

## IMAGINATION AND BIOPOETICS IN THE WRITINGS OF ERVIN LÁZÁR

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### Abstract

*This study aims to explore the theoretical potential of the term "biopoetics" by analyzing the novels of the renowned Hungarian writer Ervin Lázár and applying this concept within the context of literary discourse. Ervin Lázár, a highly acclaimed Hungarian author known for his children's books, extended his literary repertoire beyond this genre. His narratives resonate with both young readers and adults. Throughout his career, he authored several novels. In his earlier works, he crafted traditional, realistic novels, but later, he developed a distinct narrative style where the entire natural world, including trees, plants, and objects, takes on a lifelike quality. His imaginative and allegorical stories are infused with elements of both realism and enchantment, and his organic world-building is characterized by a lyrical and rhythmic prose, often referred to as "lyrical prose." This article employs a biopoetical approach to analyze Ervin Lázár's unique "organic-lyrical" prose, highlighting his distinctive poetic style.*

### Keywords

*Ervin Lázár, biopoetics, ethnobiology, lyrical prose*

## INTRODUCTION

Today's scientific landscape is marked by increasing interdisciplinarity, multidisciplinary, and transdisciplinarity. It is clear that as the boundaries between previously isolated academic domains become less distinct, the notion of 'scientific closure' is continually eroding, leading to the emergence of scientifically significant research within the overlapping realms of various disciplines, which integrate multiple academic fields. Biopoetics is one such interdisciplinary field, situated at the confluence of exact sciences (both natural and social) and literary and cultural studies. In this study, I aim to delve into the biopoetic aspects present in the writings of Ervin Lázár. To begin, I will elucidate the elements that comprise the complexity and origins of this concept.

### Landscape Poetry and Landscape Philosophy

Biopoetics, naturally, has numerous literary and philosophical precursors, and parallel trends can be traced in the history of science. Beginning with the landscape poetry of the Romantic era, extending through travelogues and travel narratives, and reaching contemporary ecopoetics that grapples with the climate crisis, the depiction of landscapes and nature has

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been an integral component of poetic tradition. Simultaneously, there exists a longstanding tradition of natural philosophy, spanning from pre-Socratic philosophers to Romantic natural philosophers and culminating in modern ecocriticism [1]. The surge of environmental consciousness in the humanities over the past few decades has also sparked a heightened interest in landscapes and nature [2]. Beyond the spatial shift in literary and cultural studies, other academic fields and discourses have embraced the study of landscapes. This includes the emergence of new ecological aesthetics [3], environmental philosophy, and even perspectives such as posthumanism and the Anthropocene. These perspectives, in contrast to traditional anthropocentric hierarchies, offer novel approaches that reposition the human subject and aim to account for the heterogeneous phenomena of reality, critiquing humanist ideology and dismantling the dualism between culture and nature.

### **The Concept of Biopoetics: Literature Review**

The term "biopoetics" transcends disciplinary boundaries. Fields like biological cultural studies [4] and evolutionary and cognitive literary studies delve into the biological underpinnings and origins of cultural behaviors. They explore the biological foundations of cultural activities rather than attributing them solely to cultural determinants. According to this perspective, literary and artistic-aesthetic experiences are genetically encoded. However, in these viewpoints, literature often appears as a tool driven by biological imperatives. Bradley Bankston opposed the evolutionary psychological approach. The term "biopoetry" was introduced by Kac. As a bioart artist, Kac fashioned his creations by merging various biotechnological tools with living materials. He pioneered new genres such as *Space Poetry*, *Aromapoetry*, *Holopoetry*, *Biopoetry*, and *Digital Poetry* [5]. Kac's experimentation with poetry involves redefining language and poetry in relation to language itself and various non-textual media. He explores the word and its material environment, pushing the boundaries of traditional poetic expression.

