

Narrative Style and Gender Relations in the Creative Relationship of Miklós Mészöly and Alaine Polcz*

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Abstract: As a couple, Miklós Mészöly (1921-2001) and Alaine Polcz (1922-2007) have a special status in Hungarian literature. Mészöly is one of the most important figures of postwar Hungarian fiction. His wife, Polcz, became an author at the age of sixty-nine when her first book, a wartime memoir entitled *Asszony a fronton* [1991, 'One Woman in the War'] (Polcz 2005, 2002b), gained attention. Although she has been generally regarded only as an *írófeleség* ['a writer's wife'] (see Borgos 2007), by the turn of the century she eventually became more popular than her husband. This paper focuses on a novel by Mészöly, *Pontos történetek, útközben* [1970, 'Accurate Stories on the Road'], that was based on Polcz's tape recorded narration of her journeys mostly to Transylvania. My analysis poses two questions; the first regards the issues of style and narration, while the second examines the topic of gender. In other words, this approach to Mészöly's novel aims to grasp the characteristics of the narrative style of Mészöly by comparing his transcription to the text recorded on the tape made by Polcz. How was it possible for the husband to publish a novel exclusively under his own name from his wife's "raw material"?

Keywords: *Polcz Alaine, Miklós Mészöly, authorship, creative relationship, gender, writer's wife, woman writer, nouveau roman, Accurate Stories on the Road, Death of an Athlete, One Woman in the War*

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Mészöly, Polcz and *Pontos történetek, útközben* ['Accurate Stories on the Road']

Miklós Mészöly (1921-2002) is considered to be one of the most important postwar writers, often hailed as a pioneer of Hungarian postmodern fiction, as can be read in the *Oxford History of Hungarian Literature*: "[t]he leading author of modern Hungarian fiction is undoubtedly Miklós Mészöly" (Czigány 1984). From as early as the sixties and seventies his novels and short stories contained an abundance of unconventional and experimentalist forms of narration. His fictional oeuvre was a provocation of realism in an age when social realism was the official trend to follow. Additionally, a large part of the unusual narrative features in Mészöly's fiction was understood as being borrowed from foreign writers of adverse ideologies, such as Franz Kafka, Albert Camus, or the French *nouveau roman*. The accusation of being a follower of bourgeois authors that Hungarian Marxist criticism leveled at Mészöly tarnished the author's reputation, for which he was silenced for many years. Still his unique forms of narration (fragmented narrative structures, multiplied narration, impersonal narrator) made him an exemplary writer in the eyes of the subsequent generations. Almost all contemporary Hungarian writers who have gained international fame in the past decades (Péter Nádas, Péter Esterházy, and László Krasznahorkai) praise him as their master and acknowledge his influence on their work. (A good introduction to Mészöly's work can be found in Györffy's (2001) paper.)

While Mészöly is a key figure in Hungarian fiction whose work is widely analyzed and recognized critically, his wife, Elaine Polcz's (1922-2007) position in contemporary Hungarian culture was not equally strong. Published after the fall of the communist regime, her war memoir, *Asszony a fronton* (1991) [*One Woman in the War*, 2002] (Polcz 2005, 2002b) shattered the silence surrounding the mass violence committed against women by Soviet soldiers in World War II. Thanks to her autobiographic and semi-fictional works, memoirs, interviews, and even cookery books, Polcz has become popular during the past twenty-five years, yet the status of her critical recognition remains ambiguous. Although the numbers for sold copies are not published, Gábor Csordás, the former director of Jelenkor Editions (the couple's publisher at the time) stated during an open discussion held in Pécs, 2005, that publishing Mészöly provides prestige, while publishing Polcz provides income. To date, Polcz's popularity continues to grow. Csaba Károlyi, the literary critic and editor of Hungary's most read literary review, *Élet és irodalom* ['Life and Literature'], wrote that forty years ago no-one would have ever thought that Mészöly would be remembered as Elaine Polcz's husband (Károlyi 2019: 19). While this may be something of an exaggeration, Károlyi's estimation still furnishes a good illustration of the divergent tendencies exhibited in the reception of their work during the decade(s) following the couple's death.

Mészöly wrote his *Accurate Stories on the Road* (Mészöly 1977) using his wife's tape-recorded travel memoirs, the typed version of which is located in the Petőfi Irodalmi Múzeum ['Petőfi Museum of Literature'], Budapest. The typed manuscript of Polcz's sound-recorded report is the earliest known piece of a set of travel memoirs describing her journeys to Transylvania and rural Hungary from the early sixties to the late eighties. She recorded her oral accounts every time she had an opportunity to visit Romania and then gave the tapes to her husband for his use. Recorded in 1977, the second piece is a travel memoir, entitled *Karácsonyi utazás*, ['Christmas Travel'] (Polcz 2002) that Polcz published after the death of her husband. Although the text of this book was also originally meant to be material for Mészöly to work with, he left it unused and this material remained in his desk drawer throughout his lifetime. This circumstance is the reason why Polcz made the unusual decision to publish *Christmas Travel*

under her own name, yet still as a part of *her husband's* literary heritage. A third piece in this set of texts comprises Polcz's work, *Két utazás Erdélyben* ['Two Journeys in Transylvania'] (Polcz 2010). This text contains the stories of a visit to Ocna Sibiuli (Vízakna) and Cluj (Kolozsvár) during the months preceding the Romanian Revolution of 1989. *Two Journeys* was published after Polcz's death in 2010. To summarize, Mészöly only made use of the tapes that recorded his wife's early journeys, when he wrote *Accurate Stories* based on her account. Polcz's later tapes were published decades later in two books, without having been reworked by Mészöly and under her own name. The first (*Christmas Travel*) came out after the death of Mészöly, the second (*Two Journeys*) after the death of Polcz. To this already rich group of texts one can add the recently published letters Polcz wrote to Mészöly throughout her journeys (Mészöly and Polcz 2017).

