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The theses of the PhD dissertation

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'A mindenség hullámzó nászruhád'
[The cosmos is your waving wedding dress]:
Motifs of Goddess Myths in the Poetry of Sándor Weöres



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I. The subject of the dissertation

The dissertation deals with the recurrent and coherent goddess motifs in the poetry of Sándor Weöres. In a period between 1930 and 1960, the poems built around these motifs form a characteristic thematic subset of his poetry. The thematic bases of these poems are the prehistoric Mother, Earth, and Night goddesses, Istar, Demeter, Persephone, Aphrodite, and Isis; in addition to these, the poems connect to the well-known motifs and group of symbols of the cult of the Virgin Mary, which synthesised and gave new dimensions to the iconography and symbol structure of the ancient goddesses.

The dissertation aims at a motif-centred analysis of the poems drawing on these myths. The research is grounded by a theoretical background in literary history, literary theory, comparative history of religion and mythology. The dissertation is built up of three chapters.

The first two parts of the first chapter supply the theoretical background: they analyse the literary importance of myths and mythology, with emphasis on the major theories of literary history and literary theory that concern mythology. Looking at the different nineteenth and twentieth-century theories of myth, the main aim is to understand the peculiarities of Weöres's mythologising. The part dealing with the history of research in G. S. Kirk's *Myth* and Melentysky's comprehensive work, *The Poetics of Myth*, form the basis of the theoretical approach. F. Schelling's and F. Schlegel's understanding of myth, E. Cassirer's neo-Kantian theory (based on a general theory of symbols), the psychologically based myth criticism of S. Freud and C. G. Jung, and finally the relevant parts of Károly Kerényi's concept of myth are also taken into account.

The third part of the first chapter examines some conclusions of the secondary literature on the mythic roles assigned to femininity and the symbol system of goddesses. Two different mythic symbol systems are expounded here. One of these is the archeo-mythologic research of Marija Gimbutas (summarised in her book *The Language of the Goddess*), which gives a detailed description of the goddess cults reconstructed from the archaeological findings of Europe, the Mediterranean, and the Middle East. The other is the mother-archetype theory of analytic psychology, worked out by C. G. Jung, which emphasises the interconnectedness of the subject's own experience of the mother and the objective mythological tradition available in the unconscious. The theory was elaborated, on the basis of the Jungian views, by Erich Neumann in *The Great Mother. An analysis of the Archetype*. This part of the dissertation deals more emphatically with the mythological contexts of the motif systems in those of Weöres's poems which centre on the Mother, Earth, and Night goddesses of prehistoric belief, since the goddess figures of this reconstructed prehistoric cult are less known than the goddesses of antiquity (who themselves derive from those archaic traditions). The archaeological findings of the 1960-70s, and the research in the history of religion based on them in the 1980s were not only predated but for a certain extent anticipated by Weöres's poems.

The last unit of the first chapter brings forward some examples for the use of Mother goddess images from twentieth-century Hungarian literature which, like the poems by Weöres, show traits of the goddess mythologies.

The second chapter discusses the role of mythologism in Weöres's poetry. In the first instance, the influences which deepened his interest in myths and the mythological direction of his art are identified. Literary historical research has already surveyed the influence and inspirative force of schools of thought and intellectual circles (including such people as Károly Kerényi, Nándor Várkonyi, Lajos Fülep, Béla Hamvas) which determined Weöres's theoretical understanding; the dissertation attempts to add further shades to the picture with the help of details from recently published interviews and correspondence. The most important feature

added to these influences is the deeply intertwined nature and mutual strengthening effect of the qualities of cultivatedness and intuition. Eastern philosophies of religion and their concept of wisdom were, as asserted by Weöres himself, also influential factors.

The next part examines the philosophical conception signalled by myth as a thematic preference in the poetic oeuvre. The specifics of this mythologism are approached with the key concepts of tradition and universality in mind, following Weöres's principle 'deepen to the traditional, heighten to the universal'. His correspondence in the 1930s-40s testifies to a view of myths which, in addition to being formative of his attitude, was also highly influential on his poetry. Weöres, in accordance with this attitude and his poetic aims, incorporates a wide spectrum of myths into his work. This results in a synthesis, syncretistically peculiar to his poems, of the universality of traditions. The reconstructed beliefs of the prehistoric age, the mythic epics of Mesopotamia, Greek mythology, the poetry of the primitives, Biblical stories, Christian cult traditions all form a part of the mythological direction of Weöres's poetry. His handling of mythical source material and imitation of the discourse of mythology are elucidated primarily on the basis of poems paraphrasing or adapting cosmogonic myths (*Az első emberpár [The First Couple]*), the *Stonehenge* cycle, and a number of the *Őskori himnuszok [Prehistoric Hymns]*). This part concludes with an approach to Weöres's mythologising attitude, based on the poems of the *Hatodik szimfónia [The Sixth Symphony]*.

