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**Western and Eastern Existentialism: Lyric Ontology of János
Pilinszky and Slavko Mihalić**

Dans mon travail, j'entreprends de mettre en parallèle la vision philosophique qui se dessine dans les romans, drames et essais de Camus et l'ontologie que nous pouvons retrouver dans les poèmes de János Pilinszky et de Slavko Mihalić, deux auteurs remarquables de la poésie centre-européenne d'inspiration existentialiste, tout en me focalisant sur la position du sujet, sur la construction de son entourage spatial, et sur la relation qu'il entretient avec les autres sujets et la transcendance.

Camus was able to develop an ontology exclusively by the means of literature, complexity of which is comparable to those elaborated in philosophical works. Just like János Pilinszky (1921-1981) and Slavko Mihalić (1928-2007), the two defining figures of the second wave of Modernity in Hungary and Croatia, whose œuvre can be also read as lyric ontology which has many similarities with the ideas of certain Western Existentialist authors.

The Plague focuses on a plague epidemic which is a traditional symbol of the „wrath of the skies“. This epidemic, however, cannot be interpreted as a punishment, because its intensity is independent of the reaction of the affected, and it also smites those who have not committed any crime. God is inscribed into the text as a privation, a lack: „mightn't it be better for God if we refuse to believe in Him and struggle with all our might against death, without raising our eyes toward the heaven where He sits in silence.“¹ – expresses his doubts Bernard Rieux, the main character. In *Caligula*, the position of the evil God is fulfilled by the title hero: „People don't understand fate and that's why I am representing fate myself. I have taken the stupid and incomprehensible face of the gods.“² The emperor wants to liberate people – by making them realize the absurdness of their lives by punishing them severely, without any particular reason. His decisions are unpredictable, and often violate the most ancient taboos. Chaerea is the only one in the court to know why Caligula's reign is so dangerous – that is why he takes the lead of the revolt.

Both works present a hostile universe in which people struggle with affliction in the sense used by Simone Weil. The hero bravely faces the absurd danger threatening

¹ http://evankozierachi.com/uploads/The_Plague_by_Albert_Camus.pdf (connection on 30/10/2013.)

² <http://knocklofty.com/wp-content/uploads/2007/11/camus.pdf> (connection on 30/10/2013.)

human lives, behind which one can discern the profile of an evil God. The struggle is futile – but still, it is the hero's commitment to it which enables him to rise above the meaningless world. In the following paper, we examine some strategies by which the poems of János Pilinszky and Slavko Mihalić construct the relationship of the lyric subject with their environment, and we will compare these strategies to the ones utilized by Camus.

The poem *Fish in the net* (Halak a hálóban, 1942) shows some typical features of the space surrounding the lyric subject in Pilinszky's oeuvre.

Fish in the net³

Writhing in a star-net
like fish hauled on land
we gasp in the emptiness
our gills filled with sand
The element we've left and lost
whispers in vain
we pant on the shingle
where we've been thrown.
Crammed one against the other
fighting for breath
we struggle and tremble
in the face of death.
From the wriggling mass
come stifled cries
but the massacre continues
till one, then other, dies.
Atonement and repentance
are the language of the soul
but nothing can save us
from this hopeless hell –
We writhe in the net
of some cosmic fisherman
and maybe at midnight
will be in his frying pan.

(Translated by Kenneth White)

The poem begins with a shocking image of creatures forcibly torn out from their native element. Their current surroundings not only endanger their physical integrity, but they also lack the means to fulfil their vital needs – they are suffocating, frantically trying to break free. Their struggle, however, is futile. Their calls for help remain unanswered, and their frantic writhing further aggravates the pains of those sharing the

³ http://www.babelmatrix.org/works/hu/Pilinszky_J%C3%A1nos-1921/Halak_a_h%C3%A1l%C3%B3ban/en/3519-Fish_in_the_net (connection on 30/10/2013.)

same fate. The poem makes it obvious that death is the only way to get out from this closed world.

A *Scaffold In Winter* (Vesztőhely télen, 1972) written in Pilinszky's late period, presents the same ontological situation even more poignantly.

A Scaffold In Winter⁴

The ones being led up? I don't know.
The ones leading them up? I don't know.
A slaughter-house or a scaffold? I don't know.
Who kills whom? People animals,
or animals people? I don't know.
And the sudden falling, the unmistakable,
and the stillness afterwards? I don't know.
And the snow, the winter snow? Perhaps
the sea in exile, God's silence.

A scaffold in winter. We know nothing.

