

University of Szeged
Faculty of Arts
Doctoral School of Literary Studies

THESES OF THE DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

Ákos Tóth

The Repetitions of Being-at-hand

(Studies on the “Middle” Period of Dezső Tandori’s Poetry)

Supervisor: István Fried, professor emeritus

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I.

The theme of the PhD thesis

I investigate the “middle” period of Dezső Tandori’s poetry in my thesis; my intention was to use various perspectives and different methods in accordance with the diverse problematic of the object. I entitled the work as “*The Repetitions of Being-at-hand*” as in my view the expression covers those challenges that all critical receptions of Tandori (mine included) has to face. The two parts of the expression “*the repetitions of being-at-hand*” (cited from the long poem by Tandori: *Gép zaja; infrarubin fény* [Mechanical Noise; Infraruby Light], Tiszatáj, 1987/1-2.) seem to carry with themselves those tendencies and directions which influenced and shaped the several decades of Tandori-reading. “Being-at-hand” apparently implies the framework of a “Life” that is more expansive and significant than the actual situation of the work and the closed structure of the text’s form. As a result, Tandori’s activity can be characterised by a flux, by a performativity that is rather hard to grasp. This lead the responsive criticism of Tandori to interpret his poetry along the conceptions of *Gesamtkunstwerk* theory. Less favourable interpretations accused this poetry as being incomprehensible. Strange it might seem but in the background of the fact that most of the receptions treat the personality of Tandori indispensable in the comprehension of his poetry, or even deduce the regulations of interpretation from the autonomy of the person, there lies the gentle rejection of his work and the deferment to face the work itself. The rejection might be labelled as ‘gentle’ because, as I have already mentioned, most often it is the production of prevailing committed Tandori-research that lead to such unbalanced results insensitive to the aesthetic truth of the texts. I intended to evade alike temptations of monographic inspiration during my work.

When we turn our attention to the expression “repetition” then we arrive at the other pole of Tandori-reception: these considerations are sensitive to the signs of literary presence and tend to foreground avant-garde (at least neologist) aspirations mostly reflecting on the historical construction of poetic language. In my view Tandori’s art itself questions and even rejects the one-sided and exclusive centring of the linguistic register. The determined perspective of literary history and the reflections of reception aesthetics prove to be unilateral or exorbitant in perceiving only the repetition of words, the traces of the linguistic work

reflecting on itself, and in omitting the opportunities of “being-at-hand” which provide those repetitions with life. The prevalence of this kind of reception can easily be identified in the gesture of modern Hungarian literary history which concentrates on the early, indeed experimental Tandori-volumes (that use hypothetical lyrical concepts) and thus distracts the attention from the later works beginning with the late 1970s; however the line of continuance in the poetical oeuvre would require it. When choosing the aspects of my work I also tried to evade this perspective that can be consoling historically or theoretically speaking, nevertheless it disarrays the structured proportions of the oeuvre. Probably the most important decision is the designating of the period within the Tandori-oeuvre that represents both the choice of the theme and the election of values. I investigated the so-called “middle” period of the writer, that is, I surveyed the artistic results and fragmental motives of the period stemming from the late 70s (from about 1976/77), from the imperative of artistic change expressed as drastic lifestyle-undertaking until the volume *Koppar Köldüs* (1991) that assumed the role of keystone and announced the univocal exhaustion and forecoming new lives of artistic language.

II.

The most important questions and problems of the PhD thesis

The prolonged moment of the “middle” period of Dezső Tandori’s career includes a warehouse of unsolved problems and paradoxes until this day both for the reader and for the researcher. In the memory of common literary thinking the period has been fixed as the “bird/sparrow” period, as the demonstration of “hyper-realist” lyric and prosaic ambitions, or consequently as (self-)documenting period. The numerous works of this artistic complex group around a few well-organised, repetitive (mostly rhetoric) tropes and text-analysing practices in critical approaches of literary history which can be characterised even after decades as experiments. Such tropes and practices are for instance: the methods of tautological (self-)quotations, the conditions of lyrical-prosaic sequentiality, or the formally heteronomous structures of texts frequently “transgressing” genre theories etc. Meanwhile usually what is left to be unperceived is a new way of thinking and seeing things, a claim that might even be called philosophical that serves as the meaning (in Tandori’s sense) of the “One”, of the Work governing the work. Only a part of the critical anomalies stem from the

