

Egyetemi doktori (PhD) értekezés tézisei angolul

“THE OBJECTS SHINE”
Transcendent aspects in the oeuvre of Gyula Illyés

Borbála Kulin

Supervisor: † Dr. András Görömbei



DEBRECENI EGYETEM

Irodalomtudományok Doktori Iskola

Debrecen, 2013.

1. The aims of the dissertation, specifying the subject

The aim of this dissertation is to reexamine some works of major importance by Gyula Illyés by re-reading from the point of view of the transcendence of his oeuvre and to show the importance of some of his lesser known artworks that have not been considered important in the literary canon so far. This study's inspiration arose on account of the new way of approaching his works as applied by studies that were published in the centenary birthday of the poet. The idea of the "paradigmatic turn" degraded his oeuvre saying that the poetic language of Illyés does not follow the changes of the era. This study aims to show the sensibility of his works in the question of poetic language and also aims to recover some new or less known elements in the oeuvre of the "national poet" by using poetic approach to his works instead of estimating them only in biographical, historical or ideological frames.

The transcendence of his oeuvre is not solely studied through a theological means of interpreting the transcendent; instead, the concept of transcendence is mainly applied through a philosophical and literary approach. Thus, the dissertation raises the questions how the subject (the poetic self) and object (the social and physical environment) are related to each other in the act of poetic representation; what kind of transcendent power do the poetic language and words have and how a consistent ethos and literary anthropology can be revealed in the oeuvre of Gyula Illyés.

2. Methods

This dissertation applies the methods and results of the latest decades of Hungarian and international literary criticism. In investigating the relation of the poetic self to its external environment, I applied the point of view of the so called „paradigmatic turn,” a concept of Hungarian literary criticism of the 1990's. I approach the question of the transcendent power of poetic language by using the methods of the international orality and literacy studies. I attempt to exemplify Illyés' ethos as well as his ideas about the performative power of literature by using the methods of comparative literature and literary anthropology.

3. Results

I. The ways of representing subjectivity within the frame of the program of the “objective poetry”

The modes of subjectivity in his poems of the twenties and thirties can be read as tentative of working out ways how to represent the self in the poetic project of “objective poetry”. These poems show three ways of representing the self: (1) the self transcends towards his physical and social environment (2) the self represents himself as being built by his physical and social environment (3) the self represents himself only in a very abstract way by applying strong hypotexts.

The two early volumes of poems, the “*Nehéz föld*” and the “*Sarjürendek*” show the same way of representing the self. The volume of 1937, the “*Rend a romokban*” represents already a new way of subjectivity. This change can be predicted already in some of the poems in the preceding volumes and develops through a serious poetic crisis. The self-irony, the emphatic problem of representing and identifying the self and the use of different registers are the poetic signs of this crisis.

The first poem of the cycle *Szerellem (Love)* plays a special role in the oeuvre of Gyula Illyés as this poem is the first that represents his special way of understanding transcendence. In this poem the poetic self transcends himself towards the society by using biblical-theological narratives. The composition of the poems follows the composition of the religious confession. Thus this poem is the first in his oeuvre that follows the composition of religious speech-acts. Later, the most known poem is the *Egy mondat a zsarnokságról (One sentence on tyranny)* that uses the composition of the catholic litany.

The most special way of subjectivity within the program of “objective poetry” is when the self represents himself as being built by his physical and social environment. This outer construction of the self is expressed mostly by the often used motif of “being seen”. This kind of representation of the relation between the subject and object is the very contrary of the method of subjective poetry: it is not the observed object that is influenced by the observant subject but the subject becomes observed and influenced by the objects.

The third way of representing subjectivity is the abstraction. This method is represented in two poems (*Úrfelmutatás, Novemberi ég alatt*). These poems that can be affiliated with existentialism are also successful essays on representing the general human.

The poems of the late thirties that document crisis are inspired mostly by poetic issues. The *Avar* (*Leaf-litter*) and the *Reggeli meditáció* (*Morning meditation*) represents this crisis by using several (or two) different registers none of them can be given legitimation in the process of reading. It means that these poems are convenient to the idea of “dialogical poems”, the theory of Lóránt Kabdebó.

