

PHD DISSERTATIONAL THESES

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*“I Take a Word...”*

Interpretations on the Poetry of Attila József

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## Definition of Objective: Questions Addressed in the Dissertation

The title for this thesis contains a sentence fragment taken from a longer quotation found in an interview given by Edit Gyömrői, in which the psychoanalyst draws upon the words of her former patient, Attila József, in order to illustrate his connection to words and the language of lyricism: “I take a word, throw it up into the air; it falls apart, and when I catch it again, it has changed into something completely different.”<sup>1</sup>

If compared to the image of the poet found in accounts made by his contemporaries, this metaphorical statement brings to life the figure of Attila József as a poet who readily juggled and played with words, transforming his mother tongue into a performance of unique “magic tricks.” If, however, this description is taken as a weighty example of the poet’s *ars poetica*, then it relays the process of “conjuring” the poet utilized to draw a word into a new context, thereby transforming it into “something completely different,” i.e., a “previously nonexistent” word. When examined from this point of view, Attila József’s description casts new light on concepts integral to understanding his poetry, namely his idea of the *emerging word* (*keletkező szó*)<sup>2</sup> or the poet’s

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<sup>1</sup> Erzsébet VEZÉR, *Megőrzött öreghangok: Válogatott interjúk (Old Voices Preserved: Selected Interviews)* ed. István EÖRSI and István MARÓTI, Budapest, PIM, 2004, 183. (Emphasis: S.O.)

<sup>2</sup> *József Attila összes művei III. Cikkek, tanulmányok, vázlatok, (The Collected Works of Attila József, Vol. III)* ed. Miklós SZABOLCSI, Budapest, Akadémiai, 1958. (*JAÖM* III), 94-95.

*name enchantment* (*névvarázs*) theory<sup>3</sup>. While many approaches are possible, the interpretation explored in this dissertation concentrates on the metaphors of “falling apart” and “catching,” processes that conceptualize words as objects, as well as the resulting “something different,” for these expressions reflect and expose those poetic and rhetorical forms or processes characteristic of Attila József’s later poetry. In short, the growing relevance and increasingly dominant role played by paronomastic, anagrammatic and hypogrammatic functions can be seen as examples of these tendencies. At the same time, these figures—in direct contradiction to the categories conventionally assigned them in stylistics—are not built into the poems as a mere pun, a linguistic effect attained by breaking the unity of poetic discourse, but rather as a rhetorical tool in which signifiers are materiality, thereby producing a kind of “din”, a sort of literary background noise that the poem’s rhythm imbues with semantic meaning, thus transforming it into “information”.

The dominant role assigned to the *word as material* in Attila József’s concept of language is a factor prevalent in any poetic interpretation of the poet’s oeuvre, throughout his initial beginnings in the avantgarde, his more mature works and, finally, in his later poems as well. Indeed, critics already made note of the anagrammatic and paronomastic figures found in the so-called “great” poems of the 1930’s, such as *Winter night*, *Consciousness*, *Enigmas*, *You know there’s no forgiving*,

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<sup>3</sup> Attila JÓZSEF, *Ady-vízió = A.J., Tanulmányok és cikkek (1923-1930). Szövegek (Essays and Articles, 1923-1930, Texts)*, ed. Iván HORVÁTH, Budapest, Osiris, 1995, 168.

*Our poet and era*, [*A sound sounding unsummoned...*] or [*Suddenly I may disappear...*]. In an extension of the literary discourse conducted in the last few decades—a discourse that frequently attempts to reinterpret Attila József’s poetry from the vantage point offered by the figures mentioned above—this dissertation will examine seven poems in order to illustrate the complex interplay amongst the material effects of language, semantic rhythm and the metaphorical meaning. Most of the works chosen for this analysis have not received much attention by researchers, in spite of their usage of interrelated motifs, a fact that allows them to be placed in the same poetic category.

