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The glow of existence enclosed in language

The dialogue between Dezső Kosztolányi and Martin Heidegger in the playground of poetic and philosophical interpretation of existence

- teză de doctorat -

SUMMARY

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KEYWORDS

ontology, poetics, hermeneutics, psychology, das Man, Dasein, death, existence, aletheia, child, time, play

SUMMARY

The aim of my research can be defined according to four - interrelated - aspects: ontological, poetic, psychological and hermeneutical views. The interconnection of these four strands is based on the hypothesis that, on the one hand, we will better understand certain lyric poetry if we read it from the perspective of philosophy, and, on the other hand, that the „poetic word” can also help us to understand certain philosophical theories insofar as it presents philosophical problems in an intensely emotional context.

In order to create a framework to my study, I have chosen the beginning of the 20th century as the focus of my research in terms of time and Central Europe (more precisely, Germany, Austria and Hungary). This choice led me to Sigmund Freud, Martin Heidegger and the Hungarian poet

Dezső Kosztolányi, which also narrowed the scope of my analysis. My research area eventually was developed around the Freudian psychoanalysis, Heideggerian fundamental ontology, and Dezső Kosztolányi's volume of poetry entitled, *The Complaints of a Poor Little Child (A szegény kisgyermek panasza)*.

The dissertation explores the dialogues of Dezső Kosztolányi's book of poems, *The Complaints of the Poor Little Child*, with Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis, Martin Heidegger's philosophy of existence, and Hans Georg Gadamer's hermeneutic interpretation of art.

Starting from the premise that works of fiction do not have only one possible interpretation, since they are 'fictional' texts that emerge through a free play of possibilities, and therefore no single reading can be considered definitive, I proposed to analyse Kosztolányi's poems from the perspective of Heidegger's philosophy of existence. I used Freud's psychoanalysis to understand the psychological content revealed by existential questions. The playing field thus created was delimited by means of Gadamerian hermeneutics.

I think that the comparative method is a good way to approach the research topic because, in my opinion, the interplay between the different disciplines can reveal new connections that would otherwise remain hidden. As István Fried puts it, as regards the justification of the comparative method: „... we never have a single text in our hands, but texts that are relevant here and that we can relate to for the sake of better understanding” (Fried 2012: 27).

In the first three chapters, the aspects, concepts, theoretical and philosophical assumptions of the investigation are presented, looking for the points of intersection that organize the theses of psychoanalysis, Heideggerian fundamental ontology, hermeneutics and Kosztolányi's conception of art into consistent forms. These introductory, methodological chapters discuss the ideas of Sigmund Freud, Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer.

In this part of the thesis, I came to the issue of taboos through Freudian psychoanalysis by exploring the reasons for the repression of the death theme in Heidegger's conceptual framework. Subsequently, the notion of conscience was discussed by examining the contents of the unconscious, which I analysed comparatively on the basis of Freud's and Heidegger's interpretation. Then, by looking into the possibility of these repressed contents coming to the surface, I arrived at the psychology of the Freudian joke technique, which, in my opinion, can be related to the Heideggerian concept of *aletheia*, as well as to Gadamer's conception of art.

Since, for the sake of clarity, these themes were presented separately, I summarised the results at the end of the theoretical section and also highlighted how these sub-areas are organised into a coherent whole. This section is followed by the longest chapter, which has the same title as the subtitle of the whole dissertation. This is a comparison of Heidegger's philosophical and Kosztolányi's poetic texts, but the broader theoretical background outlined in the introductory chapters remains perceptible as an interpretative horizon. The chapter first summarizes in separate subsections Heidegger's teaching on the idea of finality, which is the focus of the interpretation, and discusses the whole volume in general, then the existential-ontological perspective of Kosztolányi's poetry, and then turns to the five poems of the volume that are considered to be key poems for the analysis.

I have analysed these five poems of the volume on the basis of the Heideggerian terminology indicated in the titles of the subsections, which, in my opinion, covers all the topics that are indispensable for an interpretation of existence based on Heideggerian fundamental ontology.

Since, in my understanding, Heidegger's philosophical system is organised around the concept of death, and Kosztolányi's confessions also show that his poetry springs from the depths of death: „My flowers reach their roots into the grave.” (Kosztolányi 1998: 822), I decided to analyse the volume up to the poem *O Death... (Ó a halál)*, and then tried to find an answer to the question of what makes the child, who plays a central role in the volume, a privileged being.

The poems analyses are followed by two chapters dealing with important theoretical and contemporary-historical issues. These chapters examine the child, as discovered in 20th-century psychoanalysis and then in reform pedagogies, from the perspective of the Gadamerian concept of play, in order to point out, through a hermeneutic of the mode of being of the work of art, the existential seriousness of play and the importance of poetic language, which also becomes 'the house of being' by virtue of its power to escape the ordinary. In connection with this question, the notion of play, which is intrinsic to the child, emerged, which I first tried to define with reference to Huizinga, and then, in the analysis of Kosztolányi's poem that begins with *The Play*, I also tried to explore its deeper meaning. It is from this perspective that two more poems *The Poor Little Child's Complaints*, *The Game and Go*, *Little Child*, analysed.

