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## The Tree of Orpheus

Rilke - Keyes - Nemes Nagy

Da stieg ein Baum. O reine Übersteigung!  
O Orpheus singt! O hoher Baum im Ohr!  
Und alles schwieg. Doch selbst in der Verschweigung  
ging neuer Anfang, Wink und Wandlung vor<sup>1</sup>.

A tree grows in the first piece of Rilke's *Sonette an Orpheus* - the sprout of poetry, indicating the genesis of a revived, attentively listening world. How shall this image be interpreted? Tree is a cosmogonic symbol that contains the promise of recurring leafing, cyclical return. As the tree of the world (*arbor mundi*), it separates, connects and keeps the subterranean, terrestrial and celestial spheres (~ *axis mundi*). In the Bible it is an image with an eschatological connotation: the paradisiac tree of life appears in Revelations as the one that grows under the throne of the Lamb. Yet it is not these representational aspects of the symbol that help us to understand its role in the context of poetry-silence-genesis as it appears in Rilke's poem, but its character: the dynamic complexity by which it comprises both earth and sky, beginning and end, change and permanence. Rilke's tree is an "excess" (*Übersteigung*) - the primordial vitality that lies in the touch of Orpheus's song. The proto-image of poetry: a figure that constantly disperses and collects its meanings.

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<sup>1</sup> "There grew a tree. Oh, pure excess! / Oh, Orpheus is singing! Oh, tall tree in the ear! / And everything kept silent. But in the silence itself / there was new beginning, signalling and changing."  
Translated by me - T. Sz.

Thus it would not be amiss to examine it further according to the considerations of the discourse on metaphorical language.

Paul Ricoeur points out in his analysis, that the metaphorical motion is multilateral, it interrupts the literal sense of the statement but this is exactly why it is able to perform a "semantic innovation" and thus redefine - poetically - reality:

To summarize, poetic language is no less *about* reality than any other use of the language but refers to it by the means of a complex strategy which implies, as an essential component, a suspension and seemingly an abolition of the ordinary reference attached to descriptive language. This suspension, however, is only the negative condition of a second-order reference, of an indirect reference built on the ruins of the direct reference. This reference is called second-order reference only with respect to the primacy of the reference of ordinary language. For, in another respect, it constitutes the primordial reference to the extent that it suggests, reveals, unconceals - or whatever you say - the deep structures of reality to which we are related as mortals who are born into this world and who  *dwell*  in it for a while.<sup>2</sup>

Deconstruction, exploration and innovation are in progress simultaneously in the metaphorical motion - one might say that it is this tense and forceful nature of language that appears as a high-reaching tree in the *First Sonnet*. Rilke here interweaves the act of listening (referring to reception) with the subsiding into silence triggered by the poetic language that breaks through reality, and with the attentiveness that turns toward the tension and interdependence within the metaphor. We have to hear from its silence what poetry conceals and reveals (or, concealingly reveals) to us.

Nietzsche in his criticism of language (which gave a substantial inspiration to the modern polemics on metaphor) considers those metaphors that are deprived of their freedom, artistry and uniqueness and have "codified" referents as the building bricks of conceptual thinking:

Das Übersehen des Individuellen und Wirklichen gibt uns den Begriff wie es uns auch die Form gibt, wohingegen die Natur keine Formen und Begriffe, also auch keine Gattungen kennt, sondern nur ein für uns unzugängliches und undefinierbares X. [...] Was ist also Wahrheit? Ein

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<sup>2</sup> Ricoeur, Paul: "The Metaphorical Process As Cognition, Imagination and Feeling" in: Mark Johnson, ed.: *Philosophical Perspectives on Metaphor*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1981, 240.

bewegliches Heer von Metaphern, Metonymien, Anthropomorphismen, kurz eine Summe von menschlichen Relationen, die, poetisch und rhetorisch gesteigert, übertragen, geschmückt wurden und die nach langem Gebrauch einem Volke fest, kanonisch und verbindlich dünken...<sup>3</sup>

But there is, according to Nietzsche, an attitude which can keep the freshness of the unique "sensory first impression"<sup>4</sup> and which does not establish the duality of dream/wakefulness - that of Hellenism. The myth of Orpheus reveals even the danger of sinking into dream, the risk the "artistically creative" individual takes when he/she dares resort to the metaphor and thus is able to get through to the vivacity and fruitfulness prior to canonization. That is why the world germinates to the song of Orpheus.

