

Spes Superfutura

An Outline on the Rhetoric of the Sensus Numinis

Delimitation of Aims and the Subject, Methodological Notes

The thesis attempts to make the logical derivatives and consequences both of Rudolf Otto's *Das Heilige* and Northrop Frye's main works applicable for literature. For this operation it seems to be necessary to separate Otto's – apparently religion-phenomenological – work from its central element, namely from the claim to analyse religion, in order to gain a mere chain of metaphors to apply them to literary-criticism. In the first phase of the explication these metaphors will be flexible notions much more than exact definitions. In this way, in the first main chapter, the themes of “*Babel-experience*”, “*getting beyond*”, and “*illogical hope*” will play the most important role.

The next chapter will be the application itself, or, rather, a faltering attempt of the application. Vörösmarty, Babits, and Aladár Kuncz will be analysed one after the other. The literary-critical analyses generated by this way will attempt to reveal the “covering” characteristic of “being self-evident” which was examined by Heidegger clearly, though this problem was touched by the previous chapter either. Including these factors I will examine the circle of questions how the disintegration of a given language or discourse experienced by the individual, and, then, the following hope appearing in different forms be caught in the cases of the previous authors.

The whole oeuvre will be made speak in all the cases – though I will map out a net of metaphors which appears always to be the main organizing force of the oeuvres: this net of metaphors makes the analysis possible at all. Therefore, not the extract of the contents of the given works but the metaphoric elements that fight against each other will mean the basis for the examination.

In the last chapter – after the analysis of the three author – I will deal with the connection experienced between the rhetoric of the *sensus numinis* and the rhetoric of nationalism in the case of the authors examined above.

Babel and Tremendum: An Outline on the Rhetoric of the *Sensus Numinis*

Rudolf Otto, one of the best (or – more exactly – the first) phenomenologist of religion of the twentieth century drew our attention that, for example, in some texts of the Old Testament as the beginnings of the Hebrew literature, deity is characterized with both rational and irrational – “in Begriffen nicht explicibell” – traits.

Otto applies the word “numinose” mostly to this irrational characteristic: so the “numinose” can be related to the basic meanings of the word “sacred” (Lat. sacer, Gr. hagios, Heb. qadosh) as the meaning of “differing entirely”. According to Otto, the attempt to describe this “numinose” object is impossible: only the *sensus* (sense) or mood generated by the “numinose” object can be depicted: this *sensus* – according to Otto – is a kind of category of interpretation and assessment (Deutungs- und Bewertungskategorie), and a certain mood (Stimmung).

The *sensus numinis* interpreted in this way hides three main characteristics in itself: first of all, the “sense of creature” (“Kreaturgefühl”) which corrects Schleiermacher's “sense of dependence” (“Abhängigkeitsgefühl“) is the sense of the creature who sinks in his own insignificance and vanishes when he meets the one who is above all creatures.

The second basic category – which indicates the “Numinose“ – is the characteristic of *mysterium tremendum* and *tremenda majestas* which speaks in a sacral, eerie (“entirely

different”) fear of voice. This category of sense refers to its generator in a manner that this reference includes the reference to the power (“Macht”) and superior force (“Übergewalt”) of the generator cause. The characteristic of *mirum* (“mysterious”) implied in this way gets beyond our human categories and, which is more, turns against them: thus it becomes not only incomprehensible but definitely paradoxical. “At that time it seems to effect against comprehension. The most definite form of this is the so called *antinomic*. The *mirum* appears here in the simplest form of irrationality for the will of comprehension.”

Otto’s third basic category appears with the *augustum*: the self-undervaluing of the subject who experienced the numinose (which is entirely different and immensely greater than the subject itself) is revealed in it by depicting the level of profanity. The subject presumes a kind of value against his profanity which belongs only to the Numen, the sacred one.

The notions of the system of Otto’s phenomenology of religion initiates the reader in a special situation of hermeneutics: that is why it is so attractive for the literary-criticist either. It doesn’t seem to be unimportant to continue Otto’s very serious play and perform a “What if” sorted trial – and in this way to make Otto’s work usable for literary criticism as well.