Attila József’s usage of rhythm as a basis for creating meaning plays a central part in this dissertation’s interpretation of his poetry for two reasons: first of all, according to Attila József’s poetic concepts, a poem is not just music, but a “meaningful musical text” in which “the embracing” of stressed and metric verse rhythms creates “a poem’s true music in each and every case.”<sup>4</sup> With the exception of two instances, this type of “embracing” occurs in most of the poems under discussion. This alone is not enough to defend using “meaningful musicality,”—i.e., interpretation according to semantic rhythm—as an interpretative tool, for Attila József also stressed the need for a poem’s rhythm to “bring contradiction to the attention of consciousness”<sup>5</sup> Although Attila József does not discuss the significance of breaks in rhythm in his philosophy on poetry, his

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<sup>4</sup> *JAÖM* III, 272.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* *JAÖM* III, 97.

differentiation between “genuine” and “illusory” rhythms<sup>6</sup> can—in my opinion—refer to a difference between abstract and true meter, resulting in the fact that the poem’s genuine rhythm generally veers off the theoretical, standard metric path it has assigned for itself. If, however, the poem maintains the same rhythm, thereby realizing its own “formula” of rhythmic principle, then this becomes an example of “illusory,” or “non-genuine” rhythm. Thus, I take the poems’ arrhythmic deviations as a sort of appellative gesture, a way for the text to “bring contradiction to the attention of consciousness”, while simultaneously imbuing the parts of the text containing these rhythmic anomalies with a semantic weight. In the case of stressed verses, rhythmic deviations create tension between syntax and rhythm. In metric poems, this same effect is reached through the usage of a metrical foot that opposes the established prosody pattern. The way breaks in rhythm gain semantic definition can therefore prove to be the most diverse terrain for the “embracing” of stressed and metric rhythms in a simultaneously rhythmic poem.

Rhythm’s creation of meaning is not only found in stressed sounds or meter in Attila József’s poetry; a third type of rhythmic principle—one uniquely typical of Hungarian sound components—fulfills a similar role. In the poem, [*The waves’ rippling dance...*], the sound of words is based on the regular interchanging of the palatalized (high) and the velar (low) vowels. This occurs not only in the poem’s rhymes, but extends to every row,

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid

stanza and the entire poem itself, thereby becoming a definitive tool for poetic analysis.

## **Approach and Methodology**

The concept of anagrams and hypograms utilized in this dissertation is defined on the basis of a theory by Ferdinand de Saussure, developed when the linguist studied (1906-1909) the presence of anagrammatic figures in various Greek, Latin and Old German poetic texts. In opposition to the definition of anagrams offered by classical rhetorics, these cases did not display an isolated regrouping of letters, but rather the repetition of sign fragments larger than that of a phoneme or grapheme (diphones, triphones or polyphones) concentrated within relatively narrow boundaries.<sup>7</sup> The importance of the most significant form, the hypogram, lies in the fact that it provides a so-called “word theme” (*mot-thème*) useful in comprehending a poetic text. To be more precise, the repetitive appearance in the “poetic discourse” of diphonic or polyphonic sequence associations works to emphasize a (proper) name or other creative element, resulting in a “word theme”. Saussure—in spite of many years of research and systematic textual analysis—was eventually

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<sup>7</sup> Part of the notes made concerning Saussure’s theory on anagrams was published by Jean Starobinski in 1971, in a volume entitled *Les mots sous les mots: les anagrammes de Ferdinand de Saussure*. In this dissertation I refer to the following German translation of this work: *Wörter unter Wörtern. Die Anagramme von Ferdinand de Saussure*, transl. H. BEESE, Frankfurt, Berlin, Vienna, Ullstein, 1980.

forced to accept the fact that basic theoretical questions were to remain unanswered, even if much proof concerning the existence of anagrams had meanwhile been gathered. This is why this research was abandoned after a while, despite Saussure's opinion that his discovery was not a mere example of a rhetorical figure, but a basic principal of Indo-European poetry. The latter part of this hypothesis explains why Saussure's conclusions usually concerned the workings of poetic language.

Fifty years later, Roman Jakobson attempted to reach the same goal in his seminal study, *Language and Poetry*, in which paronomasia was cited as another possible example of a lyrical poetic function. As Jakobson describes it: "In a sequence in which similarity is superimposed on contiguity, two similar phonemic sequences near to each other are prone to assume a paronomastic function."<sup>8</sup>

Through usage of repetitive letter or sound relationships, anagrammatic or paronomastic figures produce a result similar to rhyming yet still—from the point of view of phenomenalization—a far more "hidden" means of creating metaphors in a poem. Its sound forms and anagrammatic inter-relatedness, the projection of meaning through sound—creating a metaphorical relationship between mainly single words or word connections—evolve into an entire text in the works

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<sup>8</sup> Roman JAKOBSON, *Linguistics and Poetics* = R.J., *Poetry of Grammar and Grammar of Poetry* (Selected Writings, vol. 3.), ed. Stephen RUDY, The Hague, Mouton, 1981, 43.

examined by this dissertation. Interpretation reveals a more complex web of meaning that becomes the basis for self-referential or metapoetical readings of these works. A reasonable explanation for this metaphorical expansion can be rooted in Attila József's concepts surrounding *inspiration* (*ihlet*), the *emerging word*, and *word enchantment*, ideas this study discusses in detail as they offer an interconnected and comprehensive tool toward poetic interpretation.

