«Elegy Here and Beyond». Genres, Canons, and Lyric Variations in Central European Modern and Contemporary Poetry through János Pilinszky's Œuvre

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Abstract

This paper, an excerpt from my forthcoming monograph on contemporary Hungarian elegy, explores the Baudelairean and Rilkean roots of the genre. Drawing on French modernism, I examine the Hungarian reception of Baudelaire from the perspective of lyric poetry and genre history. This approach is reflected both in the theoretical introductory chapter—focusing on the elegy, anti-elegy, self-elegy, and the elegiac-ironic modality—and in the historical-poetic overview, which traces his reception from its beginnings to contemporary adaptations. My research in this field was the first to introduce the concept of the 'elegiac-ironic modality', tracing its historical roots back, among other sources, to Baudelaire's notion of spleen. A central focus of this study is the transmission of Baudelairean elegy into Hungarian lyric poetry, a question investigated here through the work of János Pilinszky, one of the foremost poets of Hungarian modernism[1].

Keywords

Central European historical-literary context; contemporary poetry; elegy; genre; János Pilinszky

[1] Cf. my published papers on this subject: Szávai (2005, 2017, 2019, 2020a, 2020b, 2023, 2026).

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1. Theoretical Framework

> «La langue même est élégie.»
> (The contemporary French poet Emmanuel Hocquard quoted in Maulpoix 2018, 3)

Debates surrounding the origins and development of the elegy in European poetry reconduct to a fundamental conceptual dilemma: how can one distinguish elegiac discourse from the elegy as a formal genre—especially when the two often partially or even entirely coincide? (Braden, Fowler 2012, 397) In my paper, I address, on the one hand, the indispensability of this conceptual distinction as a theoretical problem and, on the other hand, its realization in contemporary Central and Eastern European poetry, particularly Hungarian poetry, while also considering its antecedents in both Hungarian and European modernity. Contrary to certain claims in secondary literature that contemporary elegy has effectively been eliminated or dissolved into the elegiac, I propose that the elegy is revived in our present age and manifests itself in countless metamorphosed forms. (Cf. Maulpoix 2018, 23)

The genre of elegy, a canonical lyric form coexisting and evolving alongside the European poetic tradition, was largely relegated to the background in Central and Eastern European poetry, particularly in Hungarian literature from the 1960s until recent decades. This de-emphasized status resulted from the canonization strategies that accompanied the emergence of a new lyrical language following the turn of the sixties and seventies. (Cf. Németh 2012) The reason for this inquiry is the strong presence of the elegy in contemporary Hungarian poetry, in fact, several recent volumes explicitly include the genre's name in their titles.

One of the inherent genre characteristics of the elegy is its imitative, testimonial nature, which reveals this lyrical form's particular sensitivity

to its links with poetic tradition (cf. e.g., Maulpoix 2018, 10-11) often accompanied by a critical edge or even a parodic tone[2].

What is really interesting is not simply that theoretical research on genre has already moved beyond the framework of the earlier genre-critical framework, just as the famous 'American canon debate' of the 1970s and 1980s has moved beyond its own boundaries. Nor is it merely the fact that the conceptual terrain of comparative literature and world literature has been subject to intense critical scrutiny. Rather, the essential question is what still constitutes a valid line of inquiry in all three domains.

An important part of my theoretical framework builds on the ideas of Paul de Man (1984) and Jonathan Culler (2015), who argue that the problem of *temporality*, inscribed into the poem through the figure of the apostrophe finds its most prominent expression in the genre of the elegy.

Self-elegy sharply perceives the poet as a product of their historical moment and geo-cultural identity. (Sorum 2012) Studying the elegy, especially the elegiac-ironic in the context of the postmodern trend of contemporary poetry, or within specific strands of it also requires us to critically reconsider the question of the postmodern canon, particularly if we understand postmodernism as a non-monolithic phenomenon. (Cf. Németh 2012)

In my earlier research, I described the linguistic-historical and canonization tendencies outlined above using the concept of the 'elegiac-ironic', which I introduced. The notion of the 'elegiac-ironic' offers a partial resolution to the contradiction whereby postmodern irony, as it were, «decanonizes» the elegiac and renders it inaccessible. For my part, I interpret this phenomenon as the emergence of an elegiac lyricism that permeates and transforms the ironic speech position.

[2] The second question is again a metacritical or theoretical one: how relevant is the term 'genre-critical' at all, if we consider that the very notion of 'genre', as a theoretical category was reshaped in the 1960s by poststructuralism, which redefined how we think about genre canons, particularly through the lens of French deconstruction. Indeed, the influential works of Blanchot (1959), Todorov (1976), Genette (1979), and Derrida and Ronell (1980) offer a far more complex and perhaps even ambivalent view of genre and its problems, than the simplistic claim that the theoretical canon of the past fifty years has entirely criticized, rejected, or eliminated the concept.

