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**PERSONHOOD AND OBJECTIVENESS
IN THE LOVE POETRY OF JÁNOS PILINSZKY**

DOCTORAL (PHD) DISSERTATION

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1. Underlying research and problem statement

Literary criticism has emphasized, to varying degrees in the different periods of Pilinszky's *oeuvre*, hermeticism and lyric objectiveness as the underlying character of this poetry,¹ specifying its main linguistic and poetic devices as follows:

- the attempts of depersonalization leading to dismantling the structure of the self;
- the rhetorical forms of silence and silencing;² as well as the attempts to achieve a kenosis of nothingness within the framework of sacral-theological and biblical themes;
- effectuation of a totally devotional decreation;
- relating sacred and profane existence and space in a specific way;
- visioning creation and creatureliness;
- expressing the consciousness of original sin;
- the poetic description of destruction and birth, sin and punishment;
- the metaphorical way of addressing God as subject;
- the creature existing in the disparity of the prodigal son;³
- and the poetics that can be defined as prayer.⁴

These thematic and poetic nodes of reception are supplemented by metaphysical and philosophical content, relating especially to

¹ Ernő KULCSÁR SZABÓ, *The History of Hungarian Literature*. Argumentum, Bp., 1994. 75–76.

² Gábor SCHEIN, *The Poetics of Silence in the Poetry of János Pilinszky* = ID. *Poetic Experiment in the Poetry of the New Moon*. Universitas, Bp., 1998. 211–227.

³ Dorottya SZÁVAI, *Sacred poetry, religious discourse, prayer-poetics* = ID. *Sin and Prayer. On the Textual Tradition of Pilinszky's Poetry in Camus and Kafka*. Akadémiai Kiadó, Bp., 2005. 32–36.

⁴ Dorottya SZÁVAI, *The Poetry of János Pilinszky and the Theology of Prayer* = József TASI, *Where, How? Studies on János Pilinszky* Petőfi Literary Museum, Bp., 1997. 56–64.

Kierkegaard, Heidegger and the French mystic writer Simone Weil, as well as by various literary intertexts as Kafka, Camus, Dostoyevsky and others,⁵ constituting the experience of absence, the consciousness of abandonment and the eschatological and apocalyptic perspective from *On the Third Day* onwards,⁶ implying an understanding of man's thrown-ness into being, an ontological perception of the world's emptiness.

To the above thematic, poetic and metaphysical leitmotifs, which undoubtedly are crucial elements in Pilinszky's poetic world, further aspects may be added as love, intersubjectivity, interpersonalism and togetherness.⁷ These are palpable in all periods of Pilinszky's *oeuvre*, more prominently in his early volume *Trapeze and Parallel Bars* and less conspicuously in his middle period marked by *On the Third Day* and *Metropolitan Icons*, and again more prominently in his final period: in the volumes *Splinters*, *Crater* and *Final Stage*. This love poetry is fundamentally different from conventional love poetry, yet it is precisely this different quality which relates it to the love poetry of late modernism, its 'anti-humanist' or deindividualistic character, appealing to the prominent problems and themes of late modernism,

⁵ Cf. Dorottya SZÁVAI, *Sin and Prayer. On the textual tradition of Pilinszky's Poetry in Camus and Kafka*. Akadémiai Kiadó, Bp., 2005.

⁶ Béla G. NÉMETH, *Near the Apocalypse. The re-creation of an ancient genre. Pilinszky. 11+7 poems*, Bp., 1984. Tankönyvkiadó, 394–419.; Gábor SCHEIN, *On the dominance of the eschatological view and the withdrawal of apocalypticism in the poetry of János Pilinszky = ID. Poetic experiment in the poetry of the New Moon*. Bp., 1998. Universitas, 187–211.

⁷ The notion of *togetherness* is one of the basic terms of late modern or unconventional love lyric poetry, which denotes the antagonistic, conflictual and both linguistically and theoretically unavailable generating and determining relationship between Self and Other, between self and you, between the Subject and the outside world, which in fact can be described as the basic formula of unconventional love poetry. Cf. Ernő KULCSÁR SZABÓ, *The end of 'love poetry'. 'Justice' and the encoding of intimacy in late modern poetry*

=https://mta.hu/data/dokumentumok/i_osztaly/1_osztaly_szekfoglalok/Kulcsar_Szabo_szekfoglalo_20040627.pdf (2020. 06. 14.)

to the reflection of language, and to the problem of personal existential being.

