

## THE STRANGE AND FAMILIAR ETERNITY. THE EXPERIENCE OF GOD IN CONTEMPORARY HUNGARIAN LYRICAL WORKS

SZILVESZTER LÁSZLÓ SZILÁRD<sup>1</sup>

**ABSTRACT.** *The Strange and Familiar Eternity. The Experience of God in Contemporary Hungarian Lyrical Works.* While in the second part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Hungarian literary criticism, the topic of sacrality in lyrical poetry was quite emphatically present in many scientific studies (e.g. in György Rónay's, László Rónay's, György Rába's, and Éva Cs. Gyimesi's works), this area has been unfairly neglected for the past few decades. We might say that, apart from a few lucky exceptions, among the contemporary lyrical analyses, one can hardly find a study that focuses mainly on the various motifs of Christianity, the aesthetic-poetic characteristics of transcendental experience, and the forms of expression of faith and doubt. The essay examines transcendental experiences in contemporary Hungarian poetry, and seeks to identify that attitude of the modern author, which can be described as a dialog-based approach to the Christian tradition. In this paper, we propose to present those aesthetic-poetic initiatives in István Bella's, István Ágh's, and Imre Oravecz's lyrical works, in which the relations between man and sacrality are reevaluated, as well as the role of poetry and the entire modern culture.

**Keywords:** *Hungarian poetry, contemporary literature, transcendence, faith and doubt, Christianity*

**REZUMAT.** *Eternitatea familiară și străină. Experiența sacralității în poezia maghiară contemporană.* În timp ce în a doua parte a secolului 20 aspectul sacralității, relațiile dintre om și Dumnezeu au fost reprezentate destul de intens în analiza și critica literară maghiară (de ex. György Rónay, László Rónay, György Rába, Éva Cs. Gyimesi), în ultimele două decenii, aceste subiecte au fost în mod nedrept ignorate. Am putea afirma că – în afară de câteva excepții – cercetările literare contemporane au neglijat studierea experienței transcendente, apariția valorilor creștinismului, caracteristicile estetico-poetice ale credinței și îndoielii,

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<sup>1</sup> **László Szilárd SZILVESZTER** (PhD), associate professor, Babeș-Bolyai University, Department of Pedagogy and Applied Didactics. Author of 4 monographs and numerous scientific articles in the domain of cultural sciences and especially modern and contemporary East-European (Hungarian) literature. Member of the Romanian Writers' Union, and International Association of Hungarian Studies. E-mail: szilveszter.laszlo@ubbcluj.ro

deși în lirica contemporană aceste valori sunt prezente cel puțin în aceeași măsură ca și în creațiile literare de dinaintea celui de-al Doilea Război Mondial. Studiul propune o analiză asupra prezenței sacralității în poezia maghiară contemporană, bazându-se pe o scurtă prezentare a liricii lui István Bella, István Ágh, Imre Oravec.

***Cuvinte-cheie:** lirica maghiară, literatura contemporană, transcendență, credință și dubiu, creștinism*

According to Martin Heidegger, in early Greek thinking “physis” is the concept which denotes the all-encompassing, comprehensive functioning of the universe. In the inseparability of existence and being, the human being and nature are not interpreted as components of the part-whole relationship, but as a motion conferring unity to the universe. It is this motion that gives importance to every element only in their relation to totality. Consequently, in itself, nothing is absolute and constant; nothing is permanent, only in the co-changing with the universe and the others: it can be recognized in its increase or decrease, development or disintegration. “Plants and animals are in motion even when they are standing still and resting. [...] The φύσις [physis] is the origin as well as the preordination of motion and stillness” (Heidegger, 2003: 233). Christian philosophy attributes this all-inclusive motion that gives purpose to everything to God. Outside of Him, every being has a beginning and an ending; everything can be divided and multiplied. There is nothing without God, and everything is becoming only by Him. A 15th century Christian philosopher, Nicolaus Cusanus, said: “only [God] the infinite, eternal autohypostaton exists by itself, because nothing can be added to or taken away from it. [...] if we don’t perceive this One in diversity, we’ll see nothing else but infinite deformity and indeterminable chaos” (Cusanus, 2000: 25–27). However, the relationship with God is, essentially, a hermeneutical one. This means that it can only be realized by the recognition of the fundamental difference between the human being and God, knowing that “we are able to put the entirely different in front of us just as it is” (Gadamer, 2003: 90). This relationship results not from the orientation towards scientific (subject-object) knowledge, but it requires humble attention and open-mindedness. Modern man, however, usually puts himself in the focus of every dialogue or conversation, i. e. he can only speak from a position that “experiences its basic relation to the being[s] in the objectification facing him, namely by overcoming it” (Heidegger, 2003: 232). Thus, the individual interpreted in its subjectivity as “ego” becomes unable to create and maintain true dialogue, his or her endeavors do not go beyond the limits of self-orientation and the attitude of defining the “other” as a stranger. In the 20th century, until the 60th, 70th, perhaps only a few Hungarian poets – such as Jenő Dsida and János

Pilinszky – managed to somewhat surpass this perspective. Through the analysis of István Bella's, István Ágh's, and Imre Oravecz's poems, in this study, we seek to ascertain which are the main motifs that define the experience of God in contemporary Hungarian poetry from the viewpoint of the dialogue with Christian tradition, faith, and doubt.

