

## **A Book of Revelations (On Péter Nádas's *Own Death*)**

*Ferenc Nagy*

...and he heard unspeakable words,  
which it is not lawful for a man to utter.

(2Cor 12,4)

If you utter a word I will give you thirty blows;  
if you utter not a word, just the same, thirty blows on your head.

(Toku-san zen master)

Péter Nádas's<sup>1</sup> volume entitled *Own Death*<sup>2</sup>, which is structured around the author's experiences gained in the condition of clinical death, is unique in the field of the so called high literature. Of course, we could hardly find even one among the most important texts that would not strive to tackle the matter of death somehow or would not strive to tackle this very subject above all things. Nevertheless, the narrow-sense kins of the work in question fall beyond the boundaries of literature and thus beyond the domains of cognition which are legitimated as authentic and valuable in this field.

The volume consists of two parts. One is the narrative itself, telling us the story of the author's heart attack, which he suffered on 28<sup>th</sup> of April, 1993. The résumé leads the reader from the first and later more and more severe symptoms of the author's sickness through his lonely urban wandering and taking into hospital till the clinical death occurring there, and gives the detailed description of the experiences gained meanwhile, on the way to "over there". Parallel to the text, (mainly) on the left side of the volume, the author placed a photo series of 161 pictures which he took of the old wild-pear tree standing in the yard of his country house during his recovery. The photos follow the changes

of the tree and the light falling upon it from one summer to the next, mostly from the same camera position.

Particular parts of the narrative were included in a radio interview made with the author in 1997 (the interview was also broadcast in 1997, and it was published in a volume as well<sup>3</sup> in 2006). The oral report follows the plot of the later narrative for the most part, and some of its longer extracts are almost literally the same as their corresponding parts in the narrative. The narrative itself was first published in the Christmas issue of *Élet és irodalom* (the most important weekly of Hungarian literary public life) in 2001. This release did not contain any pictures. The work was published in a book format with photos in 2002 by the Steidl Publishers in Göttingen<sup>4</sup> (the author refers to this edition as a *photo album* in his biography<sup>5</sup>). In 2003, forty-two of the photos were also shown at an independent exhibition at the Mai Manó Gallery in Budapest (in his biography, the author mentions these photos as a photo series prepared *for* the text). The German edition was followed by the Hungarian in 2004 and later by the French, the Dutch, the Spanish and the English translations<sup>6</sup> (the biographical reference marks these ones as *albums*). The text was adapted to film in 2007<sup>7</sup>. The film also evokes the subject-matter of the pictures of the book, and it is narrated by the author himself employing the written text in its entirety.

The attempt to describe in-between existence is not only the subject-matter of the book, but the book itself is also a subject in between art forms waiting for attempts of description. The problematics of its approach is partly the consequence of its in-between position, whereas this position stems from the linguistic inapprehensibility of its subject. In the present study, focusing mainly on the text, I endeavour to outline the most important rhetorical problems of signification and interpretability and step forth towards the interpretation of the book. I am thinking about how the experience of inapprehensibility is represented in the text, how its problem gets repeated in the interpretation, and how this situation relates to the experience of the inapprehensibility of death in the referential world.

It is a well-known fact that medical practice has carried out numerous successful reanimations on patients being in the phase of death defined as clinical

one, and that death itself is more and more regarded as a process rather than a state. Even scientific research has been provided plentifully with the reports of reanimated patients for a long time. However, obviously, these reports cannot account for the secret, that is real death since they are linguistically inarticulatable and thus appear to be inaccessible for human comprehension. We do not possess structural analogy as a means of differentiation between the inapprehensibility of the ultimate secret and that of the experiences gained on the way towards Over There. (The situation cannot be improved by those approaches either that explain these reports by biochemical processes or by recalled prenatal memories, partly because they are neither trustfully justified nor generally accepted, and partly because they do not offer any fixed points for understanding the problematics of the linguistic inapprehensibility of the none the less actually encountered experiences.) Being adequate with regard to death is hopeless. So it is with regard to the reports at issue; especially coming across with them in the territory of literature.

