

Ecological imperatives in contemporary Hungarian poetry

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ABSTRACT

The study reviews from an eco-poetic point of view the tendencies in Hungarian poetry of recent years that emphasise the biopoetic aspects of existence. László Lázár Lövétei's eclogues, for example, renew the discourse from the perspective of the ancient tradition, while Tamás Korpa and Mátyás Sirokai transform the reader's mental consciousness by focusing on the plant life, and in doing so, reassess and rethink the concept of being embedded in nature. For example, Gábor Dávid Németh combines the mechanisms of cultural memory, the ecosystems of environmental awareness and the plant metaphor system arising from the organicity of language. Gábor Mezei approaches the question from the perspective of hybridity. Besides blurring the traditional boundaries of body and self, these authors also exploit the subversive, resistant character of eco-poetics, not once asserting the principle of what they call the eco-poetic imperative whose topological, tropological, entropological and ethnological dimensions are worth exploring.

Keywords: eco-poetics, ecological imperatives, topology and tropology, organism and environment

The embeddedness of humans in nature and their place in biodiversity has been a long-standing theme in poetry, even if the literature of modernity has primarily problematized exclusion. Vulnerability has become a central category alongside apocalyptic visionarism, and the poetry of empathy has emerged alongside crisis rhetoric. Vulnerability, linked with memory, also attracts syncretism in an almost self-evident way (Niemam 2018, 84-101). Eco-poetics links the geological and physiological memory of biodiversity with cultural memory, the question of sustainability with the philosophy of being and environmental justice, which reinforces the ethical dimensions of spatial poetics and prompts taking a critical stance (Schuster 2018, 208-227). The importance of the ecological imperative in poetry has been emphasised by Jed Rasula (2002), who has drawn a metaphorical parallel between the development of American poetry and the process of composting, but also refers to the development of poetic compositions. The decomposing

remains of plants, layers, and sediments, which then serve as a breeding ground, also model the workings of a fertile tradition. Decomposition is also a natural method of energy transfer. Each poem is part of an ecosystem of poetic history. Sarah Nolan is right to point out that the naïve conception of nature in the Romantic tradition has become untenable: we cannot speak of a distinct, pure nature, only of polluted, damaged, threatened spaces. This is why she introduced the paradoxical notion of unnatural eco-poetics (Nolan 2017), which sees garbage or pollution as an inseparable part of the ecological environment, as well as the powerful presence of the digital universe. It decomposes and permanently critiques the dichotomy between nature and culture. Lynn Keller goes as far as talking about eco-apocalyptic poetry, but she also discusses, for example, the eco-poetics of plastics (Keller 2017), while analysing poems by contemporary American poets.

Already Goethe's famous essay *Metamorphosis of Plants* (Goethe 1981, 537) anticipated many aspects of the modern relationship between nature and poetics. One of these is the model of plant life, according to which the plant as a living organism can be a model for artificial structures. In the context of rhetoric and poetics, this insight became of particular importance, since the proliferation, sprouting, and development of the text can form conscious analogies. The process is inseparable from hybridization. Adrienn Pataky has rightly emphasised the hybridising character of bio-poetic trends in contemporary Hungarian poetry: "This phenomenon is experiencing a renaissance in Hungarian poetry (and prose) in the 2000s, and is producing new directions not previously characteristic of Hungarian literature, intertwined with body poetics, animal studies, the posthuman, or the Anthropocene"¹ (Pataky 2019). Zoltán Németh speaks of the extension of the body, and recognizes new poetic possibilities in the creation of new constellations of bodily relations: the characteristics of the plant, animal, and human body create new, visible patterns of "inscription in the body"² (Németh 2015, 40). This idea goes back to Bate's classical thesis, which bases the tradition of eco-poetics on the idea of the "imaginative reunification of mind and nature" (Bate 2000, 245). Jonathan Skinner has distinguished several levels of the eco-poetic approach. These are the following: the topological level focuses on the place, i.e., the environment of the poem; the tropological level focuses on the figural, pictorial-rhetorical structure of the poem, its rhetorical ecosystem; the entropological level focuses on the materiality of the text; and the ethnological level focuses on the relationship between the co-existence and the history of the development of landscape and humans (Skinner 2004-2005, 128-129).