The four books—Mészöly's novel, Polcz's two travel memoirs, and their *Correspondence*—can be seen as a densely interconnected transtextual system. The journeys told in the books occurred one after the other and roughly a decade apart, therefore their narration can easily be read as a series, even though their authors (Polcz/Mészöly) and genres (fiction/travel memoir/private letter) are different. The reader finds recurring characters and places just as the order for visiting the towns and cities from Polcz's youth is also repeated: first comes Vízakna, optionally followed by Sibiu (Szeben) then the road finally ends in Kolozsvár. Both Mészöly's novel and Polcz's travel memoirs are thick with detailed descriptions of long and tiresome journeys that include the experience of getting lost from time to time. The narrative includes reports regarding the conditions of everyday life in communist Romania (poverty, misery, unreliable public utilities and transport, food shortages, a lack of medicine or information, etc). The narrators (both Mészöly and Polcz's) sometimes fail to acknowledge their own family relations since it is hard for them to recognize those whom they have not seen for many years.

In *Accurate Stories* it is striking how often the text touches upon the subject of death. The female narrator visits mourning families, funeral feasts, cemeteries, lends an ear to lengthy complaints surrounding inheritance issues and is curious about the folklore of death. Since death has no such importance in other works by Mészöly, the topic's presence represents yet another a feature that makes *Accurate Stories* exceptional in his oeuvre. Mészöly reportedly had a strong aversion to the subject of death (Nádas 2017: 842), however Polcz, as a psychologist, was a pioneering expert in the field of thanatology (deathlore) in Hungary. Some of the observations in *Accurate Stories* that were made in connection to mourning rituals and customs in Transylvania even reappeared in her scholarly studies later as examples collected during fieldwork (Polcz 2001). The female narrator of the novel seems to share common features with Polcz's later autobiographic fictions. In her monograph on Mészöly, Beáta Thomka also notes that the narrator of the *Accurate Stories* is unambiguously different from that of others found in Mészöly's fiction (Thomka 1995: 118).

Accurate Stories can easily be interpreted as a part of Polcz's oeuvre as well. With this statement, I do not dispute the authorship of this work, I am merely attempting to demonstrate the breadth of the novel's intertextual range. The novel is part of a dual-authored group of texts and owes its poetical success to both the "raw material" (that is, the collected experiences, stories, detailed observations provided by Polcz) and the editing, stylistic rendering, linguistic and structural transformation performed by Mészöly. In 1970, it appeared as a book by Mészöly, with the following dedication: "For A., with my thanks for saving these stories" (Mészöly 1977: 5). (Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.)

The Making of *Accurate Stories on the Road*

A more detailed study would be necessary to provide an "accurate" comparison of Polcz's raw material with the final, published version of *Accurate Stories* in order to illustrate the differences between the two. An annotated edition of the original text and a mapping of the textual genesis from its first (feminine) step to its final (masculine) phase would be necessary to facilitate further study of the early development of Polcz's perspective. This endeavor could be seen as the starting point of someone who became a writer decades later while simultaneously (at the very least) making the sections that Mészöly rewrote and cut out from his wife's oral memoirs accessible to the public. Such a preliminary study and edition would prove an exceptional possibility for studying Mészöly's creative processes and linguistic choices since it would enable scholars to "abstract" the Mészöly element and detach his own stylistic addition from *Accurate Stories* by having at hand the "point zero" textual base from which he diverged. In lieu of such work, we may still venture some preliminary observations regarding the main differences between typed manuscript and the published novel.

Four textual processes seem to be essential to Mészöly's transcription: densification, fragmentation, reduction and extension. Beyond these, one could also add *insertion*, as in parts in the text of *Accurate Stories* that are Mészöly's own invention without precedent in Polcz's text, and *erasure*, parts that Mészöly left out from Polcz's original. Since these two types of modifications cannot be viewed as *transcriptions* of the original in the strictest sense, I will therefore not focus on them in this comparison of styles. The first paragraph of the novel contains only slight modifications of the original and therefore suits our aim of comparing the textual variants.

Polcz's version:

I'm sitting alone in the coupe, on my way to Kolozsvár. A woman enters; she is short, fiftyish, in a grey dress, wearing a kind of cape. Her head is uncovered, her grey hair ends in a tiny little bun down below, hanging nearly to the nape of her neck. Her eyes, either she's cross-eyed, something is wrong with her gaze. Perhaps it's her too strict glare? Since the other coupe is crowded, she wants to join me. She holds a purse in her hands that looks more like a grocery bag. She asks for my permission, yet she decides not to come, fearing the ticket inspector would penalize her (Typescript of Polcz's text in the Petőfi Literary Museum, Budapest).

