

Self, poetry, psychoanalysis

ANTAL BÓKAY*

Modern poetry was probably born in the late 17th Century when lyrical poetry was created as a special discourse, not only as a subjective discourse, but as the subject in discourse. Modernity in this sense is nothing else but the autonomous articulation of the internal, of the individual *Innerlichkeit*. This revolutionary phase was the period of Romanticism in culture and literature and the age of early romantic philosophy of the Schlegels, Schelling, Hegel and others. Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy in an excellent book¹ about these developments called this new literary form, the lyrical poetry the “literary absolute”. “Das Hertz ist der Schlüssel der Welt un des Lebens” – said Novalis². From this time on the autonomous, self-reflexive individual acquired a central existential position, the person who earlier carried the imprint of the age on himself, tried to put his own print now on the world. Poetry was absolutely important in this change, it was the leading genre of the age, as it served as the discourse per se of the internal core of the subject. In ever so many cases from Goethe to Coleridge and later in the 19th Century the central question was, how the essence of this autonomous subjectivity could be defined. The new philosophy built on the primacy of individuality tried to determine the core, the essence of subjectivity and explain how this core could be expressed. Charles Taylor, in an excellent book titled *The Sources of Self* labeled this change in culture as an “expressivist turn”, in which the “inner voice” was “made manifest in a given medium” while making manifest “does not imply that what is so revealed was fully formulated beforehand”³. A sense of creative inner depth was born and this “sense of depth in inner space is bound up with the sense that we can move into it and bring things to the fore”⁴. Modern lyrical poetry also created the form, the medium that could express this inner, powerful essence through the idea and technique of the symbol: “the symbol, unlike the allegory, provides the form of language in which something otherwise beyond our reach can become visible”⁵. The history of poetry, the series of its major types can easily be read as the different and possibly deeper and deeper articulations of the inner, creative essence of individuality, of self.

* University of Pécs, Hungary.

¹ Lacoue-Labarthe, Philippe – Jean-Luc Nancy: *The Literary Absolute – The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*. New York, 1988, State University of New York Press.

² Quoted by Charles Taylor: *Sources of the Self*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989. p. 371.

³ Ibid., p. 374.

⁴ Ibid., p. 390.

⁵ Ibid., p. 379

In an important sense psychoanalysis can be understood as a parallel systematic-conceptual representative of this general cultural change. The different models of self, the hidden layers of individuality revealed and named in the process of therapy, the articulations of different metapsychological systems all serve to express this inner voice. Is it possible than, to use some major ideas of psychoanalysis, to describe the changes that poetry went through in its changing discourses from and after its romantic birth? Can different phases of the history of modern poetry described as presenting different self-constructs described later by psychoanalysis? I am not able to argue it properly, but my hypothesis is that early modern lyrical poetry (romanticism, symbolism) used an Oedipal self-construct as its basic building block while the late modern objective poetry tried to reach down to a deeper layer of inwardness, tried to define, express the pre-oedipal components of the subject. To present this process I would like interpret one single poem, a kind “metapsychological poem” the theme of which is just this possibility to reach this even more hidden, often non-linguistic layer of identity.

My poetic example is a late modern Hungarian poet, Attila József⁶. He was born in 1905 and committed suicide by throwing himself before the train in 1937. When he established himself in poetry, Hungarian poets were under the influence of the late, more refined mentality of symbolism facing the relativity of the self. The characteristic features of this trend can be traced in Attila József’s early poetry, where his personal experiences are expressed in complicated, figurative-surrealistic images. Very early, from 1925 on, he disintegrates the inner order of symbolism; instead of pure aesthetic experience he claims political commitment; he abandons the figurative idiomatic world of poems for a metonymy building on the chain of neighbouring words, on stringing the fragments of the world. The montage of a fragmented world, the technique of the avant-garde is an important school, though not the ultimate goal of poetic development. About 1930, under the influence of Marxism and psychoanalysis, he began searching for an order which shows the homologous relation of soul and object, and perceives the poem as a correlation of the inner and outer world. It is then that he wrote his long poems fathoming the depth of real being, and these are, both in their technique and poetic vision, exactly like T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*. In these poems the world of the outskirts is used to give body and form to the poet’s inner experience. *A Winter Night*, for example, exposes a monumental tableau of alienated modern being, the disappearance of intimacy and private feelings, the revelation of the exact structure of objecthood, and shows that all these can be unified in a poem and explained through the allegory of a political idea providing an interpretation of the world. The climax of his poetry is, perhaps, the poem entitled *Consciousness* which, besides revealing the structure of the objecthood of the world, speaks about this structure seeming so absolute and reliable only due to our self-deceiving belief, because “the fabric of the law / always had a missing stitch, a flaw”.