1 English translations of Hungarian quotations in the text are the author's unless otherwise indicated. In original: "Ez a jelenség a kétezres évek magyar lírájában (és prózájában) reneszánszát éli, illetve újfajta, a magyar irodalomban korábban nem jellemző irányokat termel ki, összefonódva a testpoétikákkal, az animal studies-zal, a poszthumánnal vagy az antropocénnel."

2 In original: "testbe íródás"

The above theoretical considerations will also inform the analysis of the Hungarian ecopoetic discourse.

It is useful to start from one of the most classical nature-sensitive genres, the idyll. This genre, known from antiquity, uses elements, rituals, and the closeness to the nature of the pastoral environment to talk about humans, to put into allegories socio-political relations or, for example, dilemmas of poetic theory. This classic genre, which is proliferating and renewing itself in Hungarian poetry, thanks primarily to the strength of the Vergilian tradition, has recently been infused with new energy by László Lázár Lövétei. Instead of eclogues, he wrote, so to speak, “ecologues”. In his volume *Zöld* [Green], he raises the fundamental themes of eco-poetics in the tone of the eclogue tradition (Lövétei 2011). The collection already indicates the nature of the author’s thinking in its title. Lövétei engages both the ancient and the Hungarian literary tradition in dialogue: in addition to the microcosm of the characters arguing and competing in the poems, the more general nature of the textual creation also has a strong dialogic character. In addition to the obvious presence of ecological imperatives, his skillful dramatisation and humour deserve special attention. The ideals of environmentalism and attachment to the land create a strong tension. The focus of vulnerability is constantly shifting, sometimes to the plant or animal sphere, sometimes to the human component, and sometimes to the creative process. László Lázár Lövétei’s eclogues revitalise an exciting poetic schema system, playing with the rites of cultural memory (Polgár 2017, 62). It is this dialogue rather than the ideology or tropology of the ecopoetic charge that gives the poems their power.

“The purest energy patterns are carried by plants”,³ wrote Mátyás Sirokai in one of the key texts of his highly acclaimed volume *Lomboldal* [Foliage side] (Sirokai 2020; Csehy 2022), which has been translated into several languages. These energy patterns also become text-generating forces. Just as the patterns, according to the poet, derive from the transformative capacities of plants in relation to the inanimate, the matrix of the text, i.e., language, becomes an experimental field for these patterns. The poems in this volume appear as foliage, reflecting on the paper on which they are written. The word *lomboldal* is also a hybrid pun in Hungarian, since it does not merely denote the spaces of the tree canopy, but also refers to the words *lomb* (‘foliage’) and *oldal* (‘book page’). The human–plant–material existence is identical to the linguistic existence, the foliation of the plant and the text being almost analogous. Sirokai is not only a poet but also a musician, and the materiality of his wooden instruments is also closely linked to plant existence. It is this multifaceted context that gives rise to an exceptionally exciting term in Sirokai: the word *növénylés* (‘plant-ing’, meaning behaviour as a plant, transformation into a plant, perception

3 In original: “A legtisztább energiamintát a növények hordozzák.”

as a plant), which is interpreted as the common denominator of these phenomena. The layers of Sirokai's poems are inseparable: the weaving together, the occupation of space, and the symbiosis extend to the rhetorical solutions. Plants are sometimes "instruments of the wind"⁴, and sometimes puzzles: this desire to decipher is associated with reading as a process of understanding. "A foliage structure is so complex that the eye never encounters the same sight twice",⁵ says the poet. Reading the poem becomes, in this sense, an expedition into the jungle of "organic attention".⁶ The interpretability of the poem is an organic formation, as is its createdness. Sirokai's volume asserts the tropological and entropological aspects the most strikingly, giving voice to the trees and the secret language of plant life. This nonsensical language, at first sight meaningless but following rules of Hungarian phonotactics and syllable structure and, thus, coming through "almost meaningful" (similarly in a way to Lewis Carroll's *Jabberwocky*, feels like an unknown or damaged human language (*Évla utaldon, bolongi bolo enyissze udd.*), or some ancient mythical incantation with a faded meaning (*sze néa tulpa, sze tulilpa*), or even a funny gibberish (*szit balanda*) to the Hungarian reader. The "en-plant-ation" of the human body also occurs, for example, when the damp warmth of marsh plants is juxtaposed with the damp environment of internal organs. Zen meditation practices and specific, almost acrobatic tree-climbing rites also appear: these symbolise the intimacy of togetherness and embeddedness.

