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THE OLEANDER BUSH AT DELPHI, THE MINOTAUR IN THE BULLRING: Nature, myth, and cultural memory in the works of Gábor Devecseri[1]

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ABSTRACT

This study treats literature as a reflection of cultural memory and explores how literature mediates between mythical and cultural relations to the natural world. The paper aims to promote interdisciplinary dialogue between cultural memory, ecocriticism, and literary studies and draws on foundational texts from these disciplines and previous research that seeks to link them as a theoretical basis. By analysing the works of Gábor Devecseri, chosen as representative examples, the paper demonstrates how literature reveals the return to the deep layers of cultural memory represented in myths and the defects of the relationship between humans and nature, and how it thus contributes to the understanding of a complex (and interdisciplinary) process.

Keywords: cultural memory, mythology, nature, ecocriticism, Gábor Devecseri

As a reflection of cultural memory, literature mediates between mythical and cultural relations to the natural world. Some elements of nature (e.g., trees that have survived for centuries) in themselves help to nuance the relationship with the past, and when intertwined with mythical dimensions they become part of cultural memory. Myths often depict the interpenetrability of the human and plant spheres or the complexity of the human–animal relationship (let us think, for instance, of such ritual animal sacrifices, often justified by mythical stories, which combine respect and torture). Mythology and literature drawn from mythology not only help to nuance our understanding of the past but also draw

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attention to anomalies in humans' relations with nature. An allegorical representation of the manipulation of nature is more effective when it also confronts the images of animals preserved in cultural memory, the degradation of ritual into a spectacle. "Just as certain myths have legitimised the subjugation and exploitation of nature by humankind, others reflect a will to attain a harmonious relationship with the natural environment" (Martín-Junquera–Molina-Moreno 2018, 6). This harmony, or the desire for it, which has been sadly lost, can be found in the manifestations of travel literature that draw our attention to the integration of ancient sacral architecture into the landscape, and to the interplay between Greek ruins and the vegetation that surrounds them.

"Ecocriticism is by nature transnational, multicultural, interdisciplinary and pluriform", writes, wittily, Serpil Oppermann (2015, 1). It is precisely this plurality, this diversity and openness that allows us to continue to expand the range of new readings and interpretations. In my analysis, both interdisciplinarity and pluriformity will be at the forefront: the relationship between image and text, cultural memory, and biopoetics.

Through an interdisciplinary dialogue between cultural memory, ecocriticism, and literary studies, we will be able to grasp the mythical perspectives of the relationship to nature and the defects of the relationship between humans and nature in different literary genres. In this study, I analyse the works of Gábor Devecseri, chosen as a representative example, to show the interconnections between nature, myth, and cultural memory. The analysis of his works can contribute to the understanding of a complex (and interdisciplinary) process. Gábor Devecseri (1917–1971) was a translator of ancient literature, a poet, and a prose writer. In his works, elements of myth and cultural memory are combined with motifs of nature, and the relationship to nature is always given a mythical perspective. The prominent role of natural elements is also reflected in his frequent use of animal or plant names in the titles of his works – e.g., *Epidauroszi tücskök szóljatok* [Crickets of Epidaurus, sing!], *Bikasirató* [Lament for a bull], *Öreg fák* [Old trees]. The relationship between myth and landscape is represented in Devecseri's travel writings in Greece. In his *Bikasirató*, the admired bull god is only a step away from the bull-headed monster, the human–animal hybrid Minotaur. The harmony of form of individual plants and their immediate surroundings meets the musical harmonies of ancient metrics in Devecseri's poems. In the volume *Öreg fák* [Old trees], Devecseri documents imaginary monologues and conversations with trees in poems set to photographs by Ernő Vajda.

Landscape, travel, and memory

Devecseri's travelogues, written in prose and including poetic interludes, play an important role in comparing natural and hand-made formations.[2] The structuring of the travelogues is based on the relationship between myth and landscape: the names of ancient gods and heroes are used as chapter titles (mostly in connection with their places of worship or their functions), and among them, Hermes, to whom the two chapters framing the travelogue *Homéroszi utazás* [Homeric journey] are linked, is given a prominent role. This is mainly due to Hermes' function as a guide (he is the protector of travellers in Greek mythology).[3] During the voyage, Hermes appears in the sea foam (recalling the Homeric image of the god flying above the sea as a seagull),[4] but also in everyday forms, such as that of a Greek family showing Devecseri and his wife, or of a taxi driver (Devecseri 1961, 13, 21).