The most bewildering peculiarity of *Own Death* is that in the most dense parts of the description, it relies on the denotative level of signification in a way that at the same time it constantly denies its very availability. Nevertheless, it makes it impossible for the interpreting mind to shift from this level. Although the work emphasizes its own literariness from the beginning, and it continuously makes us face its linguistic constructedness (more precisely, the inadequacy of it), we do not have such a (literary) point of view in which we could understand the metaphors of the near-death experiences as images, separating them from utterances meant to be literal, from the metaphors of other texts. The reference of the text in the dimension of literature is as novel as its formulation unique. Despite the fact that we have the above mentioned, similar reports at our disposal, and in the light of them, we might as well read the text rhetorically, it would not become interpretable primarily in its literariness, but in its authenticity. That is in the sense whether (or to what extent) it conforms to those case-studies that science—the par excellence fiction of fact finding—considers to be authentic (in this case, better to say, unquestionable).

It is not only the subject-matter of the text that is unnameable, but its most important textual peculiarity is also the fact that the approachability of its essence can only be realized according to the interpretative rules of orthodox

rhetorics as the decoding of the inherent meaning. In this case, concretely as the exegesis of the existing but inaccessible secret whose standard example is the reading of sacred texts. And it has nothing to do with whether we believe the author and in the authenticity and/or relevancy of his report or not. The gravity of meanings attracts and binds the interpretations to itself either purposefully or not. Therefore, as much as it is possible, I am approaching the text focusing not on, rather around its most meaningful parts and investigate the relation of its narration and plot as a first step.

The plot, even if the narration splits the time layers locally more times, follows the traditional beginning-middle-end division of three with death in its centre and duplicates in its beginning and end the theme of the “others” (beginning: alone among the “others” with the symptoms and the fear of death [11-147.]; middle: the doctors and the near-death experiences [151-257.]; end: among the “others” with the experience of death [261-271]). While the narration is based on the metonymical logic of succession, the plot is based on the—also traditional—metaphoric mirror structure of comprehension. The structure creates the impression of well-readability: the theme is the split of the causal chain captured in a mirror structure. The text thus could become interpretable in the (allegorical) structure of the narratives of initiation and/or travelling as the process of self-cognition, where the reidentification of the subject between its departure and return in a different form would imply the break-point (optical axis) beyond the visible territory and the transformational rules of meaning assignment.

Perhaps a similar interpretation of the story of comprehension could stand behind the (little bit bizarre) editorial decision which displayed the text in its mentioned first release, in the Christmas issue of the journal, broken by text boxes of shorter writings associated with the feast. The context—independently of the subject-matter of the text and the time of the plot, furthermore, of certain radical statements included in it (or perhaps just because of them)—makes the narrative appear as some kind of rewritten Ebenezer Scrooge story, where the narrator, due to the experience of seeing face to face, would get from A to B in the process of identification.

However, it is because of this very clear structure that the enigmatic reticence, moreover, emptiness by which the narrative describes the condition of the return becomes obvious, whereas it should rather reveal the differences, the process of becoming meaningful. The most important attributes of the narrating character before his death can be summarized by the following key-words: professionalism and a (mainly) professional contact with the outside world<sup>8</sup>; strongly reflected social relations viewed from a distance<sup>9</sup>; affection towards his wife<sup>10</sup>; consciousness, a distance from sensations<sup>11</sup>; the intensive, approaching fantasies of death<sup>12</sup>. The attributes represented after the clinical death are identical for the most part: isolation<sup>13</sup>; a strongly reflected following of social norms<sup>14</sup>; affection towards his wife<sup>15</sup>; consciousness, a distance from sensations<sup>16</sup>; the intensity of near-death experiences in fantasy<sup>17</sup>. Certainly, we can face a change: first, there is a total experience of unreality, a distance felt towards all the aspects of his previous existence, then there is an act of violence committed against himself by which he needed to recreate every relationship binding him to the world (271.). However, the fact that whether these recreated relationships differ in anything from the previous ones, that is whether the logic of their organization would change or not is not revealed. Although the theme of professionalism disappears, we do not get to know details about it. Although the subject-matter of the death fantasies changes, a change in the nature of the relation towards them (e.g. the thought of suicide<sup>18</sup>) is not mentioned.