fact that those discourses and analytical processes that are able to address the early volumes (*Töredék Hamletnek* [A Fragment for Hamlet]; *Egy talált tárgy megtisztítása* [Cleaning up a found object]) show up simultaneously or even somewhat later than the volumes themselves, and they borrow maybe too much from these texts during forming their own language, consequently they also pay back too much in their reviews, in their instant canonisation with which they artificially influence the formation of the oeuvre, as it is apparent in retrospect. The other difficulty is that this middle period is extraordinarily closed and open at the same time. It is closed because Tandori consciously and spectacularly breaks up with almost the whole problematic of the Hungarian writer. It opens up at the same time towards those “special” horizons and themes whose slow, thorough circumscribing had already begun on the pages of “conceptual volumes” just preceding the mature middle period (*A mennyezet és a padló* [Ceiling and Floor]; *Még így sem* [Not Even Like That]).

My way of investigating this middle, generically diversified (short story, novel, essay, crime story, child poetry, translation are becoming as important genres for Tandori during this time as poetry), inwardly closed text-universe would not follow the probably secondary viewpoint of reception in order to read it as a well-organised whole, that is, to read it together; I rather use a primary viewpoint, keeping in mind the texts’ dedication, in order to pay attention to the unity, the common initiative of conception and realisation. I interpret the works as announcements/experiments of such an “organic” poetry that grants a major role in the working of representation to the consciousness of intermediality and mnemotechnics. The conception of elaborating a gesture-like writing technique that goes further and further away from traditional textuality has an important place in the description; this project urges the re-evaluating of the linguistic sign. This conception of the text is further shaped by the idea of a presupposed and integrated tradition: the (con)texts of Hungarian and world literature and citation as an autonomous, erudite form of knowledge. My goal is to give an overall picture and a thorough analysis of this enterprise of great ambitions that challenges the limits of literary significance and representation and, at the same time, meets the criteria of traditional artistic pleasure by offering the radical pluralism of beauty. Consequently I tried to investigate the given corpus from a multi-centred, multi-layered perspective. In the interpretation of the period the claims concerning the nature of the turn, the announcements about the novelty of the paradigm and the characteristics and signs granting the recognition of the work gain equal significance. While demonstrating the shift in the conception of the text I observe volumes,

cycles, diversely organised text groups as well as some emblematic works that might be called typical from the viewpoint of the poetics of the given period.

III.

A short description of the chapters

Poetry transforms – how? (Introduction)

In the introduction of the PhD thesis I intended to clarify those concepts and presuppositions that helped me to investigate the phase of poetic career in question. First of all, I interpreted the fact of the turn in the Tandori-oeuvre (poetry) as an open declaration or even imperative in the self-interpretation of this art itself. But I also problematized this fact as I recognised the contradiction, manifest or latent, between the perspective and conception of literary criticism concerning Tandori and his role in Hungarian literature and the self-reflexions and directions of intention of the interpreted text-universe. Even in this initial phase of the work a problem turns up that would frequently re-occur during later studies and which proves to be a central one: the relationship between poetry and cognition. It sustained to be a fundamental question during the dissertation whether and what chances and possibilities Tandori's artistic approach has against the literary institution: the latter works along the lines of certain definable reading conventions, and its aim is to understand; the first presupposes the isolating nature of language, and the genuine separation of the real-life personality.

The Tree of the Sun Hour (Elegy as the readability of being-in-time in "middle" Tandori)

I confronted the lyrical activity of Tandori in this period with the tradition of elegiac formulation in this chapter. In this sense elegy is not a genre or a regulative norm but rather a way of conceiving time, a constant relevance of the past which provides a foundation for his approach to art. Tandori constructively places the natural, literary endowment of sequentiality in the centre of the narrative; in turn it serves as the primary frame of reference both for the serial parts of the oeuvre and for single works.