The research has focused on personhood manifest in the impersonal diction, the interpersonal character in personhood and the nature of interpersonal relations exposed in personhood, as well as their relation to the findings of scholarship on Pilinszky: how these match with the image of objective lyric poetry, how they fit in with the findings revealed by theological interpretations and in what way can they be related to the metaphysical and philosophical conclusions emerging in the reception of Pilinszky's poetry. The main ambition of the research has been to provide new interpretations by adding new elements and purports to existing scholarship by exploring 'unconventional love lyric poetry', an aspect of late modernism in Pilinszky (for lack of a better term named 'love poetry'). The dissertation also aims to provide a metaphysical, linguistic-philosophical and linguistic-poetic analysis of what has a prominent role in Pilinszky's writings: the subject's self-positioning which has existential and ontological significance.

2. Theoretical and methodological considerations

A comprehensive study discussing the poetry of Pilinszky should extensively reflect on the existing scholarship on the subject, incorporate the research findings in its own interpretation and draw up an assessment of judgements concerning literary value. The findings of scholarship imply a philosophical base and a theological starting-point; however, in recent research in Pilinszky there is a lack of a linguistically and poetically focused methodology reflecting on poetic language itself. ('At the same time, Pilinszky's poetic language and the specific characteristics of his language seem to receive far less attention. In other words, the poetic approach and interpretation, inherently addressing the structure of the individual texts, seems to have been losing ground over the last two decades. Whereas there was some tradition of this: I have in mind in particular Béla G. Németh's analysis of the *Apocryph*, and the writings of Zoltán Kulcsár-Szabó and others.'⁸)

Pilinszky's evident connection to the literary periodical *Nyugat* through Attila József⁹ (and, from the point of view of love poetry, through Lőrinc Szabó), as well as to the paradigm of late modern lyric poetry is particularly important, both for the whole *oeuvre* and for love poetry. From the turn of the 1920s and 1930s onwards, Hungarian literature is producing a number of outstanding works and the traditional lag of Hungarian poetry in comparison to Western and world literature is diminishing.¹⁰ In accordance with contemporary

⁸ Kornélia HORVÁTH, "Writing is our rightful freedom. God is freedom": *János Pilinszky on his writing and poetry*. Literary History Publications, 125: 5 pp. 617-629., 13 p. (2021) 618.

⁹ Gábor SCHEIN, *The influence of the late poetry of Attila József on the early poetry of János Pilinszky = Poetic experiment in the poetry of the New Moon*. Universitas, Bp., 1998. 163-179.

¹⁰ Ernő KULCSÁR SZABÓ, *Poetry and the Threshold of the Era. Classics at the Turning Point of Modernity*. Akadémiai, Bp., 2018. 10.

trends in world literature and philosophy, a new approach to language is emerging at the beginning of the late modern period. From the 1930s, the linguistic-artistic aspect of literature is becoming increasingly emphasized, with the instrumental conception of language as a tool being discredited, and the ‘unfolding experience of the inability of language (and with it poetic language) to control the logic of statement’¹¹ is gaining focus. This ‘*linguistic turn*’ also constitutes a change in the understanding of the subject in relation to its being-in-the-world. The experience of the uncontrollability of language at the beginning of late modernity generates a perception of the Subject that replaces the opposition between subject and object by the relation between *Self* and *Other*, which becomes the basis for the concept of world and identity formation.¹² The beginning of Pilinszky’s poetic career can be dated to the 1940s, when in lyric poetry the basic layers of poetic language and the form construction relating to *Nyugat* were still dominant, and when *New Moon*¹³ was launched in the context of this perspective. As one of the late modern poets, Pilinszky, in *Trapeze and Parallel Bars* and *On the Third Day*, and to a lesser extent in his later volumes, inherits and synthesizes the linguistic traditions of *Nyugat* in his own individual tone,¹⁴ so the tendencies unfolding in the 1930s and marking the beginning of late modernism, the linguistic aspect and its effects on the construction of the Subject, are of outstanding importance in his *oeuvre*. This characteristic, the concept of world understood mainly in terms of the linguistic interaction of the Subject and the *Other* and prominently thematized in the triple metaphysical relation between the transcendental and the triple metaphysical relation of the *Self* and the

¹¹ IBID. 8.