### **Andreas Weber**

One prominent figure in the field of biopoetics is Andreas Weber, a renowned German scholar, philosopher, biologist, and writer. He holds degrees in Marine Biology and Cultural Studies and currently serves as a member of the staff at the Institute for Art, Culture, and Sustainability in Berlin. Weber introduces innovative concepts such as "enlivenment," "life-as-meaning," and "existential ecology," which contribute to a fresh understanding of life and ecosystems. His exploration of biopoetics extends to a broader theory of "conativity" and subjectivity. His biopoetic framework forms the foundation for what he terms "existential ecology." This approach aligns with the biosemiotic tradition, focusing on the communication of living organisms, and is in sync with the biosemiotic developments within the life sciences. Weber frequently references Uexküll [6], delving into the influence of Uexküll's semiotics on Cassirer's symbolic anthropology. Weber likens life to a poetic space, as articulated in his book's abstract: "All life takes place within one poetic space, shared among all beings and accessible through subjective sensory experiences" [7]. He introduces the novel term "Enlivenment," which contrasts with the Enlightenment paradigm and presents an entirely fresh perspective on ecosystems. It seeks to bridge the culture-nature dichotomy, replacing the previous Cartesian paradigm and prompting a reevaluation of the relationship between humans and nature. The Enlightenment's core categories—rational thought and empirical observation—are expanded to include the notions of embodiment and subjectivity. "Weber

provides us with a glimpse into a distinct scientific paradigm that is emerging, which he calls 'Enlivenment.' This paradigm reveals organisms as sentient, more-than-physical entities with subjective experiences and the capacity to generate meaning. Organisms embody significance and manifest a 'world-making' sensibility. Their subjectivity and sense of vitality are not incidental aspects of their evolutionary history but central to it. Weber views Enlivenment as an 'upgrade,' not a replacement, of the limited categories of Enlightenment thought. It offers a pathway to move beyond our modern metaphysical view of 'dead matter' and recognize the profoundly creative, poetic, and expressive processes inherent in all living organisms" [8].

### **Literary Studies in Hungary**

In recent decades, research in the field of contemporary literature and cultural studies in Hungary has been increasingly focused on the technological and media-technological aspects, as well as on life and nature within the organic world. In addition to literary theory, which contemplates the mediation of aesthetic experiences and metaphilology, investigating techniques of media culture, there is also a growing interest in the anthropocene/posthuman approach within literary studies. The anthropocene concept is closely tied to the exploration of the biopoetic dimension. The approach taken by literary and cultural studies differs somewhat from that of natural sciences. Life sciences' biopoetics interprets poetics through the lens of "bios," which means life, and thus examines the biological factors that shape aesthetic experiences. In contrast, literary studies aim to investigate life and concepts of life from the perspective of "poesis," which pertains to language. In other words, literary theory delves into how literary practice itself molds the concepts, emotions, and imagery associated with life. In Hungary, a conference was convened to explore the biopoetic aspects of 20th-21st century lyricism, resulting in the publication of a collection of papers [9]. It's worth noting that the term "biopoetics" is not limited to a specific genre; it can be applied to works beyond lyrics, including dramatic and epic literature.

### **Ervin Lázár**

In this paper, I aim to analyze the biopoetic elements present in Ervin Lázár's short stories. Ervin Lázár (1936–2006) stands out as a prominent figure in Hungarian children's literature, possessing a unique literary voice. While his recognition in Hungary traditionally categorized him primarily as a writer for children, it is important to emphasize that Ervin Lázár's literary contributions extend beyond children's literature; his impact on adult literature is equally significant. He has authored radio plays, seen numerous adaptations of his works, and witnessed translations into numerous languages. Examining Ervin Lázár's artistic output presents a dual challenge for researchers. The first challenge, as mentioned earlier, lies in the long-standing portrayal within the Hungarian literary canon, which pigeonholed him as a writer exclusively for children. The second challenge pertains to the conventional distinction between children's literature and adult literature. However, in the past decade, research has successfully dismantled these biases. Ervin Lázár's short stories intended for adults have become a subject of scholarly investigation, and both Hungarian and international literary efforts, as well as contemporary research on children's literature, have rightfully recognized and validated children's literature while asserting its autonomy. Ervin Lázár's work has been the subject of two monographs [10]. It's noteworthy that distinguishing Ervin Lázár's works purely in terms of audience reception is not straightforward, as most of his children's literature appeals to adult readers as well. The author himself refrained from hierarchizing his works or

classifying them strictly by target audience. Ervin Lázár's initial short story collections were explicitly rooted in realism (e.g., "*Csonkacsütörtök*" and "*Egy lapát szén Nellikének*"). However, in his later works, whether intended for adults or children, a distinct and enchanting narrative voice emerges, departing from the earlier realistic narrative style. This new 'fabulous' voice has been associated with fantastic or magical realism, sometimes referred to as Central European folk surrealism. In her study, Klára Ágnes Papp [11] explores how some Hungarian works categorized under magical realism can be placed within a longstanding tradition of anecdotal narrative. While this paragraph avoids delving into a theoretical discussion of the genre, it is clear that, alongside Ervin Lázár's unique narrative voice, rhetoric, and dialogic editing techniques, the biopoetic approach significantly contributes to the profound and intimate lyricism permeating his prose.

