

Poetics of Transcendence and Estrangement

**Hungarian Modernism
in a Central European Context**

LÁSZLÓ SZILÁRD SZILVESZTER



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Poetics of Transcendence and Estrangement. Hungarian modernism in a Central European context

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Introduction

The volume *Poetics of Transcendence and Estrangement: Hungarian Modernism in a Central European Context* consists of two parts and eight studies on Hungarian poetry. Part One, *Value Shapes of Faith and Doubt*, includes four chapters analysing the works of prominent 20th-century Hungarian poets such as Sándor Weöres, Jenő Dsida, Attila József, István Bella, István Ágh, and Imre Oravecz. It examines the extent to which late modernist lyrical discourse is connected to the stylistic and poetic tendencies of earlier periods or to those that emerged in the second half of the 20th century. Part Two, *Transylvanian Perspectives*, discusses the stylistic and poetic characteristics of Transylvanian Hungarian poetry during the communist era and, to a lesser extent, the post-regime-change period. Drawing on the works of poets such as Domokos Szilágyi, Aladár Lászlóffy, Sándor Kányádi, András Ferenc Kovács, Zsófia Balla, and László Király, this section identifies the defining features of post-World War II poetry, with particular attention to how it reflects the social and cultural conditions of the communist period and the poets' relationship with the regime.

The aim of the book is to present, first, the existential anxiety and sense of alienation experienced by the modern self; second, the otherworldly nature of the poetic depiction of transcendence and the relationship with God; and third, the confinement and isolation experienced by Eastern-Central European – particularly Transylvanian Hungarian – culture and literature during the post-World War I era and the decades of communist dictatorship.

1. The social and political changes following the First World War significantly influenced the status and value consciousness of Hungarian poetry. These changes manifested in tendencies where traditional discourses on literature's social function, the writer's responsibility, and the relationship between language, the individual, and reality were no longer seen as authoritative frameworks. In late Modernism, the restructuring of the relationship with tradition challenges the notion of language as a mere instrument, thereby undermining confidence in the uniqueness of the artwork and the integrity of the poetic self. The crisis of values and identity reflects the multifaceted and evolving nature of the human relationship with the self and society. It also highlights the realization that individuals perform certain roles throughout their lives, and these roles shape their personalities. This intellectual shift fostered the dominance of irony and self-irony in poetry, but also an openness to a critical-hermeneutical approach, and a dialogical stance.

The first part of the volume explores the main motifs that shape experiences of God in 20th-century and contemporary Hungarian poetry through four studies, focusing on the dialogue with the Christian tradition and the interplay of faith and doubt. The analysis also examines how modern poetry's engagement with transcendence is intertwined with the radical reevaluation of culture, the questioning of the artist's societal role, and the realities of the 21st century.

2. Regarding the characteristics of post-World War II literary discourse and cultural policy, in the second half of the 1940s, communist power gained control over all aspects of community life in Central European countries. It regulated culture and the arts, banned, abolished, or restructured forums with any form of independence, and completely revised the literary and artistic canon. Literary texts of this period were imbued with the phraseology of materialist "salvation history" and militarist rhetoric. As a result, it became not only possible but obligatory to interpret literary texts as straightforward political messages. The discourse of this era, underscoring revolutionary transformation and radical policy change, heavily relied on enemy imagery, the stark division between past and present, and the perpetual need for political struggle in both poetry and prose. Communist "sacrifice ethics" viewed the elimination of dissenters, protesters, and internal opposition as both necessary and inevitable for achieving social goals.

The second part of the volume aims to analyse the works and texts of contemporary Transylvanian Hungarian poets. It examines the specific value shifts that emerge in the poetry of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s in comparison with the aesthetic-ideological positions of Transylvanism, and how these shifts evolved during the post-1989 regime change period. Alongside conventional discourses on social engagement, the writer's responsibility, and the concept of Transylvanian identity, the four studies introduce new perspectives that re-examine earlier lyrical traditions.

I.
VALUE SHAPES OF FAITH
AND DOUBT

“Theatrum Gloria Dei”

Nature–Transcendence and Self–Nature Relations
in Sándor Weöres’s Poems

INTRODUCTION

In Sándor Weöres’s¹ poetry flora and fauna are not only an ornament, serving as an allegorical/metaphorical background for the representation of the self’s alienation and for the 20th century experience of a chaotic universe, but rather the reality of beings independent of subjective consciousness. This reality carries the already forgotten mysteries of the created world, and it definitely points towards a transcendent meaning, an ultimate goal. In his poems, one is both a character and a spectator of God’s glorious, eternal theater (*Theatrum Gloriae Dei*). Due to our mortality, we are part, but by our consciousness of death and faith in salvation, we are also external observers of the pre- and extra-human dimensions. Flora and fauna in this poetry can, in a way, counterbalance the modern-day problematic nature of the basic relationship between existence and the individual, for in spite of all suffering or doubt, they indicate the existence of an unknown harmony, a sacred unity (See: Schein 2001, 69–75; Bartal 2014, 150–181). Perhaps it is no exaggeration to say that this particular connection to the transcendent can be noticed in the titles of the following volumes: *A kő és az ember* [The Stone and the Man]; *A teremtés dicsérete* [The Praise of Creation]; *A hallgatás tornya* [The Tower of Silence]; *Tűzkút* [Well of Fire]; *Ének a határtalanról* [Song about the Boundless], etc. As Zoltán Kenyeres says in his monograph regarding the first period of Weöres’ poetry: for Sándor Weöres “the poem was not meant to be a means of personal self-expression, but of general expression of existence; he did not wish to capture the evanescent miracles of experience, but sought the signals of the cosmos that united man and nature; he searched the non-variable against the accidental; instead of the once-appearing, he

¹ Sándor Weöres (1913–1989) was one of the greatest Hungarian poets of the 20th century. His first poems appeared when he was fourteen; he burst on the Hungarian literary scene possessing a talent which enabled him to write in a wide range of techniques and metric forms. Beside Christianity, he studied several ancient cultures and mythologies, and discovered Eastern philosophy. Some of his poems have been set to music and translated to many languages. “Weöres handled Hungarian folk rhythms with as much ease and elegance as any Latin or Greek meter or other western European verse form. He left a legacy which, in terms of formal virtuosity, is very hard to surpass. [...] His search for meaning constantly led him into the area of metaphysics” (Makkai and Watson Liebert 2003, 917).

wanted to seize the ever-present; and the certainty or, even, the uncertainty of final things sparked his imagination” (Kenyeres 2013, 84). The world of minerals, through its impassive indifference, stillness, and absolute submissiveness urges one to greater sobriety; the plants fulfill the purpose of their earthly existence in the task of incessant growth and fecundity, whereas the destructive fight of the animals as part of an existing but inscrutable wholeness and universal meaning reminds us of the necessity of birth and death.

SÁNDOR WEÖRES’S SACRAL ECOPHILOSOPHY

Nature, despite its vulnerability and ignorance, is happier and wiser, and by virtue of its instinctive control, it is more open than we are. So, the opportunity arises: making human life more meaningful and perfect with analogies taken from the living world, getting to know its significance as profoundly as it is given to a mortal. In such a context, the relationship of animals and plants to Creation and the Creator is unproblematic, humans are the only beings who, in the constant struggle between body and spirit, in the contradiction of earthly and spiritual determination, open the way to the duality between faith and denial, joy and suffering, the stubborn will to live and the desire to die. This idea is present in Weöres’ poetry from the beginning, for example in the 1938 poem *A kakuk* [The Cuckoo]:

Alien lives are buzzing around me,
alien’s the nest where I was increased
and when my little wings changed there fluff,
I turned away from every company,
I have no nest, no trouble, no delight,
I have nothing to do with anything:
and while desires, wishes flutter,
until my death I’m but a spectator,
so let no one see me until I die

The moral of being a cuckoo is essential for a person seeking the purpose of life: it means staying away from the hustle and bustle, the petty, lamentable everyday life of the (bird) world; it means contemplation, non-commitment, rejection of all that could interfere with this harmony provided by detachment, the experience of supreme wholeness and love. This aesthetic-philosophical attitude is not unfamiliar to the poetry of the era; it is present in both Attila József’s and Lőrinc Szabó’s reflective poems. What makes Weöres’ approach different from similar lyrical representations between the two world wars is the confident conclusion, even in its ironic overtones, that all this is not the result of world chaos, or of some fatal error, but rather it belongs to the

essence and truth of Creation, and that is the way it is supposed to be, for it serves a final, transcendent meaning: “Great law stretches over the grass and tree / feeding us with each other happily / and it’s called: love and fondness. / (Is it bad? Don’t think so: / you don’t know / its goals).” In a letter addressed to Lajos Filep, Sándor Weöres describes this belief as follows: “The greatest accomplishment of my life is that I’ve got this far: I’ve never thought that the sight of life, from above, is so infinitely beautiful; it is no longer a problem here why so much confusion must exist if in its entirety life is so undisturbed. Seen from here, even the filthiest things are not scary anymore, because their authenticity, their affiliation is obvious. And the most amazing thing is that I feel how effortless it is to love everything, without distinction and gradation. [...] Those who, one by one, fight and kill each other, together are almost as great a bonfire of love as the Creator Himself” (Kenyeres 2003, 93).

Perhaps the greatest horror for the thinking and sensitive person, aware of the inevitability of death, is the cruelty of the humans who kill to eat and that of the wild animals that feed on and destroy each other, as well as the indifference of nature to all the pain and suffering that can be observed in the functioning of the – seemingly self-serving – all-overriding survival instinct. This issue is one of the origins of Sándor Weöres’ poetry – as a recurring motif, albeit in a changing form and with different conclusions, constantly emerges in each period of his oeuvre. The quoted text of *The Cuckoo* solves this problem with a dispassionate, distant, contemplative attitude, by consciously – and somewhat cynically – accepting that the cuckoo in the poem passes the burden of parental care and species preservation on to the despised noisy bird world. The poem *De profundis*, written in 1942, depicts the suffering of the “horrible feast”, the endless, infernal cycle of killing for life by extending it to the whole world: “where God’s cattle and flowers / crowd chewing, alive, each other”² At the same time, it is obvious that all this has some meaning only for man, the thinking self. *Heraclitus* [Herakleitos], written five years earlier, attributes this universal pain to the limited subjective experience and narrow individualistic worldview:³

Don’t say that life is bad and God is bad.
Don’t beg Him for pleasantness. His world
is not a lukewarm puddle of happiness
[...]

² As Donna J. Haraway says: “Try as we might to distance ourselves, there is no way of living that is not also a way of someone, not just something, else dying differentially” (Haraway 2008, 80).

³ From the recent scientific literature, Gábor Schein’s short monograph and, in more detail, Mária Bartal’s book analyse the impact of Heraclitus’ fragments, published by the Stemma publisher, with Béla Hamvas’ accompanying study, on Weöres’ poetry before the Second World War, though neither Schein nor Bartal quote specific passages from the contemporaneous translation. (Schein 2001, 49; Bartal 2014, 155–157).

Just because you didn't get to fill your stomach,
it is a shame you call the world vicious:
you are for it, not the world for you.

In Weöres' poetry, before the Second World War, to the mystery of the eternal cycle of the birth and death of living beings, the words of the 79th poem of the *Rongyszőnyeg* [Rag-carpet] provide the most authentic answer: suffering is an ineradicable part of life: "[the] suffering of birth, life, and death – says Ellen Gorsevski in a similar context – are parts of every sentient being's existence. Thus, to aid another sentient being by preventing or alleviating suffering is a moral imperative" (Gorsevski 2018, 90). The seed of the grass, the fruit of the tree, the birth of animals, and human creation, all evolve at the cost of the pain of change. Therefore, the purpose of life is not happiness but fertility, participation in the constant work of God, the possibility of merging into the never-ending act of creation. In this view, human suffering is far more sublime than that of plants or animals, since it has been given to us to share in the infinity of the whole, in eternity, not only in the particular and momentary: "Now as bonfire consumes the twig / so you are received into God's suffering – it's not a finite pain of a slaughtered hen / but as boundless as a fertile land." The poem *Aurora combattans* shows the same goal in the form of constant movement, birth and decay, struggle, and self-sacrifice. The dynamism of the octosyllabic, two-beat verses, the elevated, archaic diction, the allegorical representation, and the peculiar metaphors evoke the hymns of the Christian antiquity, early Middle Ages, as well as those composed by Aurelius Prudentius Clemens and St. Ambrose:

It is foolish to ask You for
heavenly and earthly joy
happiness is never the main goal,
never the aim but only a repose.

Your Entirety is lasting
only if all parts are changing.
Not stillness is to be achieved:
let everything move that lives.

"In Weöres' worldview", Jenő Alföldy says, "the permanent, the unchanging, the immovable, the eternal is identical with the all-encompassing essence, the manifestation of which is all that changes. Change is the most characteristic feature of the Universe, but while everything changes in the macrocosmic world of the starry sky, just as in the microcosmos of the corpuscles, the totality of changes does not alter the common essence that can be found in everything, namely eternity" (Alföldy 2014, 18).

PARADOXES OF ETERNITY

Phenomena considered eternal on the human scale of time, but in fact transient, or seemingly momentary, yet permanent – this is a paradox that appears in Sándor Weöres’ several poems. Probably, the best known of these is *Öröklét* [Eternity], in which the poet contrasts the eternity of the apparently forgotten experience, of the event experienced, of the once happened “lizard’s creep” or “stroke of wings” with the temporal nature of the material world doomed to annihilation sooner or later in cosmic time, of the celestial bodies or even of the “grave devouring everything” (*Trans. Katalin Ullrich N.*). This view can be found in the early poems, as well. It is about emphasizing the radical difference between appearance and reality, materialism and transcendence, about that existential and at the same time aesthetic-philosophical attitude so characteristic to Weöres, which, by contrasting sacredness with rationality, definitely decides in favor of the former:

What you don’t trust to stone
and decay, shape out of the air.
A moment leaning out of time
arrives here and there

[...]

As a bather’s thigh is brushed
by skimming fish – so
there are times when God
is in you...

(*Örök pillanat* [Eternal Moment]
– translated by Edwin Morgan)⁴

The *Háromrészes ének* [Song in Three Parts], or by its later title, *Harmadik szimfónia* [Third Symphony], continues this line of thought through the representation of the duality between the above and below, heavenly and earthly, eternal and momentary. The poem, even with regard to Weöres’ poetry, has an exceptional structure; it is a three-pillar construction, with musically recurring motifs, variations, and refrains. In the experimenting lightness of the poem, dynamism and abrupt stops, joy and pain, vulnerability and power, birth and death are present simultaneously. The weight of eternity is antagonized by fragile beauty; permanence by movement; quietness by singing; timeless and unchanging divine contemplation by active existence:

⁴ All the poems translated by the translators mentioned above are cited from A Makkai, and E. Watson Liebert ed. In *Quest of the “Miracle Stag”: The Poetry of Hungary* (Makkai and Watson Liebert 2003).

“Little bird cries, little bird rejoices, / while from his red planks / the mighty one looks down –” (*Trans. Susanna Fahlström*). As silence carries music, as calmness carries motion, so the intransient, that is the Creator, carries the transient, the never-ceasing spectacle of the created world. In this way, the seemingly different things are essentially one (“You yourself are the hunter and the wild”); the self, the individual dissolves in the process that gives the unity of the Universe. “On the way to completeness, there is no good and bad any more; here, basically, everything belongs to the good already, but the dual perspective remains vivid. In the dimension of completeness/incompleteness, all value choices are guided by an ethical principle, the aesthetic values of poetry appear on the »back« of this moral imperative”, as Zoltán Kenyeres puts it about the *Song in Three Parts* (Kenyeres 2013, 308).

Nature, here, resonates to the vibrations of the human soul; feelings find their match in animal sounds, movements, dance and singing as a projection of the dream-like, surreal, inner world. The recurrent refrain, the different variations reflect this perfect harmony, the coexistence of man and nature: “The peacock screams with you / toddles into the night with you / the rambling rose looses its elongated line with you.” A play of opposites and parallels intertwine the lines of the poem, the alternation of strength and weakness, action and tranquility, fortissimo and piano, which, however, are not mutually exclusive. “In the *Song in Three Parts*, the living being becomes an existing one; this metamorphosis of the lyrical hero is the mystery of the birth of the complete person. But in life, Weöres also finds this person: in the nun who adds herself to her nine bags as the tenth, which means that she herself is an object. In life, the complete person considers him- or herself identical with everything, is, in fact, an object among other objects. This is where the purpose of this philosophy of life becomes apparent”, Imre Bata notes in connection with the poem (Bata 1979, 98).

MAN AND NATURE

After the Second World War, Weöres wrote several long verses (See: Bartal 2014, 182–319). Beside poems dealing with various mythological themes (e.g. *Mahruh veszése* [The Fall of Mahruh], *Medeia* [Medea], *Minotauros* [Minotaurus], *Orpheus* [Orpheus], etc.), *Az elveszített napernyő* [The Lost Parasol] is primarily significant because in it the poet doesn’t build directly on ancient Greek or Far Eastern traditions and characters but chooses an ordinary idyllic story as a starting point. By this, in some sense, he realizes the aesthetic-philosophical synthesis of the entire oeuvre. The poem itself consists of nearly 400 lines. According to Attila Tamás, the author of the first short monograph on Weöres, “it shows a stylized worldview one degree naiver than the real one” (Tamás 1978, 92). The essence of the epic

thread is the parasol left during the woods as a memento of a rendezvous in nature. Its further “fate” reveals the secrets of existence and nature, birth and death. The object lost in the woods acts as an alien body in the natural world. Beyond the factors motivated by practical use, it can, like any other man-made product, be understood as a metaphor for temporary protest the chaos that prevails in the universe (See: Derrida 2008, 11–18).

Sándor Weöres’ poetry constantly reflects on the perfection and incomprehensibility of divine work, but also on its infinite righteousness and goodness. In the process of creation, mortal man seeks to approach the beauty and orderliness of the created world. This analogy is underlined in the poem by a detour which, as a story in the story, details the fabric and origin of the parasol, and the difficulties of producing it. In most cases, therefore, even making such an easy-to-use tool as a parasol presupposes aesthetic purposes: “Lombard silk and red Rhine dye, / long-travelled Indian ivory, / Pittsburgh iron, Brazilian wood, how / many handcarts have trundled its parts, they have gone by rail, they have gone in boats: / a world to make it! son of a thousand hands!” (*Trans. Edwin Morgan*)

The parasol represents the man-made twentieth-century living space, global civilization (See: Páli 2017, 127–138). The poem places this next to the created world, the mountains, the valleys, the animals, and the plants. Perhaps it is no coincidence, either, that due to its functionality, it protects man from one of nature’s vital sources: sunlight.

The story also proves that the artificial and the natural world are not completely alien to each other. The man-made order, which is fulfilled in the making of the tool, apparently prioritizes the victory of entropy during the process of disintegration, but as plants and animals slowly take possession of the now defunct object, the law of love is finally able to rule over chaos (See: Kabdebó 2019, 27–32). The initial distance between the two worlds, created now the parasol is left in the woods, irrevocably disappears with its disintegration. We can witness the new life, sprouting in the shelter of the parasol, overcoming destruction and death:

The vapour-tulip throws back its head,
a glass-green other-worldly meadow glistens,
at the horizon a purple thorn gathers;
darkness surrounds the far-off island;
a little ray like a woman’s glance flickers,
caresses its fugitive lover, glitters
as it flutters onto its drowsy son,
while a smile dawns eternity on man,
its arches bend and march on their way
between watery shores, Theatrum Glorïae Dei.
(*Translated by Edwin Morgan*)

From such a perspective, everything is full of play and ease. Eternity, salvation exists in the moment. The beauty and fragility of small things, their vulnerability, the infinite love that culminates in the tiniest manifestations of life, overwhelm all destructive forces. The Universe works as God's theater; it is only necessary to recognize that its purpose is to be found not in the individual but in the greater whole. "Nothingness identified with the Universe has nothing to do with nihilism", Jenő Alföldi remarks. "It merely refers to the fate of Something or Someone perpetually transforming into something or someone else in the continual process of changing; everything that returns into the Universe turns again into Something, Someone else until the end of time. This is not about reincarnation. It is simply the disconnection of individual existence and its return into the eternal cycle. But Weöres identifies this with the love that pervades the Universe, which is both a Buddhist and a Christian trait" (Alföldy 2014, 21).

And indeed, *The Lost Parasol*'s last verse is the apotheosis of faith and love that conquer all, like Attila József's well-known poem *Óda* [Ode]. Despite its hidden irony, it has a hopeful ending, since it proclaims the affirmation of life. The image of the oriole here, like in the refrain of the *Song in Three Parts*, where a little bird sings about its joys and sorrows, is an expression of innocence and unconditional aesthetic service. The bird exists, because its existence has a purpose, a meaning, it contributes to the beauty of the Universe, to the fulfillment of a never-ending creation. "Now I expend my life exultantly / like the oriole in the tree: / till it falls down on the old forest floor / singing with such full throat its heart might burst and soar" (*Trans. Edwin Morgan*).

ASPECTS OF DEHUMANIZATION

In contrast to the playfulness of *The Lost Parasol*, the depiction of subhuman beings in Weöres' poetry after the Second World War is often related to alienation or disillusionment with the 20th century society. Excessive rationalism, the dehumanizing effect of technical civilization, or a reality deprived of all the possibilities of transcendence under the guise of modern science appear with cruel irony in the poems of the 50s and 60s:

Did we evolve from the ape?
I don't know – but we're turning into monkeys:
the bond that ties
us to the angels is already broken

(*Elérünk olyan józanságot...*
[We Achieve Such Sobriety...])

Beside irony, however, in Weöres' poetry, the human person turning (back) into a monkey, the grotesque idea of (de-)evolution is much more than a simple metaphor. A close friend and master of the poet, Nándor Várkonyi, in his book *Sziriat oszlopai* [The Pillars of Seiris], to which Weöres made translations of *Gilgamesh* in 1937 and 1938, outlines, based on Edgar Dacqué's theory and the old myths of mankind, the possibility of another, somewhat reversed, evolutionary history (See: Várkonyi 1990, 113–116). Várkonyi speaks of a specific (de)formation, (d)evolution of the ancient type of man over time, which, as a final moment, can forecast the tragic spiritual decline of the *Homo sapiens* into the animal world.⁵ Such a view is evidenced by the train of thoughts in Weöres' cycle of poems, comprising 49 pieces, *Én, a határtalan szellem* [I, the Boundless Spirit], written in the 1940s, which makes it clear that the final destruction of modern man, who is moving further and further away from the sources of sacredness, and that of a brutal society, have so far been prevented only by the growth of divine grace: “God's infinite patience has / descended to the lowest degree / Because between the grinding mill-stones no one can turn right or left [...] He looks at those who have been deprived of their minds / who kill without reason, / not with anger but with a smile, // like at fighting animals.”

Here, too, we find the following sentence: eating meat is nothing but an unnatural act of violence toward the animal world. This idea also resonates with a statement in *The Pillars of Seiris*, which claims that in ancient times, mankind turned to eating meat only out of necessity (Várkonyi 1942, 163).

In Várkonyi's view, technical development and culture, body and spirit, the emotional, imaginative, and intellectual sides of man are in conflict with each other; the over-fulfillment of one dimension always brings about the atrophy of the other. According to him, while the ancient prehistoric peoples were

⁵ In the first edition of the volume, Várkonyi tries to support Dacqué's arguments, which are undoubtedly outdated from a scientific point of view, concerning the changes in the various forms of the human species with several mythological quotations: “Saxo Grammaticus almost literally repeats Native American legends: »Before time, there were three types of humans: horrible-looking people, robust people, and giants. Then, there were high-spirited people who had the ability to see the truth and to prophesy. Then, ordinary people came. They no longer possessed the skills of the former ones: the art to change their own shape and deceive people's eyes. Yet, they defeated the others, wiped them out, and became masters of the Earth«” (Várkonyi 1942, 282). “The legends of the ancient peoples convincingly show the Tertiary origin of culture before the Flood; the great instructors appear as gods and demigods (Chon, Oannes, Thot), and as kings, princes (Kenan, Xisuthros, etc.). [...] The new race, the »ordinary«, that is, the later dominant, wild, uncultivated, plebeian man is remembered with similar precision; our Quaternary grandfather. The traditions mentioned earlier also talk about them: they are disciples of the crawling demigods. The Jewish myth says with objective honesty: »In Enoch's time, humans became like monkeys«” (285). “So, here are the myths telling a whole little story of evolutionary development that strikingly matches the latest findings in physiology: the first phase is the representative of the fearsome, giant animal-like, forehead-eyed creature, the reptile and amphibian human tribe, as we call it: the Proto-homo; then comes the Tertiary man, with an elongated head, webbed fingers, with demonic powers and magic science, the Homo Magus; and finally, the small, uncultivated but sensible, diligent, and prolific »ordinary« Homo Faber” (287).

ruled by transcendental relations, European society, which follows in the footsteps of the Greeks, is more obsessed with the material world, although humans differ from animals only in their openness to sacredness, advanced imagination, and emotional connections, thereby are able to transcend the limits of their earthly existence. “In the process that creates civilization”, as the afterword of the first edition of *The Pillars of Seiris* states, “intellectual abilities are predominant, whereas in the cultural activity, the emotional and imaginative ones. The latter are undoubtedly superior; the distance that separates them from the animal’s imaginative and emotional abilities is greater than the difference between animal and human intellect [...]. Man is primarily a religious being; that is what makes us human” (Várkonyi 1942, 293–294). The 20th century modern, rationalist society seems to have lost this state of existence and mind forever. According to the testimony of Weöres’ two emblematic lines, the only refuge for the individual seeking the purposes of Creation, from which sacredness can probably still be reconstructed, is the reestablishment of the connection with the prehuman and extrahuman dimensions, the rejection of self-glorification: “My friends are the / animals and the superhuman currents” (*Elhagyott dimenziók* [Abandoned Dimensions]).

In one of his late poems, *Natura*, however, this possibility is no longer given: the prehuman sphere, which could provide shelter, seems to be severely compromised, as well; and the cold indifference of the rationally more and more known and “possessed” cosmos brings the inevitable threat of fear of chaos, of final destruction, as a kind of “gift” to man. Thus, everything is just a sham and a lie: the unthinking, unconscious bliss of nature as well as the illusory security of non-existence in minerals:

The punches of the sky are
red wounds in the heart,
everything writhes under
the hammers of non-existence

The animal pretends to be alive
but has a dream in its forehead.
The stone pretends to be hard
and there is order in the world.

The scepticism manifested in Weöres’ late poems seems to testify to the dominance of the sense of insecurity, alienation, and existential anxieties of the 20th century over the creative presence open to sacredness, radically opposed to the oppressive small-mindedness of his age. Yet, in some of his last poems, the poet is still able to rise and break away from the world of hopelessness and pain (*Odatúl, odaát* [Beyond, Over There]; *Változatok*

egy Narekaci-témára [Variations on a Narekaci-theme]; *Angelus Silesius*). The inexhaustible patience and receptivity of organic and inorganic beings, of the primordial elements, the duality between matter and spirit, body and soul that are at odds with each other, yet inseparable, provide, in this context, an opportunity for confidence to the individual who is forced to face finality, the ephemeral nature of life, but at the same time consciously reflects on the earthly and celestial reality. As the verdict-like words of the 1987 *Lépések* [Footsteps] aptly state: “Footsteps sound right at the bottom / but there is always a way up / upward.”

One thing is certain: Sándor Weöres’ poems, despite all hopelessness and doubt in the late works, proclaim the presence of the divine principle and the miracle of Creation in a world without Sacrality, a world turned away from God.

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“Beyond the Strapped Gates”

Late Modern Tendencies in the Poems of Jenő Dsida⁶

INTRODUCTION

Hungarian literary criticism, in order to highlight the defining characteristics of Jenő Dsida's poetry, points to a longing for transcendence, the experience of God, and the expression of the perfection of the created world (Cs. Gyimesi 1999; Rónay 2005; Lisztóczy 2005). Poems such as *Templomablak* [Church Window], *Tíz parancsolat* [Ten Commandments], *Nyáresti áhítat* [Evening Devotion], *Álmod adsz...* [You Give Dreams...], *Hálózni nélkül...* [Without a Nightgown...] depict a direct relationship between the individual and God. In these poems, as Cs. Gyimesi Éva maintains: “belonging to God is self-evident for the poet, something that can be spoken of just as naturally and obviously as everyday life” (Cs. Gyimesi 1999, 198).

The portrayal of a trusting relationship between God and man appears more contrived in Dsida's late avant-garde poems, where the speaker presents a profaned image of Christ (*Krisztus* [Christ]; *Az utcaseprő* [The Street Sweeper]) or desires to identify with the role of the Savior (*Út a Kálváriára* [Road to Calvary]). These texts align with the expressionist aspirations of the early twentieth century, which, alongside a fundamentally existentialist outlook, demonstrate significant social sensitivity and a desire to change the world. However, in Dsida's poetry of the 1920s and 1930s, there is also a stylistic-poetic approach that can be compared to the poems of his contemporaries such as Attila József or Lőrinc Szabó, expressing a clear scepticism regarding the optimistic view of modern Cartesian thinking, and subordinating the individual's experience of transcendence to that of the tragic, the lack of values, or identity crisis. In this context, alongside the questioning of poetry's public role, there is also a poetic manifestation where the conventional relationship between the author and the text, poet and language have been radically transformed.

⁶ Jenő Dsida (1907–1938) poet, translator, one of the most important creators of Transylvanian Hungarian literature between the two world wars. The young poet took part in the movements of ethnic literature: he was a member of the writers' community of Helikon, the Zsigmond Kemény Society, secretary of the Catholic Academy of Transylvania, member of the Romanian Hungarian section of the PEN Club. The war, the consequences of the Trianon dictate, and the heart disease of his youth left their mark on his poetic oeuvre. His recurring themes are deep Catholic religiosity, love and the fear of death. “Dsida became a Christian mystic: he compared the fate of the poet living in minority status to Christ's ministry on Earth” (Makkai and Watson Liebert 2003, 835).

HERMIT OF PASTORAL LANDSCAPES

In the early 20th century, Georges Bataille emerged as a theorist of a movement – first appearing in Baudelaire’s poetry and resonant with the interests of psychoanalysis – that sought to break taboos by exploring morbid, repulsive, naked human bodies and corpses as literary themes. Beneath this surface, however, lays a deeper intent: to conceal the inescapability of tragedy, the pervasive sense of anxiety, existential alienation, and the fear of death (Bataille 1997, 35–59). Expanding on this perspective, the intact human body symbolizes the systematic order of the world and the idea of individual unity, while its disintegration reflects the fragmentation of the universe or the self. The modern poet perceives the disintegration of the ego as a reflection of the world’s imperfections, with the self projected as a fragmented entity, ironically masking his own doubts. “Baudelaire – states Paul de Man – celebrates the most repulsive aspects of death in a language of natural and joyful sensation, or in his deliberate use of necrophilic imagery [...] which allows him to state desire in terms of death, hiding, as it were, the very inevitability of this association behind a pretense of the bizarre and the abnormal. [...] Such poets are at their greatest when, at rare moments, they drop the mask – as in the extraordinary poem [*Le Rêve d’un curieux*] in which Baudelaire perceives that the promise of unity contained in death is itself a theatrical fiction, a game of the imagination which does not end the real torture of the eternal waiting for a reconciliation of opposites that will never occur” (De Man 1988, 10).

A similar stylistic-poetic discourse characterizes Jenő Dsida’s lyrical works, particularly in verses that revive the tradition of ancient pastoral poetry. Primarily, the two cycles from the *Nagycsütörtök* [Maundy Thursday] collection, composed between 1929 and 1932, can be classified into this category: *Pásztori tájak remetéje* [Hermit of Pastoral Landscapes] and *Szerelmes ajándék* [Lover’s Gift]. These poems, verses of solitude and escape, “sing the harmony between love and nature in a way that isolates the subject from the real world acting as a narcotic against the dissonant powers of reality” (Láng 1996, 35):

Our cottage is hidden by the forest.
 Only the smiling God knows
 that the hermit has a wife.
 The scent of pine has made us muscular,
 strengthened our hearts, expanded our lungs,
 made our love infinite.
 You are grateful to me for the joys of the night –
 I sharpen arrows and spears
 while you milk the goat.
 The victorious sun rises.

