

# Hungarian Perspectives on the Western Canon



# Hungarian Perspectives on the Western Canon:

*Post-Comparative Readings*

Edited by

László Bengi, Ernő Kulcsár Szabó,  
Gábor Mezei, Gábor Tamás Molnár  
and Pál Kelemen

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## PREFACE

This volume serves the purpose of introducing important authors and works of Hungarian literature to an international reading public. In order to fulfill this goal, the editors have invited scholars to write papers in which Hungarian works are interpreted vis-à-vis important works of the Western literary tradition. This gesture simultaneously asserts and challenges the concept of “the Western canon.” Our intention has been to re-examine and challenge the distinction between “major” and “minor” literatures. For practical reasons, we thought it best to present the Hungarian authors and works by linking them to authors and works presumably better known to our target audience. On the other hand, we hoped to make the impression that reading presumably marginal works may also highlight unexpected or previously unknown components of the literary tradition. If this is so, it is because the marginal or the minor has the potential of inhabiting spaces within the canon that would otherwise remain blank or imperceptible. Our insistence on reading the Western literary tradition *through* the lens of Hungarian literature comes from our conviction that the reversal, albeit temporary reversal, of the major/minor or central/marginal polarities can be illuminating.

With our collection, we hope to enter a space in which issues of international or supranational literary communication have been hotly contested. Debates about world literature, translatability and untranslatability, national literatures and area studies have once again come to dominate the international journals of literary studies. Our collection presents a limited, but for that very reason, relatively well-defined account of this complex set of problems. Some of the articles in this volume speak to the continuous existence and afterlife (*Überleben* in Walter Benjamin's sense) of the Classical tradition in modern Hungarian literature. Others discuss issues of contemporaneity between historical developments in the West and those in Hungarian literature, while still others touch upon the translation of Western European works or the adoption of Western literary or cultural models in a local context. Modern Hungarian literature is certainly unimaginable without integration into international networks, and thus the two-way comparisons between individual authors and works often uncover existing pathways of translation, adoption or other forms of reception.

Our aim, however, has never been to revive the reception studies of

classical Comparative Literature but rather to read texts as illuminating one another. This book is also not intended to serve as a substitute for a systematic work of literary history but rather a series of case studies. We no longer hold traditional comparative methods, based on verifiable mediations or transactions between national philologies and national literary narratives, to be the exclusive standard of interpretation; readings can concentrate on common surfaces and textual events instead. This is meant by “postcomparatist perspective,” a term to indicate that the grounds or conditions of a comparative reading never precede the reading itself, can never be located outside of the space that the reading charts.

The limits of translatability have also been tested by some of the Hungarian works discussed. Since our contributors were given freedom in selecting the authors they wished to discuss, the Hungarian examples quoted in the papers did not always come from the growing body of Hungarian literature already translated to English. Selected texts and passages needed translating, which proved a challenging task, especially in the case of avant-garde poetry.

The selection of examples reflects the individual choices of the authors. Efforts have been made to include the most internationally recognized contemporary Hungarian novelists in the selection, and though the volume ultimately does not include papers on the works of Imre Kertész and László Krasznahorkai (winners of the 2002 Nobel Prize in Literature and the 2015 Man Booker International Prize, respectively), contemporary literature is represented by the works of Péter Nádas and Péter Esterházy, along with well-known poets and playwrights.

The Editors



# **I. POETRY WITH POETRY**

# LITERARY MOVEMENT-IMAGES: ERNST STADLER AND LŐRINC SZABÓ

ERNŐ KULCSÁR SZABÓ

african music glittering in my brain...

—Lőrinc Szabó, “Will-o’-the-wisp”

Just as the sound appears as a sand figure,  
so the mysterious X of the thing-in-itself  
appears first as a nerve stimulus, then as an  
image and finally as a sound.

—Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lie in an  
Extra-Moral Sense”

Since the study of medial cultural techniques started paying particular attention to the transfigurational motives of kinesis, new perspectives have opened up for literary studies, among other things concerning the insight that in the medial materiality of texts the play of tropological substitutions is a movement the “reality” of which is primarily inaccessibility, because what perception is able to access—like Chladni’s sand figures, outlining soundwaves—though it is “placed” in vain in the reality of time and space, as mediatedness/mediating cannot be avoided, is never identical to what it experiences. The sound’s mode of existence—which is not accessible as a self-identical entity—is constituted in the (transfigurative) mediation of wave-motions. The metaphorical nature of this mode of existence can lay the foundations of the insight in acoustic as well as visual experiences according to which the agent of the effect can become existent—even if it is always already inaccessible in metaphorical mediation—only if it is no longer self-identical. And though the forms of motion in cultural history have a boundlessly wide spectrum, from the first travelogues to the racing car poems of Marinetti or Lajos Kassák (or even Mihály Babits’s “Photograph in Motion” [“Mozgófénykép”]), their paradigmatics in the history of poetry is as unexplored as the significance of the turn in the history of Modernism, which was the first movement or moment to exploit, following the avant-garde, the medial-artistic capacities of the non-conventional (non-“arbitrary”) signs. This movement had originated

in the historical avant-garde with the—perhaps in the beginning rather naive—Dadaist experiment as an attempt to answer the question as to how the literary work of art can be made a place of reality where the transfigurational event of movement—without the author’s contribution—takes note of itself, translates itself so to say, and at the same time writes itself into the language of another system’s mediality.

Concerning these broad, rarely discussed questions, only a few aspects of the history of poetry are covered in the secondary literature, perhaps first and foremost the historical aspects of the influences between lyrical texts that experimented with “kinetographic” techniques between the turn of the century and the beginning of the late Modern period in the 1930s. The question remains open as to whether the textual techniques of the literary “movement-images” explored in the following examples can contribute to a more subtle narrative of literary Modernity, or whether, on the other hand, the possible insights concerning the tropes’ mode of existence turn out to be fruitful in this horizon of questions.