As the integrity of the *self* in modernity was fundamentally fractured with the advent of postmodernism, the position of elegiac discourse in contemporary lyric poetry, rooted in the tradition of the genre was split *ab ovo*. The speaking subject becomes so intensely self-reflexive that a tension arises between the lyrical self and the lyrical genre – the elegy – which it speaks and addresses through inherited forms. As a result, the integration of the elegiac tradition becomes accessible primarily through an ironic speech position, functioning as an *inner voice*. In this way, the genre identity of contemporary Central and Eastern European poetry becomes fundamentally intertextual, almost as if it were written «for two voices».

All of this corresponds quite precisely to the fundamental and widely accepted insights of recent international research on the elegiac genre, which shows that contemporary versions of the genre are characterized by a high degree of self-reflexivity, a highly critical engagement with tradition, and an intensification of metalinguistic features. To quote from the introduction to Jean-Michel Maulpoix's handbook *Une histoire de l'élégie*:

> The common, sometimes stereotypical definition of elegy (a poem close to the genre of lament, evoking the passing of time and mourning for lost loved ones) does not take into account the richness, variability, and sophistication of this lyrical genre, nor of its reflexive depth.[3]

According to this conception, elegy is not a genre of tearful lamentation, but one of insightful self-reflexivity. That is why, as Maulpoix argues:

> Elegy is a subject that has been poorly treated by critics, who have not sufficiently explored the significance and importance of this ancient lyrical genre, and have more than once confused it with the concept of the elegiac. This is precisely why a reinterpretation is needed, one free from critical prejudice of this vibrant and still flourishing lyrical genre, which has recently undergone new and sometimes unexpected metamorphoses.[4]

[3] Orig.: «Cette définition, bien sûr, n'est pas fausse, et nombre de textes la confirment, mais elle ne rend pas compte de la variété, la souplesse, la profondeur réflexive, ni la sophistication de ce genre…» (Maulpoix 2018, 21). Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from Hungarian and French are the author's own.

[4] Orig.: «C'est aussi que ce genre délaissé par la critique n'a dans l'ensemble guère été pris au sérieux. Peu d'études générales lui ont été consacrées, attentives à ses véritables enjeux.

According to the Anglo-American scholarship on elegy, the contemporary canon of the genre is best described using terms such as 'anti-elegy' or 'self-elegy'.

From my point of view, recent discussions of contemporary anti-elegy are highly instructive and align closely with my own conceptual framework for elegy research. A chapter in *The Oxford Handbook of the Elegy* introduces the concept of the anti-elegy, which closely corresponds to my concept of the 'elegiac-ironic'. In his essay, Clifton Spargo writes:

> Anti-elegy is less a new poetic form or a break with tradition than a tendency in elegiac poetry to resist consolation by confronting the cultural tradition and poetic conventions of the past. This tendency became prevalent in the mid-twentieth century and was completed in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The birth of the anti-elegy coincides with the anti-commemorative turn of 20th century culture, the emergence of museum culture and the mimesis of realism. Anti-elegy designates not so much a new form of poetry or a break with the tradition of elegy as a tendency within elegiac poetry to resist consolation by setting a contemporary mourner against past cultural and poetical conventions – a tendency that becomes fully pronounced by the middle of the twentieth century, extending thereafter into the late twentieth and now into the early twenty-first century. Enacted as a gesture against the conservative, constrictive aspect of literary tradition, anti-elegy coincides with the anti-commemorative turn of twentieth-century culture, reflected in the suspicion of monuments, museums, and realist mimesis in art and literature. (2010, 427)

The characteristics of this poetic form or lyrical genre, as outlined above and supported by contemporary research on the elegy, closely correspond to the core problem I am addressing, namely, how efforts to renew the generic canon of elegy either place limits on or reshape ironic utterance in contemporary Hungarian poetry, and how this process relates to the embeddedness of these lyrical corpora within the broader European tradition. Within the self-representation constructed through the elegiac, the ironic self addresses the elegiac voice, often in dialogue with the tradition

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L'un des objets de cet essai est donc de la réévaluer, au moment où, contrairement à d'autres préjugés également bien établis qui la croient disparue et vaporisée dans «l'élégiaque», elle se montre vivante sous la plume de nombreux écrivains contemporains, fût-ce parfois au prix de surprenantes metamorphoses» (ivi, 23).

of poetic history. This is presumably closely linked to the fact that many of the most representative or canonical examples, drawn from both European and Hungarian poetry, are *ars poetica*, *autopoetic*, *self-referential*, or *apostrophic* poems that stand before us as striking reinterpretations of the lyric-historical tradition. As we have seen, this reinterpretative tendency is, in fact, a canonical generic feature of the elegy itself.

With a touch of self-irony, I must point out that I am placing a *genre category* (the elegy) alongside a rhetorical figure or *modality* (irony). This terminological hybridity, which may seem contradictory, might be resolved if we approach both irony and elegy not strictly as genre, figure, or modality, but rather as *discursive* positions, that is, as particular *modes of lyrical reading*.