Down on the winding path,
a whip cracks,
and the oxherds are singing.

(*Hegyen lakók* [Highlanders])

In order to repress the anxiety of materialistic thinking disguised in the coat of the metaphysical cognition and as a consequence of individual alienation, the author here constructs a new face, a new identity for himself by turning to the tradition of pastoral poetry. However, the fairy-tale-like, illusionary nature of the depicted landscape also indicates the loss of the world and reality: *Halvány, borús táj* [Pale, gloomy landscape]; *Elalszom, mint az őzek* [I fall asleep like the deer]; *Hajnali séta* [Morning walk]; *Emléksorok* [Memory tracks]; *Szökevények a fák közt* [Fugitives among the trees].

The contradiction between the lyrical role and reality is also evident in the poem *Alkony* [Twilight] from the *Pásztori tájak remetéje* [Hermit of Pastoral Landscapes] cycle, but this time it candidly points out the illusionary nature of the idyll:

On cool marble gates, tangled tendrils
creep silently, thickly, darkly,
and decaying birds fall from them.

The poet's mask is much less capable here of concealing the fundamental crisis of identity and values that characterizes the late modernism between the two World Wars. It is not coincidental that alongside the existential solitude revealed behind the metaphysical disguise of the natural landscape, the poem unmasks the artifice of the speaker's own creative role and shows us the painful and tragic consequences of his lie: “In tatters, the damp / sky hangs in fear. / – The silent hermit in a dark-brown robe. / Murmuring deliriously, he wanders, roams / on dilapidated, overgrown paths.”

Furthermore, the crisis of identity, coupled with the questioning of faith in the expressive power of poetry, can also lead to a scepticism about the validity of modern thinking in these lyrical works. The attempt to tame death and dissolve horror through the utterance – as we can experience in several pieces of the *Nagycsütörtök* [Maundy Thursday] collection, such as the poem *Szomorú pásztor* [Sad Shepherd] – is inherently a failed attempt, but in this realization, the stoic tranquillity of accepting reality and the security of the poet's creative, thinking role are also considered forever lost:

Oh – the shepherd, seven times sad,
whose thoughts wander scattered,
and whose sheep have strayed away forever.

In the events of life – as Peter Sloterdijk points out – poetry, fictionality, and lies are always present. As a result, human consciousness finds itself ontologically in an ironic situation: “one from which the pretending [...] is condemned to see through his own fictions” (Sloterdijk 1989, 80).

The crisis of faith in modern poetry, emerging from the disintegration of the world and the recognition of a fractured cosmic view, also manifests in the disintegration of the human face or body, reflecting the loss of the divine image. One example of the realization of the impossibility of falling apart and (re)creating synthesis is Dsida Jenő's poem: *Légyott* [Dateing] from 1934:

Her hair's thicket
slowly begins to crawl
and wraps around –
entwines the wall.
Her heart, which has decayed,
releases from her chest,
flies like a wasp
underneath the ceiling.

Above her mouth,
violet flames ignite.
I reached for her hand:
her damp fingers,
with a soft rustle,
fell to the ground one by one,
like withered petals
tend to fall.

The analogy of the wasp and the falling flower petals, as well as the metaphor of the violet flames, emphasize the movement of distancing, where the various components of the whole (heart, mouth, fingers) scatter as independent entities in the world, not only in terms of their functions but also in their essential characteristics. The changes that occur during the identification of the human body and the elements of the universe, however, are not created in reality but in the act of utterance, which also means that emblematically, the external world only manifests as a projection of the experience of identity loss. That the “desire for unity,” as Paul de Man claims, “should have to be stated in terms deriving from the most dreaded of all experiences, that of death, is a supreme paradox which is bound to introduce an almost unbearable tension in a poetry which set out to be all quietness and appeasement” (De Man 1988, 10).

After all, the thought of death necessarily entails the loss of control over one's own body, and also the consciousness of annihilation carries within

it the deprivation from experiencing and influencing the universe. We can interpret from a similar position the poem *A pántos kapukon túl* [Beyond the Strapped Gates], one of Dsida's last works, as a representation of the experience of the fear of death. The concept of passing is interpreted here through the expression of losing the well-known world:

Later, at the thought of passing,
horror burst out on my skin,
and I thought of the repulsive cemetery beetle,
which burrows into my putrid flesh
and soon lays its eggs inside me.
When I looked at a woman,
her charm frightened me,
for I imagined her bloated, lifeless,
and I sniffed the stench of corpses with dizziness.

The image of the body disintegrating into its elements – like the reflection of the self in the world and the world in the individual – can only be recognized as a representation. The speaker mostly experiences his own body as an emblematic (alter)ego in relation to others. In the quoted poem, this mirror relationship connects the “When I looked at a woman” phrase to the individual's realization of the finitude of their own existence, reinforcing the fact that death(consciousness) is essentially a result of an external experience, and it can only develop through encounters with the death of another person.

As one of the relevant conclusions of the quoted lines, the recognition emerges that every human face is a kind of mirror-face, which, however, is not merely the result of individual intention or conscious activity, but is determined by the inherent rhetoric of writing, the constraint of language tradition, and its conventional organization. As Derrida points out: “we speak only one language – and that we do not own it [...] and, since it returns to the other, it exists asymmetrically, always for the other, from the other, kept by the other (Derrida 1998, 40). This experience is indicated in the poem titled *Itt feledtek* [They Left Me Here]:

Oh, how pitiable I must appear,
with a mouth bent to weep,
drawing the evening cloak over myself,
with hanging arms by the rosebush.
But I am alone,
cloud-serpents crawled onto the stars,
no one can see me.
Ghost-fingers wander on the wall of silence,
and heavy scents cling to my shoulders.

The speaking persona's image, his face of anxiety and pain, results in a transformation, where the lyrical subject is moving from identification to the recognition of an authentic identity. However, this process in the text of the poem paradoxically leads to the final cessation of the relationship between the self and the world around him. The "wall of silence" represents the only real experience that becomes the emblematic expression of the speaker's feeling, that he has passed out of his life: "cloud-serpents crawled onto the stars, / no one can see me. [...] heavy scents cling to my shoulders." All in all: while the assertion of life can ironically be seen as a metaphor of passing, the mask becomes the real face of death, as the voice of the individual, seeking to validate its own existence can no longer break through the imperviousness of the "silence-wall":

First, I groan quietly,
 then I cry louder,
 then, in the terrible fear of solitude,
 I jump up and shout hoarsely.

Therefore, the final monologue of self-abandonment can only conclude in the annihilation of his voice for the people left outside. However, this poetic gesture also means the departure from the linguistic fiction of the lyrical identity that can be postulated as a speaker (and is intended to determine the directionality of the discourse initiated by the text of the artwork). In the last part of the poem, the speaking persona summarizes his own situation as an epitaph from an infinite spatial and temporal distance and impersonal position, thus ironically heralding the irreversible occurrence of his own annihilation. "Self-death writing," as Schein Gábor states, "is permeated by the knowledge of transience, and thus writing frees the self from its individual nature" (Schein 1999, 52–53). In this context, the presence of speech and the lyrical subject is nothing more than mere illusions:

My cry receives a stuffy darkness as an answer,
 no one responds to me.
 From afar, crispy shreds of music
 flow tickling into my ear,
 and the rolling turmoil of dance beats
 down my desperation, confusedly.
 There is a wedding somewhere in the thousandth house,
 at the end of the big street. They went there,
 everyone went there, the whole world.
 They left me here.

Paradoxically, as speech reveals the dissolution of the subject within the text, it simultaneously offers the possibility of preservation and continued existence through the act of writing. As language itself becomes a tool of identity loss, it can equally, against the author's intention, repeatedly recreate its author's (pseudo)persona. In its transience, the human exists here merely as text, and thus, as evident in the poem *Sírfelírat* [Epitaph], the essence of creation becomes a metaphorical preserver of the decaying human face in death:

I have done everything I could,
All of debts I owed I have paid
I release everyone from their obligations,
forget the decaying earthly likeness of my face.

“All writing claims it can be awakened into spoken language” as Hans-Georg Gadamer states (Gadamer 2006, 395). Indeed, the illusion of the presence of the (textual) subject, materialized in the final line of the poem, not only rejects ironically the necessity of oblivion, but also entails the evocation of the biographically grounded Dsida-face in the mind of the interpreter.

NAMING THE UNNAMEABLE

Thus, what the poet previously believed to be his own voice and face becomes apparent as mere fiction, while the artwork itself aligns with conventionalized roles of identification. A declaration of this poetic attitude is manifested in the poem *Hulló hajszálak elégiája* [Falling Strands Elegy]: “I walked all paths / I loved and got angry / I lived, cried, I sang / for everyone. I was a poet.” The rejection of honesty and originality in these verses demonstrates that the power of lyrical words is no longer a guarantee for solving the questions of value and identity. Just as the speaker's voice is lost in the rhetorical proliferation of language, the illusion of the subject's integrity always dissipates when expressed in a literary text. The poet's name, as the trademark of his unity of self, leaves behind the mirage of identity and identification between signifier and signified, word and reference as soon as something is spoken. “[T]he words that language uses are only fragments that have precipitated out of the word” (Heidegger 1998, 207). In the Hungarian poetry of the 1930s, the textual medium that was perhaps the last to give up the appearance of the unity of the self in the modern age, somewhat loses its position as an existential standpoint offered as security to the author.

“[W]e believe – as Nietzsche points out – we know something about the things themselves when we speak of trees, colors, snow, and flowers; and yet we possess nothing but metaphors for things – metaphors which correspond in no way to the original entities...” (Nietzsche 1990, 83). The questioning of

the descriptive power of language and the linguistic possibility of depicting reality is characteristic of the lines of Dsida's poem *Túl a formán* [Beyond the Form]:

You say something is a house,
 – it has four walls –
 yet it is not.
 You call it a stove,
 yet it is not,
 you call it a flower,
 yet it is not,
 you call it a woman,
 you call it God,
 yet it is not.

Here, gradation transforms the linguistic definability of the ontological status of being and reality into an incessantly recreating movement, ranging from the banal tools of everyday life – that is, the objects created by humans that only manifest their functionality (house, stove) – through the unnameable elements of divine creation (flower, woman), all the way to the ultimate genus proximum of a transcendental worldview (God). The failure of rational cognition through language in this rhetorical movement can ironically always be (re)rewritten backwards, for while the extralinguistic nature of fundamental questions of being and existence – the divine principle or the concepts of woman and flower – may seem obvious to anyone, the unnameability of objects of everyday reality (house, stove) calls into question the very foundations of rational thought. As Friedrich Nietzsche states: “mankind set up in language a separate world beside the other world, a place it took to be so firmly set that, standing upon it, it could lift the rest of the world off its hinges and make itself master of it. To the extent that man has for long ages believed in the concepts and names of things as in aeternae veritates he has appropriated to himself that pride by which he raised himself above the animal: he really thought that in language he possessed knowledge of the world” (Nietzsche 2005, 16). The Dsida-poem illustrates the illusory nature of Cartesian immediacy between things and language and the futility of the poetic intention to eliminate this distance:

Beyond all attributes and destinies,
 the soul of things lies hidden.

“The name dissolves before what it names,” observes Gergely Angyalosi (Angyalosi 1996, 162), and although in the poem's conclusion the prosopopeia, or anthropomorphization of the universe, points primarily to the

intimate relationship of the individual to the transcendent, the peace of being greeted as a familiar or the secure unity of the individual and their world (Cs. Gyímesi 1999, 149–155), this solution suspends the autonomy in which the speaker could separate their own face and voice from the rhetorical horizon presented by language:

Their uncertain words reach out for me,
their invisible arms embrace me,
and I sway in the secret of secrets
like on my mother’s lap.

By giving his own body and face to things, the individual also transforms (ironically) into a rhetorical figure constantly reoccurring within the self-referential horizon of language. As observed in the context of a similar nature by the lyrical subject of Dsida’s sonnet titled *Kalendárium szonettekben, Augusztus* [Calendar Sonnets, August] dated from 1930: “See, now at noon, like the weak, dead salt / spreading in the waters of swaying seas, / I also dissolve in this poem’s very essence / and with concern I say: perhaps this is the last.”

Speech, which represents the means of cognition and describing metaphysical reality for the human of the 20th century, can no longer appear as a reliable path to grasp existential questions for the individual. In (modern) poetry, existence becomes inexpressible through words, as the paradigm that proclaims the existential primacy of divine revelation has lost its validity in modernism compared to the primacy of matter. Instead of the Christian statement that: “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14, 423), the materialistic thinking regards the linguistic expressibility of the world as the only real dimension of existence, placing the description of human and nature at the focus of all theoretical inquiries. Unlike writing and information, which can be seen as metaphors of life, in this manner, matter itself, death, becomes the primary ontological characteristic of existence. In this relation, the only attribute of humans is transience, and time becomes the foremost experience which gains meaning in the decay of the body. Jenő Dsida’s poem titled *Már majdnem elfeledted* [You’ve Almost Forgotten] from 1938 ironically reflects on this question: “you won’t be able to avoid it, / you can’t escape from it, / even though you almost forgot: / – No one can die in your place.”

FEAR OF THE DARKNESS

The shift in perspective, that aimed to replace the ethical-aesthetic norms and objectives of the religious worldview, with a “progressive” scientific mindset based on rational thinking, in the post-World War I era, due to the devaluation of efforts for societal improvement and the ideological aims of communism and fascism, became permanently questionable. In the modern vision of a future detached from the past, evident by the 1930s, the divine principle became inescapable due to humanity’s persistent need for transcendence. Let us recall Jenő Dsida’s poem titled *Kóborló délután kedves kutyámmal* [Roaming Afternoon with My Beloved Dog]:

It’s a beautiful thing to leap over life, to circle around,
to fly through the young fields, on the path of instincts,
so freely, irresponsibly. Here’s the ditch, forward,
down into the deep, up the hill and oh my, up the mountain,
and beyond the mountain, in the air filled with diamond dust,
there, let’s go, our figures enlarged on the dark horizon,
our faces shining, a beautiful dog’s forehead surrounded by a glowing flame,
pouring down the heavenly blue light, laughter of flutes, deep
horns, merry
sounds of golden violins, we glide through the meadow,
amidst the blinding double row of
angelic guards, only forward...
soaring, bursting, exhausted, ignited, rushing forward,
until we reach the Marble Throne and declare: –
“We have returned before you, eternal divine Majesty.
We have crossed over life. And we have caught the cat!”

The tragedy of transience, the love of being, and the duality of the “death-face” behind the “cheerful mask” are both depicted here, as the line “It’s a beautiful thing to leap over life” can be interpreted as both a figure of speech that gentles death as a eulogy in hopes of an afterlife and as an ironic pathos of modern value deficiency. What could be resolved within religious conviction becomes tragic from the perspective of modern thinking, and this duality persists for the people of the 20th century, as long as doubt – which is a fundamental determinant of the Cartesian worldview – and fear (especially regarding the inevitable occurrence of rationally incomprehensible transience), continue to recreate themselves even in the shadow of faith.

The modern concept of the individual, therefore, inherently assumes solitude, aloneness, and the fear of death. In our consciousness – says Northrop Frye – we perceive “the tragic aspect of time in which every moment brings us toward death, and in which we know only what has been, and never what

is or is going to be” (Frye 2000, 209). This is why we can find in Jenő Dsida’s lyrical work titled *A sötétség verse* [The Poem of Darkness] from 1938 the same ironic-allegorical discourse, in which the speaker evokes the ruthless tragedy of transience, destined for every human being:

But tell me: have you ever let
a snow-white sugar-cube soak up
dark liquid, dipped in the bitter night
of coffee in its cup?
Or watched how the dense liquid,
so surely, so insidiously,
will seep up through the white cube’s
pure, crystalline body?
Just so the night seeps into you,
slowly rising, the smells
of night and of the grave all through
your veins, fibres, cells,
until one dank brown evening,
so steeped in it, you melt and sink –
to sweeten, for some unknown god,
his dark and bitter drink.

*(Translated by George Gömöri and Clive Wilmer)*⁷

“The reading of the poem is imbued with a fascination,” notes Gyöngyi Orbán, “and, just as »slowly rising«, it is subtly permeated by the horror of death” (Orbán 1999, 123). And essentially, the same aesthetic-poetic attitude characterizes Dsida’s earlier pieces of poetry – for example, the well-known lines of *Nagycsütörtök* [Maundy Thursday] – where doubt, uncertainty, (self)lack of confidence, and the failure to establish connections with fellow human beings become significant:

I looked around:
it would have been so good to speak a little
to close friends, a few words to men you trust,
but there was only damp night, dark and chill,
Peter was now asleep, and James and John
asleep, and Matthew, all of them asleep...
Thick beads of cold sweat broke out on my brow
and then streamed down over my crumpled face.

(Translated by George Gömöri)

⁷ All the poems translated by the translators mentioned above are cited from George Gömöri. 2013. Introduction to Jenő Dsida’s Poems. Poems Translated by George Gömöri and Clive Wilmer (Gömöri 2013).

The allusions referring to the Gospel text here demonstrate the duality of expectation and hopelessness, just like in the text of *Olvadó jégvirág* [Melting Ice Flowers]: “Awakening, tangy wine-coloured lions / settle on the great rock tomb / and Lazarus lies silently, coldly / as a three-day-old corpse.”

Therefore, the cause of the identity and value crisis in the poetry between the two world wars, can be understood not only in terms of the disintegration of the individual, but also in a Cartesian worldview, which can be fundamentally derived from the tradition of modernism. In this worldview, all forms of transcendent-based knowledge are denied at the metaphysical level, yet its axioms preserve the structures of faith, just like in pre-Enlightenment thinking. After all, in the duality of the empirical inscrutability of human existence and the Cartesian pursuit, the birth of the modern “self” could only come about as a convoluted interplay of the knowable and the unknown. The language of science, the metaphysical language devoid of tropes, directs the dimensions of knowledge into a reflective rhetorical movement in which – due to the subject’s connection to temporality and the temporal validity of evaluation – objective analysis and (self)understanding are unveiled as illusions.

However, the relationship with God is essentially a hermeneutic relationship, which means that we can only fulfil it by recognizing the distance between ourselves and God, realizing that which is different from us, and we can “present it to oneself as it is” (See: Gadamer 2006, 440–441). Such a relationship does not arise in the direction of (subject-object based) scientific knowledge, but it presupposes the attentiveness, humility, love, and openness of inquiry. The modern individuals place themselves at the centre of every dialogue, meaning that they can only speak from a standpoint that experiences “their fundamental relation to beings as the objectification – understood as mastery – of what is encountered” (Heidegger 1998, 187–188). The individuum, interpreted in his own subjectivity as an “ego,” thus becomes incapable of establishing and maintaining a genuine dialogue, and his attempts are not capable to pass the limits of self-directedness and a behaviour that defines the “other” as an object. Only in a few instances can Jenő Dsida’s poetry (e.g. *Templomablak* [Church Window], *Tíz parancsolat* [Ten Commandments], *Nyáresti áhítat* [Evening Devotion] can give up this limited perspective.

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Tragic Irony and Existential Estrangement

Attila József's Poetry⁸

INTRODUCTION

In the avant-garde poetry after the First World War, we can already find references to the fact that the linguistic expression of subjective factors, the relationship between the individual and society, became fundamentally problematic for the people of the time. During this time, language usage itself underwent a transformation. Everyday forms of speech, with their agitative, imperative, and identity-marking roles, came to the forefront amid the turbulent political climate of the war and its aftermath, characterized by severe social issues. Avant-garde movements consciously embraced the vocabulary of everyday language, including its vulgar, aggressive, and subcultural elements. They used a system of content and formal tools aimed at radically redefining the relationship between artistic creation, the transformed linguistic environment, and society. Modern art strives for simplicity, writes Hannes Böhringer (Böhringer 1995). Indeed, stylistically, the avant-garde is marked by a profound departure from traditional conceptions of art and from the canonized artistic language. It involves the destruction of formal and rhetorical constraints, the de-semiotization and the abandonment of symbolic usage of language (Kulcsár-Szabó 1997, 78–94).

While the liberal ideas represented by *Nyugat* – the most well-known Hungarian literary journal of the first decades of the 20th century – may be seen as extremely pacifist, if not outright apolitical, avant-garde poetry discovered a mode of expression that sought to dissolve the distinction between life and speech, adopting a dynamic, agitational, and even dictatorial stance. “In the moments of the highest oral intensity – notes Peter Sloterdijk about this discursive worldview, possibly first associated with Friedrich Nietzsche – all representations are reduced to ashes in the act of being expressed. There are no longer any semantics, only gesticulations; no longer any ideas,

⁸ Attila József (1905–1937) was a seminal figure in 20th-century Hungarian poetry, celebrated for his deeply introspective and socially conscious works. His poetry, often reflecting Marxist ideals, psychological depth, and a mastery of form, explored the human condition with both lyrical beauty and intellectual rigor. Despite battling mental illness and financial instability, his works such as *Eszmélet* [Consciousness], *Ars Poetica* [Ars Poetica], and *Reménytelenül* [Without Hope] remain iconic, bridging modernism and Hungarian literary tradition. Tragically, he died young, leaving a legacy that continues to inspire and resonate globally.

only tropes of energy; no longer any higher meaning, only temporal stimulation; no *logos*, only orality. There is no longer anything holy, only heartbeats; no longer any spirit, only breath; no longer a god, only the movements of a mouth” (Sloterdijk 1989, 63).

Avant-garde efforts, aimed at restoring the referential relationship between literary texts and reality, simultaneously pursued the transformation of society through art. The creative process was to be guided by consciously articulated principles outlined in programs and agitational manifestos. This poetic orientation can be traced back to the continuation of the Hegelian tradition within modernism. “It is not difficult to see – Hegel says –, that ours is a birth-time and a period of transition to a new era. [...] The frivolity and boredom which unsettle the established order, the vague foreboding of something unknown, these are the heralds of approaching change. This gradual crumbling [...] is cut short by a sunburst which, in one flash, illuminates the features of the new world” (Hegel 1977, 6–7). Therefore, the avant-garde momentum primarily represents a provocative form of artistic expression, best captured by a spatial metaphor that has become a commonplace term for this orientation: “The avant-garde understands itself as invading unknown territory, exposing itself to the dangers of sudden, shocking encounters, conquering an as yet unoccupied future. The avant-garde must find a direction in a landscape into which no one seems to have yet ventured” (Habermas 1983, 5).

“The speed, the unrelenting movement, and the lack of restrictions seemed to be the most characteristic forms of experiencing life”, says Gyula Laziczus in a contemporary study. At the same time, he voices doubts about the goals and usefulness of this exploratory journey: “The continuity of Hungarian literature is closely influenced by the paths opened by the boldest, while activism raises concerns about whether it has strayed onto hopeless paths” (Laziczus 1922, 49–54). In contrast, by the late 1920s and early 1930s, questions surrounding the role of artwork, the aims of art, and the relationship between form and content, innovation, and tradition had become far less straightforward. Beyond moral values or social conventions, the creators of the years leading up to the Second World War sought to portray the human being once again as a passionate being, emphasizing its existential solitude and vulnerability to individual fate.

THE IRONIC RESIGNATION: MODERNITY AND FAITH

The sense of community emerging in Hungarian poetry of the late 1920s and early 1930s becomes a source of alienation precisely because of its context, which can be described as a tension between sameness and difference. Modern thought constructs concepts such as “we”, “you”, or “they” solely from the perspective of the individual self, simultaneously marking its own (separate) position within a heliotropic, self-referential, metaphorical linguistic structure. This poetic intent not only acknowledges the isolation of the individual but also renders impossible the experience of traditional forms of religious faith:

Right from the start I have stood on my own feet;
with nothing to call your own, you’ve nothing much to forfeit.
You’ve no more to lose, and that’s a fact,
than an animal when it drops dead and that’s that.

(*Kész a leltár* [I Have Done My Reckoning]
translated by Michael Hatwell)⁹

In Attila József’s poem, the insignificance and inevitability of human mortality are juxtaposed with the omnipotence of God invoked in Psalm 90:

Lord, you have been our dwelling place
throughout all generations.
Before the mountains were born
or you brought forth the whole world,
from everlasting to everlasting you are God.

This ironic perspective on individual existence and its values, combined with a dialogue with lyrical tradition, characterizes the lines of *Kész a leltár* [I Have Done My Reckoning]. The poem’s ironic tone, as interpreted by literary scholars, reflects simultaneously on the ideological and poetic orientation of classical modes of expression, particularly those found in the works of Sándor Petőfi¹⁰ and François Villon:

⁹ All the poems translated by the translators mentioned above are cited from Makkai and Watson Liebert 2003; Bátki 1997; <https://allpoetry.com> and <https://www.visegradliterature.net>.

¹⁰ Sándor Petőfi (1823–1849) was a renowned Hungarian poet and a leading figure of the 19th-century Romantic movement. His poetry often reflected themes of freedom, love, and nature, capturing the struggles and aspirations of the Hungarian people. Petőfi’s works, such as National Song (*Nemzeti dal*), became symbols of the Hungarian Revolution of 1848. His unique style combined simplicity and emotional depth, making his verses accessible and resonant across generations. “During the 1848–1849 War of Independence, he continued to write inspiring and revolutionary poems. In 1848 he was attached to the staff of the Polish-born leader General Joseph Bem, who held a special affection for the young poet. He rose to the rank of major in Bem’s army. In the battle of Segesvár

For me no death in battle, nor the end of a rope:
bed in the place I would finish up, I hope.

The phrase “death in battle” recalls and rejects the stance of Petőfi’s poem, “the end of a rope” echoes Villon’s quatrain: “Francis I am, which weighs me down, / Born in Paris near Pontoise town, / And with a stretch of rope my pate / Will learn for once my arse’s weight” (*translated by Peter Dale*).¹¹

The pinnacle of the (self-)ironic perspective in the poem is the phrase “bed in the place I would finish up, I hope” and its surrounding textual context. The rejection of two alternatives – “death in battle” (self-sacrifice for the nation) and “the end of a rope” (a rebellious, Villonesque defiance against societal norms) – creates a tension of values, heightened by the ultimate goal: “bed in the place I would finish up, I hope.” The lyrical subject, opting for passive survival or even passive surrender, not only adopts an attitude counter to that of classical literary figures but also ironically overwrites his earlier creative approaches (e.g., *Bérmunkás-ballada* [Ballad of Wage Laborers], *Munkások* [Workers], etc.). This tragic-ironic “hope” confronts the futility of human life and the flawed relationship between poet and society, ultimately discarding any possibility of an optimistic future. The two final lines of the poem affirm the resignation to the unchangeability of existence:

Come what may, I have closed my reckoning.
I have lived. Others, too, have died of living.

In conclusion, we could affirm that Attila József’s poetry often disguises the insignificance of life, its hopelessness, and the individual’s destined death behind a façade of confidence in human strength and individual abilities. This is evident in his 1935 poems, such as *Boldog hazug...* [The Happy Liar] and *A bűn* [The Sin]:

I don’t believe in God and if there’s,
let Him not trouble with me.
I will absolve myself;
whoever lives helps me.

“Here we encounter the idea of self-redemption”, notes Imre Bori in his analysis of Attila József’s *A bűn* [The Sin], “the ultimate refuge of loneliness, which [the poet] must soon abandon because the individual is powerless and

on July 31, 1849, he was killed – in all probability by a Cossack lancer” (Makkai and Watson Liebert 2003, 364).

¹¹ Attila József published his own translation of Villon’s poem in the 1931 volume entitled *Tilt the Capital*.

self-redemption proves to be an illusion” (Bori 1965, 20). In these poems, the modern human condition is expressed as a passive drifting through existence. The mutually negating duality of faith and denial, evident in later works such as *Nem emel föl* [He Lifts Me Not], *Bukj föl az árból* [Tumble out of the Flood], and *Az Isten itt állt a hátam mögött...* [God was standing here, behind my back...], reflects both the incapacity for action and the impossibility of accepting the “empty, human-faced unbeing”:

Terrify me, my hidden God,
I need your wrath, your scourge, your thunder;
quick, come tumble out of the flood,
lest nothingness sweep us asunder.

[...]

A fragment from a wreck I lie,
tossed by a cruel tempest frothing;
alone; I dare, and I defy:
all merely signifying nothing.

I'd choke my very breath, to die,
your rod and staff thus disobeying,
and look you boldly in the eye,
you empty, human-faced unbeing!

(*Bukj föl az árból* [Tumble out of the Flood])

translated by Zsuzsanna Ozsváth and Frederick Turner)

In Attila József's *Kosztolányi* [Dezső Kosztolányi] (1936), the lyrical voice simultaneously addresses itself, an undefined community, and the deceased poet. The seemingly sorrowful farewell can be interpreted as a traditional expression of the insignificance and futility of poetic and human existence. However, the enjambment between the second and third stanzas, built on an inversion-based metaphor, disrupts the solemn tone of the obituary:

We indolent are only now beginning to suffer,
but you have already signed your work.

Like a dash, your body lies flat.
You are now devoured only by worms,
as we devour chicken, wine... Nobody, my friend!

In the poems text, this aphoristic formulation comes across as a double-faced metaphor: the pathetically solemn tone of the obituary is transformed into irony by the speaker, who sharpens it with the humour of colloquial language. So, the absurd distance between the metaphor and its referent

arises here from the juxtaposition of two radically different speech styles. The purpose of this unusual imagery is none other than to dissolve the living mourner's detached cynicism in the face of death's proximity. The rhetorical suspension of conventional strategies of linguistic deception ultimately reveals in *Kosztolányi* [Dezső Kosztolányi] a distinctive state of being, in which the poetic mask gives way to the lyrical self's despair and existential anxiety, standing in stark contrast to the traditional obituary's solemn yet rigorously detached tone. In conclusion, we can affirm that, by recognizing the emptiness of existentially charged words, Attila József's poetry increasingly adopts a style characterized by aphorisms, linguistic play, conceptual shifts, and allusions. From a poetic perspective, this irony often replaces faith in the expressive power of language with a self-reflective, private discourse saturated with quotations and self-quotations.

Shortly after the *Kész a leltár* [I Have Done My Reckoning] and *Kosztolányi* [Dezső Kosztolányi], in January 1937, Attila József wrote *Ős patkány terjeszt kórt...* [An Ancient Rat Spreads Disease...], which remained unpublished during his lifetime. Here, the critique of the self, directed both at itself and at contemporary society, unfolds in a narrative sequence of absurd, allegorical, and anthropomorphizing images. In the first part of the poem, irony becomes a source of rhetorical cohesion through the abuse of metaphorical structures (catachresis): "Oppression croaks in flocks, / alights on living hearts as on carrion – / and misery seeps across the globe, / like drool on the face of fools." The irony based on image confusion, however, becomes an expression not only of the dimensions of social existence, but also of the poet's vulnerability: "And like a jackal turning to the stars / to vomit forth its cries, / where torments gleam in our skies, / the poet in vain howls".

The tone of ironic disillusionment is reinforced in the concluding section by an allusion to poetic tradition. While Lóránt Kabdebó indicates that these lines are characterized by an artistic attitude seeking to relativize and alleviate the tragedy of the preceding section (Kabdebó 1996, 33), and Frigyes Janzer argues that "this is not a rejection of tradition, since the romantic gesture reminiscent of Mihály Vörösmarty (»I trust«) carries the true emphasis" (Janzer 2001, 73), I suggest that the lyrical subject, surveying the horizons of the present, past, and future, ironically questions the very possibility of historical progress:

And yet I trust. With tears, I beseech you,
fair future, do not be so bleak!
I trust, for unlike our forebears,
They don't pull me into a stake....

In the final stanza, which evokes the idyllic tone of Rococo poetry, the vision of a forgetful and definitive future essentially points – as a kind of (anti-) *Ars poetica* – to the awareness of the futility of individual existence and poetry:

The peace of freedom shall arrive,
pain will become gentle in time –
and we too will be forgotten at last
in the quiet shade of bowers.