It is worth comparing, in this context, Ernst Stadler’s “On Crossing the Rhine Bridge at Cologne by Night” (“Fahrt über die Kölner Rheinbrücke bei Nacht”, 1912) and Lőrinc Szabó’s poem “Will-o’-the-wisp” (“Lidérc”, 1925). While traditionally both of them are connected to the avant-garde, this (after the first reading hardly questionable) connection has characteristics in the two poems that are so different that they throw their deeper, Expressionist relationship into doubt. While the Stadler poem is an emblematic composition of Expressionism as it was first beginning to emerge, the text by Lőrinc Szabó is the product of the period in its phase of decline, and as such it is nearer to the threshold of late Modernity, even if the two compositions were separated by a period of only twelve years. As both texts “thematize” the forms of movement (which can easily be compared in a referential way), they are especially suitable for a comparison from the point of view of literary history because they both use the formal structure of subjectivity as the scenic basis of their “sights”. The observers, who are motionless in both cases (though one of them “represents” a camera in a kind of horizontal movement sitting in the train passing at full speed), give accounts of the sights with which the lyric subjects meet, following the codes of the rules of contemplative reception. From a referential point of view, here we can only draw empirical-thematic distinctions between the two poems that are produced between the textualization of two movement-processes, one that is indicated as “real” within the frames of fiction and another that is imaginary. On this level, similarities, in a strange way, are more illuminating and telling than differences. We can hardly lose sight of the fact that during the performance

of the visual perceptibility of movement both texts use mirror-symmetries, the mutuality and two-directional nature of which are more and more active and inevitably inscribed into and part of the formal structure of subjectivity, which initially can only be constructed in one direction. The potential reversibility of visual angles is demonstrated first of all by the temporary, transitional rhetorical anthropomorphizations of the artificially illuminated sight in Stadler's text:

[...] O curve of the million lights, mute guard at the sight  
 Of whose flashing parade the waters go roaring down. Endless line  
 presenting arms by night!  
 Surging on like torches! Joyful! Salute of ships over the blue sea! Star-  
 jeweled, festive array!  
 Teeming, bright-eyes urged on! Till where the town with its last houses  
 sees its guests away. (Stadler 1976, 45–47)

Though in “Will-o’-the-wisp” we do not find similar inscriptions producing a prosopopeia, the reversibility of perspectives is ensured by places of grammatical undecidability, where the semantic distinctions made with the help of typography (which can be read as identifications as well, because of the topological movements that are thereby liberated) put an end to the one-directional stabilizability of the sight's structure, because the assertions divided by colons make possible understandable readings from the opposite direction as well:

african music glittering in my brain,  
 but all in vain, it's just the lure

of your light: I cannot reach there:  
 of your light: the fantasy: I, –  
 of your light: unfoldable,  
 ungraspable is this light [...]

We must pay attention here not only to the way in which a kind of medial code conversion is mediating the play of oscillation (?), the oscillation while the sound is turned into movement (“african music glittering in my brain”), but also to the fact that the statements one can read in the chiasmic cross-positioning of the last two lines in the third stanza, in the two-directional movement of the phrases, even literally perform, as it were, the linguistic materiality of this glittering-sparkling play of light: “a fényed: kibonthatatlan, megfoghatatlan ez a fény” (“of your light: unfoldable, ungraspable is this light”). And one should not forget that “megfoghatatlan” (“ungraspable”)—as the statement of the lyrical subject—refers not only

to the enigmatic nature of the addressee appearing as a dream image, but—as the text's (simultaneous) statement—even to the grammatical shiftiness of the material word form “fény” (“light”).

Though at first reading the similarities between the two texts seem decisive, a more thorough comparison brings to the surface some important poetic differences. The origins of the surface impression regarding a closer relationship, according to which the two texts (despite the real and imaginative formulation of movement-images in their frames of fiction) belong to the same (futuro-)expressionist paradigm, lie in the fact that, from the perspective of the discursive patterns of poetry, both texts recreate the (subject-centered) general formation of the same, undivided position of speaking that served as a basis of all classical Modern poetry up until Apollinaire's text, “Zone.” This external, discursive similarity of the two texts on the other hand proves to be an even more fragile illusion if we keep in mind that these are just tendencies of the avant-garde, which tried desperately to deprive the self—i.e. an entity convinced of its own unity—of its full authority. These tendencies endeavored to move the text-developing principles of creation out of the self's sphere of activity. From the futurist “technical manifesto” through the contingency-principle of Dadaists and even the Surrealist “écriture automatique,” the most varied avant-garde ideas were uniform in that they replaced the anthropological event of individual artistic creation with the performative power of a non-subjective, non-human happening.