¹² IBID.

¹³ Gábor SCHEIN, *Possibilities of rethinking the Western lyrical tradition* = Tibor GINTLI, *Hungarian literature*. Akadémiai, Bp., 2015. 866.

¹⁴ Gábor SCHEIN, *János Pilinszky* = Tibor GINTLI, *Hungarian literature*. Akadémiai, Bp., 2015. 897-901. 897.

Other, in the specific milieu of Pilinszky's linguistic world can be associated with his love poetry. However, this aspect has mostly been overlooked in scholarship in the shadow of the aspects and thematic determinations traditionally associated with his poetry.

The theoretical, philosophical and theological underpinnings, as well as the relative lack of linguistic, linguistic-poetic analysis of the poetic form in Pilinszky scholarship have both been impetus to setting up the theoretical and methodological background of the dissertation. Although scholarship has multiple references relating to personhood and at times even to love poetry, these are mostly restricted to remarks or comments. In examining the whole *oeuvre*, the dissertation aims to integrate the philosophical and theological foundations in its narrative, expanding the horizons of poetic meaning in certain periods of Pilinszky's *oeuvre* primarily through philosophical and linguistic-poetic interpretations. Additional theoretical, philosophical and linguistic works are also involved: the dissertation draws upon Benveniste, Gadamer and Heidegger's reflections on language and the aspects of language relating to personhood, as well as on Paul de Man, Derrida and Foucault's implications on language and the Subject applicable in the poetic analysis. Subsequently, the interpretations offer close-reading oriented textual analysis based on a linguistic-poetic approach reflecting on form and meaning. The interpretations draw on previous research and at the same time add new theoretical content, with strong focus on personhood and love in Pilinszky's philosophy of poetry, his construction of the world and his self-positioning.

The three digressions, parts of the methodological grounding of the dissertation, are tailored to broaden our understanding of Pilinszky by providing new perspectives (the comparison of lyric poetry and epic within late modernism), new methodologies (philology and the digitalization of philology), and most recent historical data (from Pilinszky's last years related to Vas County). The first of the excursions, prior to discussing the volume *On the Third Day*, deals

with the philological aspects of Pilinszky's *oeuvre*, suggesting that an adequate philological processing based on the latest digital technology could foster the preparation of a critical edition that would enrich our understanding of Pilinszky with new insights and readings that may be of interest to scholars and to the general public. Between the chapters discussing the second volume, *On the Third Day*, and *Icons of the City* a brief comparative analysis of some of the main works of János Pilinszky and Géza Ottlik is inserted. Its aim is to orient the reader in regard to subjectivity rooted in language in late modern paradigm. The third excursus is about a lesser-researched period in the life of János Pilinszky associated with the village of Velem and the town of Sárvár. It discusses the sounding poem which was important for János Pilinszky in his philosophy of creation throughout his career. The presentation of a hitherto unpublished letter aims to provide new insight into Pilinszky's last years spent in Velem.

3. The role of personhood in impersonality

The first, theoretical, chapter of the dissertation is tailored to settle the integrative interpretative framework outlined above. By pointing out that late modern lyric paradigm, in terms of its idiomatic features and its relation to language, can be perceived from a basic situation associated with the Subject's position and to the changing relation between subject and object, this chapter seeks to outline a valid scope of interpretation of personhood in late modernism, more specifically in the lyric poetry of János Pilinszky. Texts that thematize togetherness in an objective manner are set in relation to the Subject, to the Other, and to language in this poetic diction. This interpretative strategy is followed throughout the subsequent chapters which primarily comprise textual interpretations, drawing on the theoretical, philosophical and theological scope of previous interpretations and at the same time concentrating on personhood and the linguistic-poetic aspect. Texts selected from the Pilinszky corpus that are substantial both in themselves and in the context of the *oeuvre* are subject to examination. The primary focus of interpretation is on the ontological functioning of these texts on the plain of the linguistic-poetic and figurative meaning construal relating to the positioning of the Subject in regard to togetherness.