As the first step of this transformation we presume that the *sensus numinis* “endeavours” to be manifest. The attachment of the base of associations of the rational (i.e.: explicable with human notions) picture of God of the Bible to the *sensus numinis* is only one of the possible alternatives of this manifestation. There must be other bases of associations, and, as the Numen is irrational, it is very possible that we will find its footsteps not only among the religious-self-reflected nets of metaphors. For the basic code of the biblical system of relations has been lost, but, naturally, the *sensus numinis* remained, we can suppose that numerous poets have been partaken in this irrational experience. Forced by the power of self-manifestation, but missing the old code, they had to create personal codes to word the *sensus numinis*.

In the following passages the examination of the rhetoric of the *sensus numinis* performed by biblical examples will be built around three basic categories.

The “**Babel experience**” is the stumble on the road of the mind which tries to comprehend the “totality” and the “logos”. Babel experience is a catastrophe which follows the “being shocked to perceive” (or with other words: realizing with consternation) the irrational object. We realise this “babelic stumble” in every cases of the wordings of the *sensus numinis*, thus it must be interpreted as the part of the experience (if not as the experience itself).

The second basic category is the “**getting beyond**” which aims really at getting beyond the Babel experience. This category can bring about some intellectual products which try to explain the Babel experience in the framework of rationality even though the Babel experience has nothing to do with rationality.

The third basic category is the “**illogical hope**”: this one turns against all kind of rationality, and, as well as the Babel experience, it is such a fundamental, human “mood” (perhaps a psychological motif) and a rhetorical phrase (or turn) as well, which is an organic part of the wording of the *sensus numinis*. This kind of hope doesn’t fit in the logical-lingual system by which the discourse of the hopelessness was built up. From that point it seems to be irrational and paradox, because it is totally ignorant of the well-built discourse of despair.

According to all of these thoughts, the rhetoric of the *sensus numinis* will become more and more distinct if we put (or bring) the notions of the Babel experience, the getting beyond, and the illogical hope to the front. However separately were they analysed so far, they are the inseparable always-presupposed parts of a single and unique existential phenomenon.

I can depict this phenomenon, shortly and simply, as the disintegration of a primordial (as Husserl would say) imagination or code, or, with other words: the break of a world; and then as the attempt to recreate or speak an annihilated language again, or, as an alternative option, the attempt to create and speak an irrational language.

Vörösmarty and the *Sensus Numinis*

In Mihály Vörösmarty's case the most significant element of the parts which build up the rhetoric of the *sensus numinis* is the cyclic approach or view of history. The point of history can be interpreted only in the frames of the category of nation for him, but, beyond the borders of the category of the nation, the cyclic rotation between the highest and the lowest position of humanity rules. For this very reason, the discourse of nationalism and the discourse of the point of history supports each other mutually. The discourse of nationalism is lifted up to sacral heights by the cyclic view of history, while the alignment to the nation presents a kind of reason for the existence of the individual who wanders in the history which rotates pointlessly – thus nationalism gives point to the history.

In my thesis I show what followed the disintegration (that is the straightening of the cyclic view of history out) of the above-mentioned unit in the case of the poem *Az emberek* (*People*): the result was the picture of the “telos” running into the abyss, the sentence with the totally despairing “there is no hope” phrase. These consequences are resulted mainly by Vörösmarty's anthropological metaphors. In the case of *A vén cigány* (*The Old Gypsy*) the road of history running straight on and the break of the discourse of nationalism should help build up the voice of hopelessness at once, as it happened in the poem (for example) *Setét eszmék* (*Dark Thoughts*). But the thing that happens is something very different: the road of humanity ascends to the heights, while the discourse of nationalism gets lost in the blur. The creation of this teleological view of history is absolutely illogical if we are aware of the preliminaries. In reality it – quoting Otto – seems to effect against comprehension. We can claim bravely that the hope presented by *The Old Gypsy* appears in the simplest form of irrationality for the will of comprehension. The reflections of the later history of reception seem to justify this claim, since it is very striking in the cases of much of them how unimaginable it is for to interpret the poem among the frames of rationality.