All in all, it seems rather strange that the abovementioned texts are not really able or ready to separate themselves from the discursive patterns of classical Modern poetry, even though they “know” that the elements of movement can be taken note of only by medial substitutions (by effects of sound, light and color made “language,” by glittering, dissolving, misleading illusory impressions and by the optically materialized marks of graphic segmentation). How is it possible that even such (avant-garde, or close to avant-garde) texts, which are not only conscious of the fractures between signified kinetic entities and their visual-auditory signifiers, but partly recognize the secondary displacements as well—this way eliminating the classical-Modern codes of aesthetic perception—in the end remain under the domination of the discourse-controlling principles originating in the subjectivity of the turn of the century, which refers back to itself? Or is it possible that this observation does not hold true of the poems by Stadler and Lőrinc Szabó in equal measure? In order to find useful answers to these questions, I take into consideration three interconnections that may further literary interpretations from the perspective of the archeology of cultural techniques. These interconnections may unveil the illusion of

“detaching” questions concerning the history of poetry. In the history of aesthetic experience, on the other hand, most recently around 1900, totally new conditions were formed regarding the literary “writability” of movement. We should not forget that in the artistic paradigmatics of play one of the most basic changes is actually taking place these days, that is, the unavoidable process of recognizing the historically bound nature of Schiller’s aesthetic ideology. For it was Nietzsche who for the first time connected the phenomenon of play with the par excellence artistic character of movement, that is the total lack of any kind of cognition, any aim or (human) interest (Nietzsche 1999a, 432: 23[81]). Because play in this way frees itself from the discursive forces of the human-ideological traditions of interpretation, there is at the same time a new path opening in the history of thinking, with all its consequences in late Modern anthropology: from the image of the playing subject we move to the subject that is involved in the play, without controlling it, so that the subject is “played” by the movement of play. This was thanks to hermeneutics, among other things, as the aesthetic theory of play in Gadamer’s writings at last liquidates in the history of poetry the omnipotent construction of the subject that is satisfied with its own unity.

The unfixable nature of the play’s aesthetic form of movement is connected by Nietzsche basically with the event of becoming (*Werden*)—understood through the indivisibility of coming into being/death and its sensory inaccessibility.<sup>1</sup> He is describing the phases of movement as transfigurative substitutions, the mode of existence and the state of which are understandable from the direction of metaphoric figurativity as well, because only the exchanging of the medial codes can give information about them that cannot be “pointed at” in a material way (Nietzsche 2009, 256). With this recognition of the questionability of the organic mediation between code systems, the revaluation of the allegory happens in French Modernist poetry almost in a parallel way. But this turn is not significant only because it opened up the way for the “poetry of the city” with some kind of (literary) sociological indices (an avant-garde paradigm that contains Stadler’s poem as well). This significance originates more like in the quite similar questioning of the late Romantic unity concerning the state of the soul and the natural sight around the subject. From that point on, it was possible for inaccessible elements of movement to appear in

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. „Zwischen zwei Gedanken spielen *noch alle möglichen Affekte* ihr Spiel: aber die Bewegungen sind zu rasch, deshalb *verkennen* wir sie, *leugnen* wir sie...“ (Nietzsche 1999c, 53–54: 11[113]) For information about the inconsistency of “Werden” and sensory perception see “Erkenntniß an sich im Werden unmöglich; wie ist also Erkenntniß möglich?” (Nietzsche 1999b, 313: 7[54])

poetry as operations of medial threshold-crossings. These operations more and more often deprive the tropes of their immanent semantic “constancy,” because of the inorganically “inconsistent” contingent coding of the sight and the allegorical liberation of the movement of space structures and time structures.

The demolition of the organically produced images following the stubborn late Romantic conventions at last became possible because in the meantime “beauty,” the state of aestheticity, or altogether everything that can be brought into connection with aesthetic experience, was legitimized in a new form in the history of poetry, namely first in the Baudelairian construct of transition, volatility and temporal instability that recreated the contrast of eternal and transitional beauty—as Jauss pointed out—not in the name of classic, peace-seeking harmony between the unchangeable and transitional. Instead, it attributed the “kinetic,” i.e. temporal-historical (since it depends on the prevailing reception) mode of existence to “timeless” beauty.<sup>4</sup> And indeed, as the “beautiful” exposes itself to this double temporality in a poetically productive way, in the following there was nothing to prevent the non-objectively stable transitionality of “beauty,” which can never be strengthened. This means that for a long time the characteristics of movement explored in artistic Modernity basically helped the discourse of Modernity inscribe the productive contrast of continuance and change, stabilization and the unfixable nature into the mode of existence of the identity of aesthetic quality.

The experience of this changeability was recognized and legitimized in its constitutive existence, and its tropology overwrote the “eternal returning” as well into the figure of movement of the continuous restart, making the metaphor of movement from Jauss,<sup>5</sup> through Deleuze<sup>6</sup> to Vattimo<sup>7</sup> the most important feature of Modernity. This experience first of all turned out to be an indispensable element in the exploration of the threshold of the new era, because while it connected the diverging

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<sup>4</sup> To the relation between “éternel” and “fugitif” and the self-understanding of Modernity see Jauss 2005.

<sup>5</sup> See e.g. the expression he uses so often: “unstoppable, onward-rolling wheel of *modernité*.” (Jauss 2005, 363)

<sup>6</sup> “*It is not the same which returns, it is not the similar which returns; rather, the Same is the returning of that which returns, – in other words, of the Different; the similar is the returning of that which returns, – in other words, of the Dissimilar. The repetition in the eternal return is the same, but the same in so far as it is said uniquely of difference and the different.*” (Deleuze 1994, 300–301)

<sup>7</sup> “[Nietzsche] exposes the essence of modernity as the epoch in which Being is reduced to the *novum*.” (Vattimo 1991, 168)

movement (as *essentia* and mode of existence) with the deepest essence of “beauty,” thus situating Modernity more and more on the horizon of the aestheticization concerning the understanding of the world and existence. Kinesis represented as a par excellence artistic phenomenon thus was connected to the principle of mediality—the significance of which became well known only much later—in an inseparable way. All this could have happened first of all by the artistic exploration and exploitation of the “instantaneity-effect”<sup>8</sup> upgraded by Nietzsche, which laid down the conditions of the fact that the event of change constituting the “movement without aim” in an inaccessible way can be grasped and interpreted only as an occurrence that can be perceived through medial substitutions, and this is why it is uncontrollable.