Tamás Korpa's 2020 volume *A lombhullásról egy júliusi tölgygel* [On the falling of leaves with a July oak] takes the topological aspect and the poetics of place as its point of departure. Why are trees, flowers, and even rocks not marked on a map? Is the colour green enough to indicate the forest, yellow the desert, light brown the plateau, a darker brown the mountain range? Even an oak has coordinates. Sometimes the poems are titled with the coordinate itself (e.g., $48^{\circ}37'32.5$ "N $20^{\circ}50'45.9$ "E), sometimes with the name of a tourist location in Slovakia, together with the altitude (e.g., *Bezvodý (800 m)*). The volume is created by poetry projected on the topography of the Slovak Karst mountains. If we look at the tropological and entropological aspects, we immediately notice that almost all the texts contain at least one particular poetic solution. It is mainly a radical renewal of poetic premodifying and synesthetic structures. Some examples are as follows: *kisportolt száj* ('athletic mouth'), *kettévágott kaptár* ('beehive cut into two', lit. cut hive), *rövid gödör* ('short pit'), *választékos gondok* ('assorted troubles'), *őszi pigmentfröccs* ('autumn pigment splash'), *poszthumusz levelek* ('posthumous leaves'), *kandírozott rügyek* ('candied buds'), *kátyús fodor* ('potholed ruffle'), *falánk szírom* ('gluttonous petal'), and *fanyar folyosó* ('tart corridor'). In natural spaces, humanoid and human existence are only components of something;

4 In original: "a szél hangszerei"

5 In original: "Egy lombszerkezet annyira összetett, hogy a szem sosem találkozik kétszer ugyanazzal a látvánnyal."

6 In original: "az organikus figyelem"

valleys and mountains are metaphorical spiritual landscapes as well as natural formations. “It is as if the leaf stems are synonymous with each other”,⁷ Korpa writes, and this quote makes clear the close relationship between grammar and botany. We can also state that bodies of trees and the human anatomy almost claim a common poetic atlas.

Tamás Korpa’s volume of poetry is at once a poetic landscape mapping and an anatomy of an unstoppable vegetative rhetoric. It is most exciting when it presents a linguistic phenomenon as a karstic spectacle or transforms certain impressions into default units of memory. Korpa is interested in the process that results in the transformation of an observed natural “part” into an organ, even a sense organ. A stream or a branch, for example, can function as a sensory organ. The dense network of synesthesia and metaphors sketches the neural network of these sensory organs to us. This is joined by the runaway machinery of anthropomorphized nature: the tree gargling with its “whole body”, or the mass of interrogated logs and tree limbs, or the “court of houseplants”, where, for example, objective testimony is expected from the outside observer.

In Korpa’s poems, the valley bottoms and enigmatic hollows, or in other words the landscape itself, absorb time. In the poem *Havránia skála (770 m)*, for example, the poet deliberately confuses verb tenses and moods. The verb tenses grow into a mossy carpet or expand into opaque foliage. The nourishing soil of these grammatical categories is the human view of time, so their validity in a more complex eco-landscape becomes relative. In the poem *Blatnica potok*, the poet lists 3rd person singular forms of verbs throughout 48 lines in order to find the most specific one to describe a phenomenon. Cumulation and synonymy are the vegetative luxury of language. And in the poem *A köd definíciója (Okrúhly laz)* [The definition of fog (Okrúhly laz)], adjectives and pronouns are rampant. Stubborn and parasitic adjectives of the most varied registers litter the path, obscuring the direction.