The mythic figure of Orpheus is, by itself - similarly to the image of the tree - a link between separate spheres. His song binds the nether world with the sky, reconciles the wild and the tame. Moreover, he is the mediator between Apollo and Dionysos<sup>5</sup>. Modernity attached autoreferentiality to the notion of orphic poetry, labelled it as "poetry thinking itself"<sup>6</sup>, which is obviously the matter of language-use - according to Robert McGahey, in Mallarmé's works language itself functions as a myth<sup>7</sup>. In the *First Sonnet* autoreferentiality appears with the metaphor. The song of Orpheus enters the world by the sweep of the metaphor, and this is what the tree marks, the high-reaching monument of the instant when the world found the way to its own beginning through poetry. But what happens to the tree of Orpheus further on? In other words: how, and with what modifications does this concept (comprising language-use, poetry and thinking) appear in the works of two poets, Ágnes Nemes Nagy and Sidney Keyes, who were greatly influenced by Rilke? This essay can be considered as a "reader's experiment", for the idea of comparison was in fact suggested by Nemes Nagy, for whom the English poet was very important,

<sup>3</sup> Neglecting the individual and the real gives us the notion, as well as the form, whereas nature knows no forms or notions, and therefore no species, only an X unapproachable and indefinable for us. [...] What is therefore truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms, in short a sum of human relations which become poetically and rhetorically intensified, decorated and furnished with figurative sense, and seem, after a long usage to a nation fixed, canonic and binding...". Translated by me - T. Sz. Nietzsche, Friedrich: "Über Wahrheit und Lüge im aussermoralischen Sinn" in: *Werke*. München-Wien: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1980. 5. Bd. 313-314.

<sup>4</sup> Nietzsche 315.

<sup>5</sup> See McGahey's *Introduction* to McGahey, Robert: *The Orphic Moment*. Albany: SUNY Press, 1994.

<sup>6</sup> McGahey quoting Sewell's expression in *Introduction*.

<sup>7</sup> McGahey 4.

not so much for poetic as personal reasons<sup>8</sup>, one of which was that both of them admired Rilke's works. I believe that the experience of such an experiment may also lead to a better understanding of the modes of tradition and influence.

Reading Rilke's *First Sonnet* we did not find an exclusive meaning that could be doubtlessly attached to the image of the tree. It proved to be a more fruitful method to set all our knowledge attached to *the tree* in motion. We have faced a *hermetic* sign, which carries the openness of the meaning all the way to autoreferentiality. Gábor Schein describes hermetic poetry as follows:

[...] a nyelvi jel többértelműségének, meghatározatlanságának és nyitottságának igyekszik az értelmi egységen belül a legnagyobb hatóerőt biztosítani úgy, hogy a nyelv ne a pusztá reprezentáció eszközéül szolgáljon, hanem valódi létfunkcióra tegyen szert.<sup>9</sup>

In other words, hermetic signs start a metaphorical motion (of undefined direction) and thus - referring to something *else* - their meaning is being constantly expanded. Rilke's objective poetry aims to provide objects (*Dinge*) the possibility of this extension through art. The object, as a linguistic entity, receives a share of the wideness, liveliness and veracity of the metaphor. Thus Rilke's poems tighten the connection between seeing and creative artistic vision. The transformation of the object takes place within the endless dynamism of the metaphorical process, as Péter Pór says, during the shift (*Wendung*) into an "orphanic formation".

[...] a materiális létezőnek végig kell vinnie ugyan az átváltozás nagyon is erőszakos aktusát, a folyamat végén azonban mégsem tűnik el (szimbolista értelemben), és nem is mozog és változik tovább korlátlan szabadsággal

<sup>8</sup> Ágnes Nemes Nagy says in an interview about Keyes: "I first met his name in an English brochure which reviewed English war-time poetry. It immediately struck me, it caught my eyes that his date of birth was the same as mine. It struck me and somehow, half consciously I began to have the impression that I might have something to do with this poet, that - maybe I can word it in such a way - he died instead of me. [...] The fate and figure of Keyes [...] could take upon itself the whole problem of war. It could also take upon itself the survivor's qualms of conscience that I felt, all that one who stays alive undergoes after the cataclysm of the war." Translated by me - T. Sz. Nemes Nagy, Ágnes: *A magasság vágya*. Budapest: Magvető, 1989. 470-481.