Paradoxically, in this gesture, questioning the relationship between the self and the universe becomes a declaration of the primacy of language over individual existence. Through the act of writing, the poem's text continually recreates, as a trace, a self-construct permanently severed from its creator in death, standing against oblivion. In the poem's final lines, the speaker – reconstructed anew in every act of reading – thus, alongside its apparent affirmation, also ironically rejects the necessity of the oblivion expressed in the meaning of the text.

FROM THE CRISIS OF IDENTITY TO SILENCE AND TEXTUAL DISSOLUTION

The crisis of values and identity in modernism can essentially be interpreted as an existential condition of lack, condemning individuals to a passive recognition of hopelessness and disillusionment. At the same time, however, when viewed through the potential of hidden possibilities, it renders the definitive elimination of illusions impossible. A rationalist mind perceives the disintegration of the world's unity and humanity's alienation as a tragedy, while the failure of Cartesian thinking is understood as a "lack of world," a form of existential crisis. Modern thinking can thus be described as a metaphysical assumption of a lost or yet-to-come alternative way of being, which, in Jürgen Habermas' words, is defined as "on the one hand, the effective-historical bond of a continuous happening of tradition in which revolutionary deed is embedded; on the other, the dominance of the horizon of the expectation over a potential of historical experiences to be appropriated" (Habermas 1998, 14).

From the mid-1930s onward, the tragic and confessional aspects of Hungarian poetry increasingly overshadowed the intent to synthesize the elements of the universe or to depict universal connections impersonally. "In the place of *logos* being made *flesh* it would seem that now *physis* has become language", observes Peter Sloterdijk (Sloterdijk 1989, 67). As existentialism and psychoanalysis in the 1930s began to openly question the validity of classical modern thought paradigms, the duality of "eszmé" [idea] and "élet" [life] ultimately succeeded in rewriting modern rationalism through

ontology – with the addition of a single accent in the Hungarian title of Attila József's poem: *Eszmélet* [Consciousness].

In contrast to the cryptic compression of the earlier *Medáliák* [Medallions] cycle, which can perhaps be considered the pinnacle of pure poetry in József's oeuvre, in *Eszmélet* [Consciousness] the seemingly playful self-portrayal is transformed into the tragically ironic expression of the impossibility of individual validation and the recognition of futility:

I am thin, at times I eat only bread.
 Among souls that idly chatter and temporize
 I search – free and free of charge –
 for greater certainly than the fall of dice.
 Stuffing myself with roast beef would be nice,
 or cuddling a small child to my heart –
 (Translated by John Báltki)

In this context, the experience of the tragic determinism of human existence even calls into question the validity of the concept of freedom:

Silence listened, the clock struck one.
 Why not visit your childhood –
 even among cinderblock walls one could
 imagine some bit of freedom,
 I thought. But when I stood up,
 the constellations, the Big Bear
 like prison bars, shone up there
 above my silent cell.

Although freedom here appears at first glance to be tied to the concept of lost youth, the verb “imagine” suggests a vision rather than a remembrance, casting doubt on the connection between the two concepts. The freedom that once existed in youth but is believed to have been lost in adulthood is primarily tied not to nostalgic recollection but to the possibility of imagining it. The assertion, “one could / imagine some bit of freedom,” is not about the self “knowing that its share of freedom is insufficient, that it deserves more, or at least feels entitled to more,” as György Tverdota notes (Tverdota 2004, 202). Rather, it reflects the substantial difference between the concepts of imagining and remembering, suggesting that freedom, for the speaker, is merely an illusion absent from both youth and adulthood. The title *Börtöncella* [Prison Cell], given by the poet to an earlier version of the quoted passage, thus refers to the determinism of human existence, fully realized in the inherent finitude and inevitability of passing. A similar ironic rejection of the relationship between youth and freedom is evident in one of Attila József's final poems,

Talán eltűnök hirtelen... [Perhaps I'll suddenly vanish...]: "My youth, that greening wilderness, / I thought was eternal and free, / sadly I hear with tearfulness, / the rustling dry twigs in the tree" (*Translated by Leslie A. Kery*). Because the verb "thought" applies equally to the concepts of freedom and eternity, the freedom of youth is similarly withdrawn here, along with the idea of youth's eternal existence. Perhaps it is no coincidence that in Attila József's poetry between the two world wars, the ultimate point of reflection – understanding human contemplative existence and individual life – culminates in silence or the withholding of speech:

This is how in eternal night
the lit-up days speed by
and I stand in the light of each compartment,
learning on my elbow, silent.

"Theological hermeneutics – as Hans Robert Jauss points out – knows both the idea of verbal exchange that surmounts itself in fulfilled communication and form of decaying dialogicity." In the silence between God and man, this fulfilment is essentially realized: "»the divided must go on talking, the united can be silent; man is silent because all is said and done«" (Jauss 1982, 209). This loss of voice characterizes Attila József's final poems as well:

My heart sits on the twig of nothing,
its little body shivering, dumb.
In calm unbroken gathering,
staring, staring, the stars come.
(Reménytelenül [Without Hope])
translated by Edwin Morgan

In this relationship, the metaphor for understanding existence and the self is the ear, not the mouth. For whoever speaks does not listen. Existence can be heard, but not in speech – rather, in silence. The emblematic figures of the universe, the stars, in their anthropomorphized presence, here refer more to the intention of compassion and care than to strangeness or threat.

As Saint Augustine writes, the experience of everyday reality is expressed through the metaphor of sight: "Thus we do not say, »Listen for anything red,« or »Smell how shiny!« or »Taste how brilliant this is!« or »Feel the brightness of that!« For all such objects we speak of seeing. Yet we do say not only, »See how it shines,« which the eyes alone can report; we also say, »Let's see how this sounds ... See how fragrant ... See what this tastes like ... Just look how hard that is!« So, as I have pointed out, general sense-experience is called lust of the eyes, because when the other senses explore an object in an effort to collect knowledge, they claim for

themselves, by a certain analogy, the office of seeing, in which the eyes unquestionably hold the primacy” (Augustine 1997, 273). However, tradition is fundamentally different in nature from the sensory immediacy of reality. As Hans-Georg Gadamer notes in a rhetorical turn reminiscent of Saint Augustine, the hermeneutic phenomenon is based on the possibility of hearing: “It is not just that he who hears is also addressed, but also that he who is addressed must hear whether he wants to or not. When you look at something, you can also look away from it by looking in another direction, but you cannot »hear away.« This difference between seeing and hearing is important for us because the primacy of hearing is the basis of the hermeneutical phenomenon” (Gadamer 2006, 458). From this perspective, listening paradoxically has much more in common with writing, which allows tradition to present itself as potentiality, than with speaking, which mediates everyday experience.

Listening to emptiness, an act that may be considered a final transcendental standpoint for the individual of the 20th century, signifies the recognition of the indivisibility of life and death. The voices of existence and nonexistence merge into silence, as their ultimate confluence renders the distinction between these two ontological states meaningless:

The raven flies, silence grows cool
across cold space. Bone, can you hear the silence?
Molecule clinks against molecule.

(*Téli éjszaka* [Winter Night]
translated by John Báltki)

The individual, trapped in the linguistic prison of metaphysics, finds their attempts at external reflection – whether directed at the self or language – to be illusory within such a framework: “but even the trickiest cat can’t catch at once / the mouse outside and the one on the house” *Eszmélet* [Consciousness]. Similarly, the rationally distinguished duality of consciousness and existence, or of above and below, collapses into interchangeability: “Once risen up in the sky, the star / of the night river is not worth much” (*Ars Poetica* [Ars Poetica], translated by Michael Beevor).

And perhaps this is why, in these poems, the emphasis on the textual nature of writing comes to the forefront, in contrast to the efforts of orality to preserve the identity and authority of a unified construct of the self. This is why Attila József, in his final poems (*Ars Poetica* [Ars Poetica]; *Jön a vihar...* [The Storm Is Coming...]; *Költőnk és kora* [Our Poet and His Age]), engages in playful experimentation and proliferation of textual elements. Ultimately, the cessation of speech is realized not only in silence but also in the conscious disintegration of linguistic constructs, in a turn toward mere purposeless articulation:

Here is my verse.
 This is its second line.
 Its title harsh, with echoes that rage:
 “Our Poet and His Age.”
 The void flying within,
 as if it were the dust
 of something...

(Költőnk és kora [Our Poet and His Age])

This is not merely about the fact that “the subjugation of sound to text [...] confronts us with allegories of unreadability, culminating in figures of silence [...] or depriving the recipient of sound of the ability to transform the speech into a continuum of meaning against the unraveling texture” (Kulcsár Szabó 2001, 35). Rather, it addresses the ironic necessity for poetry, particularly in the lyrical experience of the 1930s, to distance itself from any form of referential creation if it is to articulate the modality of existence.

If experienced existence cannot be articulated without losing its original intent – its orientation toward others – then the only recourse is to abandon the instrumental nature of writing and accept the subjectivity and temporality of interpretation. This realization ultimately leads to the acknowledgment that, from the perspective of Cartesian thought, all creative work becomes unnecessary. If language is ungovernable for the poet, then even the preservation of the self’s unity within the text becomes illusory, and the belief in the originality of creation, fundamentally tied to the unity and uniqueness of the individual, dissolves.

In this shift in perspective, Attila József’s poetry from the 1920s and 1930s ultimately denies the unity of the subject and the expressive power of language. Both in thought and expression, it arrives at the recognition of the untenability of a prevailing worldview but, in most cases, fails to transcend this state. From this vantage point, the alienated self, condemned to helplessness in the face of the dominant ideas of its era, finds fulfilment in a tragic, ironic mode of representation. As Paul de Man observes, “Thus modernity, which is fundamentally a falling away from literature and a rejection of history, also acts as the principle that gives literature duration and historical existence.” In such an environment, the poet “cannot renounce the claim to being modern but also cannot resign himself to his dependence on predecessors – who, for that matter, were caught in the same situation” (De Man 1970, 400–401).

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The Strange and Familiar Eternity

The Experience of God
in Contemporary Hungarian Lyrical Works

INTRODUCTION

According to Martin Heidegger, in early Greek thinking “*physis*” is the concept which denotes the all-encompassing, comprehensive functioning of the universe. In the inseparability of existence and being, human beings and nature are not interpreted as components of the part-whole relationship, but as a motion conferring unity to the universe. It is this motion that gives importance to every element only in their relation to totality. Consequently, in itself, nothing is absolute and constant; nothing is permanent, only in the co-changing with the universe and the others: it can be recognized in its increase or decrease, development or disintegration: “plants and animals are in movement [...] Φύσις [*physis*] is the origin and ordering of movedness and rest” (Heidegger 1998, 187; 189). Christian philosophy attributes this all-inclusive motion that gives purpose to everything to God. Outside of Him, every being has a beginning and an ending; everything can be divided and multiplied. There is nothing without God, and everything is becoming only by Him. A 15th century Christian philosopher, Nicolaus Cusanus, said: “only [God] the infinite, eternal autohypostaton exists by itself, because nothing can be added to or taken away from it. [...] if we don’t perceive this One in diversity, we’ll see nothing else but infinite deformity and indeterminable chaos” (Cusanus 2000, 25–27). However, the relationship with God is, essentially, a hermeneutical one. This means that it can only be realized by the recognition of the fundamental difference between the human being and God, knowing that “one can present it to oneself as it is” (Gadamer 2006, 440–441). This relationship results not from the orientation towards scientific (subject-object) knowledge, but it requires humble attention and open-mindedness. Modern man, however, usually puts himself in the focus of every dialogue or conversation, i. e. he can only speak from a position that “beings can be experienced as objects only where human beings have become subjects, those who experience their fundamental relation to beings as the objectification – understood as mastery – of what is encountered” (Heidegger 1998, 188). Thus, the individual interpreted in its subjectivity as “ego” becomes unable to create and maintain true dialogue, his or her endeavors do not go beyond the limits of self-orientation and the attitude of defining the “other” as a stranger. In the 20th century, until the 60th, 70th, perhaps only

a few Hungarian poets – such as Jenő Dsida and János Pilinszky – managed to somewhat surpass this perspective. Through the analysis of István Bella's, István Ágh's, and Imre Oravecz's poems, in this study, we seek to ascertain which are the main motifs that define the experience of God in contemporary Hungarian poetry from the viewpoint of the dialogue with Christian tradition, faith, and doubt.

TRAGIC JOY IN ISTVÁN BELLA'S¹² POETRY

István Bella's poetry was mostly influenced, regarding both the tone and the typical topics, by the poetic heritage of Attila József, although – as Bella himself emphasized it – in the development of his individual style, the poetry of Gyula Illyés and Sándor Weöres, or that of the only a few years older generation than him, can be considered a starting point. “It has a lot to do with folk song, the *Kalevala*, the modernity of Béla Bartók, Attila József, and Zoltán Kodály, as well as with those whom he can call his elder brothers: László Nagy and Ferenc Juhász. It is not difficult to discover the reader of the Bible and the Psalms in his verses, either”, Jenő Alföldy observes (Alföldy 2009, 46). And indeed, irony, tragic, gentle humor, and word game are equally typical of this poetic career starting in the mid-1950s, and even of the already completed oeuvre as a whole.

The title of István Bella's first volume, *Szaggatott világ* [Fragmented World] (1966), illustrates the peculiarly modern duality – by this pointing to the poetic tradition of Attila József, Gyula Illyés, and Endre Ady even – which, in the relationship with transcendence, with God, becomes the dominant feature of all his later poetry: the undecidability of acceptance and refusal, faith and doubt, desire and rejection. In the 1950–1960s poems of István Bella, besides the “community voice” required by the aesthetic expectations of the era, the consciously suppressed personal experiences constantly emerge in connection with the painful – but usually joyfully, nostalgically recalled – events of childhood, such as poverty, loss, and orphanage. This attitude views the past and religious tradition experienced as a child not only by performing the gestures of identification, the definite commitment to continuity, but undeniably as the dominant source of identity and poetic existence:

¹² István Bella (1940–2006) was a prominent Hungarian poet, translator, and essayist, whose works are deeply rooted in Hungarian literary traditions and the lyrical exploration of existential themes. He began his literary career in the 1960s and became widely known for his elegant use of language, rich imagery, and the blending of folk motifs with modern poetic forms. Bella's poetry often reflects on themes of love, death, nature, and the passage of time, imbuing his verses with a timeless and philosophical quality.

I sang the crucified Jesus
 nine-year-old orphan Evangelist
 I brought with me the song from there
 (*Szaggatott világ* [Fragmented World])

Of course, instantly – and not without self-irony – he adds: “now that I have nothing to do with God”, justifying, even before himself, the problematic nature of the restoration of religious belief and confidence. All this can be regarded not so much as an effort to comply with ideological and political expectations but rather as an honest confession of the lyrical self – the acknowledgement of the fact that what had happened during and before World War II definitively became inaccessible to the poet creating in the Rákosi- and the early Kádár-era which propagated the materialist “salvation history”.

Considering the context of the 1950–1960s, obviously the fact itself is significant that this theme is at all present in the young poet’s verses, moreover, from 1966 onwards the motifs of religiousness, the allusions to the biblical stories and Christian tradition, begin to increasingly define István Bella’s poetic voice *Szaggatott világ* [Fragmented World]; *Bethlehem* [Bethlehem]; *Dödögő* [Babbling]. A typical figure of this lyrical orientation is the shepherd who in the first poems is formed from concrete childhood experiences, flesh and blood persons *Izmini József* [József Izmini], later, however, almost exclusively referring to the Savior Jesus Christ, as an expression of the relationship with God, develops into a constant metaphor of the presence of the Holy. Consequently, in István Bella’s poetry, Christian past is not just an external reference point but, from the very first volumes, a priceless heritage, a living tradition. Nothing proves this better than the relaxed and intimate, bantering and playful tone that depicts the dialogue with God through the sincerity of the relationship between the father and child:

My God, I’ve had enough
 coolness and so much youth
 that you do not have to fear
 that for my beggar life
 you will have to pay with my years.
 (*Nyugtalanság* [Disquiet])

A specific form of this dialogue is the sometimes self-denying, sometimes God-praising confessional tone (*Tékozló meztelenség* [Prodigal Nudity]; *Elégiák* [Elegies]), prayer (*Invokáció* [Invocation]; *Fény és levegő nélkül* [Without Light and Air]), and the emphasizing of the hope of Salvation (*Bízz hát* [So, Trust]; *Karácsonyesti vers* [Poem for Christmas Eve]; *Érdi Bethlehem* [Nativity Play in Érd]).

In István Bella's poetry, a prominent place belongs to those verses which allude to the two most authentic representatives of the 20th century Hungarian religious lyricism: Jenő Dsida and János Pilinszky. As for Pilinszky, the speaker shows the search for God as the only possible way of transcending the earthly "convict-condition", as the never ending obsession of the believer: "takes his discus-glory into his hand / throws it / and never lets it go"; as for Dsida, the Transylvanian poet living and creating between the two World Wars, he discovers the bond of common destiny – besides the confidence in Eternity – in the breath of approaching death, in the chronic heart failure: "Jenő Dsida, I understand You / Your every word-beat / is mine" (*Dsida Jenő* [Jenő Dsida]). The same identity-seeking attitude appears in the poems recalling the memory of the father, who died in World War II; here the personal relationship with God – as a recurring motif in Bella's oeuvre – is based on the analogy of the early lost, but always present personal contact, the father-son relationship (*Önarckép* [Self-portrait]; *Válasz nélkül* [Without Answer]; *A címzett ismeretlen* [The Unknown Addressee]; *Gyermekdal* [Children's Song]; *Eleven fényed* [Your Live Light]; *Apám* [My Father]; *Első versem* [My First Poem] etc.). Despite all modern scepticism and pessimism, the cycle-title *Játszom Istennel, s ő velem* [I Play with God, and He Plays with Me] of the 1991 volume *Arccal a földnek* [Facing the Ground], which emphatically represents the motifs of aging and passing away, convincingly demonstrates the continuity of the direct relationship of trust even in the poems created after the 1989 change of regime:

I play with God. How long has He,
the Lord been playing games with me!
It's Christmas Eve. For a thousand years
we've sat beneath his canopy
in a silent corner of the word.
I play with Him, and God with me.

(*Karácsonyesti vers* [Poem for Christmas],
translated by Adam Makkai)¹³

However, this lyrical orientation is far from being devoid of rebellious and ironic moments. The inscrutability of the divine plan, the presence of cruelty and evil in the world, the personal experience of approaching death show the specific states of being and mind of the individual struggling between absolute fidelity and ultimate despair. The tragic tone of the

¹³ All the poems translated by the translators mentioned above are cited from A Makkai, and E. Watson Liebert ed. In Quest of the "Miracle Stag": The Poetry of Hungary (Makkai and Watson Liebert 2003).

exclamation “Throw my poem away, son of man!” (*Világot írni* [Writing a World]) is as much a part of this poetic endeavor as the hopeful feeling of “I know: there is no death” (*Tudom* [I Know]). Especially the (post-)apocalyptic Cain-monologues – where we can recognize the 20-21st century social and human relationships – of the 1998 volume *Ábel a sivatagban* [Abel in the Desert] represent this creative stance, pointing to the inner reality and hellish depths of that solitude and loneliness which is, probably, most authentically shown by Attila József in Hungarian poetry: “where there is neither god, nor human handhold” (*Mint egykor* [Like It Once Was]). “One reality kills the other one – it’s only natural. Absolute truth is with God, or nowhere else. But still, why does the world exist? [...] If we want to unlock the secret of Bella’s poetry, we must first follow this lead”, István Kemsei states (Kemsei 1999, 90). The struggle between love and hate defines these verses, the perpetual dilemma between faith and doubt, the lack of the tangible, perceptible, anthropomorphic God. It is no coincidence that in István Bella’s poems written after the 1989 regime change the motif of the doubting Thomas’s finger penetrating into Christ’s wound repeatedly appears (*Hasonlatok* [Comparisons]; *Egy utcafához* [To a Street-Tree]).

The last cycle of poems of the 1998 volume *Ábel a sivatagban* [Abel in the Desert] paint a particularly pessimistic picture of the world. The title itself conveys a sense of hopelessness and the vulnerability of the individual. Abel’s chance of survival in the rough and violent world of earthly existence is minimal; his major “sin” – that he is, after all, gentler and, in the strictest sense of the word, nobler than Cain – seals his fate. No wonder that in these verses we can hear his voice only post-hoc, after the murder (*Ábel a gyilkokról* [Abel about the Murder], *Ábel álma álmairól* [Abel Dream about His Dreams]; *Ábel a sivatagban* [Abel in the Desert]; *Ábel fűlsóhaj* [Abel Sighs]). In fact, we can see the events – the rebellion against God, the impenitence, the denial – from the perspective of Cain; it is he who speaks even in those verses which apparently reflect on the events from the outside (*Isten halottkém-jelentéséből* [God’s Autopsy Report]; *Emlékfoszlány Isten időbarkájából* [Memory from God’s Time Ark]). “By Abel, the creator of values, the Lord’s beloved one perishes for the first time in history, but unfortunately not for the last, with whom the Cain-world still does not know what to do, no matter whether he is alive or dead” (Kemsei 1999, 92).

From this point of view, the murder is inevitable: it is the consequence of the human inclination to evil, of being expelled from the Garden of Eden. And, basically – if we can talk about such a thing at all in connection with the cycle of poems *Ábel a sivatagban* [Abel in the Desert] – as a paradoxical, final conclusion, it can be said that the difference between the two brothers comes only from the Lord’s attention. By themselves, both Cain and Abel are lost, only the testimony of the Lamb, sacrifice and redemption, repentance and forgiveness can save the human being and humankind from damnation:

Abel could be Cain
and Cain could be Abel.
But the lamb,
it is always the same.

*(Csak a bárány [Retrial],
translated by István Tótfalusi)*

However, in the symbolic “stories” of the 1998 volume, Cain finally loses not because he committed the murder, but because he is not able to repent, moreover, as a self-proclaimed “prophet”, he constructs an ideology for himself, creating the apotheosis of rebellion and wickedness. In István Bella’s poetry, Cain is the prototype of modern man, the embodiment of material culture, moral relativism, and rational thinking, who chose the possibility of definitive separation from God:

Carissime,
if you want to kill someone,
if you want to make someone perish forever,
son that even his death can be killed,

Do not kill him!

[...]

Kill all of his dead!
Eradicate his cemeteries
to seventh generation,
visit devastation upon
the graves, the cradles that rock the future,
scatter the bones among the rock,
grind them into bone-white flour,
burn them with quicklime mixed
with water.

Have the wooden grave-posts and the headstones
burned, grind them to powder
and cast them to the winds,
especially if the runes and writing
cannot be scoured away.

Have a hundred-thousand tiny Babels erected in their place.

*(Káin próféta első levele a Cainus-beliékhez
[The Prophet Cain’s First Epistle to the Cainites],
translated by Adam Makkai)*

According to Krisztina Hanti, in these poems “Bella shows God through Cain’s eyes, while he identifies himself with Abel. Even as a poet, he acts as Abel. He is aware of the fact that he carries death in his own fate, and yet he stands up against the destruction of values with his own means” (Hanti, 2008: 100).

The 1999 collected edition *Tudsz-e még világul?* [Do You Still Speak World-ish] and the 2008 posthumous volume *Mintha tükrök között beszélnek* [As if I Were Talking between Mirrors] largely confirm the same experience. The playful-ironic tone of the newer poems, the linguistic humor and self-reflection, however, despite the realization of the hopelessness of the Abel-existence, bring comfort and the old confidence of the father-son relationship back into the dialogue with God:

As someone who’s made mischief,
You’ve caught me, my God.
Around me, sixty years’ flames, ashes.
I promise I won’t do it again.
(*Hatvan év* [Sixty Years])

“After sixty years of flaming, a mischievous child asks God for forgiveness [...] And in the schoolboy greetings of the sixty-year old friends, the memory of Csokonai, Petőfi, and the puckish humor of our school years seem to revive, it rejuvenates you, and he, the little bit older, looks at them with János Arany’s resigned wisdom”, the old friend, himself a poet, recalls the last meeting with István Bella, while reading his posthumous volume of poems (Ágh 2007, 126).

IN BETWEEN DOUBT AND BELIEVE, ISTVÁN ÁGH¹⁴

István Ágh’s first volume *Szabad-e énekelni* [Is it Permitted to Sing?] appears in the middle of the 1960s, in 1965; three years later, in 1968, it is followed by the second one entitled *Rézerdő* [Copper Forest], and in 1971, by the third one: *A tündér megkötözése* [Binding the Fairy]. István Ágh’s poetry is characterized by an apolitical attitude, different from the one typical of the era, it is a mature poetic orientation aspiring to classicism that is, however, determined – especially considering the lyrical works of the 1970–1980s – by the different tendencies of the avant-garde. From the beginning, there is some

¹⁴ István Ágh (1938–2025) was a renowned Hungarian poet, novelist, and essayist, known for his vivid depictions of rural life and profound reflections on human existence. He grew up in a small village, and the landscapes and experiences of his childhood greatly influenced his poetic vision. Ágh’s poetry often combines natural imagery with philosophical and social commentary, creating a unique blend of traditional and modern themes. “His early poetry evinces an elegiac nostalgia for the native haunts he was obliged to desert when moving to the capital. [...] His mature poetry deals with the loss of youth, speaking in a voice of philosophical resignation” (Makkai and Watson Liebert 2003, 633)

sort of reserved outside approach in this poetry, which feels at home only partially on Earth and keeps looking upwards, from where the most prosaic “pub-reality”, the basest manifestations of human existence are always seen and shown in the light of eternal spirituality, the relationship with transcendence, while the lyrical self finds his own identity in semi-presence in the world. The atmosphere of this unusual identity-search and spirit, the effortless lyricism, is intensified by surreal situations and images reminding us of Sándor Weöres’ poems:

But I break my heart,
and drive it into crowded pubs:
drunk men and women
lean against the tin counter.

[...]

Dawn feathered me
with rainbow rays,
I circled around you, world,
like a winged angel.

(*Másnap* [The Next Day])

The 1965 volume *Szabad-e énekelni* [Is it Permitted to Sing?] brings to mind the tradition of Christmas holiday greetings, the Nativity play, one of the most typical events of popular custom. “Chanting, walking from house to house, had an important role in cultivating or establishing relations of kinship, friendship, and faith, as well as in the involvement in traditions, initiations”, Béla Márkus remarks (Márkus, 2015: 51).

It is but obvious that in István Ágh’s poetry, right from the first poems, there are such expressions as the Mount of Olives, Angel, Eucharistic Procession, Advent, Absolution etc., even though references to the Gospel and the Catholic tradition in the poems of the 1960–1970s are usually connected to a profane spatial and temporal dimension. The desacralized context, however, is far from serving the purpose of ironic reflection, instead creates the medium of that specific homeliness which makes the presence in the world, the existence of the individual partial but the poetic forms of (self-) expression unique and complete.

In some of the poems of the first volume, nature appears as something the first human couple might have experienced immediately after the Creation, in the Garden of Eden, in the unspoiled tranquility and joy of God’s closeness; and because violence and destruction, the idea of death are not part of this world, the harmony of the eternal present free from strife, the experience of genuine happiness, the lack of the awareness of mortality confer a special atmosphere to István Ágh’s poems:

My grass hut with trees clinging onto the Moon,
 full of mosquito bites,
 my evening love-scenes,
 the smell of whipped up dirt on the plant-scented wind,
 my green tent for the ball,
 it was I who ransacked your foliage,
 it was I who hired your musicians,
 I was the one who chose your women,
 in the dawn of the bicycle's solitude,
 immortal in all the gossip,
 oh, youth, my youth.

(*Ifjúságom* [My Youth],
translated by Mike Starkweather)

Nevertheless, this atmosphere comes not from the illusion of youth, from wishful thinking that obscures reality, but rather from a lyrical point of view which sees the world as beautiful as it is, since he finds the inalienable place and function of all objects and living beings in it. In this interdependence without hierarchy, old age is as natural as youth (*Nyári vásár* [Summer Fair]; *Arcok a tűznél* [Faces by the Fire]; *Búzavirágok kéklenek* [Cornflowers Bluening] etc.), and human life is described by the lyrical self as a wandering, a pilgrimage towards the Transcendent (*Imádság* [Prayer]).

In some early poems, hopelessness and the prospect of death are present, but only as a kind of transition between the present and eternity, because not only man and nature but also the world of objects is waiting to continue its duty beyond this world, yearning for Resurrection, the promised Salvation:

The attic: a red tile coffin,
 store of memories.
 Baby shoes, hundred-year-old boots
 weep for the old body,
 they're waiting for the resurrection.

(*Báránycú sárga házunk*
 [Our Lamb Faced Yellow House])

Besides, the tone of István Ágh's lyrical poems alludes in a much more concrete way to the relationship between man and God – by evoking religious poetry, folk prayers, and the Hungarian classical poetic tradition (*Balassi* [Balassi]; *Sivatagi testamentum* [Desert Testament]), or by combining almost blasphemously the desire for holiness and earthly love and passion (*Szerelmes himnusz* [Love Anthem]). In this particular world, on rare occasions, irony appears, pointing out the fragility of life, vulnerability, the imperfectness of

man and society, which later, from the 1968 second volume, results in a more tragic and pessimistic view.

István Ágh's later poems, therefore, no longer depict a perfect world. The harmony between God and man, man and nature is disrupted, and, apart from a few exceptions, it returns only in the verses written after the 1989 regime change, in a completely different context, due to the recognition of divine grace and providence. In the poems of the 1968 volume entitled *Rézerdő* [Copper Forest], temptation, sin, and hopelessness take the form of the devil, indicating that, for the believer, the estrangement from God implies not so much worldliness, or the fulfillment of the materialist ideology, but the risk of falling victim to the ancient power of evil and lie, the fatal presence of the invincible tempter, the fallen angel who bears the external marks of female sexuality:

It's a robber and has horse hooves,
and doesn't steal 'cause finds sorrow,
it's a big predator but shedding woman hair
Golden eagle circles smoking
Ezekiel's wheeled angel
silence, silence, after the whirr
somebody's been here something hair shedding
carved its horseshoe into my wall.

(*Valaki járt itt* [Somebody Has Been Here])

In the second half of the 1968 volume, through the figure of the sailor and the old woman, the speaker of the poems metaphorically bids farewell to the times of childlike confidence and cloudless hopes, to his own youth.

"The world is no longer a motionless idyll", Géza Vasy states in a contemporaneous literary analysis, "but a changing and contradictory reality, where disharmony is always present. [...] Attila József's »mature man« becomes Ágh's personal experience, but just like Attila József, Ágh challenges this thought, he fights against the increasing loneliness of man, seeks the shelter of a »protecting community«" (Vasy 2003, 377). Without questioning the authenticity of this emotional turn and the poetic honesty, we have to state that in the volume entitled *Rézerdő* [Copper Forrest] the motif of "growing up", of disillusionment – in the same way as in Attila József's early poetry – is rather a rhetorical pose, the expression of that theoretical and poetical orientation according to which the tragic is the only category fit for modern poetry, while the most genuine feeling of the 20th century poetry is existential alienation (Adorno 1998, 25–26). It is probably no coincidence that in István Ágh's poetry, from the volume *A tündér megkötözése* [Binding the Fairy], the pessimistic tone of the love and mortality poems, old woman and sailor dialogues of the *Rézerdő* [Copper Forrest]) loses its initial momentum, but it is

no longer able to return to the ingenuity of the first verses. Piece VII. of the cycle entitled *Csillagra-törők* [Star Conquerors] of the 1973 volume *Jóslatok az újszülöttnék* [Predictions for a Newborn Baby] perfectly illustrates this state of being and mind:

Heaven is not the same any more,
as if it were trampled down,
striped with blood,
ribboned with breath,
full of planted flowers,
afflicted by us,
adorned with us,
sanded with our smiles.