### István Bella

István Bella's poetry was mostly influenced, regarding both the tone and the typical topics, by the poetic heritage of Attila József, although – as Bella himself emphasized it – in the development of his individual style, the poetry of Gyula Illyés and Sándor Weöres, or that of the only a few years older generation than him, can be considered a starting point. “It has a lot to do with folk song, the *Kalevala*, the modernity of Béla Bartók, Attila József, and Zoltán Kodály, as well as with those whom he can call his elder brothers: László Nagy and Ferenc Juhász. It is not difficult to discover the reader of the Bible and the Psalms in his verses, either”, Jenő Alföldy observes (Alföldy, 2009: 46). And indeed, irony, tragic, gentle humor, and word game are equally typical of this poetic career starting in the mid-1950s, and even of the already completed oeuvre as a whole.

The title of István Bella's first volume, *Szaggatott világ* [Fragmented World] (1966), illustrates the peculiarly modern duality – by this pointing to the poetic tradition of Attila József, Gyula Illyés, and Endre Ady even – which, in the relationship with transcendence, with God, becomes the dominant feature of all his later poetry: the undecidability of acceptance and refusal, faith and doubt, desire and rejection. In the 1950–1960s poems of István Bella, besides the “community voice” required by the aesthetic expectations of the era, the consciously suppressed personal experiences constantly emerge in connection with the painful – but usually joyfully, nostalgically recalled – events of childhood, such as poverty, loss, and orphanage. This attitude views the past and religious tradition experienced as a child not only by performing the gestures of identification, the definite commitment to continuity, but undeniably as the dominant source of identity and poetic existence:

I sang the crucified Jesus  
 nine-year-old orphan Evangelist  
 I brought with me the song from there  
 (*Szaggatott világ* [Fragmented World])

Of course, instantly – and not without self-irony – he adds: “now that I have nothing to do with God”, justifying, even before himself, the problematic nature of the restoration of religious belief and confidence. All this can be regarded not so much as an effort to comply with ideological and political expectations but rather as an honest confession of the lyrical self – the

acknowledgement of the fact that what had happened during and before World War II definitively became inaccessible to the poet creating in the Rákosi- and the early Kádár-era which propagated the materialist “salvation history”.

Considering the context of the 1950–1960s, obviously the fact itself is significant that this theme is at all present in the young poet’s verses, moreover, from 1966 onwards the motifs of religiousness, the allusions to the biblical stories and Christian tradition, begin to increasingly define István Bella’s poetic voice (*Szaggatott világ* [Fragmented World]; *Betlehem* [Bethlehem]; *Dödögő* [Babbling]). A typical figure of this lyrical orientation is the shepherd who in the first poems is formed from concrete childhood experiences, flesh and blood persons (*Izmini József* [József Izmini]), later, however, almost exclusively referring to the Savior Jesus Christ, as an expression of the relationship with God, develops into a constant metaphor of the presence of the Holy. Consequently, in István Bella’s poetry, Christian past is not just an external reference point but, from the very first volumes, a priceless heritage, a living tradition. Nothing proves this better than the relaxed and intimate, bantering and playful tone that depicts the dialogue with God through the sincerity of the relationship between the father and child:

My God, I’ve had enough  
coolness and so much youth  
that you do not have to fear  
that for my beggar life  
you will have to pay with my years.  
(*Nyugtalanság* [Disquiet])

A specific form of this dialogue is the sometimes self-denying, sometimes God-praising confessional tone (*Tékozló meztelenség* [Prodigal Nudity]; *Elégiák* [Elegies]), prayer (*Invokáció* [Invocation]; *Fény és levegő nélkül* [Without Light and Air]), and the emphasizing of the hope of Salvation (*Bízz hát* [So, Trust]; *Karácsonyesti vers* [Poem for Christmas Eve]; *Érdi Betlehem* [Nativity Play in Érd]).

In István Bella’s poetry, a prominent place belongs to those verses which allude to the two most authentic representatives of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Hungarian religious lyricism: Jenő Dsida and János Pilinszky. As for Pilinszky, the speaker shows the search for God as the only possible way of transcending the earthly “convict-condition”, as the never ending obsession of the believer: “takes his discus-glory into his hand / throws it / and never lets it go”; as for Dsida, the Transylvanian poet living and creating between the two World Wars, he discovers the bond of common destiny – besides the confidence in Eternity – in the breath of approaching death, in the chronic heart failure: “Jenő Dsida, I understand You / Your every word-beat / is mine” (*Dsida Jenő*) [Jenő Dsida]. The same identity-seeking attitude appears in the poems recalling the memory of the father, who died in World War II; here the personal relationship

with God – as a recurring motif in Bella’s oeuvre – is based on the analogy of the early lost, but always present personal contact, the father–son relationship (*Önarckép* [Self-portrait]; *Válasz nélkül* [Without Answer]; *A címzett ismeretlen* [The Unknown Addressee]; *Gyermekdal* [Children’s Song]; *Eleven fényed* [Your Live Light]; *Apám* [My Father]; *Első versem* [My First Poem] etc.). Despite all modern skepticism and pessimism, the cycle-title *Játszom Istennel, s ő velem* [I Play with God, and He Plays with Me] of the 1991 volume *Arccal a földnek* [Facing the Ground], which emphatically represents the motifs of aging and passing away, convincingly demonstrates the continuity of the direct relationship of trust even in the poems created after the 1989 change of regime:

I play with God. How long has He,  
the Lord been playing games with me!  
It’s Christmas Eve. For a thousand years  
we’ve sat beneath his canopy  
in a silent corner of the word.  
I play with Him, and God with me.  
(*Karácsonyesti vers [Poem for Christmas]*, translated by Adam Makkai)<sup>2</sup>

However, this lyrical orientation is far from being devoid of rebellious and ironic moments. The inscrutability of the divine plan, the presence of cruelty and evil in the world, the personal experience of approaching death show the specific states of being and mind of the individual struggling between absolute fidelity and ultimate despair. The tragic tone of the exclamation “Throw my poem away, son of man!” (*Világot írni*) [Writing a World] is as much a part of this poetic endeavor as the hopeful feeling of „I know: there is no death” (*Tudom*) [I Know]. Especially the (post-)apocalyptic Cain-monologues – where we can recognize the 20-21<sup>st</sup> century social and human relationships – of the 1998 volume *Ábel a sivatagban* [Abel in the Desert] represent this creative stance, pointing to the inner reality and hellish depths of that solitude and loneliness which is, probably, most authentically shown by Attila József in Hungarian poetry: “where there is neither god, nor human handhold” (*Mint egykor*) [Like It Once Was]. “One reality kills the other one – it’s only natural. Absolute truth is with God, or nowhere else. But still, why does the world exist? [...] If we want to unlock the secret of Bella’s poetry, we must first follow this lead”, István Kemsei states (Kemsei, 1999: 90). The struggle between love and hate defines these verses, the perpetual dilemma between faith and doubt, the lack of the tangible, perceptible, anthropomorphic God. It is no coincidence that in István Bella’s poems written after the 1989 regime change the motif of the doubting Thomas’s finger penetrating into Christ’s wound repeatedly appears (*Hasonlatok* [Comparisons]; *Egy utcafához* [To a Street-Tree]).

<sup>2</sup> All the poems with the translators mentioned above are cited from A. Makkai and E. Watson Liebert, 2003.

The last cycle of poems of the 1998 volume *Ábel a sivatagban* [Abel in the Desert] paint a particularly pessimistic picture of the world. The title itself conveys a sense of hopelessness and the vulnerability of the individual. Abel's chance of survival in the rough and violent world of earthly existence is minimal; his major "sin" – that he is, after all, gentler and, in the strictest sense of the word, nobler than Cain – seals his fate. No wonder that in these verses we can hear his voice only post-hoc, after the murder (*Ábel a gyilkokról* [Abel about the Murder], *Ábel álma álmairól* [Abel Dream about His Dreams]; *Ábel a sivatagban* [Abel in the Desert]; *Ábel fősóhajt* [Abel Sighs]). In fact, we can see the events – the rebellion against God, the impenitence, the denial – from the perspective of Cain; it is he who speaks even in those verses which apparently reflect on the events from the outside (*Isten halottkém-jelentéséből* [God's Autopsy Report]; *Emlékfoszlány Isten időbárákjából*) [Memory from God's Time Ark]. "By Abel, the creator of values, the Lord's beloved one perishes for the first time in history, but unfortunately not for the last, with whom the Cain-world still does not know what to do, no matter whether he is alive or dead" (Kemsei, 1999: 92).

From this point of view, the murder is inevitable: it is the consequence of the human inclination to evil, of being expelled from the Garden of Eden. And, basically – if we can talk about such a thing at all in connection with the cycle of poems *Ábel a sivatagban* [Abel in the Desert] – as a paradoxical, final conclusion, it can be said that the difference between the two brothers comes only from the Lord's attention. By themselves, both Cain and Abel are lost, only the testimony of the Lamb, sacrifice and redemption, repentance and forgiveness can save the human being and humankind from damnation:

Abel could be Cain  
and Cain could be Abel.  
But the lamb,  
it is always the same.  
(*Csak a bárány* [Retrial], translated by István Tótfalusi)

However, in the symbolic "stories" of the 1998 volume, Cain finally loses not because he committed the murder, but because he is not able to repent, moreover, as a self-proclaimed "prophet", he constructs an ideology for himself, creating the apotheosis of rebellion and wickedness. In István Bella's poetry, Cain is the prototype of modern man, the embodiment of material culture, moral relativism, and rational thinking, who chose the possibility of definitive separation from God:

*Carissime,*  
if you want to kill someone,  
if you want to make someone perish forever,  
son that even his death can be killed,

Do not kill him!  
[...]  
Kill all of his dead!  
Eradicate his cemeteries  
to seventh generation,  
visit devastation upon  
the graves, the cradles that rock the future,  
scatter the bones among the rock,  
grind them into bone-white flour,  
burn them with quicklime mixed  
with water.

Have the wooden grave-posts and the headstones  
burned, grind them to powder  
and cast them to the winds,  
especially if the runes and writing  
cannot be scoured away.  
Have a hundred-thousand tiny Babels erected in their place.  
*(Káin próféta első levele a Cainus-beliékhez [The Prophet Cain's First  
Epistle to the Cainites], translated by Adam Makkai)*

According to Krisztina Hanti, in these poems “Bella shows God through Cain’s eyes, while he identifies himself with Abel. Even as a poet, he acts as Abel. He is aware of the fact that he carries death in his own fate, and yet he stands up against the destruction of values with his own means” (Hanti, 2008: 100).