From my perspective, it is of particular significance that Schiller, the founding figure of modern lyric theory, places the elegy between idyll and satire (1967, 110-154).

I would also recall that Friedrich Schlegel had already drawn attention, in the *Athenaeum Fragments* (2002), to the genetic affinity between irony and elegy. It is equally noteworthy that Northrop Frye (2020, 176), in *Anatomy of Criticism*, asserts that irony can be not only comic but also tragic. Elegy is a song of lament, and in one of its variants, a jeremiad. The lament or jeremiad is always addressed to another subject, most often a transcendent one. From this perspective, it may be ventured that there is a substantial, even genetic connection between the genre-based dialogical or apostrophic nature of lyric poetry and the elegy as a genre. (De Man 1984, 239-263; Culler 2015)

The apostrophic address to the Another inherently contains the same inner tension of the elegy that Schiller (1967, 129) had already described: «Thus the sentimental poet always deals with two conflicting representations and feelings: with reality as a limit, and with his own idea as the infinite [...]»[5]. In the figure of apostrophe, a tension arises between the Oneself and the addressed Another, just as between «reality» and «infinity». It can therefore be assumed that in certain poetic œuvres, from Baudelaire to contemporary authors, the elegiac and apostrophic modes of address at least

[5] Orig.: «Seine Darstellung wird daher entweder satirisch, oder sie wird elegisch sein» (Schiller 1967, 72).

significantly overlap, insofar as the interlocutor in the dialogue appears as an unattainable or lost ideality and thus becomes the object of mourning.

In Schiller's conception of elegy, particular attention should be paid to the duality of desire and reality, which can be mapped onto the divided, self-reflexive nature of the lyric subject, a condition that becomes dominant with modernity. In the case of the elegy, this duality plays out between the subject of «desire» and the subject of «reality».

Contemporary Hungarian poetry often seems to explore precisely those «fissures» opened up by the dialogic split and reflexivity of the lyric subject, fissures through which a more personal elegiac voice may emerge, in sharp contrast to the principles of programmatic postmodern aesthetics. What takes shape in the lyric utterance is a kind of internal dialogue in which both the ironic and the elegiac lyric subject speak at once. To borrow the terms of Schiller's typology of lyric: the «Ich» ironically reflects on the elegiac «Selbst».

I can only briefly mention here the connection between the elegy and the self-apostrophe lyrical rhetoric. From the perspective of the elegy as a genre, this issue appears in the following form: in the self-representation of the lyrical subject, the ironic self addresses the elegiac self, particularly in its dialogue with the poetic tradition, within which a purely elegiac position can no longer be adequate.

2. János Pilinszky and the Elegy

2.1. Introduction

János Pilinszky (1921-1981) was one of the greatest poets of postwar Hungarian literature. With his indispensable and European-level œuvre, he fundamentally renewed the discourse of Hungarian poetic modernism. János Pilinszky's poetry explores the difficulty of connecting with the Another, the enduring imprint of Second World War trauma, and the struggle with God's distance and silence. Although, unlike the case of most of his contemporaries in Eastern Bloc Hungary, his poetry has been translated into several languages, he is hardly known in English-speaking countries, widely recognized in France. In the poetic scene of twentieth-century Hungary, János Pilinszky is regarded as a poet who developed his own distinctive poetic language, one

that is infused with the trauma of the Second World War and is characterized by silence and motifs of «objectification». (Silence operates in Pilinszky's poetry in several purely poetic contexts, such as avoiding verboseness and chatting in favor of the meticulous selection of words.) This poetics of objectification represents the lyrical self in a covert, indirect way. (Szmeskó 2020)

Pilinszky's poems keep their distance from the perceptible world; they adhere to a metaphysical, mystical tradition, and recur to biblical and theological topics. This poetry focuses on the event of an encounter between the self and the transcendental. Pilinszky's poetry can be read as a lyrical expression of absurd existence, linking his œuvre to French existentialism, primarily to the works of Albert Camus.

Ted Hughes, Pilinszky's first and most prominent English translator wrote an excellent introductory essay for the 1976 volume *Selected Poems*. I quote from this work:

> Hungarians consider János Pilinszky to be one of their best living poets. [...] Pilinszky's special quality is not easy to define. He recognisably belongs to that generation of East European poets which includes Herbert, Holub and Popa, but his differences draw any discussion of him into quite another context. Hungarians tend to set him a little outside their ordinary writers, and his poetry a little outside ordinary poetry. The reason for this is something essential to Pilinszky's character. Critical judgement cannot rest in the aesthetic excellence of his work: it inevitably ends up arguing the ethical-religious position of Pilinszky himself, not at all a simple one in Modern Hungary or anywhere else, but one which his poems and other writings and his life define with such poignancy and authority that it confronts the critic with a problem–a private, existential challenge. (VII.)