Consequently, in the 1970s, hopelessness, death, and estrangement from holiness become the dominant motifs of István Ágh's poetry, more authentically than in the second volume, since the displayed experiences are related to real life, to the eternal departure of acquaintances and friends, including Ágh's brother, László Nagy, who died in 1978. Instead of the rebellion against the injustices of life, remembering, taking leave, and resignation dominate the tone of these verses. The vocabulary of religious poetry, the metaphors of transcendent worldview, the expressions referring to the mystic secrets of Catholicism, however, are mostly present as non-functional, empty forms in the 1970s poems, they demonstrate the aimlessness of human life and poetry, the uselessness of faith and creation:

The oakum of our hair, as white as lime,
falls, stopping the machine, which spills
the songs before us onto our table,
freely disgorged the songs are wips,
the eat each other, they spread squirming
on this winter plain, children's songs,
girl's songs of farewell, keenings,
soldier's songs, chants,
and a tune gathers again
to shape the prayer of the woeful mouth:
Deliver me, Lord, from eternal death...
a change of clothes can't fend away
death, with unbuttons pelisses

(*Dalaim halottai II.* [The Dead of my Songs 2],
translated by Alan Dixon)

The wasting of divine grace, the experience of sin and atonement, the loss of faith in the effectiveness of creative work, are all part of this lyrical orientation (*Végső* [Last]; *Után* [After]; *Család mínusz egy* [Family, Minus One]). With its (self-)ironical title, the poem *Idézetek az Ábránd utcából* [Quotes From Dream Street], by the statement “you took me too seriously, father”, indicates the idea of unfulfilled desires, the vanity of the poetic, intellectual, and prophetic role. In this regard, not only individual existence but the whole society, even the world itself is chaotic and unpredictable, and the self is only a party and witness to the crisis of mankind moving towards final annihilation and apocalypse. *Szeptember 30.* [September 30] is one of the poems dealing with the personal experiences of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, even though the reality depicted in it goes beyond the specific events:

Here I stand in line between two believers
who call for death
and I’m singing like a fool

“The dreadful reality of the fear of void is the existential experience of the 20th century human being, and through the filter of this ontological anxiety, characteristic of our age, one can discern the fragments of memories which make up the material of the poems, the motifs and requisites of life” – Mátyás Domokos remarks in his analysis (Domokos 2005, 1298). In the 1977 volume *Jól vagy?* [Are You Well?], the painful self-reflection trying to express the experience of vulnerability, decay, and death thus leads to total negation (*Gyász hang gyász* [Grief Voice Grief]; *Istenem* [My God]; *Apám* [My Father]). However, the loneliness of modern man, the idea of the universe without a God – as Béla Márkus’ monograph rightly points out – here can be associated not so much with Attila József’s lyrical attitude or the scientific concepts of the end of the millennium but rather with a vision of nature and man which, regarding Hungarian literary tradition, appears first of all in Csokonai’s poems and is based on the classical Newtonian worldview (Márkus, 2015: 94–96). In István Ágh’s poetry, from here on, the path leads upwards, viz. by clinging to the memories of early faith, through recalling the father and the mother, the grandparents and the childhood experience of God (*Békességet* [Peace]; *Az újjáépítés fogantatása* [The Conception of Reconstruction]; *Körmenet* [Procession]).

In the volumes of the 1980s, religious references are more frequent (*Napvilág* [The Light of Day], 1981; *Keseredik a föld héja* [The Earth’s Crust Is Growing Bitter], 1984; *Napló és tulipán* [Diary and Tulips], 1987). The fear of passing away, the disillusionment, the apocalyptic visions are almost entirely missing from these volumes, as well as resignation and the tragic note. Instead, playfulness and (self-)irony prevail, which reflect on the previous poems of the oeuvre, on the poetic attitude giving too much importance

to the poem, the role of the poet, the pain of the individual and world, mostly within the limits of a humorous dialog with the tradition of the 20th century modern Hungarian poetry – namely with Gyula Illyés’ and Mihály Babits’ works (*Egy Babits-sor megfejtése* [Explanation of a Babits-line]; *Amit Illyés mutat be* [What Illyés presents]). Relief is also a part of this change, which discovers the happiness of one-time, unique events, the beauties of life, the creative power of memory and imagination in the awareness of the naturalness of aging (*Keseredik a föld héja* [The Earth’s Crust Is Growing Bitter]; *Vénasszonyok nyara* [Indian Summer]). Confessional tone and self-analysis become the characteristic features of this poetic diction which, through sincere remorse and search for transcendence, and by recognizing everyday miracles, finds its way back to the vital dialogue with God.

Where is god
whom I learned to write in small letter,
and this small g made me an insect, too

[...]

This ditch flower has withered,
and the first gossip of the somewhere existing sentimentalism
is hanging on the table,
and it would quench thirst like Christ.
Vinegar for me! Remorse!

(*Árokparti virág* [Ditch Flower])

After the 1989 regime change, in Ágh’s poetry, the metaphors of faith and doubt are closely linked to the recollection of various personal experiences and events, for instance the Italian tour or the 1956 revolution, as well as the Budapest daily life. The time of the events and the locations, in these poems, are mostly clearly identifiable, thus the relationship to sacrality always appears in a well-defined context, but not in all cases can be subordinated to the situation to which it is connected. So, real events help, simply by their uniqueness, the lyrical self-reflection, the attitude ignoring concrete space and time, the partial – but with the individual consistently aiming at the full – realization and understanding of the goal of human existence, the laws of society, the events and opportunities of individual life. One can find here the dichotomy between reality and vision, repentance and rebellion (*Az öreg Michelangelo* [The Old Michelangelo]; *Innen indulnak* [They Start Here]; *Mindig virágos* [Always Blooming]; *A bélpoklosok Messiása* [The Lepers’ Messiah] etc.), while the dialogue with God also belongs to this effort:

My age-worn holiday, homeless
Mother of God, if the stall
of Bethlehem is a roofless ruin,

if the key to the vacant dwelling is lost,
where could Mary bear her son?

[...]

so I offer a tattered stall, myself,
the tiny crib of my heart,
the breath of my lungs, the myrrh of my liver,
the incense of my teeth, the gold of my eyes,
the Christmas tree of my backbone,
tinsels and the Galaxy on my ribs,
silver thorns to the Saviour for my salvation.

*(Fölaajánlom magam [I Offer Myself],
translated by István Tótfalusi)*

In such a context, the memory absorbed in childhood's faith, in the joy of holidays, or Haydn's music, creates the continuity that, despite the negative life experiences, the disillusionment, the pains and diseases of old age, opens the way for hope and trust, giving a sacred purpose and meaning to the final farewell to life, as well (*A Teremtés* [The Creation]; *Születésnap, 1938* [Birthday, 1938]; *Az orr látomásai* [The Nose's Visions]; *Gyászeseemény* [Bereavement]). "You try to somehow reach the corner of God's cloak" – István Ágh notes in an interview in the 2000s. "Of course, you never succeed, as on Michelangelo's fresco God's and Adam's finger can't meet, either. But the gesture and the will are clearly visible" (Ágh 2004, 117).

SACRALITY AND DEPOETIZATION, IMRE ORAVECZ¹⁵

Just like István Bella's and István Ágh's poetry, Imre Oravecz's poems are defined, from the very beginning, by a poetic attitude focusing on sacrality, on transcendence. We could even say that each moment of the vast oeuvre reflects this relationship, not only by connecting to the traditionally religious rural culture but as a basic experience of individual creative life, as a source of past and present, man and history, culture and civilization.

The religious motifs, starting from the 1972 volume *Héj* [Skin], constitute an essential part of this universe (re-)created consciously from personal memories and elements of imagination, while in the later volumes the

¹⁵ Imre Oravecz (born 1943–) is a distinguished Hungarian poet and writer, whose works are deeply personal and often reflect on themes of memory, identity, and the passage of time. His rural upbringing significantly shaped his poetic voice, as he frequently draws inspiration from the landscapes and traditions of the Hungarian countryside. Oravecz's poetry is known for its simplicity and emotional depth, blending everyday experiences with universal human concerns. "Oravecz himself stands on the map of modern Hungarian poetry as a rebel and something of a loner" (Makkai and Watson Liebert 2003, 843).

experiences of sacrality result from the relationship with the family, ancestors, and the tradition of peasant society, from the values of Catholicism and universal Christianity. Words like “psalm”, “mass”, “cross”, “prayer-book”, and “rosary” are, as well, part of this existential stance, as mutual assistance between neighbors, or the Commemoration of All the Faithful Departed held over the graves of unknown soldiers:

Ever since I can remember,
they had always been there,
in our garden, next to the cemetery,
they were lined up in the potato field,
packed in side by side,

[...]

once every year, on All Souls' Day, we'd weed them thoroughly,
put them in order,
and place lighted candles on them,
as if they were relatives,
but only one on each,
because they cost money

sometimes I tried to relate them to bloodthirsty beast in Soviet films,
but it didn't work,
I couldn't take offense at them,
my friend Miki always came to mind,
whose father hadn't come home from the war
and might be buried like this somewhere in Russia,
or even worse than this

(Katonasírok [Soldiers' Graves], translated by Bruce Berling)

The space and time perspective of Oravecz's poems is also special, since through metonymic relations, metaphorical images, allegories, and enumerations individual destiny appears – despite the concrete referentiality – embedded in a historical, salvific, and mythological dimension. Although from an external (e.g. the reader's) viewpoint all this may seem chaotic, the individual always finds his place and role in it. The speaker of the poems appears as an initiate, as a bearer of secrets in these situations, but the source of knowledge is the community surrounding him, while the values and standards not only help at the level of everyday events, but also provide guidance regarding the development of sacred relationships, even the understanding of human existence and the world.

Thus, in Imre Oravecz's poetry the connection to tradition is created by those objects, scenes, and natural elements, which in their distinctive functions are able to evoke the various aspects of traditional rural culture, peasant

activities, and religious life (*Egy földterület növénytakarójának változása* [Changes in the Flora of a Tract of Land], 1979; *Halászóember* [Fishing Man], 1998; *A megfelelő nap* [The Right Day], 2002; *Távozó fa* [Departing Tree], 2015). The memories juxtaposed – images mostly originating from the narrower metaphorical and metonymical space of childhood and family – create, due to selection, a unique existential medium that points back and forth in time: “in the corner half-made bed, / dusty books on the shelves, / photos on the nightstand, / in the drawers and boxes memories, relics, / here clothing, clock, glasses, / over there phone, prayer-book, calendar” (*Csendélet* [Still-life]).

The non-poetical, prosaic, objective tone strengthens, paradoxically, the personal, even the intimate nature, the authenticity of the (narrated) events, the community ties come alive in the sincere emotional relation to the evoked characters and the empirical world. At the same time, the documentation of momentariness is, right from the first volume, an elementary part of this orientation, which subordinates everything, human being, nature, and object to the awareness of impermanence. From the point of view of Oravecz's poems, we can never see the whole, only the fraction, the fragment that, building on memories, shows immobility, the state before or after the action, event, documenting photographically, as it were, the presence of life, the traces of the physical, mental and spiritual existence of man:

solemn icon
in front of the bed
in the unstirred silence
old banknotes
leaf tobacco
notebook chaff hair bulb
wrapped in damask

In the poems of the 1972 volume *Héj* [Skin], we mostly can't see the speaker; we can only hear his fragmented speech. These lyric episodes don't have flesh and blood characters; a body part or a gesture emerges now and then from the bursting stream of memory. Only the figures brought into existence, so to say as a fiction, by things, instruments, machines, places, and the (imagined) space and time constitute an exception (*Dubrovnik* [Dubrovnik]; *H. Bosh álma* [The Dream of H. Bosch]; *Áldozat* [Sacrifice]; *Lingua* [Lingua]). In this relation, therefore, reality is present through various places, buildings, objects, and paintings; the values of Christian past – mostly related to the religious and cultural context of Medieval Europe – appear only incidentally, from the imprints of different periods and locations. This depersonalized discourse is characterized by projecting surrealistic images on one another, genuinely illustrating that the existence evoked here finds its meaning, beyond the linguistic, visual, and temporal dimension, in a higher, sacral context:

The clock struck. On its face
 a handcart made its way,
 the wheels creaking,
 the seat empty

(Idő [Time], translated by Bruce Berlind)

The prose poems of the volume *1972. szeptember* [September 1972] simultaneously display the period from the Creation to the Fall, and from Christ's Coming to the Apocalypse, adding a salvific dimension to the experience of the birth and death of love, of happiness and despair, of heaven and hell. The personal issues, here, metaphorically evoke the eternal struggle between good and evil, love and hate, life and death, since by reflections alluding to the Gospel stories, they transcend the space and time limitations of subjective memory. In the introductory part, for example, we can recognize the first words of Saint John's Gospel: "there was you, there was there, there was / then, there was blue sky, there was sunshine, there was spring, / there was warm, there was meadow [...] there / was trust, there was giving, there was richness, there was pleasure, / there was gaiety, there was laughter, there was song, there was / talk, there was prayer [...] then the you became she, the / there became here, then became now [...] affirmation / became negation, faith became doubt, hope became despair, love / became hate, future became past" (*Kezdetben volt* [In the Beginning] *translated by Bruce Berlind*).

Just like in István Ágh's poetry, in Oravecz's poems humankind plays a central role – including, in particular, the destiny of Hungarian people, of traditional peasant society. The post-apocalyptic portrayal of life and death, of reality addresses this issue, as well. Contrary to the present state of being, to the destructive effect of modern age on identity and community, to the civilization-stricken rationalistic society, the 1983 volume *A hopik könyve* [The Book of the Hopi], depicts an ideal – probably non-existent – world which accepts the process of birth, life, and death as something natural, and the human being as God's creation:

the first vibration center of the human body is on the crown,
 the Creator places life in man
 through the first vibration center,
 and takes it out from there through it, as well

(Eototo és Aholi az embertestről)

[Eototo and Aholi about the Human Body]

The Indians in the 1983 volume are, basically, the allegorical characters of an old, traditional, happier society, of a universe in which all the events are subject to the divine order and to the wisdom coming from tradition; even

death or irrational events have a meaning, cause and consequence affecting sacred relationships. “A *hopik könyve* [The Book of the Hopi] is an ancient story, a reality that existed about ten thousand years ago, which is for us now like a myth and fiction. At that time, the world was a better place, a lot of problems didn’t exist, though human existence always and everywhere is the same, we are born, we suffer, we are happy sometimes, and then we die. [...] Even today, there are people for whom the fact that they must die does not cause a big problem – but for most of them it does cause a great deal of problem. More so since death is eliminated from our lives. We live as if we were never going to die, and we bury our dead in the same way – we die as if we had never lived” – Imre Oravecz remarks in an interview (Herczeg and Lapis 2008, 26).

This experience, according to the testimony of Oravecz’s works, is inaccessible to the modern man, but it can be reconstructed, to some extent, from childhood reality based on confidence and emotional decisions, bizarre games, and actions built on rites (*A régi Szajla* [The Old Szajla]; *A gyermekkor módosítása* [Modification of Childhood]; *Támpontok a gyermekkor módosításához* [Clues to the Modification of Childhood]). That is so even if the “stories” themselves are formed from a timeless, universal dimension that always resists the efforts searching for specific references and time limitations. “The retrospective angle of the remembering self usually portrays and searches for the past from the consequences of growing up and, by doing so, the once private appears already as stranger and lost, and gains meaning as such, yet – precisely because this perspective is determined by the experience of absence – the meaning manifesting itself is no longer relevant, given that in the context of the present, i.e. in the temporal context of remembering it cannot be retrieved”, Zoltán Kulcsár-Szabó states (Kulcsár-Szabó 1999, 91).

In the 2000s poems, turning to tradition, remembering, and settledness bear witness to that attitude which is able to accept death as a part of life and the inevitable impermanence of worldly things. Rejoicing over unexpected love and giving thanks become part of the transcendental dialogue, as well as the playful-ironic prayer poems for easy old age, for the mercy of good death (*Bőség* [Abundance]; *Kívánságlista* [Wish List]; *A kérés részletezése* [Detailing the Request]). In this context, it is not so much the preordained death of every human which lends a melancholic tone to the expression but rather the fate of traditional society, the (self-)liquidation of rural communities, and the disappearance of the ancient forms of sacrality. The demoralizing and identity-crushing irresponsibility of communism, nationalization, and then the consequences of the political decisions made after the regime change, as well as the related family stories and personal experiences intensify the tragic aspect of Oravecz’s poetry:

Father Győző presents the wafer,
 and we pray aloud.
 We are around fifteen or twenty people in the church.
 In Szajla, the Lord has neither workers nor harvest any more.
 (*Mise* [Mass])

Péter Szirák correctly notes: “The destruction of Hungarian peasant society is part of a worldwide trend, with a delayed land distribution and a little collective farm detour. But elsewhere, something new grew out of the old: in the West, they provide large subsidies for the maintenance of the rural world. Because it slows down the unbearable expansion of urbanization, strengthens community life and environmental awareness. It’s expensive everywhere, yet they assume the costs. Over here, however, rural life has been ruined to such an extent that there is nothing instead. In many places, farming has disappeared; people do not even sow in the kitchen-garden. In many places, even the young live on welfare, or on disability pension. No one wants to cultivate the land anymore. [...] In Hungarian literature, which nowadays mostly moves in a vacuum, producing neat historical novels, and manufacturing puns, only Imre Oravecz keeps us posted about all this” (Szirák 2008, 42).

After the change of regime, the optimistic objectivity of Oravecz’s poetry, its strong faith, and the playfulness with which it turns to God is, on the other hand, unique in the 21st century Hungarian literature. The evocation of simple peasant life, of the happiness and joyfulness, despite all the hardships, of childhood (*Középkor* [Middle Ages]), the unbroken trust in Salvation, in the existence of afterlife, in the validity of redemption (*Túl* [Beyond]; *Halottaim* [My Dead]; *Megkönnyebbülés* [Relief]), the epigrammatic *Szekuláris bizonyíték* [Secular Proof] completing, (self-)ironically, Pascal’s wager with the reality of the (post-)modern age are equally part of this kind of poetic space. This orientation – though in some ways it has been present since the first volumes – is able, more maturely and tested, near the end of life, experiencing the process of aging, to look at the personal past and future serenely: “God is like a light / we can only see that He shines” (*Egy hívő naplójából* [From a Believer’s Diary]).

If it’s allowed to speak from the perspective of a contemporary literary interpretation, the conclusion of Oravecz’s poetry is that: just as focusing on transcendence and remembering have a purpose and meaning, so human life and death cannot be in vain. As the counter-poem of the *Egy hívő naplójából* [From a Believer’s Diary], written in English, convincingly demonstrates: “Feeling God’s presence in my lonely nights / makes me think of a beautiful garden / I have always wished to be a gardener in” (*Confession of a Faithful*).

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II.
TRANSYLVANIAN
PERSPECTIVES

Poetry on the Red Flag's Shadow

Hungarian Literature and Cultural Policy in Transylvania
from World War II until the End of the Communist Dictatorship

INTRODUCTION

If we accept the viewpoint according to which “literary theory is indissociably bound up with political beliefs and ideological values” (Eagleton 2003, 169–170), and “the work of art is the product of a negotiation between a creator or class of creators, equipped with a complex, communally shared repertoire of conventions, and the institutions and practices of society” (Greenblatt 1987, 13), then we will probably not deny that the actual social reality may play a role in producing and maintaining the external references of a literary work at least as important as the author’s or readers’ different interests and expectations. Although contemporary literary criticism mostly faces the legitimate need to strictly separate the aesthetic/poetic identity of the work of art from the gratuitous study of the author’s intent and biographical details, from the perspective of the writer, the public or critical orientation, the nature of the complex system of relations which regulates the writing, the publication, and reception of a literary work can by no means be left out of consideration. Consequently, it does matter if the evaluation of a poem, oeuvre or stylistic tendency – using Zsuzsa Selyem’s appropriate categorization – takes place in the background of an “author-text-censor-reader” or “author-text-manager-reader” relationship (See: Selyem 2003, 63–96), just as, hermeneutically, there is a difference between the result of that mode of reception which, in order to circumvent an external political power, is forced to follow the strategy of reading between the lines and one which does not need to make this compromise.

After World War I, the advocates of Transylvanianism, one of the Transylvanian Hungarian community’s leading ideology, declared that Transylvania was a specific entity and home to the three Transylvanian ethnic communities, Hungarians, Romanians, and Saxons who had been living together for centuries. The start of this political/cultural movement is frequently related to the publication of the pamphlet *Kiáltó Szó* [Calling Voice], whose authors and supporters were prominent Transylvanian Hungarian writers and intellectuals, among them – to name but a few – Károly Kós, Árpád Paál, István Zágoni, Endre Dózsa, Sándor Reményik. The Transylvanianist set themselves the goal of realizing cultural autonomy (Balogh 1999). As Géza Szávai, a contemporary Hungarian writer from Transylvania discusses:

Transylvanism mainly consisted of three different ideological orientations: emphasizing the rights of Hungarian speakers to of surviving on the native land as a moral imperative, highlighting the specificity of “Transylvanian Spirit”, and creating the historical background of national consciousness (Szávai 2004, 166–179). However, these issues suffered significant changes from the late ‘40s, when the requirement to survive on the native land was redefined in different strategies of adaptation to the social/political goals of (the communist) power or protest assimilative aspirations, censorship, and abolition of minority institutions. The idea of common values and interests of nationalities living together and the historical extension of interdependence of cultures were increasingly replaced by (emotional) attachment to the mother tongue and Hungary, as well as by emphasizing the need for Hungarian national identity. More so since official forums barely made it possible for Transylvanian Hungarian intellectuals to do so. In 1940, because of the Second Vienna Treaty, North-Transylvania was reunified with Hungary, but this partial reunification only lasted until the end of World War II, when the allies granted Romania the whole territory again. At the beginning of the ‘40s, during a period of less than five years, approximately 160 000 North-Transylvanian Jews (most of them ethnic Hungarians) were deported and killed by Nazi Germany. Between 1941 and 1948, the Hungarian Transylvanian community decreased from 1 706 000 to 1 481 000 persons (Varga 1988, 39–41).

LITERATURE AND CULTURAL POLICY FROM THE MID-‘40S TO THE END OF THE ‘50S

After the instauration of the Communist regime in Romania, the “revolutionary” process of consolidating the Soviet-style new power, in Transylvania the idea of opposition between the Romanian majority and Hungarian minority was increasingly replaced by propagating the necessity of “class struggle” and radical social change. At the same time, almost nobody noticed that the gradually developing machinery of the totalitarian state nearly destroyed all individual and collective forms of organizations created through no small effort between the two world wars to promote Hungarian culture and identity, and, eventually, the historic churches. “Following World War II”, observes Stefano Bottoni, “the Transylvanian Hungarian world integrated into the Romanian state structure, and after 1948 into the Romanian communist state without being forced to abandon cultural identity. That is why the permission to use the mother tongue and national symbols, and the utopia of building socialism in Hungarian obscured the fact that many Hungarians unconsciously assisted in developing an extremely harsh dictatorship” (Bottoni 2008, 14–15).

The 1946 note, entitled *Itt élned, halnod kell* [Here You Must Live and Die], by Edgár Balogh, a prominent representative of the Transylvanian Hungarian left-wing intelligentsia between the two world wars, can be considered an instructive ideological precedent. In this note, he mentions that at the people's meeting held on the occasion of the anniversary of world peace in Kolozsvár (Cluj), a Transylvanian city, which at the time was still inhabited by Hungarian majority, Hungarian speakers were booed by the Romanian-speaking audience. Apart from blaming the Hungarian proletariat for being passive, in his writing, Balogh regards this extreme nationalist gesture as an open demonstration of power on the part of Romanian bourgeois "reaction", and gives voice to the hope that in the spirit of the new internationalism represented by the working class, manifestations of this kind will disappear from Transylvanian public life once and for all: "On May 10th, in front of the Romanian Cathedral in Kolozsvár, I wasn't surprised by the whistle storm that broke out when Hungarian speakers rose to speak, but by the relatively small number of workers present. [...] I shouted words into the microphone, and I couldn't even hear my own voice. I was speaking on behalf of all of us who want a better world, and my words elicited a negative response. [...] Those who had instigated Romanian students and advised Hungarian workers to stay away knew very well what they were doing. Their double game stabbed democracy in the back" (Balogh 1957, 286–287). Nevertheless, Edgár Balogh's words seem interesting not only from the perspective of that truth-seeking intellectual attitude which states firmly that "people's democracy", that is to say the new socialist politics will no longer tolerate nationalist rhetoric, but also because they appeared, along with the unintentional references to the Hungarian revolution of 1956, in the collected edition of his works in 1957.

In the period immediately following World War II, texts of literary history and cultural policy analysing the relation between literature and the new state power system apparently do not emphasize party loyalty and militant revolutionary attitude but the superiority of socialist ideas and service for "the people", "freedom", and "humanity" by means of a certain kind of "representation of reality". Lajos Jordáky, a Hungarian sociologist, critic, and essayist in Kolozsvár in one of his books published in 1946, talks about the mutual relationship between literature and socialist state, as well as about their common goals, highlighting that the writer's duty is to reshape society, to strengthen socialist ideals, class consciousness, and to represent reality: "The writer now wants the new form of literary expression to be the manifestation of the social class to which they belong. [...] Socialism creates the precondition for the birth of great literary works: freedom; and it allows the masses access to these literary works: through people's well-being. Literature, on the other hand, serves and facilitates the implementation of socialism through the assessment and artistic representation of reality. For this very reason, socialists and writers

must find each other, recognizing that they want the same thing and must work closely together” (Jordáky, 1946: 8). In Jordáky’s view, it is not yet party or ideological loyalty that primarily determines literary activity, but rather the idea of serving the truth, the people, and freedom. Knowing the Soviet model, the following sentences probably seemed ironic even at that time: “Socialism, unlike any other ideology, doesn’t want the writer to be a party writer; it doesn’t even expect them to be a party member. [...] The writer serves humanity, the good, the truth, and freedom just as much as socialism does.” Yet, Jordáky contradicts himself when in a later chapter of the book redefines the concept of “party poet”: “In a socialist sense, the party poet is the poet of the class and progressive mankind, just as the self-conscious and militant party of the working class is the party of the class and progressive mankind. [...] At the same time, they who, by their art, promote socialism are party poets even if organizationally they are not members of the labor party” (Jordáky 1946, 76–77). The same idea can be found in Gábor Gaál’s writings on topics concerning aesthetics and history of poetry (Gaál 1950, 286–291 and 301–310), and also in the unambiguous gesture that as chief editor of the literary journal *Utunk*, he provides an opportunity for right-wing authors debuted between the two world wars (Gáll 1995, 15), to publish their works. Even István Nagy, probably the fiercest defendant of Soviet communist patterns of propaganda literature, appreciates Sándor Kacsó’s, Emil Grandpierre’s, László Szabédi’s or Sándor Fodor’s works, and rejects the most extreme clichés of communist consciousness and class struggle. In a 1948 article, he says: “Our writers very often err in describing the party and the class enemy. They give the impression that party members are ideally good people, while endow the class enemy with the vilest monstrosities. So, they distinguish the most conscious characters of the two classes by extremely striking colors. That’s a mistake, because it has no educational value, nor is it true that only white and black colors oppose each other” (Nagy 1957, 106). Of course, this dictatorial and radically change demanding period in Transylvanian Hungarian literature was far from being without any – ideological – conflicts. For example, let us just mention the controversy erupted over János Arany’s, one of the greatest 19th-century Hungarian poets’ best-known epic poem, the *Toldi*: in the spirit of socialist realism, Gábor Gaál severely condemns his fellow writer, Marcell Benedek, accusing him of anachronistic aestheticism and disregard for class categories (Gaál 1950, 334–339). His opinion about Transylvanian Hungarian literature between the two world wars is very ambivalent. While he speaks highly of István Petelei’s short stories, he attacks with the same fervor Sándor Reményik’s “bourgeois”, “nationalist” poetry (Nagy 1957, 221–233 and 112–124). As a general characteristic of internal showdowns in Central and Eastern Europe, a few years later the accuser himself becomes the accused one, in consequence of which Gábor Gaál is forced to “practice self-criticism” due to “ideological unpreparedness” several times.

Probably the greatest difference between Stalinist literature in Romania and Hungary can be attributed to their different positions reflected in the relation between the author and state power. While Transylvanian Hungarian literature – due to its minority status – was always treated by the Romanian communist regime as an extraneous phenomenon,¹⁶ the mother country writers were able to participate more directly in the definition of the aesthetic/ideologic orientation of cultural and art policy and in the exercise of power. It follows from the necessity of this kind of subordination that contemporary Transylvanian Hungarian literature, in the literary works of the late '40s and early '50s, emphasized a new, reinterpreted version of Transylvanism: fraternity between nations, and joining forces in the ideological/political struggles (Balogh 1957, 301–305, or 314–319; Gaál 1950, 280–285; Nagy 1955, 268–272). Nonetheless, this proved to be a rather futile attempt, since Romanian writers did not really reciprocate these gestures. Of course, contemporary literary criticism and history writing in Hungary also sought to consolidate the same ideological/political position, inasmuch as they were extremely careful to avoid even the appearance of somehow offending the sensibilities of the “friendly” socialist countries, while making efforts to strengthen the identity of transborder Hungarian communities.

Nevertheless, while within Hungarian literature and cultural politics in Romania in the late '40s and early '50s prevailed – maybe precisely because minority discourse was left out of mainstream ideology – a more or less permissive attitude which, under the circumstances, allowed various voices of leftism to assert themselves, in Rákosi's Hungary the Stalinist internal showdowns were much more radical. “After all, the intensification of class struggle, the enhancement of political and ideological vigilance, the pressing demand for theoretical firmness, the search for the hiding places of the enemy even in the cultural frontline – these sparked the controversy over comrade Lukács's certain opinions which, in fact, did not help us, the working class, the Party but the waverers, the opponents of the Party's policy, in a word: the enemy. [...] Comrade Lukács's [...] literary slogans did not comply with the Party's increasingly harsh political and economic slogans. [...] When the Party intensified its struggle against capitalists, when revolution was far behind us, then, in the spring of 1949, comrade Lukács turns to the right and begins to fight – not for socialist realism but basically against it, against those literary currents and their representatives who – in one way or another – stood for progress towards socialist realism”, concludes József Révai, the omnipotent leader of cultural and literary life in Hungary, briefly

¹⁶ In this respect, it is an interesting fact that after 1956 the Romanian secret police began to listened and watched permanently not only ethnic Hungarian writers but also Hungarian members of the Romanian Communist Party's Central Committee.

summarizing the era's arts policy "objectives" in a damning article written against György Lukács (Révai 1950, 284 and 287).

The somewhat more open nature of Transylvanian Hungarian literary and cultural discourse of the time may also be put down to the fact that, unlike in Hungary, in Transylvania the worldview of left-wing writers and intellectuals got impulses from very different sources, largely influencing the development of left-wing ideology after World War II (Bottoni 2008, 170–171). Nándor Bárdi speaks of four left-wing generations who played a more or less significant role in shaping the political orientation of Transylvanian Hungarians after the communist takeover (Bárdi 2004, 71–85). According to Bárdi's classification, the third and especially the fourth generation assumed a leading role in organizing literary and cultural life after the consolidation of communist power mainly in the '50s and '60s, namely: Ferenc Szemlér, Edgár Balogh, István Asztalos, József Méliusz, István Nagy, Győző Hajdu, Géza Domokos, Ernő Gáll, András Sütő, Sándor Huszár etc.

In the early '50s, when – in concordance with Stalinist Soviet nationalities policy – the Hungarian Autonomous Region was established, Transylvanian Hungarian left-wing intellectuals undoubtedly experienced it as a triumph of freedom and sincere gesture of socialist ideology. They believed that ethnic conflicts would definitively end, or at least dissolve in an idealistic post-nationalist/internationalist view particularly emphasized by the communist propaganda, despite the fact, that the political decision also created an opposition between the Hungarian intelligentsia (writers, journalists) of Cluj/Kolozsvár – the most important Hungarian cultural center in Transylvania –, and the same of Marosvásárhely/Târgu-Mureș, the new center of the Autonomous Region. "There is no doubt that in the old Romania the communists proved to be consistent defenders of minorities, and they were also the allies whom one could rely on against the anti-minority right-wing, against fascism [...] It is also a fact that in 1946 Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej stated: the ethnic Hungarian community is considered an ally of Romanian democracy, and at that time this statement did not remain mere rhetoric", says Ernő Gáll (one of the prominent literary, journalistic and cultural political personalities after World War II) in his memoirs written in the '90s (Gáll 1995, 9).