[*Egyedül ülök a kupében, Kolozsvár felé utazva. Bejön egy asszony, alacsony, 50-60 közötti, szürke ruhában, valamilyen köpenyeg van rajta. A fején semmi, szürke haja parányi kicsi kontyba végződik hátul, majdnem a tarkóján. A szeme, vagy azért, mert bandzsit egy kicsit, valahogy nem egészen jó a pillantása. Esetleg túl keményen néz? Mivel zsúfoltan ülnek a túlsó kupében, át akar ülni hozzám. Kezében tart egy szatyorszerű retikült. Kérdezi, hogy szabad-e átjönnie, aztán úgy dönt, hogy mégsem jön, mert meg fogja büntetni a kalauz.]*

Mészöly's version:

I'm traveling home to Kolozsvár for All Soul's Day. I'm alone in the third-class coupe. A half red-painted, fifteen-watt bulb shines over the door. I dozed off for a while. I open my eyes. We are rushing through switches, the door begins to slide back and forth, then finally

opens completely. A short, fiftyish woman enters. Grey dress, dim cape. Head uncovered. Greyish hair shrunk into a bun, the size of a child's fist, almost at her nape. Something is wrong with her gaze, either because she's cross-eyed or she has a strict glare. The purse in her hands is more like a grocery bag (Mészöly 1977: 7).

[*Kolozsvárra utazom haza látogatóba, halottak napjára. Egyedül ülök a fapados kupéban. Az ajtó fölött félig pirosra festett, tizenötös körte világít. Már jó ideje bóbiskolok. Felnyitom a szememet. Váltókon robogunk át, az ajtó csuszkorálni kezd, végül teljesen kinyílik. Alacsony, ötven-hatvan év körüli asszony lép be a fülkébe. Szürke ruha, seszínű köpeny. A fején semmi. Őszes haja gyermekököllyi kontyba zsugorodik össze, majdnem a tarkóján. Valami hiba van a pillantásával, talán mert bandzsít, vagy mert túl keményen néz. Kezében szatyorszerű retikül.]*

The first process is densification. Although the paragraph cited from Polcz cannot be called either wordy or redundant, Mészöly was still able to shorten it. See for example the two sentences (of which the first is grammatically irregular) with eighteen words altogether in the original that became a thirteen-word sentence without any loss of meaning. "Her eyes, either she's cross-eyed, something is wrong with her gaze. Perhaps it's her too strict glare?" → "Something is wrong with her gaze, either because she's cross-eyed or she has a strict glare".

The second stylistic process regards fragmentation. The two versions of the first paragraph are almost the same in length (MM: 79 words; AP: 82 words in the Hungarian) but the original version has eight sentences, while the transcription has twelve. Natural narrative, if there is such a thing (Fludernik 2002), does not prefer short, staccato-like sentences. Of course this predilection may vary from language to language, but at least in Hungarian a story is usually not told thus: "The kids were playing football. Ginger was anxious. She unleashed herself and grabbed the ball. The ball became deflated." Instead, most people would probably speak like this: "When Ginger saw the kids playing football, she unleashed herself, grabbed the ball and pierced it immediately." This comparison shows that the linguistic puritanism, neutralism, objectivism, and the density of style for which Mészöly is famous in Hungarian criticism is—at least in this case—a result of reductive operations of free speech.

Mészöly's fragmentary style in *Accurate Stories* is close to the French *nouveau roman*.¹ By pulling apart sentences and blocking their continuity, he also breaks connections between the objects of the world depicted in the fiction. The mode of narration is so similar to Alain Robbe-Grillet's that we can apply Roland Barthes's interpretation of the French writer's 1954 book, *The Erasers*, to Mészöly's book. "The whole purpose of this author's work in fact is to confer upon an object it's 'being there' to keep it from being 'something'" (Barthes 1965: 14) [*"Tout l'art de l'auteur c'est de donner à l'objet un «être là» au lieu de lui ôter un «être quelque chose»"*]

¹ The longer Hungarian version of this paper discusses in detail how Mészöly's objective descriptive style—as well as Péter Nádas's experimental writing—approached in some respects the French *nouveau roman* in the 1970s. Both authors were blamed by official Hungarian Marxist critics for their extravagant narrative and stylistic choices despite the obvious differences underlying the formal similarities to French writers such as Robbe-Grillet (Szolláth 2018; see also Szentesi 2012).

(Barthes 1965: 14; Barthes 1954: 295). Instead of, "Dupont is going to have ham for dinner" Robbe-Grillet writes, "On the kitchen table there are three thin slices of ham spread out on a white plate" (Robbe-Grillet 1965: 22). This fragmentary descriptive style lacks the usual textual tools of narrative *insertion* (Bal 2009: 42) that make the descriptive "digressions" look self-evident and motivated in the line of storytelling. The *nouveau roman* way of description cuts off connections, such as the connection a thing has to its owner. Just as the three slices of ham found in Barthes' example had been "freed" from Dupont, in Mészöly's version the description of the woman's clothes are put in a separated sentence and detached grammatically from the person: "[The woman] in a grey dress, she wears a kind of cape." → "Grey dress, dim cape." Disconnection and fragmentation is a general rule in *Accurate Stories* that works on a higher textual level also. Mészöly cuts out most of the lines representing conventional beliefs and public opinion from Polcz's text that people use in everyday communication for situating and contextualizing their topic. Thus he reduces the cohesive force of associative logic, mental schemes, scripts and cognitive scenarios (Stockwell 2009: 76-89.).

The third textual process can be called reduction of the narrator's personality. Mészöly de-personalized the narrator of Polcz's text by minimizing the available information about her. Mészöly deleted almost all of the self-referential comments which would directly introduce her. It is very unusual for a first-person narrator who participates in the story he or she is narrating to remain unknown. Curiously, it is not until the eleventh page that the reader discovers the narrator's identity as a woman,² when we read that there is a bottle of eau de cologne and facial powder in her bag. *Accurate Stories*, just as the 1967 novel of Mészöly, *Az atléta halála* (Mészöly 2017) [*The Death of an Athlete*] (Mészöly 2012), provokes the reader's implicit expectation that in a novel written by a man the narrator should be male if otherwise not indicated. While we learn on the thirty-fifth page that the narrator's nickname is Libus, her real name remains obscured throughout the novel. While the narrator of Polcz's text expresses all the emotions anyone would feel on a journey like this, she is haunted by nostalgia, worried about her family in Transylvania, feels sorrow about seeing the mourning family and is glad to be meeting old friends again. In contrast to the first version, the narrator of *Accurate Stories* is not characterized by her feelings or reactions. In the novel, the entire emotional scale from happiness to anger is disabled, although the narrator finds herself in the same situations as in Polcz's version: she meets death, illness, aging, poverty, old friends, women with tragic fates, but the narrator remains a moderate, friendly stranger who listens to everyone without unmasking herself throughout the four hundred pages.