The poetry of this outstanding figure of twentieth-century Hungarian literature is, in essence, of European significance, embedded in world literature, intercultural in its outlook, and transnational in its scope or, in Spivak's terminology (2003), within the field of transnational cultural studies. Pilinszky's œuvre can be read within the horizon of transnational comparative literary studies. In other words, it is important to emphasize Pilinszky's position, integration, and significance within world literature, also in light of the most recent concepts of world literature, such as those proposed by Damrosch (2003), Casanova (1999), and Moretti (2000). His poetry displays a remarkable capacity for integrating into and engaging with the world literary field.

Pilinszky's Second World War experience and his concentration camp poetry can be considered a *par excellence* Central European phenomenon. At the same time, the major cultural inspirations and formative intellectual encounters that shaped Pilinszky's poetics were primarily linked to his journeys in Western Europe[6].

It must also be emphasized that Pilinszky's contribution as a mediator of Western culture in Hungary was of lasting importance. He helped make widely known such Western and American authors—many of whom had either not yet been translated or were subject to political censorship—as Camus (who had a fundamental impact on the poet, as well as on our first Nobel laureate in Literature, Imre Kertész), Simone Weil or Beckett[7].

2.2. Pilinszky and the elegy

There is no nostalgia in Pilinszky's artistic vision. Unless it is of a metaphysical nature. His is a poetry of deficiency, or of the figures of deficiency: it is neither nostalgic nor elegiac.

The explanation for this phenomenon lies primarily in the temporal perspective of Pilinszky's poetry, specifically, in the experience of time within his poems. Increasingly, a *posthuman* perspective also plays a significant role in contemporary interpretations of his work. The withdrawal of the elegiac mode reaches its culmination in the core principles of the «evangelical aesthetic» that Pilinszky articulated in the 1970s: the present

[6] The prominent contemporary figures who played a key role in mediating Pilinszky's œuvre, primarily as translators, were mostly from the West: Ted Hughes, Pierre Emmanuel, Gabriel Marcel or Lorand Gaspar. Pilinszky undertook most of his travels in Western Europe. During the 1960s and 1970s, he travelled to the West annually. Visiting numerous European countries as well as the United States and North Africa. Altogether, he spent at least three—possibly four—years abroad.

[7] As a contributor to two Catholic journals (*Új Ember* and *Vigilia*), he played a key role throughout the 1960s and 1970s in introducing the most progressive works of modern European literature and thought to the Hungarian public. In this sense, Pilinszky became a vital transmitter of the spirit of the 'free West' during a time when the Central and Eastern European dictatorships were engaged precisely in suppressing freedom.

moment of attentiveness, the «engagement immobile» in Simone Weil's pseudo-term[8], the *parousia* and an eschatological orientation.

Pilinszky's œuvre displays a fundamental unity in that the lyrical subject almost invariably articulates some form of loss. In this sense, he speaks from the position typically associated with the elegiac subject. However, the perspective from which this experience is distanced from the traditional orientation of the elegiac genre. The lyrical subject in Pilinszky's poetry adopts a fundamentally different attitude toward loss.

2.3. Mourning and Melancholia

A historically characteristic feature of the elegy in Pilinszky's œuvre is that, in line with 20th-21st century developments of the genre, it eliminates the perspective of hope. The question of hope is one of the most complex issues in Pilinszky's lyricism, like in the theories of elegy. The paradoxical, indeed problematic nature of hope emerges not only in *Trapéz és korlát* (1943, *Trapeze and Parallel Bars*) («It is a chilled world, a no-man's land. And like scrap iron thrown over the top our hopes the stars loom dead»[9] – *World grown cold*, translated by Ted Hughes, cf. Pilinszky 1976, 14), and not only in the context of the «late, prodigal hope» but also in the full-fledged eschatological vision of the 1970s. «Hope did not carry me» (*Nem a remény vitt*) – I refer here to a line from *Tékozlók* (1975, *The Prodigals*). Moreover, in *On the Third Day*, God himself, 'the God who bleeds the tissues of history' (Pilinszky), speaks as a 'speaker' who has lost hope: «but God sees there is no way / or road or hope to break from this vision!»[10] (*Revelations VIII. 7.* translated by Ted Hughes, cf. ivi, 47)

és lát az isten égő mennyeket	and God sees the burning heaven
s a menny szinén madarak szárnya-röptét	and against it birds flying and he sees
és látja mint merűlnek mind alább	sinking deeper and deeper
a tűzkorongon átkerűlni gyöngék	those too weak to cross the disc of fire

[8] In fact, it was Pilinszky who derived the concept from Weil's fundamental ideas.

[9] Orig.: «Kihűlt világ ez, senki földje! / S mint tetejébe hajitott / ócskavasak, holtan merednek / reményeink, a csillagok.» (1948, *Kihűlt világ* in Pilinszky 1992, 35).

[10] Orig.: «de látja isten nincsen arra mód / kitörni út remény e látomásból!» (*Jelenések VIII. 7.*, Pilinszky 1992, 49).