Devecseri stresses the idea, later also expressed by J. Assmann,[5] that it is not the fact that something is old that makes it old, but that it necessarily has something to do with humans. It is not only artwork that contains condensed human experience but the landscape does too. In this sense, therefore, elements of nature – grasses, trees, rocks, springs, mountains, and caves, which are interwoven with humans' destiny through mythology – can be considered a part of cultural memory (Devecseri 1961, 225).

The question of the relationship between nature and humans is raised by the fancy ovoid rock called the navel of the earth, at Delphi. According to Devecseri, the landscape confirms the mythical idea, making it plausible that the centre of the earth is there, "as if the whole earth were rippling outwards from here"[6] (Devecseri 1961, 79). The counterpart of the metaphor can be found in Homer: in Greek myth, not only the navel of the earth is visible and tangible, but also the navel of the sea, although the latter cannot be visited in the context of a Homeric journey, since it is located in a mythical distance, where, according to Homer, Calypso holds Odysseus captive, on Ogygia, an island surrounded by water, which can be considered the navel of the sea.[7]

Myth acts as an instance that transforms experience into memory and preserves it (Von Jagow 2000, 7), while the memory of the modern

2 On the encounters between the present and the mythical past in the travelogues of Gábor Devecseri, see Polgár 2021, 68-71.

3 "He is always on the move, he is the *enodios* and *hodios* that we meet on every path" (Kerényi 1984, 20). In original: "Mindig úton van, ő az *enodios* és *hodios*, akivel minden ösvényen találkozunk."

4 Cf. Homer's *Odyssey,* Book 5, lines 51-54.

5 "It is fundamental to the thesis that the past only comes into being insofar as we refer to it" writes J. Assmann, denying the widespread belief that the past is simply the result of passing time (Assmann 2011, 17).

6 In original: "mintha az egész föld innen hullámoznék szét."

7 Homer's *Odyssey*, Book 1, line 50.

traveller can also rely on visual documents. On returning home from a trip, photographs can also serve to supplement what was seen in Greece, to make up for missed sights. The entrance to the Delphi museum is described as follows: "Now, long after our trip, I can see from Zoltán Szentkirályi's brilliantly successful colour photographs what a beautiful oleander bush stands guard on one side.[8] I didn't notice it when I was there. That is, I must have seen it, it must have contributed to the whole picture, I just didn't pay any special attention to this tender and magnificent masterpiece of nature, I was running, we were running eagerly into the museum to see *human* masterpieces. Nature smiled wisely and allowed this"[9] (Devecseri 1961, 92). In this case, it is not the functioning of memory that is at stake, but the focus on the view, the photograph bringing a moment of what was seen closer, which was part of the overall effect, but as a detail did not reach the threshold of consciousness in itself. The gaze captures many things, while the consciousness selects, mainly because of its interests and motivations. While the landscape as a whole contributes to the influence of the architectural and artistic monuments of antiquity, the individual elements of the landscape do not seem interesting in themselves: "On the way out, we again did not look at the oleander bush, because then the *whole* landscape again captured us. And if we were willing to pay attention to a particular detail, that detail was, in any case, a memory of antiquity, our *special* attention was directed to it solely, even if we were not as consistent as the excellent botanist on a previous tour, of whom we heard said that he did not get out of the bus in Mycenae, or Tiryns, »because there was no vegetation there«"[10] (Devecseri 1961, 92). The landscape, with all its elements, is important to the traveller only as a carrier of cultural memory, because of its sacral or evocative character. The luxuriant vegetation in the vicinity of the Greek ruins would indicate, in the words of F. László Földényi, that "nature is claiming back its rights"[11]. Földényi draws on an essay by Georg Simmel, whose basic idea is that "the ruin is the manifestation of a cosmic tragedy", "nature is taking revenge for the rape by the spirit in the form of a

8 Some of the photos taken by Zoltán Szentkirályi are shown as an appendix to the travelogue – in black and white.

9 In original: "Most, jóval utazásunk után, Szentkirályi Zoltán remekbesikerült színes felvételeiről látom, milyen gyönyörű leander-bokor áll őrt az egyik oldalán. Akkor, ottjártomban, észre se vettem. Azazhogy bizonyára láttam, bizonyára hozzájárult a teljes képhez, csak külön nem figyeltem rá, a természet e gyöngéd-pompázatos remekművére, rohantam, rohantunk be mohón a múzeumba szemügyre venni az *ember* remekműveit. A természet bölcsen mosolygott, hagyta."