<sup>9</sup> It "tries to provide the biggest impulse for the ambiguity, undefinedness and openness of the linguistic sign within the unit of sense, in a way that language would not serve as a mere means of representation, but would obtain a real vital function." Translated by me - T. Sz. Schein, Gábor: "A hermetizmus fogalmáról és poétikájáról" *Literatúra* 2/1995, 194.

(avantgardisztikus értelemben), hanem léte új megerősítést nyer, és a művi tárgyban beteljesül; látszólagos modell-léte mitopoétikus változáson megy át, és valódi, azaz költői léte jelenvaló marad a végső *orfikus alakzatban*.<sup>10</sup>

This linguistic-poetic concept produces also the metaphor of itself, the *Weltinnenraum*, the - literally - world-inner-space of the self, which is the tense metaphorical field. Thus Rilke furnishes the attitude characteristic of Nietzsche's "artistically creative" individual with the idea of space:

Durch alle Wesen reicht der *eine* Raum:  
Weltinnenraum. Die Vögel fliegen still  
durch uns hindurch. O, der ich wachsen will,  
ich seh hinaus und *in* mir wächst der Baum.  
(*Es winkt zu Föhlung...*)<sup>11</sup>

This space of cognition through the metaphor is, at last, the room of self-cognizance, of meeting ourselves. Facing the hermetic sign, the reader constitutes its meaning out of his/herself, his/her feelings. Thus the interpretation demands a kind of openness from us, which is nearly unaccomplishable for our hearts - says Gadamer in connection with the angelic figures of the *Elegies*.

Es ist also eine höchste Möglichkeit des menschlichen Herzens selber, die hier als Engel angerufen wird - eine Möglichkeit, vor der es versagt, die es nicht zu leisten vermag, weil den Menschen vieles bedingt und zur Eindeutlichkeit und uneingeschränkten Hingabe an sein Föhlen unfähig macht.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Though the material entity must carry out the rather violent act of metamorphosis, it does not disappear in the end of the process (in the symbolist sense) and does not move and change further with unlimited freedom (in the avantgardistic sense) but its existence gains new affirmation and it becomes accomplished in the artistic object, its illusory, model-like existence goes through a mythopoetical change, that is, its poetic existence remains present in the final *orfic formation*." Translated by me - T. Sz. Pör, Péter: "Az orfikus alakzat" *Holmi* 9/95, 1295.

<sup>11</sup> The *only* space spans all the existences:/ Weltinnenraum. The birds fly silently/ through us. Oh, whatever I want to grow into/ I look it out and the tree grows *in* me." Translated by me - T. Sz.

<sup>12</sup> It is the greatest possibility of the human heart itself that is being evoked here as an angel - a possibility it fails to realize, one that it is unable to accomplish, because many things make the person dependent and unable to give himself up to his feelings unboundedly." Translated by me - T. Sz. Gadamer, Hans Georg: "Mythopoetische Umkehrung in Rilke's Duineser Elegien" in: *Kleinere Schriften*. Thübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1967. 197.

It is therefore the lack of understanding with which this poetry plays a dangerous game - as full of risk as Orpheus's descent was to the nether world.

Metaphorization in Rilke's poetry leads us to a deeper understanding of *application* - the use and usage of a poetic text, and to the task of "hermeneutic self-purification"<sup>13</sup>, which is the recognition of man's original creativity and of the possibility that lies within the world.

Was haben wir seit Anbeginn erfahren,  
als daß sich eins im anderen erkennt?

(*Es winkt zu Fühlung...*)<sup>14</sup>

After having the basic features of Rilke's hermetism sketched, let us now seek traces of it in one of Sidney Keyes's poems, *The Gardener*:

If you will come on such a day  
As this, between the pink and yellow lines  
Of parrot-tulips, I will be your lover.  
My boots flash, as they beat the silly gravel.  
O come, this is your day.

Were you to lay your hand like a veined leaf  
Upon my square-cut hand, I would caress  
The shape of it and that would be enough.  
I note the greenfly working in the rose.  
Time slips between my fingers like a leaf.

Do you resemble the silent, pale-eyed angels  
That follow children? Is your face a flower?  
The lovers and the beggars leave the park -  
And still you will not come. The gates are closing.

O it is terrible to dream of angels.