és véges-végig mint a rézveres
olyan színűt dirib-darabra törtet
hol nem találni mától egy kapást
a földet látja mégegyszer a földet

a pusztaságot és a zűrzavart
lovaskocsit keresve hol kigázol
de látja isten nincsen arra mód
kitörni út remény e látomásból!

and from end to end
in a redness of copper broken to fragments
where a man hoeing will never be found again
he sees the earth and once again the earth

the desert and the chaos
and a horse and cart searching to wade out
but God sees there is no way
or road or hope to break from this vision!

The explanation for the anti-elegiac character of Pilinszky's poetry lies in the fact that his poetic language is not constructed from the perspective of loss, but from the perspective of the subject who has lost, from the solidification and petrification of lack. This is evident in the recurrent metaphors of «misery», «orphanhood», «plundering», «discoloration», and so forth. In other words, the poems emerge from a kind of frozen moment, a speech situation beyond loss, beyond grace. This poetic voice is not that of the traditional elegiac narrator: rather than lamenting the past in the present, it is concerned with «burning in the vitrine of present time» (*Van Gogh*), with the exhaustion of the now (from the seventies to the present tense of *parousia*) and with maintaining an eschatological orientation toward the future.

A good example of all this is *Téli ég alatt* (1943, *Under the Winter Sky*, translated by Ted Hughes, cf. Pilinszky 1976, 13):

Fejem fölé a csillagok
jeges tüzet kavarnak,
az irgalmatlan ég alatt
hanyattdölök a falnak.

A szomorúság tétován
kicsordul árva számon.
Mivé is lett az anyatej?
Beszennyezem kabátom.

Akár a kő, olyan vagyok,
mindegy mi jön, csak jöjjön.
Oly engedelmes, jó leszek,
végig esem a földön.

Tovább nem ámitom magam,
nincsen ki megsegítsen,
nem vált meg semmi szenvedés,
nem véd meg semmi isten.

Over my head the stars
jostle their icy flames.
A sky without mercy.
I lean my back to the wall.

Sadness trickles searching
past my orphaned lips.
What happened to my mother's milk?
I smudge my coat.

I am like the stone–
no matter what comes, let it come
I shall be so obedient
and good I shall fall flat full length,

I shall not deceive myself any longer.
There is nobody to help me.
Suffering cannot redeem me.
No god will protect me.

Ennél már semmi nem lehet	Nothing could be simpler
se egyszerűbb, se szörnyebb:	than this or more horrible.
lassan megindulnak felém	The biblical monsters
a bibliai szörnyek.	start slowly towards me.

There is hardly any elegiac element to be found here. This early poem is also instructive in that its well-known closing lines ultimately eliminate the possibility of an elegiac relation to loss:

Tovább nem ámitom magam,	I shall not deceive myself any longer.
nincsen ki megsegítsen,	There is nobody to help me.
nem vált meg semmi szenvedés,	Suffering cannot redeem me.
nem véd meg semmi isten.	No god will protect me.

These lines definitely freeze the potential for an elegiac experience of existence and temporality[11].

Apokrif (*Apocrypha*), the iconic poem of Pilinszky from 1956, deserves special attention from this perspective as well[12]. It is indeed evident that the speaker of *Apocrypha* speaks from beyond the elegiac position. I do not intend to refute this claim, but I wish to nuance it. I refer to Hughes: «In each poem we find the same diamond center: the postapocalyptic silence» (1976, 8).

2.4. «In a sense, we are all the Prodigal Son»[13]

I would suggest that the prodigal-son motif – which I examined in depth at the beginning of my research on Pilinszky, and which plays a fundamental role in *Apocrypha* – is in close connection with the presence of the elegy in his poetry, or more precisely, with the genre of self-elegy.

[11] In terms of the historical development of Pilinszky's œuvre, this reflects the fact that in *Trapeze and Parallel Bars*, the lyric speaker is predominantly focused on damnation.

[12] A lecture of the poem from the standpoint of the elegy as a genre would require a more extensive line of thought, perhaps even a separate paper. Traditionally, this emblematic Pilinszky poem has been read from entirely different angles: as an apocryphal text, in the apocalyptic register, as a verse of utter desolation and abandonment- or more recently, from a posthuman perspective.

[13] «Egy lírikus naplójából» (Pilinszky 1993, 226).