The emerging comprehension is also problematic. After the fulfilled recognition (273-281.), the narrative ends with the intention of gifting the “large woman” (283.). The coat hanger was understood as the language of gestures spoken by the “large woman” during the hospital treatment, as the metonymical formation of the expression of sympathy. (155.). The reconsideration of the comprehension of this language of gestures as a gift would mean its posterior evidence, that is the token of thanks and gratitude told for the sympathy and care expressed by it formerly. Nevertheless, this would be completely symbolic if the gift was a single coat hanger, but, let us say, carved from cedar-wood. However, it is not a single coat hanger that is at issue here, but ten of “the best and the most expensive ones”. The ten coat hangers do not function as symbolic signs separately any more, while together they possess not merely a symbolic, but a functional aspect as well, so to speak, a forcedness to be used. However, in their

functionality, from the point of view of the hospital practice (that is being understood as a donation), they are ridiculously insignificant: not only counted by the ten, but even by the hundred (it is different though if they come from a joiner). On the other hand, although the direct addressee of the gift is the large woman, the speaker, despite the distinction, thinks of the recipients<sup>19</sup> in plural, as equal elements or members of the same domain. Consequently, the gift is undecidably kind and intimate or cynical and humiliating, showing the inverse of the ambivalent hospital situation of humiliation and relief, bondage and knowledge (107., 254.).

The changed (power) relation towards the omnipotent guards of knowledge concerning the body and death (i.e. towards doctors) marks at the end of the story that knowledge has been transferred to the side of the speaker. However, although this change of attribute gets manifested as a *theme*, its content (meaning) remains unknown for the reader in the mirror structure of the *narrative*. Ergo, he understands (it), we do not. This knowledge exceeds human knowledge; it is total; it shakes everything; however, for the reader, it only appears as a similarly totalized question or lack standing at the place of comprehension.

The text works against the possibility of meaning attribution also in its language, use of metaphors. It is worth having a closer look at the particular textual references in relation to their texture because they represent all the possible dimensions of the apprehensibility of the theme. To this extent, their (quasi-)fragmented nature is also emphatic. However, they are rather markers demonstrated and dropped as useless ones at the same time, or if they are more persistent ones, they are systematically unsettled. Among the references, we can find religion, mythology, medical scientific language and finally, even literature itself.

The tropes of the inevitable God and Christ are the strongest signifiers in the context of the text, thus the text lays special stress upon their impossibilization. During the near-death experiences, God gets denied in his existence twice (203., 221.). One of the critics of the text draws a smart parallel with the similar attestation of Yuri Gagarin, the hero of Soviet space travel, after

landing, when the gravity of the Earth made him go round it in his space capsule within 108 minutes<sup>20</sup>. Nevertheless, irony—besides all its obscurity—already means something; consequently, the text gets refined: first, God becomes the metaphor of power, then—directly after his second denial—he is assumed as a signified reconsidered in its existence (“His”). This time, that very light is mentioned as his most authentic simile which later on appears as the ultimate signified at the end of the sequence of experiences (221.). However, this ultimate signified is identified with the light filtering through the window of the maternity wards (281.). That is to say, the chaos is complete, demonstrative. The two God-anthropomorphizing curses of the “large woman” stand in contrast with the two fine maneuvers around the God-signifier as the only long-term chance of the pragmatic use of language<sup>21</sup>.