While in the Classical-Modern discourse of poetry the subject turned out to be a necessary referential point around which perception and reading stabilized (cf. Stierle 1996, 518–520) and the self-identity of poetic utterances could be preserved, from that point on, the criterion of identity in the new poetry depended primarily on what secured the discursive stability of the genre, without a subject that could be clothed with anthropological attributes, and without the poetological privileges of the subject. The poems of Stadler and Kassák can be read following the lyrical codes valid before the avant-garde, first and foremost because of the discursive structures of lyrical utterances which were not renewed, at least to the extent that the unquestionable stability of referentiality originates from easily perceptible poetic competences, which are maintained by the subject of both lyrical utterances by the authentic formation of the structure of the sight described. On the other hand, this means that all the elements of the sight reflected by the texts belong to the level of perception, the coordinates of which are preliminarily fixed in the imagination of the lyrical subject. The conditions of the fact that this “belatedness” of looking at the world receives the experience of the sight as already arranged, that is, as something that already has qualities, is established by the pre-coded anthropological principles of the selection of perception itself, even if the elements of the moving sight are, so to say, only “mirrored” by the imagination of the perceiving subject. (One observes this in Stadler’s text in an exemplary way first of all in the

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<sup>8</sup> “Alles *Plötzliche* gefällt, wenn es nicht *schadet*, so der Witz, das Glänzende, Starktönende (Licht, Trommellärm). Denn eine Spannung löst sich, dadurch daß es aufregt und doch nicht schadet.” (Nietzsche 1999a, 432: 23[81]) The abovementioned determination of the temporary, the suddenly beginning contains a kind of medial trinity as well, linguistic, visual and auditory (“Witz,” “das Glänzende,” “das Starktönende”).



anthropomorphous “rewriting” of the accessibility concerning the objects of civilization.) In a reading like this, Stadler’s text—which attempts to counterbalance the dominance of the writing system anthropologically controlled and coded by taking notes of the kinetic-mechanic succession of movement-images flying away—still contains a kind of innovative potential, because its scenery depicts with an unquestionable poetic originality the codes of the city’s technology and civilization—quite popular in early avant-garde poetry. In the same horizon of reading, Lórinç Szabó’s text seems to be more like a post-Romantic love poem that simply rewrites the well-known topic of unfulfilled desire. The scenery of the poem that gives the impression of consistency and an organic nature is, from this point of view, closer to the sight-producing techniques of classical Modernity than it is to the solemn-ceremonial aestheticism of the close-up in Stadler’s text:

And then the long solitudes. Bare banks. And silence. Night. Reflection.  
 Self-questioning. Communication. And ardor outward-flowing.  
 To the end that blesses. To conception’s rite. To pleasure’s consummation.  
 To prayer. To the sea. To self’s undoing. (Stadler 1976, 47)

But as I have noted, the mirror-techniques of the two texts, which are similar but function in different ways, are the sources of relevant differences regarding the history of poetry, for if we approach the texts with modes of reading that are—as poetically most relevant—demanded of reception by the poetry that was over the threshold of the avant-garde, then our first impressions of the texts are not only less and less justified but are actually reversed, as it were. These readings emphatically extend referentiality to grammatical-rhetorical figures and the constitutive-tropological features of the text. In this reading, which does not even aim at cutting the tropological “considering” or imaginative “after-formation” free from the textual reality of the text (as from the most important or proper place of medial shifting) and thus does not leave the text behind unread, the two poems behave in very different ways. From this point of view, they make visible different poetological rule systems which do not allow for the two texts to be attached to the same paradigm of the history of poetry, even though the temporal distance between them is negligible.

The fact that the mirror-technique of sight operates in both texts through unbroken, well-formed grammar contributes to the discursive stability of the utterances reflecting upon the images of internal and external movement which last until the end. To the poetic consistency of the sight’s stabilizability of such origins in “Will-o’-the-wisp”, on the other hand, an extra potential of the rhetorical figurativity is attached,

which in a tropological reading simply blows up the strong coherency of the “hallucinatory,” dream-like sight, and at certain moments it strongly endangers the consistency of a referential reading. If the referential reading of the dream-images means in the reader’s experience the linear after-formation of the sight “placed” in the imagination of the subject of the lyrical utterance, such a subsequent producibility is ruined by the ambivalent nature of the text’s central rhetorical figure. The whole tropological system of the poem is formed and kept in motion by a kind of identification that can be reversed. The mode of reading that steps back to referential identifications is overbalanced here by typography which articulates the utterances and seemingly makes the text well-arranged while deceiving the intentions of grammar, aiming at unambiguity before giving voice to the musical score. The after-formation of the sameness of the images recalled (also referred to in the text) is an in-executable order by the text because the identifiability turns out to be two-directional, and this undetermined nature springs—among other things—from the ambiguous grammatical positioning of the colons. While the colons interrupt the sentences using nominal predicates and thus play with two different modes of communication and intention, a two-directional tropological movement is established which proves referentially irresistible. The utterances can be read on the one hand as assertions that identify something with something else while “declaring something,” but on the other hand (thanks to the figure of the asyndeton) they can be read as a semantic chain of mutually reversible substitutions.