In the context of unfulfilled waiting, the closure of Keyes's poem (evoking Rilke's *Elegies*: "Ein jeder Engel ist schrecklich") with its despairing tone compresses the

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<sup>13</sup> Gadamer 209.

<sup>14</sup> What else have we learnt since the beginning/ than that one recognizes oneself in the other?"  
Translated by me - T. Sz.

most that can be said about angels - that one is only able to dream of them, which is a "terrible" and unspeakable experience. Poetry cannot break through the ineffability of the encounter. The text is built on oppositions, this also indicating the impossibility of meeting: the conditional suggests that the gulf between the speaker and the addressee, reality and dream is unbridgeable. This results in the uncertainty and emptiness of the speaker's world - since the Other, who would constitute meaning in it, is absent. It is the Other, who might intelligibly measure the time of the *I*: in solitude such efforts fail ("O come, this is your day" - "Time slips between my fingers like a leaf").

On the level of signs this loss of meaning appears as the dissemination of canonic symbols. The garden cannot represent man's original home any more, and this affects also the title, which thus can be seen as ironic. The traditional concept of man being a gardener is an affirmation of man's creative ability (that of *cultivation*), but in Keyes's poem the creative drive is frustrated. The sense of failure in the text is concentrated in the absence of the tree: there should be a tree somewhere in the garden, a tree of life or time from which the leaves so dominantly present in stanza two must have fallen. But the poem stresses not only those potentialities of hermetism that result in the interruption of the meaning-formation but also the ability of the poetic sign to widen its sense and thus open new ways for the interpretation, as it happens, most outstandingly, in stanza three, in which the ungraspable nature of the angelic *Thou* is highlighted by questions organized around metaphors containing hermetically functioning signs.

What we have got to know is that angels no longer give us the possibility of recognizing the highest potentiality of our hearts. The closure makes it evident that the poem presents a post-Rilkean, interrogating, seeking, lamenting state of existence. Dissemination remarks on the final loss of a central poetic vision as well as the loss of the artist's mission, and thus it reinterprets the tradition dedicated to the creation of an organic world. Apart from Rilke there was another poetic mode that influenced Keyes's poetry: Keyes in all probability managed to redefine the Rilkean heritage from the viewpoint of Yeats's mythical symbolism. Its most outstanding example is *The Wilderness*, a long poem Keyes wrote two months before his death. This piece is about man's way into his interior, into a deserted land, where the void is produced by the consuming fire. And - in what can be seen as a reflection on Yeats's *Byzantium*-poems - poetry emerges in the fire as a "metal bird" singing in the flames. It is in the very heart of the absence where Keyes places the symbol of immortal art. This speaks again about the emptiness that removes art

from the artist and tells us that the god-like creator of the "artifice of eternity" has fallen out of his role. The Nietzschean creativity functions here only in the dream, in the vision; dream and vision are "terrible", however, because they cannot be articulated.

The closure of *The Gardener* also contains a reflexion on the Yeatsian tradition. The text suggests that dreaming is the only possibility for existing within the reach of angels and then, at this very point, the poem comes to an unexpected halt. The promise lying in the dream is not being fulfilled and this makes poetry become mute. That is, art has lost connection even with the inspiring, revelative trance, with the concept Yeats worded as follows: "I think that in the making and in the understanding of a work of art [...] we are lured to the threshold of sleep"<sup>15</sup>, or, "I believe [...] in the vision of truth in the depths of the mind when the eyes are closed"<sup>16</sup>.

Yet, the wonderful third section of *The Gardener* with its choppy questions predestined to remain unanswerable presents the final potentiality of poetry, a fragile lyric music, able to - as Keyes puts it in *The Wilderness* - "speak for all those who have lost the gardens,/ Forgotten the singing, yet dare not find the desert" (*The Wilderness*).

Nemes Nagy Ágnes: *Fák*

Tanulni kell. A téli fákat.  
Ahogyan talpig zúzmarásak.  
Mozdíthatatlan függönyök.

Meg kell tanulni azt a sávot,  
hol a kristály már füstölög,  
és ködbe úszik át a fa,  
akár a test emlékezetbe.

És a folyót a fák mögött,  
vadkacsa néma szárnyait,  
s a vakfehér, néma éjszakát,  
melyben csuklyás tárgyak állnak,

<sup>15</sup> Yeats, W. B.: *Essays and Introductions*. London: Macmillan, 1974. 157.