The Christ-signifier is a more complicated matter, thus the text escapes well in advance: the speaker does what is doubly undoable and looking back from over there, reads Christ’s stretched body onto his own (231.) in a way that the bodily is in advance placed to the context of an emphatically narcissistic sexuality. This context does not only emerge in the text at the moment of death as an accidental and no longer controllable reaction<sup>22</sup>, but also is represented as a fundamental disposition of the general human condition, which joins the body and the “others”, the body and death<sup>23</sup> and (in this particular case) the body of the dead speaker and that of the dead Christ. “The symbol of Christian culture is a naked male body with covered loins,” the author stresses in an interview<sup>24</sup> anatomizing the latent, sexuality-related organizing principles of culture. Ignoring the sacral meaning, which would even render blasphemy uninterpretable, we could only get to these latent connotations of culture from the sign if Christ’s body meant himself at all. However, the text precisely keeps its distance even from them. As the subject-matter of Mantegna’s pictorial *perspective*, the body of Christ is merely an arising *simile* of an optical enigma in *perspective* study.

Although mythology would not be short of matter concerning the theme, it is originally so distant that its meaning can be easily made inaccessible. The baying dogs of Cerberus (23., 29.) comport with the experience of clinical death, described as an unmarred, pristine state and characterised by euphoria and ecstasy, as much as a defibrillator does with the figure of Hades. Although the

linguistic obsession is obvious, the reflectedness of its voicing is none the worse. Calling upon Polymnia's aid is similar to this as well (169.). On the one hand, the invocation of the muse takes place derogatorily late, around the middle of the text. On the other, both her person and the mythological terrain the speaker hopes to get through "with common words" by the help of hers typically fall beyond the phraseology and reasonable interpretational domain of the common use of language. As finally, together with the invocation, the apostrophe itself as a figure of speech is primarily part of the elevated use of language. (In addition, the stylistic simplicity of the text is, to say the least, delusive.)

The medical technical language (mainly on pages 59., 105., 121.) gets revealed in the very contrast of the end, despite its all-embracing objective acuteness, as something uselessly inadequate and threatening too, because it is unable to reckon with its responsibility as an authoritative linguistic practice<sup>25</sup>.

However, in contrast with what is said above, the language of literature is undisturbed and operable. Although among the literary references, the Beckett quotation is quite a remarkable misreading, by distinguishing and replacing the meaning of "self" and "I", it is not indefensible<sup>26</sup>. The Rilke reference is coherent just the same way (129.), and while one provides help in the (local) wording of the relationship between body and self, the other does so concerning the problem of "[p]ure sensory perception". That is on the allegorical layer of the language about languages, the text tells us that in the approach of the theme, apart from literature, every other language is misleading and should be removed. And the text itself, apart from maintaining the local possibility of meaning attribution as the most important result of its literariness, demonstrates the cleaned, empty place of meaning at the centre of the semiotic structure.

In addition to the narration and the use of language, the same structure seems to be the most important peculiarity of the formal-typographical formation of the book, too. The journal publication of the narrative is airy, interrupted rhythmically by line-spaces. It is divided into one and two-sentence long paragraphs and units of a few paragraphs apart from some longer (generally the "the most meaningful") coherent descriptions. This text formation served as the means of representing a contemplative attitude to the slowly unfolding events

and the narrated issues. Furthermore, it made possible and emphatic the highlighting of utterances conceived in different perspectives (state of consciousness, time layer) and also their (contrastive, interpretational and temporal) relation to each other. This kind of text formation is fully comprehensible from a textual point of view.

Although the airy layout has also remained unchanged in the book, the rhythm and meaning-forming role of the divisions has radically changed. The line-spaces have disappeared without trace, and have been replaced for the most part by single sheets and photos placed on the verso. However, place is not identical with function: the sheets isolate originally cohering segments of the text or unite segments originally divided by a line-space. Even if a setting technological justification might emerge here as an explanation for particular cases (by no means everywhere), the phenomenon still remains perfectly alien from the semantic and rhetoric aspects of text formation. The division of the text also differs in the case of the segments not modified in their coherence: paragraphs are not marked by indentations in the book, but by a new line justified left, which merges with the text better. Compared to the size of the sheets, the extension of the texts (that is the length of the blank part of the sheet after a particular text segment) is arhythmic here. The textual logic of text formation thus falls into the background or rather becomes amalgamated with the formal specificity of the body of the book.