As the semantically unfixable movement of the tropological substitutions prevents the referential identifications and stops the grasping of “meaning” from some central, self-identical utterance, further possibilities take shape. Poetically, the “sight” does not prove suitable for after-production as a receptive depiction, and, paradoxically, there are some further unique possibilities for the “ending,” “stopping” movement’s medial accessibility as well. Because as the reversible identifications surrender the subject of the utterance to the mirror-play of substitutions (“of your light: the fantasy: I, – / of your light: unfoldable, / ungraspable is this light”). The pictures that become “visible” in the poem are not only those that are recalled by the subject, but also include the grotesque images and the “nothing” embraced by the self, and, furthermore, its artificial, textual origins together with its metonymic-synecdochic constitutions (“that I am left by common sense // embracing the grotesque for you, / the nothing, thinking it is you”), as this self in its double textual figurativity is watching the dance of an undetermined figure—undetermined because of the broken codes of perception. This mirror-

optics of seeing and being seen in its mutuality identifies the self with the addressee through the movement of light-metaphors, and its identifications through paronomasia<sup>10</sup> while preparing the possibility of their substitution. And this undeceivable tropological act prepares the special image in which the subject of the utterance is facing a par excellence *invisible sight*. The subject will become a witness (“I-witness”) of a sight, in the optical mutuality of which it becomes visible in a double quality: as a source of light and as a figure that is illuminated. And this is the internal, unstabilizable, transitory place, where the subject of the poem steps in front of us in the clearest way in its poetical quality that we can call—keeping in mind Benn’s inter-subject—the metonymy of the “externalized” self, the late Modern lyrical intimacy placed out of itself:

of your light: the fantasy: I, –  
 of your light: unfoldable,  
 ungraspable is this light,

this light: you, who are dancing naked  
 and who I can never reach,  
 as you glitter in me, like fire in secret,  
 that is in coal, blackened, asleep.

Even if at the end of the poem, an anthropomorphism—“written into” a superordinate simile—temporarily blocks the chain of tropological substitutions (“that is in coal, blackened, asleep”), as a result of which the movement of the light identified as dancing (as the dance of the addressee and at the same time the dance of the flames) comes to a stop, “breaks off,” this sudden freezing of the movement liberates an especially rare double effect in Szabó’s poem, because it provides a never accessible sight, the “*Werden*”, the coming into being/dying becoming, an element of movement “graspable” only in the mediality of language, in which the identical inaccessibility of this phenomenon communicates itself—as a transition from one mode of existence to another, that as such can never be positioned. The aesthetic impressions of black glittering (that again cannot be stabilized in the tension between synesthesia and oxymoron) are mediated on the basis of these by a double, *mimetic* and *textual* kinesis that is a unique event of late Modern Hungarian poetry. This is the case in

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<sup>10</sup> We should not forget that the word form “fény” (“light”) contains, or even “involves in itself” in its own literariness, the “én” (“I”) as well. And this happens through the paronomasia that is repeated in the word form, “szénben” (“in carbon”) as well, which functions as a contradictory position of light, because of its blackness.

part because the “before-position” that is full of tension, as the ember can transform into fire at any moment—in the simultaneity of the phases of movement pushed into each other—can be grasped here together and at the same time with the glittering brightness of the flames blazing up, just like the totally unreal experience of this moment. Because the kinetographic image of the “becoming” coming into being—that cannot be accessed by sensual perception, and the after-production of which in the referential reading is impossible—is “recorded” by the text in a manner that involves it in the text’s own materiality as a medial happening, being written in a synchronic way. For what this text-written medial event grasps in its inability to be shaped into visual images (following the reading codes of the poetical trivium “én”—“fény”—“szén” [“I”—“light”—“coal”]) is the discrete immaterial moment of the conversion from glittering into flame, darkness into light, invisible into visible, that—at that point already as an event of reception—comes into being from the sudden meeting of the stabilizing referential reading and the rhetorical reading staying in motion.

As the textual-material movement of the text’s tropological system handles the transfigurative identifications as the central metapoetic principle on the level of the text’s mediality, poetic interferences come into being not only between the (mimetic) world of experience, between imagination and the levels of conscious reflection, but also between the movements thematized and “shown” by the text, which are going on within it. These poetic interferences are not only able to transform the subject (that is on the one hand “incorporated” and on the other hand and at the same time exteriorized by the text) into “light,” “sense,” or “fantasy,” but they identify it—through the abovementioned transfigurations through paronomasia—with the addressee, at whom the apostrophe points, in a tropological, material way. Thus both their entities and their boundaries are dissolved in the tropological text-dynamism, and they turn into the transitional modus<sup>11</sup> of the internal chrono-topic identity of the imperceptibility of the juxtaposition and the succession of the movement’s perceptible elements containing an asyndeton.

From this point of view, the textual-medial techniques of “Will-o’-the-wisp”—concentrating on the moment of becoming in the sense of

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<sup>11</sup> This transitional character of the event’s mode of existence that is described here with the term “meanwhile” is connected by Deleuze with “*Werden*” as well: “It is no longer time that exists between two instants; it is the event that is a meanwhile [*un entre-temps*]: the meanwhile is not part of the eternal, but neither is it part of time—it belongs to becoming [*Werden*].” (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 158; the English translation does not refer to the word “*Werden*.”)

“*Werden*”, following Heraclitus and Nietzsche—which are able to make the phenomenon of inaccessibility and volatility part of the aesthetic experience, thus eliminating the phenomenon of the contemplative monologue-situation of the utterance separating the self from the addressee, give the poem an important place in the history of poetry around the starting point of late Modernity. Stadler’s text turns the directed movement that comes to a rest into the metaphysical immobility of classical Modern mortality, where the aim that is reached extinguishes all kinetic potentials. Coming to rest in the poem by Lőrinc Szabó is a position of movement frozen first of all not by semantic evolution, but by textual materiality, i.e. the kinesis of the beginning—and in its own belatedness always already present—coming into being that can be liberated anytime. But the moment made potential this way is anything but moment of the Stadlerian “passing” (*Untergang*). While reading the poem, it becomes evident, that first of all it is the poetic moment of coming into being, that is—as “delayed” beginning and “postponed” becoming—the most valuable of all elements of movement. In the innocence of its material-textual becoming (see Nietzsche 1990, 65)—like the mode of being of the trope understood literally so that it cannot be stabilized—withdraws itself from the intentions of expropriation of the eschatological meaning-construction as well as from the meaning-construction of human ideology. (A kind of fallibility in Stadler’s text regarding the history of poetry can be observed in the fact that it can be related to any of the abovementioned paradigms with some effort on the part of the interpreter...) So if Kittler’s suggestive observation concerning media archeology would turn out to be true, according to which “[s]ince December 28, 1895, there has been one infallible criterion for high literature: it cannot be filmed” (Kittler 1990, 248), then the poem by Lőrinc Szabó—with its images which cannot be concretized, which can only be “read,” because they cannot be removed from the mediality of literature—can probably face this challenge in a more successful way than its better-known “rival” in world literature.

