

# THE CONCEPT-OF-SUBJECT IMPLICATIONS OF READING REWRITTEN POETIC IMAGES AT THE END OF THE 1920S

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The choice of *Az Istenek halnak az ember él. Tárgyi kritikai tanulmány Babits Mihály kötetéről* [Gods Die and People Live On: A Critical Essay on Mihály Babits's Collection of Poems] by Attila József as a particularly suitable text for illustrating the subject matter denoted in the title of the present lecture does not require extensive justification. In this unconventional critical piece Attila József subjects Mihály Babits's poetry to devastating criticism. What's more, he rewrites and "corrects" the poetic images of Babits. The readings that take the biographical motives in the critique for their point of departure – i.e., the personal motivations of the previous generation and the iconoclastic Attila József – are unable to properly uncover the poetic dimension of this linguistically multi-leveled text. The critical piece was written in December 1929, in other words during József's artistic period between 1927 and 1930. According to Ernő Kulcsár Szabó's concept of the history of the lyric genre, it is in this period of Attila József's poetry that the struggle between "the image-based and the montage-based lyrical language uses and view of the world" occurs, which is then "followed by the formation of a 'discursive language use' with a basis in the speech-like tone."

The choice of topic thus seems particularly valid even from this aspect, since it is not at all self-evident how the reading process establishes the poetic interrelationships discernible for the reader between the methods and the systems of rules of image representation and the position occupied by the lyric "I" written into the poetic language.

In my presentation, I will consider as my primary concern the unraveling of the concept-of-language and the concept-of-subject implications deducible from the rhetorical examination of rewritten images. In a longer study I have already analyzed in detail the entire text of Attila József's critique, which I cannot undertake to reproduce here for obvious reasons. At present, I will restrict myself to offering a relatively more detailed introductory analysis, which will provide an outline of reading-rhetorical questions related to the poetics of rewritten images. Then I will illustrate these with a sample of excerpts.

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Attila József furnished his most profound analysis about the system of images in *Gondok kereplője* [The Rattler of Anxieties], where he rewrote the first stanza of the poem in two steps.

The original text goes like this:

A csupasz fák csúcsa mint tűk hegye bök be  
 az égi flanellba:  
 Az Isten a földet hóba és ködökbe  
 puhán becsavarta,  
*hogy óvja azt a pár maradék plántáját,*  
*amit az ember nem*  
*irtott ki még, s amik a bús tavaszt várják*  
*szabadon vagy kertben.*

[The tips of naked trees, like the points of needles, stab into  
 the celestial flannel:  
 God has softly wrapped the ground into  
 snow and fogs,  
*so as to protect his few remaining plants*  
*that man has not*  
*as yet eradicated, and which await the sad spring*  
*in the open or in the garden.]*

In the first version by Attila József the stanza cited above is transformed as follows:

Az Isten a földet puhán becsavarta  
 égi flanellba,  
 ráfonta, kötötte havát, ködét,  
 hogy óvja azt a pár maradék plántáját,  
 amit az ember  
 nem irtott ki még.

[God has softly wrapped the ground  
 into a celestial flannel,  
 having woven his snow and fog around it,  
 so as to protect his few remaining plants  
 that man has not  
 as yet eradicated.]

The second version reads:

Csupasz fák gémberedő ágát  
 puha gyolcs-ködbe csavarja, fedi:  
 az Isten megóvja világát;  
 az ember lelkét vaksággal veri.

[Numb branches of naked trees  
are wrapped, covered into soft cambric:  
God protects his world;  
afflicting man's soul with blindness.]

Attila József calls one of the best stanzas of the Babits collection a philosophical still life. This negative evaluation presumes a reading that does not confine the comprehension of the text to the examination of the phenomenological aspect of language. At the same time, the semantic tension inherent in the philosophical still life expression suggests that there are at least two language elements required for establishing an abstract meaning, and at least one of the two elements have to be undeniably of imaginal nature.