The effect of all these on reading is quite remarkable. On the one hand, they make the practical implementing of reading more difficult (more critics of the book consider it important to mention this experience of theirs); on the other, they prevent the unfolding of reading in the symbolic dimension as well. The beginning sentence of one of the short segments of the original text (of course not divided by a space-line) is an expressive example for that. There the sentence does not give any causes for a lengthy lingering over it either:

A cup of piping hot soup is left on the table. (51.)

The book presents the above sentence not only on a separate sheet, but on a platform held by three photos on both sides, which does not occur at any other points of the book. As a result of this, we are forced to linger over the sentence long and still just as the narrator is forced to sit motionless over the hot soup placed on the table for a long time:

For a long time I sat motionless over the hot soup at the white-clad table of the pub. (57.)

And as he does not understand what is happening to him in the text world, we too do not understand what is happening to us as readers in the scope of the book:

You don't understand what is happening, [...] (55.)

The narrator confirms the fact and legitimacy of our embarrassment by changing the focalization and even highlights it by addressing us personally. Since the book, forming this part of the text into a metafictional allegory, proves just the opposite of what makes the proving possible, that is "in the novel, there is no Julien Sorel, sunset, truth: there are sentences in the novel"<sup>27</sup>. Anyhow, we are in the soup with this sentence.

The relation of the particular text segments and the photos can also be described as a textual-like (readable) connection only with difficulty. Although the shift of the photo series towards allegorism is obvious, the individual photos do not become interpretable this way (or any other ways), in the light of their textual counterpart. (Rather in the whole context of the text, but might as well without it, just confer their independent exhibition mentioned in the introduction.) A good example for that is the comparison of the different translations. The number and position of the pictures are the same in every edition, however, at some places, as the division of the text changes, different segments of the text become their counterparts on the opposite sides. (An "enjambement" appears on one of the pages of one translation where it does not

in another one; certain paragraph boundaries become sheet boundaries in this or that translation, etc.) The relation of the text segments and the photos is not a close one.

However, the blank sheets found on fixed “pages” in every translation, namely on pages 8., 148., 260., 285. and 286., are closely linked to the text. These sheets follow the beginning and ending points of the three most important thematic units of the résumé: (the beginning of the narrative); rambling alone to the hospital; fallen into the doctors’ hands and death; home coming and the comprehension of the things experienced; (the end of the narrative). Being part of a text, a blank page, an empty space would be the usual, moreover, ideal field of reading it into a text, but all these sheets (apart from the one standing after the end of the text), on the one hand, are situated on the side of the pictures, on the other, their meaning is caesural, that is unequivocal since they sign a blank by a blank, a split by a split, the unrepresented by the unrepresented. (For that matter, these boundaries are also referred to by the text itself.) The blank sheets are closely linked to the written text, but it is not a textual relation, less textual than that of the pictures and the text. In accordance with this, the page number (the last sign of the functional relation between a book and a text) is also missing from them. However, they are not blank spaces out of the system since they are parts of the physical extension of the book consisting of sheets, and as such, they also form part of the page numbering, which reflects the number of the sheets. It is this aspect from which they finally become really essential: the previous distinction of the body of the book and the text is necessary so that their correspondence—happening through these parallel, blank places with identical meaning—can be stated rhetorically.