However, the fact that in Transylvanian Hungarian culture – which, in some respects, may be considered an ethnic subculture – conflicts between different political/ideological tendencies within the party did not arise as acutely as in Hungary does not even remotely imply that free speech or at least a certain "polyphony" was allowed to be part of the literary life of the era; authors referred to as "rightists" or "bourgeois" were completely silenced after the communist takeover in Romania, as well. Let us only mention here the tone of the debate erupted in the mid-'50s in the literary journal *Utunk* on the occasion of re-publishing the works of Jenő Dsida, a Transylvanian Hungarian poet who lived between the two world wars and died young, as well as the

attitude of those in power and the subsequent harsh political attacks (Panek 1998, 258–267). The old bourgeois writer, the “parasitic” intellectual – as Gábor Gaál puts it in several of his studies published in the second half of the ‘40s – must go into the dustbin of history (Gaál 1950, 269–274 and 275–279). In consequence of such cultural struggles, a growing number of writers are forced to choose to temporarily remain silent, while others drop out of literary and public discourse because they are sentenced to several years in prison on fabricated charges (e.g. Lajos Jordáky).

In a social context where all manifestations of minority existence and search for identity were subject to strict limitations, literature was the only medium that gave the possibility of taking a stand on various issues. The suppression of the Hungarian uprising of 1956 was followed by reprisals in Romania, as well; communist authorities tried to intimidate young Hungarian intellectuals. Many writers and poets, such as Géza Páskándi, Ferenc Bartis, Lajos Páll, and Gyula Dávid were sentenced to serious jail time on fabricated charges, others – for instance, Domokos Szilágyi – “escaped” retaliation probably only through collaboration with the secret service (Cf. Selyem 2007, 5–38). Another impact of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution was the abolition of the Hungarian Autonomous Region and the Bolyai University, steps toward the “nationalizing” communism in Romania.

Regarding the characteristics of literary discourse and cultural policy of the post-World War II years, it can be clearly stated that the newly established communist power in Eastern-Europe gained control over all manifestations of community life as early as the second half of the 1940s, and came to regulate all aspects of culture and the arts; it banned, abolished or restructured all forums which enjoyed some kind of independence; it completely revised the literary and artistic canon, and at the same time sought to develop a new ideological/political space that would serve only its own interests. “We can talk about how the party leadership of literary life demands the development of institutionally secured public opinion”, stated József Révai, one of the Hungarian communist critics of the era, who held office in a decision-making position in the executive apparatus of cultural policies imposed on Hungary based on Soviet model. “This institutional security is the Hungarian Writers’ Association, with its strong, ideologically united party organization. [...] It’s time for the party organization of the Writers’ Association to finally begin its work, so that our Party can rely on it in the realization of our literary life’s guidance” (Révai 1950, 318).

Although the communist regime, in literature as well as in all areas of social life, aimed at uniformity and creating an “art” serving propaganda purposes in the entire central and eastern European region, the Romanian Stalinist “cultural project” differed in many respects from that of other countries’, e.g. Hungary’s. However, it was common to the centrally proclaimed literary policy orientation of both countries that they propagated the socialist

human ideal and communist ideology, realistic representation and pursuit of community goals which, in fact, worked as a dictatorial, strictly controlled mechanism placing the Party's interests and personality cult above all, and dealing out rewards and punishments accordingly. "Socialist literature consciously serves the same purposes as the labor movement and the organized labor party; its role is not that of the lonely forerunner anymore, but of one who goes along with the community, the people, and society. In this connection, it is not only literature and the place of the artist in society that changes, but theory and criticism acquire greater importance. In the development of socialist literature, at every step there are theoreticians, critics and writers interpreting the movements, the needs of the Party and society, as well as the demands of social development", states Miklós Szabolcsi, one of the best known Hungarian literary historians of the era, in his study appeared in the early 1960s, summing up the "history" and aims of socialist literature (Szabolcsi 1963, 22). Literary texts of the time contain almost every accessory of the phraseology of materialist "salvation history" and militarist rhetoric. Beside the key concepts, viz. the "Party", "People", "Truth", "Light", "Word", "Revolution", "Freedom", there are, as obligatory oppositions, words like "Contagion", "Fascism", "Exploitation" etc., making it possible, or rather compulsory, to interpret the literary text as a simple political message. In this era, the discourse emphasizing the aspects of revolutionary transformation and radical policy change built strongly on the image of the enemy; the fault-line between past and present, old and new, and also the necessity of continuous political struggle also prevailed in both poetry and prose as eternal actualities. In order to achieve the intended social goals, this kind of communist sacrifice ethics, after all, regards the annihilation of resisters, protesters, and even of the internal opposition not only as a possibility, but as an assumed necessity. "The goal of social redemption conceived by the proletarian revolution exempts us not only from the sin of sacrificing ourselves, but also from the (otherwise sufficiently realized) sin of sacrificing others", states Dávid Szolláth, referring to György Lukács, in his work analysing the elite and mass phenomena of contemporary attitudes, as well as the literary and historical aspects of power and community gestures (Szolláth 2011, 42). It is consequently no coincidence that the party-state rhetoric during the decades of communist dictatorship in Central and Eastern Europe – though in different ways and with varying intensity depending on the country and the period – is determined everywhere by the image of the enemy and militarist attitude, while individual freedom or forms of expression different from those prescribed are extremely controlled and restricted all along. These phenomena also determine literature in both Romania and Hungary, by no means only as a common manifestation of a consistent aesthetic/poetic view of writers, but mainly because of the strict demands and compulsory/exclusive ideological position of the post-World War II political system.

In the first volumes of the poets who made their debut in the 1950s or at the beginning of the 1960s, the representation of national identity and of the situation of ethnic Hungarians in Transylvania is generally closely linked to the ideological/political stereotypes of the official party propaganda. Instead of the conflict between nations or nationalities, the most important element of the prevailing poetic discourse is the message emphasizing reconciliation, interdependence, and cooperation, while “revolutionary poetry” finds its enemy image in the “reactionary” or “bourgeois” representatives of the former social elite. The dominant feature of these poems is contrast, and the verse structure built on militaristic rhetoric is composed rather of simple metonymic than metaphoric components. All the elements of the past are associated with negative connotations, while present and future possibilities are endowed with positive meaning – almost exclusively for didactic, educational purposes. There are only a few exceptions to this, e.g. Aladár Lászlóffy's¹⁷ volume entitled *Hangok a tereken* [Voices on the Squares]. Though these poems show a radical change of discourse – primarily related to the avant-garde endeavors – and the need to break with the classical poetic tradition, all of this is dissolved in an attitude which embraces the whole human community and can likewise be regarded as a profoundly Christian worldview.

This poetic attitude is characterized using metaphors specific to folk songs, to folk love poetry, by the effortlessness of pure human consciousness that is able to melt into the eternal cycle of nature and identify with it, and by the transcendent thought that sees life as the greatest miracle:

But they ask You unsuspectingly:
 “What do You see where I see nothing?”
 Feel it quickly: people are friends!

Say it then: the other stars are far away!
 And don't let Your proud heart make
 You feel Yourself more and better

(Aladár Lászlóffy: *Az Űr* [The Void])

¹⁷ Aladár Lászlóffy (1937–2009) Transylvanian Hungarian poet, writer, essayist. From 1961 on he worked as an editor for Állami Irodalmi Kiadó (National Literary Publisher), later for the *Napsugár*, Dacia Könyvkiadó (Dacia Publisher), *Előre* and *Utunk* journals (from 1989 *Helikon*). His work has been honored with several prizes, including the Kossuth-Prize, and the Order of Merit of the Republic of Hungary.

FROM A SHORT RELIEF TO THE DECADE OF THE IDEOLOGICAL AND POLITICAL TERROR (1965-1989)

From the mid-‘60s until about the first half of the 1970s, Hungarian culture and literature in Romania gained some freedom for a relatively short time, which – from an ideologic/poetic viewpoint – only meant that, as a result of “socialism with a human face”, it was no longer absolutely necessary to follow the patterns of socialist realism, public poetry, glorification of the Party, and the building of a communist society. The new leader of Romania, Nicolae Ceaușescu in his needing to make a compromise with Hungarian intelligentsia, accepted to establish some new Hungarian institutions for example the Kriterion Publishing House and the weekly journal *A Hét*. At the same time, the previously rejected “individualism”, the private sphere, the representation of subjective and existential issues, and the topics pertaining to historical tradition or Hungarian national identity (in fact, rather the identification with the Transylvanian, Székely¹⁸ community) also came to the fore in the literary works of the period. For half a decade, Transylvanian Hungarian artists enjoyed a greater degree of freedom than those living in Hungary. “Towards the mid-‘60s, Romania officially opened the way to Western literature”, recalls Lajos Kántor, one of the greatest Transylvanian Hungarian literary critics of the 20th century, “so, up until the early ‘70s, the inflow of »foreign ideas«, the spread of modernity encountered fewer obstacles than in Hungary” (Kántor 2005, 9).

However, the limits of this relative freedom are well illustrated by the controversy which erupted in connection with the “double bond” of Transylvanian Hungarian literature (which meant that it belonged both to Hungarian and to Romanian literature), in consequence of which the Romanian party leadership ordered the writers and editors of literary journals to publicly distance themselves from the idea raised by the Hungarian Writers’ Association as a “nationalist deviation” (Kántor 2005, 9). It is obvious that in such a context intellectuals were forbidden from using the expression “Transylvanian Hungarian literature” instead of “Hungarian literature in Romania” until the regime change in 1989. Lajos Kántor and co-author Gusztáv Láng were accused of revisionism, because in the title of their literary history summary they indicated the year 1945 which was the year of “liberation” in Hungary, although in Romania “liberation” began on August 23, 1944. It is also worth mentioning the story told by Aladár Lászlóffy, one of the first young Transylvanian Hungarian

¹⁸ The Székelys (Hungarian pronunciation: [ˈse:kɛj]), sometimes also referred to as Szeklers, are a subgroup of the Hungarian people living mostly in the center of Romania (also called Székely Land), which is not a separate political-administrative region. During the Medieval ages, the Szeklers played a key role in the defense of the Kingdom of Hungary.

poets whose poems were published in the Forrás book series,¹⁹ reserved for first-book authors, which functioned from the '60s until the end of the '80s. The story is about to what extent the relationship with those in power was relaxed, and about why, despite all caution, an unforeseeable coincidence or unexpected political event posed enormous risks to the writers and editors of the period: "The Forrás-series is filled with Mihály Babits, Gyula Illyés, and Dezső Kosztolányi, not to mention Attila József. The whole past, along with the Battle of Mohács, has appeared in these texts. Censors were often quite sensitive to certain verses, »Well, that's no good!«, and then you had to come to an agreement with them. Yet, at other times, if something fitted in with their ideas as progressive tradition – and everybody fitted in as progressive tradition –, they didn't protest. In this regard, embracing progressive tradition was not only allowed but also desirable. What irritated censorship was often of an entirely personal nature or was in the air. For instance, for a while, I edited the Sunday supplement of *Előre*. One day a young man, named Péter Cseke, comes to me, and says: »I have written a report about the village of Recsenyéd, about the things they did at the turn of the century; terrible, but these people emigrated to America. That is not correct ideologically, but I also criticize them.« Its title was: We skated over to America. I enthusiastically approved the report. How could I have known that the following week Ceaușescu would go to America? That could have caused a lot of trouble, if we hadn't noticed it in time" (Hevesi et al. 2001, 45).

From the second half of the '70s, however, after Nicolae Ceaușescu's visit to China and North Korea in 1971, in a few years this relative freedom gradually disappears. In Romanian politics, nationalism comes to the fore; the Securitate, the Romanian secret service resorts to increasingly drastic methods to intimidate society. In the '80s, the purpose of the regime already is to assimilate, annihilate ethnic minorities, and as a result of forced resettlement policies coordinated by state authorities, in many Transylvanian cities, Hungarians become an insignificant minority (Varga 1988). The government seeks to abolish or merge cultural and educational institutions which had earlier possessed some degree of autonomy; at the same time, it subjects all literary forums to strict, centralized political control. Vilmos Ágoston, a Transylvanian Hungarian writer and criticist who emigrated to Hungary in the '80s, recalls the forced connection between public life, art, and literature

¹⁹ "Forrás Generation" is a term for writers whose works were published in the series called "Forrás", reserved for first-book authors, from 1961 onwards. The first of the Forrás authors was Zoltán Veress, followed by Gyula Szabó, Sándor Kányádi, András Sütő, Andor Bajor, János Székely and Géza Páskándi; the second "Generation" was represented by Aladár Lászlóffy, László Király, Árpád Farkas, Ferenc Kenéz, Zsigmond Palocsay, Ádám Bodor etc.; and third generation consisted of those writers, essayists and philosophers that assumed a leading role in organizing literary and cultural life in the years '70s and '80s, namely Gusztáv Molnár, Sándor Szilágyi N., Vilmos Ágoston, Gáspár Miklós Tamás, Géza Szócs, Péter Egyed, Mária Adonyi Nagy etc.

as follows: “The Magyar Műhely [Hungarian Workshop in Paris] was not banned for being avant-garde, but for being Hungarian. [...] We had to avoid the possibility of direct confrontation to express our opinion on that particular situation in which we were living, because if I had written that here Hungarians were oppressed, that’s a sentence, a general statement, but it surely would not have been published” (Ágoston 1994, 12; 16).

Although, from a certain point of view, the recollections of Lajos Kántor or Vilmos Ágoston can only be regarded as fiction, part of the communist “grand narrative”, it is unquestionably a matter of fact – even though it does not strictly fall within the scope of literary studies – that in the ‘80s Romania faced the most horrible totalitarian dictatorship in Central and Eastern Europe. In these years, the excessively pervasive personality cult, the ideological terror, and the – disguised or undisguised – assimilative aspirations made the life of the Hungarian minority in Transylvania extremely difficult. Zsófia Balla,²⁰ a Transylvanian Hungarian poet who debuted at the end of the ‘60s, aptly points out one of the distinctive aspects of the ‘80s in the Ceaușescu era: “This society has already got used to the Party always telling them how to be moral and how to write” (Balla 1994, 22). This historical and social/political context most obviously influenced the Transylvanian Hungarian literary canon and the orientation of the critical reception of literary works, since all public figures were fully aware that resistance to power would easily lead to expulsion, silencing or even physical destruction.

Consequently, knowing the situation in Romania in the ‘80s, any approach according to which literature functioned as unconditional political engagement or as the only possible (counter-)discourse can be reevaluated; not to mention that on such a predetermined path the aesthetic/poetic function of literary works, creative freedom, and inventiveness were inevitably pushed into the background. Literary works created before the 1989 regime change usually “suggest a moral system which displays the ideal of dutiful steadfastness rather than that of fruitful initiative”, states Éva Cs. Gyímes, one of the best-known Transylvanian Hungarian critics of the 20th century (Cs. Gyímes 1999, 10). In Transylvanian Hungarian literature, we might add, this ambition was especially abandoned by those “artistic” endeavors which strove to serve the goals of the existing power (in some cases the same authors also represented the former tendency, the tradition of dutiful steadfastness).

However, defying power through literature became not only an artistic imperative in the ‘70s and ‘80s, but also an expectation on the part of the readers. The social role of the writer, the noble fight for the “right cause” was

²⁰ Zsófia Balla (1949–) Transylvanian poet and essayist. From 1972, she worked as music editor in the Hungarian department of the Cluj radio station until the station was closed in 1985. Thereafter she worked as a journalist for the Romanian newspaper *Előre*, published in Hungarian language. Since 1993, she has been living in Budapest, Hungary.

of vital importance to the reading public, which highly contributed to the appreciation and revaluation of literature and all creative work in general. In this way, the social prestige of a particular literary text often was more important than its aesthetic quality. On the other hand, literary criticism in Hungary – if it wished to deal with the issue of “transborder” Hungarian literature at all – could only confirm this necessity, which had become a tradition, and, regarding the cult and canon formation mechanisms of the ‘70s and ‘80s, significantly contributed to the strengthening of the value system that legitimized the fetishizing of the creative role and the revelation-like, exalted discourse as an aesthetic/poetic expectation. The aspirations most often represented exactly by the institutionalized reception itself in judging literary works are dictated not only by aesthetic but also by ideological considerations, which can certainly affect the acceptance or rejection of a particular author, text or literary tendency. “In the 20th century, the value judgments of universal Hungarian literature”, as Hungarian critic Mihály Ilia correctly observes from the perspective of the early 1990s, “were mostly judgments made by public taste dictatorship on issues concerning foreign Hungarian literature. When in the 1930s they started to sell in Budapest the books published by the Transylvanian Guild of Fine Arts, it turned out that the readers embraced pictures of the creek, the pinewood, and the traditional costume, the representation of untainted Székely life; and business affected literature, it contributed – among others – to the deterioration of the Guild of Fine Arts. Today, there are still huge shortcomings in the publishing industry. (Of course, there are exceptions.) Until recently, the reception of non-traditional trends, of Hungarian thinking and essayistic literature in Romania, were omitted; the literature of successive generations is hardly present. The complexity of the culture of ethnic Hungarians in Romania is barely felt at home, as if domestic public consciousness did not want to believe this phenomenon; not only the publisher, but the reader also selects; it is the worst thing they can do since they worsen the historical fact by exclusion” (Ilia 1991, 42).

Analysing the development of Transylvanism between the two world wars and the subsequent poetic changes, Éva Cs. Gyímesi, in her excellent essay entitled *Gyöngy és homok* [Pearl and Sand], draws attention to that mode of speech impregnated with metaphors which had a decisive role in the development of the specific value orientation of Transylvanian Hungarian literature (Cs. Gyímesi 1993). This accurately detailed study on the evolution of the motif of the pearl,²¹ in both the lyric and prose works of the period, as well as on the aesthetic horizons associated with it, undertakes to present that kind of

²¹ The classic metaphor of Transylvanism: in Transylvanian Hungarian poetry, it represents the ennobling power of suffering, the active experience of minority existence, the idea of value born from pain.

attitude which probably can best be identified with an intellectual behavior which makes a virtue out of necessity and with the elevated worldview which creates value out of pain. At the same time, regarding the literary works of the 1970s, the essay *Gyöngy és homok* detects the presence of a (counter) speech, which is opposed to the classic ideology of Transylvanism, and which is far from being able to aestheticize minority traumas and to confidently dissolve the sense of helplessness by the illusion of moral superiority. Tragic irony perceived as an answer to specific life situations of the individual and the community – in Zsófia Balla's, Ferenc Kenéz's, and Kálmán Györffi's poems, as well as its analysis in connection with Domokos Szilágyi's poetry – suggests the development of a much more pessimistic (self) defense mechanism and survival strategy in Transylvanian Hungarian literature than the one functioning in the previous poetic discourse – represented, among others, by Lajos Áprily, László Tompa, Áron Tamási, and Károly Kós. "Tragic irony", as Éva Cs. Gyímes points out the essence of this aesthetic attitude, "contains the negative moment of choice: by deeming the situation unacceptable and expressing the conflict bluntly, it rejects and denies them. Since it does not aestheticize necessity, tragic irony makes us realize disharmony and the lack of the possibility of a positive choice: helplessness." Thus, the ironic approach in fact creates a situation in which "denial, though it is not real action, is a value in itself since, by exploring disharmonious value relations, it encourages the search for real ways of conflict resolution" (Cs. Gyímes 1993, 90). In her analysis of Domokos Szilágyi's.²² lyrical oeuvre, Éva Cs. Gyímes mostly connects the increasingly emphatic tragic/ironic attitude which, instead of the previous, ideologically/politically positioned, discourse, is mainly expressed in the questioning of historical and social development, and even of the social function of poetry, to the poems of the volume published in 1969, entitled *Búcsú a trópusoktól* [A Farewell to the Tropes]. From this point of view, the experience of the devaluation of values can be considered as a reflection revealing the universal crisis of both world politics and humanity, and at the same time as a prophetic attitude which (apparently) makes it possible for the speaker to remain an outsider. Here, the creator, "due to the superiority of the ironic attitude, which leaves antinomies unresolved and relativizes the opposing poles by turning them against each other, tries to transcend the tragic contradictions between the depths and heights of human existence, as well as between the positive and negative lessons of history" (Cs. Gyímes 1990, 56).

It is undeniable that in Domokos Szilágyi's volumes, the tragic-ironic view that accompanies the feeling of vulnerability to dictatorial power, the

²² Domokos Szilágyi (1938–1976) Transylvanian Hungarian poet, born in Nagysomkút. He got his degree in Hungarian Language and Literature from the Bolyai University, Kolozsvár, and worked for *Igaz Szó* and the newspaper *Előre*. In 1970, he retired for health reasons, and in 1976 he committed suicide. After 1990, it was proved that he collaborated with the Romanian secret service, the Securitate.

worthlessness of the emotions, thoughts, and even of the whole existence of the individual, the defensive reflexes of the human being sunk to the level of a beast, the experience of humiliation and self-humiliation is present with a decisive force. These poems, in proclaiming the paradoxical duality of facing death and desiring to live, in representing the world in a grotesque manner, show mankind as the suffering subject of a huge concentration camp created by itself:

Respected Prosecutors,
I witnessed
that the person in question was born,
grew up conscientiously,
mingled, separated, as it is written,
[...]
he worked so as to be noticed when he was missing,
and he lied only when hope
sank below the horizon –
Respected Prosecutors, he wasn't guilty!
his own body went over to outside word,
and the word, the word, the word
finished him off nastily and then
left his victim in the lurch.

(Domokos Szilágyi: *Följelentés* [Reporting],
translated by Len Roberts)²³

Extending this question slightly towards a later lyrical orientation, it can be definitely stated that in the 1970s, besides Domokos Szilágyi, other Transylvanian poets begin to make use of the tragic/ironic tone in their works, e.g. Sándor Kányádi,²⁴ László Király²⁵ or Árpád Farkas.²⁶

²³ All the poems translated by the translators mentioned above are cited from A Makkai, and E. Watson Liebert ed. In *Quest of the "Miracle Stag": The Poetry of Hungary* (Makkai and Watson Liebert 2003).

²⁴ Sándor Kányádi (1929–2018) one of the most famous Transylvanian Hungarian poets, translator, was born in Nagyalambfalva. He was editor and frequent contributor to several literary and children's magazines. He was politically active, published numerous works about to ongoing oppression of Transylvania's Hungarian minority. He received several awards and prizes, including the Kossuth-Prize, the Herder-Prize, the Order of Merit of the Republic of Hungary, and the Prima Primissima Prize.

²⁵ László Király (1943–) Transylvanian Hungarian poet, writer and translator, born in Sónád, held a degree in Hungarian Language and Literature (Babeş-Bolyai University, Kolozsvár), worked initially as a teacher before he became a reporter (*Előre*), and later editor of *Utunk* (*Helikon*) from 1989 onwards).

²⁶ Árpád Farkas (1944–2021) Transylvanian Hungarian poet, translator, started publishing in periodicals, worked for *Igaz Szó* (*Látó* from 1990), and *Háromszék*. In 1985, he translated works of a Romanian poet, Ana Blandiana, who had been blacklisted by the Communist regime. In his poetry, he often speaks out for the survival of the ethnic Hungarian minority in Romania.

I would have snowed, myself –
 but look, how it's started to fall!
 Snow falling above the homeland
 in wild, enormous flakes.
 It reaches to the knees, the waist, the throat
 and whispering, it chokes,
 a lecherous foam that overflows
 all the church tower's bells.

[...]

Without motion
 in these Large Swaddling clothes
 existence learns to be silent.
 The blades of scythes and knives
 are swathed to the canopy of heaven,
 the village's slow panting
 is turning white, is gasping,
 stone does not clatter against stone,
 who speaks, speaks with a mouth full of snow –
 and the mind peacefully sits around
 in the stomach of the great snows.

(Árpád Farkas: *Alagutak a hóban* [Tunnels in the Snow],
translated by Adam Makkai)

The unprincipled compromise, the dilemma of being faithful to the ideological goals of the communist regime, of making concessions for the sake of social advancement, and of accepting retreat and silence, all these illustrate that as a citizen of a dictatorial state, one can only make bad decisions.

Besides (self) reflection concerning the whole of humanity and history, this value position mostly fulfills itself in the representation of minority existence or the relationship between the individual and communist power. In this case, irony can be interpreted not merely as a gesture of abandonment, the giving up of a deceptive vision of the future, but partly also as the overwriting of a previous aesthetic/poetic attitude, even if the unity of the lyrical self and the monologue-like, linear speech is still mostly preserved. The following volumes may be mentioned here: László Király's *Sétalovaglás* [Horse Ride] (1976); *Az elfelejtett hadsereg* [The Forgotten Army] (1978), Árpád Farkas's *Jegenyekör* [Poplar Circle] (1971), and *Alagutak a hóban* [Tunnels in the Snow] (1979) or Sándor Kányádi's *Szürkület* [Nightfall] (1978):

I saw when the poet
 was pushed like a thief

I saw when the poet
was humiliated like a thief

I saw when the poet
was condemned like a thief

I saw that, and I who has never stolen
I began to fear like a thief

(Sándor Kányádi: *Ostinato* [Ostinato])

As a common structural feature, in these poems the rhythmically recurring details, the factual – apparently irrelevant – enumerations show the true face of the communist state power, the inhumanity of the retaliatory machinery represented by the secret service forces, informers, and provocateurs, as well as the experience of threat and total vulnerability.

However, analysing the attitude of prominent young poets of the period towards Transylvanian spirit, we can undoubtedly find a certain degree polarization: while in Aladár Lászlóffy's or Domokos Szilágyi's poems, written in the 1950s and 1960s, regional issues are almost entirely absent, and in Sándor Kányádi's poetry metaphorical language related to the Transylvanian spirit becomes predominant only in the third and fourth volumes, in Árpád Farkas's or László Király's first volumes, for example, we can witness the expression of adherence to the narrower homeland, that is the Székely Land, at the very beginning, as well as the undertaking of a strong linguistic identification and of the lyrical tradition between the two world wars. The anthropomorphized nature, the onomatopoeic words, and the threatening character of the colors and surroundings project the picture of an unbearable, inhuman, alien, and absurd world before us.

"Tragic irony – according to its nature – may not show us a way out of our crises, but it can make us fully realize their depths. It may not dissolve disharmony, but it can control it. Its bitter pills help the divided mind and soul reconcile from time to time so that helplessness should not become our nature, we should not get used to it. Internalized helplessness would be a sin; through irony, it remains what it is: an endured necessity" (Cs. Gyimesi 1993, 90). The sentences above can be regarded not only as an observation concerning the interpretation of literary works, but also as a self-reflexive statement, an intellectual confession about a contemporary state of being. In the relationship between the individual and power, the generation making its debut in the 1970s and 1980s had to face the same challenges as their older colleagues who had already been recognized as part of the literary tradition. At the same time, in accordance with the increasingly open anti-Hungarian efforts of the regime, local political leaders tried to phase out even all the limited public forums,

alternative possibilities which, at the price of no small compromises, minority intellectuals had succeeded in creating in the previous decades.

Thus, while in the context of the '60s and '70s, the artistic representation of the (existential) problems of the Transylvanian Hungarian community was still possible through a heroic/mythical or tragic/ironic discourse, later, in the '80s, references to community identity and traditions, or any form of religious expression, immediately put both author and text on a black-list. "At first", recalls Vilmos Ágoston, "they watched very carefully so the word »Hungarian« would not occur twice on a page; then they watched very carefully so it would not occur at all" (Ágoston 1994, 17). Nevertheless, the authors referred to by the critical reception as the Third "Forrás" Generation²⁷ wished to create their own value system within a stylistic/poetic orientation which, in some respects, got much closer to trends in European literature than to traditional Transylvanian discourse. The most characteristic feature of this mode of speech is, probably, language-game and ironic self-reflection: "Much could be said about this different kind of intellectual orientation. On the one hand, it's more disillusioned, on the other, it's more playful and lighter", says Zsófia Balla, talking about her contemporaries (Balla 1994, 18).

This literary attitude, instead of presenting the exposure of the individual to power as a universal human problem, focuses increasingly on allusions to real events and persons or on the ironic/allegoric mode of representation as a means of protest. Consequently, the artistic representation of various repressive mechanisms, abuses of power, as well as the more and more concrete references may limit the contextual background determining the act of reception in such a way that within a broader interpretative horizon, it evidently deprives its censor of texts meaning. "Only fairies know the boundaries of Fairyland", says, with no little irony, Ferenc Bréda, a well-known representative of young intellectuals in Kolozsvár, who debuted in the second half of the '70s and was editor of the Hungarian pages of *Echinor* Babeş-Bolyai University periodical between 1977–1979 (Bréda 1994, 44).

Previous to the 1989 regime change, in the poetry of the generation of poets who made their debut in the 1970s and 1980s, e.g. in Géza Szócs's²⁸ volumes (*Párbaj, avagy a huszonharmadik hóhullás* [Duel, or the Twenty-third

²⁷ "Forrás Generation", a term for writers whose works were published in the series called "Forrás", reserved for first-book authors, from 1961 onwards.

²⁸ Géza Szócs (1953–2020) Transylvanian Hungarian poet and politician, son of István Szócs, writer and translator. After 1986, he went into political exile in Geneva, Switzerland, where he worked as a journalist. In 1990, Szócs returned to his native land, and was active in the Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romania (RMDSZ), for which he sat from 1990 to 1992 in the Romanian Senate. From 1993 onward, he lived in Hungary. He served as Secretary of State for Culture of the Ministry of National Resources in Hungary from 2010 to 2012. In 2011, he was elected president of the Hungarian PEN Club.

Snowfall], 1979; *A sirálybőr cipő* [The Seagull Leather Shoe], 1989) or in András Ferenc Kovács's²⁹ poems (*Tengerész Henrik intelmei* [The Admonitions of Henry the Sailor], 1983; *Tűzföld hava* [The Winter of Tierra del Fuego], 1988), basically such a specifically new kind of poetic attitude appears, but this voice is not strange to László Király's (*Amikor pipacsok voltak* [When You Were Poppies], 1982; *A téli tábor* [The Winter Camp], 1984; *A költő égő asztala* [The Poet's Burning Table], 1986; *A föld körüli pálya* [The Orbit Around the Earth], 1988) or Sándor Kányádi's (*Sörény és koponya* [Mane and Skull], 1989) lyrical works written in the 1980s. In these poems, self-irony, rhetorical playfulness, mutilated or deformed words, and nonsense serve the same purpose as the increasingly incomprehensible allegorization: the exposure of the machinery of power, whose activity insidiously undermines culture, language, and identity. At the same time, in a certain socio-political context, it highlights the morally disputable character of the petty compromises of literary life functioning in the shadow of the communist dictatorship:

come on this whole thing was just a provocation
 this illustrious Géza Szőcs is nothing but a stool pigeon
 just like Lajos Kossuth was too

he was the agent of the imperial house
 charged by Vienna to make a pretty big upheaval

you ask why

so there would be shooting hanging killing
 and so it would be clearly visible
 who the emperor's enemy is

(Géza Szőcs: *Kompromittálás* 2. [Compromising, 2],
translated by Len Roberts)

As it is typical of much of the Transylvanian poetry of the era, in the poems of the '80s, as well, particular emphasis is given to texts referring to the brutality of Communist power, the "obligatory" characters and accessories of the dictatorship – to a world of enforcers, interrogations, informers, and house searches, a society of intimidation and skulking complicity. Instead of pathos, in these poems, the personal and tragic voice is counterpointed by playfulness and irony. The impossible situations, word-associations, the

²⁹ András Ferenc Kovács (1959–2023) one of the most famous Hungarian poets. He was born in Transylvania, he was a translator and academic. He worked as the poetry editor for the *Igaz szó* journal (*Látó* from 1990). He received several awards and prizes, including the Romanian Writers Union Prize, the Kossuth-Prize, the Artisjus Prize.

representation of absurdity, style and humor almost imperceptibly dissolve the weight of terror, the experience of vulnerability.

From a stylistic/poetic point of view, this artistic orientation can be considered important not only because in the ideological/political context of the late '70s and early '80s, increasingly efficient censorship prevented a growing number of writers from publishing their works or actively participating in public cultural forums, but also because this change of perspective in Transylvanian Hungarian literature indicates the appearance of a form of discourse – probably closest to postmodernism – which requires less and less social engagement and moves away from the conventional forms of that prophetic (creative) attitude which wishes to address all members of a particular community.