### **Ethnobiology**

Anna Varga [12] delves into Ervin Lázár's short stories through the lens of ethnobiology (it's worth noting that her analysis extends not only to Ervin Lázár but also to another Hungarian writer, Gyula Illyés). Anna Varga approaches Ervin Lázár's short stories from an ecological and biographical perspective, particularly focusing on the writings found in the volume "*Csil-lagmajor*." Her research contributes to the historical understanding of the landscape within a depopulated region, tracing the literary imprints left on this area and enriching her ethnobiological knowledge of the Plains (Puszta). Consequently, the portrayal of the rural world through literature simultaneously serves as a contemporary historical record. Hence, the depiction of the farming environment through the medium of literature can be interpreted as a representation of a contemporary historical document. In many instances, the trace or artifact discerned from the literary text becomes the sole testament to a wilderness area that has undergone profound transformation. Ethnobiology, in particular, is concerned with the intricate interplay between humans and the landscape. It involves exploring and documenting the traditions of landscape cultivation and the preservation of traditional ecological knowledge. In her analysis of Ervin Lázár's short stories, Anna Varga sought answers to a series of pivotal questions: "1. What did the landscape resemble? 2. What traditional ecological knowledge is conveyed? 3. Which specific species and habitats are mentioned by the authors? 4. What is the relationship between the people inhabiting these desolate lands and nature? 5. What farming and nature-related aspects of life can we glean from these narratives? 6. How and why did the wilderness and the surrounding landscape undergo transformation?" [13]. In this context, biology and literature play complementary roles in the study of landscape history. If biopoetics encompasses not only the thematic or motivational incorporation of nature (plants and animals) but also explores the biological influences on artistic creation, the ethnobiological approach aligns with this notion to a certain extent. It becomes evident that, in this case, the landscape also serves as a catalyst for creative psychology. An illustrative case is found in the collection of stories titled "*Lovak, kutyák, madarak/Horses, Dogs, Birds*" [14], which can be seen as a literary embodiment of ecological memory.

### **Poetics and Biology**

As previously mentioned, biopoetic inquiry comprises at least two complementary tendencies, which, while not contradictory, offer distinct perspectives. On one hand, there's an inclination that explores the biological underpinnings of aesthetic experiences, examining literary works

