

Abstract of Ph.D. Thesis

**Representations of trauma and loss within the early poems of
Attila József**

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I. The importance of the topic and the antecedent

The fundamentals of my approach will be based on the traumatic experience of self-development and Attila József's heritage within literary criticism and psychological research. Any reader of Attila József is aware of the fact that the city of Szeged must be noted as the base of self-representation. Therefore new questions, issues have arisen in terms of understanding Attila József through Modern Hungarian Literature. Despite the general recognition of the poet's work and the idea of the connection among Attila József and Szeged¹ (László Péter) in addition to the Freudian theory and perception of psycho-analysis and literature I should like to begin with defining the analogy and relation between the studies of modern, foreign literary criticism, psycho-analysis, aesthetics and the possibilities of new interpretation.

Along with the analysis related to the history of literature one may implicate the aspect of psychology, aesthetics and linguistics where the sense of psychological trauma is observed and related to the individual and communal features. In parallel, history could be implemented which determines the perspective of development and destruction of communities.

The foreign essays related to the Freudian psychoanalysis,² psychosis (Foucault),³ „Violence and the Remaking of a Self”⁴ and „Explorations in Memory”⁵ are examining these principles. It is mainly the importance of the perspective of the self, identified by the vision of subconscious based on the concept of history that draws the attention to the historical view, which is well described in the works of Dominick LaCapra,⁶ Paul Riceour and Ruth Leys⁷ and from the field of narrative

¹ PÉTER László: *József Attila Szegeden*. Bába Kiadó, Szeged, 2005.

² FREUD, Sigmund: *Bevezetés a pszichoanalízisbe*. Gondolat Kiadó, Wien-Budapest, 1932, 1986.

³ FOUCAULT, Michel: *Madness and Civilization. A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*. Tavistock Publications, 2000.

⁴ BRISON, Susan: *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2002.

⁵ CARUTH, Cathy: *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*. The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996.

⁶ LACAPRA, Dominick: *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 2001.

⁷ LEYS, Ruth: *Trauma: A Genealogy*. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 2000.

psychology Hungarian scholars such as Békés Vera,⁸ Ehmann Bea,⁹ Vincze Orsolya¹⁰ have reformed the research.

Studies have shown the primary function of individual trauma, self development considering the historical viewpoint. However, it is important to notice that these functions work correctly as explanations within a wider range of literary interpretation in which the purpose is finding the answers to self development or the lack of self development. But the notion of my thesis is to go beyond the representation of the Freudian and biographical analysis and study the foreign scholarly sources that have been published after the turn of the century. I shall attempt to use the viewpoint of LaCapra, as he does not define the concept of trauma through psychoanalysis but varies it through the medium of history, society, culture and political tradition.

The insertion of history and culture in terms of the trauma relating to self-trauma –e.g. the recognition and distinction of loss and absence- should be considered as additional arguments for literary criticism. When gathering the several traumas of Attila József I would like to place Bókay’s self-analysis and self-construction¹¹ concept into a greater context.

And for readers it is especially interesting to recognize the further progression of comparison, aside from Bókay’s interpretation, possibilities offering the element of trauma in the works of scholars such as Cathy Caruth, Ferenc Erős, and Dominick LaCapra.

⁸BÉKÉS Vera: PhD-disszertáció. Kézirat. In: http://pszichologia.pte.hu/files/tiny_mce/doktori/2009-Bekes%20Vera-veziszek.pdf (2012. október 24.)

⁹EHMANN Bea-GARAMI Vera: Az énbefonódás nyelvi markeri történelmi eseményekről szóló laikus elbeszélésekben In: Vincze O., Bigazzi S. (szerk.): *Élmény, történet: A történetek élménye. Pszichológiai Horizont 4.* Budapest: Új Mandátum Könyvkiadó, 2008. 41-51.

¹⁰VINCZE Orsolya: PhD-disszertáció. Kézirat. In: http://pszichologia.pte.hu/files/tiny_mce/File/2009-Vincze%20Orsolya.pdf (2012. október 24.)

¹¹BÓKAY Antal: Szelf-analízis és versépítés József Attila költészetében. *Thalassa*, 2005. 2-3. 5-47.

II. The methodology of research, applied methods

The development of the thesis was proceeded by continuous research in libraries and throughout consultations. I have here met all scholarly sources that have been published about Attila József therefore I could acknowledge the present publications future initiatives and their usage with regards to my thesis.

During the selection process of the methods my aim was the following: re-evaluate the adaptability of the documents that can be found at University Library of Szeged. My research perspective is that in order to present Attila József in relation to aesthetics, it is inevitable to explain the intellectual background where he lived during the time he wrote.