The 1999 collected edition *Tudsz-e még világul?* [Do You Still Speak Worldish] and the 2008 posthumous volume *Mintha tükrök között beszélnek* [As if I Were Talking between Mirrors] largely confirm the same experience. The playful-ironic tone of the newer poems, the linguistic humor and self-reflection, however, despite the realization of the hopelessness of the Abel-existence, bring comfort and the old confidence of the father–son relationship back into the dialogue with God:

As someone who’s made mischief,  
You’ve caught me, my God.  
Around me, sixty years’ flames, ashes.  
I promise I won’t do it again.  
*(Hatvan év [Sixty Years])*

“After sixty years of flaming, a mischievous child asks God for forgiveness [...] And in the schoolboy greetings of the sixty-year old friends, the memory of Csokonai, Petőfi, and the puckish humor of our school years seem to revive, it rejuvenates you, and he, the little bit older, looks at them with János Arany’s resigned wisdom”, the old friend, himself a poet, recalls the last meeting with István Bella, while reading his posthumous volume of poems (Ágh, 2007: 126).

## István Ágh

István Ágh's first volume *Szabad-e énekelni* [Is it Permitted to Sing?] appears in the middle of the 1960s, in 1965; three years later, in 1968, it is followed by the second one entitled *Rézerdő* [Brass Forest], and in 1971, by the third one: *A tündér megkötözése* [Binding the Fairy]. István Ágh's poetry is characterized by an apolitical attitude, different from the one typical of the era, it is a mature poetic orientation aspiring to classicism that is, however, determined – especially considering the lyrical works of the 1970–1980s – by the different tendencies of the avant-garde. From the beginning, there is some sort of reserved outside approach in this poetry, which feels at home only partially on Earth and keeps looking upwards, from where the most prosaic “pub-reality”, the basest manifestations of human existence are always seen and shown in the light of eternal spirituality, the relationship with transcendence, while the lyrical self finds his own identity in semi-presence in the world. The atmosphere of this unusual identity-search and spirit, the effortless lyricism, is intensified by surreal situations and images reminding us of Sándor Weöres' poems:

But I break my heart,  
and drive it into crowded pubs:  
drunk men and women  
lean against the tin counter.

[...]

Dawn feathered me  
with rainbow rays,  
I circled around you, world,  
like a winged angel.

(*Másnap* [The Next Day])

The 1965 volume *Szabad-e énekelni* [Is it Permitted to Sing?] brings to mind the tradition of Christmas holiday greetings, the Nativity play, one of the most typical events of popular custom. “Chanting, walking from house to house, had an important role in cultivating or establishing relations of kinship, friendship, and faith, as well as in the involvement in traditions, initiations”, Béla Márkus remarks (Márkus, 2015: 51).

It is but obvious that in István Ágh's poetry, right from the first poems, there are such expressions as *the Mount of Olives, Angel, Eucharistic Procession, Advent, Absolution etc.*, even though references to the Gospel and the Catholic tradition in the poems of the 1960–1970s are usually connected to a profane spatial and temporal dimension. The desacralized context, however, is far from serving the purpose of ironic reflection, instead creates the medium of that specific homeliness which makes the presence in the world, the existence of the individual partial but the poetic forms of (self-)expression unique and complete.



In some of the poems of the first volume, nature appears as something the first human couple might have experienced immediately after the Creation, in the Garden of Eden, in the unspoiled tranquility and joy of God's closeness; and because violence and destruction, the idea of death are not part of this world, the harmony of the eternal present free from strife, the experience of genuine happiness, the lack of the awareness of mortality confer a special atmosphere to István Ágh's poems:

My grass hut with trees clinging onto the Moon,  
full of mosquito bites,  
my evening love-scenes,  
the smell of whipped up dirt on the plant-scented wind,  
my green tent for the ball,  
it was I who ransacked your foliage,  
it was I who hired your musicians,  
I was the one who chose your women,  
in the dawn of the bicikle's solitude,  
immortal in all the gossip,

oh, youth, my youth.  
(*Ifjúságom [My Youth]*, translated by Mike Starkweather)

Nevertheless, this atmosphere comes not from the illusion of youth, from wishful thinking that obscures reality, but rather from a lyrical point of view which sees the world as beautiful as it is, since he finds the inalienable place and function of all objects and living beings in it. In this interdependence without hierarchy, old age is as natural as youth (*Nyári vásár [Summer Fair]*; *Arcok a tűznél [Faces by the Fire]*; *Búzavirágok kéklenek [Cornflowers Bluening]* etc.), and human life is described by the lyrical self as a wandering, a pilgrimage towards the Transcendent (*Imádság [Prayer]*).

In some early poems, hopelessness and the prospect of death are present, but only as a kind of transition between the present and eternity, because not only man and nature but also the world of objects is waiting to continue its duty beyond this world, yearning for Resurrection, the promised Salvation:

The attic: a red tile coffin,  
store of memories.  
Baby shoes, hundred-year-old boots  
weep for the old body,  
they're waiting for the resurrection.  
(*Our Lamb Faced Yellow House [Báránycú sárga házunk]*)

Besides, the tone of István Ágh's lyrical poems alludes in a much more concrete way to the relationship between man and God – by evoking religious

poetry, folk prayers, and the Hungarian classical poetic tradition (*Balassi* [Balassi]; *Sivatagi testamentum* [Desert Testament]), or by combining almost blasphemously the desire for holiness and earthly love and passion (*Szerelmes himnusz*) [Love Anthem]. In this particular world, on rare occasions, irony appears, pointing out the fragility of life, vulnerability, the imperfectness of man and society, which later, from the 1968 second volume, results in a more tragic and pessimistic view.