Friendly and empathetic—these are the epithets Hungarian literary critics use when they write about the mostly unknown narrator of *Accurate Stories*. The critics who praise the narrator's quiet sympathy for the people argue that her *caritas* and her solidarity proves that *Accurate Stories* has little in common with Alain Robbe-Grillet's famous anti-humanist criticism

² Since Hungarian, like other Uralic languages (e.g. Finnish, Estonian) is non-gendered in a grammatical sense, it is easy for a narrator of a Hungarian narrative to hide his/her gender. This feature of *Accurate Stories* is adaptable to English, but would be hard to adapt for example to a Romance language. See (Vasvári 2011) on this question.

and the French *nouveau roman* (Szentesi 2012: 338). As to how critics can praise the ethics of an admittedly only slightly known character/narrator, the answer is that although we actually do not know anything about the first-person narrator's past, life, profession, home and background in Hungary, her sense of perception and the way she sees things and listens to people is so extraordinary that it indirectly characterizes her. We do not know how she feels or what is on her mind, but we see how deeply interested she is in anything that comes across on her way; her capacity of attention is enthralling. This is why Mészöly's de-personalization of the narrator cannot be complete, a factor that brings us to the fourth textual modification.

The last textual practice is extension. The minimalization of what is known about the narrator's personality is supplemented with the maximalization of her perceptive ability. Although Polcz's "raw material" is already redolent with detail, Mészöly succeeded in deepening and elaborating the richness and accuracy of her descriptions. This can be demonstrated, for example, by comparing the episode that takes place at "Ószer," the Kolozsvár flea market. The film-like depiction of the town-sized fair of pennyworth objects and of the crowd of penniless people is a beneficiary play for the "accurate" descriptive style. However, in the paragraph quoted above there are also two, small differences that demonstrate the extension of perception and accuracy of description in Mészöly's version. These are the bulb over the door that is painted "half-red" and the bun of the lady that is not "tiny" or "little" but "shrunk into the size of a child's fist." The unexpected comparison helps the reader's cognition to imagine or visualize the detail and to make it memorable. In the novel's subsequent pages, we also learn that the lady's two shoelaces are different colors, that she is constantly but unconsciously crinkling a piece of paper in her hand, that her hand is missing a finger, and so on. Strangely enough, it is thanks to these detailed observations that the reader learns more about the occasional fellow travelers in the course of a few pages than about the narrator-protagonist during the entire novel. This is of course a good means of capturing the reader's curiosity in a novel that is not story-orientated. The relative de-personalization of the narrator which occurs by restricting her emotions and ideologies on the one hand while simultaneously extending her perceptive capacity on the other hand foreshadows the "camera-eye narrator" of Mészöly's 1976 novel, *Film*.

The Couple's Creative Relationship: The "Mészöly and Company" Model

Following the overview of the stylistic changes in Mészöly's texts, I will focus on the Mészöly and Polcz's working relationship in order to unravel the social and cultural context that surrounded the creation of their common book. The question under examination in this section is what gender-based conception of writing and artistic creation made the transition of authorship for *Accurate Stories* possible.

Polcz herself purposely prepared her travel memoirs for her husband and gave them to him as a present. She was proud that Mészöly made use of work; when the book was published, she was selflessly glad for the success of the book³ (Mészöly and Polcz 2017: 559–60). She later wrote that it had been her stories, but his property (Polcz 2002: 5). As far as Mészöly was

³ Although in another case —of which she complains about in the same letter—she was rightfully upset when the filmmakers left her name unmentioned at the premier of a film titled *Befejezetlenül*, ['Unfinished'] (1970) which she co-authored with director Judit Vas.

concerned, he accepted the "raw material" thankfully and dedicated the book to "A.", based upon which at least the insiders could gain some inkling of what may have lain in the background. Nor did he keep Polcz's role as a secret since he spoke about it to László Cs. Szabó, a famous Hungarian intellectual who was living in British exile at the time (Mészöly and Polcz 2017: 553). The couple also spoke about it to Miklós Béládi, literary historian in an interview that remained unpublished for a lengthy amount of time (Mészöly and Béládi 2018: 56). When confronted by the evidence of Polcz's substantial contribution to the novel, the present day reader may find the omission of Polcz's name from the cover of *Accurate Stories* unfair; during my research I could not find any indication made by anybody (including Polcz, Mészöly, their friends, literary critics) that any type of disagreement surrounded the choice of the author's name.

What conception of gender-roles did the couple have in mind (and circulated in their socio-cultural environment) that enabled a collaborated work to appear so naturally and self-evidently as the sole product of the male writer? How did authorship emerge in the story in which the wife's "raw material" turned into the husband's book? Before answering this question, we must first reconstruct how the couple interpreted their relationship, not as intimate partners, but as work partners in general (irrespective of the *Accurate Stories*) and how they viewed their uncommon case of both being authors. For this investigation, their collected letters of four decades of correspondence (Mészöly and Polcz 2017) is an indispensable source.