Translated by Gábor Mezei

## Appendix

### Will-o'-the-wisp

LŐRINC SZABÓ

You are just a dream, I want you in vain,  
spirit, borne by desire itself,  
fairy pleasure, you whisper such things,  
that I am left by common sense

embracing the grotesque for you,  
the nothing, thinking it is you,  
african music glittering in my brain,  
but all in vain, it's just the lure

of your light: I cannot reach there:  
of your light: the fantasy: I, –  
of your light: unfoldable,  
ungraspable is this light,

this light: you, who are dancing naked  
and who I can never reach,  
as you glitter in me, like fire in secret,  
that is in coal, blackened, asleep.

Translated by Gábor Mezei

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THE MNEMOTECHNICS OF THE POETIC IMAGE  
IN LATE MODERNITY:  
GOTTFRIED BENN, PAUL CELAN  
AND ATTILA JÓZSEF  
  
CSONGOR LÓRINCZ

Thinking about the poetic image, one immediately encounters basic problems of terminology. Of course, the term “image” is often evoked, and without much hesitation, in discussions of poetry, and it is also used in the everyday practice of interpretation, with a more or less firm knowledge of its referent. However, the fact that the term “poetic image” comprises such different linguistic phenomena as scene, metaphor, simile, or any motif with minimal visual characteristics, as well as the referential or the fictional image, may suggest that the possibility of defining the “poetic image” is far from simple.<sup>1</sup> Leaving aside this terminological overdetermination, one notes that literary history also offers divergent paradigms for the definition of “image,” which suggests that one should ascribe different historicities to the many meanings of the concept. In fact, it was this latter insight that served as the point of departure for the only available book-length study in the field: Walther Killy’s 1956 essay collection entitled *Changes of the Poetic Image (Wandlungen des lyrischen Bildes)*. Killy endeavored to explain and to expose what different poets meant by the term “image” by taking into account not only their poetry but also their theoretical writings. The problematic aspect of his book lies, from today’s point of view, in the attribution of a (world)view to the poetic image, a phenomenal or semantic vehicle not yet separated from the tyranny of the imagination<sup>2</sup> or of the code of perception. Killy took for

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<sup>1</sup> On the difficulties of defining the concept of “image” in general, see Heidegger 1997.

<sup>2</sup> This was challenged by Heidegger in “The Origin of the Work of Art”: “If we fix our vision on the nature of the work and its connections with the happening of the truth of what is, it becomes questionable whether the nature of poetry, and this



granted the symmetry between image and sense without paying enough attention to the textual condition of literature. Today, after the institutionalization of *Bildwissenschaft* (visual studies),<sup>3</sup> to mention only one external cause, one cannot escape the challenge of questioning and testing whether existing theories of the literary and, particularly, the poetic image are able to account for the specific mediality of literary language. For if we take the non-material mediality of literature seriously, then we have to examine something other than the linguistic exposition of some preconceptions about the image that are already at hand.

There are several reasons for this, but I would like to draw attention to one single conspicuous phenomenon. In Modernity, poems are illuminated by artificial lights, their imaginary spaces are traversed and observed with the help of artificial sources. In Ezra Pound's famous poem "In a Station of the Metro," the ambiguity of the "apparition" (as both phenomenon and specter) results from the light being technically produced: its blurred character generates visual ambivalence. The claim about the artificiality of the spectacle is, of course, also valid in a more general, rigorous sense. In fact, the images in lyrical texts cannot be considered correlatives of perception, but are instead the products of a linguistic constitution. Their coming into being is always predicated upon the textual medium, and although rhetorical figurations always already imply images, the determination of these images is always deferred, up to the point when their legibility becomes questionable.

What are the linguistic or textual preconditions for the possible in the poetry of late Modernity, and what is the interpretational relevance of the pictorial or visual instance? To seek an answer to this question, I shall first examine the opening lines of Attila József's meta-reflexive poem, "Our Poet and His Time" ("Költőnk és kora", 1937). This poem begins with a deixis, which has been interpreted as an example of autoreferentiality.<sup>4</sup> However, the first line, "Here is my poem" [*There you are, here is my poem*],<sup>5</sup> presupposes a double instance of reception: a *hearer*, since it contains an act of addressing and refers to the poem as a conceptual entity (i.e. the poem is done), and a *reader*, since the clause "*here is my poem*" refers to the text, to the printed medium itself. This latter is supported by the second line ("*This is its second line*"), which fulfils the conditions of

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means at the same time the nature of projection, can be adequately thought of in terms of the power of imagination." (Heidegger 2001, 70)

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Schade 2008 on the difficulties to translate the term into English.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Kulcsár Szabó 2004.