The fourth and last part of the first chapter discusses the roles assigned to goddess motifs in Weöres's poetry, on the basis of his poems, interviews, and correspondence. His theoretical stances and artistic attitudes imply an emphasis on a universal quality which is rooted in tradition but is at the same time based on an exceedingly personal experience. It is this that makes the presence of goddess traditions specially important within the mythological aspects of his work. The existence of the woman and her symbolic and mythological reading are primarily determined by the universal experience of reproduction. Consequently, the concept of Universality is naturally associated with the feminine principle. This archaic world of goddesses is dominant in Weöres's poetry: prehistoric chthonic deities like the Mother Earth, river and Night goddesses, the Divine Mother who unifies the characteristics of fertility cults in an idol-like image, the goddess of fate, and the figures of Istar, Aphrodite and the Virgin Mary, who both conserve and transform the characteristics of all these. Weöres experienced the traditions of the mythical and symbolic system of femininity intuitively, like the concepts of objectivity and the cosmic. This can be considered the prerequisite of the adaptation of myths and the creation of works based on the goddess motifs.

Following the delineation of the goddess concept as an internally perceived experience, the traditions of the feminine (in mythology and the philosophy of religion), definitive of Weöres's attitude, are also scrutinised. A number of influential views were present in his knowledge and (mythological, religio-philosophical, and literary) source material about goddess myths and the feminine principle. He knew Mesopotamian, Greek, and Vedic mythic poetry, Hinduist religious concepts, Chinese Taoist teachings, and was closely acquainted with the sources of the Catholic cult of the Virgin Mary both as a poet and as a translator. However, it was rather his intuition and 'historical/prehistorical sense' which determined his approach in the pseudo-mythology of the archaic goddess.

The question of femininity is in many aspects a central one in Weöres's whole oeuvre, not only in the poems founded on the mythological concepts of the goddess. In this the concept of totality, associated with androgynous qualities, comes under examination in the poems focusing on the malefemale opposition (especially *A két nem [The Two Sexes]*).

The third chapter of the dissertation discusses instances of the adaptation of goddess myths, motifs, and topoi into poems; that is, it gives a motif-centred reading of poems which draw on mythical elements of goddesses from various mythological and religious traditions. The

poems are presented in a thematic grouping: first the works bearing the marks of the prehistoric goddess cult are examined; then those which adapt goddess concepts from the mythologies of antiquity; lastly those which use the contents and stylistic registers of medieval hymns to the Virgin Mary.

The poems which are focused on archaic goddess figures are organised around a traditional motif (e.g. Mother Earth or Mother Night), to which the stylised motif element(s) from the subjects of better-known antique goddesses are integrated. When creating his pseudo-mythology and reconstructing the archaic concept of Mother Earth, the use of the subject of Demeter or the Mother Earth beliefs of primitive religions is highly logical. A number of Weöres's poems deal with variants of this ancient goddess: *A kis istenanya* [*The Small Mother Goddess*], *A nagy istenanya* [*The Great Mother Goddess*], *Az ütem istennője* [*The Goddess of the Beat*] are primarily built around the topoi of fertility and motherhood, while *A sötétség úrasszonya* [*The Lady of Darkness*], *Securitas*, and *Az őszanya szól ivadékaihoz* [*The Ancient Mother Speaks to Her Offspring*] conjure up the personified figure of the earth and the night, which preserve some of their original chthonic attributes. Weöres also uses mythological motifs of goddesses to create two, originally separate poems which now form part of the *Hatodik szimfónia* [*The Sixth Symphony*]: the Fate goddesses, the Moirai of the pre-Olympic order of Greek mythology in *A teremtés* [*The Creation*], and the Indo-Aryan river goddess, source of life and death, in *Az ősidő* [*The Ancient Times*].