(Translated by Katalin N. Ullrich)

The poem provides significantly little information. We do not know whether those who lose their lives are people or animals, and who is holding the executioner's axe. The only thing that is sure is that living creatures suffer and die in vain, not serving any higher purpose, and there is nothing we can do about it – which is, in any case, tragic and intolerable. The slaughter-house (or scaffold) becomes a universal metaphor of life on Earth, a symbol of the finitude of life, and the inevitability of meaningless suffering – above which looms the figure of a silent God who watches the suffering of his creatures indifferently.

Let us return to the first line of *Fish in the net* again, according to which the fish writhe in a star-net. This line reveals the loss of meaning of an archetypal symbol. According to *Szimbólumtár*, a Hungarian dictionary of symbols, the star signifies the presence of deity, superiority, eternity, immortality and hope.⁵ Stars have an important role in Christian symbolics as well – the advent of the Messiah was also foretold by a star. From an ontological point of view, stars are the most ancient symbols of the Order structuring the world into a meaningful whole, which also serve as points of orientation.

⁴ http://www.magyarulbabelben.net/works/hu/Pilinszky_J%C3%A1nos-1921/Veszt%C5%91hely_t%C3%A9len/en/36884-A_Scaffold_In_Winter (connection on 30/10/2013.)

⁵ http://www.balassikiado.hu/BB/netre/Net_szimbolum/szimbolumszotar.htm#csillag (connection on 30/10/2013.)

In the last lines of the poem *Trapeze and Parallel Bars* (Trapéz és korbát, 1946) eyes of the net turn into the bars of a cosmic prison: „We crouch on the sky's parallel bars – / like convicts condemned.“⁶ The order of Cosmos is not a structure providing safety any more – rather, it is a multitude of meaningless limitations forced upon people, from which the only way out is death. Thus the poem precisely depicts that quality of being-in-the-world which Heidegger called thrownness into being.

According to the archetypal meaning of cosmos, the preexisting structure of our world is a safe haven, serving as a „fixed point, the central axis for all future orientation“⁷, while chaos is perceived to be dangerous and unpredictable. In Pilinszky's world, however, cosmos is a hostile medium where humans feel to be out of their native element, yearning to reunite with chaos, which is, however, endowed with the features of a deity.

The poems of Slavko Mihalić also depict a bleak, unfriendly world. The poem *Morning* (Jutro, 1959) equates the image of the landscape illuminated with the red light of the morning sun with a scaffold spotted with blood.

Morning⁸

In the morning, I wake up completely blind
I can only hear sounds which hurt my ears
Morning is a grim squire surrounded by dogs
There is an abyss behind the window

The fingers (packs of ants) do some meaningless work
Which already belongs to a world to-come
The steps are shots
to my own flesh

The whole Earth looks like a slaughter-house
Here is someone's skin, there is a bloody leg
Hoofs, horns, intestines, huge innocent eyes
They're wide open to be even more convincing

Glasses of warm milk – glasses of blood
Mine has been mixed with yours on the common meal of
horror
The street is strewn with shards of glass
Walls attack with sharpened nails

A bird has blown up like a grenade

⁶ http://www.visegradliterature.net/works/hu/Pilinszky_János-1921/Trapéz_és_korbát/en/2114-Trapeze_and_Parallel_Bars (connection on 30/10/2013.)

⁷ <https://www.dmt-nexus.me/doc/the%20sacred%20and%20the%20profane.pdf> (connection on 30/10/2013.)

⁸ Rough translation by the author of this paper. Based on: Slavko Mihalić, *Približavanje oluje: izbor iz djela*, Zagreb, Školska knjiga, 1996, p. 56.

Morning is like a slaughter-house
And the day is a cleaned-up butchery
(Which dogs are not allowed to enter)

The only hope is the hope of night (hope of the cold-store)
In case they don't sell us

The first line instantly reveals that each and every contact with the world – no matter how superficial – is traumatic for the subject. Although the surrounding world is present only in the form of peripheric sensory stimuli, even these stimuli break into the consciousness of the lyric subject in a brutal and painful way, destroying its integrity.

The everyday acts of daily routine are associated with bloody, sinister images. The familiar streets and houses, scenes of the subjects' everyday life, suddenly appear to be strange, even physically threatening. The feeling of strangeness and anxiety even pervades the subject's home. Not only they feel threatened in the outside world, but they have to face the Heideggerian uncanniness (*Unheimlichkeit*) even in the space which they can freely structure, and above which they have complete control – which thus has been so far perceived as safe.

The central image of the poem is unfolded in the third stanza. The body parts scattered chaotically and torn out of the meaningful whole strike us as superfluous and meaningless – thus the scaffold, just like in Pilinszky's poems, becomes a metaphor of mortality and meaningless suffering. The end of the last stanza underlines with bitter irony the fact that mortality is part of the condition humaine, not unlike the last image of *Fish in the net*.