10 In original: "Kifelémenet megintcsak nem néztünk a leander-bokorra, mert akkor ismét az *egész* táj ragadott meg. S ha hajlandók voltunk egy-egy külön részletére figyelni, az a részlet mindenképpen az antikvitás emléke volt, *külön* figyelmünk csak arra irányult, ha nem voltunk is olyan következetesek, mint egy megelőző utastársaságban a kitűnő botanikus, akiről azt hallottuk, Mükénében, Tirünszben ki se szállt a buszból, »mert ott nincs vegetáció«."

11 In original: "a természet mintegy visszaveszi jogait."

building, and forcing its own vision on it"[12] (Földényi 2018, 20-21). The botanist mentioned by Devecseri also seems to see only the violent repression of nature in the Greek architectural monuments so admired by other travellers.

Lament for a bull: Mythical animals, ritual, and mass sensation

Animal motifs with a mythical background feature prominently in several of Devecseri's poems. A small silver fish becomes a Hermetic phenomenon in the poet's sonnet *Lellei emlék* [Memory of Lelle]. Hermes, the messenger of Olympus, is at home in the deep as well as in the heights: as a god who accompanies the dead, he often descends to the underworld, but he can also soar high with the help of his winged sandals. Hermes is also associated with the abyss, the night, the demon, the animal (Mann–Kerényi 1989, 56). The silver fish mentioned in Devecseri's poem travels the depths and the heights at the same time by soaring up into the air in the belly of a seagull. Its post-absorption existence is full of paradoxes: at once motionless, it is part of a moving, crumbling process, and at once disappearing and multiplying in death. It gets into a dark place yet closer to the brilliant sunlight.

The poem *Medúza (Bulgáriai emlék)* [Medusa (Bulgarian Memory)] is not about mythological creatures but about a real jellyfish caught from the sea (a tourist, a Czech doctor, wants to put the jellyfish in a jar in front of the onlookers on the beach), but the disintegration of the creature, which is taken out of the water and out of its natural environment, and its transformation into rotting jellied mass, is played out before the tourists' eyes like a mythological metamorphosis. What is interesting and spectacular for humans is the destruction of nature and the loss of an animal's identity.

Treating the destruction of an animal as a spectacle is at the heart of Devecseri's most influential poetic composition, *Bikasirató* [Lament for a bull]. The work incorporates elements of lament poems from world literature, oratorios, and verse travelogues. The title refers to Lorca's *Lament for the death of a bullfighter*, which it turns inside out, but not in a polemical sense: although Devecseri places the lamentation of the bull in a prominent position, the work is also, by implication, a poem of pain over any form of violence, that is, including the violent death of the bullfighter (Devecseri 1974, 245-246). This is in line with the animal liberation theory of Peter Singer, who argues that human and animal suffering can be brought together (Garrard 2012, 147).

Devecseri's poem consists of 33 numbered subsections, with the mystical number 33 referring to Christ's age and the Passion. The

12 In original: "a rom egy kozmikus tragédia megnyilvánulása", "a természet bosszút áll, amiért a szellem megerőszakolta őt egy építmény formájában, s rákényszerítette a maga elképzelését."

theme of the bullfight is set within a poetic description of a journey to Spain.[13] The bullfight as spectacle and mass sensation in Devecseri's poem is both a historical allegory (evoking memories of war, killing, and violence) and a ritual act with mythical foundations. However, from the perspective of the past, it is precisely an essential element, the act of ritual purification, that is missing. The selection, breeding, rearing, and running of the bull becomes an end in itself, a means of petty planning of violence, of gruesome entertainment, of the abuse of naivety, detached from transcendence.

The *Bikasirató* [Lament for a bull] is a Dionysian work, "if we think of the killing or, even more, the attack on the helpless victim as a motif, the tearing apart, which the audience itself performs or at least watches with approval"[14] (Bircsák 2008, 92). The ancient ritual antecedents are intertwined with Christian ones, and the Bikasirató [Lament for a bull] is also an attempt to reinterpret the Passion Play, and Bach's Passions are among its models (Rónay 1986, 408).