The specialty of his poetic turn compared to Eliot’s route was that he started from a radical rewriting of the nature of self, of his own self, his identity in an impersonal, objective way. And only as the next step he tried fill in, mirror this very new self-concept with a poetic world that could present, explain this personal core. Imagine an Eliot who would identify completely with Prufrock, and all his later works, would be written by this Prufrock figure. I would like to show through an interpretation of one single poem that in it an invisible inner construct is presented, a kind of screen that opens up an underlying structure of self, hidden as a heterogeneous layer behind the verbally available Oedipal self.

The poem was written in 1925, close to the twentieth birthday of the poet, it is short and seemingly simple:

⁶ His poetry was extensively translated into English. Edwin Morgan – major contemporary Scottish poet – translated 60 poems (Attila József: *sixty Poems*, Glasgow: Mariscat Press, 2001). Some other collections: *A Transparent Lion – Selected Poems of Attila József*, Kobenhavn/Los Angeles: Green Integer; *Perched on Nothing’s Branch – Selected Poetry of Attila József*. Translated by Peter Hargitai, Apalachee Press, 1986.

With pure heart

1. Got no father, got no mother,
2. no god, no homeland,
3. no cradle, no shroud
4. no kiss, no lover.

5. Last three days I haven't eaten
6. neither a lot, nor a morsel,
7. my twenty years is power,
8. I am looking for a buyer.

9. If no one wants it,
10. the devil will take it,
11. with a pure heart I will plunder,
12. if need be I will murder.

13. I'll be caught, I'll be gallowed,
14. with blessed earth I'll be covered,
15. & death spreading grass will grow,
16. on my oh, so beautiful heart.

(Tr. by M. Castro & Gábor Gyukics)

The primary constructing principle of the poem is the three time repetition of the figure “heart”: in the title, at around the two-thirds of the text and as the last, with closing word of the poem. The pure and beautiful heart can be read as the *metaphor* of a new personal existence. This *metaphoricality* is one of the two important and consequently used formal differences used in the poem. The other is that the declaration that “I exist with pure heart” is the *only affirmative* statement of the poem, while everything else is given in the *negative*, as refused. It seems as if two different but inseparable self-constructs are available, the non-detailed, general, purely stated fact of the (idea of the) heart and, on the other side, the detailed, structured, negated reality of the person. I return to the “heart” motive in a moment, let's see first the enclosed longer, negative and non-metaphorical text of the poem.

The reality of the self is presented in two steps that are separated by the repetition of the heart motive. The *first*, longer part (line 1-10) presents the existential *structure* of personal reality, the *second* an existential *narrative* of the person (line 11-16). Both of these parts, this longer text of the poem completely lacks metaphoricality and built on a very different rhetorical technique, on metonymy. Metonymical images are built on syntagmatic relation, they do not refer to a symbolic depth (to a hidden sense) but use a kind of surface relation of neighboring phenomena, an often visible connection of the objective world (adjacency, part-whole relation). In rhetoric the metonymical relation that is extended to a longer chain, to a temporary sequence is called *metalepsis*⁷.

The first ten lines contain a very strict binary structuring, the first four lines as the first unit, the second four with different structuring is the next part, and two additional lines that lead to the next longer part. The text of the poem is extremely, I would say: purely, nearly mechanically structured, constructed, it is like a machine of signifiers.

In each of the first four lines there are two, altogether eight denied metonymies of the personal fate:

Got no father, got no mother,
no god, no homeland,

no cradle, no shroud
no kiss, no lover.

⁷ Genette, Gérard: *Métalepse. De figure à la fiction*. Éditions de Seuil, Paris, 2004.

The father is the metonymical figure of order, while the mother accepts, offers love. The same is repeated in the next line on a more transcendental level: God is the transcendental principle of orderliness, the homeland is the collective world that accepts. The third line refers to the binary structure of a certain, socially defined birth (what kind, what quality of cradle one gets) and through the quality of the shroud the collective acceptance of the deceased. The fourth line describes the love that the speaker offers and through the kiss, the love he gets. The four metonymical pairs suggest the total Oedipal construct of the person, that places us into a certain life and allows to define the character of its beginning and the end too.

The next four lines continue the refusal of the Oedipal rhetoric further on in the form of two plus two lines.

Last three days I haven't eaten
neither a lot, nor a morsel,
my twenty years is power,
I am looking for a buyer.

If no one wants it,
the devil will take it,

While the first four lines of the poem referred to a kind of *spatial structure*, a kind of inner-social state of the person, this part suggest some *temporariness* and activity. The sixth and seventh lines define a time sequence that comes up to the present, while the second half of the strophe starts from the present heading toward the future event. The “last three days” can easily be associated with the three days of Eastern fasting at the end of which a renewed person was born as the resurrection happened. This part is also motherly as it is connected with eating. The eighth and ninth lines are about “power”, the life-power, the accumulated libido of the speaker, it is a fatherly, phallic component of the Oedipal self. The poet was exactly twenty years old in the time of the writing of the poem, and selling his inner power means the act of transforming his own self into something fetishistic, something that appears in the form of money. The buyer is, however, the devil, he is the “spirit of negation” who is opposed to God, who was the positive “buyer” of the offer of Jesus on the cross.