Haza akartam, hazajutni végül,
ahogy megjött ő is a Bibliában.
Irtóztató árnyam az udvaron.
Törődött csönd, öreg szülők a házban.
S már jönnek is, már hívnak is,
szegények már sírnak is, ölelnek
botladozva.
Visszafogad az ősi rend.
Kikönyöklök a szeles csillagokra –

Home – I wanted finally to get home –
to arrive as he in the Bible arrived.
My ghastly shadow in the courtyard.
Crushed silence, aged parents in the house.
And already they are coming, they are
calling me,
my poor ones, and already crying, and
embracing me, stumbling.
The ancient order opens to readmit me.
I lean out on the windy stars –

I would like to draw attention to several aspects that illuminate the interrelations between the Prodigal Son–narrative voice and the presence of elegy, anti-elegy, and self-elegy in Pilinszky's poetry. These include the internal fracture at the heart of the Gospel parable (Luke 15: 11-32)—a fracture that is also characteristic of what I have elsewhere referred to as the lyric of «ruptured evidences»—as well as the parable's multiply binary structure, its distinctly modern self-reflexivity, and its recurring motifs of exile, distance, tension, and estrangement. These elements are mirrored in the genre features of the elegy, and even more closely in those of the anti-elegy and self-elegy. Together, they form a shared internal space within Pilinszky's poetic world.

I am referring here to the binary tensions between a lost past and a disenchanted present, between the absent son and the elder brother who remained at home, or between exile and return. These are not merely thematic oppositions but also expressions of an experience of alienation in the present, of elemental loss and foundational negativity. In the elegy, this emerges as the absence of the past; in the Prodigal Son poems, as the absence of sonship itself—experienced as a crisis of understanding and conversion. In both cases, what occurs is a dismantling and rewriting of the original form or structure: whether it be the genre of the elegy or the biblical parable of the Prodigal Son, we witness processes of deconstruction and reconstruction alike.

Apocrypha represents one of the most striking examples in this respect as well. The often-quoted closing section, which evokes the parable of the Prodigal Son – ultimately reveals itself to be a false closure. The apparent fulfilment: *Visszafogad az ősi rend.* (*the ancient order opens to readmit me*) is

immediately followed by: *Kikönyöklök a szeles csillagokra* (*I lean out on the windy stars*). The verbal prefix *ki-* 'out' (lean out) and the metaphor of the windy stars both suggest that the Prodigal Son's return is not one of genuine completion. Rather, it is followed already followed in the very next moment, by a kind of existential drifting, a cosmic dislocation. And this is without yet addressing the poem's broader context or its ultimate horizon: the final lines

És könny helyett az arcokon a ráncok,	And instead of tears, the wrinkles on the faces
csorog alá, csorog az üres árok	Trickling, the empty ditch trickles down.

make it clear that the poem remains committed not to the resolution but to the preservation of the inner tension, fracture, and radical negativity that define the (anti-)elegiac and prodigal condition of being.

The deep and fundamental experience of negativity in Pilinszky's poetry, the sense of «absent presence» is inseparable from the elegiac pattern of unresolved and unresolvable inner division. This pattern extends from the poetics of silence to the experience of the *Deus absconditus*, and culminates in the extreme linguistic and stylistic bareness of his 1970s poetry, this elegiac pattern becomes increasingly expressed through paradox. «His silence is the silence of that moment on the cross, after the cry» – writes Ted Hughes (1976, IX).

Beginning with the volume *Harmadnapon* (1959, *On the Third Day*), Pilinszky's poetry embraces a brokenness that is not to be healed, but rather endured[14].

The anti- or self-elegiac position in Pilinszky's poetry and the Prodigal Son motif are connected by a series of shifts in emphasis and transformations that occur between the original or canonical form (the elegy, the Gospel parable) and their rewritten or modernized versions, foremost among them a heightened degree of self-reflexivity. As Pilinszky himself put it: «In the

[14] Cf. my first Pilinszky monograph (Szávai 2005) where I interpreted the famous parable as «a hermeneutical genre» (Theo Elm) in the context of Kafka's and Camus's work and its impact on Pilinszky's poetry.

light of the New Testament [...] I am the Prodigal Son, the penitent sinner, and the Pharisee all at once – and perhaps even simultaneously»[15].

The analogy, or rather the deeper connection, lies in the distance from the canonical, allegorical interpretation of the parable, in the apocryphal rethinking of the Judeo-Christian tradition, and in the (self-)reflexive detachment characteristic of the anti-elegy or self-elegy. Through these strategies, modern poetry marks a critical separation from the traditional forms of the genre.

2.5. «Once Paradise stood here»

The other basis for my reflection is one of the central symbols in Pilinszky's poetry: *Paradise*, which can likewise be interpreted within the context of elegy and/or the elegiac. This remains true even if the lost paradise in his poetry does not appear in the sense that the *topos* assumed from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century, nor even according to the conventions of classical modernity – let us say, of the Proustian variety. And yet, as a *par excellence* symbol of temporal reference and as a marker of *le temps perdu*, it does, in some sense, evoke the elegiac genre.

In the poem *Egy szép napon* (1971, *One day*), one of the most important late examples of the elegiac mode, this layer of meaning takes lyrical and linguistic form.

Mindíg az elhányt bádogkanalat,
a nyomorúság lim-lom tájait kerestem,
remélve, hogy egy szép napon
elönt a sírás, visszafogad szeliden
a régi udvar, otthonunk
borostyán csöndje, susogása.