In addition to the philosophical and theological theories traditionally associated with Pilinszky, the philosophies of Heidegger, Simone Weil and Gadamer, the chapters interpreting poetry draw on the following sources:

- Émile Benveniste's conception of subjectivity as derived from language;
- Paul de Man's theories of prosopopeia and apostrophé, interpretable in terms of language;
- Nietzsche's conception of truth and the world in relation to the tropological use of language;
- Gadamer's ontological conception of language;

- the linguistic foundations of Foucault’s theory of the subject;
- some of the linguistic aspects of phenomenology regarding the axiom of vision-reception;
- certain details of Derrida’s linguistic trace.

Additionally, philosophy as reflected in Pilinszky’s poetic diction is involved in the interpretation where it seems relevant to the perception of the Subject and its linguistic origin as well as to personhood and linguistic constructedness. Thus certain elements of Heidegger’s being-in-the-world and Weil’s prayer poetics relating to togetherness and linguistic meaning-formation are subject to analysis. In accordance with the main interpretative strategy followed in the dissertation, the priority of textual analysis and examination of poetic texts is maintained throughout. The philosophy of language and language function on the one hand, emphasizing the figurative and subject-generating character of language, and the analyses of the texts in the context of the self-constitution of the Subject and the positioning of the Self on the other, positioned at the same time alongside with and in opposition to the Other and the transcendent, have hopefully led to new interpretations that had not been perceived before.

A close examination of the poems *Trapeze and Parallel Bars* and *What Kind of an Underground Struggle* has led to the implication that the notions of personhood and togetherness playing a crucial role in late modern and objectifying poetry of Pilinszky are already palpably present in the poems of the early stage which initially had been very well received but were later pushed into the background in the reception due to the enforced silence the poet was sentenced to and to the elemental power of the next volume, *On the Third Day*. The poem *Trapeze and Parallel Bars* poses the question whether the Other is accessible on the verbal-linguistic level and inscribes this dilemma into the linguistic-poetic structure of the text, implying at the same time that linguistic access is impossible to realize. The existential-ontological problem of realizing intersubjective personal relation on the linguistic level becomes fixed as the formation of the Self’s

integrity and its self-positioning. The poem *What kind of underground struggle* is based on the representation of the interpersonal system of relations between the Self and the Other, and, starting from the ontological acts of forgetting and recollection, it constitutes the Self's existential dependence on the Other. The analysis of the text provides opportunity to synthesize the philosophical background traditionally referred to in the Pilinszky reception and the philosophical aspects for examining the question of personhood and language. Drawing on Heidegger's concept of language, Foucault's theory of the subject and de Man's concept of prosopopeia, the analysis, while maintaining its focus on the close reading of the poetic text, points out the simultaneous the presence of togetherness and personhood in the work of art, concluding that the strong objectification, emptying and the ontic situation of solitude in the poetic text lead to, paradoxically, generating personhood. However, this personhood is rendered passive and vulnerable by the basic characteristic of the Other, its 'state of absence', its withdrawal, and the Subject's dependence on it.

The most important part of the dissertation are the interpretations devoted to the volume *On the Third Day* and the poem *Apocryph*. Apart from the consent in scholarship that this volume stands out in the Pilinszky *oeuvre* as one of the most significant events in 20th-century Hungarian lyric poetry, *On the Third Day*, with *Apocryph* holding a unique place in it as an extensive and integrative poetic text, are the most discussed works in Pilinszky scholarship. It has been a challenging and at the same time fruitful task to supplement the additional aspects of personhood, togetherness and the approaches, themes and meaning construal typical of non-conventional late modernist love poetry. The beginning part of this chapter supplies ground for the examination of personhood in the context of World War II lager poetry in *On the Third Day*, arguing that, despite its mood, themes and basic characteristics, the volume, if in an abstract constellation, focuses on the Subject, allowing personhood to emerge amidst hermeticism and depersonalisation, with the Subject shaping

the way he perceives his being-in-the-world, where personhood, and ultimately togetherness, intimate interpersonality, have also their relevance, since the self-situating, existential-ontological orientation manifests itself as the personal experiment of the Self primarily in the metaphysical and linguistic-poetic acts of turning to the transcendent, and to the Other.

