

Theses

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Temple and Sanctuary. Hungarian Ekphrastic Poems from the Twentieth Century Mirrored by World Literary Examples

The main point of focus of my dissertation titled *Temple and Sanctuary* was to analyze three significant Hungarian ekphrastic cycles or volumes. Based on the paper's introduction first of all I would like to point out the reasons of my decision to center the argument on the close analysis of three larger ekphrastic textual units. I chose that line instead of a comparative investigation of the numerous ekphrastic poems in our literature, or of a reception historical interpretation revealing inner relations in the context of an oeuvre. The three ekphrastic textual collections are the following: György Somlyó's *Piero Della Francesca* – a cycle; Lajos Kassák's *Mesterek köszöntése* (Greeting of Masters) – a volume; Dezső Tandori's *A verébfélék katedrálisa* (A Cathedral of Passerines) – a cycle.

In relation to the Hungarian literary tradition preceding the advent of the journal *Nyugat* in the first half of the twentieth century it became an almost exclusively applied practice to ignore the structuration introduced by the poets themselves or their contemporary editors during the later editions of collected volumes. This practice produced a number of regrettable mistakes of textual arrangements in the unchanging collected volumes. Sándor Petőfi's volume titled *Felhők* (Clouds), for example, would

make a decisively separated unit in his oeuvre, due to its closed structure and to the unified tone of the poems; yet these poems had been infused without selection, following solely the chronological order, in the collected volume of the poet. The same can be said about János Arany's collected volumes, where the cycle *Őszikék* is not secluded in the flow of poems. In the case of finished oeuvres from the twentieth century the situation is somewhat better; the usual practice is to separate the different volumes, however, it is rather frequent that the borders of cycles cannot be distinguished. The need to distinguish these borders is doubtlessly a claim of contemporary literature. The poetry of the millennium concentrated rather on the overall chargeability of volumes rather than on significant individual poems. Furthermore, the perspective of such a literary history that directs the focus of reading on canonized, *great* poems in the *finished* oeuvres, and ignores the original contemporary arrangements of texts, suggests a museum-like viewpoint on all-time literature, and thus renders contemporary poetry's significance into something that can only be justified in retrospect. Bearing all these factors in mind, the inner coherence of the analyzable ekphrastic textual groups, the unity of their themes and perspective provided a significantly broader horizon on investigating ekphrastic methods and problems than the close examination of the poems in relation to their given oeuvres. However, the chosen cycles and the volume show radical differences in their perspectives on visual artworks, and also in their way of articulating the experiencing their *auras*, not to mention the degree of success of their endeavors.

Another conscious characteristic feature of my paper is that its main, though not exclusive, focus is on the reading of the primary texts and the relevant points of the given visual artworks. I paid less regard on relating the flourishing theoretical texts of ekphrasis with the chosen cycles and volumes.

The subtitle of my dissertation contains the word 'mirror'. In between the chapters concerning Hungarian literary examples there are two embedded chapters about world literary examples. These I treated as convex mirrors. In an indirect way I intended to use as a forming principle the long poem of the contemporary American poet John Ashbery titled *Self-portrait in a Convex Mirror*. The poem refers to the painting by the Italian mannerist painter Parmigianino. The first Hungarian translation of this poem is attached as appendix nr. 2 as my own work together with Dénes Krusovszky.

In the introduction I recall two archetypical ekphrastic texts: the excerpt from *Iliad* describing the shield of Achilles that is usually treated as the first world literary example of ekphrasis, and a text from the Gospel of John. The latter introduces and describes the famous scene in which Jesus draws or writes something on the ground. To my best knowledge no one has ever interpreted this text as a hypothetical ekphrasis. For me the analysis of this biblical verse or verses (John, 8) proved to be an important source in the following chapters, when I tried to construct the potentially rich and irregular network between poems, descriptions and the pictures or drawings on which they were based. (Christ writes or draws something on the ground when he is confronted with a moral dilemma by the Pharisees.)

The first chapter following the introduction sheds light on the connection between the concepts of *temple* and *sanctuary*, or at least it determines the theoretical basis of that connection. As a starting point it already hints at the fact that this dichotomy does not serve as a categorical framework for the circumscribing of ekphrastic spaces, but rather as the erasable, watermark-like system of auxiliary lines strongly connected to their auratic or non-auratic (ephemeral) status. In this chapter I analyze two poems by

Charles Baudelaire: the sonnet *Correspondences* and *The Beacons*. Only the latter can be regarded as an ekphrasis; the sonnet is introduced concerning the above-mentioned dichotomy and the land-historical metaphoricism that helps to interpret *The Beacons*.