<sup>5</sup> The quotations are taken from József 1999, 155. The italicized passages in brackets are word for word translations of the Hungarian original.

the blank deixis, the deixis of writing, which in turn immediately erases the deictic instance by not being an example of anything of a higher order.<sup>6</sup> “My poem” thus exists between reader and hearer, between materiality and concept. The poem cannot coincide with its self-referential gesture, which immediately foregrounds the arbitrariness of deixis as far as the textual context is concerned (even though common sense would dictate that there can be nothing arbitrary in deixis). The line itself—the basic formal unit of the poem, the unmovable given—can only be arbitrarily pointed at, insofar as deixis foregrounds its written character, its exteriority, precisely by staging it and by functioning as a theatrical act (an act of addressing). It gives a name to something that has been nameless (“*This is its second line*”), which is a form of catachresis. It thereby resists the voice-giving power of the apostrophe, particularly because catachrestic naming, in this case, not only implies the giving of a name, but is also the mark of countability (“*This is its second line*”). The poem’s textual spatiality, rather than being visually perceivable, therefore has to be counted in a contingent series of numbers—as if the geometrical spacing of the lines had given way to an algebraic operation. This tension between apostrophe and *calculus* relieves the deictic prescription of the voice of the act of addressing: it cannot totalize the linguistic act of addressing, since the supposedly singular, linguistic-pragmatic “space” may just as well be a random member of a series that goes beyond it. The gesture of pointing at the “exterior place” necessary for the archive<sup>7</sup> has to be transferred: if there were such a thing as an absolute deixis, then it would certainly be interiorizable—the act of pointing would bring about the thing pointed at. If the textual effect of the line cannot be posited as an example, then it cannot have any kind of identity (“Nothingness so flits within it” [*Nothing is flitting in it, like*]). Hence, even though the typographic form of the text presupposes space, there is no determinable or spatializable “place” in it, and any attempt at such a determination must remain arbitrary. The virtualization of the given character of the “line” may imply precisely that lines can be transposed, as lines really can be in many other works of Attila József.

The catachrestic aspect inscribes itself in the deictic naming through this very countability, since the semiotic-referential mode of being of the name cannot be circumscribed. One can always proceed to its new meanings while reading, and create new connections within the textual space. Catachresis functions as the memory of the non-present, in this

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. de Man 1986, 42–43.

<sup>7</sup> Derrida 1996, 12.

case, as that of a virtual voice. This mnemotechnic mark of the catachresis, in fact, of naming itself, is the product of a medially conditioned process, that of the *decree*. The catachresis of “This is its second line” carries with it the index of a decree, just like the aporetic wording of “O begins its full recital,” [*It sounds hard with letters K*].<sup>8</sup> Rather than being a simple naming, the line turns into a textual, medial registration. The mechanical quality of the number thus behaves as the interpretant of the notation.

At the same time, the arbitrariness of the catachresis, the mechanical quality of the decree, and the suspension of any deictic identifiability destroy the determinability of the phenomenal relations: the text becomes empty. Thus, the ability of “Nothing” to be conceptualized in the trope “Nothing is flitting” is still dependent upon metaphorical movements. However, if we perform an anagrammatic reading of the line “*Nothing* is flitting *in* it,”<sup>9</sup> then the phenomenal relations are rearranged, or else entirely disfigured; hence we get the entirely a-phenomenal result that the text is empty, “nothinged,” and at the same time, flitting “in nothing.” The meaning of “nothing” doubles, since “nothing” as, originally, “absence” (“as a something’s dust...”) turns into “nothing” as “emptiness” or “vacuum.” Hence, the topological determinability of “nothing” also becomes questionable: if it is not “nothing” that “is flitting,” but “something is flitting” in nothing, then “nothing” becomes activated as an adverbial of place, and thus functions as a referent; on the other hand, if it functions as the subject of the sentence, associated with “is flitting,” it functions as a trope. This duality renders the possibility of the synecdoche uncertain, suspending any expectation concerning the visualization of abstract connections. If, in the anagrammatic constellation, we emphasize the phrase “in nothingness,” then the subject of the sentence, “nothing” disappears, that is, literally becomes “nothing.” This grammatical aporia renders “nothing” accessible, but as memory, thereby doubling it. The word cannot be grasped: it is divided, textually deferred. Consequently, it cannot be identified with certainty as the mnemotechnical index of the concept, that is, it fades into forgetfulness. Similarly, the concept does not appear except as the memory of the word, and not as a fixed, cognitive entity. “Nothing” and “something” are not strictly separated, nor do they

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<sup>8</sup> The Hungarian version “K betűkkel szól keményen” also refers back to the Hungarian title, “Költőnk és kora,” but in the Hungarian version of the line it is the “hard” quality of the letter “K” that is emphasized, forming a contrast with “sound.”

<sup>9</sup> In the Hungarian version, the clauses “nothing” (*semmi*) and “in” (*benne*) are next to each other and thereby give the anagrammatic reading: “in nothing (*semmiben*).”

contain each other. The “poem” is not simply “nothing,” as it would be in the aesthetic doctrine of a-referentiality. It is also already “something”; however, the relationship between the two is undecidable. Hence, anagrammatic reading produces a conflict between the grammatical structure and the referential implications of the poem.

The defiguration of the concept “nothing” may suggest that “Our Poet and His Time” cannot originate from the conceptual-referential identity of words; “nothingness” is not something given, which could be the object or the theme of the poem. In fact, the naming of a concept like “nothing” always already functions as an abstract deixis, positing the neutral graspability of the concept, regardless of the referential dispersion generated by the process of archiving. So the poem does not treat “nothing” as a guarantee of de-referentialization, that of a possible separation from the contingencies of language, but, through the dissemination of “nothing,” it rather alludes to the divergent referential implications of the interplay of word, concept and textual place. The circumscription of “nothing” results precisely from textual registrations and anagrammatic figures of reading. “Nothing” can only produce its effects as a memory-like subversion of “something.” Furthermore, the anagram has literally erased “nothing,” but this forgetting as textualization has also rendered the referential status of “nothing” uncertain. The double effect of this medial-textual registration, or inscription, interprets the transformation of voice into writing (where the voice is only present as memory, as something translated, and the text is only present as translation—referring to the forgotten), as the play of reference turning into quotation and quotation turning into reference.<sup>10</sup> This play comes into being through the parallel activation and subversion of a mnemotechnical order.