Criticism has given voice to its doubt more times with regard to the structure of the book, which is diametrically opposed to the innately spontaneous style of the text intending to be inornate. Although the stylistic tension is unquestionably present, it is also obvious that this is only one aspect of the tension; the opposition is systematic and stems from the inner, rhetoric essence of the theme. The textual rhythm falls into background or rather gets amalgamated with the material rhythm of the sheets. The role of the basic units of meaning formation (sentence, paragraph, text segment) is strongly relativized by the sheet uninterpretable both semantically and syntactically. The text, considered as the

territory of signification, and the body of the book, an irrelevant technical field concerning meaning assignment, become equal. Namely, the book and the text strive to form themselves into such a self-identical, closed body which is as inaccessible and closed for comprehension as the very subject-matter it “incorporates”. However, the example of the cup of soup at spotlight also indicates that it is not or primarily not some kind of encoded and decodable, matterful meaning which is at issue here.

The book follows the idea of the ultimate Book, which, being ultimate, refers only to itself: its reference is ever-lasting<sup>28</sup>, its meaning is empty, its form is undetachable. Its text reminds of such a cryptogram which does not have a deciphered, segmented reading decoded as a text; therefore, in the different editions, it can be taken into hand unreadable, only in its body, in a facsimile as much faithful as the circumstances allow it. This inaccessibility is not the consequence of the secret as topic, rather, it is the effect of a structural conception on every aspect of the book. This is the structural imprint of the textually apprehended secret itself. Or, to put it in other words, it is the presence of the secret fixed in the book by the reader during its reading into a text (which is theoretically based on shifts and replacements). The presence of the secret shows through the narrative, the language, the body of the book and the “meaning” as well.

The central, ultimate metaphor of the text is birth—one of the most conventional ones for the apprehension of death. However, the text does not understand it in the Beckettian sense, as a causal chain (or a one-way relation) heading into the end (or nowhere) without any sense, and neither as the metaphor of religion replacing death with life in rebirth. Although the text does not follow that scientific hypothesis in its entirety either which sees the vivification of the unconscious memory content of birth (i.e. the death of foetal life) in near-death experiences, it takes advantage of it much rather for the unification of these two border points or border processes by taking out life of the two: his death is his birth (225.), but it is he who gives birth to his own death (217.)<sup>29</sup>. It is in this (unfoldable and unrationalizable) central image where the pattern organizing

every aspect of the book, the self-referential, empty, inherent meaning, the secret becomes apprehensible finally in its “meaning”, too.

The secret is inapprehensible and undecodable. It is only its organizing force that can be experienced in the centre of the semiotic structure. The process of reading arrives at the point from where it has departed from, or rather at a point which it would have intended to avoid: reading gets stuck, the “interpretation” of the inaccessible meaning is the question of belief henceforth. What is really bewildering in *Own Death* is thus the fact that it does not merely force us to follow the practice of the reading of sacred texts in a literarily doubtful way as a consequence of the subject matter, but it is also capable of grasping and showing the place of its reference structurally and textually, which can be accessed by meanings only in banalities.

<sup>1</sup> Péter Nádas (1942-) is one of the most outstanding authors of Hungarian contemporary literature. He started his career as a photographer, and since 1969, he has been making a living exclusively out of his writings. They focus on the relation of the individual and power, the connections of history and personal fate, and on the bodily determinedness of personality. Criticism approaches the interpretation of his works mainly from the direction of Thomas Mann’s, Genet’s, Musil’s, Joyce’s and Proust’s literary heritage. His most important works translated to English are the following (it is the year of the first publishing that appears after the English title between brackets): *A Book of Memories* (1986), *Ivan Sanders and Imre Goldstein* trans. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997). *The End of a Family Story* (1977), Imre Goldstein trans. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998). *A Lovely Tale of Photography*, Imre Goldstein trans. (Prague: Twisted Spoon Press, 1999). *Love*, Imre Goldstein trans. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000). *Fire and Knowledge*, Imre Goldstein trans. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007). His three-volume novel flow, entitled *Párhuzamos történetek* (*Parallel Stories*), which was published in 2005 (Pécs: Jelenkor) and has meant the biggest challenge for criticism, is under English translation at the moment at the Farrar, Straus and Giroux Publishing House.