István Ágh's later poems, therefore, no longer depict a perfect world. The harmony between God and man, man and nature is disrupted, and, apart from a few exceptions, it returns only in the verses written after the 1989 regime change, in a completely different context, due to the recognition of divine grace and providence. In the poems of the 1968 volume entitled *Rézerdő* [Copper Forest], temptation, sin, and hopelessness take the form of the devil, indicating that, for the believer, the estrangement from God implies not so much worldliness, or the fulfillment of the materialist ideology, but the risk of falling victim to the ancient power of evil and lie, the fatal presence of the invincible tempter, the fallen angel who bears the external marks of female sexuality:

It's a robber and has horse hooves,  
and doesn't steal 'cause finds sorrow,  
it's a big predator but shedding woman hair  
Golden eagle circles smoking  
Ezekiel's wheeled angel  
silence, silence, after the whirr  
somebody's been here something hair shedding  
carved its horseshoe into my wall.  
(*Valaki járt itt [Somebody Has Been Here]*)

In the second half of the 1968 volume, through the figure of the sailor and the old woman, the speaker of the poems metaphorically bids farewell to the times of childlike confidence and cloudless hopes, to his own youth.

"The world is no longer a motionless idyll", Géza Vasy states in a contemporaneous literary analysis, "but a changing and contradictory reality, where disharmony is always present. [...] Attila József's »mature man« becomes Ágh's personal experience, but just like Attila József, Ágh challenges this thought, he fights against the increasing loneliness of man, seeks the shelter of a »protecting community«" (Vasy, 2003: 377). Without questioning the authenticity of this emotional turn and the poetic honesty, we have to state that in the volume entitled *Rézerdő* [Copper Forrester] the motif of "growing up", of disillusionment – in the same way as in Attila József's early poetry – is rather a rhetorical pose, the expression of that theoretical and poetical orientation according to which the tragic is the only category fit for modern poetry, while the most genuine feeling of the 20<sup>th</sup> century poetry is existential alienation (Adorno,

1998: 25–26). It is probably no coincidence that in István Ágh's poetry, from the volume *A tündér megkötözése* [Binding the Fairy], the pessimistic tone of the love and mortality poems, old woman and sailor dialogues of the *Rézerdő* [Copper Forrest]) loses its initial momentum, but it is no longer able to return to the ingenuity of the first verses. Piece VII. of the cycle entitled *Csillagra-törők* [Star Conquerors] of the 1973 volume *Jóslatok az újszülöttnak* [Predictions for a Newborn Baby] perfectly illustrates this state of being and mind:

Heaven is not the same any more,  
as if it were trampled down,  
striped with blood,  
ribboned with breath,  
full of planted flowers,  
afflicted by us,  
adorned with us,  
sanded with our smiles.

Consequently, in the 1970s, hopelessness, death, and estrangement from holiness become the dominant motifs of István Ágh's poetry, more authentically than in the second volume, since the displayed experiences are related to real life, to the eternal departure of acquaintances and friends, including Ágh's brother, László Nagy, who died in 1978. Instead of the rebellion against the injustices of life, remembering, taking leave, and resignation dominate the tone of these verses. The vocabulary of religious poetry, the metaphors of transcendent worldview, the expressions referring to the mystic secrets of Catholicism, however, are mostly present as non-functional, empty forms in the 1970s poems, they demonstrate the aimlessness of human life and poetry, the uselessness of faith and creation:

The oakum of our hair, as white as lime,  
falls, stopping the machine, which spills  
the songs before us onto our table,  
freely disgorged the songs are wips,  
the eat each other, they spread squirming  
on this winter plain, children's songs,  
girl's songs of farewell, keenings,  
soldier's songs, chants,  
and a tune gathers again  
to shape the prayer of the woeful mouth:  
Deliver me, Lord, from eternal death...  
a change of clotes can't fend away  
death, wich unbuttons pelisses  
*(Dalaim halottai II. [The Dead of my Songs 2], translated by Alan Dixon)*

The wasting of divine grace, the experience of sin and atonement, the loss of faith in the effectiveness of creative work, are all part of this lyrical orientation (*Végső* [Last]; *Után* [After]; *Család mínusz egy* [Family, Minus One]). With its (self-)ironical title, the poem *Idézetek az Ábránd utcából* [*Quotes From Dream Street*], by the statement “you took me too seriously, father”, indicates the idea of unfulfilled desires, the vanity of the poetic, intellectual, and prophetic role. In this regard, not only individual existence but the whole society, even the world itself is chaotic and unpredictable, and the self is only a party and witness to the crisis of mankind moving towards final annihilation and apocalypse. *Szeptember 30.* [*September 30*] is one of the poems dealing with the personal experiences of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, even though the reality depicted in it goes beyond the specific events:

Here I stand in line between two believers  
who call for death  
and I'm singing like a fool

„The dreadful reality of the fear of void is the existential experience of the 20<sup>th</sup> century human being, and through the filter of this ontological anxiety, characteristic of our age, one can discern the fragments of memories which make up the material of the poems, the motifs and requisites of life” – Mátyás Domokos remarks in his analysis (Domokos, 2005: 1298). In the 1977 volume *Jól vagy?* [*Are You Well?*], the painful self-reflection trying to express the experience of vulnerability, decay, and death thus leads to total negation (*Gyász hang gyász* [*Grief Voice Grief*]; *Istenem* [*My God*]; *Apám* [*My Father*]). However, the loneliness of modern man, the idea of the universe without a God – as Béla Márkus’ monograph rightly points out – here can be associated not so much with Attila József’s lyrical attitude or the scientific concepts of the end of the millennium but rather with a vision of nature and man which, regarding Hungarian literary tradition, appears first of all in Csokonai’s poems and is based on the classical Newtonian worldview (Márkus, 2015: 94–96). In István Ágh’s poetry, from here on, the path leads upwards, viz. by clinging to the memories of early faith, through recalling the father and the mother, the grandparents and the childhood experience of God (*Békességet* [*Peace*]; *Az újjáépítés fogantatása* [*The Conception of Reconstruction*]; *Körmenet* [*Procession*]).