The deepest layers of cultural memory also reveal other images of the bull. It used to be a feared and dreaded creature, exalted as a god, whom humans dared to defeat only by first praying to it, begging for forgiveness. From the admired bull-god, only one step leads to the bull-headed monster, the man-animal hybrid Minotaur, who "was the blood drinker still, that it was not / his blood the people drunk" (Devecseri 1972, 11). In the bullfight, the mythical roles are reversed, the bull-killing Theseus the Toreador and the audience cheering him on become bloodthirsty, and the bull wanders the arena like the heroes trying to defeat Minotaur in the labyrinth. In this part of the poem, Devecseri polemically relates not only to the world literary source, Ovid's Metamorphoses, but also to its Hungarian literary antecedent, Sándor Weöres' poem Minotaurus, which sees the mythical story from the point of view of a raped princess, one of the victims of the Cretan monster.

Despite the parallels that emerge from cultural memory, the narrator of Devecseri's poem denies the rite, citing the senselessness of suffering and the life spirit, while documenting the ecstasy of the crowd and the cathartic experience of killing with a reporter's detachment.

The cruel ritual of the bull sacrifice, which has become a commercial sensation, is counterbalanced by the spectacle of the images seen in the halls of the Prado. The interlocking spaces of the picture gallery are reminiscent of a labyrinth, but the beauty obliterates the proximity of

13 The trip to Spain is linked to Devecseri's friendship with Robert Graves. They met when Graves visited Hungary in 1968, and the following year Devecseri and his wife went to visit Graves in Mallorca. In his recollections, Graves writes that there was no bullfighting in Mallorca or in Madrid, where the Devecseris also spent a few days, but they saw a film about bullfighting in the cinema, which made a deep impression on Devecseri (Graves 1972, 7-8).

14 In original: "amennyiben az ölésre vagy még inkább a tehetetlen áldozatra való támadásra mint motívumra, a széttépetésre gondolunk, amit a közönség maga hajt végre, vagy legalábbis pártolva végignéz."

the Minotaur, the wandering becomes an end in itself, and we do not feel the suffocating confinement or the need to get out into the open air as soon as possible. In a way, violence is already aestheticized in the bullfight, as the bullfighter marches in picturesquely and flamboyantly, performing elegant ballet steps, as if his beauty predestines him to victory over the blundering bull. "There is this difference: in the Operetta / or in the Classical Ballet, / death is not compulsory", the poet adds (Devecseri 1972, 12). If we accept the definition that "the field of aesthetics is also the field of the struggle for control of human perception and thus the field of the domination of communication"[15] (Varga 2018, 221), the beauty of the bullfighter or of the images in the gallery becomes a means of concealing a power game.

The bull is as much at the mercy of the viewer as the objects on display. The eye motif highlighted in section 29 is a representation of the power relations dominated by vision. On one side are the motionless spectators clinging to the stone seats, on the other the bull staggering to its death, and the eye provides the link between the two. The eyes cling to the act of killing as if they themselves were killing, the immobile becomes the mover, and the moving, staggering bull, always running at it again, tips the spectators out of their comfortable position of seeming motionlessness by its forced movement.

Landscape and metre, poetry and vegetative metaphors

In Devecseri's poetry, vegetative metaphors and the images of time associated with them play a particularly important role. The poem *Erdő* [Forest] is a metaphorical description of an incurable disease: the tree of death, the consciousness of death to be born, grows in the human host. The poetic image is a combination of the cancerous sprawl and the joyous growth of nature, the passing away is not marked by withering, by wasting away, but by the proliferation of the plant. The metaphor also implies that the time of death is not winter, but summer, and that the creative human will not die in old age, of exhaustion, but while working and flourishing. The poem's point of departure is Dante's *Divine Comedy*, and here we see a reversal of the Dantean situation: in Dante, man enters a dark forest; in Devecseri's poem, the dark forest enters the man. This also indicates a loss of active participation in the shaping of events, a powerless helplessness. The human who carries the consciousness of death in their heart as a new living being to be born relates to the growing horror with a kind of parental love. According to the poem, death can only spring from life, and therefore the living must relate to it as a mother to her shamed but still cherished freak child.