Nature, which obliterates the traces of human history, appears as much as nature which has been wounded by humans: the time that shapes history in nature is infinite patience.

In Gábor Mezei’s 2016 book *natúr öntvény* [natural casting], the contrast between nature and the artificial (cast) is hidden. This volume goes beyond the more traditional biopoetic conceptions that characterise Korpa’s and Sirokai’s volumes. Mezei is closer to the Nolan type of unnatural eco-poetics. Artificial and natural are already indistinguishable, the landscape can be modelled or model-like and artificial. Some examples of the tropological aspects of the volume are as follows: *a fűben betontojás* (‘concrete eggs in the grass’), *tótükrön árnyas acélnyálka* (‘shadowy steel mucus on a lake surface’), *a még meleg fű üvegszállai* (‘glass fibres in the still warm grass’), *lágyan forrasztott hegygerinc szilikoncsipkéi* (‘silicon lace of a softly soldered ridge’).

7 In original: “A levélgyekek mintha egymás szinonimái lennének”

Organic and inorganic, natural and industrially produced things meet and become one in these word assemblages or casts.

Constructedness and hybridity extend to everything, there is no untouched terrain. Indeed, sometimes even the tools of construction are involved in the metalepsis of the transition from the living to the object (cf. *rügyező fejű kalapács* ‘hammer with a budding head’). In the case of Mezei, there are metalepsis-like movements in a tropological sense. The elements of nature are always passing into the passivity of immobile but malleable matter, and dead matter is being transported into the realm of proliferation dominated by the life principle. Yet this transgression is not grotesque or comic: it takes place as a natural act that focuses on the activity of the creator. Mezei comes close to saying out loud that nature does not really exist, that it exists only as a construct. The volume is also exceptionally carefully constructed: it consists of seven cycles, two of which contain 2 times 7, i.e., fourteen, poems that mirror each other. Each poem in the *nehéz forgács* (‘heavy wood chips’) cycle is 13 lines long. The role of the prime numbers is also enhanced. The mathematician Marcus du Sautoy, author of *The Music of the Primes*, makes it clear to non-mathematicians that the primes are the “atoms” of mathematics (like the notes of an octave in music) from which all the numbers can be extracted (Du Sautoy 2014). Thanks to primes, our data is saved when we pay by card, and the incompatibility of primes serves as a base when the acoustics of a concert hall is designed, but, according to Mezei, there are living beings whose biological life cycle is linked to primes. Prime numbers also become, for Mezei, the atoms of the poetic volume, of harmony, of construction, and of thought: the prime number is the defining “atom” of existence, the basic material of construction, whether it be mere inanimate matter or a living organism. In his lecture *A szavak csodálatos életéből* [From the Miraculous Life of Words] (published in 2003), Péter Esterházy says that a real writer in the world of literature is like a prime number in mathematics. In Mezei’s conception, nature, writing, and existence are brought into harmony by using these allusions.

Mezei extends the notion of constructed nature to mythical registers. Early science was far less exact than today’s, with a much greater role for imagination and myth-making. The *monstrorum historia* cycle uses the title of a famous Renaissance work by Ulisse Androvandi: this magnificent work of monster descriptions categorises and describes mythological creatures, natural wonders, and human freaks. Mezei’s “monster descriptions”, catalogued with prime numbers, extend the rhetoric of bestiaries (and herbaria) in a poetic direction. The situation is complicated by the intersection between plant and animal components: for example, in his world there are also *évelő pikkelyesek* (‘perennial scaly reptiles’).

The spaces of the volume are laboratory spaces: sometimes we see a table for building models, sometimes a kitchen where bizarre dishes are prepared, and sometimes a bestiary of the imagination. One can

only see the world as a model built to scale, a designed landscape, a panopticon, driven partly by exactness tending towards the mystical (the music of the prime numbers), and partly by the dynamism of the mystical tending towards the exact.