The chapter interpreting the poem *Apocryph* offers an extensive discussion of the notion of personhood. Based on Heidegger's concept of being-in-the-world as its starting point, the interpretation of the poem draws on the phenomenological conception of vision, the meaning-making effect of de Man's poetic question, and the figuration of the apostrophé in elucidating the rhetorical and linguistic-poetic structure of the text. The Derridean conception of language associated with the Babel motif is involved to highlight the meaning-structuring feature of the tree motif related to the utterance and the Subject's world- and self-situation, as well as the personal relation of the Self to the Other, who perceives the Other in its multiperspectival mode of representation. As a result, new insights and perceptions are added to the extensive reception of *Apocryph*, this text of extraordinary importance. It seems worth exploring the Subject's relation to the Other with regard to the *Apocryph* too – either taking it as a late modern non-conventional love poem, or as reading it as an instance of turning to the transcendent, or assuming a multiperspectival and polysemantic Other. The impersonal and objective poetic world postulates personhood, and the self-situating of the Subject is carried out through language and in relation to another Subject. The Self's state of being is made seen, in a state of 'being as seeing', in relation to the Other, with the Subject interpreting his experience of the world in relation to this other entity, constituting it as being in a state of dependence.

The concluding part of the dissertation offers an interpretation of parts from certain poems from Pilinszky's final volumes, *Metropolitan Icons*, *Splinters*, *Final Solution* and *Crater*, related to

personhood. These volumes have been thought both to form one cohesive unit and to belong to two separate periods. Pilinszky's final period represents a change in his writing, both in terms of the increase in the number of poems and in the underlying works of philosophy and religious thinking to his poetry. The interpretations focusing on personhood point out that there is no contradiction between the act of prayer as a verbal event in the artistic situation of *engagement immobile*, the motif of the icon which can also be considered as a linguistic figuration, the attitude of Simone Weil and her mystical philosophy of religion, the metaphysical grounding of Pilinszky's *oeuvre*, and being-in-the-world, Dasein. The increased number of poems in the final stage of the career, in many cases carrying references to private life and pertaining to personhood and often to love, underpin our understanding of this period of Pilinszky's lyric poetry as being related to togetherness. Dialogicity, coming to the fore, the silent or unrealized communication with the Other who is constantly set in its existence ('Dasein'), and the signification power of language affect the self-situating of the Self depending on the Other and the transcendent, yet do not fundamentally change the philosophical, existential-ontological orientation of Pilinszky's poetic discourse.

4. Publications

In bed, between pillows, in bed. Certainty and uncertainty built around one line: 'A thought troubles me' and 'When you come' = Palócföld. 2023. pp. 3–4, 142–151.

Oblivion, address and prosopopeia in Pilinszky's poetry. János Pilinszky. = Pannonhalmi szemle. 31.1. 84–95.

My experience of the world in the mirror of the apocalypse and the Other. János Pilinszky's Apocryph = Radiant Path Satu Mare Workshop 2022.4. 59–85.

János Pilinszky's love poetry: linguistic-poetic possibilities in the interpretation of János Pilinszky's love poetry = Sugárút: Szatmári Műhely. 2022 : 1 pp. 45–57. , 13 p. (2022)

The Self and the Other in the Love Poetry of János Pilinszky: The Trapeze and the Barrier = Contemporary: Journal of Literature and Criticism. 2022 : 4 pp. 85–93. , 9 p. (2022)

The poetic subject in the metaphysical system of transcendence and the Other. Pilinszky's recitations in Sárvár in March 1979 = Szabolcs-szatmár-beregi Szemle 56 : 4 pp. 91–99. , 9 p. (2021)

János Pilinszky in the digital space = Eruditio – Educatio 2022 : 4 pp. 104–111. (2021)

Balázs FÜZFÁ – Gabriella SÜTH – Balázs SÁRKÖZI (Eds.), *'Sejtjeimbe vackolódó föld': Anthology on Hungarian Literature, Language and Culture beyond our Borders* Szombathely, Hungary : Savaria University Press (2021) , 616 p. ISBN: 9786155753657

The linguistic and existential ontological features in the works of János Pilinszky's Apocryph and Géza Ottlik's School on the Border = Kortárs Kiadó 259–264. (2021)

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