The second chapter is about Gyula Juhász's poem *A fekete Mária* (The Black Mary). The poem is connected to a picture in a temple located in Szeged. I chose the poem because of the fact that its text has been engraved near the picture itself among other greeting *ex votos*. I tried to reveal the complex layering of meanings of the ekphrasis relying on the categories introduced by Hans Belting. According to Belting in Europe the age of image (that should be meant here as cultic image) preceded the age of art. The Black Mary of Szeged is a rather late and, considering its flourishing cult, an authentic copy of a significantly earlier type (the original icon can be found in the Jasna Gora monastery in Poland). This can be explained by the art historical hiatus produced by the Turkish occupation, or by the fact the earlier category of cultic image has not been eliminated entirely in the later history of Western Christianity. The speaker of Juhász's poem does not represent a collective, he only speaks for himself, nevertheless he projects on the Mary-picture all those looks that begged her during her history; and in the sum of these looks the speaker finds such a degree of collective feeling that provides in itself a key to understand the special sacredness of the picture organically united with the its role in Eucharistic practice. By the end the poet steps out of the fictive space of the poem in a performative gesture; a poem whose text, as I have already mentioned, has been put on the wall, engraved in marble, by the congregation, or according to the logic of the poem, by the sum of all past, present and future looks.

The third chapter is about György Somlyó's ekphrasis-cycle titled *Piero della Francesca*. The cycle is most strongly connected to the sequence of frescoes titled *The Legend of the True Cross* that can be found in the Basilica of San Francesco in Arezzo. The sequence of pictures represents the complex story of Christ's cross based on a collection of texts that was very popular in Piero's time, the *Legenda Aurea*. Much emphasis is laid on those events that happen before and after the story included in the Bible, up till the dream of Constantine. It is an essential and clearly traceable ambition of Somlyó's cycle to write a kind of modern *Legenda Aurea*; to inhabit the spaces of the text with the characteristic figures of the Arezzo of the twentieth century (alongside with the imagined model-choosing of Piero). It is of primary importance for the lyrical self of the cycle to encounter the aura of the frescoes of Arezzo, and to interpret the shared relics of culture and religion as rhetoric constructions. The texts of Somlyó do not reckon sacredness as it is meant by Belting. The Renaissance of the quattrocento and Harmony extinguish the significance of each other due to the aesthetic inauthenticity of the raised theses and answers. Alongside with the meaning-extinction there is also a retouching of this process in Somlyó's texts, without, however, the cathartic encounter of failure as failure, presented through the poetic routine of sentence-rhetoric.

The fourth chapter (the second mirror-chapter) of the dissertation interprets Rilke's *Fifth (Duino) Elegy*. It is connected to a painting from the rose period of Pablo Picasso that describes a family of artistes. In the first part of the chapter I briefly analyze a most significant poem in Rilke's oeuvre, the *Archaic Torso of Apollo*. I concentrate on those motifs and phenomena that can be connected to the ekphrastic world of the *Fifth Elegy*. Rilke's aristocratic conception, or, if you like, religion of art presents the Greek

torso as a vital whole in all its details revealing its essential (though metonymic) figure, and through this recreation (or at least through the attempt of this recreation) the poem itself becomes a related *orphic figure*, as it was called so by Péter Pór in his essay titled likewise. In this sense the perfectly polished sonnet-form is not at all an attempt to fill in the holes, but rather the demonstration of the unamplifiable nature of the Apollo-torso – the poem contextualizes the prevalence of the plastic form in the present, not in history. The sculpture may well have served as a religious object right after its completion, however, this period of its existence ended in a way as if it has become not a metonymic double of the same artwork, but rather an original, religious cultic object, as an object, as a whole, and as a torso as an emphatically *artistic* whole. In the ekphrasis-conception presented by the sonnet the artwork and its spectator are in a never-resting, dynamic hierarchical relation: it is not only the speaker of the poem who looks at the torso, but the whole of the headless sculpture, all its points looks back at him, until finally their relation becomes tyrannical from the perspective of the Apollo-torso in the imperative quotation-like ending. It is on the brink of tolerability for the speaker of the sonnet (in harsh contrast with the harmonically closed form) as it can be read in the introduction of the *First Duino Elegy*. The *Fifth Elegy*, the so-called Saltimbanque-elegy, as all other members of Duino-sequence, is looser, more abstract, subtler, if you like, and its formal factors are closer to the poetic taste after the Second World War than the polished, elegant slags of the *New Poems*. The perfect formal self-identity formulated in the Apollo-sonnet gains indirect emphasis in the case of the Picasso-work; in the elegy the ideas of formal saturation or unsaturation surfaces in the description of the pictured figures. The primary addressee of the long text is the *angel*, a necessarily saturated being who appears as a keystone above the intentionally vital motifs, mythological and biblical personae, antique and non-antique works of art. For

the Rilke of the *Fifth Elegy* ekphrasis no longer means a mere linguistic possibility for the articulation of another medium's artistic reality, rather that the temple of the Rilkean art religion, a temple whose finely polished inner sphere, orientation, sterilely classicized outlook did not seem really motivated, at this point this temple transforms into a one-time *inner-baroque* sanctuary whose specifically *natural* locus is at least as bewildering and hardly graspable as the construction itself.