Attila József deems the first line of the Babits poem

A csupasz fák csúcsa mint tűk hegye bök be  
az égi flanelba:

[The tips of naked trees, like the points of needles, stab into  
the celestial flannel:]

to be superfluous probably because the supplementary figure of the opening image is a simile that permits the reading of the image only as a visual experience. The search for meaning thus is restricted to a definitive identification of the image. We will have to come back to this explanation at a later stage.

The expression "pár maradék plántáját" [his few remaining plants], which has the meaning of threatened entities, is comprehended by Attila József as an image. But in his first version he omits the last one and a half lines of the original, *amik a bús tavaszt várják szabadon vagy kertben.* [which await the sad spring in the open or in the garden.] He might have been driven to do this by the acquiescence that expanding upon the sight that serves as a basis for the metaphor extinguishes the image, which cannot be recognized in the visual experience of the plants. Emphasizing just one of the components of the metaphor makes the distance between the meanings of the connected elements too short, and thus it loses its expressiveness. Furthermore, this decreased value metaphor, the image that can be perceived only visually, namely the plant, together with the full simile that connects the two material elements, i.e., the tips of the naked trees resembling the points of needles, through an involuntarily interfering anthropomorphic motif of meaning, suggests the notion of the protection of babies. Attila József deleted the above textual loci with the justification that they were "bastard", which might refer to a reading experience of this kind. Critical language identifies the undesirable outgrowth of image formation through a trope. This formation comes about from a cross of meaningful segments characteristic of man and the material world. The semiotic occurrence that takes place may raise the question why Attila József tries to dis-

tance the three texts, which inevitably enter into a dialogue even with one another, from these tropological transformations that can be traced back to such anthropomorphisms. It is especially the formation of the meaning of protection, coming from the notions of celestial flannel and fog, that would be hindered by the recreated text, since the personification edged between the constituent elements of the image results from the unification of semiotic units characteristic of the living and the non-living.

The image in the final version by Attila József reflects the motif of reinterpreted protection:

Csupasz fák gémbredő ágát  
puha gyolcs-ködbe csavarja, fedi:  
az Isten megóvja világát;  
az ember lelkét vaksággal veri.

[Numb branches of naked trees  
are wrapped, covered into soft cambric:  
God protects his world;  
afflicting man's soul with blindness.]

We might wonder if the last sentence in the stanza, “az Isten megóvja világát; az ember lelkét vaksággal veri” [God protects his world; afflicting man's soul with blindness], would not cancel the code that ensures the transformation of meaning between the images of nature and those of psychological conditions which, in Attila József's reading, controlled the poetic interpretation of the poet's creation of images. It is possible that the rewritten image invalidates the rule that can be based upon the theory of metaphor replacement. In this case, the closing line of the poem, in the quality of a self-interpreting configuration, offers the examination and supervision of the identification of images for the reading. The task of interpretation thus prescribed also requires a separate clarification.

In Babits's poem, the system of tropological substitutions is constructed by anthropomorphisms. The reading based on the principle of aesthetic sensation interprets the image as a visual sight, the basis of which is constituted by the belief that mankind has the same essence as nature. Attila József rewrote the image in a fashion that effectively deletes it by suspending the myth of man and nature sharing the same essence.

The fact is that this soul is dangerous for the living, and that is why God protects nature from it by making the soul blind, in other words by hiding the things from man's sight. This meaning, at the same time, can be established by the reading, if it replaces into the text the anthropomorphisms that operate the transformation of meanings between man and nature.

Csupasz fák gémbredő ágát  
puha gyolcs-ködbe csavarja, fedi:  
az Isten megóvja világát;  
az ember lelkét vaksággal veri.

[Numb branches of naked trees  
are wrapped, covered into soft cambric:  
God protects his world;  
afflicting man's soul with blindness.]

We ought to notice that, even before the reading of the image, the personified trees imply the premonitions of death, and through the vision of a sickly and threatened old man with bandaged hands, they stabilize the figurative meaning of the text. The metaphor of the soul afflicted with blindness can also be sensed as an image, although its so-called degree of visibility is rather low. The reader is supposed to carry out a tropological transformation by projecting material characteristics upon a human base in order to reach the sight of "the eyes being the windows of the soul" to render it as the literal meaning of the image.