While reading the couple's correspondence, one can easily notice that their understanding of gender roles is contradictory. The contradiction does not necessarily lie between the views of the husband and the wife, but rather within their shared views. This phenomenon emerge even within letters written by the same person. They tried to understand their situation as an author couple, but their views regarding this matter were neither steady nor consistent. Their relationship changed a lot during the decades. For a long time Polcz was nothing more than an *írófeleség* ['writer's wife'], or at least she was known in the literary field as such, and only a few friends of the family knew about her work as a psychologist. She became a writer later, when she was sixty-nine years old, following the publication of her book, *One Woman at War*, in 1991. As Mihály Szegedy-Maszák, a leading literary critic at the time, described it, "Alaine became important when Mészöly was already declining" (Dér and Geröcs 2011).

The question of *writer's wives* as a typical gender role in the early twentieth-century emancipation of intellectual women was explored in Borgos's groundbreaking study twelve years ago (Borgos 2007). The case studies of her *Portraits of the Other* examined Aranka Böhm, Ilona Harnos and Sophie Török, wives of three of the most famous writers of Hungarian modernism (Frigyes Karinthy, Dezső Kosztolányi, Mihály Babits), that is, writers from the circle of the legendary literary review entitled *Nyugat* ['West']. In their times, gaining recognition for female intellectual and literary talent (all the three lived before the World War II) entailed a different set of possibilities compared to Polcz's time, who was at least two generations younger. It was not exceptional among Mészöly and Polcz's contemporaries for the female member of an author couple to receive more recognition. The Mészölys were close friends with the painter, Julia Vajda, and her sculptor husband, György Jakovits, as well as with Ágnes Nemes Nagy, one of the best known Hungarian poets of her time whose husband, Balázs Lengyel, was also a writer but of more modest fame. The Mészölys knew Magda Szabó and Tibor Szobotka, another writer couple in which the wife possessed a larger literary reputation. Mészöly had a good relation with his Polish translator, Grácia Kerényi, and expressed his devastating opinion concerning

Kerényi's husband, István Telegdi-Polgár, who was jealous of his wife's literary success (Mészöly and Polcz 2017: 358–59, 368).

The letters reveal that Mészöly and Polcz's views regarding male-female relationships was contradictory. They naturally believed that men and women are equal, but in some cases they held that the wife's opinion is subordinate to her husband's will. This contradiction was surely rooted in their pre-war education. Both Mészöly's family from the Transdanubian town of Szekszárd and Polcz's social environment in Transylvania conveyed a traditional, patriarchal model of marriage. This inherited model was of course in opposition to their new lifestyle as modern Budapest intellectuals. Borgos's interpretation of the role held by a "writer's wife" in pre-war Hungary can also be applied to their case as well: "The role of a writer's wife did not necessarily go along with transformation of a traditional male-female relationship and division of labor; moreover, traditional roles were instead preserved in the private sphere" (Borgos 2007: 120). As this study is not intended to be biographical in nature, I abstain from reconstructing the history of their marriage; nor do I wish to delve into the history of mentalities found in their early family lives. In a move that sets aside this couple's biographical background in favor of only focusing on their working relationship as was recorded in their correspondence, it can be concluded that Mészöly and Polcz conceived of their roles as partners in three different ways.

1. The Mészölys sometimes viewed themselves as a sort of Hungarian "Sartre and Beauvoir" or "Mr. and Mrs. Browning," that is a couple in which both members are equally talented. The names of Robert Browning and Elisabeth Barrett Browning appeared in an early letter from Mészöly to his wife in 1953 (Mészöly and Polcz 2017: 88) in which he details a discussion between himself and Rózsa Ignác (1909-1979), a popular pre-war actress and writer. Ignác referred to the Brownings as "the only example" she knew of an author-couple in which both the husband and wife were equally talented. A young husband at the time, Mészöly wished the same for his marriage. Examples of this view can be found later on, such as when he is writing to Polcz while in the midst of experiencing a writer's block. Mészöly resignedly accepts his failure as a writer, yet consoles himself with the hope that Alaine will still be a successful and famous psychologist (Mészöly and Polcz 2017: 306).

2. On the opposite end of the equality-subjection spectrum, we can find the roles of the "creative husband" and the "supporting wife." In this type of relationship, the wife's activities are entirely subjected to the creative work of the husband: "I cannot help it, but I have remorse, and life is emptier for me if you don't go on well with your work. This feeling is even worse than what I feel when I have troubles with my own work because I don't feel that my work is as important as yours" [*Nem tehetek róla, de ha nem írsz eleget, üresebb az élet, és lelkiismeret-furdalásom van. Rosszabb, mint az egészen sajátom, mivel a saját munkám nem tartom olyan értékesnek.*] (AP to MM, Oct. 1962, Mészöly and Polcz 2017: 299–300).

3. The third, and probably the most representative model of gender roles can be situated between the two poles relayed above and can best be described as the "Mészöly and company" model. In this model the wife also has an important creative role; although her function is not reduced to mere assistance, the husband is in charge and he makes the decisions concerning the main issues. In the first two decades of their marriage, Mészöly and Polcz wrote puppet plays and children's tales together and made adaptations of folktales. While some of these works appeared only under Mészöly's name, others were published under the names of the couple, although Polcz used a penname (Miklós Mészöly and Ilona Molnár). In these cases it is difficult or even impossible to decide how they cooperated. It must also be emphasized that these tales

and puppet theater pieces were written for the purpose of making a living. In the 1950s many of Hungary's politically banned, non-communist writers who had been prohibited from publication survived by publishing translations, theater and radio adaptations, or writing children's literature. Employed by a puppet theater in Budapest, Mészöly's career followed the same type of trajectory during this period (Kós 2002: 19). The work relation of the couple in those first decades of Hungarian communism seems to be that of a "family enterprise," even though this capitalist terminology sounds rather alien when referring to these times. It can, however, be supposed that the practice of common cooperation was established during these years since a large portion of their correspondence refers to the "management" of their family enterprise, including the discussion of deadlines for submitting works, dramaturgical and editing tasks, publication of tales in anthologies, royalties, payments that were still due, and so on. It is not surprising that the practice of sharing intellectual endeavors also occurred in the case of *Accurate Stories*, a more prestigious work that was conducted with greater artistic ambition compared to the works that had been written for money.