The second group consists of poems which utilise the goddess conceptions of mythologies from antiquity. The mythological sources of Istar pokoljárása [Istar's Descent to Hell] and Anadyomene are known, so in these cases the original myth or the poetic/mythological source text is a specially important point of reference in approaching Weöres's adaptation. These antique textual traditions also appear as actual source material, as in the plot of *Istar pokoljárása* [*Istar's Descent to Hell*], called by Weöres a 'rewriting'. In other cases myths appear only indirectly, in elaborate systems of allusion, like the myth of Aphrodite Urania in *Anadyomene*. Here a thematic use of sources, a poetised adaptation of a subject is to be observed. Also in this group is *A kelő csillag tündére* [*The Fairy of the Rising Star*].

The antithesis of the Epicurean principle of matter as venerated in Aphrodite/Venus (the late antique idea of sin as manifested in the woman and her sexuality, a notion later very influential in the West) is also the basis of Weöres's reinterpretation in the poem *Az óriásnőstény* [*The Giant Female*]. The negative pole of the dualistic system is the opposite of a masculinity elevated above the material level: stripped of its divinity, femininity is to be despised and condemned in its very fertility and material existence. In the motto, Weöres invokes the hateful Adulteress of Revelations, and the poem itself allows the legendary woman to speak for herself about her adultery and 'hateful abominations' — addressing her accusers, she also refutes their accusations, which then turn against them.

Weöres also inserts motifs from different traditions (from Buddhist and Hindu philosophy and religion) into the traditional subjects and motif combinations of the great goddess myths, those of Istar, Aphrodite, and the adulteress. From the interaction of these elements a whole new concept of myth evolves.

The Catholic cult of the Virgin Mary provides the system of symbols which is drawn upon by the third thematic group of Weöres's goddess myth poems. In works reflecting typical elements of the cult of Mary (*Anyámnak For my Mother*; *Hetedik szimfónia, Mária mennybemenetele. Édesanyám emlékének Seventh Symphony, the Ascension of Mary. To the Memory of my Mother*; *Salve Regina*) Weöres extends the creative transforming of mythical motifs and subjects into the visual symbol system. The rich variety of forms in the iconography of Mary is integrated to the literary-rooted mythical/mariological motif system.

These poems are of central importance for the argument of the dissertation, since they are definitive syntheses summarising Weöres's stance. The poems which use the thematic and stylistic elements of the medieval hymns to Mary work as summaries which rely on archaic and antique goddess motifs, just as the symbolism of Mary synthesises preceding traditions while representing a specifically Christian idea, the connection of the finite/historical and the infinite/divine levels. Mary's figure does not manifest in subjects but in large-scale compositions of loosely connected motif-combinations. The stylised mythic motifs of the archaic mother goddesses and the mythic topoi of antique goddesses are complemented by elements which, deriving from the nature of Mary's cult, transform even personal emotions into motif-like images.

If we want to see the poems which play with the variations of the mythology of the goddesses (written over several decades) as an interconnected series of poems on the basis of thematic considerations, one of the latest, *Salve Regina*, emerges as the greatest synthesis.

The conclusion of the dissertation considers the importance of the goddess/Mother of God motif structure, as reflected in Weöres's poetry, his understanding of the world and of cultures. On the basis of the analysis, these poems carry the specifics of his attitude and philosophical poetry. This is highlighted by three, partly interdependent aspects.

The mythic material of goddesses in Weöres's mythologising is a corpus that represents cosmic order and the laws of life and death, as was their original prehistoric function. The poetic definition of femininity, '*A mindenség hullámozó nászruhája*' [*The cosmos is your waving wedding dress*] can also refer to an everlasting universe and its order, which reveal themselves in constant shaping and creating activity. A second highlighted theory of Weöres is the theory of original unity built upon a feminine principle. This original experience of life, realised in unity, expresses totality (identification with the feminine element as originality). The third fundamental idea of Weöres, emphasised in the group of poems on goddesses, following those with the symbolics of the Virgin Mary, is a peculiar poetic theology related to mysticism. This ideology is represented the most powerfully in the vision of the goddess/Mother of God in *Salve Regina*.

II. The methodology of the dissertation

The dissertation aims at a motif-centred analysis of the poems of Sándor Weöres, which is based on an interdisciplinary approach. The theoretical background is built upon literary history and theory, comparative history of religion and mythology. Iconographic studies were also used in the examination of the motifs of the Virgin Mary.