CULTURE, COMMUNITY, AND LITERATURE AFTER THE COLLAPSE OF THE COMMUNIST REGIME IN 1989

For the Transylvanian Hungarian community, the 1989 regime change was supposed to mean the end of nationalist dictatorship, of the infinitely intensified ideological/political terror, of the deliberate policy of ethnic homogenization, and the solution of minority issues as well as of internal and external conflicts. Nevertheless, after a few months of cloudless enthusiasm, in 1990, Transylvanian Hungarians had to face the rearrangement of previous power structures; they confronted national and ethnic conflicts, disguised assimilation, and economic vulnerability. The National Salvation Front³⁰ led by Ion Iliescu, which as a party easily won the first elections due to its dominant position, adopted an anti-intellectual³¹ and anti-minority policy from the very beginning.³² After a very short pause, Romanian secret services resumed their activities, largely based on the repressive machinery of dictatorship, i.e. the former Securitate staff, supporting political organizations formed from second-line members of the communist nomenclature. Thus, until the mid-'90s, Romania functioned as a semi-authoritarian state, where former

³⁰ The National Salvation Front (Frontul Salvării Naționale) is the name of a political organization that was governing Romania in the first weeks after the regime change in 1989. It subsequently became a political party, and won the first elections under the leadership of President Ion Iliescu. In 1992, some members of this party, including President Iliescu, broke away from it, forming the Democratic National Salvation Front. In 1993, the remaining NSF was renamed as the Democratic Party.

³¹ "The government called miners to Bucharest from time to time, prompting them to act violently against groups that questioned the legitimacy of the system represented by president Ion Iliescu" – remarks Gabriel Andreescu in his analysis on the period (Andreescu 2000, 20).

³² The notorious Black March in Târgu Mureș and subsequent retaliations during which only ethnic Hungarians were convicted brought about intimidation and the revival of old power habits" (Cf. Novák and László 2012, 16–21).

beneficiaries of the communist regime consolidated their political and economic positions. “December 1989”, points out Stefano Bottoni, “successfully ousted the old regime and its elite: Ceausescu’s direct subordinates. The new power elite stepped out from the second line of the old ruling class. If the Romanian Communist Party had not been dissolved, we could only have talked about a radical elite change within the party (Bottoni 2014, 265–266).

The continual denial of the historical presence of Hungarians in Transylvania, the expropriation of cultural and community spaces and the tendentious reinterpretation of recent events defined the electoral messages of both left- and right-wing political parties for a quarter of a century after the 1989 regime change. Right from the first months after the regime change, radical nationalists gained ground who saw the presence of ethnic minorities, especially the self-organizing efforts of the Transylvanian Hungarian community, as a major threat, and sought to undermine them by all means possible (Cf. Illyés and Kántor 2012, 79–98). At the same time, as part of subtle political manipulations, there developed an old/new national ideal and “hero-worship” which tried to enhance the prestige of the military, state security organs, and law enforcement authorities, particularly by alluding to external and internal “threats” and by maintaining “historical” enemy images. In fact, this ideology relied on militaristic rhetoric just as that of the Ceaușescu era, more or less openly establishing continuity with the minority policy and repressive strategies of the past forty years. So, deliberate intimidation and discrimination were present, to a greater or lesser degree, in Romanian political and cultural forums, printed and electronic media just as in some court decisions or during various official inspections. Double-talk played an active role in this kind of policy, which promised the European Union and the Atlantic Alliance “exemplary” solutions to minority issues, while the selective – or tendentiously biased – application of laws and incitement against minorities for the sake of electoral success were part of the daily practice.³³

However, compared to previous years, after 1989, a radical change of direction occurred in the political and cultural life of the Transylvanian Hungarian community, especially with regard to the openness of the newly created community spaces, the opportunities provided by literary journals and newspapers, and the various forms of self-organization. Following the abolition of censorship, free speech and freedom of expression, were insured, under the circumstances. Relative freedom of movement also existed, at least to Hungary and the former communist countries, but smooth travel to the European Union did not become possible until after Romania’s accession

³³ Since the regime change, election propaganda threatening to detach Transylvania from Romania has been part of almost every campaign in Romania. For example, in the 1996 presidential elections this was also illustrated by a map (Cf. Molnár 2002).

in 2007. Amid the new opportunities, on almost at all levels of society, the question emerged whether to remain on the native land or to emigrate, all the more so, since in the first half of the '90s, a new kind of dialogue began to develop between Hungary and the Transylvanian Hungarian community, which was a slightly cautious but productive and equal partnership until the early 2000s. "It's an incredible freedom that I'm not locked in a country and that there's no more censorship; that I can be here in Hungary. I publish quite a lot, and now they don't write »Kolozsvár« next to my name (so they don't treat me like an exotic zoo creature), but I simply have to exist within poetry or literature", says Zsófia Balla in a 1992 interview, implying somewhat ironically that from the perspective of the Hungarian intellectual living outside Hungary, classification based on individual values and free from any discrimination would be the best attitude on the part of the mother country (Erdélyi and Nobel 1994, 155).

There is no doubt that intellectuals were able to integrate into Hungarian society more easily and were much less exposed to different experiences of discrimination. "Graduates who immigrated to Hungary", states Ildikó Zakariás, "are different from temporary migrant workers with respect to their social status, labor market situation, and network of contacts: they leave a different kind of environment and arrive in another kind of environment. If they managed to find a job according to their qualification – and that is more probable among graduates than among other groups –, they did not have to deal with the difficulties of low-prestige work or labor market and residential isolation. Due to less stringent immigration regulations in the early '90s, obtaining Hungarian citizenship encountered fewer obstacles in the labor market" (Zakariás 2008, 37). Even so, the attitude of Hungary towards "Transylvanians" wishing to move to Hungary was by no means always so unambiguous. The "guest worker", who in the maze of bureaucracy was treated in the same way as immigrants coming from other continents, the "foreigner", who had to wait for (permanent) residence permit or was forced to cross the border from month to month because of their illegal status, rightly felt that in the eyes of the mother country they are the second-rate, unwelcome, and unpleasant "relative". They, if possible, should hide their identity in order to avoid the tactless questions, the ignorant wonderment about their language skills. It took almost twenty years to overcome fears fuelled politically, as well, and to solve this unfair situation. In this context, of course, it is also obvious that the Transylvanian Hungarian community often assessed the gravity of the motherland promises, as well as the various intentions and opportunities available in the given economic/political environment, incorrectly. Especially in the first decade of the 2000s, Transylvanian Hungarian national identity and consciousness was characterized by a duality which, on the one hand, expected stimulus and support for their cultural, political, and economic struggles, for the realization of their

individual and collective goals almost exclusively from Hungary. On the other hand, because of the non-fulfillment of their – sometimes perhaps excessive – hopes, they defiantly turned against the theatrical gestures, overly cautious attitude of Budapest public life and state leadership, as well as against all manifestations that took the issue of transborder Hungarians to the arena of daily political skirmishes.

Transylvanian Hungarians, particularly intellectuals, always laid claim to some kind of independence, especially regarding the manipulative intents of Hungarian party politics. In the spirit of equal partnership, they mostly rejected all efforts aimed at controlling public discourse, at monopolizing the shared values of the past and present, the historical tradition or the feeling of national unity. From such a perspective, the dreamy nationalist rhetoric or the colonialist attitude caused the same dissatisfaction as the political/ideological orientation which treated transborder Hungarians as Hungarian speaking “Romanian” guest workers, or immigrants. This attitude was certainly changed after the year 2010.

As for cultural and literary life, with the disappearance of external and internal boundaries, the 1989 regime change have offered many new possibilities for intellectuals. Transylvanian Hungarian authors can freely publish their works in Hungary, as it is quite natural for authors living in Hungary to publish their works in Transylvania: “[...] authors who have remained in Transylvania also get the attentive reader to browse the Budapest book catalogs if one is curious about their writings” – notes Imre József Balázs in a 2001 review (Balázs 2001, 94). It is also worth mentioning that the aspects of “transborder issue” play an increasingly minor role in the reception of literary works, which mostly earns positive feedback from both writers and readers. Owing to strong partnership between the two nation parts, in the 2020s it is less important whether one lives on one or the other side of the border.

In first two decades of 21st century, Transylvanian Hungarians have established their own social, cultural and literary forums, educational networks and civil organizations that have effectively promoted the process of parallel nation-building, the development of a “transnational consciousness” (Bárdi 2013). There are new publishers, new literary journals and academic institutions which enable communication in the mother tongue and the representation of the specific problems of Transylvanian Hungarians. As a consequence of the technological innovations Hungarian news sources, cultural and literary initiatives are reachable, and with the development of the Internet and the online media, information is accessible in the same way and at the same time to both the community living in the Carpathian Basin and Hungarian communities living in other parts of the world. Therefore, the aims that would have been important in the cultural and political/economic life of Transylvanian Hungarians after World War I seem to have

increasingly been achieved since the 1989 regime change: especially since Romania's accession to the European Union. Still, emigration and population decline, the state of fear and deprivation of rights, and the constant struggle to preserve one's identity pave the way for scepticism, as well.

It is probably obvious that, because of changes in the situation awareness of Transylvanian Hungarian literature after 1989, the traditional discourse on social engagement, the writer's responsibility and Transylvanian spirit have not been able to prevail exclusively for the past two decades or so. However, if these issues have emerged at all, the writer's exemplary attitude and heroic pathos have mostly been replaced by a viewpoint which, besides the reinterpretation of the classical relationship between the author and literary work, has urged the critical/hermeneutical dialogue with the Transylvanist tradition of the first half of the 20th century and with the typical trends during the Communist dictatorship.

Now, if we try a little more carefully to delineate the differences that distinguish the aesthetic/poetic tendencies of contemporary Transylvanian Hungarian literature from previous (value) orientations, we can clearly state that, besides certain new tendencies, ideologies which date back to before the regime change have always had followers, and not only among the older generations. In a somewhat polarized manner, we might even say that the seemingly more traditional trends are interested in the continuation of the Transylvanist discourse, including the aesthetic/poetic patterns emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, while other tendencies are concerned with the naturalization and further consideration of the discourse seeking to break with this tradition. The first, apparently more conventional attitude is generally associated with a need for tragic/nostalgic (self) reflection, while a different kind of orientation, besides humor and language-game, emphasizes the intention of redefining culture, society, and national image, as well as the idea of representing the 21st century mediated reality. As a matter of fact, in contemporary Transylvanian Hungarian literary works, these issues are, at the same time, linked to an external approach, focusing on Hungarian and Transylvanian characteristics from the outside, which, along current social, political, ideological tendencies, asks about the future of mother tongue, culture, and art in a somewhat pessimistic, often ironic manner. The playful/ironic portrayal of narrow-minded provincialism is as much a part of this (world) representation, which contemplates things in a "distorting mirror", as the superficial adherence to local traditions and social patterns, or the (self) reflexive examination of the identity crisis of the 21st century disguised as intellectual independence. Thus, individual issues and the different types of attitude towards the world and fellow humans gradually become part of the typically 21st century media space created by mass media and social networks which, on the one hand, functions as a medium facilitating the effective flow of information, and on the other hand as an instrument of

power structures shaping the individual according to their own interests, or expressly as a metaphor of political manipulation. From a stylistic point of view, the literary texts produced after the 1989 regime change are, in many cases, characterized by a deliberately vulgar language or the use of teen slang. They point out the radical differences between the values of the past and the present, as well as the crisis of the language and the way in which art is losing ground and the emphatic social critique flowing from the emerging youth culture. Probably, these are the characteristics that most clearly connect Transylvanian Hungarian poetry at the end of the 20th century and at the beginning of the 21st century to trends in Hungary.

In contemporary Transylvanian Hungarian poetry, instead of registers seeking to aestheticise minority existence – or aiming to interpreting it in a tragic/heroic context typical of the decades of the communist dictatorship –, the direct, playful representation of issues concerning individual and national identity becomes predominant. (Self) ironical depiction of the relations between Transylvania and Hungary, and the anomalies of these relations, through the lens of migrant worker experience or of globalization come into the fore. In some aspects, all these initiatives were continuously present already in the 1980s, e.g. in Sándor Kányádi's, Aladár Lászlóffy's, László Király's, and András Ferenc Kovács's poems, and after the 1989 regime change they found a wide resonance in the poetry of younger Transylvanian Hungarian poets, such as Péter Demény³⁴ (*Bolyongás* [Wandering], 1997; *Beszélgetés a tükörrel* [Conversation with the Mirror], 2004; *A fél flakon* [The Half Bottle], 2007; *Lélekkabát* [Soul Coat], 2015), or László Lövétei Lázár³⁵ (*A névadás öröme* [The Joy of Naming], 1997; *Két szék között* [Between Two Chairs], 2005; *Zöld* [Green], 2011; *Miféle harag* [What Kind of Anger], 2019). This kind of postmodern reality is determined by a marketing approach and market factors, in the same way as predictions about the disappearance of traditional value systems, or the 21st century experience of the loss of prestige of literature and the devaluation of the status of poets and intellectuals:

Who are “they”: I could never
figure it out, though I write all kinds of things
just “this word: Hungarian
I haven't written it down so far”...

³⁴ Péter Demény (1972–) Transylvanian Hungarian poet, writer, translator and academic, born in Kolozsvár. Degree in Hungarian Language and Literature at Babeş-Bolyai University, editor of *Kritérium Könyvkiadó* (Kritérium Publisher), and *Polis Könyvkiadó* (Polis Publisher), works at *Krónika*, *Erdélyi Riport*, and *Látó* journal.

³⁵ László László Lövétei (1972–) Transylvanian Hungarian poet, translator, born in Lövéte, a little village in Harghita county. Degree in Hungarian Language and Literature at Babeş-Bolyai University, editor and editor in chief of *Székegyföld* journal (2010-2020).

So, there it is.
 True, it's a quote
 but for lack of anything better, that'll do...

[...]

Don't expect some sort of ode:

It is not dawn, nor am I drunk

(László Lázár Lövétéi: *Hol volt, hol nem*

[Once Upon a Time])

In these poems we can witness a particular critical-hermeneutical approach, which is interested in both rejecting and reusing the traditional poetic way of speaking. On the one hand, the confessional character of the poems really helps the formation of a (fictitious) authorial identity; on the other hand, precisely because of the dialogue with previous texts, it leads to the creation of a horizon of meaning that questions the authenticity of the 21st century individual, reality, language, and poetry. The pathos of resistance, the pain of scepticism and renunciation are always overwritten by humor stemming from the directness of the speaker, the ease of everyday language.

Consequently, the narratives and motifs about the Transylvanian spirit appear in a well-defined, historically and textually organized (value) horizon, pointing out the radical differences between a false portrayal of Transylvania and post-communist reality, the well-known stereotypes and real values. Christian attitude and postmodern playfulness are as much part of the lyrical discourse as creative serenity and humility, which – viewed from the perspective of the individual – open new directions for the self-understanding gestures and attempts of poetry, as well as of individual and collective identity.

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Revolt and Transformation

The Poetry of András Ferenc Kovács³⁶

INTRODUCTION

When examining Transylvanian Hungarian poetry of the 1980s, alongside the lyrical works of László Király³⁷ and Géza Szőcs,³⁸ it is perhaps primarily the first two collections of András Ferenc Kovács – *Tengerész Henrik intelmei* [The Admonitions of Henry the Sailor] (1983) and *Tűzföld hava* [The Winter of Tierra del Fuego] (1988) – that are characterised a mode of expression that later, with varying emphasis, became a guiding force for the post-transition generations of poets. This poetry exhibits an unusual richness, blending old Hungarian lyrical traditions with the 20th century vernacular, or the theatre jargon, which are as much present as the literature and mythology of classical literature and mythology. An informal tone, alternating between fragments from the works of – in some cases fictional – French and Spanish authors, Anglo-Saxon poetry traditions and the gestures of commedia dell'arte figures, reveals itself in a unique poetic space, whose inalienable characteristic is the postmodern technique of allusion and citation, the hiding individual moving between texts, the clown mask, and allegorization.

³⁶ András Ferenc Kovács (1959–2023) was a renowned Transylvanian Hungarian poet, translator, and editor, celebrated for his innovative and multifaceted contributions to modern Hungarian literature. His poetry is characterized by a unique fusion of traditional lyricism with postmodern techniques, including intertextuality, citation, and theatrical elements. He worked as the poetry editor for the *Igaz szó* journal (*Látó* from 1990), and received several awards and prizes, including the Romanian Writers Union Prize, the Kossuth-Prize, the Artisjus Prize.

³⁷ László Király (1943–) is a Transylvanian Hungarian poet and prose writer whose works explore identity, tradition, and moral endurance. His poetry blends realism with lyricism, evoking the fate of individuals within history and the love of homeland, folk culture, and community.

³⁸ Géza Szőcs (1953–2020) was a Transylvanian Hungarian poet and politician whose visionary, experimental voice intertwined history, myth, and personal experience. His poetry reflects the struggles and hopes of Transylvania's Hungarians, blending irony, surreal imagery, and moral depth. After exile in Geneva, he returned in 1990, became active in the Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romania, and from 1993 lived in Hungary, later serving as Secretary of State for Culture and president of the Hungarian PEN Club.

MASKS AND IDENTITIES

Instead of the avant-garde clichés, András Ferenc Kovács's first two books of poems are defined by classicization, traditional forms and genres, a light and ironic creative attitude that contemporary critics labelled, for lack of a better term, as role-playing, reminiscent primarily of troubadour lyricism, an attitude which looks with some scepticism at the social and community building role of language and poetry. This lyrical attitude contains dialogue with the poetic legacy of Bálint Balassi, Mihály Csokonai Vitéz, or even Jenő Dsida: *Episztolatöredék apámhoz* [Epistolary Fragment to My Father], *Köröcskéző maszkabál* [Masked Ball in Circles], *Naiv glossza* [Naive Gloss]. It is characterised by the desire for a distinctly biographical, elegiac portrayal of a contemporary Transylvanian Hungarian identity and living spaces, radically different from the traditional Transylvanist perspective³⁹: *Il Transilvano* [The Transylvanian], *Vásárhelyi passió* [Marosvásárhely Passion], *A hómezőn fekte lovasok* [Black Riders on the Snowfield]; as well as by role-playing that hides the true face of the self behind various texts, quotes, theatrical gestures and masks of real or imaginary figures: *Pulcinello fohásza, szerenádja Pulcinellához* [Pulcinello's Supplication, Serenade to Pulcinella], *Juvenalis Egyiptomban*, [Juvenal in Egypt], *Andalúz költő románca* [Romance of an Andalusian Poet]. "In the works of András Ferenc Kovács – as Ernő Kulcsár Szabó observes –, quotation, fictional and real allusions, the disassembling and assembling of the voices in a new way, and the relativization of the lyrical speaker – occurring through the historical complexity of the formal tradition – give rise to a poetics that anticipates several versions of postmodern Hungarian poetry" (Kulcsár Szabó 2004, 253).

Simultaneously, the turn toward tradition in Kovács's 1980s work is realised not only through the palimpsest-like layering of meaning dimensions, the interplay of various strata of culture and historicity, but also through the virtuously diverse, capable of evoking both the lightness of Villon's poetry or the voice of Milán Füst:⁴⁰

Like fierce caravans, oh, blessed torments travel across
the Arabias of broken bodies, traders in dreams –

³⁹ Transylvanism mainly consisted of three different ideological orientations: emphasizing the rights of Hungarian speakers to of surviving on the native land as a moral imperative, highlighting the specificity of "Transylvanian Spirit", and creating the historical background of national consciousness (Szávai 2004, 166–179).

⁴⁰ Milán Füst (1888–1967) was a Hungarian poet and writer known for his introspective and deeply philosophical poetry. His work often explores themes of existential angst, loneliness, and the complexity of human emotions. Füst's style is marked by its modernist tendencies, combining lyrical intensity with a reflective, almost meditative tone. Though his poetry was less recognized during his lifetime, it has since gained appreciation for its depth and originality. He was also influenced by European literary traditions, blending them with a unique, personal voice.

offering written pitchers, carpets of spheres! My heart
 too is but a handful of pearls – exchangeable for dust, scatterable
 in the words of nomadic days... Oh, nothing that can be bartered for
 Berber wind,
 you are both beautiful and terrible – the watchfires of tent camps
 frozen on the tusk of the moon, you, the rising of
 warlike camels, the death of chess pieces in desert light
 (*Mint ádáz karavánok, ó!* [Like Fierce Caravans, Oh!])

This orientation does not suggest that the poems lack political engagement, that they are detached from communal issues, or are independent of the realities of the era. On the contrary, due to rhetorical play and self-reflection, these poems often employ a mode of expression in which the communist dictatorship, the poet's role, and the individual's relationship with power appear in a distorted mirror. This is evident even in the first poem of the *Tengerész Henrik intelmei* [The Admonitions of Henry the Sailor] collection, *Ballada megadott témára* [Ballad on a Given Theme], which ironically reflects the reality of compromises made in the hope of success, where rebellious behaviour is reclassified as opportunistic compliance:

poetry contests and mastersingers
 I have to laugh that I am swaggering here
 stumbling around puppets, grinning
 in a crowded dive among a thousand pipers
 dissected nothing, precious misery
 acute color blindness, pumped-up arrogance
 the theme is lousy but fits perfectly here
 I die of thirst beside the fountain's water

The identification with Villon's vagabond role serves both the dialogue between texts that expands the rhetorical horizon of the poem and the (re)creation of a lyrical situation connected to the updated discourse on Transylvanian Hungarian identity. The refrain, which can be understood as a literal quotation – although in some respects it actually prevents access to the “concrete” meaning of the poem – ironically points to the ethical questions of literary life, under the shadow of communist state power, as well as the societal/intellectual role of poetry. Therefore, the poem may be seen as rejecting compromises made with the system to achieve certain cultural concessions or personal positions, and a refusal of the personality cult: “Tiny prince, your parade is horribly dull / don't be merciful, I don't plead for grace / today the world falls this way, tomorrow that way/ and we die of thirst beside the fountain's water.”

The inseparability of poetry and political stance, the reassessment of the position of literature, or the strategy of reading between the lines, all find

themselves in an ironic situation here, just like the authenticity of the poetic voice or the acceptance of the lyrical pose as a genuine portrait. The poem *Dadogódia-dal* [Stammerer's Triumph] also aims at revealing the compromising, conventional attitudes and questioning the real value of the artwork and the validity of the poet's role:

ave caesar, you hired us for lies
 why should we care now
 about Parnassus' laurels if we live on pay

From this perspective, it becomes clear that artistic freedom in a dictatorship is entirely subject to the dual burden of state censorship and the expectations of the audience, independent of the creator's will: "raging circus, bitter bread / exiled poets grinned they fled / the century's slashed its veins caesar." At the same time, András Ferenc Kovács's 1983 poetry book, *Tengerész Henrik intelmei* [The Admonitions of Henry the Sailor], also reflects a style characteristic of the contemporary verses of Aladár Lászlóffy⁴¹ and László Király, reminiscent of the mood of Menippean satires. In the apocalyptic vision of poems like *Salétrompuszta* [Nitre Plain] or *Szélnek eresztett menázsériák* [Menageries Scattered to the Wind], circus performers and props become figures of the here and now, embodying the obliteration of tradition and culture, reflecting a world of lacking values: "they have arrived, they are all circling here / uninvited, the St. Vitus dancers and the stump / orators here put on their show..." In this context, the lyrical identity takes on a diffuse historical form. The poems present a wandering soul, an individual who belongs to nowhere, a temporally and spatially homeless figure, experiencing a lack of freedom, as well as the inhumanity of a chaotic world. All of these are conveyed through the forced assumption of the clown mask and the vagabond role. In this artistic orientation, the return to traditional genres and the dialogue between texts become as important as the allegorical depiction. "The poet taking cover behind the costumes – as Éva Cs. Gyímesi notes in her analysis – is, in fact, restlessly searching for a meaning hidden from him. The passion of this search transcends the bleakness of an absurd philosophy of existence: behind the mask of the modern clown, the comedian weeps, no matter how well he disguises it" (Cs. Gyímesi 1999: 260)

Several poems in András Ferenc Kovács's 1988 poetry collection *Tűzföld hava* [The Winter of Tierra del Fuego], including *Alkony vak hegedőssel* [Twilight with a Blind Fiddler] and *Távoli tájkép térzenével* [Distant Landscape

⁴¹ Aladár Lászlóffy (1937–2009) was a Transylvanian Hungarian poet, writer, and essayist whose allusive poetry connects history with the experiences of modernism. His work blends intellectual depth with moral reflection, linking tradition with avant-garde innovation and exploring multiple lyrical identities.

with a Brass Band], can essentially be associated with this allegorical field of meaning, depicting characters such as the minstrel, the fairground musician, the circus performer, and the goliard. Closely connected to lyrical tradition and history, these poems convey motifs of existential alienation and threat, presenting a peculiar “reality” in which ideological oppression and the intellectual’s vulnerability to power come to the forefront. In these poems, the central dilemma revolves around the choice between surrendering one’s individuality for total assimilation and embracing the status of a persona non grata: “Tremble at the morning / trumpet call – it cries for you / and shatters in the wind / siren requiem. Hide / in a uniform / you too, hide in a cheerful / uniform-grin // The fog is already sending / its brass bands. Shout / hooray – it’s worth it, poet / you could be – free / if you were. The new hope attacks / with trombones, / frayed trumpet fire” (*Távoli tájkép térzenével* [Distant Landscape with a Brass Band]).

In the poems of András Ferenc Kovács from the 1980s, the conscious dismantling of linearity, syntactic, and grammatical structures can, in a certain reading, ironically point to censorship imposed on artistic texts or the dictatorial creative or receptive attitudes. Fragmented words and half-sentences often crystallise new meanings. The lines in *Übüper utazása Micsináljunksban* [Ubu Père’s Journey in Whatchagonnado] excellently illustrate this poetic orientation:

ubu cae shark the idiotic Rolation
 gesticulating on a rocket, squeaks and chops
 whirling and prances about, it jigs and joggles
 breezy propaganda gossips around it
 grandmasters and noble dumb-noses
 everyone who claps licks the cornucopia
 but he twangs, chatters, farts far away
 jiggles home with a tin whistle

The mutilated, deformed words or gibberish here may serve a similar purpose as the allegorization that escalates to the point of incomprehensibility: exposing the power machine that grinds down culture, language, and identity. However, the poetic expression, dismantled to the point of meaninglessness – while seemingly renouncing any clear connection to external reality – also meets the demands of a discourse conducted against power.

In her essay entitled *Kritikai mozaik* [Critical Mosaic] Éva Cs. Gyímes states the following: “The experience of reading poetry proves that the internal coordinates of the poetic situation can never completely detach themselves from the external coordinate system of the situation – except, perhaps, in the form of utopia. In most cases, only the possibility of symbolically and metaphorically modelling the situation remains, without the

prospect of surpassing it. The imagery and metaphors are fundamentally shaped by the distinctive geographical-historical space, the world that poetry considers its homeland, its birthplace” (Cs. Gyimesi 1999, 9). This passage is not only valid as a diagnosis for the literary works analysed but also as a self-reflective, intellectual confession of a state of existence in communism.

PLAYING WITH THE OLD ONES

After the regime change in Romania, in the poetry of András Ferenc Kovács, the tradition that was already characteristic of the volumes of the 1980s seems to be complete: playing with different avatars, pseudo-identities, and alternating language registers, intertextual references, and forms of speech. In these poems, the lyrical self, hidden behind fictitious locations and characters, often appears in an indeterminate linguistic and historical context. This multiplicity of the poem’s rhetorical dimensions makes it difficult to clearly determine the identity of the “real” speaker. Self-portrait-like texts, such as *Be jó ismerni KAF urat!* [How Nice to Know Mr. KAF!] and *A kaffogás művészete* [The Art of Barking], visibly play on the identity of the creator and the speaker; but the individuals in the Jack Cole, Caius Licinius Calvus, or René Sándor Lázár poems are not so closely tied to the schematic traits of the actual author. The origin in these works is subject to a diffuse movement, which, through multiple layers of concealment, prevents the coordinates of the depicted space and time or the lyrical identity from being associated with real-life events or the figure of the biographical author.

It may suffice to mention here the poems written under the name of René Sándor Lázár in the late 1990s and early 2000s, which are also marked as translations or adaptations in their subtitles: *Kereskedő Alexandriából. Fordítás-próbák Sir Archibald Blacksmith révén, görögből* [Merchant from Alexandria. Translation Attempts via Sir Archibald Blacksmith, from Greek], *La primavera (Japán rajzok Julimnak)* [La Primavera (Japanese Drawings for My Julie)], and *Lenge, latin szerenád (Petronius Arbiter éneke)* [Light, Latin Serenade (A Song by Petronius Arbiter)].

The “Description de l’Égypte” (*Verses Napló Kairótól Nubiáig*) [“Description de l’Égypte” (Diary of Poems from Cairo to Nubia)], signed by the alter ego René Sándor Lázár, is such a play with words and dream scenes. Ironically, the location and the experience associated with it seem to be the source of the “travel diary” here, but these fictitious events are actually created only by the stream of the linguistic field, sounds, sonority, and names. The speaker himself alludes to the imaginary nature of the “narrated” story:

Oh, how much green is pil'd up in the Journal –
 Poor me, I almost believe it!
 Beyond Memphis, at Dahshur, on the Nile
 A cow carcass grazes on holy water...

The poem thus is replaced into the original environment of lyricism, music, and language, into the gravitational field of a self-creating rhetorical horizon, whose sole purpose is the play with words, since the “individual” and the “message” can both be put in parentheses. The seemingly tragic speech, which is actually based on the superficiality of poetic tradition, essentially exposes the fictional nature of historical consciousness:

Pyramid upon pyramid... What a monotonous refrain!
 Khufu rhymes with Menkaure and Khafre,
 And we chew on sherbet and schnaps!
 In vain did Khufu build a bigger one perhaps –
 You arrogant pyramid, you'll wear away soon enough!
 [...]

Amon sails his crafted boat into the night:
 A solemn ray rocks on Thutmose's sacred lake.
 The young Khonsu now's crossing the dream:
 The moon is white, deathly silent the toll-house...
 I too will be gone – and the word won't pain my mouth.

The gibberish the allusions, and deliberate anachronisms evoke the mood of Menippean satire, as does the presence of footnotes, playful name creations, or various techniques of genre and form mixing.

Alongside the clown mask and identity-multiplying postmodern playfulness, however, the relationship to cultural and poetical tradition, including Transylvania and Hungarian identity, is also emphasised in András Ferenc Kovács's poetry of the last two and a half decades. A distinctive type of this orientation is represented by works in which references to one or another characteristic of minority existence can be read as part of a broader textual context, as a detail of a consistently constructed allegorical image, connected to a situation based on some analogy, to a foreign ethnic group, historical figures, or events. This depiction is looking back to the characteristic speech type of Transylvanian Hungarian poetry in the 1970s and 1980s, which, under the dual burden of social expectations and censorship, subordinated the concrete references in the poem to the gestures of meaning multiplication, rhetorical play, and ironic alienation. The poem *Anonymus Smyrnaeushoz!* [To Anonymus Smyrnaeus!], dated 1990, may be the first example of a lyrical attitude that evokes the voice of Greco-Roman poetry in such a way that apostrophic speech, recalling the turbulent centuries of European culture

– in an allegorical reading sensitive to the identity of the creator and the actual message –, prevails as a reflection on the situation and struggles of Hungarians in Transylvania:

forget not, traveller, the taste of the last word
in your mouth the triumphant shouts of arsonists
the wise generations of library fires

[...]

forget not, traveler, the imperial desire
the universal reconciliation of ashes,
the abduction of words, the conquest of letters,
forget not the counter empire of inner speech.