Writing requires different skills and abilities. In the following I will analyze how Mészöly and Polcz divided creative tasks amongst themselves. It is important to emphasize the fact that Polcz did not *write* her travel memoirs, but rather recorded them on tape. The underlying reason for her decision could be found in the couple's mutual belief that Alaine Polcz was not good at writing. First of all, she was considered a "bad writer" from the primary, banal aspect of her poor penmanship. Although she was an expert in graphology, she wrote with small and terribly formed letters that were either hard or even impossible to read. In his letters, Mészöly often begs her to write more slowly and legibly. Boglárka Nagy, the editor of the volume, *Correspondence* and expert of the couple's work also admits that Polcz's handwriting was impossible to decipher in certain cases (Mészöly and Polcz 2017: 5). Secondly, her skills in composition were also considered weak. Various sources record how Mészöly, who regularly edited and corrected her papers and professional articles, was often annoyed by her stylistic failures. As the Hungarian writer and close family friend, Péter Nádas recalls, "Her first sentences already made [Mészöly] sick. Alaine cannot write. They were fighting. My dear, I never said that I can write! Why can't you understand, for land's sake, that it is impossible to start a paper with such a sentence? That is not even a sentence! Miklós went mad seeing that Alaine could not write" [*Miklós*] már az első mondatok láttán dührohámot kapott. Alaine nem tud írni. Veszekedtek. Kincsem, én soha nem mondtam, hogy tudok írni. De miért nem érti meg végre, hogy ilyen mondattal nem lehet egy tanulmányt kezdeni. Ez nem mondat. Miklóst a felismerés, hogy Alaine nem tud írni, felbőszítette.] (Nádas 2017: 842). Nádas's memoirs reaffirm Polcz's own accounting: "Any time I wrote something, Miklós read it and ticked me off badly. A Hungarian writer's wife should not write such ugly sentences, he told me. Can't you feel its rhythm? I couldn't feel it. And my grammar. Then he explained to me something that I did not even understand. He scolded me until I cried and he got a headache, then he continued saying that it is horrible, how can you write like that? I was in despair, I went to bed; he stayed up all night and corrected my paper till morning" [*ahányszor írtam valamit, Miklós elolvasta, és iszonyatosan lehordott. Hogy egy magyar író felesége nem ír le ilyen mondatot. Hát nem érzed a mondat ritmusát? Nem éreztem. Meg a nyelvtan. És olyanokat mondott, amiket én nem is értettem. Szidott egészen addig, amíg el nem sírtam magam, neki megfájdult a feje, és akkor még mindig mondta, hogy hát borzasztó, hogy így írsz, rettenetes. El voltam keseredve, és lefeküdtem aludni, és reggelre kijavította.*] (Polcz and Szabó 1995: 34).

As is obviously apparent, in this relationship possessing a skill for writing was considered to be a masculine trait. The competence Polcz put into their mutual projects was deemed important, yet still not as important as the art of writing. While her high level of intuitive and perceptive ability was often acknowledged and held in esteem by Mészöly, the ranking of their skills evidently mirrors a very basic contrast of gendered abilities in which observation, perception, sensitivity and understanding stand on the opposite side from creativity, linguistic and artistic productivity. The skills that are deemed as feminine follow the standard patriarchal model of passive and receptive feminine subjectivity, while masculine skills are linked to activity. This opposition of gendered abilities is reinforced in some of the letters, such as in the following one written by Polcz to Mészöly: "I'm working hard on my paper and because of that I'm only dealing with the most urgent issues. Besides that, I'm collecting experiences for you. I don't have anything but my sight. I can never come up with anything by myself" [*Sokat dolgozom a tanulmányon, ez okból csak a legsürgősebbet intézem. Meg neked gyűjtök élményt. Mi egyebem van, minthogy látok? Soha semmit nem tudok kitalálni.*] (Mészöly and Polcz 2017: 186).

The dedication found in *Accurate Stories* was not the only instance of Mészöly thanking Polcz for her help in collecting "raw material" for him. Many of Mészöly's letters to Polcz certify that he was truly grateful to his wife. When she sent him some of the extraordinary sentences uttered by a psychiatric patient whom she she overheard at the clinic, Mészöly responded to her with the following: "The lines you quote from the patient are fearfully beautiful.... It comes to my mind from time to time that I'm worth nothing without your perceptive ability and without the data you collect every time. I'm nothing more than a shoemaker, who gets his fine piece of leather—and his job is nothing more than to beat it with the hammer. I'm just hammering, and that's all" [*Félelmetesen szép, amit idézel a betegtől.... Sokszor csakugyan azt hiszem már, hogy a te megfigyelő s adat-szolgáltató érzékenységed nélkül félelmelem vagyok. Mint egy cipész, akinek odaadják a jó bőrt – a többi már mesterség dolga. Kalapáljon. Kalapálok.*] (Mészöly and Polcz 2017: 214). In these lines, her ability to find the best raw material seems to be a more valuable contribution than his own mechanical craftsmanship of hammering the textual pieces into one piece. In terms of Mészöly's intertextual poetics, collected "raw materials," textual fragments, borrowings, and insertions are substantial parts of the final texts. From this point of view, one can suppose that the ranking of oppositional gender-roles was not always a simple, textbook case between Mészöly and Polcz.