and literary activity through the lens of exact sciences. On the other hand, literary science seeks to understand how poetics molds our perceptions and conceptions of life and nature. This paper aligns with the latter approach by exploring how Ervin Lázár's prose extends the realm of existence beyond the human, creating a literary manifestation of the poetic biosphere underscored by Andreas Weber. In Andreas Weber's eco-aesthetic exploration, the poetic dimension of biology serves as the foundation for self-awareness and our comprehension of the world. In his *Biopoetics*, Weber refers to an 'inverse proportionality,' in that humanity is becoming more and more technically aware of life, while at the same time its sensitivity to biology and species is becoming more and more destructive. Weber summarizes the essence of biopoetics: "'Biopoetics' pursues the idea that we can comprehend living beings by virtue of the aliveness we share with them. We are alive, as are all organisms, and our existence follows the same principles that we intimately understand from within ourselves, as it is through them that we exist. These principles encompass heightened awareness, sensation, expressiveness, connection-through-mutual transformation. They are the creative principles that guide poetic experience—hence the term 'biopoetics'" [15]. The captivating lyricism of Ervin Lázár's epic world is also 'caused' by his organic, biopoetic approach, the participatory and compassionate presence of the whole living world, his animistic vision of objects and the inanimate, and the multiplicity of rhetorical figures that create and confirm it. So it is not simply that plants and animals are recurring elements and heroes of his stories, that is, it is not just a matter of using them motivically, or that nature is not simply a prop or a set, a mere background for the representation of spiritual-emotional events. In his short story "*Öt, hat, hét/Five, Six, Seven*" [16], the worlds of the city and the forest, culture and nature, the urban and the organic are sharply and plastically drawn in opposition. The sensual, expressive atmosphere of the text is provided by the sensory metaphors of sound, touch, color, and light. The world of the city and the forest are both drawn by the narrator through sound. Two worlds of sound are juxtaposed. Outside the city, in the forest, a dying flower awaits the narrator. At the flower's request, the narrator commands the Suns of the days of the week to the sky, and in the all-overwhelming brightness, in a surreal, apocalyptic vision, the world is broken down into atoms: the atoms (elementary particles) of plants and fish and all living things meet in this heat with the atoms of the de-anthropomorphized self. In Ervin Lázár's short stories, plastic images illustrate the dynamic movements of life stripped down to its biological essence. This elementary dynamism is brought to life by the means of poetics. An excellent example of the 'infiltration' of the environment and landscape can be found in the short story "*Rozmaring*" [17]. In this narrative, the childhood landscape—comprising trees, roads, hills—and even the objects themselves—buildings, tools, instruments—are personified entities that form the very essence of comfort and intimacy. These elements are the organic components of one's identity. However, Illés Ézsaiás, the protagonist, grapples with the realization that these elements are held together solely within the realm of memory, the imaginary space of nostalgia. The emblematic carrier, filter, and evocation of this experience is the rosemary, now relegated from the flower garden to mere words (as he couldn't find rosemary in his former home). In the short story "*A kalapba zárt lány/The Girl in the Hat*" [18], a girl, who had believed herself to be free and independent, encounters a hat on the street. The hat unambiguously claims to be hers, despite the girl's protests. It settles onto her head like a bird, and no matter how she struggles, she can't remove it. The hat continues to grow, entrapping the girl within its dark interior. Gradually, however, she discovers the presence of a brook in this confined space, and as the darkness dissipates, she glimpses weeds in the dim twilight. She finds herself in a neglected garden, which she slowly and gradually begins to cultivate. What was once a prison has transformed into a vibrant, natural

environment of intimacy and homeliness. This metamorphosis of the garden mirrors a metamorphosis of the soul—a process of initiation. In the story of "*A hétfejű tündér/Seven-Headed Fairy*" [19], it seems that the heads of the seven-headed fairy represent the sensuality of the world. When an ugly little boy, feeling that the fairy has turned him into the ugliest boy in the world, cuts off six of the fairy's heads, sounds, smells, colors, and natural beings disappear from the world. However, the one remaining head of the fairy, representing love, profoundly changes the boy, dissolving his self-destructive anger. He sees himself in the fairy's eyes and no longer perceives himself as ugly. In the parable of "*Vérengző Alfréd/Alfred the Bloodthirsty*" [20], people hide from the king who beheads everyone in trees, emerald green grass, sunbeams, and waters... This list could go on indefinitely. A comprehensive exploration of all the biopoetic aspects in Ervin Lázár's texts would require a substantial study. In Ervin Lázár's tales, short stories, and novels, nature pulsates with life. The beings within it are intricately interconnected, resonating with one another. Nature isn't a mechanically conceived entity pitted against culture, which, in an anthropocentric perspective, takes a subordinate role to humanity. Nor is it a mere decorative ornament within the narrative. The ideas of Andreas Weber exemplify this viewpoint: "In the enlivening perspective, nature isn't a causal-mechanical object but a relational network among subjects, each with individual interests in staying alive, growing, and unfolding. Enlivenment necessitates pushing biological thinking beyond the objectivist paradigm, similar to the shift in physics a century ago from Newtonian thinking. To move beyond the Newtonian approach to the biosphere—to acknowledge that we, as human observers, are as alive and expressive as other organisms and ecosystems we observe—requires recognizing a non-reductionist biology" [21].

## SUMMARY

This study delves into the biopoetic nuances within Ervin Lázár's writings. Rather than commencing with interpretations rooted in evolutionary psychology, which explain the reception of literary works and the emergence of aesthetic experiences through Darwinian theory, deriving normative aesthetics from cognitive structures, my approach centers on the biopoetics of literary studies. This perspective scrutinizes how the concepts of life and nature are conveyed through the medium of literature. To this end, I draw upon the eco-poetic concepts coined by biologist Andreas Weber (biopoetics, enlivenment), shedding light on the organic essence of Ervin Lázár's lyrical prose and his distinctive rhetorical style.

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