Like an Arrival (Tandori or the ontology of not-being-there: A feltételes megálló [The Request Stop])

After describing the general terms of definitive, methodical and poetical approach, in this chapter I intended to grasp, at once in their concreteness and in their conceptuality, those poetical moments that took place in the second half of the 70s, the period I evaluated as a turn in the writing career. I propose that in this volume (*A feltételes megálló* [The Request Stop], Versek: 1976-1980, Magvető Könyvkiadó, Budapest, 1983) Tandori concentrates and announces the possibility of a resumption or indeed a genuinely new outset; I judged to be necessary to give a more thorough and autonomous analysis of this volume which can be considered to be of central importance not only within the Tandori-oeuvre but also in the context of Hungarian poetry of past decades. It seemed necessary to observe in its thesis-like delimitation, in its accidental functioning and effective roles the term “halved simile” offered by Tandori (and traced back to a passage in Goethe’s *Faust*); the term serves as an ideal condition of the text and also as the endangered position of this status threatened exactly by the requirements of textuality. Moreover, a recurring question of my study concerns the relationship between Tandori’s poetic language and image; to be more precise, the question is how the ideal figure of the image can serve as the means of liberation and as an ontological clarification for such a linguistic work of art that reveals the problematic of signification and constantly thematises its difficulty. I expected to answer this question with the help of analysing a cycle of long poems (*Részlet* [Excerpt]) in the volume; this cycle analogically reutilises the novelties and revolutionary suggestions of the “tradition” of impressionistic landscape painting in the workings of and on the texts and in the solutions of poetic problems. I also tried in this chapter to dissolve probably the most widespread applied thematic concepts of contemporary Tandori-interpretation (the one concerning birds) from the exclusive rule of biographical approach and to use it as the guarantee of phenomenological interpretation of the lyrical object (the close reading of another representative piece, *Falusi templom* [Rural church], came to my help).

The mo(nu)ment (*Dezső Tandori: Napfény egy üres szobában* [Sun in an Empty Room])

I concentrated on the possibilities of visual reflexion as an analogy of textual being in the preceding chapter by interpreting the mutual relationship of image and text; in the next case study I actualised a classical argument in the history of aesthetics. I observed the visual and textual paradoxes functioning in the Tandori-version of the well-known picture by Edward Hopper; furthermore, I speculated on how the two kinds of media surface the

descriptive/interpretive schemes of the signifying process concerning spatiality and temporality precisely by supervising and challenging their own possibilities.

“We were Ernő Szép” (To the Nature Study of Literary Collegiality: Ernő Szép and Dezső Tandori)

The dissertation reconstructs in significant extension the literary historical intentions taking shape in Tandori’s poetic works and works on poetic theory. It is the relationship towards Ernő Szép’s work and the attempt to find new ways of expression that directed my attention to a question treated perhaps less significantly until so far in reading Tandori: the formation of the common narrative(s) of the history of modern (Hungarian) poetry; the revision and sustainability of the canon; the artistic gesture of choosing tradition as a means of reinventing tradition; and, naturally, to the occurrence and expansion of this process and of the reflexion of this process in Tandori’s art. Moving further from the narrow task of observing the possible relations between Tandori and Szép and the history of Szép’s influence I attempt to survey and re-evaluate from the contemporary interpretive and receptive horizon provided by Tandori’s art the results and settlements of modern Hungarian poetical claims from the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries already summed up by conventional thinking in the history of poetry. While describing the relationship between pretexts and the receptive texts I observed and evaluated those proposals of reading that paves the way for the essayist, literary historian Tandori encountering Ernő Szép’s work. This phase of the study was directed to reconstruct the structure of the receptive discourse along the figures and gestures of persuasion, canonisation, proposal as propaganda etc. The task was to describe the forms of judgement, hypotheses, criteria that formed the background for the rhetoric functioning of these interpretive texts (such “opportunities” were the report about the “discovery” of Szép; the possibilities to rank Szép in Hungarian and world literature; the varying attempts of comparisons with Szép’s poetic career etc.).

Honourable Acts on a Deserted Land (Ernő Szép-Dezső Tandori: Magányos éjszakai csavargás(ok) [Lonesome Night Wandering(s)])

In this light the poetic questions concerning the literary work are being reshaped into (literary) political questions in the process of all-time historical observation and acquirement. Exactly like the way moments in the assignment of significant tradition serve as the most effective means to reshape a given discourse. I intended to give examples of the dynamic intertextual

relation-forming of these processes by analysing two of Tandori's model-like text-exhibitions and the detailed description of their respective antecedents. A huge extent of the PhD thesis is covered by the close reading and analysis of Tandori's versions on the poem by Ernő Szép *Magányos éjszakai csavargás* [Lonesome Night Wandering]. My intention was to exhibit the motives of this only seemingly historical interest which in reality moves and sustains this poetics through displaying the different historical, sociocultural, poetical etc. contexts of the texts. After all, I tried to understand that aesthetic-philosophical-artistic paradox in the background of the poetic expeditions towards Ernő Szép which can be linked both to theoretic settlements about language's incapability of communication and to the artistic program of mutuality and empathy in Tandori's enterprise.