The stereotype of writing as a skill that belongs to a masculine realm has its own history, as is best exemplified by Christa Bürger's analysis concerning Wilhelm von Humboldt's separation of male and female skills (active-productive vs. passive-receptive) and its impact on Goethe and Schiller's opinion in connection to the dilettantism of women writers (Bürger 1994). This opposition was indirectly reinforced by the reception of Mészöly's work, in which his writing was repeatedly praised as masculine. As the famous Hungarian author, László Márton, recalls in reference to his first juvenile experience of reading Mészöly, "Somehow the whole text, its point of view was radiantly and vigorously masculine. That was impressing" [*Valahogy az egész írás, láttatás módja sugárzóan és erőteljesen maszkulin volt. Ez imponált.*] (Márton 1991: 60). (The text in question happened to be a fragment from *Accurate Stories*.) It is not hard to find stereotypical critical opinions about Polcz's writing, too. Another writer and friend of the couple, Endre Kukorelly, stated in a literary discussion that was meant to be provocative and myth-busting, that Polcz was an "amateur" who "babbles" too much in her texts: "from time to

time she hits the mark, annoyingly, but mostly she is horrible and awful" [*hebrencs, álnaiv, amatőr...néha bosszantóan jó, általában borzalmas és pocskék*] (Frum 2009; O. Nagy 2009; Velkey 2009). Kukorelly's opinion cannot be called exceptional, even though it is rarely expressed on paper with such blunt words. One could easily reconstruct a whole gendered vocabulary by selecting excerpts from Hungarian critical texts discussing Mészöly and Polcz in order to demonstrate that masculine writing is considered to be rational, economical, taciturn, while feminine writing is seen as babbling, formless, fluid and impressionistic.

The stereotypical opposition of gendered writing is reflected critically in some of Mészöly's fiction. In his first novel, *Death of an Athlete* (Mészöly 2017: 2012), the female narrator, Hildi, writes sketches for her memoir of her dead lover and famous athlete, Bálint Óze. We learn from the story that she was asked by the communist state's Ministry of Sports to write a propagandistic book "for the youth" about Bálint. She fails to complete the task and the book she writes instead is the novel itself we are reading. Lacking the optimistic or heroic tone standardly employed in Stalinist times, her notes and memoirs are private and personal, and therefore brimming with the characteristics that are traditionally linked to women's writing: her writing is admittedly non-professional, the narration is voluble and impressionistic and she is disposed to question the credibility of her own memory. Although these adjectives are basic parts of the paternalistic vocabulary that modern Hungarian criticism used in reference to women writers (L'Homme 2007), these are still the characteristics that made Mészöly's novel exceptional at the time and earned it a long-lasting canonical position. Hildi turns out to be a pseudo-dilettante whose alleged feminine non-professionalism is evidently more authentic and modern than the socialist-realistic style favored by the patriarchal state. Non-professionalism, questionable referentiality, non-linear narration and vernacular language are the very features that were highly valued later in the decades of Hungarian postmodern fiction. In *Death of an Athlete*, traits of a stereotypical feminine narration are reinvented as an anti-realist, even oppositional narrative mode. *Death of an Athlete* therefore is a successful subversion of stereotypical binary code of male-female writing, since Hildi's personal, nonlinear discourse marked as "feminine narration" is represented as a more authentic form of narration compared to the social-realistic representation of Bálint Óze that the Ministry of Sports, a representative of the patriarchal and patriotic political will, would prefer.

Polcz as a Writer in Her Own Right

The "Mészöly and Co." type of working relationship described above implies that Polcz learned how to write from Mészöly. She improved both her ability to write as well as the primary skill of observation: "I was looking at everything with your eyes, too" [*Mindent néztem én a Te szemeddel is.*] (AP to MM, Mészöly and Polcz 2017: 131). Mészöly's answer was the following: "Please look at everything through both of our eyes!" [*Mindent nézz meg! Mind a kettőnk szemével!*] (MM to AP, Mészöly and Polcz 2017: 152). This little dialogue in their letters probably contains a double meaning. First, she is observing things to collect as "raw material" while en route to him and, secondly, she is also looking at things the way Mészöly would see them. Polcz meanwhile improved her writing as she strove to write more economically and "accurately," that is in a way that was more in keeping with Mészöly's manner. Two of her letters sent home from Transylvania actually are very close in style to the final *Accurate Stories*: a description of a vendor of melons (Mészöly and Polcz 2017: 128) and a second depiction of an abandoned mine (Mészöly and Polcz 2017: 348). These two fragments could have been included

in the novel even without Mészöly's editing. The latter probably was praised by Mészöly (his letter is missing and it is not reproduced in the *Correspondence*) but we can deduce his opinion from Polcz's reply: "I was amused that you are envious about my choice of words. How couldn't you notice that I learned this from you? Even the viewing of that mine! I was seeing at it as you want me to see it for You. But you don't notice that, of course. But it's normal. How weird it is, that I notice it when I re-read my lines" [*Azon is jól mulattam, hogy irigyled, hogy fogalmazok. Hát nem vetted észre, hogy ezt Tőled tanultam? De még a bánya látását is? Úgy láttam, ahogy Neked kell látnom. Persze nem veszed észre. Ami nem is olyan különös, inkább az a különös, hogy én olvasás után észreveszem.*] (PA to MM, Mészöly and Polcz 2017: 229).