Consequently, the first chapter supplies an overview of the different theories of the relevant disciplines (mythological studies and literary theory) that can be applied to the study of myth, and also a summary of the theoretical results of the study of Weöres's mythologising.

An important stream of modern literary criticism, myth criticism (developing in the 1940-50s) made the myth-theory approach a central element of research. Most importantly Cassirer's philosophy of symbols and Jungian analytic psychology supplied the theoretical background for this stream. On the basis of this, both the notion and the importance of tradition were reinterpreted. Myth criticism (the works of M. Bodkin and N. Frye) worked out an approach to works of art from the perspective of archetypes and myths. It is indispensable to see that in the Weöres poems mythological stories are understood as primary phenomena hidden in the human psyche. The fundamental thesis of myth criticism, that of archaic, pre-logical language reviving in poetry, is highly consonant with Weöres's poetic program, that of summoning the '*lélek árján fénylő forró igék*' [*the fiery flashing verbs on the soul's flood*] into poems.

The sujet-poetical theory of A. N. Veselovsky provides a useful methodological approach for the analysis of Weöres's myth syncretism. On the basis of this, the motif is the basic narrative unit of myth, a single-element image scheme. As opposed to this, the sujet consists of compound motif-combinations. In this understanding, motifs and sujets are formal units that show great variety in the course of time and according to changes in the content of works. Certain motifs can penetrate a sujet; the combination of sujets is also very typical. According to sujet-poetical theory (which examines myths in history), this process is very common in myth variation and in literary works built up of mythological elements. This theory provides the basic methodology of the dissertation, and is also a useful theory for the motif-centred approach to the poetry of Weöres, which contains creatively combined mythic elements. In the case of the poems chosen for analysis, the treatment of the sujets as poetic raw material is not only realised in the thematic adaptations, but the complex interaction of sujets and motifs of different origins is also observable. The reinterpretation of a story or a mythic theme also means its reconstruction, which nevertheless does not tear the mythic context apart, and integrates the motifs of a similarly mythic tradition to the basic sujet.

With sujet-poetical analysis, the peculiar myth-creating method of Weöres can be evidently shown in two poems. These are *Istar pokoljárása [Istar's Descent to Hell]* and *Az óriásnőstény [The Giant Female]*. In addition to the dominance of the traditional motifs and the stylistic features of the Istar sujet, the content of the myth is radically transformed by the motivic insertion of the theory, derived from Indian philosophies of religion, concerning life, death, and transcendent existence. This synthesis on the level of motifs is a perfect example to illustrate Veselovsky's thesis, according to which sujets and motifs exist in history, where in the process of variation certain motifs penetrate the sujet, and sujets themselves can be combined. According to Veselovsky, the relationship of the poet to the traditional typical sujets is expressed through the creation of variations.

The smaller units, the motifs and topoi also play an important role in the mythological elements of the poems chosen for analysis. The dissertation takes the myth motif to be a thematic unit with a symbolic value, the traditional content of which had been created in its original mythic context; thus, it carries its meaning inherently. On the basis of the well-known motifs of the goddess cults, Weöres creatively constructs the system of motifs based on the pseudo-prehistoric mother goddess. The structure-formative elements of this system are known and presupposed parts of the prehistoric system of beliefs: the symbolic features referring to fertility and the mysteries of life and death. Thus in the mythological poetry of Weöres a motif is not a recurrent unit of the text itself but the poetic use of a traditional basic thematic unit of myths which carries with it the context of the original mythological material.

The topos, as a linguistically fixed thematic and rhetorical element in literary tradition, also figures prominently, especially in the medieval Mary hymns. The visual correspondent of the topos, the iconographic scheme, is also an important thematic basis in those poems of Weöres which draw on the cult of the Virgin Mary. The attribute systems and visual representations of thematic formal elements, elaborated by and transmitted in the visual arts, had always been in interaction with textual traditions.

The definitive elements of the poems chosen for analysis are the symbol and the metaphor. Although symbol and metaphor frequently become inseparable in poetic language, the definitive aspect of the symbol is its visual character and its reliance on the unconscious; it realises the unity of the sign and its denotation, and it is characterised by stability and general reference. As opposed to this, the metaphor is an occasional phenomenon. In the poems of Weöres, the compound use of the symbolic image structures of traditional motifs and the individual (as Iván Fónagy put it, 'occasional') metaphoric images enhance the suggestiveness and vividness of poetic imagery.