Illyés denies communication with transcendent God, or uses the poetic tool of the reflexive self-irony when applying the conventional frames of talking to God. Some of his poems show that he prefers the “mystic” way of communicating with God, that is silence, listening and relinquish the self.

II. The duplex cultural background of his oeuvre represented by the poem A ház végén ülök...

The special and well known dichotomy of Illyés's oeuvre that means the duplicity of the cultural influence in his works can be described the most economically with the tools of the orality and literacy studies.

This duplicity appears in all the three ways of identifying the self: in the relation of the self with the society, in the relation of the self with his environment and in the relation of the self with the transcendent (God).

The poem *A ház végén ülök...* is a poem of central importance and can be read as the ars poetica of the period.

The old woman in the first part of the poem represents not only an old person who talks to the objects of her environment. She represents rather a person who lives in an archaic oral culture where no difference is made between living and not living things. This world view inherited from the oral culture of the rustic, peasant environment influences Illyés' poetry especially in the twenties and thirties.

The invocation of the ritual of the Eucharist let us interpret the poem in the point of view of the idea of Eucharist. It means that it raises the question that is the central issue in the theological debate of Eucharist: what is the relationship between the object and its meaning, the relation between the form and substance?

The often representation of olfactory, auditive and tactile stimuli in the poems of Illyés shows that his poetic language is a consciously applied heritage of the oral culture. Whereas the literary criticism says that the popular style of his poetry is based on the objectivity of representing, these motifs reveal that this style can be characterized rather as empirical as it has also subjective elements in the act of perception and representation.

In the poem of *A ház végén ülök...* we can see a transition between the nature of oral and literal cultures regarding the relation to the meaning of physical objects: the physical objects are interpreted as signs, physical traces of a one-time utterance, the same as the letters and the words that got bodies due to the act of writing. Thus, the ars poetica that the poem expresses can be understood as the task of the poet is to read the profane world as a sacred text and to reveal and articulate the hidden, transcendent and absolute meaning.

The poetic adaptation of the basic characteristics of the popular-archaic-oral culture makes Illyés' populism a poetry of not only national but universal interest.

III. The problem of acting and moral integrity in the drama "Tiszták"

The drama entitled 'Tiszták' is of a central importance in his œuvre. Thematic elements evolving in the dialogues and monologues shows that the drama's main question is what the ontological status of human act is. Focusing on this philosophical issue the drama shows a close relationship to other dramas that put in focus the problem of human act such as Sophocles' *Oedipus*, the *Hamlet*, some dramas of the French and German romantic period, and, among the texts of the 20. century, the *Myth of Sisyphus* of Camus and some dramas of Brecht, Eliot and Shaw.

The main characters of this drama can be considered not as persons rather embodied ideologies or attitudes, so they are symbolic figures. Thus the characters of the drama are object-like figures accordingly to the claims of the 20. century's dramatics.

The drama confronts several world views: the atheism (Perella) confronts religiosity (the Albigensian), the faith in transcendent power is represented in the conflict of the catholic and dualistic theology. The "outsider" Perella is originally catholic but his world view is atheist, his faith in the action makes him the practicer of the cathar theology.

While the *Hamlet* suggests that the death can be a possible way of self-realization and the *Myth of Sisyphus* tells about the happiness that can be reached when understanding the absurdity of life, the *Tiszták* declares that there is no way leading to the “maximum of life”. The search of moral integrity is controversial as moral integrity and acting are in paradoxical relation with each other.

If we read the *Tiszták* as a concept of identity, in the figure of Perella we can see an individual struggling for his own identity whereas he can be characterized only in his intersubjectivity. The drama shows this struggling individual in the moment of his identical crisis.

IV. The sketch of a literary anthropology

Many places in the oeuvre of Gyula Illyés show that he imagined literature as a mediator that carries transcendent messages. His model of literary communication oscillates between the constructivist and reception aesthetics's view of literature. He can not give up on the idea of the inherent message of the text as he claims the union of the form and the substance. But he suggests that the validity of this transcendent message can come into existence only in the act of reception that is defined by the personal expectations of the reader.