Referential disfiguration also draws attention to the tension between “nothing” and “second” as countability. In this context, “nothing” evidently equals “zero,” or a non-number, withdrawing itself from the possibility of being signified either by a number, or a word, or any semiotic entity (cf. de Man 1996). The referential dispersion produced by the anagrammatic character of “nothing in/in nothing,”<sup>11</sup> the defiguration, the slip of the tongue of the decree all foreground the heterogeneity of

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<sup>10</sup> One cannot ascertain the origin or status of the unmarked anagram: is it a slip of the tongue of the dictating voice, or the effect of voice turning into writing? This latent tension becomes visible in reading: reading always brings into play unforeseeable references, the possibility of which (including the possibility of the anagram) cannot be contained by either the supposed intentionality or the grammar of the text. Cf. de Man 1986.

<sup>11</sup> See note 9.

“nothing” relative to the numeric or definitional order. Hence, “nothing,” as non-number, threatens the principle of seriality (i.e. of the countability or definability of the series), thereby representing the possibility of an interruption; this, in its turn, is the precondition of the possibility of repetition, but it only becomes active in repetition itself. However, the naming of “nothing” (which cannot escape the asymmetry between its nominal and real definitions) already brings into play referentiality, or the memory of referentiality (“as something’s dust”): “nothing” is not subversive because of its absolute heterogeneity, but rather because of its relationship with the linguistic structure *as* iterability.

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In modernity, the disappearance of iconic relationships is accompanied by technical indices. The aporetic image “A transparent lion lives between black walls” in Attila József’s poem “A Transparent Lion” can also be read along these lines.<sup>12</sup> This image can be read as the negative “description” of a photograph, as the reduction of the optical pattern, the phantom-like darkening of the picture. The unreadable image behaves like the (not necessarily image-like) matrix of the visual concept. The self-representation of the poetic “I” oscillates at the crossroads of this matrix and the possibility of its development—the same way the textual status of the text(ual picture) hovers between the development of the picture and its signature, since the evocation of the darkened image cannot function except as reading (and not as the production of any immediate phenomenality). That is, it does not necessarily behave as an image, but rather as the commentary of an image. Thus, the technical development of the picture becomes tantamount to the act of reading, which does not lead to the birth of the image as such, but to its metaphorical transfer: the “image” will be readable as the copy of the non-visual matrix. This creates a new possibility for the interpretation of the pastness of the poem: the poem’s directedness towards the past can be conceived as the reading of a (negative of a) faded photograph, as an attempt to remember. Much as “your words that rang off ages ago” cannot be fully remembered by the “I” at the end of the poem, the mnemonic interpretability of the image becomes questionable in the visual dimension. The image has always already fallen prey to forgetting: the description of the picture can only initiate remembrance without ever being able to develop it fully in the

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<sup>12</sup> See “A Transparent Lion” in József 2006, 45.

photographic sense of the term.<sup>13</sup> As a first conclusion, one can state that in the (faded) photograph the exteriority of memory becomes the index of the exteriorizing of the “I” in a way that is medially conditioned (and cannot be the product of any imagination, however “visionary” this imagination may be). By the same token, the rhetorical code of the text also changes, or at least it opens itself to another possibility of reading: if the poem can be called a “poème-conversation” (cf. Kulcsár-Szabó 2004), then we can read the text as a series of lines written on a postcard or on the back of a photograph, perhaps to be sent; this is all the more so the case because the poem bears the traces of language use proper to the latter kind of communication (“I don’t have a bite of bread to eat,” “It’s been five weeks, and still I know nothing about you”). In this respect, only the text is present, the image is, paradoxically, invisible and inaccessible to language. Language can only reiterate, defer its reference to the image, the same way the reproduction of the negative of the photograph can result in an endless series of copies. Precisely because of the deictic undecidability of the text, or writing, the addressee of the image cannot be detected: although the text promises the development of the picture, it leaves it in the mode of *subscription*, which is dependent upon interpretation. If the text takes its origin from the remembrance of the image, then the deferral of the appearance or semantic anchoring of the image does not lead to a complete forgetting but rather to the subversion of the rhetorical strategies attributed to the text. The text makes the reader experience the “image” only belatedly and in its own changes: the image as such can never be perceived or observed. The present of the image is not the present of its iconic qualities, but, as Benjamin would put it, the possibility of its cognition (cf. Benjamin 1985, 577–578).

In Attila József’s poem, the aporetic coming into being of the poetic image presupposes a mode of staging in which the memory of the visual moment in language is doubly conditioned in the very same language.

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<sup>13</sup> The “development” is deferred to the future and remains something always still to come. Cf. Benjamin’s remark in his preparatory notes to the “Theses on the Philosophy of History”: If we want to contemplate history as a text, we have to apply the claim a recent author [a certain Mongold] made about the literary text: the past placed images in it, and these are comparable to the pictures taken by a photosensitive slide. Only the future has developers in its service that are strong enough to disclose the image in all of its details. (Cf. Benjamin 1974, 1238; 1243.) The postponement of the “development” is in a kind of isomorphic relationship with the mnemonic aspect of the image: the image flashing up in the present moment of cognition can be further defined as memory image [*Erinnerungsbild*]. (1243)