Studies, Articles and Editions Pertaining to the Topic of Dissertation:

„In Aachen man find time for” – Dezső Tandori: Koppár Köldüs [„Aachenben az ember raer...”] (Tandori Dezső Koppár Köldüs c. kötetéről), in *Tiszatáj* 2001/7

The Known and Secret Subject-Matter – Memory, Forgetting and His/story in Tandori's Poetry in the 1990s [Az ismerős és titkos tandarab (Emlékezet, felejtés, történelem a kilencvenes évek Tandori-lírájában)], in *Szövegek között V.* (Fejezetek a mai magyar irodalomból), Szeged, 2001

Pictures at an Exhibition – Poems about abstract pictures [Egy (ki)állítás képei (Festményversek absztrakt művekről)], in *Szövegek között VI.* [Fejezetek a világirodalom köréből], Szeged, 2002.

The Tree of the Sun Hour (*Elegy as the readability of being-in-time in “middle” Tandori*) in *Tiszatáj* 2006/4

The mo(nu)ment (*Dezső Tandori: Napfény egy üres szobában* [Sun in an Empty Room]), in *Tiszatáj* 2009/1.

Like an Arrival (*Tandori or the ontology of not-being-there: A feltételes megálló* [The Request Stop]), in *Jelenkor* 2010/1

Wiew and World Wiew (On the Idea of Approach in A feltételes megálló [The Request Stop] [Látkép és világnézet (A szemlélet fogalmáról és szerepéről Tandori Dezső *A feltételes megálló* című kötetében)], In Szövegek között XV., szerk. Fried István, Kovács Flóra, Lengyel Zoltán, SZTE BTK Összehasonlító Irodalomtudományi Tanszék, Szeged, 2010.

“We were Ernő Szép” (To the Nature Study of Literary Collegiality: Ernő Szép and Dezső Tandori), in Szövegek között XVI., szerk. Fried István, Gyulai Zoltán, Kovács Flóra, Pál Katalin, SZTE BTK Összehasonlító Irodalomtudományi Tanszék, Szeged, 2011

The Way of Ernő Szép [Szép Ernő útja (Az irodalmi nyilvánosságtól az irodalmi nyilvánvalóságig)], in Híd 2012/1

Boulevard To Infinity [Sugárút a végtelenbe (Szép Ernő: *Magányos éjszakai csavargás*)], in Irodalomtörténeti Közlemények 2012/6. szám

Poetry transforms – how? (Introduction)[A költészet átalakul – hogy is], in Forrás 2012. December

Past Perfect - Dezső Tandori: Aztán kész [Befejezett múlt], in Tiszatáj 2002/3., Helikon 2002/6., Szörös Kö 2001/6.

TD and The World – Dezső Tandori: Az Oceánban [TD meg a Világ], in Bárka 2020/6.

~A Free Truant – Dezső Tandori: „Hol élsz te?” [A szabad-iskola-kerülő] in Tiszatáj 2003/12.

Wakefulness and Poetry – Dezső Tandori: Az Éj Felé [Ébrenlét és poézis], in Alföld 2004/12.

The Man Who could Be Walked Round – Dezső Tandori is 70 years old [A körbejárható ember - Tandori Dezső 70 éves], in Forrás 2008/12.

Dezső Tandori: The Best Day – Selected Verses [Tandori Dezső: A Legjobb Nap (válogatott versek)], Selection, Edition, Notes and Introduction by Ákos Tóth; Tiszatáj Könyvek, Szeged, 2006

Dezső Tandori: Cape of Bad Hope – Verses, 2004-2008 [Tandori Dezső: A Rossz Reménység Foka (versek, 2004-2008)], Selection, Edition by Ákos Tóth, Tiszatáj Könyvek, Szeged, 2009

Dezső Tandori: 'Wondrous Tuesday', 'Awful Wednesday': Fictions, Essays, Studies: 2000-2010 [Tandori Dezső: Csodakedd, rémszerda (Tárcák, esszék, tanulmányok, 2000-2010)], Selection, Edited by Ákos Tóth, Tiszatáj Könyvek, Szeged 2010