<sup>16</sup> Yeats 28.



meg kell tanulnunk itt a fák  
kimondhatatlan tetteit.<sup>17</sup>

Nemes Nagy's poem is built on a net of ethical imperatives ("Tanulni kell" - "Meg kell tanulni" - "meg kell tanulni"), and this would - on principle - imply a modality with fixed referents based on dualities. But this modality does not come into being in the text, it is crushed already in the first line by the incongruence between the two sentences ("Tanulni kell" - "A téli fákat."). How can the poem still present a demand for positive ethical quality? The image of the winter trees goes through a gradual change in the opening stanza: first it is furnished with an adjective ("zúzmarásak"), and finally in the third line it reaches metaphorization: "mozdíthatatlan függönyök". The object of the ethical ambition is therefore the metaphor itself, which, as a modality, aims at affinity and communion, but these - according to the closure - belong to the sphere of the inexpressible. The heroism of this attitude is that it tries to speak about the unspeakable and see the invisible (the "whiteblind" night and the "hooded", that is, *covered* objects). Though the cognitive mind fails, it does not give up and this behaviour supplies it the metaphor. "E költészet számára a világ egyfelől mozdíthatatlan függöny, amely elfedi a lét igazságát, másfelől benne nyilvánul meg a tapasztalhatatlan igazságból fakadó etikum."<sup>18</sup> In this paradoxical situation "learning" does not mean an accomplishable activity but constant labour, endeavour and concern.

The second section of the poem evokes the Rilkean *Wendung*. It is the process of metaphorization, the dynamism of the transsubstantiation is where the truth of existence reveals itself; here, however, revelation is simultaneous with the threatening eventuality of dissolution. This poem seeks and learns revelation on the border of Nothing. ("Meg kell tanulni azt a sávot,/ hol a kristály már füstölög,/ és ködbe úszik át a fa,/ akár a test emlékezetbe.") Learning - in the words of Rilke's Malte - is the studying of seeing in the physical sense - the insight into the Rilkean communion of those which exist. But this communion comes into being only in the last, beautiful moment, when the steaming crystal, the tree swimming into mist and

<sup>17</sup> One must learn. The winter trees./ As they are hoarfrosted to the sole./ Unmovable curtains./ One must learn the zone/ where the crystal steams/ and the tree dissolves into mist/ as the body into memory./ And the river behind the trees/ the mute wings of the wild duck/ and the whiteblind, blue night/ in which hooded objects are standing,/ one must learn here the trees'/ inexpressible deeds." Translated by me - T. Sz.

<sup>18</sup> For this poetry the world is, on the one hand, an unmovable curtain that conceals the truth of existence, and on the other, it is where the ethics arising from the inexperienceable truth is manifested." Translated by me - T. Sz. Schein, Gábor: *Nemes Nagy Agnes költészete*. Budapest: Belvárosi, 1995. 70.

the perishing body of the person blend into one, unifying metaphor. The fragile, glimmering, misty text regains a territory from the unspeakable.

Applying tradition to their own life-world (*Lebenswelt*) Nemes Nagy and Keyes produced different interpretations of Rilke's poetry. Keyes's poem presents a reception of the heritage that emphasizes the artistic cosmos and the role of its creator by reflecting on the absence of these entities with the means of hermetism - by indicating the limits of the speakable. The tree of Orpheus, that holds the firmament of poetry, does not appear in *The Gardener*, only its falling leaves. The poem explores its own borders - to "caress/ The shape of it and that would be enough".

For Nemes Nagy, Rilke's poetry offers a possibility of bridging man's separatedness from the world. Her poem exalts the metaphor as the means of it because of its potential for exploring reality. Her winter trees become the trees of poetry through their physical reality, in the ethics of the human glance and through the creative ability of language.

Both interpretations of Rilke's poetry are justified by the manner the hermetic tradition applies the metaphor. The divergence between the two, however, seems to represent a split of the unified vision offered by Rilke: it might be said that while Rilke's Orpheus was sure that he could realize the opportunities of both gods combined in him, Keyes inclines to explore his Dionysian features (dream, vision, poetic ecstasy) and carries them to their utmost limits, while Nemes Nagy's poetic temperament defines his Apollonian aspects (cognition, ethics, poetry of the open eyes) and thus appoints poetry the way of authentic existence.

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