Mezei's other volume, *Száraztenger* [Dry sea] (2021), is an even stronger expression of the poetics outlined above. As he puts it, in this book he is primarily interested in the wasteful geometry of the immediate medium. It is clear that topology plays a prominent role here too: most of the poem titles refer to specific places that can be retrieved on a map, yet these loci lead to the spaces of a private geography. The mapping of the given landmarks gives rise to a network of poetic cartography. The past is replaced by the present of memory, and the texts are then subdued by subjectivity or linguistic tyranny. Another striking feature is the human body deprived of its hegemonic position (Polgár 2020). Nothing exemplifies this better than the author's portrait photograph. We see only a figure, a squatting body contour in a landscape "furnished" in a particularly innovative photo-poetic way. This is no classic portrait, there is no author's face, it is replaced by a human figure that exists in the landscape and is composed into the geometry of the view, a human figure which becomes insignificant and blends in such that it is almost unidentifiable. The contour becomes the dominant object of the poetic world. The phenomena are arranged within the contours of an umbrella term. In this world, for example, city districts have a "morphology", paired absence has "economics", and distance has a "deep structure". Sometimes these structures function as structures of negation or reductions, e.g., *nincs szintaxisa a hóesésnek* ('snowfall has no syntax').

Sometimes the geometry of the poem emphasises the presence of intertexts, e.g., the turn *hegesztett kockacsend* ('welded cubic silence') in the poem *bükkszentkereszt* [placename] sketches the first stanza of the classic poem *Passion of Ravensbrück*⁸ (*Ravensbrücki passió*) by János Pilinszky into the background of Mezei's poem. The Hungarian reader perceives the allusions as organic outgrowths or destructive impurities.

The historical coordinates of the textual landscape and the cultural landscape play the most important role in Gábor Lanczkor's volume *Sarjerdő* [Coppice] (2021). The poems are usually linked to specific spaces: the topological delimitation is exact here, just like in Korpa's or Mezei's poems. What makes the places unique, however, is the cultural or literary tradition associated with them. Here, the places evoke the classical authors of Hungarian poetry and culture, cultural memory turns into space, literary tradition into topography and nature. In Lanczkor's work, the ethnological aspect becomes powerful: the interaction between human activity, which produces and gives life to texts, and the natural environment. Jed Rasula's notion of compost also captures the layering of Lanczkor's texts: the geology of landscape and

8 English translation by János Csokits.

the processes of text formation are analogous. Today's culture grows from the compost of layers of tradition. The metaphorical forest, elevated to volume title, refers primarily to this.

An exceptional achievement of the eco-poetics line is Gábor Dávid Németh's book *Lebegő arborétum* [Floating arboretum] (2022). The word *arboretum* evokes a sense of vulnerability and protection in the reader. Vulnerability is a sign of emphasising the ecological imperative. The exceptional power of the tropological level is already pointed out by the author of the blurb, Márió Nemes Z., who calls some of Németh's word formations "fetishes of the lyrical private language"⁹ (Németh 2022, footer text). Nemes Z. cites the rather uniquely formed word *kamillakényszer* ('chamomile compulsion') as an example. This formulation, which links private mythology and magic, seems almost natural in the context of the poetic world of the volume from the point of view of eco-poetics. The turn of phrase is a poetic, tropological representation of the vulnerability of living in the shelter of an arboretum. Gábor Dávid Németh is also open to the Ovidian tradition of metamorphoses – mythological syncretism is not alien to him either. Sometimes, for example, he speaks in the voice of a tree, at other times he performs plant or animal metamorphosis or plays with the role potential inherent in these metamorphoses. Interestingly, the arboretum is not bound to specific coordinates but floats, as indicated by the premodifier in the title. It is presented as a protected or imaginary space floating in a space without coordinates.

To sum up, the eco-poetic lineage of Hungarian lyric poetry is extremely rich and varied. In terms of poetic innovation, it has contributed significantly to the enrichment of the poetic arsenal of contemporary Hungarian poetry and has also created a new artistic attitude.

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9 In original: "a lírai privátnyelv fétiseinek"

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