So, the *sensus numinis* in Vörösmarty's poems reveals the Babel experience and the illogical hope in a single motif at once. The language assembled from the discourse of nationalism and the cyclic view of history collapses at once in the poem *The Old Gypsy* so that, at the same moment, the language-creator energy of the getting beyond could become effective and create the motif of hope in contradiction with all kind of logic. But, in spite of all of these things, one phenomenon doesn't change: this is the prophetic position of the narrator, though, it is true, he speaks here not as the prophet of the nation but as the prophet of the whole humanity whose lot is turning good.

Babits and the *Sensus Numinis*

In the case of Babits, the problem of the “intervention in the world” appears just after the first war and it goes through the whole oeuvre after its first appearance. Alongside this problem, two important metaphors appeared during the examination, namely the figures of the “city” and the “prophet”. The “city” is a symbol of the “world”, it refers to the wickedness, strangeness, “otherness”, deafness of the earthly world with a global claim – as much as a metaphor can be “thematized”. At the same time, the “city” is the target of the intervention, the possible scene of the mission, the field of the ineluctable activity of the prophet. The problem begins at this very point: the “prophet” of Babits is not able to address the city, and, what is more, he can't interpret the “prophethood” of his own. The “intervention in the world” and the figure of the “prophet” appears in a strange symbiosis in the oeuvre: the city (in its special “wicked” form) doesn't even appear as long as the necessity of the intervention comes forth, and, in the contrary, there wouldn't be any need for the prophet if the city didn't exist.

It is the greatest problem that the narrator and the prophet, and the prophet and the city can't correspond to the imagination in which these three figures can find their places in an imagined and ancient harmony. There are two figures who keep on seeking but never find each other: the narrator seeks for the prophetic identity because the "city" metaphor makes him seek it, and the prophet seeks for the "voice" – but not the "city", the scene of his potential failure and annihilation and the proof of his identitylessness and artificiality. The city is the potential killer of the prophet *as a metaphor* by not being aware of the prophet. It is a great difficulty that the prophet and the intervention is needed as long as the city exists – but the prophet comes to nothing in the city...

If ever, the Babel experience of Babits can't be worded other way than by the analysis of the paradox connection of some metaphors.

Our task is not easier in the case of the getting beyond and the illogical hope.

The illogical hope hides in the irony of the *Jónás könyve (the Book of Jonah)*, or, more exactly, in the fact that the author couldn't find any kind of rational solution for the problem of the metaphoric connection of the city and the prophet, though we can localize the attempt to give an answer in the diction of the work: this means that the narrator tries to get beyond somehow the greatest problem of his life with the help of irony. And, even though his attempt is apparently unsuccessful, the fact that the attempt has been made at all reveals an implicit illogical hope. This hope turns against rationality, and, despite it seems to be a "pseudosolution", it must have a serious power because there couldn't be any endeavour without this power.

Aladár Kuncz and the *Sensus Numinis*

The experience of the first war unsettled the ideological direction treated almost self-evidently of the authors of the journal *Nyugat*. This ideological direction, the "idealism thirsting for freedom" was worded against the Hungarian nationalism which was thought to be basically corruptable, and the "persecutor-aesthetics", the ultranationalist phraseology of literary-criticism. Mostly the wording of the relation to the community and history got out of the circle of reflections. This process became the spring of numerous problems after all.

In Kuncz's case, the individuum "thirsting for freedom" (and probably imagining to be free at all) realized its own basic defencelessness. In Kuncz's *Black Monastery*, this realization is concentrated into the metaphor of "death" in a manner that the author gave up (not voluntarily) a given sort of experience of collectivity, namely the connection to the "culture-body" of France at once – since, suddenly, the "culture-body" became the "body of the nation" and it cast out from itself the "non-fitting" elements.

The death of the individualism (as the main supporter of the liberal theory-system of the age) and (the death of) the integrity and the freedom of the individuum, and, besides, the lack of an alternative experience of community beside the nationalism exposed to the power and corruption helped all together create the most drastic and direct expression of the experience of disintegration in the *Black Monastery*. This kind of expression is a real undressed Babel experience.

The fictional mode depicted in this way and using the figure of pharmacos (Frye's expression) creates a world without transcendency: individual is exposed to blind and incalculable forces: now, nothing obstructs the thematic presentation of the disintegration of this subject.