Among the Kavafis transcripts published in 2005, the poem *Gyászchórusok* [Funeral Choruses] also fulfils this play with (fictional) historicity, allowing the ironic-allegorical orientation of the search for identity to build upon the well-known motifs of Greco-Roman culture and literature. Here, too, the dialogue with tradition is connected to a lyrical context that, in a certain reading, becomes capable of recreating the topoi of Transylvanian Hungarian identity:

Advancing, or always retreating,
from defeat to new triumph,
from triumphs to continuous defeats,
from exile to banishment,
always opposing, or always maneuvering,
always fleeing to feasts,
all patriots, all traitors too:
Sparta's friends, Persia's friends
Spartan mercenaries, Mede leaders all!

However, in these allegorical readings, the content of statements relating to Transylvanian Hungarians instantly dissipates the moment we separate the text from the information about the real author's identity, namely András Ferenc Kovács, the poet of Marosvásárhely. Indeed, due to the unrevealability of the speaker's identity and the emphasis on the "transcript" character of the poem, this dimension of meaning can be overwritten by an interpretation that evokes classical Greek heroes, the characteristics of the Athens–Sparta–Persia relationship, and the traditions of ancient history and philosophy. In this way, the reliance on cultural memory in András Ferenc Kovács's poems foregrounds the experience of otherness, highlighting the awareness that, from a postmodern perspective, dialogue with historical texts, literary works, and the canonised national tradition is

at the same time a hermeneutic and deconstructive relationship. According to László Bedecs, such poetic masks “make it impossible to identify the poet, that is, to assign the prophetic voice, while simultaneously freeing the poet from expectations and obligations” (Bedecs 2003, 202).

Furthermore, the alter egos in András Ferenc Kovács’s texts, such as the dual alienating techniques of the poems of René Sándor Lázár, which build on both fictional personality and fictitious dating, allow the speaker to develop a multidirectional approach. This, on the one hand, by adhering to traditional forms of poetry, evokes figures, events, and requisites of the national past, while on the other hand, it maintains an ironic distance from this extremely selective, ideological, illusion-based horizon, which is subordinated to the self-righteousness of collective memory and amnesia, as well as to the interests of those in power. For instance, the poem *Edények romlása* [Decay of Pots], signed by René Sándor Lázár, reviews the history of Transylvania from the era of the Principality onwards through the metamorphosis of a wine cup that has advanced to the status of a church chalice. The elevated diction and archaization, reminiscent of 16–18th century historical songs, reinforce the authenticity of the “speaker”, as well as the current validity of the “message”, but also maintain a playful-ironic distance, especially because the narration comes from the mouth of a fictitious person who lived at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries:

Anna Bornemissza was a diligent housekeeper,
This clean jug is from her kitchen:
Perhaps Apafi himself poured wine from it,
And a servant of the emperor drank it before him!

Thieving times are upon old goblets –
We constantly diminish, arguing over words,
Hope once devout has turned into chatter,
Our faith rings hollow, a dented drinking vessel.

The duality of pathos and irony is heightened by the imitation of the speech style of the Reformed preachers, the musicality produced by pure rhymes, the quickening pace of the narrative, and the sententious conclusion: “No miracle or place shall be given to us anew. / We exist... Like a silver communion chalice: / Its luster wears from many bitter mouths, / Until it becomes a copper cup at the final reckoning.”

This same tone essentially characterises the texts of *Kettős portré Erdélyből* [Double Portrait from Transylvania], *Diárium* [Diarium], *Metamorphoses Transylvaniae* [Metamorphoses Transylvaniae], and *Erdélyi kriptá: Pantheon* [Transylvanian Crypt: Pantheon], signed by René Sándor Lázár, published in the mid-1990s, with fictitious dates between 1921 and

1924. The awareness of the irreparability of historical crimes, as well as the need to address the contemporary Transylvanian Hungarian society, which builds castles in the air from illusions of the grandeur of the national past, can be discerned in these poems. Internal rhymes and references to ancient mythology serve the same purpose here as the archaisms, the gestures of alienating the text, as well as the presence of the footnotes – simply dubbed “philological gags” by Gábor Képes (Képes 2004, 105) – they promote a playful-ironic detachment and self-reflection, that is, the need for an attitude facing reality:

He honours God – jovial Péter Bod:
 No blight touches him, nor shallow doubt.
 She called upon His face, enclosed in grace –
 In vain did Árva Kata Bethlen lament.

Wise Hungarian Athena, mournful Minerva,
 Who gains redeeming cheer through duty's chain now?
 We whisper pale, like old parchments:
 For naught – stiffened into martyrs, saints.

(Kettős portré Erdélyből)

[Double Portrait from Transylvania]

The proliferation of the lyrical tradition in these poems points not only to the possibility of recreating reality as fiction, but also to the existence of humans and culture, the individual and the world in language and their dependence on language. Perhaps in this relation we should interpret *Psalmus Transylvanicus* [Psalmus Transsylvanicus], in which the elevated tone and the attempt at self-definition based solely on linguistic identity appear in the context of role-play-like dialogue that ironically reinterprets the psalm of the Reformed priest of the 16–17th century Albert Szcenci Molnár:

In you we trusted from our ancestors' falling,
 Psalm, you were our shelter,
 When there were no words left,
 And home was but formed from dust –
 No symbol on our tattered flag,
 Only our hearts flap in times of shame.

However, it seems obvious that this mode of speech perceives the entire Christian cultural sphere as only a symbolically accessible, formal dimension, which can still be protected by the energies of community and social cohesion from disintegration for a while, but whose essence can be considered – at least for the self – lost forever. The absence of transcendence and

its transfer into a profane, desacralized space, opened by the Reformation and completely emptied in modernism, thus puts the genre itself in quotation marks, regardless of the fact that at the level of stylistic imitation the poem is closely tied to the text of Psalm 90.

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Local Identification, Transcendence, and Political Stance

Zsófia Balla's⁴² Poetry in the Pre-Regime Change Period

INTRODUCTION

At first glance, it can be definitively stated that compared to the works of Sándor Kányádi⁴³ or Aladár Lászlóffy,⁴⁴ the poems in Zsófia Balla's pre-regime change volumes do not stand out from contemporary works due to specifically identifiable local characteristics, place names, or an emphasis on regionalism. In the poetry of other authors from the generation that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, such as László Király or András Ferenc Kovács, far more references can be found to Transylvanian Hungarian identity than in Balla's works. "It is an incredible freedom that I am no longer confined to a single country, and censorship no longer operates. The fact that I can be here in Hungary, that I publish frequently, and that my name is no longer followed by »Kolozsvár« – so I am not displayed like some exotic zoo creature – but that one must exist simply within the realm of poetry or literature", the poet notes in a later interview from 1993 (Erdélyi and Nobel 1994, 155). Her words ironically reflect the perspective of a Hungarian minority intellectual living beyond Hungary's borders, emphasizing that classification based on individual merit, free from positive or negative distinctions, would be far more acceptable than the constant reinforcement of a Transylvanian identity.

⁴² Zsófia Balla (1949–) is a Transylvanian Hungarian poet and essayist. Her poetry is characterized by intellectual depth, subtle irony, and a reflective tone that often grapples with questions of identity, exile, and the human condition. Emerging in the late 1960s and 1970s, her work departs from traditional modes of Transylvanian Hungarian poetries expression, favoring linguistic play and personal introspection over collective themes. Balla's voice is both disillusioned and playful, blending existential concerns with light-hearted irony, making her a distinctive figure in contemporary Hungarian literature. She settled in Hungary in 1993.

⁴³ Sándor Kányádi (1929–2018) was a Transylvanian Hungarian poet and translator whose lyrical and narrative works explore the life, language, and cultural identity of the Hungarian minority in Romania. His poetry combines folk traditions with modernist tones, often expressing both playfulness and moral seriousness. Deeply engaged with questions of human dignity and belonging, Kányádi's poetry became a voice of a traditional rural culture and community, confronting modernity and urbanization.

⁴⁴ Aladár Lászlóffy (1937–2009) was a Transylvanian Hungarian poet, writer, and essayist. A modernist deeply rooted in tradition. "Lászlóffy's poetry is characterized by a sober intellectualism and a way of handling history as a pretext to discuss contemporary affairs *sub rosa*. His works evinces the intention to examine the totality of the human experience" (Makkai and Watson Liebert 2003, 603).

In the lyrical works of young poets emerging in the late 1960s and early 1970s – compared to the poetry of previous generations – the heroized-mythical discourse portraying the individual's vulnerability against power is increasingly replaced by allusions to specific events and people, linguistic play, and ironic-allegorical self-reflection. “A lot could be said about this different intellectual orientation. On the one hand, it is more disillusioned, but in its disillusionment, it is also more playful, more light-hearted,” Zsófia Balla observes, referring to the writing style of her contemporaries (Balla 1994, 19). Regarding the ideological-political context of the late 1970s and early 1980s, it can be observed that, from a stylistic and poetic perspective, this artistic attitude is significant not only because the increasingly refined sensitivity of censorship made it progressively harder to publish or participate in public cultural forums, but also because this shift in perspective in Transylvanian Hungarian literature signals the emergence of a mode of expression that distances itself from the conventional forms of “prophetic” behavior, which sought to address every member of a given community equally.

OBJECTS AND MEMORIES

In the poems of Zsófia Balla's first volume, *A dolgok emlékezete* [The Memory of Things] (1968), the most immediate metonymic connections of the individual – everyday objects and tools, elements of the concrete living space (e.g., carpet, pillow, keys, the room in an apartment building), and various attributes of the human body (hair, voice, smile) – whether visible or evoked, form the environment where both the sense of familiarity and alienation, security and existential fear, find its place. This world is deeply individual in scale, yet paradoxically universal as, except for a single reference in the title of a poem (*Kolozsvárhoz* [To Kolozsvár]), it is independent of time and space. Every element is both a result of the here-and-now deixis in the strictest sense of the word and a figure carrying abstract, metaphorical, or symbolic meanings:

It can say of itself
 there is nowhere to grow,
 its path has reached an end.
 And when it looked down for the first time,
 it realized
 it could not descend
 (*Futónövény* [Creeper])

Zsófia Balla's object-focused poems are mostly short texts, often as brief as a haiku. Even more so, they are small, jewel-like formations – miniatures that evoke the joys of life, happiness, fear, sorrow, everyday wonders, and timeless,

simple life lessons. Some features in this poetic world are linked to female existence: the mirror, the green stockings, and the amulet, which suggest the speaker's relationship with familiarity and intimacy. At the same time, they evoke a sense of alienation, loneliness, and the absence of partnership. Thus, the poems in the 1968 volume are marked by a high degree of variety and openness, firmly rooted in a direct and natural relationship with the world. The authenticity of being, within historical and linguistic traditions, is conveyed through the loss of narrower or broader communities, the volatility of love and fate, and the profound experiences of absence and orphanhood:

Our family – half a hundred people died,
 I have no kinship anymore,
 strangers who accept me,
 even those who wash my clothes.
 The dog with the beaten nose has returned,
 I don't feel like I'm really here.
 They expect me to validate their world,
 but a pure void shines in my goals clear.
 I belong to no one!
 Only the paper kills me
 by trying to mirror my brain.
 And after turning off the lamp,
 I am always extremely afraid,
 because in the dark of night,
 no one can see that my hair is red.

(*Családunk* [Our Family])

These lines simultaneously express tragedy and objective reckoning, the pain of loss and conscious denial, fear of the world, and the defiant acceptance of dispossession. The plural, identity-defining gesture of the poem's title, combined with its ode-like, monologue-style speech, reinforces the possibility of an allegorical and ironic interpretation, which seeks to understand the poem's lines as communal poetry, a self-reflection on the Hungarian or Jewish minority in Transylvania, or a declaration of intellectual resistance against ideological dictatorship and communist power.

Similarly, the poem *Virágok* [Flowers], with its characteristically feminine theme presenting the personified story of a bouquet of flowers received as a gift, belongs to this category. Its metaphorical framework evokes the longing for freedom, the rejection of imposed life models and stereotypes, and the notion of passive, self-destructive resistance as the only form of protest. The simple sentence structure, the monotony of punctuation, and the text broken into short lines convey the limited possibilities of self and the sense of confinement:

Their dreams are clipped.
 Put in cold water every morning,
 they are forced to flower anew
 and do it eagerly.

They got tired of it.
 Didn't need wonders.
 Grew to hate
 the bright rooms.
 From spite, they gave no scent.
 Conspiring to wither, they went.

(translated by Anna Bentley)⁴⁵

The state of loneliness and the colour red in Zsófia Balla's first volume are as allegorical as the motifs of snow, silence, and winter in the later poetry of Árpád Farkas⁴⁶ or László Király. These elements convey the uncertainty of existence, alienation, and, in a closer reading, the ideological and political biases of the era, along with the unbearable repression of power: "It is disheartening to be alone. / If needed, I stare at my shirt. / I was red when I was born, / The frost pinched me red and hurt. / My face is also / an illustration, a fleeting trace / an empty sign of this age" *Két pontban* [In Two Points].

The *Savanyú imádságok* [Sour Prayers] cycle, comprising eleven numbered poems in the 1968 collection, represents a completely different direction. These poems explore the manifestation of transcendence through an ironic and self-ironic dialogue with God. They reflect contradictory gestures, evoking both the search for and rejection of the divine, faith and doubt, while maintaining earlier attributes of lyrical identity: loneliness, alienation, and the need for dialogue – this time projected onto God. The eighth poem in the cycle is perhaps the sincerest religious work of the 1960s and 1970s Transylvanian Hungarian poetry, expressing an unbreakable longing for transcendence and a profound sense of reliance on the Creator. Similar to Attila József's poem *Talán eltűnök hirtelen...* [Perhaps I'll Suddenly Vanish...], the lyrical confession is brought to life by an attitude of earnest self-reckoning and the experience of God's closeness:

⁴⁵ Cited from: Anna Bentley: Three poems from Zsófia Balla. Hungarian Literature Online. New Work – 15th August, 2018. (https://hlo.hu/new-work/three_poems_from_zsofia_balla.htm).

⁴⁶ Árpád Farkas (1944–2021) was a Transylvanian Hungarian poet whose lyrical works unite national identity with moral strength. His poetry evokes the landscapes and spirit of homeland, intertwining personal emotion with collective memory. Marked by clarity, rhythm, and symbolism, his voice affirms language's power to preserve identity amid historical oppression.

Lord!

A few times I return to you
and spin myself in your hand.
My round coins fall out, it's true,
along with words I barely planned.

[...]

I sought peace: I fell asleep.
I sought movement: I broke my leg.
I asked for love, and you gave it,
but I didn't find myself.
My requests are getting less and less,
and my voice flows soft like milk
Perhaps I would return to you,
if I believed it were your will.

“The negative experiences – notes Béla Pomogáts – destroyed the carefree good feelings of youth, yet Zsófia Balla had inner reserves despite all this, such as her intimate relationship with art and music, playfulness, and increasingly something that perhaps cannot be tied to religious doctrines: trust in redeeming grace.” This optimistic state of being, fully reliant on divine will, was first expressed in the *Savanyú imádságok* [Sour Prayers] cycle of the 1968 collection *A dolgok emlékezete* [The Memory of Things].

Zsófia Balla's second and third volumes, *Apokrif ének* [Apocryphal Song] (1971) and *Vízláng* [Water Flame] (1975), further develop the dialogic relationship introduced in *A dolgok emlékezete* [The Memory of Things] between the subject and their environment and the individual and reality. This relationship strongly represents the fundamental right to freedom of the intellectual, creative, thinking individual, the right to an uncompromising personal sphere, and the unique delineation of the premises of communal existence. “I am the voice of all who rebel / and of every bowed head,” declares the poem *Ha megszólalok* [If I Speak] from the 1971 volume, proclaiming courage in standing against power, the value of solidarity, and the necessity of moral integrity. The same relationship is depicted in several poems in *Apokrif ének* [Apocryphal Song]: the nightmarishly tense world of *Ordít egy kölyök* [A Kid Screams], the rhythmically repetitive lines of *Ami van* [What Is], and the optimistic, hymn-like yet ironic listing in *Pengetés* [Plucking], reminiscent of László Nagy's⁴⁷ *Adjon az Isten* [May God Give]:

⁴⁷ László Nagy (1925–1978) was one of Hungary's significant 20th-century poets, known for his powerful, lyrical expressions and deep connection to Hungarian folk traditions. His poetry often explores themes of nature, love, and existential struggle, while also reflecting on the individual's role in society. Works like *Himnusz minden időben* [Hymn for All Time] and *Adjon az Isten* [May God Give] showcase his ability to blend personal introspection with universal concerns.

Rain needs an umbrella's care,
 my throat needs a fresh, free air.
 rags to fit the needle's thread,
 a coast to hold the flood indeed
 for a bite a mosquito
 good reason for fiasco
 hands to fit the handcuffs tight,
 a guide leads to heavens light.

“This poetry is not political, but moral in nature: it does not lash out at ephemeral earthly powers but rather reveals what has happened. It accounts for and demands accountability before God and man,” notes Anna Szabó T. (Szabó T. 2003, 23). Zsófia Balla's poems from the 1970s reflect on the problems of personal existence in the here and now. The importance of humanity, love, and the moral responsibility of individual steadfastness are fundamental elements of this direction. Rather than adopting the tragic-pathetic registers of communal voices or a heroic, ideological stance – typical of Transylvanian Hungarian poetry after the Second World War – this approach is marked by the honesty of plain speech and the embrace of individual values, emotions, and truths. That kind of self-reflective, personal perspective emerges in the dichotomies of *Cserepek* [Shards]: the inner compulsion for truthfulness versus the provoked struggle, the quiet individual stance versus the inarticulate scream, and the essential contrast between courage and conformity.

A similar sentiment is echoed in the lines of *Ahogyan élek* [As I Live], which identify the concepts of home and homeland with the consciously chosen moral position of the individual: “As I live, that is my homeland.” Local experiences – such as a street scene viewed from a window or the everyday act of standing in line – and the allegorical-ironic images formed from them often expand into global visions (*Imádság melegért* [Prayer for Warmth]). Paradoxically, this does not result in the decontextualization of the given experience but rather elevates it to universal significance:

This is the real city
 that glimmers behind the curtain
 the sky walks on yellow dust
 fancy rain drizzles
 how high the temple casts
 its lace-like figure

Through vivid imagery and rhythmic language, Nagy crafted a poetic voice that resonated with both the historical challenges of his time and the timeless human condition.

reading, and aesthetic experience. The ironic, rebellious tone of protest or inner turmoil, clearly present in the *Savanyú imádságok* [Sour Prayers] cycle of the first volume, is entirely absent from this attitude.

I listen to every piece of music,
I read every book,
I don't send anyone away,
saying that I was waiting for someone else.

I note everything well for me
So, I have something to recall
In eternity

(*A szippantás* [The Inhale])

In the texts of *Vízláng* [Water Flame], the relationship with God is more emotional than intellectual. Individual faith is presented as a kind of self-evident certainty, fitting the given context, due to the specific situation and the intense experience of existence at that moment. Life and world history – past, present, and future – intertwine completely in this personal relationship, for the speaker does not reflect on tradition from the outside but, through identification, becomes part of it: a visual element, a figure in space and time. This creative modality is characterized by openness of expression, identification with biblical narratives, a love of culture, and receptivity, all of which can represent both the individual and the global aspects of the entire salvation history through metaphorical or allegorical gestures:

Barefoot in the sandals
no one washes the dust
The body of the Lord on the altar
Dusty with blood no one washes the dust

(*Bach: F-dúr Preludium és Toccata*

[Bach: Prelude and Toccata in F major])

“Zsófia Balla chases the equinoxes of consciousness in the poems of *Vízláng* [Water Flame]; this thin boundary is a delicate balance between the already and the not yet, which is the essence of being human. She is drawn to the edges, the hillcrests, the symbolic points of transcendence. This volume is palpably on the threshold of awareness: the realization that we can never fully fill out the very personal form allotted to us without leaving an infinitely vast piece of paper” (Cs. Gyimesi 1999, 242).

FREEDOM-DESIRE METAPHORS

Zsófia Balla's poetry of the 1980s is marked both by the distinctive lyrical voice she developed over the previous two decades and by the renewal of poetic expression and dialogue. The two volumes (*Második személy* [The Second Person], 1980, *Kolozsvári táncok* [Kolozsvár Dances], 1983) continue the tradition that has characterized her poetic direction from the beginning: an intimate connection to objects and people, an exploration of the world through a feminine sensitivity, and a focus on the experience of alienation and fear. However, her voice does not turn into a monologue; instead, it becomes a dialogic attempt, addressed to an unknown, hidden figure – a mysterious reader, writer, dance partner, or perhaps God himself – whose constant presence is perceived only in traces, yet profoundly shapes the development of lyrical self-reflections.

The texts in the *Második személy* [The Second Person] volume largely align with the genre of contemplative poetry, brought to life through a uniquely individual spatial and temporal perspective. This is particularly evident in her use of the stylistic-poetic space of the “long poem” – reminiscent of the works of Domokos Szilágyi or László Király – and in the avant-garde play of unconventional typographical arrangement (*Formával dicsérd az Urat* [Praise the Lord with Form]; *PaterNoster* [PaterNoster]; *Dániel könyvéből* [From the Book of Daniel]). In these poems, the speaker seeks their own identity within the labyrinth of subjective experiences, past and present, cause-and-effect relationships, imagination, desires, passions, and the human connections that (re)construct the self. This relationship is simultaneously intimate, intellectual, distantly ironic, and nostalgic, particularly as specific locations in Kolozsvár and references to well-known intellectuals appear. Yet, instead of fostering a sense of belonging, these elements remain fundamentally alien. The clear references here point not to presence but to a disintegrating décor – the lifeless props of a memory-based (and perhaps never-existent) world. This attitude is characterized by a combination of linguistic play, tragedy, humor, and self-irony, most notably in the text of *PaterNoster* [PaterNoster] from the 1980 volume.

Everyone is present, yes, fine.
 If needed, in artificial language and heart.
 Under the three-color shirt curtain
 withered skin, barren firewalls.
 [...]
 Reverend hands, reverend arms,
 reverent glances above,
 multi-color printed and serious
 perspectival smiles.

The experience of erasing the past, along with the loss of identity and tradition, emerges in the allegorical descriptions of Kolozsvár's depopulated yet repopulated spaces: the figures of absence, demolished houses, and renamed streets. These elements announce the destruction of an old, familiar world, whose memory lingers only in family photos, the "snow-hard" headscarf-wearing market youth of "Hóstát", and the figures of the "Museum Uncles" left behind. For the individual, however, the vanishing spaces and looming emptiness also symbolize the ultimate renunciation of existential possibilities. This state of mind is conveyed through an almost horror-like portrayal of a dark reality and a painfully narrative account evoking apocalyptic images:

Look, here behind the abbey church,
 how faceless demons harvest
 in the trampled cemetery beyond,
 where gardens and small houses
 were knotted together by the Szamos and the roads,
 an army advances, seeking those
 who survive; where it treads, the fruit trees explodes;
 above them, a relentless earth-drilling machine spins;
 vacant houses, with smashed-eyed
 grimace with black mouths, broken windows.

(PaterNoster [PaterNoster])

The speaker in Zsófia Balla's poems from the 1980s not only unveils the tragedy of the destruction of values, the disappearance of communal spaces, and the diabolical plan of forced assimilation aimed at erasing national heritage, but also exposes complicity in the petty compromises we all accept – in personal decisions and in silent assent. Éva Cs. Gyímes highlights this dual orientation in Balla's poetry, identifying both external and internal causes of oppression and vulnerability in an analysis written about a year after the volume's publication: "This attitude questions the values that sustain us from waking to sleeping, shaking our comforting illusion that our existence is authentic and that we have reason to smile. Yes, this is the poet's task: to awaken what we call doubt and conscience. Is the explanation for this ambiguity, this »life-empty« space, found outside or within? The answer is uncertain, but one thing is clear: the responsibility is ours in any case" (Cs. Gyímes 1981, 873). In such a context, we may find that in the metaphors of "languages not fully lived" and the experiences of being a "second-class citizen," in the relationship between appearance and reality, individual and power, the opposition between the classic victim and perpetrator is recognized. Equally, however, the everyday compromises of contemporary individuals are also brought to light.

Zsófia Balla's second volume from the 1980s, *Kolozsvári táncok* (Kolozsvár Dances), is not characterized by the specific typographic arrangements or montage-like structural elements found in her earlier volume, *Második személy* [The Second Person]. Instead, these poems focus primarily on presenting subjective experiences of existence, recollections of the past, and individual moments from various events in human life. Unlike the earlier volume, this collection does not contain extensive texts; rather, it consists of loosely connected, cycle-organized, short, haiku-like miniature pieces – except perhaps for the poem *Emlékezés és óceán* [Remembrance and the Ocean], which, with its dialogic structure, evokes the voice of ancient Greek tragedies.

The poems in *Kolozsvári táncok* [Kolozsvár Dances] are reminiscent of her first poetry book, *A dolgok emlékezete* [The Memory of Things]. However, this time, the self does not intend to draw its themes from the tangible reality of objects and tools. Instead, through the motifs of rhythm and dance found in folk songs and music, she unifies the world on an individual scale, incorporating human relationships and everyday life experiences. “Dance, movement, resistance to immobility, to imposed silence. Where speech is impossible, there is music and dance”, as Zsófia Balla notes in a later interview (Erdélyi and Nobel 1994, 150).

Alongside the tragic-ironic tone, this radically self-centered lyricism boldly relies on playfulness, the joys of singing and movement, the liberating, tension-relieving effect of spontaneous expressions and frankness, and the lightness of rhyme and musicality, even if this dance becomes a mad whirl induced by blindness and darkness, the only means of affirming life and resisting protest:

And there is no shape to bright
no hope, no lamp to growth our light
no silhouettes, no living spaces;
only the night as it trembles
and with it everything is uniform – – –
only the movement breaks the norm,
only this panther rush

The dance,
The dance!
THE DANCE!

(*Az éj anyagában* [In the Fabric of Night])

“Here, somehow, the spasm of silence loosens up and becomes movement: what is unspeakable, escapes into rhythmic motion. Dance is an effective, community-building ritual even without words, unownable because it is constantly reborn as a form of sign language. The grotesque shouting, the soul

shivering in the heat of music and dance, has a tragic backdrop here: the alienating city, the burning presence of the lost in the memory of those who remain. [...] And dancing, no matter the kind, provides a way to be together. It is a symbol of mutual dependence” (Cs. Gyímesi 1999, 243–245).

In the poems of *Kolozsvári táncok* [Kolozsvár Dances], personal fate and communal trials, vulnerability and fear, the milieu of communist dictatorship are presented in such a way that – despite the dark imagery – the absurdity of the depicted world, the paradox of existential situations, and the comical aspects of everyday struggles are emphasized. Whether it is the message of “Our Big Friend: The Instrument Union” (*Off beat* [Off Beat]) or the compelled (self)irony rewriting Zseni Várnai’s 1911 leftist propaganda poem *Katonafiamnak* [To My Soldier Son]:⁴⁹

Don’t laugh, my son, because I will also be there.

A good laughing fit is worth more than anything.

(*Futamok lehangelódott irodalomtörténetre és pianínóra*

[Movements on a Depressed Literary History and a Piano])

Despite the concrete title, references to Kolozsvár locations, communal spaces, and characters are almost entirely absent from these poems. Instead, a self-reflexive, allegorically ironic discourse dominates, which can be related to the specific conditions of the 1980s, the dilemmas of everyday life, and the position of the thinking intellectual. The experience of mass demonstrations as one of the most effective tools in the power’s display of force (*A béketüntetés* [The Peace Demonstration])⁵⁰ is just as present here as the memory of daily blackouts or the narrowing perspectives of life in a reservation, for example, in the depiction of the terror of the state language and the cessation of native language radio programs:

Disturbed radio station,
a polyglot child speaks in the belly
Here Remekvár broadcasts

⁴⁹ “My precious heart, my handsome soldier son, / I write this letter with my blood to you. / Since you’ve had to take the Kaiser’s shilling, / our world has turned red of a fiery hue. / The big decisive battle is approaching, / and you will be our enemy, beware! / When they command to attack your own blood: / don’t shoot at us, my son, I will be there!” (Zseni Várnai: *Katonafiamnak* [To My Soldier Son]) *Transl. by Peter Zollman* (Makkai and Watson Liebert 2003, 660–661).

⁵⁰ “On the road, the great crowd marches, / chanting and protesting, / the sound of footsteps pounding the ground! / Who sees, feels it tremble / deep within the house, / or paints a slogan and / boldly steps out. / The orator, standing in the square, / speaks seriously and firmly / to the people above the sea, / who flood the streets and squares / as far as the eye can see. / Amidst many flags and banners, / he sees a lonely word, / which is more eloquent and truer than anything in the square: / on the sign, it simply read, / (who brought it, no one knows) / it was just this: / I AM AFRAID.” Zsófia Balla: (*A béketüntetés*) [The Peace Demonstration].

the first Hungarian-language
 program of the day
 The exact time half past eleven
 lights out

(*Holdudvar, dicsfény, télutó*
 [Moon Ring, Halo, Late Winter])

In a close reading, “*Remekvár*” [Excellent Fortress] replacing the name Kolozsvár, ironically refers to the political efforts under Nicolae Ceaușescu’s regime to eradicate traditional Hungarian city names and pre-World War II cultural heritage. This policy manifested not only in unrealized plans for village destruction but also in highly successful urban destruction, resettlement, and transformation efforts. At the same time, however, it also evokes, as a metonymy, the terms used for the former official self-designation of the Romanian dictatorship – the “golden age” and the “glorious age”, which sounded rather cynical to the Hungarian community. Of course, it may not be unimportant that by the 1980s, place names were only allowed to be written in Romanian in the press or textbooks, leading to forced euphemistic paraphrases such as “the city on the Szamos River” (Kolozsvár) or “the city on the Bega River” (Temesvár). In the poems of *Kolozsvári táncok* [*Kolozsvár Dances*], the betrayal of intellectuals, the behavior seeking petty compromises with communist power, and the ethical questions of individual responsibility perhaps come to the forefront even more than they did in the 1980s volume: *Második személy* [The Second Person] texts. The short, epigrammatic poems present with biting irony the apotheosis of cowardice disguised as wisdom, the *ars poetica* of the champions of compromises, and the unscrupulous egoism of older contemporaries who have reached positions of decision-making:

I keep my mouth shut, my head doesn’t hurt
 I drink my methyl vodka down, ups!
 (*Két gyermekjáték* [Two Children’s Games])

You survive everyone because you wisely protect your life
 Others fall now, – you’ll live well alone
 (*Egy magamentőnek* [To a Self-Saver])

“Indeed, it wasn’t just official censorship at work here, but also the »inner censorship« of those in power,” Zsófia Balla notes, referring to the radical tensions between generations and the opportunistic behavior of former “rebels” now speaking from positions of authority (Balla 1994, 20). In such an interpretation, the poems of *Második személy* [The Second Person] and *Kolozsvári táncok* [*Kolozsvár Dances*] highlight the internal struggles of the 1980s, illustrating the self-destructive, community-destroying nature

of the generational battles fought within the Transylvanian Hungarian community for cultural-political positions and individual advancement.

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The Metaphors of Pilgrimage and Alienation

László Király's Poetry⁵¹

INTRODUCTION

In the Transylvanian Hungarian poetry before the Regime Change in 1989, the spatial and temporal motifs of embarking on a journey are common, whether related to themes of homelessness, forced wandering, or the traditional metaphors of the life journey from birth to death. European and national history and the lyrical tradition, with their well-known characters and events, create fertile virtual spaces for imaginary journeys and dialogues, during which not only the addressed but also the speaker takes on a specific mask and identity. For example, László Király's contemporaneous poems excellently illustrate the complex network of relationships and meanings that generate forms of wandering, searching for places, and pilgrimage in an allegorical-mythical or tragic-ironic space and time. This is achieved by engaging in dialogue with the cultural tradition and Christianity, as well as with specific events and characters from Hungarian history.