## Main Points and Structure

The poems to be analyzed are grouped according to three chapters, in relation to the issues mentioned above. The titles for each chapter—as well as the quotations heading the subchapters—are metaphorical references to the possibility of a self-referential or metapoetical reading.

In the first chapter entitled *Dream*, an interpretation of two poems as dream texts is engendered by the text's use of metaphor (such as in the poem *Net*), poetic intent (*In a Sparse Wood*), or linguistic (i.e., mainly paronomastic) connections. In the second stanza of the first poem, the metaphorical image of the *net* unites the concept of a fisherman's net with that of a neural net found in the neural system. Then, in third stanza the poem develops into a dream text as a linguistic signifying chain through a paronomastic and anagrammatic figuration of *hálóm/álmot/látom*. In the course of analyzing the poem, *In a Sparse Wood*, the syntagma “blossoming signs” („kifeshő jegyek”) gains meaning as metapoetical reference, offering a reinterpretation of

Attila József's poetical philosophy concerning the *emerging word*.

The self-referential analysis of the poems examined in the chapter entitled *Memory* ([*The waves' rippling dance...*], [*Light memories...*]) is supported by the way the act of remembering is presented in a series of increasingly sensual memories, while the text's simultaneous development of anagrammatic "remembering" word symbols indicates a parallel process.

The words directed by the poetic subject to an unnamed other in the opening poem (*Loneliness*) of the third chapter, *I*, evolves due to the complex interweaving of rhetorical techniques such as apostrophe, chiasmus and hypogram. At the same time, the speaker in [*A long, long while...*] is defined as a double entity („amphibian”) living on the border between consciousness and unconsciousness. An examination of the late poem, *The shadows...* closes these interpretations of Attila József's poetry, for this work contains the main motifs found in the previous six poems, while its "unbreakable order" („megbonthatatlan rend”) and rhythmically arranged usage of the word *pleasure* (*kéj*) draws attention to self-referential and metapoetical interpretations.

*Effects*, the final chapter in this dissertation, introduces the enduring influence of Attila József's rhythmic and rhetorical innovations as shown through an analysis of Lajos Parti Nagy's poem, *Songscript* (*Dallszöveg*) and András Ferenc Kovács's work, *A.J.'s Sonnet* (*J. A. szonettje*).

## Publications Related to the Dissertation

„Egy kis játékot én is érdemelnék...” *Fónikus harmónia és anagrammatikus jelenségek József Attila néhány kései versében* = „száz év magány”. *József Attila-tanulmányok*, szerk. BARTÁK Balázs–Antonio SCIACOVELLI, Szombathely, Savaria UP, 2005, 184-196.

*A saját magá(ny)ról beszélő szöveg. Az én-konstrukció retorikája: aposztrophé, chiazmus, anagrammatika és paronímia József Attila Magány című versében* = *Vers-ritmus–szubjektum. Műértelmezések a XX. századi magyar líra köréből*, szerk. HORVÁTH Kornélia–SZITÁR Katalin, Budapest, Kijárat, 2005, 278-299.

BÓKAY Antal: *József Attila poétikái*, *Irodalomtörténet* 2005/4., 432-435.

„Veszem a szót...” *Anagrammatikus és paronomasztikus jelenségek József Attila két versében* = *Mozgásban. Irodalomtudományi PhD-konferencia elméleti irányvonalokról, kihívásokról és lehetőségekről*, szerk. BODROGI Ferenc Máté–MIKLÓS Eszter Gerda, Debrecen, Kossuth UP, 2008, 104-119.

„...a zene mögött zug az örök erdő”. *József Attila*: [A hullámok lágy tánca...], Partitúra 2009/2., 53-78.

*József Attila válogatott versei*, vál., jegyz. OSZTROLUCZKY Sarolta, Budapest, Nemzeti Tankönyvkiadó, 2009.

*A dallam és a szöveg-én. József Attila-intertextusok Parti Nagy Lajos Dallszöveg és Kovács András Ferenc J. A. szonettje című versében = Ritmikai és retorikai tradíció a kortárs magyar lírában*, szerk. HORVÁTH Kornélia–ÉRFALVY Lívia–BOROS Oszkár, Budapest, Ráció, 2011, 114-127.