The search for the possibilities of figurative meaning for the soul afflicted with blindness confronts the reading with the language experience coming from the eternal tension between statement and expression. The statement here questions the assumed organic similarity between man and nature, i.e., the validity of the anthropological approach that served as the basis for metaphor-replacement theory. The meaning thus outlined, however, is the result of a reading process in which, through the intervention of anthropomorphisms, the soul afflicted with blindness gets phenomenalized, as it were. Accordingly, the text cannot delete the image, or more precisely, the principle of similarity upon which the notion of man is based.

The metafigurative meaning thus attainable focuses the attention of the reading to the linguistic position of the "I".

It seems as if the "I" would be missing from the final version, and the place of the resounding utterance is also unidentified.

The rhetorical I of the text makes the sounding of the voice in the poem possible through transversal movements of the states of seeing and being seen, on the horizon of an unstable locus of utterance.

As we may recall, Attila József found only one genuine metaphor in Babits's poem, the metaphor of celestial flannel. If we subject the context of the critique to a more profound scrutiny, we will not have difficulty in recognizing the fact that the unfolding of the protective notion in the final version is possible because Attila József replaces the anthropomorphism-generating original metaphor with images seeping in from his own poems. In fact, the soft cambric fog is borrowed from the

8<sup>th</sup> piece of *Medáliák* [Medallions] and from the poem called *Betlehem* [Bethlehem], and this is not indicated in the critical text. Two conclusions may be drawn from this phenomenon that are important to highlight. The intertextual existence of the image slows down the seemingly inevitable operation of anthropological meaning transfer and, consequently, it restrains the validity of the totalizing patterns of meaning formation. In accordance with numerous other poems written by Attila József in the same time period, the poetics of rewritten images points forward to the direction of the possibility of the appearance of the so-called *secondary modern* linguistic experience (Jauss) through the fact that the meaning of the poetic image cannot be deduced from the phenomenality of language. That is to say, words cannot be fully translated to the language of visual experience through a game of replacements between the inner and the outside world. At this stage, I can only allude to the fact that the filling of original images with unidentified excerpts cited from his own works may add novel aspects to the poetological analysis of texts written by Attila József between the years 1927 and 1930. As long as the poem analyzed does not retain the difference between the cited and the natural utterances, we might even consider this as an indication of a faltering of the unshakable belief in the possibility of control over language.

The intertextual game discernible in the Attila József version of Babits's poem calls forth the breaking of the monocacy of the anthropological-phenomenological reading construed as an indication of the start of a new epoch.

Unfortunately, I cannot go into a detailed discussion of this most complicated question here. Nevertheless, I can offer a few examples taken from the critical text analyzing the figurative way poetic language works, to illustrate the relative status of the principle of meaning replacement.

It can be easily discerned that Attila József most often recognized the simple case of catachresis in Babits's poems. Let us take a fairly enigmatic example in order to demonstrate the way Attila József read incoherent poetic images. This excerpt perhaps represents the most important rhetoric pattern of reading tropes embedded in the diction of criticism. "Ísmét másutt vonatja szalad mint bárka az özönben: két jármű menetét hasonlítja össze olyképpen, hogy úgy az egyik, mint a másik szaladásáról való képzetünk végleg elenyészik." [At yet another place, his train is running like the Ark in the flood: he likens the movement of two vehicles in such a fashion that cancels out our notions of the running of both of them.]

What lay behind the ironic paraphrase of the central simile of the poem *A húszéves Nyugat ünnepére* [On the Twentieth Anniversary of *Nyugat*]? The lines "lelkem, munkám és vonatom szalad / mint bárka az özönben, Ararat csúcsát keresve" [my soul, my work, my train are running / like the Ark in the Flood, searching for the peak of Ararat] exposes the lyric "I" in a concave mirror in an

interpretation that cancels the classic modern conventions of the reading of poetic images.

It is important to see the following clearly. It would be misleading to think that Attila József here criticized Babits's poem in the sense of the incoherent image acknowledged in contemporary French criticism as an independent rhetorical figure. If I am not mistaken, it is exactly the very coherent logic of classic modern imagery that Attila József questions and perhaps rejects.