THE PRODIGAL SON RETURNS HOME

At the end of the 1960s, László Király published two volumes of poetry in succession: *Vadásztánc* [Hunting Dance] (1967), and *Rendhagyó délután* [Unconventional Afternoon] (1968). Both volumes reflect a distinctive lyrical sensitivity, expressed most clearly through an emotional connection to nature and the Szekler landscape, and through depictions of everyday situations and human destinies. Classic lyrical themes such as the relationship between man and woman, man and nature, the self and the world, the experience of transience, and the motif of returning from a journey are presented with a uniquely modern simplicity in Király's poems. Stylistically and poetically,

⁵¹ László Király (1943–): Transylvanian Hungarian poet, writer and translator, born in Sónvrad, held a degree in Hungarian Language and Literature (Babeş-Bolyai University, Kolozsvár), worked initially as a teacher before he became a reporter at *Előre*, and later editor of *Utunk* (*Helikon* from 1989 onwards). "Király is a lyricist who couches his hidden social messages in modern, mostly rhymeless forms without falling victim to the temptations of avant-garde. During his early period, he was influenced by the poetry of Endre Ady, Attila József and Sándor Weöres [...] as well as the French Aragon" (Makkai and Watson Liebert 2003, 873).

these poems are characterized by a formal clarity reminiscent of folk songs and by concise, ballad-like structures, and, in some places, by a narrative, free-verse-like diction:

who loves the earth
 let him love it now
 place his weathered scythe in a handle
 strike the iron of the hoe resting on the fence
 sharpen a silver blade for them
 while the iron hums a summer song
 listen once
 the homeland's calling sound
 and return peacefully from wandering
 to the worn tables glow by wine
 (November [November])

A common feature of the poems of *Vadásztánc* [Hunting Dance] and *Rendhagyó délután* [Unconventional Afternoon] is that expressions of love for the homeland and motifs of attachment to the community are connected to the evocation of specific places and events: *Gyermekkori útlevél* [Childhood Passport], *Az én mezőim* [My Fields], *Anyám* [My Mother], *Sirató* [Lament], *Szigorúság* [Severity], etc. (*Vadásztánc* [Hunting Dance], 1967); *Anyaföld* [Motherland], *A szénapadlás* [The Hayloft], *Végtelen ének* [Endless Song], *Virradat* [Dawn], *November*, etc. (*Rendhagyó délután* [Unconventional Afternoon], 1968). These places and events do not evoke crucial moments in the history of the Szekler people but stem mostly from personal experience. In the narrative sequences of the poem *Végtelen ének* [Endless Song], for example, the characteristic situations of rural life, the experiences of childhood, and the gesture of mutual help are present as identity-shaping forces in a fictional journey that revives subjective memories of the past and old wanderings:

I walk along the hanging plank over the water
 rain drizzles above me
 I hear the cries of childhood from Csegely
 from Bekecs
 [...]
 My eyes slowly encompass the mountains
 my hearing reaches even the most distant sounds

“Király’s poems about the homeland, from the earliest to the most recent volume, combine a natural sense of love with a conscious of chosen necessity. [...] He can surrender to the magic of memories, scents, and instincts, so

that his words, which desire to sing and define the homeland, may rise from a deeper and more authentic place,” notes Éva Cs. Gyímes in her contemporary analysis (Cs. Gyímes 1978 167; 169).

Thus, a distinctive landscape and human portrait emerge in the texts of these two volumes, closely related to the poetry of Lajos Áprily and even more to that of László Tompa, as well as to the aesthetic-poetic tradition of Transylvanianism. Among contemporaries, this lyrical voice is primarily comparable to the verses of Árpád Farkas or Sándor Kányádi, as it proclaims the strength of rural society and folk culture, the hope of survival, and the viability of traditional Szekler communities. Such primordial trust and optimism emanate from the poem *Virradat* [Dawn], which emphasizes both the importance of attachment to the homeland and traditions, and the acceptance of new challenges and openness to the modern world. The Nyárád and Küküllő regions, the cattle herd, the herd of horses, and the “people with pitchforks” are as essential to this unique sense of identity as the rhythm of wind instruments or the music of Louis Armstrong:

Somewhere within me
the crack of the whip
meets
rhythm of squealing brass trumpets

A big-eyed black trumpeter
stares at my droopy-moustached
shepherd brothers

At the same time, considering the ideological-poetic orientation of the 1960s, references to the texts of the Old and New Testaments and to Catholicism occur with unusual frequency in the poems of *Rendhagyó délután* [Unconventional Afternoon] (e.g. *Könyörgés a pénztárosnőkért* [Prayer for Cashiers], *Ezékiel* [Ezekiel], *A tékozló fiú megtérése* [The Prodigal Son's Repentance], *Próza* [Prose]). Király's poetry could perhaps be mostly related to the contemporary poems of Domokos Szilágyi, but while in Szilágyi's work the elements of religious poetry explicitly serve gestures of denial, rejection, and ironic detachment, in Király's work these elements function as a living tradition, part of a distinctive worldview and lyrical discourse. The treatment of various biblical themes and the prayer motif appear as expressions of a unique relationship between a young modern intellectual of the twentieth century and God, embracing various forms of faith from the intimate bond between Father and son, through the search for God, to rebellion. And through the invocation of the archetype of the prodigal son they are closely connected to the motifs of wandering, home-coming, and the eternal temporality of decisions, as well as free will:

my lord
 who allowed me to hunger
 endured it when I spoke and was punched in the mouth
 you took care of me though
 your beasts did not eat me
 give me strength
 to leave the gate open
 so that I can leave again at any time
 (*A tékozló fiú megtérése* [The Prodigal Son's Repentance])

Here, Christian consciousness is interpreted as an integral part of individual identity, broadening the Szekler-Hungarian sense of belonging to embrace a fellowship with all of humanity. The lyrical subject – alongside a pronounced social sensitivity – testifies to Christlike love when he calls the cattle herder, the “glittering-skinned” blacks shoveling coal in the ship’s hold, or the “white-palmed jazz musician, who cries out the pain of poverty and ostracism, his brothers (*Virradat* [Dawn], *Armstrong* [Armstrong])). The closing poem of the volume *A hosszú úton* [On the Long Road], written in a dialogue form, emblematically expresses this primordial trust in the world, life, and eternity, as well as the experience of earthly pilgrimage: “why did you choose this path, wanderer / I did not choose it came straight at me // you know this path is endless / I know but I am not edgy // have you heard what kind of wild beasts await you / I have heard and they tear apart the guilty // how can you walk so calmly though / walking is good and fits eternity // have you considered everything even death / even that it also requires calm and strength // you are scary sorry for the questioning / never mind safe journey passerby”.

Similarly to the gesture of the texts of *Rendhagyó délután* [Unconventional Afternoon] to unify the experience of Transylvanian existence with elements of Afro-American culture in a global Christian vision, one of the central motifs of the poems in the 1970 collection *Ballada a fáradt asszonyokról* [A Ballad about Tired Women] is the passage between virtual worlds. The figure of the father calling his prodigal son back from his wanderings as “the only scribe” (*Aszály* [Drought]), the apocalyptic image of the aimlessly wandering “alarm-riders” (*Lovasok* [Riders]), or the figure of the weatherbeaten old sailor returning with a handful of sugar (*Hazatérés* [Homecoming]) are present in these poems in the same way as the ironic portrayal of the identity and difference of foreign and “native” perspectives on life (*Akit a harmat hozott* [Whom the Dew Brought], *Kit nem a harmat hozott* [Whom the Dew Did Not Bring]). In these poems, embarking on a journey, wandering, and returning home are in a narrower sense metaphors for feeling homeless and finding

a home, but, from the perspective of salvation history, they are allegories concerning human life and earthly existence. The everlasting human pilgrimage is invoked with references to heroic wanderers in European history: Christopher Columbus and Sándor Kőrösi Csoma, or the great vagabonds of Hungarian literature: Bálint Balassi, Mihály Csokonai Vitéz, Sándor Petőfi, and Lajos Kassák. Here, the attachment to and the aspects of identification with the homeland are not so much built on the metaphors of Transylvanianism but rather on personal past experiences), including the necessity of honest speech and religious faith, as well as the emphatic representation of openness to journey and mission. Implicitly, this homeland enclosed in the human soul, the allegory of the eternal home that lives in memories, appears in the lines of the poem *Kőrösi Csoma Sándor útja* [The Journey of Sándor Kőrösi Csoma]: “Oh / there is nothing more uplifting / nothing more faith-giving / than the home-knowing thought / that flutters with memories of mountains, trees, and grasses / locked in the sad, desiccating infinity of the desert / For / it has a purpose / strength / light / and past / And it can never be orphan”.

In the mostly apolitical poems of the 1970 volume *Ballada a fáradt asszonyokról* [A Ballad about Tired Women], homelessness and alienation are connected to the concepts of the winter landscape, ice, frost, and confinement (*Havak várása* [Waiting for Snow], *Jeges út* [Icy Road], *Fény* [Light], *Tánc* [Dance]); although snow, as a Christian symbol of purification and rebirth, is also present in some poems as a representation of the redemption of humanity and the erasure of historical sins (*Havazás* [Snowfall], *Irgalom* [Mercy]). However, these metaphors are much more pronounced in the 1976 *Sétalovaglás* [Trail Riding], where images revealing the experience of value deprivation and the identity- and soul-destroying nature of ideological-political terror play a decisive role starting from the very first lines of the titular poem: “there will come a time when on not-fields not-horses / with not-people will trot / and on not-faces not-laughter will bloom, / and that will be the not-age / which self-boastingly knocks down, cuts out, dismantles, and buries everything.” Here, winter and snow are not symbols of purification and rebirth, but – as part of the allegorical representation – the central elements of existential threat. The *November vége* [End of November], for instance, presents with balladistic conciseness the state of being condemned to silence and lies, the dual nature of the spoken word, and despite everything, the importance of assuming inner values, the imperative of honesty. Structurally, the punctuation – almost entirely absent from Király’s earlier works –, the lines of the poems divided into short, expressive sentences reinforce the feeling of hopelessness, confinement, and a sense of alienation:

The silence is terrifying. My words are treacherous.
 I speak – I kill my secrets.
 It strips bare – the word is cruel, ambiguous:
 it whips and urges me to calm down.

Snow is sweeping. Real. Not symbolic.
 I think of my former woods.
 Their fancied memory is still wondrous.
 Beating in them big iron drums

The experiences of vulnerability, intimidation, and the inhumanity of communist power techniques are similarly reflected in the final poem of the volume, entitled: *Erőltetett menet* [Forced March]. This piece, evoking the memories of the Hungarian poet Miklós Radnóti, who was killed by fascist soldiers, as well as his final works and his tragedy, employs avant-garde-like prose poetry, familiar from Király's earlier works. This poem – through a series of narrative images – perceptibly conveys the horror of the last years of fascism, an era marked by hypocrisy, ideological terror, and a complete lack of freedom of opinion and speech. The lyrical voice here takes the form of a seemingly meaningless, uncontrollable, mad monologue, or a (self)censored internal dialogue that ironically reflects on the pathetic role of the poet under dictatorial regimes: “in your foolishness, what did you allow, what did you dare / you are scared even of this poem – but you are not scared, you cannot believe that / your fortune is a handful of brains, maybe breaded at jackals' lunch.”

The third Király volume of the 1970s, *Az elfelejtett hadsereg* [The Forgotten Army] (1978), is organized around two radically different themes. The first cycle, entitled *Éjféli esők* [Midnight Rains], builds on historical and lyrical traditions, as well as on personal past events, presenting an aspect of identification that looks at reality from the timeless dimension of collective memory, from the perspective of its characters and narratives. “I've got a story or two about the righteous / They hold me in the palm of their hand”, summarizes the opening poem of the cycle, *Utak* [Paths]. In contrast to the texts of the fourth volume, *Sétalovaglás* [Trail Riding], that reflect on the present, using metaphors of vulnerability and intimidation, *Az elfelejtett hadsereg* [The Forgotten Army] is a kind of inner shelter, an “indestructible building,” a community of “Those who resisted the temptations and aggressions of formlessness. / Whose destiny is unity itself, / the perfection of form.” Here, the self finds its place in a consciously assumed existential position, which includes the memory of the victims of the two world wars (*Halljátok-e a dalt* [Do You Hear the Song], *Terítsd be hóval* [Cover It with Snow]), as well as the tragic fate of the simple villagers who were forced to build the Danube Canal (*Kései bujdosók* [Late Fugitives]). The verses evoke classics of Hungarian poetry like János Arany, Endre Ady, Mihály Babits,

Attila József, and Miklós Radnóti (*Arany-balladák* [Arany Ballads], *Ady* [Ady], *J. A. játéka* [J. A.'s Games], etc.) and enter into dialogue with contemporary Transylvanian writers and artists (*Túlmélyi árnyék, túlmagasi fény* [Too Deep Shadow, Too High Light], *Ajándékdal Szilágyi Istvánnak* [Gift Song for István Szilágyi], *Menyasszony-bokrok* [Bride-Bushes]). Adherence to the mother tongue is one of the central gestures of this identity-seeking behavior: "The moral obligation to protect and care for the language marked the rather wide space that László Király's poetry filled with its poetic and formal variety. [...] According to his conviction, language is the actual medium of personal existence, the most important guarantee of human relationships and community, a key to hopes. Through it, he could remain faithful to the human community from which he came, stick to his original culture, and be truly himself," states Béla Pomogáts in his analysis of *Az elfelejtett hadsereg* [The Forgotten Army] (Pomogáts 2010, 255).

The other two cycles of the 1978 volume, *Határátlépés* [Border Crossing] and *Henrik király* [King Henry], expand the experience of real travel into a dialogue between specific texts, which extends endlessly in space and time. The self-reflection in these poems is realized in an allegorical-ironic context, pointing out the true nature of tyrannical power, individual vulnerability, and the lack of freedom:

Well, good morning dreams,
 customs cleared dreams,
 dreams passing through piercing eyes,
 perfectly regular, permissible dreams,
 good morning, and good morning fleeting dawns!
 (*Határátlépés* [Border Crossing])

This creative gesture also aims to encompass the entire history and cultural history of humanity in a single tableau, starting from well-known European locations (*Képeslap* [Postcard], *A búcsú* [The Farewell]), through the world of ancient Rome and Muslim culture (*Olvassuk Cicerót* [Read Cicero], *Janicsár-temető* [Janissary Cemetery]), to the figure of King Henry VIII ruling as a bloody-handed dictator (*Henrik király* [King Henry]), and from the works of Pieter Bruegel and Hieronymus Bosch to Picasso (*Az öreg Pieter Brueghel* [The Old Pieter Brueghel], *Bosch-album I-IV* [Bosch Album I-IV], *Picasso-vásznak az Ermitázsban* [Picasso Paintings in the Hermitage]). The depiction of various historical and social forms, spatial and temporal variations of tyrannical rule and servile adaptation to power in the *Határátlépés* [Border Crossing] cycle is intertwined with motifs of emigration, and loss of value, the traditional metaphors of homelessness, perpetual wandering, and forced vagabond life: "And yet leaving home is so hard, / with our bundles of scrap on our backs, with the knife at our side, / looking back, the light in our eyes

breaks / we wave our hats, an owl hoots in an old tree, / the trough calls us with piglet squeals, / the cow moos, our mother looks after us from a broken window" (IV. *A tékozló fiú*, 1510 [IV. The Prodigal Son, 1510]).

IN THE SHADOW OF COMMUNISM

In the 1980s, László Király's new volumes appeared in quick succession every two years: *Amikor pipacsok voltak* [When You Were Poppies] (1982), *A téli tábor* [The Winter Camp] (1984), *A költő égő asztala* [The Poet's Burning Table] (1986), and *A föld körüli pálya* [Orbit Around the Earth] (1988). In these new poems, the tragic, pathos-laden voice is accompanied by a playful and ironic tone. The textual space is also more open – both in terms of its references and its layers of meaning – than what characterized Király's poetry over the past two decades. Far from being dominated by light humor, this renewed poetic language is rather characterized by an elegiac, nostalgic self-reflection, which, through wordplay, rhyming, inventive rhetorical turns, and direct allusions, somewhat distances itself from the defining tendencies of the more than half-century-old poetic tradition of Transylvanian poetry. Specific locations, Szekler landscapes, Transylvanian towns, and regionalisms are almost completely absent from the volumes of the 1980s, as are biblical allusions and transcendent references from the previous decades. In terms of interpretative possibilities, Király's poetry of the 1980s presents an enigmatic and mysterious world that, despite intentional incoherence and linguistic abstraction, reveals a distinctive attempt at identification, a clear individual and communal attitude.

The poem *A Kővadászok klubja* [The Club of Stone Hunters] is typically one of those Király works where almost no concrete reference aids in understanding. Even the title itself is the result of a word-creating game, and the five verses resemble the text of a secret alliance, ritual, or cultic ceremony. The question of individual and collective identity is connected here to a playful, imaginary space, from which the "initiated" can discern the aspects of everyday reality, the minority situation, and the ideological-political phenomena of the era. Although the allegorical references undoubtedly form a coherent system of meaning and provide support for such interpretations, for the reader unfamiliar with the Transylvanian-Romanian situation of the eighties and with the direct allusions, basically all this remains hidden. Since the poem is the opening verse of the first new volume of the 1980s, *Amikor pipacsok voltak* [When You Were Poppies] (1982), this gesture can be seen as a sort of reference, metonymically indicating the need for a radical change of strategy and direction in Király's poetry, a redefinition of the dominant lyrical discourses of the previous decades). From this perspective, the modern fetishization of the poet's and the intellectual's role, the specific imperatives of the Transylvanian

and post-Transylvanian traditions, and the relationship between the individual and authority get an ironic tone, while the motifs of pilgrimage and wandering are connected to shared experiences and personal memories:

Now I open the Club of Stone Hunters.
Be careful not to be overcome by dreams.
I know: when you were poppies,
Many songs of “hey-ho” and floral celebrations resounded.

The stone hunters are sons of loyalty –
Standing among them is neither glory nor folly.
You who were once poppies,
Know well the blood-soaked country.

“Király captures the era with a few decisive strokes, in which all one can do is remember”, states a 2014 analysis that examines the question of the relevance of the poem (Zsidó 2014, 175). The (re)interpretation of the poet’s role in a playful-ironic context (*Költő ablakkeretben* [Poet in a Window Frame], *Villon titkos balladája* [Villon’s Secret Ballad], *Költők múzeuma* [Poets’ Museum] etc.) and central metaphors like the dream – largely as a synonym for silence and resignation – or the journey (as remembrance, distancing) are the origins of this lyrical orientation. Despite all intentional incoherence and linguistic abstraction, a particular identification effort, a distinct individual and communal attitude emerges from it. The sense of absence, the projection of possible but unlikely events, the unspoken words, and the allegories of an alien world often suggest a balladic tragedy behind the elegiac tone, even if the friendly immediacy or the subjective-nostalgic title of a particular poem somewhat distances the text from this interpretation:

here is the path to the only well,
to the only water that one can drink,
barbed wire lurks in tall grass,
the well has been filled in by careful hands.
(*Érzelmes utazás IV* [Sentimental Journey IV])

There are no specific place names in these poems, nor could there be. However, there are some deformed words: “kvárig nbányaig nváradig / sztyörgyig”⁵² (*A földreszállás* [The Landing]), which ironically points to the fact that in Romania, from the mid-1980s onward, place names could only be written in

⁵² Original Transilvanian city names in Hungarian language: Kolozsvár, Nagybánya, Nagyvárád, Sepsiszentgyörgy.

the official language of the state, not in Hungarian. There are no references to the peculiar faith or God-relationship of the 20th century person, but there are metaphors depicting the emptiness of pragmatic religiosity, the destruction of values, the tragic nature of the materialist worldview, and the shivering soul in “God’s icy house” (*Faustus* – 1 [Faustus – 1], *Integetők* [Saluters], *Érzelmes utazás*: V, XXIII, XXVI [Sentimental Journey: V, XXIII, XXVI]). The heroes and role models of the national past and Hungarian lyrical tradition – well known from previous Király volumes – are missing, yet in a seemingly historical frame appears the figure of the “fat-silent,” “executioner-eyed,” inquisitive strangers (*Érzelmes utazás*: XI [Sentimental Journey XI], *Hátország* ‘45 [Hinterland ‘45]), the ars poetica of cowardice (*Érzelmes utazás*: XII [Sentimental Journey: XII], *Horogkeresztesek* [Nazies]), or the depiction of the raw brutality of dictatorial power: “we beat them / until they confessed” (*Érzelmes utazás*: 4+2 [Sentimental Journey: 4+2]).

Instead of the pathos-laden poet, the speaker in Király’s poems adopts a clown mask, a disguise through which the individual presence, the process of writing, society, or even the world is interpreted as part of an ironic outlook – one that is always conditional, illusory and linguistically self-reflective. Nonsense text, deliberate anachronisms, and catachresis (abuse) are constant features of this lyrical stance: “My children in room pale, / bewildered / in the strange January, / before over-listened / radios, / in bombarded assassination / exile mood. [...] in Y a ban on writing poetry was ordered” (1984. január 7. [January 7, 1984]). In such a context, emigration is the only remaining alternative for an individual burdened by both ideological and national oppression, the conscious realization of eternal homelessness. This compulsory “choice”, the thought of permanently leaving the Transylvanian community is ironically represented in the first piece of the *Érzelmes utazás* [Sentimental Journey] cycle:

If I were to leave,
if I were to leave behind,
they would call me this or that
king, leroy.
from lászló would be this and that,
basil or who knows,
and I could mourn
the autumn-smoky garden.

(*Érzelmes utazás*: I [Sentimental Journey: I])

In the 1980s, the genre of classical elegy in Király’s poetry took on a distinctive form, associated with the persona of a poet-alter ego. In the 1982 collection *Amikor pipacsok voltak* [When You Were Poppies], the fictitious Russian author Al. Nyezvanov “presents” a fourteen-part verse cycle (*Egy*

álmodott költő [A Dreamt Poet]), but the “adoption” of the fictive guest creator’s texts continues in later volumes, such as in the 1984 collection *A téli tábor* [The Winter Camp] (e.g., *Hold* [Moon], *Amikor* [When], *Idő* [Time], *Legenda* [Legend]), and again in the 1988 collection *A föld körüli pálya* [The Earth-Orbiting Path] (e.g., *Mese* [Tale], *Novemberi fény* [November Light], *Ahmatova* [Ahmatova]).⁵³ The allegorical language, grotesque artist figures wearing clown masks, a carnival spectacle of weeping and laughing, the homeless wanderer, and the foreign, dream-like, ghostly image of the homeland – which appear in most of Király’s contemporaneous texts reflecting on the poet’s role – also reappear here: “On the spacious porch of the Moon / you sit with me, / and they come from afar / from the black-green breath of the forests, / from the skies / and the silver endlessness, / they sound / whimpering trumpets, / tinkling / golden zithers, / they stamp their clownish feet on the embers, / blowing their distressing / honeyed songs, / tumbling / through clearings, / screaming / for merry house, / for a better homeland, / beating a soundless / non-existing piano....” (Al. Nyezvanov: *Hold* [Moon]).

In Király’s last volume from the 1980s, the ironic attitude is replaced by a certain kind of confession. The poems in *A föld körüli pálya* [The Earth-Orbiting Path, 1988] are largely dominated by the personal voice of the remembering self. Only a few verses depart from this introspective and apolitical stance. For example, in the titular reference to Faust – who makes a pact with the devil and is driven by the fire of curiosity and knowledge (*Faustus* 1–13) – and in some allegorical verses, such as *Takinava Szüntaró II.*, which depicts the infinite vulnerability and tragic nature of individual existence in a society marked by injustice and sin. In *Faustus* 1, the world of tradition and the destruction of values are equated with the analogy of severed body parts; *Faustus* 6 ironically evokes the “Iron Age memory” of passports; and *Faustus* 8 conveys the meaninglessness of substitute actions, the trauma of surveillance, and the lack of freedom of speech and opinion. In such a context, the fragmentation of sentences ironically highlights the deceitful and lifeless nature of mandatory ideological and political

⁵³ “The ‘life story’ of the Russian poet-alter ego is recounted by the author himself in a 2000 interview as follows: ‘We were having beers with László Csiki in Bucharest’s University Square after a full day of editing books, and after we had already said everything to each other that was necessary, as a boredom-breaker, we sat next to us the American Al. New and the Russian poet Al. Nyezvanov. The guys turned out to be nice; at first, it was all just a game, but soon Csiki parted ways with his American friend, while the other became an indispensable helper for me. He helped me day after day with his name, as our omnipotent censors were primarily known not for their world literature knowledge, so they thought the Russian poet was indeed a real person. But it wasn’t just them who thought this. This is how we worked together: I wrote the Nyezvanov poems for years. I am grateful to Him. [...] Sometimes I ask myself: I wonder where he might be now, and will we meet again? Perhaps he has gone back to Russia and is writing his poems. If he is still alive” (Erdélyi–Nobel 2000, 7).

clichés, and the dehumanizing automatism of simulated speech, while travel is primarily interpreted as a metaphor for estrangement from home, deprivation of existence, and the gesture of giving up identity and selfhood.

By the end of the 1980s, László Király's poetry thus reaches from the metaphor of pilgrim life and the sense of security provided by a transcendent worldview to the compelled conscious realization of the wanderer's role, homelessness, and lack of freedom, culminating in apocalyptic visions that show inhumanity, the chaotic inscrutability of the world, and the destruction of values. The motifs of existential alienation and threat in these poems specifically refer to the individual, deprived of freedom and forced into confinement, reflecting experiences of ideological and national oppression, the relationship between the Transylvanian Hungarian intellectual and the communist regime, and the vulnerability of intellectuals to power. This is an absurd world where not only actual travel but also dreams, imagination, and literature are subject to fundamental restrictions and the soul-destroying effects of censorship and intimidation.

After the 1990s, Király's published volumes mostly focus on themes of recalling and reflecting on the events of the period before the regime change. Among the works from the 2000s, the poems *Sárga Róza* [Yellow Rose] and *Alpok utca 3* [Alps Street 3], as well as the *Sókert ablakok* [Salt Garden Windows] cycle, or *Levél* [Postcard], addressed to the creators of *Székelyföld* [Szeklerland] magazine; *Hófol* [Snow-Patch], born from an evening spent with Sándor Kányádi; *F. F. őrnagy sírja* [Lieutenant F. F.'s Grave]; and *Nagy-takarítás* [Big Cleaning], which evokes memories of police intimidation and their actions, clients, and participants, all belong to this category. In Király's poems from the 2000s, the turbulent centuries of Hungary's history (the Russian, Turkish, and Tatar invasions) and the methods of the communist and post-communist secret police serve as points of departure for analysing the subject's position. They also provide a framework for exploring the nature of power and the behavior of those who cozy up to it:

here's a winner in creation just not me
 I know those who cast light will reap shadows
 and I saw beneath my steps oh poor soul
 how they lick the mud of loyalty
 they keep all our fine words since then
 by listening in silence through their devices
 when we are gone and when we leave behind
 our red-white-green and red-yellow-blue home spaces
 (*Sárga Róza* [Yellow Rose])

The strongest poem in this poetical attitude is *Alpok utca 3* [Alps Street 3], which, with its original, expressive imagery and direct, even vulgar style,

authentically captures the tragic existential and spiritual condition rendered unforgettable and inescapably relevant by the betrayal of friends tied to the events before the regime change:

Our informers, the upright Hungarians
Still, they never wrote our verses
What their shitty, fagot words were worth
And the threats that urged us to be good

Here is the May morning song
They're /toss-/vomiting/ in cemeteries
I've known since then how to kill spotlessly
They know it – so more and more flee
(*Alpok utca 3* [Alps Street 3])

“Everything began in the past; everything was beautiful or ruined in the past. And not just yesterday or the day before yesterday: it is a distant past, nostalgia for a very distant past, perhaps only remembered by the poet. The present is corrupt, strange, frightening: even what could be positive cannot be experienced as positive,” notes Péter Demény in his analysis of the poem (Demény 2003, 138).

Similarly to the texts of *Sárga Róza* [Yellow Rose] and *Alpok utca 3* [Alps Street 3], Király's later poem *Azt kérdezték* [They Asked Me], written in 2010, depicts the true face of communist dictatorship, the everyday Romanian reality of blackmail and intimidation. The poem recalls a personal event in a snapshot-like, epigrammatic brevity, using the simplicity of everyday language and a seemingly light, humorous tone – but in reality, evoking the profound tragedy of lived horror – to highlight the attributes of Transylvanian intellectual life in the 1960s: the state of utter vulnerability, the forced adoption of a hero's role, and the dilemma of resisting power or collaborating with it:

they asked me in a building
what I'd think
if my bones rotted away here
at the age of twenty-two
for such casual questions
finding a simple answer isn't easy

To survive such brutal “challenge”, only one response is possible, ironically: silence, meaning abandonment of innocence, sincerity, and the need of questioning, the renunciation of “beauty,” “loyalty,” and “truth.” With this conclusion, the final lines of the poem successfully evoke the horizon

of values that characterized Király's poetry of the 1970s and 1980s, for example, in the poems of: *When You Were Poppies* or *The Poet's Burning Table*: "we keep so silent at times like that / our mouths sealing shut / at twenty-two / when out there / great questions arise pristine // from the clay-colored waters of everyday life / about beauty / fidelity and let's say – truth."

At the same time, Király's poetry in the 2000s prominently features, along with its personal past, reflections on the realities of the last decade of the 20th century and early 21st century, including the ideological and political anomalies of the post-communist period, the characteristics of a market-driven mindset and the mediated experience of daily life. Especially characteristic is the self-reflective depiction of the loss of familiarity and the experience of alienation in the poems of the volume *A Csomolungma bár* [The Mount Everest Bar], presenting the paradoxical duality of the era: in the contradiction between changes visible at the surface level and the persistence of the deep-seated mentality and dictatorial power habits of the 1980s. The contrast between foreign language names and outmoded locations, a blend of globalization and extreme provincialism, gives this world its uniquely hybrid character. The ironic reckoning with the illusions of the early post-regime change period in these poems takes place alongside depictions of the absurd elements of Romanian nationalism and increasingly pronounced signs of Balkanization, in a context where the speaker (seemingly) maintains a playfully detached stance as an external observer amid the flow of events. The nature of the creator and the artwork, and the question of the authenticity of the poet's role thus return in László Király's newer poems, often with a summarizing, retrospective intention, similar to the texts of the pre-regime change volumes.

Alongside the playful-ironic expression of the challenges of intellectual existence, the compulsion to conform, and the fear of being judged by posterity, the figure of the "departing Transylvanian Don Quixote" battling the shadows of the turn of the millennium and the 21st century presents itself. Many poetic faces emerge, looking at us with a resigned, nostalgic mood, preparing for the conclusion of life and oeuvre, but once again, without any theatrical gestures or forced pathos:

For the forty-fifth time, spring arrives – for free:
the poet secretly elegizes.

Beyond the mountains, in glowing iron armor
the summer approaches with heavy steps

(*Az udvar* [The Courtyard])

The same confessional, self-ironic gesture is present in László Király's poems from the second decade of the 2000s, such as the 2010 *Háttra arc* [About-Face] and the 2011 *Al Nyezvanov: Újév* [Al Nyezvanov: New Year], which anticipate

the premise of a possible Transylvanian living environment and intellectual presence, where human relationships are based on honesty, and poetry can truly be freed from all external power influences. In this context, even the loss of youthful carefreeness and the sins of dictatorship might become compensable, if not by other means, through the reversibility of the past, the play of memory and imagination, or by the reaffirming power of faith, and the joyful moments of creative life and work:

If I were to be young again
and reflect on my inexperienced old age,
while Mr. S. is taking some tricky photos
of me at the Monument,
holding The King in my palm –
[...]
With a smile displeasing even my God,
I have been drafted into the somber poet-regiment
of seven centuries, I note.
I wasn't careful – and there's no way out.
(*Hátra arc* [About-Face])

In this game, the term “about-face” does not suggest a return or self-surrender, but rather highlights the gesture of shaping truth and forgiving all wrongs through the perspective of time and eternity. Against the tragedy of the moment, the overall picture thus ultimately becomes cheerful and optimistic, dissolving the bitter memories of communist and post-communist rule and oppression, and the traumas of the past, through the recognition that “everything was and will be: perfect” in this transcendental stance, which views the world from above: “He could be my follower, watcher, informer, / imagined among foolish wires, telescopes, bushes, / though he only smiled, with a smoldering chestnut in his hand [...] or greeted me with a flower, elevating himself to a brother” *Al Nyezvanov: Újév* [Al Nyezvanov: New Year].

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