In the analysis of the poem that closes the volume, I reflected on why Kosztolányi has to say goodbye to the little child. This scene also raised the question of who this child really is for

Kosztolányi: a memory, a role, or both, or neither? It is in pursuit of this question that I have carried out a comparative analysis in the following chapter, which, in contrast to the widespread interpretations, points to the poetic bravura that emerges from the assertion of Heidegger's point of view. Similarly to Heidegger, Kosztolányi does not operate a linear concept of time in the vulgar sense, thus the very being of the child required reinterpretation. The assumption that a particular concept of time is at work in this volume is justified by the aim of the opening poem, *As One Who Fell Between the Rails* (Mint aki a sínek közé esett), to capture for a moment that is eternal. In contrast to the linear notion of time in everyday terms, in my reading, the world created by the volume, the aspect of time that is presented, is expressed in the ecstatic present developed in Heidegger's analysis of Dasein. This ecstatic present, which replaces the linear notion of time in the vulgar sense, creates a playground that moves its readers out of their everyday mode of being. In my interpretation, the recollection of events from childhood is only the starting point of the volume, but at this level the miracle does not yet happen. Here we have only facts, about which Kosztolányi's mother talks about to Jr. Endre Kuban: „As a very small child, he became acquainted with suffering, illness and the fear of death at an early age... His childhood was a constant struggle with illness and death” (Kosztolányi 2001: 243). After these past memories, however, when the same event is mentioned in connection with poetry, the author uses present tense, „I see the poems about suffering, I see the good doctor standing there with a coffee spoon full of medicine in his hand beside the child's bed” (Kosztolányi 2001: 243). I consider this remark very important because I think that the miracle or creative power of poetic language, as Gadamer puts it, is that it produces an enrichment in being, by making what shines out as beauty in the poem, present. The doctor in the poem, for example, is not the same as the doctor who stood at the child's bedside years before, but an idealised doctor whom Kosztolányi places in the playground created by the poem so that he stands before us in his own presence, whenever we read the poem. This is what makes Kosztolányi's created world eternal, which exists in the mode of eternal presentness, excluding the other two components of the linear concept of time: the past and the future. The poetic feat of playing with the passage of time was, in my opinion, achieved in Kosztolányi's poetry by shaping the characters and sets of the volume, i.e. all the props of the playground are created by the poetic word, from the eternal, deep and true human feelings and moods that emerge from his existential question. This thought came to me explicitly when I came across the following introductory sentence in Ferenc Virágh's account of his visit to Dezső Kosztolányi: „Dezső

Kosztolányi is one of the great trio of modern Hungarian literature of the twentieth century. Of the three, Ady is the eruptive force stirred up with instinctive ferocity and great fervour, Babits is the unsurpassable, great intellect, and Kosztolányi is the man of moods and emotions. The mood is dominant with him, he gives us everything through his mood.” (Kosztolányi 2001: 211) This is why he is unable to talk about experiences when asked by journalists, because, as he himself puts it, „I cannot tell you an experience! To ask a writer for an experience is the strangest thing. Because the writer is the poorest in experience... by writing he has surgically removed everything from himself. It is like asking a beggar for money...” (Kosztolányi 2018: 117).

Even Gabriella Hima, when examining the specificity of Kosztolányi's works, concludes that there is a very strong attraction to existential questions of man: Kosztolányi was preoccupied with the mysteries, possibilities and limits of existence, existential lows and crises, and above all, Hima says, with the problem of life without perspective, situation in which neither individual effort nor any possible change in external, social conditions can help... He was deeply aware of this ontological attitude. He formulated his literary objective as follows: „I want to be a writer who is banging on the gate of existence” (cf. Hima 1992: 12). Another important similarity between Heidegger's and Kosztolányi's conceptions of existence is that both of them consider the question of death to be a key problem, but neither of them is concerned with the question of what death is or what happens after death, but rather with the question of preparing for death.

For Heidegger, death is the possibility of attaining the true man (Dasein) in the sense of *aletheia*, which he defines as the most sacred, irrelevant and insurmountable possibility (cf. Heidegger 1989: par. 50). In the Kornél Esti short story, Kosztolányi says, „No, about death I do not know what it is, and so I do not care about it, but dying. That is my business. I have to take care of it someday. It is the only serious task of every man. The only test...” (Kosztolányi 1973: 51-52).

Thus, like for Heidegger, death for Kosztolányi does not simply mean the cessation of existence, but it is itself part of life, and that is why it can become a key concept in the interpretation of existence for both thinkers. Tolstoy's narrative of Ivan Ilyich's death, referred to in paragraph 51 of Heidegger's *Being and Time*, may have played a key role in the crystallisation of this idea, and Kosztolányi puts it as follows: „only he who is about to leave can truly see the world” (cf. Hima 1992: 35).

In my interpretation, Kosztolányi was therefore not a time traveller, but made an inner journey in which he stripped himself of all roles and reached the bare human reality, which was realised in the presentation of the true man in the sense of *aletheia*, through the creative power of the poetic word. It was the path that led him to the poor little child whose existential burden weighs on all readers, but no one is able to lift this weight from the shoulders of those who follow. All that can be done, and that was the aim of my dissertation, is to integrate the eternal, true human questions addressed to us by the poems into a philosophical discourse that goes on into infinity.

The final thematic chapter, before summarising the results of the thesis, compares my interpretation of Kosztolányi's work, as formulated in the previous chapters of the thesis, with the perspective of a Hungarian secondary school teacher's manual and a Romanian Hungarian textbook. The idea of the chapter is based on the fact that teaching aids of similar genres are good documents of the established approach of a certain period, of the canonized interpretation of a literary work.

The aim of my dissertation was to create, within the framework of a so-called game of self-knowledge, a specific investigation of Dezső Kosztolányi's poetic world, which would bring about an encounter with existence under the aegis of Heideggerian fundamental ontology.

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