<sup>2</sup> Péter Nádas, *Own Death*, Janos Salamon trans. (Göttingen: Steidl Publishers, 2006). Henceforth, I am referring to the page numbers of this edition.

<sup>3</sup> Zsófia Mihancsik, *Nincs mennyezet, nincs földem – Beszélgetés Nádas Péterrel* (Pécs: Jelenkor Kiadó, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> Péter Nádas, *Der eigene Tod*, Heinrich Eisterer trans. (Göttingen: Steidl Verlag, 2002).

<sup>5</sup> The text of the biography I am referring to can be found in Péter Balassa's study collection entitled *Mindnyájan benne vagyunk – Nádas Péter műveiről* (Budapest: Balassi Kiadó, 2007), 545.

<sup>6</sup> Hungarian edition: Péter Nádas, *Saját halál* (Pécs: Jelenkor Kiadó, 2004). French: *La mort seul à seul*, Marc Martin trans. (Paris: L'esprit des pénisules, 2004). Dutch: *De eigen dood*, Rob Visser trans. (Amsterdam: Van Genneep, 2004). Spanish: *La propia muerte*, Adan Kovacsics trans. (Barcelona: Galaxia Gutenberg, 2006).

<sup>7</sup> Péter Forgács dir., *Saját halál*, Duna Televízió Zrt., 2007. The film won the first prize of the Experimental Film category at the Budapest Film Festival in 2008.

<sup>8</sup> Meeting at the confectionary on business (19.); further, non-detailed programs (31.); contact with the publisher (27.) and the motif of galley proofs (29., 62-63., 89., 175.).

<sup>9</sup> "All the while, I of course played my life role [...]" (19.); "Or is he not sweating, he asks, because he is once more repulsed by everything and everybody." (31.); an ascetic lifestyle (41.); "I sat here in the ice-cold failure of my upbringing." (65.); the theme of the "others" e.g.: "Before my death, in deference to others, I wanted to wash off the sweat of death." (83.)

<sup>10</sup> "This became most important now, along with correcting the galley proofs. How could I spare her?" (175.)

<sup>11</sup> From the fear of death: "I [...] saw it was the body's fear, not mine, [...]" (37.); from the scorching pain: "A double vision that comes almost inevitably with my profession often impaired my sense of reality, and so I had to be on guard against my own perceptions." (93.); from life-danger: "[...] what had

struck her was how dangerously calm I appeared.” (105.); from the shock of reanimation, still under its physical effects: “[...] this much consciousness was a bit too much for him.” (257.)

<sup>12</sup> “There was not a day when I didn’t imagine my violent death: I was killed or I killed myself [...]” (39.); “I would have no objection to a sudden death by heart attack [...]” (89.)

<sup>13</sup> “[...] I was not here.” (267.) “For a long time I didn’t dare leave the house [...].” (283.)

<sup>14</sup> “I tried to do everything to their satisfaction [...].” (267.); “One knows what to do to be accepted by others [...].” (271.)

<sup>15</sup> Although “[f]rom the time one is brought back forcibly, one has nothing to do with anything. Not with objects, with other beings, [...] with anything.” (267.), there is the skyey presence of his wife in the list of the few remained links to the world which are the most real in their intangibility: “The memory of a parfume Magda once used, evoked by this present parfume;” (269.).

<sup>16</sup> “One has feelings. If one pricks one’s finger it hurts, but one has nothing to do with that.” (267.) “One mustn’t see the place a thing occupies in the overall structure, one must see the thing instead, the thing that others take to be real.” (271.)

<sup>17</sup> “I couldn’t forget its [...] familiar ribbing. [...] It was enough to think of it and it grabbed me again. [...] I longed to return to [...] that] place [...]” (263.) “Once again it was enough to think of it to be grabbed by it.” (275.)