All the time I've been looking for the lost
tin spoon, the bric-a-brac scenes of misery –
hoping that one day I'll be
deluged by tears and welcomed back gently
by the old yard, the silent,
whispering ivy of our home.

[15] Orig.: «Az Újszövetség fényében (…) én vagyok a tékozló fiú, a megtérő bűnös és a farizeus egyszemélyben, s még az is meglehet, hogy egyszerre» (Pilinszky 1993, 226).

Mindíg, mindíg is hazavágytam.	All my life, all the time I've been longing for home. (Translated by Katalin N. Ullrich16)

The title itself and its repetition in the third line refer to the eschatological dimension of the rehabilitation of the lost paradise. This semantic dimension, which connects the text's otherwise divergent strands of meaning is sustained by the image of the (old) courtyard/home as archetype, by the revelatory final sentence («all the time I've been longing for home»), as well as by the motifs of 'seeking' (*keresve*), 'hoping' (*remélve*), 'weeping' (*elönt a sírás*), 'being received again' (*visszafogad szelíden*) and the synesthesia of «the silent, whispering ivy» (*borostyán csöndje*), in which the eschatological sense of silence is complemented [...] by the association of the amber-colored brightness, evoking the color symbolism of the – already metaphorical – expression golden age.

This poem, conveying eschatological temporal orientation both in its Prodigal Son motif and its title, clearly marks the boundary where Pilinszky's poetry detaches itself from the elegiac tradition, namely through its eschatologically future-oriented vision. At the same time, the myth of the Golden Age remains a shared semantic space in the elegiac and anti-elegiac Prodigal poems alike: as a «contaminated» metaphor of the lost paradise of the (creaturely/filial) prodigal speech position and of the lost dimension of the past in the elegiac utterance.

Valamikor a paradicsom állt itt. Félálomban újuló fájdalom: hallani óriási fáit!	Once Paradise stood here. In half-sleep, the renewal of pain: to hear its gigantic trees.
Haza akartam, hazajutni végül, ahogy megjött ő is a Bibliában. Irtóztató árnyam az udvaron. Törődött csönd, öreg szülők a házban. (…)	Home – I wanted finally to get home – to arrive as he in the Bible arrived. My ghastly shadow in the courtyard. Crushed silence, aged parents in the house. (…)

[16] Cf. János Pilinszky, «Egy szép napon» in Babelmatrix. Babel Web Anthology. The Multilingual Literature Portal, <https://www.babelmatrix.org/works/hu/Pilinszky_János-1921/Egy_szép_napon> (08/2026, open access).

«Once Paradise stood here. In half-sleep, the renewal of pain: to hear its gigantic trees» – we read it in the well-known lines of *Apocrypha.* Insofar as paradise here is also «lost» and thereby enters the semantic domain of loss, the poem evokes one of the fundamental attributes of the elegiac genre.

The following passages of the poem also require close attention from the perspective of the elegiac position and its relation to the elegy as a genre:

Ismeritek az évek vonulását az évekét a gyűrött földeken? És értitek a mulandóság ráncát?, ismeritek törődött kézfejem? […]	Do you know the wandering of years, the years on the crumpled fields? And understand the wrinkles of transience, recognize it on wearied hands? […]
Csak most az egyszer szólhatnék veled, kit úgy szerettem. Év az évre, de nem lankadtam mondani, mit kisgyerek sír deszkarésbe, a már-már elfuló reményt, hogy megjövök és megtalállak. Torkomban lüktet közeled. Riadt vagyok, mint egy vadállat. […]	If only once I could talk to you, whom I loved so. Year after year I never tired of saying it, as a child cries into the crack of a fence the slowly suffocating hope that I would come and find you again. Your closeness throbs in my throat. I'm terrified like a wild animal. […]

Beyond the passage referring to paradise, the elegiac quality is arguably most fully realized in the following, well-known lines from the second stanza:

Sehol se vagy. Mily üres a világ. Egy kerti szék, egy kinnfeledt nyugágy. [...]	You are nowhere. How empty the world. A garden chair, a deckchair left out. [...]

The two subsequent lines, however, already extend into the third stanza, and in a sense prepare the ground for the gradual and marked dismantling of the elegiac register:

Éles kövek közt árnyékom csörömpöl. Fáradt vagyok, kimeredek a földből. [...]	My shadow clatters on sharp stones. I'm tired, rammed into the ground. [...]

The elegiac trajectory of the poem, together with any perspective of hope is thus dismantled in the third and final section: it turns into a «clattering shadow» and petrifies, becoming in the poet's words «like a stone»:

Akkorra én már mint a kő vagyok; halott redő, ezer rovátka rajza, egy jó tenyérnyi törmelék akkorra már a teremtmények arca.	By that I am like a stone, Dead crinkle skin, drawing of a thousand groves, by that the face of the creatures are a good handful of gravel stones.
És könny helyett az arcokon a ráncok, csorog alá, csorog az üres árok.	Wrinkles on the face for tears, Empty furrows dripping, dripping instead of tears.