The repetition of the motive of “pure heart” separates the first and second part of the poem, and this second one contains a narrative, again negative in each of its components.

with a pure heart I will plunder,
if need be I will murder.

I'll be caught, I'll be gallowed,
with blessed earth I'll be covered,

As the first step the speaker breaks in a space of other people and – second – breaks in a personal existence, as he kills somebody. The next two steps are reactions of the outside world, the destruction of the person: he is caught and hanged. The end is clearly phallic, the hanged body becomes stiff and erect. In this part the last Oedipal component, the body itself is refused, it is detached from the heart, the personal core.

I have mentioned but have not discussed an important feature of these ten lines: every component, act, phenomena are in the negative in it, the most frequent words are the “no” “neither”, and the narrative is built of destructive acts only. Negation must have a crucial role in building this levele of personal core. Freud in a short 1925 paper titled *Negation* suggested that the negation of statements about the outside world is different from those that negate an inner experience as this type of negation often refers to inner contents that cannot be said, expressed, and the function of negation is a non-referential referring to these. Kristeva in her analysis of negation wrote that rejection “suggests the heterogeneity of significance (...) it opens up an a-signifying, indeed pre-linguistic

crucible”⁸. She also suggests that “negativity is the liquidifying and dissolving agent that does not destroy but rather reactivates new organizations and, in that sense, affirms”⁹. In this poem too, negation is partly a refusal of a certain, Oedipal personal construct but it is also a reference to through rejection of an unknown, unsayable deeper layer of personal identity, it “reveals itself as a screen over an emptiness”¹⁰ but over a very rich, saturated emptiness. Negation is a part, a component of dream-work, a strange interplay of the invisible visibility. Of course it always initiates the question: if it is not, than what?

Now we may turn to the all embracing personal essence, the heart. At the end of the poem in the last two lines, the residue of this inner reduction, the leftover essence is the heart that is changed from “pure” into “beautiful heart”. The term “pure” in this position does not mean moral purity, nor some naivety but the term is used in the same position as it was used by Immanuel Kant in the “Critique of Pure Reason”. Kant’s aim was to reach the absolute, the absolutely non-empirical essence of thinking. The “beautiful heart” term suggests a change from the epistemological position into an aesthetic one again in the Kantian sense, the stainless, spotless inner essence.

The poet, the late modern poet would like to break through the early modern in a basic sense “empirical”, Oedipal self-construct, and reach the “critique of pure This”, the sense arrived at in this moment becomes empty, the “heart”, is pure, and beautiful, but radically empty, a sense-less sense.

To summarize my interpretation: *With Pure Heart* is a “self-theoretical” poem, that tries to present that crucial change in poetic vision that lead from the earlier, sense centered, symbolical-metaphorical poetic discourse into a new one that is built on the idea of inner structure, the reaching down into the level of primary identity. It is important to note, however, that with the constant negation, through the negated components and relations of a personal structure we, the readers are required to project a kind of screen, a feeling of an empty but unforgettable relation, we are drawn into a dream-work that suggests a more basic, worldless construct in the background of the person. This pre-linguistic structuring can probably called the feeling, the activity of the primary narcissistic identity level of the person.

It would be interesting to follow the next possible steps of the poet after the projection of this purely energetic, unsayable, negative core. It is not possible to stop here, and it is not possible to give the proper meaning, metaphorical sense of the “heart” (as Freud offered at a point the meaning of the Irma dream). In the search for a sense the “navel point” appears in the case of the person too: the navel is not a lack, but an unavoidable heterogeneity, the gap between language and non-linguistic personal energy construct. This primary identity, however, never ceases to facilitate the person, it needs to interpreted, picked up, used in life.

In the following years, the poet Attila József developed several techniques that tried a metonymical mirroring of this unsayable original gap. He wrote several poems about his own name. Our proper name is a metonymical figuration as it was attached to us, given to us without referring to our essence; it has never been connected to our personal (Oedipal) sense. Another poetic possibility was the analysis of love and in it the mirroring function of the other (metonymically placed) person as a specular projection of the wordless personal identity. A third group of the gap-filling primary narcissistic identity poems are about a special image of God, a loved and loving grandfather like figure, a kind of pre-oedipal father.

Several other poems and more detailed analysis would be needed to explain properly my hypothesis. I hope, however, that even in the case of this short poem a possibly typical late modern attitude to self could be shown. This metonymical, objective self became the starting point of a late modern poetic world view.

⁸ Kristeva, Julia: *Revolution in Poetic Language*. Translated by Margaret Waller. New York: Columbia University Press, 1984, p. 147.

⁹ Ibid., p. 109.

¹⁰ Kristeva, Julia: *Tales of Love*. Translated by Leon S. Roudiez, New York: Columbia University Press, 1987, p. 23.