<sup>18</sup> Cf. footnote number 5. Researchers of near-death experiences argue that the real significance of these experiences, their reality, incomparable to the effects of any drugs or shock, is verified nonetheless by that very large-scale, tendentially appearing change that these patients show up later in their personalities and lifestyles. That is these experiences have *meaning* concerning the lives of the patients. Such a highlighted typical change is the disappearance of suicidal fantasies. Nádas, among other things, also presses this point in the interview mentioned in the introduction (cf. Mihancsik, 50., 61-62.).

<sup>19</sup> “So that at least *they* would not have to run around for hangers.” (283. Italics mine.)

<sup>20</sup> Szilárd Borbély’s study is perhaps the most revelational writing about the discussed text. It is entitled “Átbillenni, átbukni, átfordulni, leválni...,” in Péter Rácz I ed., *Testre szabott élet – Írások Nádas Péter Sajat halál és Párhuzamos történetek című műveiről* (Budapest: Kijarat Kiadó, 2007), 60.

<sup>21</sup> In the Hungarian original, the conventional equivalent of the English “[f]uck this place” (155.) is a swear word which positions God to an obscene context, and which could have been better translated into English as “god damn it” or even more blasphemously as “god fuck it”. See the other occurrence on page 177.

<sup>22</sup> “All the pain, [...] the fear of death [...] does not prevent from a certain narcissistic and exhibitionistic satisfaction from faintly shining through. / I can’t look all that bad.” (201.)

<sup>23</sup> It is quite remarkable how focused the text is when, after the undressing of the speaker, it dilates upon his “small black underpants, which were rather incongruous in [his] situation.” (163.) (In the original: *very* small.) That pair of underpants is identical with fresh underwear that the speaker “put [on] for the sake of others who would find [him]” after washing off the sweat of death also “in deference to others” (83.); consequently, that underwear should be the most congruous in the situation. Although the colour and its meaning are funny, they are not definitely unexpected, but the adjectives “(very) small” and “incongruous” turning up beside these underpants are thought-provoking. There is not such a wide range of models in their case as there is in the case of female underwear; and, as the one size smaller would rather be *tight*, it is difficult not to understand a concrete thong by it. The adjective “congruous” thus has an ambivalent meaning. The theme of the (latent) sexual aspect of the body and the others, the body and death is well-anticipated.

<sup>24</sup> Enikő Darabos, “Hirtelen valami olyasmi közelébe kerül,” (an interview with Péter Nádas), available: <http://www.ahet.ro/interju/kultura/hirtelen-valami-olyasmi-kozelebe-kerul-211-45.html>, access: 7 December 2008.

<sup>25</sup> The gifting taking place at the end refers to the coat hangers in a way as if they were not the exclusive subjects of the miscarried diligence of the doctors directed to their quest (“At least...”). Parallel to this, the relation of the practice unable to account for the essence and of the blocked language searching for its words also appears in a concrete simile in connection with the circumstantiality of the defining of the disease: “As if we had been getting to the familiar result in a stammer.” (173.)

<sup>26</sup> Beckett: ““They give birth astride a grave.”” (215); Nádas’ interpretation: “My mother gave birth to my body, I give birth to its death.” (217. Cf. footnote number 29.); earlier: “The self, I thought, becomes what it formerly had been without the body and will remain un-embodied for eternity.” (145.)

<sup>27</sup> An aphorism of the recent Hungarian literary theoretical discourse which has become folkloristic, and which comes from Gábor Németh or Endre Kukorelly, two of the most significant contemporary writers. My translation.

<sup>28</sup> The analogy of the narration is remarkable: the plot of the text is the past, whose reference is the future, and which is narrated emphatically in the present in the “dense” parts several times.

<sup>29</sup> In the Hungarian original, the second half of the sentence “[m]y mother gave birth to my body, I give birth to its death” (217.) sounds as follows: I give birth to *my* death. (My translation. Italics mine.)