By foreshadowing the conclusion that can be reached through an analysis of the tropological system of the poem, which – for lack of time and space – I cannot detail at this stage, one notices that the paraphrase of the elliptically contracted lines in *A húszéves Nyugat ünnepére* [On the Twentieth Anniversary of *Nyugat*] is the result of such a reading that discredits the possibility of convergence between the entities accessible to the senses and the cognitive forms of experience.

Attila József's literal reading compares the incongruous notions of the movement of two simple vehicles. This down-to-earth referential interpretation might in effect turn our attention to the reconsideration of the poetic code that guarantees the reading of the original Babits image. What happens in fact is that the critics establish the incoherence of the image on the basis of a tacit reference to perception by the aid of the senses, while they actually compare qualities that can hardly be accessed experientially. Is it not possible that the Babits poem ultimately does prompt the reader to execute a similar interpretive operation? The re-generation of its system of metaphoric images is made possible first of all by the Biblical connotations associated with the notion of the Flood on the one hand, and on the other hand, by the imitation of the meaning-stabilizing tropology of "Repülj hajóm, rajtad a Holnap hőse" ["Fly, My Vessel, The Hero of Tomorrow is on Board"].

The system of metaphors that saturates all the elements of the poem also makes it possible for us to read the abstract images as vivid visual scenes. As a consequence, the recipient is made to string together with particular precision bits of intellectual experience with vivid imagery, based on a mute but rather uncertain knowledge. The inherited use of symbols emphasizes the phenomenological nature of language use. Thus, an understanding of the images can be carried out successfully if the reader counterbalances the tensions between the linguistic creation, the performative strength of the utterances, and the tropological movement of the text.

The opening motif of "lelkem, munkám és vonatom szalad /mint bárka az özönben, Ararat csúcsát keresve" [my soul, my work, my train are running / like the Ark in the Flood, searching for the peak of Ararat] is an instance of personification connected to two dead metaphors. The train and the work, being an object and an abstract notion, can only "run" metaphorically, when personified. The reader, however, does understand the meaning of this figure of speech ahead of time,

even without perceiving and identifying the image as a sight. It is the heightened spiritual condition of the soul, longing for the “healing distance” (“gyógyító messzeségbe”) that establishes a contact between the lyric “I” that is looking out of the moving train and the meaning of the concept of “the Flood.” It perceives the world as chaotic, as if it were a “Flood.”

During the course of reading the lyric “I” appears in the text as a seeing entity and one that is being seen, as long as the link can be established between the concrete and the abstract images through the alternation between the internal and the external points of view. Either looking out of the window, or viewing the running steam engine from the outside, the reader is supposed to imagine the train as if it were “the Ark” moving among white, foamy waves.

The Babits poem actually makes an attempt at becoming the inheritor of Ady’s use of images, which were composed in the language of the prophets. The owner of the vessel, tossed up and down by “the Flood,” might be construed as a metaphoric variation of the lyric “I”. In addition, the rendering of the Babits poem in one’s own words is facilitated by the fact that *A húszéves Nyugat ünnepére* [On the Twentieth Anniversary of *Nyugat*] also paraphrases Ady’s poetic language, and the recollection of it by Attila József’s critique makes it indirectly at the same time an event of secondary modern comprehension of the classic modern aesthetic experience.

The paraphrase cancels the image, and thus it indirectly focuses the attention to the visual experience-generating and visual experience-reducing role of the linguistic medium. The readers are most likely to come across the images of the Babits poems in the course of their interpretation in the fabric of the critique, interwoven with tropes. In their quality of sheer spectacles, void of poetic value, these images suggest about the figurative functioning of images and the inner structure of their meanings that the iconic layer is inseparable from the meaning of the image. Yet it does not exhaust its import. We read on, after reconstructing the spectacle surmised by ourselves to be behind the image and concentrating chiefly on the figurative operation that enables the establishment of the image. These are but methodologically distinguishable phases of the reading, which do not follow in a chronological sequence but rather shift into one another, similarly to the way horizontal movements in reading are conceived by Jauss. However, the details and the conclusions of the query that this last aspect raises reach beyond the discussion of the present issue, and could be further explored in a new separate paper.