But, in Kuncz's work, unexpectedly, another metaphor appears in a very unfamiliar way in comparison with the logic of its fictional mode: the figure of the "birth" connects to this metaphor. A new "corpus" gets into the story: the *black frater* is born (so to say "corporaliter") which is merely irrational because it transgresses the borders of space and

time, it gives point to history and the life connected to history, and to the – apparently totally pointless – suffering, and, by this way, it presents the motif of the illogical hope. And, in spite of that the rhetorical presentation of nation steps forth again and again in this form and with similar function from the wider context of language, the metaphor of the *black frater* of Kuncz steps as an alternative beside this irrational narrative of nation – just like the biblical “*corpus Christi*”-metaphoric –, since both of them bring the identity *with* and the identity *as* to the same level, and, by this, the “*frater*” metaphor keeps alive and in balance the forces of decentralization and centralization at the same time.

The examples analyzed in my work seem to support the thoughts presented above: after the original “irrational” and “mystic” characteristic of the “transsylvaniaism” – this metaphor is definitely identifiable with the figure of the “*black frater*” – was worded, literary criticism has been zealous to remove the interpretation of the *Black Monastery* from the frames of irrationality. For this very reason it is important today to draw the attention to the transcendent characteristic of the *black frater* again.

On the Connection between the Rhetoric of Nationalism and the *Sensus Numinis*: Final Notes

The notion of nationalism is one of the most frequent and important element among the thoughts explicated above. Because it is more and more suspicious that there is a certain kind of connection between the rhetoric of nationalism and that of the *sensus numinis*, and, because the theory of nationalism is not homogeneous at all, it seems to be important to expose what the meaning of nationalism is according to this thesis.

The rhetoric of nationalism betrays for us the tension – worded by Homi Bhabha, Benedict Anderson, and Ernest Gellner as well – that we can realize between the *continuously changing* treasures of metaphors of the rhetoric of nationalism effected by history, and the (apparently) *permanent imagination* that shows nation as an organical-ordered unit: this organic imagination works its actual world up with the bricks of the continuously recreated biological metaphors.

The organic imagination reveals such a desire which aims at stopping time just as well giving point to history. This kind of desire lays the interest of *identity as* low in order to give space to the ligal form which aims at experiencing a certain kind of ancient unity.

The rational discourse determined by history always crosses the road of the “timeless” discourse which continuously endeavours to be manifest. The former one exposes itself to historicity, that is why their coincidence (or meeting) generates countless discursive formations: perhaps nationalism seems to be less and less definable phenomenon for this very reason. Thus it must be stressed that we can make manifest a certain kind of permanency in the structure of the continuously changing narratives: *when I mention “nationalism” in the thesis, I mean the phenomenon called a “timeless”, “irrational” discourse of nationalism by – for example – Bhabha.*

We have to imagine the discourse of this “timeless irrationality” as the figure of a hero with supernatural qualities which has – mainly after the disciplines of biology appeared – various biological functions either. He has an astonishing identity-creator (and holder) power, mainly because he is able to lift the figure of the individual identified with him up to mythic heights independently of the difficulty of any cases.

The connection between the *sensus numinis* and the “heroic” discoure (or, rather, narrative) of nation can be characterized with a given sort of tension either. The rhetoric of nationalism stepped into the rank of discourses which are offended at their basics by the *sensus numinis* because the rhetoric of nationalism exposes a clear claim to sacrality, and it

lifts individual into transcendent heights. The rhetoric of nationalism became such a system of relations which makes the Babel experience and the illogical hope possible at all by the disintegration of this system. This illogical hope points out two main directions for the getting beyond: first of all the direction of speaking the language of nationalism again. This is the road which leads to the point at which the heroic discourse of nationalism becomes entirely unapproachable for dialectic mind.

The second direction means the seeking for a kind of new language. This possible new language cannot be placed among the frames of rationality (if one can find it at all) for the main reason that the *sensus numinis* turns the attention to the irrational basics of the subject (and, here, we can consider irrationality as Rudolf Otto does: this basement “in Begriffen nicht explicibell”, it is unexplicable with [human] notions). And, furthermore, the *sensus numinis* warns that the Numen is unapproachable. Whatever rhetoric tries to reach the numinous heights, its fate will be the same than that of the grandiose building of Nimrod: referring to Derrida’s (mis)translation, the Everlasting God will cry the name above it: Babel!