In the fifth chapter of my paper I analyze the last volume of Lajos Kassák, the *Greeting of Masters* (*Mesterek köszöntése*) which contains only ten medium-sized ekphrasis. Each of them is titled after one of the European painters of the twentieth century: *Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque, Fernand Léger, Franz Marc, Marc Chagall, Paul Klee, Henri Rousseau, Giorgio de Chirico, Max Ernst*. In the introduction I circumscribe the problematic point that in Hungarian literary formal art, though not exclusively, but predominantly conservative both in its influence and in its reception; it is conservative in a classicized way of Mihály Babits or István Vas. The syzygy of the early Kassák with the most durable literary *and* artistic performances of European avant-garde thus remains an isolated phenomenon; not only in Hungarian literary history, but even in Kassák's oeuvre, too. We might consider the *Greeting of Masters* as a kind of private collection of Kassák, as his private museum of paintings in which not the individual works of the masters hang, but rather the poems attempt to recreate their creative worlds respectively. We might testify then how the periodical and qualitative artistic synchronicity on one hand, and the consistent poetic language of Kassák (developed from classic avant-garde poetics) on the other invest this textual collection with a special panoptic character for the non-contemporary reader, and that the *up-to-date* world of this panopticum sets forth the artistic performance of this artist

for those who know his oeuvre. Though it lacks direct visual references, Kassák's sequence of poems becomes interpretable in the context of (Kassák's) art because it does not describe paintings of the painters, but rather evokes the artists themselves, thus renouncing to rely upon the aura of the works it makes symbolic but strong gestures to literally recreate modern-contemporary auras. It is not a physical sphere turned into a spiritual one in which the speaker stands or stood in front of the work(s), neither the one-time auratic museum experience or a temple-space transubstantiated into a museum – it is a kind of privately arranged ekphrastic scene where the sphere of contemplation of images coincides with the poem itself – that covers the individual paintings for the reader, making only their rearranged world visible. Whereas in the dissolving, opened up space-notions of the poems there haunts a kind of floating dreamlike quality, their most general spatial simile is cosmos itself, the starry sky (sometimes represented only metonymically). In contrast the natural or constructed space-notions (woods, fields, towns) are always scene-like. The pathos of *greeting* is projected among the planets in the name of some kind of one-time cosmic pantheism which becomes authentic by the self-evident, technical coziness, and not by a (Rilkean) belief in the sacredness of art. The sanctuary of Kassák's ekphrastic poems is the mild-perspective universe itself.

The ekphrastic sphere of the finally analyzed Dezső Tandori-cycle titled *A Cathedral of Passerines*, however, contains the signs of the total elimination of the visual aura; Tandori wrote poems on the paintings of impressionist and postimpressionist painters: we find the names of Van Gogh, Paul Cézanne, Claude Monet, Edouard Manet, Auguste Renoir, Seurat, Camille Pissarro and Utrillo among the titles; following the names there are the titles of paintings, too. At the time when he worked on this cycle

the author did not travel at all, since he had to take care of his sparrows at and around his home; so naturally he did not attend Western European museums then. The poems in *A Cathedral of Passerines* were emphatically and conceptually made on the basis of reproductions found in artistic albums. There are a number of references to this fact in the great cycle: most visibly in the Utrillo-poems which create a kind of inner cycle within the greater one. In the first Utrillo-text the speaker symbolically copies the black and white reproductions in the sphere of the ekphrastic poems, and then refills them with colors. The fact that Tandori sets out from the reproductions instead of the original paintings guarantees their re- and overwritability (sparrows are often copied into the sceneries of pictures).

A Cathedral of Passerines contains an inarticulate sequence of mid-length poems which is effectively divided into organic subunits by the small cycles (one for each painter) disconnected rhythm, and the formal likeness of individual poems within the unity of the poetic discourse, or, contrarily, the formal diversity of poems following each other. With varying intensity it is characteristic of the whole cycle that what is presented is a skepticism regarding the visual receivability of a broadly defined nature; this skepticism is manifested by the fact that the speaker does not endeavor to describe a part of a land or of a town directly, he describes them only as they are recorded by the painters, mediated through reproductions – in this endeavor the ekphrastic frame is interpreted as an inevitable principle of choice and form.

The epilogue of the dissertation lays down a continuable field of inquiry in the investigation of the borderlands of poetic ekphrasis; possible directions are presented through the brief analyses of four texts. The epilogue is followed two appendices; the first interprets two musically titled visual works of Tamás Kopasz along the problem

of sacredness, while the second is the already mentioned translation of John Ashbery's poem.