The modern and contemporary elegiac poet thus turns against the cultural tradition of the past and its poetic conventions. From my perspective, Jahan Ramazani's (1994, 135) notion of «form's central perplexity» (in relation to Yeats) is especially illuminating: the poem manifests itself primarily in its self-reflexivity, which arises from the tension between the lyric voice and the absence it articulates. This tension constitutes the very core of the self-elegy.

> The self-elegy, whether implicitly or explicitly, always rests on the question of the relationship between the poet and their own poetic work. Unlike the traditional form of elegy, which functions as a memento, a sign that the lost subject is not forgotten, the self-elegy is inherently proleptic and forward-looking, and as such, remains uncertain about its own status as a memorial. (Sorum 2012, 93)

This is a particularly difficult question in the case of Pilinszky, as the KZ-poetry (concentration camp poetry) can, on the one hand, be regarded as a kind of aesthetic act of memorialization. In this respect, the famous KZ poems [e.g., *Harbach 1944* or *Francia fogoly* (*The French Prisoner*) and *Frankfurt*] clearly belong to this category – to the extent that this corpus, in certain textual moments, evokes the genre of the traditional elegy. To this must be added everything Pilinszky says about Auschwitz in prose, which had an extraordinary impact on subsequent generations, and not least on Imre Kertész. It should also be noted that, historically, elegy is in close generic affinity with the epitaph.

> Auschwitz is a museum today. Within its walls lies the past—and in a certain sense, the past of all of us. Precisely because it has come to an end, it has become even more real, even more valid. Our most familiar objects, the everyday instruments of our civilization—down to the last discarded tin spoon—underwent here a metamorphosis never seen before. [...] Blows and abrasions, which we have hardly attempted to decipher. Yet these are the letters of the century; these are the typographies of the age. [...]

> All that happened here is a scandal, insofar as it could happen, and unexceptionally sacred, insofar as it did. (Pilinszky 1993, 132)

These are the well-known lines from the essay *Ars poetica helyett* (1970, Instead of Ars Poetica). The following passages, however, also highlight Pilinszky's sharp critique of humanism, and the anti-elegiac position that stems from it:

> The humanum cannot do anything against something which happened in the past. The maximum one can do is to reach it only with the illusion of memory. [...] I would call this disposition of the religious soul—so akin to the immovable reality of the past—*engagement immobile*, motionless commitment. And in a related sense, what else is art but *engagement immobile*, a motionless commitment, a total devotion? (ivi, 133)

At the same time, Pilinszky's conception of the historical *zero point* also possesses a distinctly *proleptic* quality: «Auschwitz is a museum today [...] these are the emblems of the century». With this statement, he situates the historical, ethical, and aesthetic imperative of «poetry as testimony» within a framework that actively undermines its own claim to monumentality. In the manner of the modern anti-elegy, it aligns with the twentieth-century culture's anti-commemorative turn, as well as with the critique of museum culture and realist mimesis. (Spargo 2010, 427)

Even within a single poem, this paradox is evident in KZ poems: the memento-like poetic gesture of «You bear witness without speech» (*Némán, némán is reánkvallasz*)[17] gives way to the *anti-commemorative*, *anti-realist* (or even *anti-mimetic*) declaration of «on the third day he triumphed over death. / Et resurrexit tertia die» (*Harmadnapra legyőzte a halált. / Et resurrexit tertia die.*) (*On the Third Day*, translated by Katalin N. Uhlrich) which can be read as a radical critique of culture through the idea of Auschwitz as museum.

And the deeper reason behind all this, of course, is to be found in the sacred, mystical horizon of Pilinszky's poetry, already eschatologically oriented in his famous volume, *On the Third Day*, and in his later formulation that poetry, and indeed art as such, is of a fundamentally religious nature.

[17] Cf. *On the Wall of a KZ Lager*, translated by Clive Wilmer and George Gömöri (Pilinszky 2008).

Finally, I would like to draw attention to one more generic horizon that may be worth further reflection. When Pilinszky adopts the elegiac poetic position in his camp poems, one may also speak of an Orphic stance within that mode. Research into the genre history of the elegy attributes special significance to the Orpheus narrative. From Rilke to the present day, Orphic poetry has been regarded as one of the *par excellence* forms of elegiac lyrical discourse, inasmuch as Orpheus may be seen as the exemplary figure of the mourning poet, the embodiment of poetic language itself. Speaking in the voice of Orpheus, the elegiac poet appears before the reader as both a cultural hero and a communal spokesperson. But this would already be the subject of another paper.

Instead of conclusion, I quote Paul Ricœur (1950, 422): «Seule la poésie – l'élégie – peut par la magie du verbe purifier le lamento du corps et guider la réflexion sur la contingence du vivant» («Only poetry—elegy—can, through the magic of the word, cancel the lamentation of the body and guide the reflection upon the contingency of the living»).

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