The study of life at university during the period of the 20's and 30's made it essential for me to research in the fields of linguistics, aesthetics, literary criticism and politics. The documents (university newspapers, journals) have illustrated a new concept for the research of Attila József.

The point of view of my instructors and professors during the consultation and analysing the documents have benefitted my research greatly.

Throughout the writing process of my research I have visited the institutes, where the researches of Attila József occurred. I had spoken to all the researchers and instructors: János Bányai, Kornélia Faragó, Béla N. Horváth, Mihány Ilia, László Péter, Beáta Thomka, György Tverdota, who all were available to help me.

III. Review of primal results

To declare the relation among Attila József and Szeged, or rather the poet's and the University of Szeged's relationship I have examined literary criticism and aesthetics throughly with the point of view of foreign studies and research.

When speaking of trauma it is impossible not to consider life changing matters and facts that should be identified as formative powers which lead to the development of the trauma itself, however, given the significant personal experience I have tried not to set that into focus. But concentrate on the aspect of psychology where the sense of trauma is observed and related to the individual an communal features.

From the research I have found those summaries fundamental which inquire Attila József's attachment to Csongrád County and living in Szeged (László Péter). It is that explains how I have compleated the research with my own perspective and found interrelation that is a portrayal of the city, in the poet's point of view.

In my approach I have expressed Attila József's sense of art on the basis of István M. Fehér's study,¹² which I have compared to the definition of art by Gadamer. This suggests a princible: the development of the lyrical self. Another source was Danto's¹³ representation of art which resembles Attila József's judgment of literature.

I continued to discuss the relevant psychological studies which are related to individual trauma and historical trauma. Here I engaged the traditional method of psychoanalysis between thoughts and feelings of the self within a living enviornment and interpreted it in a different manner within cultural and historical trauma. As a result of seeking this interpretation the formation of a research with new observations has been brought forth.

The point was to introduce the self in connection with the value of loss and absence. We discover that Attila József who is presented in literature within the poems is a different self than the one in reality. Here, we can assume that the poet presented in the literary work and the poet himself are seperate selves who have

¹² FEHÉR M. István: *József Attila esztétikai írásai és Gadamer hermeneutikája*. Kalligram Kiadó, Pozsony, 2003. 32.

¹³ DANTO, Arthur C.: *Hogyan semmizte ki a filozófia a művészetet?* Atlantisz Könyvkiadó, Budapest, 1997

different traumas. The psychological tension and contradiction among the poet and the individual presented in the poem are verified in Attila József's biography.

For the history of literature the trauma of Attila József is noted fully by the loss of his mother. Anna Valachi¹⁴ suggests further depths to the dilemma of Attila József. The main reasons of his loneliness and trauma was his relation to women. This is another way of saying that he was not capable of forming a romantic relationship with the opposite sex. Attila József has identified this problem himself and tried to find the reason for his lack of romance, loneliness, frustration in his relationships. The loss of his mother and the thought of wanting to die. Antal Bókay opposed the view of the self-trauma in Attila József's poems.¹⁵

We shall pay attention to the traumatic experiences the poet had to encounter throughout his life. These are not only those which literary criticism has presented but other aspects that are closely related to these happenings such as Foucault's definition of „madness”. The attention is now on the trauma and concerning madness as a form of neglect on the part of society or as a sensational artistic power.

Although, the basic view of Attila József studies is examining the subject of losing his mother there are various possibilities. In my discourse I choose to characterize and analyze these experiences of trauma in connection with the terms of LaCapra.

I have demonstrated by the theory of Caruth that the traumatic experience obviously is evoked unconsciously and continuously. Therefore accepting the strong emotions of past experience is impossible. If we take a closer look these not only awaken but remind the person of the trauma and present emotions to experience it once again.

One of the problems with regards to the theory of LaCapra was that the poet was equal to the person writing the literary works and in addition is the victim of the trauma. In this case Attila József is the writer-poet, writer of of the literary work and the victim. LaCapra argues that the writer of the story has the task of writing objectively and should not identify himself with the people in the story. Therefore the experience of loss has been established in more than one aspect in Attila József's

¹⁴ VALACHI Anna: „Költő szerelme szalmaláng”. József Attila és a nők. *Eső*, 2003. 4. 116-122.

¹⁵ BÓKAY Antal: Szelf-analízis és versépítés József Attila költészetében. *Thalassa*, 2005. 2-3. 5-47.

life. This has led him to develop a specific poetic language where he struggles to create a poetic-self, which had a fatal impact on his private life.

Intense suffering was accomplished through his poems, often with humour e.g. *On My Birthday*. These are repressed emotions that arise and represent his inner self. The self-expression of these topics in Attila József's poems expose an inner urge of writing about them.