In the volumes of the 1980s, religious references are more frequent (*Napvilág* [*The Light of Day*], 1981; *Keseredik a föld héja* [*The Earth’s Crust Is Growing Bitter*], 1984; *Napló és tulipán* [*Diary and Tulips*], 1987). The fear of passing away, the disillusionment, the apocalyptic visions are almost entirely missing from these volumes, as well as resignation and the tragic note. Instead, playfulness and (self-)irony prevail, which reflect on the previous poems of the

oeuvre, on the poetic attitude giving too much importance to the poem, the role of the poet, the pain of the individual and world, mostly within the limits of a humorous dialog with the tradition of the 20<sup>th</sup> century modern Hungarian poetry – namely with Gyula Illyés' and Mihály Babits' works (*Egy Babits-sor megfejtése* [Explanation of a Babits-line]; *Amit Illyés mutat be* [What Illyés presents]). Relief is also a part of this change, which actually discovers the happiness of one-time, unique events, the beauties of life, the creative power of memory and imagination in the awareness of the naturalness of aging (*Keseredik a föld héja* [The Earth's Crust Is Growing Bitter]; *Vénasszonyok nyara* [Indian Summer]). Confessional tone and self-analysis become the characteristic features of this poetic diction which, through sincere remorse and search for transcendence, and by recognizing everyday miracles, finds its way back to the vital dialogue with God.

Where is god  
whom I learned to write in small letter,  
and this small g made me an insect, too  
[...]  
This ditch flower has withered,  
and the first gossip of the somewhere existing sentimentalism  
is hanging on the table,  
and it would quench thirst like Christ.  
Vinegar for me! Remorse!  
(*Árokparti virág* [Ditch Flower])

After the 1989 regime change, in Ágh's poetry, the metaphors of faith and doubt are closely linked to the recollection of various personal experiences and events, for instance the Italian tour or the 1956 revolution, as well as the Budapest daily life. The time of the events and the locations, in these poems, are mostly clearly identifiable, thus the relationship to sacrality always appears in a well-defined context, but not in all cases can be subordinated to the situation to which it is connected. So, real events help, simply by their uniqueness, the lyrical self-reflection, the attitude ignoring concrete space and time, the partial – but with the individual consistently aiming at the full – realization and understanding of the goal of human existence, the laws of society, the events and opportunities of individual life. One can find here the dichotomy between reality and vision, repentance and rebellion (*Az öreg Michelangelo* [The Old Michelangelo]; *Innen indulnak* [They Start Here]; *Mindig virágos* [Always Blooming]; *A bélpoklosok Messiása* [The Lepers' Messiah] etc.), while the dialogue with God also belongs to this effort:

My age-worn holiday, homeless  
Mother of God, if the stall  
of Bethlehem is a roofless ruin,

if the key to the vacant dwelling is lost,  
where could Mary bear her son?

[...]

so I offer a tattered stall, myself,  
the tiny crib of my heart,  
the breath of my lungs, the myrrh of my liver,  
the incense of my teeth, the gold of my eyes,  
the Christmas tree of my backbone,  
tinsels and the Galaxy on my ribs,  
silver thorns to the Saviour for my salvation.

*(Föläjánlom magam [I Offer Myself], translated by István Tótfalusi)*

In such a context, the memory absorbed in childhood's faith, in the joy of holidays, or Haydn's music, creates the continuity that, despite the negative life experiences, the disillusionment, the pains and diseases of old age, opens the way for hope and trust, giving a sacred purpose and meaning to the final farewell to life, as well (*A Teremtés* [The Creation]; *Születésnap, 1938* [Birthday, 1938]; *Az orr látomásai* [The Nose's Visions]; *Gyászszemély* [Bereavement]). „You try to somehow reach the corner of God's cloak” – István Ágh notes in an interview in the 2000s. „Of course, you never succeed, as on Michelangelo's fresco God's and Adam's finger can't meet, either. But the gesture and the will are clearly visible” (Ágh, 2004: 117).

### **Imre Oravecz**

Just like István Bella's and István Ágh's poetry, Imre Oravecz's poems are defined, from the very beginning, by a poetic attitude focusing on sacrality, on transcendence. We could even say that each moment of the vast oeuvre reflects this relationship, not only by connecting to the traditionally religious rural culture but as a basic experience of individual creative life, as a source of past and present, man and history, culture and civilization.