About the question of the transcendence of the message we can describe a continuous change in his oeuvre. In the poetry of the twenties and thirties we can see that the physical objects considered as signs have transcendent qualities behind themselves that can be revealed by poetic act. From the late thirties the possibility of linguistic and poetic articulation becomes an issue. In the fifties we can see how the declaration of the union of ethic and aesthetic qualities helps to sustain the faith in literature. In the sixties we can see how the risk of losing the ethic legitimation of poetic utterance ruins his confidence in the language.

The poetic crisis of the thirties and the mistrust in words documented by the poems of the sixties have basically different origins. While the crisis of the thirties is an inner problem of literature, a poetic crisis, the crisis of the sixties concerns the social and performative role of literature.

While Illyés undertakes to continue the poetical heritage of Sándor Petőfi, his idea about the role of the poet is not a romantic-individualist one. In his view the poet is a social formation so his role as the

“national poet” can be better understood from the point of view of the sociological theory of art.

On the other hand his idea on the role of the poet has some romantic elements also: the emphasizing the fact of “being chosen” sustains the transcendent ideas on the role of the poet. But the transcendent content is replaced by immanent ones as it is not God or any transcendent power that made him a poet by choosing him: it is the social environment that did so.

The oeuvre of Gyula Illyés contains controversies about the role and power of literature and about the ways literature “operates”. Despite of these controversies a coherent literary anthropology can be sketched. The basis of this literary anthropology is that the poet is considered as a social entity and social construction. The poet has a role of a mediator who articulates the “hiding” contents of the world and the society. These contents that can be articulated only by poetic utterances and that belongs to the ethical and transcendent basis of the world and the society can be only kept in existence by the artistic act and its reception.

The model of his literary anthropology operates transcendent frames: the motif of “being chosen”, the mediator role of the poet and the performative power of literature that sustains transcendent values are all elements inherited from the field of religion. Although he refills this transcendent frames with immanent contents. Thus the oeuvre of Gyula Illyés keeps the same distance from – or sustains the same proximity with – the sacred and the secular.

V. The way of speaking about the denial of the transcendence in his poem Mors bona, nihil aliud

In the last chapter I analyse one of his most characteristic poem about death written in the fifties, the *Mors bona nihil aliud*. I show that a french inspiration and influence can be clearly revealed in the attitude to the transcendent in this poem.

The denial of the afterlife, that characterizes all of his poems about death has its roots in the french atheism, and the influence of the poetry of the contemporary french poet, André Frenaud is also important.

I also investigate the question how the poetic language of Gyula Illyés, that can be characterized mainly by the metaphysical conception of the modernity, contend to express the denial of the

transcendent. As a result I find that however the poet himself recognizes the paradox between the metaphysical concept of the poetry and the poetic representation of the denial of the transcendent, his concept of language keeps maintaining the metaphysical concept of the modernity about poetry.

However the catachresises of death in the poem reveal the struggle of the metaphysical poetic language to fulfil the aim: to transform the concept of death to something that can be accepted as good and to something that is under human control, without any fear of the transcendent.

As a result I show that the denial of the transcendence in his poems related to death is in contradiction with the transcendence of his oeuvre only for the first sight. It can be seen, that the denial of the transcendence in the poem *Mors bona, nihil aliud* goes hand in hand with the concept of acting, with the belief that human acting has the power of making the world better. This belief in human acting is the common seed of the various way of the representation of the transcendence in his works.

PUBLICATIONS

Borbála KULIN, *The poetic means of expression of the transcendent in the early poems of Gyula Illyés*, Irodalomtörténet, 2011/3, 360-377.

Borbála KULIN, *The world as sacred text*, Irodalomtörténeti Közlemények, 2012/5, 570-587.

Borbála KULIN, „*Here we are trapped*”. *The problem of human acting and moral integrity in the drama Tiszták of Gyula Illyés*, Studia Litteraria, 2013, accepted.