One of the studies presented in my thesis is the theory of the trauma through history, which many scholars have written of since the Holocaust. Of course this theory is in connection with individual trauma and should not be observed separately. The concepts described in psychoanalytical studies support one and another providing additional information.

Rememberance is always an individual experience, whereas memory is collective. As for understanding collective memory¹⁶ and the matter of individual rememberance these areas develop a larger meaning for the study of Attila József's work and research.

Recent studies have shown that Dominick LaCapra have been assuming to find answers to what differentiates rememberance and memory, proposing matters of individual and communal trauma. For my purposes I have chosen to operate with the identical features of the theories and find possibilities for unifying Attila József research. Perhaps the most efficient is to study the role of collective memory within Attila József's self-development.

In Gyáni's studies the individual and communal mourning procedure implies the importance of mourning rituals. They not only represent the individual and the pain of the individual but the sympathy and grief of the community as well. I shall now refer back to the critical point in my thesis where Attila József's father had left his family and the family could not tolerate the misery of losing him. The mourning process had not begun and could not proceed to accept¹⁷ the fact of the loss and the trauma. According to the theory of Ricoeur (cited by Gyáni)¹⁸ neither the individual (Attila József and his family) nor the community could express their emotions. In this position we could mention the individual trauma and the relation of melancholy and mourning. During this process first one must encounter melancholy, than

¹⁶ GYÁNI Gábor: Trauma, emlékezet, kultusz. *Élet és Irodalom*, 2006. 45. 6.

¹⁷ POLCZ Alaine: *A halál iskolája*. Magvető Kiadó, Budapest, 1989.

¹⁸ GYÁNI Gábor: Trauma, emlékezet, kultusz. *Élet és Irodalom*, 2006. 45. 6.

mourning. Ricoeur believes that it is with the help of the community the individual can accept the meaning and overwhelming experience of the loss. If melancholy does not result in mourning the ignorance of the community reminds us of the intensified nervous energy of melancholy and becomes a traumatic experience.

Dominick LaCapra differentiates the structural and the historical concept of trauma. Structural trauma applies to all individuals and societies, e.g. in the case of Attila József individual trauma revealed when his father leaves the family and the illness of the mother defines the possibility of losing his mother as well. The result is that during the years spent in Öcsöd Attila József must rely on the support of his older sister. Etus is caring, responsible and more mature than her age.

Several sources claim that at the time the children were not aware of what was happening with their mother. Without any warning the mother visited them in Öcsöd the children were relieved from the thought of their mother dying but when she disappeared again they had to go through the mourning process again.

On the other hand historical trauma is specific, not all encounter it. We shall differentiate among the victim, perpetrator and the outsiders.¹⁹

As stated in LaCapra's theory in order to accept the trauma it is important to isolate yourself from the loss otherwise the experience in the past will differ from reality. This motion is problematic because of the fact that the person was attached to the other person, family member etc. emotionally and by mourning one should accept that he has lost the only thing left that connects him with the person. At this point he is not attached emotionally or physically. Therefore LaCapra's idea of one repeatedly going through the motion of loss and mourning are connected and not separate categories.

One of the many significant features of loss is that we cannot lose something that was never ours. In addition, the anxiety that one feels is impossible to overcome or end when this loss becomes the object of mourning. In contrast, the anxiety that is related to the loss will remain. In order to control the anxiety we have to declare the specific object of our fear hereby we can put an end to the fear or cope with it. The experience of loss may manifest itself by altering the person into a poet, who will continue to write about these emotions. Attila József's poetry displays recurring

¹⁹ LACAPRA, Dominick: *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 2001.

subject matters such as: the loss of home, the absence of freedom, desire for loss and the sense of guilt.

As stated by LaCapra the experience of trauma is the consequence of events, therefore some happenings may become a trauma and others will not. Even the impact of the trauma may differ. In time LaCapra describes the concept of loss in relation to history, it is not equal to the experience of loss it may develop into grief or mourning and become continuous melancholy.

The mourning process allows one to have a critical opinion referring to the reintegration of a person into a community. Nevertheless, the urge of acting-out may occur repeatedly resulting in the person not being able to live a normal life.

In Rűsen's opinion the experience of trauma will transform into grief and the person will adapt to the situation and accept the loss. However, if the loss becomes melancholy the person will not adapt and in the case of Attila József he will continue to write about the emotions evoked by the experience of loss. Attila József did not accept the trauma of losing his mother and that is why he could never trust a woman²⁰. Attila József was constantly longing for a mother figure instead of passionate love. For this reason the trauma of the poet remains unresolved.