The religious motifs, starting from the 1972 volume *Héj* [Skin], constitute an essential part of this universe (re-)created consciously from personal memories and elements of imagination, while in the later volumes the experiences of sacrality result from the relationship with the family, ancestors, and the tradition of peasant society, from the values of Catholicism and universal Christianity. Words like “psalm”, “mass”, “cross”, “prayer-book”, and “rosary” are, as well, part of this existential stance, as mutual assistance between neighbors, or the Commemoration of All the Faithful Departed held over the graves of unknown soldiers:

Ever since I can remember,  
they had always been there,  
in our garden, next to the cemetery,

they were lined up in the potato field,  
packed in side by side,

[...]

once every year, on All Souls' Day, we'd weed them thoroughly,  
put them in order,  
and place lighted candles on them,  
as if they were relatives,  
but only one on each,  
because they cost money

sometimes I tried to relate them to bloodthirsty beast in Soviet films,  
but it didn't work,  
I couldn't take offense at them,  
my friend Miki always came to mind,  
whose father hadn't come home from the war  
and might be buried like this somewhere in Russia,  
or even worse than this  
*(Katonasírok [Soldiers' Graves], translated by Bruce Berlind)*

The space and time perspective of Oravecz's poems is also special, since through metonymic relations, metaphorical images, allegories, and enumerations individual destiny appears – despite the concrete referentiality – embedded in a historical, salvific, and mythological dimension. Although from an external (e. g. the reader's) viewpoint all this may seem chaotic, the individual always finds his place and role in it. The speaker of the poems appears as an initiate, as a bearer of secrets in these situations, but the source of knowledge is the community surrounding him, while the values and standards not only help at the level of everyday events, but also provide guidance regarding the development of sacred relationships, even the understanding of human existence and the world.

Thus, in Imre Oravecz's poetry the connection to tradition is created by those objects, scenes, and natural elements, which in their distinctive functions are able to evoke the various aspects of traditional rural culture, peasant activities, and religious life (*Egy földterület növénytakarójának változása* [Changes in the Flora of a Tract of Land], 1979; *Halászóember* [Fishing Man], 1998; *A megfelelő nap* [The Right Day], 2002; *Távozó fa* [Departing Tree], 2015). The memories juxtaposed – images mostly originating from the narrower metaphorical and metonymical space of childhood and family – create, due to selection, a unique existential medium that points back and forth in time: “in the corner half-made bed, / dusty books on the shelves, / photos on the nightstand, / in

the drawers and boxes memories, relics, / here clothing, clock, glasses, / over there phone, prayer-book, calendar" (*Csendélet*) [Still-life].

The non-poetical, prosaic, objective tone strengthens, paradoxically, the personal, even the intimate nature, the authenticity of the (narrated) events, the community ties come alive in the sincere emotional relation to the evoked characters and the empirical world. At the same time, the documentation of momentariness is, right from the first volume, an elementary part of this orientation, which subordinates everything, human being, nature, and object to the awareness of impermanence. From the point of view of Oravecz's poems, we can never see the whole, only the fraction, the fragment that, building on memories, shows immobility, the state before or after the action, event, documenting photographically, as it were, the presence of life, the traces of the physical, mental and spiritual existence of man:

solemn icon  
in front of the bed  
in the unstirred silence  
old banknotes  
leaf tobacco  
notebook chaff hair bulb  
wrapped in damask

In the poems of the 1972 volume *Héj* [Skin], we mostly can't see the speaker; we can only hear his fragmented speech. These lyric episodes don't have flesh and blood characters; a body part or a gesture emerges now and then from the bursting stream of memory. Only the figures brought into existence, so to say as a fiction, by things, instruments, machines, places, and the (imagined) space and time constitute an exception (*Dubrovnik* [Dubrovnik]; *H. Bosh álma* [The Dream of H. Bosch]; *Áldozat* [Sacrifice]; *Lingua* [Lingua]). In this relation, therefore, reality is present through various places, buildings, objects, and paintings; the values of Christian past – mostly related to the religious and cultural context of Medieval Europe – appear only incidentally, from the imprints of different periods and locations. This depersonalized discourse is characterized by projecting surrealistic images on one another, genuinely illustrating that the existence evoked here finds its meaning, beyond the linguistic, visual, and temporal dimension, in a higher, sacral context:

The clock struck. On its face  
a handcart made its way,  
the wheels creaking,  
the seat empty  
(*Idő* [Time], translated by Bruce Berlind)



The prose poems of the volume *1972. szeptember* [*When You Became She*] simultaneously display the period from the Creation to the Fall, and from Christ's Coming to the Apocalypse, adding a salvific dimension to the experience of the birth and death of love, of happiness and despair, of heaven and hell. The personal issues, here, metaphorically evoke the eternal struggle between good and evil, love and hate, life and death, since by reflections alluding to the Gospel stories they transcend the space and time limitations of subjective memory. In the introductory part, for example, we can recognize the first words of Saint John's Gospel: "there was you, there was there, there was / then, there was blue sky, there was sunshine, there was spring, / there was warm, there was meadow [...] there / was trust, there was giving, there was richness, there was pleasure, / there was gaiety, there was laughter, there was song, there was / talk, there was prayer [...] then the you became she, the / there became here, then became now [...] affirmation / became negation, faith became doubt, hope became despair, love / became hate, future became past" (*Kezdetben volt* [*In the Beginning*] translated by Bruce Berlind).