Some fragments of Polcz's *Christmas Travel* also display signs of her attention to Mészöly's stylistic principles. Although the text of the aforementioned book was also prepared for her husband's usage, Mészöly did not utilize Polcz's raw materials after *Accurate Stories* and the typed manuscript remained in his desk drawer until Polcz decided to publish it after his death. In the volume's foreword, Polcz states that she worked on the text "the way Miklós used to, regarding the shortenings and clarifications" [*ahogy Miklós szokott, ami a rövidítést és a pontosítást illeti*] (Polcz 2002a: 8). The literary critic, Julia Sonnevend, was correct in saying that some pages (particularly pages 66-67) in Polcz's text approached her husband's style (Sonnevend 2002: 582). These pages prove that Polcz indeed learned from Mészöly, who in turn must have learned from Polcz, as can be seen in his creation of Hildi, the female narrator in *Death of an Athlete*. The lessons Polcz gleaned from Mészöly, however, are not necessarily connected to her evolution as an author. If Polcz had only followed Mészöly's instructions, she would have become a mere imitator of Mészöly, not an original writer. The imitation of Mészöly's style in *Christmas Travel* can be more rightfully interpreted as a part of her *Trauerarbeit* ['work of mourning']. For her, both finding the old manuscript and working on it after her husband's death represented the opportunity to recollect their past as well as their struggles and successes in writing and publishing. As Polcz mentioned in one of her other books, wearing a piece of clothing that had belonged to the deceased eased the pain for a few moments as she mourned (Polcz 2008: 14). Borrowing the style of the beloved dead probably had a similar effect in killing the pain.

The style of *One Woman at War*, Polcz's chef-d'oeuvre is a total contrast to the economical, accurate, minimalistic style that Mészöly preferred. First of all, this work consists of a confessional and autobiographic narrative, a choice of genre that already negates Mészöly's predilection for reserved, impersonal narration and nameless, unidentified narrators who hold back their emotions. Another basic difference between the couple's texts can be found in how they represented wartime trauma. Many of Mészöly's short stories contain traces of the traumatic experiences he had as a soldier and fugitive deserter during World War II. These traces demonstrate that war cannot be explained in its full disastrous nature and therefore remains essentially inexplicable. Mészöly's wartime experience can even be related to his dilemmas concerning the possibilities of realistic representation since wartime trauma can easily render memory questionable. His preference for non-linear narration can also be linked to this past since war is an event that breaks up time (Mészöly and Szigeti 1999: 47–55). In contrast to Mészöly's dilemmas, *One Woman at War* speaks about wartime trauma with embarrassing sincerity and by using plain words for events that are relayed in chronological order and with complete openness regarding the details of the uncountable times Polcz was raped by Soviet soldiers.

Polcz's war memoir broke silence about a tabooed memory. In most cases, Hungarian mothers and grandmothers did not talk to younger generations about "their shame" of being raped by soldiers. This silenced topic has only recently gained more attention, partially thanks to Márta Mészáros's 2017 film entitled *Aurora Borealis* and a monograph by Andrea Pető (2018). In connection to Polcz, Louise O. Vasvári analyzed both the issue of silence ("egy úrinő ilyenről nem beszél" ['the things a lady of class do not talk about ']) as well as the issue of writing about rape from a point of view of corporeal feminism (Vasvári 2010). To succeed at the enormous act of unveiling an obscured episode of Hungarian cultural memory, Polcz's memoir had to be trustworthy and authentic—and not only in the sense of historical factualness, but also on the level of narration and style. *One Woman at War* is meant to be a non-artistic and non-fictional autobiography that should use plain words and simple narration. The narrator renders herself authentic by showing herself as "one woman" among many, a woman who is not different in any sense from the reader, particularly not in the sense of being a writer: "I recorded on tape my book, entitled *One Woman at War*, with no other reason but to console one of my friends. I did not understand it as or consider it to be literature. Anybody can write a book about her life" [Asszony a fronton című könyvemet, mivel azt vigasztalásul mondtam magnóra valaki számára, nem éreztem, nem tartottam irodalomnak. Egy könyvet mindenki tud írni az életéről.] (Polcz 2012: 28).

This is how the "dilettante," non-professional, feminine writer's image is inscribed into the very logic of the narration of the book that in fact made Polcz into a successful author. Based on this logic, an "amateur" writer is more apt to tell a true story compared to a professional author who is a master of rhetoric and has all the necessary tools for transforming what is relayed as so-called "truth." As Philippe Lejeune expresses it, when writing is too artistic, it easily seems artificial and lacking in sincerity: "*Quand l'art se voit trop il paraît artificie; et l'artifice, dissimulation, ou comédie. Entre l'art et la « sincérité », le lecteur finit par croire qu'il y a antinomie*" [When art is too evident, it seems to be artificial while the artificial seems to be dissimulative or comic. The reader finally finds that there is opposition between art and 'truthfulness'] (Lejeune 1996: 189).

One Woman at War also marked Polcz's first manuscript that Mészöly did not read before its completion. It was instead the poet, Ágnes Nemes-Nagy, who encouraged Polcz to write her war story; Mészöly, however, also read it in one night after the manuscript was finished and left Polcz a nice letter of congratulations (Polcz and Szabéni 1995). Her first work that she wrote without his husband's guidance and supervision, the book that is essentially opposes all of Mészöly's stylistic principles can be viewed as the possible end of a long learning process and the starting point of an autonomous writer's career.

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