metaphor of freedom since he is the one who is able to act in the most unusual situations, keeping his dignity intact.

Emerence's friends (the three graces) represent three different types of interpretation and interaction. Polett defines their relationship with her through her suicide which Emerence helps to prepare. This suicide is the prefiguration of Emerence's own subsequent death and her set of ideas concerning the meaning of life and the necessity of death. Emerence thinks the time is right for Polett to go, the narration that ties her to life is no longer valid and she needs to leave. Emerence does not believe that our

worlds (hers or Polett's) could be changed. According to her, everything is predestined and determined and her identity is connected to this fixedness so changes to it result in damages done to her identity. She cannot and would not want to rebuild herself after the traumatic events and this makes her think that Polett has no further chance either, for she can interpret Polett's fate only through her own self, and not in the light of Polett's existence. Emerence is certain for herself and she interprets events in relation with this certainty.

Sutu is thought to be a traitor after Emerence's death, yet she is the one who understood and accepted her rules and patterns of behaviour. Adélka on the other hand could not comprehend it at all, she is the naivest of all the characters, she seems to be floating high above the events without reflecting on any of them, yet she gets Emerence's flat. What the neighbouring people see is that Sutú does not hesitate to make decision while Adélka waits patiently to see what happens next.

Emerence's strongest relationship is not with her friends or employers though, but with their dog, Viola, who represents the mythological animal and the prince charming in one: he is her true love, child, husband and saviour, the connection between childhood and adulthood. His name is heavy with allegory: he is a male dog named after the baby calf that was so important to the little girl Emerence and whose death was her fault (caused by her devotion) and she had to watch her die. Emerence's love towards the dog has both extremes: sometimes she is cruel, ready to punish him. Sometimes it seems that her role is like an ancient god's: she can do whatever she likes with her creatures. At times, she storms with rage, punishes the innocent (like when Évike cannot come to visit), but the other one loves her so much that he forgives her every time, follows her obediently.

There are contradictions in her relationship with the cats, too. She saves and adopts them but by doing so she deprives them from the chances of survival: in this closed world rules are different, they are not afraid of dogs, they are unaware of the dangers waiting outside. Emerence knows that too and she asks the writer to have them all put down when she dies.

These frameworks of relationships lead us to the question that has surfaced earlier: the unique belief system of Emerence. Hers is more the faith of the antiquity than of Christianity but the possibility of the afterlife has a place in it, because without that her existence would be beyond desperate. Even her most specific life goal connects her to death and afterlife: she wants to build a magic vault in which she can have all her relatives around her so they can stay together after death. For this puritan woman this aspect is not the only important feature in the vault. The building's pomp and grandeur are counterbalancing the circumstances of her closed, unchangeable state. Her character however is far from antique patterns, she is more like Martha in the Bible. As the writer reflects on it, Emerence is more Christian, even with her anti-church attitude than most of the people who dress up nicely for the Sunday mass (the story of the clothing donation reflects on that).

Emerence has swiftness and toughness in her that show her strength but at the same time there are hidden fears in her that appear when her closed world is threatened and she is desperate to keep it shut. Doors that are always closed make interpretation difficult for those who are outside, but the ones behind the door are also unsafe because there is the possibility of being stuck. Emerence hid her eccentricity and fear behind her first door: she kept everyone out, out of fear that her cats might be hurt, tried to protect them from death, but at the same time – as noted above – she chained them to herself and made their lives impossible. With Emerence's illness this system and order turns into chaos as the cats try to take care of their own needs but because of closeness this results in filth and disorder. The stillness and paralysis of Emerence is the cause of this, the dissolution of this order is the outcome behind the first door.

This sanctuary has not seen many visitors but the inner room guards more: the foundation-stone of Emerence's identity. Among the objects bequeathed to the writer stands a dusty but beautiful piece of furniture which is the symbol of gratitude and self-sacrifice, the memento of Emerence's greatest charitable act. Tragically, this had never become integral part of her life, she kept it hidden in secret like it was something shameful. She protects this good deed as the most sacred treasure. However, this treasure loses its value because of being closed and untouched: it had never been used so it vanished.

As the two doors give a frame to Emerence's life and existence, so do the two chapters (the first and the last), both titled *The Door* in the novel, making entering and exiting possible for us, overwriting the events on the pragmatic level of the novel. The second and the penultimate chapters give more vivid tones to this interpretation: first, we meet *The Contract* that binds us, sets the rules and frames for us on the road, and the penultimate chapter is titled *The Solution* that gives us a chance to release and exit. These two chapter titles evoke the prayer that can help us with the intertextuality and can locate the novel in a new genre: a single prayer told for Emerence from *The Funeral Oration*: „And we love St Peter who was given power to unlock and bind, to wipe out all her sins. And if we go further in the *Funeral Oration* we might find an answer how the autobiographical Mariska, the housekeeper becomes Emerence in the novel or we might get information what Emerence's character can implicate outside the text: „and we love the Saint Woman Mary.”

We have seen that one of the novel's aims and perhaps its stake is to be able to put a puzzle together from the small, scattered pieces of mirror glass which might result in a face that is sometimes „calm, unruffled, early morning mirror of water”⁸ (Szabó 2015), sometimes scattered, disposed to defacement – since an (auto)biography cannot do otherwise: due to constant freeze frame it defaces the face gradually, the face that we are trying to create in the game of recollection, so defacement can be an allegory of the process of interpretation itself.⁹

8 Szabó: *The Door*.

9 Paul de Man: *Az önéletrajz mint arcrongálás*. Translated by Fogarasi György. *Pompeji*, 1997/2–3. 93–107.

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