Just like in István Ágh's poetry, in Oravecz's poems humankind plays a central role – including, in particular, the destiny of Hungarian people, of traditional peasant society. The post-apocalyptic portrayal of life and death, of reality addresses this issue, as well. Contrary to the present state of being, to the destructive effect of modern age on identity and community, to the civilization-stricken rationalistic society, the 1983 volume *A hopik könyve* [*The Book of the Hopi*], depicts an ideal – probably non-existent – world which accepts the process of birth, life, and death as something natural, and the human being as God's creation:

the first vibration center of the human body is on the crown,  
the Creator places life in man  
through the first vibration center,  
and takes it out from there through it, as well  
(*Eototo és Aholi az embertestről* [*Eototo and Aholi about the Human Body*])

The Indians in the 1983 volume are, basically, the allegorical characters of an old, traditional, happier society, of a universe in which all the events are subject to the divine order and to the wisdom coming from tradition; even death or irrational events have a meaning, cause and consequence affecting sacred relationships. "*A hopik könyve* [*The Book of the Hopi*] is an ancient story, a reality that existed about ten thousand years ago, which is for us now like a myth and fiction. At that time, the world was a better place, a lot of problems didn't exist, though human existence always and everywhere is the same, we are born, we suffer, we are happy sometimes, and then we die. [...]

Even today, there are people for whom the fact that you have to die does not cause a big problem – but for most of them it does cause a great deal of problem. All the more so since death is eliminated from our lives. We live as if we were never going to die, and we bury our dead in the same way – we die as if we had never lived” – Imre Oravecz remarks in an interview (Herczeg – Lapis, 2008: 26).

This experience, according to the testimony of Oravecz’s works, is inaccessible to the modern man, but it can be reconstructed, to some extent, from childhood reality based on confidence and emotional decisions, bizarre games, and actions built on rites (A régi Szajla [The Old Szajla]; A gyermekkor módosítása [Modification of Childhood]; Támpontok a gyermekkor módosításához [Clues to the Modification of Childhood]). That is so even if the “stories” themselves are formed from a timeless, universal dimension that always resists the efforts searching for specific references and time limitations. “The retrospective angle of the remembering self usually portrays and searches for the past from the consequences of growing up and, by doing so, the once private appears already as stranger and lost, and gains meaning as such, yet – precisely because this perspective is determined by the experience of absence – the meaning manifesting itself is no longer relevant, given that in the context of the present, i.e. in the temporal context of remembering it cannot be retrieved”, Zoltán Kulcsár-Szabó states (Kulcsár-Szabó, 1999: 91).

In the 2000s poems, turning to tradition, remembering, and settledness bear witness to that attitude which is able to accept death as a part of life and the inevitable impermanence of worldly things. Rejoicing over unexpected love and giving thanks become part of the transcendental dialogue, as well as the playful-ironic prayer poems for easy old age, for the mercy of good death (*Bőség* [Abundance]; *Kívánságlista* [Wish List]; *A kérés részletezése* [Detailing the Request]). In this context, it is not so much the preordained death of every human which lends a melancholic tone to the expression but rather the fate of traditional society, the (self-)liquidation of rural communities, and the disappearance of the ancient forms of sacrality. The demoralizing and identity-crushing irresponsibility of communism, nationalization, and then the consequences of the political decisions made after the regime change, as well as the related family stories and personal experiences intensify the tragic aspect of Oravecz’s poetry:

Father Győző presents the wafer,  
and we pray aloud.  
We are around fifteen or twenty people in the church.  
In Szajla, the Lord has neither workers nor harvest any more.  
(*Mise* [Mass])

Péter Szirák correctly notes: “The destruction of Hungarian peasant society is part of a worldwide trend, with a delayed land distribution and a little collective farm detour. But elsewhere, something new grew out of the old: in the West, they provide large subsidies for the maintenance of the rural world. Because it slows down the unbearable expansion of urbanization, strengthens community life and environmental awareness. It’s expensive everywhere, yet they assume the costs. Over here, however, rural life has been ruined to such an extent that there is nothing instead. In many places, farming has disappeared; people do not even sow in the kitchen-garden. In many places, even the young live on welfare, or on disability pension. No one wants to cultivate the land anymore. [...] In Hungarian literature, which nowadays mostly moves in a vacuum, producing neat historical novels, and manufacturing puns, only Imre Oravecz keeps us posted about all this” (Szirák, 2008: 42).

After the change of regime, the optimistic objectivity of Oravecz’s poetry, its strong faith, and the playfulness with which it turns to God is, on the other hand, unique in the 21<sup>st</sup> century Hungarian literature. The evocation of simple peasant life, of the happiness and joyfulness, despite all the hardships, of childhood (*Középkor*) [Middle Ages], the unbroken trust in Salvation, in the existence of afterlife, in the validity of redemption (*Túl* [Beyond]; *Halottaim* [My Dead]; *Megkönnyebbülés* [Relief]), the epigrammatic *Szekuláris bizonyíték* [Secular Proof] completing, (self-)ironically, Pascal’s wager with the reality of the (post-)modern age are equally part of this kind of poetic space. This orientation – though in some ways it has been present since the first volumes – is able, more maturely and tested, near the end of life, experiencing the process of aging, to look at the personal past and future serenely: “God is like a light / we can only see that He shines” (*Egy hívő naplójából*) [From a Believer’s Diary].

If it’s allowed to speak from the perspective of a contemporary literary interpretation, the conclusion of Oravecz’s poetry is that: just as focusing on transcendence and remembering have a purpose and meaning, so human life and death cannot be in vain. As the counter-poem of the *Egy hívő naplójából* [From a Believer’s Diary], written in English, convincingly demonstrates:

Feeling God’s presence in my lonely nights  
 makes me think of a beautiful garden  
 I have always wished to be a gardener in  
 (*Confession of a Faithful*)

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