On the basis of sujet-poetical theory, the poems of Weöres that draw on goddess myths can be grouped into two basic types according to the elements of mythic forms. The first basic type is a stylised myth motif, the other is built around specific mythic sujets. This variation of basic forms, however, forms completely new connections through the poetic works. The sujet combinations and motivic interactions unite into a homogeneous structure in the poems. The synthesis of these draws the outline of a syncretistic myth poetry, the thematic contents of which are in harmony with the ideal aims of the poetry of Weöres. The tradition is revived due to the self-confident treatment of formal elements, their deliberate contamination, and their creative reinterpretation. In these poems, myths are not used only as motifs or narrative elements, but exemplify the creative adaptation of myth as a way of seeing, a peculiar system of signs.

III. The results of the dissertation

The rich oeuvre of Sándor Weöres can be approached from a variety of standpoints. The dissertation focuses on the role of mythologisation, which is an important aspect since the mythological poems bring us closer to the understanding of the peculiarities of Weöres's method of composition, attitude, and philosophy.

In addition to this, the dissertation's importance lies in the fact that the motif system it uncovers in the poems of Weöres can be seen as paradigmatic: it exemplifies the appearance of highly traditional myth motifs in twentieth-century poetic works. The rehabilitation of myth is a widely observable phenomenon of modernity, added to which some specific aspects of the twentieth-century go as far as a general 'remythologisation' of literature and culture. This tendency seems to supersede the 'demythologisation' of European culture in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, under the influence of the rationalism of the Enlightenment and later of positivism. Mythologism gains ground in poetry, prose and dramatic literature too. In this respect, the myth-based poetry of Weöres can be associated with one of the main streams of literature of the 1910's.

Károly Kerényi defines mythology as art and the material of art at the same time. And when he emphasizes the living nature of mythology, as opposed to being static, he highlights the bases of the twentieth century trend of remythologisation. The main merit of these poems of Weöres is the fact that he is able to make vivid poetry out of the mythological clichés. Istar, Aphrodite, and the heavenly vision of the Virgin Mary are presented in personal and peculiar reinterpretations, the thematic aspects of which do not only connect to other poems of Weöres on the theme of femininity but can also express his artistic aims in the context of the whole oeuvre.

In literary theoretical terms, the analysis of the motif combinations in these poems enables conclusions primarily concerning sujet poetics. The syntheses that Weöres's poems offer of antique, Indian, Chinese myths and philosophies of religion and of Christian mariology prove perfect material for Veselovsky's theory on the variation of sujets and the modifying effect of motifs penetrating the sujet.

The dissertation aims at the definition and interpretation of the meanings of Weöres's goddess myth motifs (both of the elements identical to their source and of the elements deliberately modified). This examination thus approaches one of the most remarkable twentieth-century poetic corpora of Hungarian literature only from one aspect, but an essential one. This vantage point is not so much to reinforce the already widely known fact that the corpus draws on all mythologies and philosophies known by the poet, but to highlight that a thorough inquiry into this motif system is able to approach and interpret Weöres's peculiar syncretism, poetic theology, and the formal characteristics of his combination of motifs.

IV. Publications relating to the subject of the dissertation

- *The Cultural Historical Context of the Iconography of Mary in Gothic Cathedrals. An Iconological study of the Mary-portal of the Notre-Dame of Reims.* (Szeged: JATE, 1989) (p. 1-65)
- *A Dictionary of Symbols.* (eds. József Pál, Edit Újvári. Budapest: Balassi, 1997, 2001), entries *Mother Goddess, Aphrodite/Venus, Our Lady, Demeter/Ceres, Moon, Innin/Istar/Astarta, Isis, Kybele, Virgin Mary*
- 'Sándor Weöres, Poet of the 'Real'.' Helikon (Cluj Napoca), 25 February 1999 (p. 11-12.)
- 'The Invisible Fundament. Sándor Weöres's Conception of the Canon.' Magyar Napló, March 2000. (p. 35-38.)
- 'A Fruitful, Well-adorned Branch': *Symbols of Mary in the Poetry of Sándor Weöres.* (Gábor Ágnes Kapitány, eds. Budapest: Osiris, 2002) (p. 200-212.)
- *The Syncretism of Religious Traditions in the Poetry of Sándor Weöres.* (volume of studies from the conference of the Workshop of Modern Hungarian Literature, Szeged; Szeged: JATEPress, forthcoming) (p. 11)

* "feldolgozta az előzőt" 2.