Unintentional Spring⁹

This spring is so pleasant.
If there were only sun, it would be too strong
If there were only clouds, it would be savourless
Like this, it burns the throat, but calms it as well

Still, someone has passed with bow and sharp arrows tucked
under his armpit
...The images were flickering on the water for a long time
I'm worried for those who find sense
even in that
Aren't they getting used to the severe defeats?

I'm not saying that they should go back to the destroyed sanctuaries
I'm not suggesting that they should start saying goodbye
to the people dead and alive
I just fear for them
...Just like the wind that fears for the trees

⁹ Rough translation by the author of this paper. Based on: *Id., Pjesme*, Zagreb, Matica Hrvatska, 2010, p. 83.

whose branches it's combing.
This spring is unintentional.
Snowdrops have come out even though no one has made any
effort for that
They didn't try it either -- it just
happened that way
They could grow tall

The poem *Unintentional Spring* (Proljeće bez namjere, 1956) reveals the devaluation of another important place of familiarity: the defamiliarization of nature. In Western discourses, nature has been considered as the most perfect manifestation of the order structuring the world – not only pleasing the eyes and mind and calming the troubled soul, but also serving as an indirect proof of God's existence. Mihalić's poem, however, warns us that we should not be tempted to assume that the springtime rebirth of nature is caused by the self-movement of nature's laws, or by any external power or force. It is, rather, an arbitrary event which signifies nothing aside itself: „Snowdrops have come out / even though no one has made any / effort for that / They didn't try it either -- it just / happened that way / They could grow tall”. Mihalić thus negates the presupposed connection between the harmony of nature and the eternal order of the universe. But this is only the first step of the process aiming to mercilessly confront other people with the absurdity of their existence and their inevitable failure.

The problem of the unintelligibility of the universe appears in Mihalić's poetry as well. His poem *Cosmic Ponderings* (Svemirska zanovijetanja, 2004) suggests that the secret of the universe cannot be revealed – the Bible cannot explain the imperfect nature of the world and the contradictory relationship of man and God, while the scientific theory of creation is able to explain the end result of the process, but cannot grasp the mystery of existence.

Just like Camus, Pilinszky and Mihalić also construct an unfriendly, inhabitable universe, where man is left to himself, suffers from terrible bodily and psychic pains, and for whom only death can bring relief. But while in Camus's world the meaningless suffering is caused by a monumental catastrophe, Pilinszky's and Mihalić's world is ab ovo dangerous and unpredictable. Also, they often use metaphors like slaughterhouse or scaffold which, aside from revealing the pains of the subject thrown into the world with brutal directness, also refer to the political atmosphere of their time, the era of socialist Hungary and Yugoslavia. And while the heroes of Camus fight the absurd actively, the subjects of Pilinszky and Mihalić revolt only inside – otherwise they endure the blows of the cruel universe passively, with bitter resignation.

In the oeuvre of Pilinszky and Mihalić, however, Heideggerian *Unheimlichkeit* gets much more emphasis. In Mihalić's poems, the lyric subject cannot find peace even in the traditional lyric places of familiarity like home or nature, implying that orderliness is only illusory, and the world is in fact ruled by chaos. In Pilinszky's poetry, there are no such places of familiarity – the subject is standing face to face with the hostile universe.

Their anxiety, however, is not only the result of their defenselessness – it also has an intellectual component, specifically the unintelligible and meaningless nature of the world, and the despair evoked by the lack of a higher organizing intelligence. The unintelligibility of the universe is also pointed out by Mihalić, reminding us of Camus according to whom the reason why humans see the universe as absurd is the fact that their two basic drives, the appetite for the absolute – i. e. the need to reduce the world to a number of fundamental principles –, and the desire to clarity – i. e. the urge to come to know the world via direct physical experience –, is doomed to failure.¹⁰

Finally, every author comes to the conclusion that the meaninglessness of the universe makes the existence of God doubtful, too. However, each author answers this challenge in a different way. Camus forcefully rejects even the possibility of the existence of God. Mihalić finds that neither the supposition nor the negation of the existence of God can bring us closer to the meaning of the universe. Pilinszky craves for the proximity of God, hoping that reestablishing their connection can end the absurdness of the subject's existence. It is no accident, however, that the figure of an evil God looming behind the absurd world is present in each œuvre, even in the poems of the admittedly Christian Pilinszky.

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¹⁰ <http://blsciblogs.baruch.cuny.edu/authenticityandastonishment/files/2012/10/Albert-Camus-The-Myth-of-Sisyphus.pdf> (connection on 30/10/2013.)