One of the main results during the research was finding connection between Attila József becoming a poet, writing in the city of Szeged and the role of the University of Szeged during that time. When analysing his early poems I have found that Attila József creates his own poetic self an identity that exists within his poetry and is not equal to himself. The traumatic experience of self-development and the heritage of Attila József and the possibilities of new interpretation were stated. The experience of loss and mourning related to the event of trauma presented through literary work is not the same as the trauma of the poetic-self. Furthermore, I have decided to study the concept of developing the poetic-self.

²⁰ VALACHI Anna: „Költő szerelme szalmaláng”. József Attila és a nők. *Eső*, 2003. 4. 116-122.

Summary of the results stated in the Ph.D. thesis:

- Analysis related to the history of literature, aspect of psychology, aesthetics and linguistics in modern foreign literary criticism
- The concept of remaking a self identified by the subconscious based on the historical relation to trauma, both communal and individual
- The relation among Attila József and the University of Szeged examined through literary criticism, aesthetics, foreign studies and research
- Introduction of Attila József's sense of art on the basis of István M. Fehér's study²¹ in comparison to the definition of art by Gadamer
- Danto's representation of art and the development of the poetic-self,
- Discussion of relevant psychological studies which are related to individual and historical trauma,
- I have introduced the self in connection with the value of loss and absence,
- When analysing his early poems I have found that Attila József creates his own poetic self an identity that exists within his poetry
- The experience of loss and mourning related to the event of trauma presented through literary work is not the same as the trauma of the poetic-self.

²¹ FEHÉR M. István: *József Attila esztétikai írásai és Gadamer hermeneutikája*. Kalligram Kiadó, Pozsony, 2003. 32.

IV. Publications related to the Ph.D. thesis by András Zelena

Essay in tome:

Szeged szerepe József Attila életében. In: Szegedtől Szegedig Antológia, 2013. (Közlésre elfogadva, igazolás mellékelve. Leütés: 17 500.)

Visszhang - József Attila és külföldi recepciója. In: Szegedtől Szegedig Antológia, Szeged, 2012. 425-428.

Radnóti Miklós és József Attila párhuzamosságai. In: Térdimenziók és emlékezetformák. SZTE BTK, Szeged, 2010. 23-30.

Radnóti Miklós és József Attila párhuzamosságai. In: Surranva kell most élned itt. Radnóti Szegedi Öröksége Alapítvány, Szeged, 2009. 99-108.

Essay in journals:

József Attila filozófiai nézetei Arthur C. Danto művészetfelfogásának tükrében. In: *Műhely*, 2013/3. szám (Közlésre elfogadva, igazolás mellékelve. Leütés: 20 900.)

Szeged szerepe József Attila életében. In: *Új Dunatáj*, XVII. évf. 2-3. szám, 2012. (Közlésre elfogadva, igazolás mellékelve. Leütés: 17 500.)

József Attila és Juhász Gyula mester-tanítvány viszonyáról. In: *Pannonföld*, 2012. (Közlésre elfogadva. Leütés: 15 600.)

A névadás jelentőségéről József Attila költészetében és életében. In: *Szeged*, XXV. évf. 4. szám, 2013. 7-9.

József Attilai költeményei Danto művészetdefiníciója és imitációelvűsége tükrében. In: *Új Dunatáj*, XVII. évf. 1-2. szám, 2012. 39-48.

Visszhang - József Attila és külföldi recepciója. In: *Szeged*, XXII. évf. 11. szám, 2010. 37-38.

A kötet fedlapján Attila kézírása. Recenzió: Prágai Tamás –mint gondolatjel, vízszintes a tested – tanulmányok József Attiláról. Szerk. Prágai Tamás. In: *Új Dunatáj*, XIV. évf. 4. szám, 2009. 89-91.

A szedő kézjegye, avagy banalizáció József Attila két versében. In: *Magyar Múza* online. 2009.

Aktába írják. *Szeged*, XXI. évf. 2. szám 2008. 30-32.

Editing:

Térdimenziók és emlékezetformák. SZTE BTK, Szeged, 2010.

„Mert annyit érek én, amennyit ér a szó” Szegedi Radnóti-konferenciák. Radnóti centenáriumi Emlékkötet 2009.

Lectures:

Fejezetek a szegedi felsőoktatás hallgatói életének történetéből, SZTE JGYPK: József Attila egyetemi traumái. SZTE JGYPK 2013. március 13.

Fejezetek a szegedi felsőoktatás hallgatói életének történetéből, SZTE JGYPK: Egyetem József Attila szemével. SZTE JGYPK 2011. november 11.

XI. Apáczai Nyári Akadémia: A modern magyar irodalomtudomány József Attila és Radnóti képe. Újvidék, 2011. július 4-9.

VIII. VMTDK: Rejtett dimenziók József Attila összes fényképeiben. Szabadka, 2009. november 20-22.

VII. VMTDK: A József Attila-kutatás aktuális kérdései. Szabadka, 2008. november 21-23.