The album *Öreg fák* [Old trees], the result of a collaboration between Devecseri and a photographer, Ernő Vajda, focuses on time, perceived

15 In original: "az esztétika terepe az emberi érzékelés kontrolljáért folytatott küzdelem és így a kommunikáció uralásáé is."

together with all of its space, embodied in the centuries-old trees that have witnessed the lives of several generations of human beings. This volume, one of the exciting undertakings of Devecseri's last period, is a mirror of the transformation of the visual into the pictorial, of the naturalistic documentation into a work of art, and of the images into texts. The presentation of centuries-old trees is also combined with mythical dimensions (Polgár 2020, 39-41). In the afterword, the photographer stresses that in these long-suffering trees, he sees individuals who stand out from the crowd: "their scars often bear a striking resemblance to human faces",[16] he writes (Vajda–Devecseri 1969, unnumbered). Trees are often the embodiment of plant–human hybridity, an intermediate state, and mythological parallels are often drawn with them. The poem *Intelem* [Moral warning] begins with a description of the metaphorical relationship between an oak tree (photographed in the Tőserdő nature preserve in central Hungary) and a human hand. The branches of the tree in Ernő Vajda's photograph curl like flexible fingers. In addition to the visual similarity, the accompanying poem also presents an abstract metaphor: the unyielding hardness of the tree is a sign of the moral firmness of the beckoning hand. Similarly, due to its solidity and blocky nature, *Ördögiga-fa*[17] becomes a warning sign, behind which there is also the possibility of a metaphorical transformation: the tree is the "leg of a giant on horseback",[18] and the invisible horse that it rides is, according to the poem, nothing other than time. Another pedunculate oak (this one photographed in Kismaros, in the Danube Bend region) is also associated with a metaphor for body parts: the branches of this tree resemble not human fingers but two arms (cf. the poem *Kétágú fa-óriás* [Two-branched tree-giant]). The metaphor is also given mythological dimensions, as the tree holds the sky in its two arms like Atlas. The gesture of lifting is combined with the gesture of embracing, thus making the tree caring and loving.

The dialogue written for the picture *Bükkös, ködben* [Beech forest, in the mist] sees in the adult the child of the past, and the forest emerging from the mist acts as a nurse of memories. The trees that predate our birth, and which surely outlive us, can take us back to childhood, as can the sounds, images, and smells associated with childhood. But being back is also staying here, and while retaining adult consciousness, we return to a swaddled state and now consciously grow back into ourselves, observing events from the outside. In the poem, written for a photograph of a 120-year-old Japanese acacia in a park in the small town of Szigliget, the individual memory links two very close periods, one during the day and one at night. In the memory, the darkness of midnight meets the light of day shining on the leaves of the acacia

16 In original: "beforradt sebhelyeik gyakran megdöbbentően hasonlítanak emberi arcokhoz."

17 The poem is named after the eponymous protected gigantic beech tree in Western Hungary.

18 In original: "lovagló óriás lába"

tree, and then comes the real recognition, the real glimpse of light, the sloppy and half-attentive gaze of day is replaced by the later, nocturnal illumination, and the fragment of memory finds its meaning in another dimension of time.

The harmony of form of individual plants and their narrower surroundings in Devecseri's poems also meet the musical harmonies of ancient metrics. The mirror structure of the poem *Hőség tava* [Lake of heat] (Devecseri 1964, 148-149) is expressed in Sapphic stanzas. Four of the eight stanzas are regular, but after the Adonisian coda of the fourth stanza the order of the Adonisian coda and the Sapphic lines is reversed, so that one half of the poem mirrors the other. In the poem, the contours of objects dissolve with the heat, light and heavy, and up and down are reversed. The foliage, tree trunks, people, and shops that have "fallen into" (i.e., are reflected in) the lake of heat-like water stand on their heads, and the Sapphic stanza stands on its head in the same way. Above and below also meet in the image of the sunbeam in the opening stanza of the poem *Dobospusztai bükk* [The beech of Dobospuszta]. The metre of the poem and the motif of the logs softening the winter recall Horace's ode to Thaliarchus (Carmina I, 9). Devecseri's poem was originally published in two parts, alongside photographs of the same beech tree from two different perspectives by Ernő Vajda. Accordingly, the poem is divided into two parts: the first two stanzas describe the path of the sunray wandering through the beech forest, while the other three stanzas describe the flame of the beech wood burning in the tiled stove and, in a detached way, the fire of existence and the soul's desolation. In his Afterword to the volume, Ernő Vajda speaks of the harmony of the form of individual plants and their narrower environment – through Devecseri's accompanying poem, this harmony of form meets the musical harmonies of the alcaic stanza.

Conclusion

Devecseri's works, in different genres, are all about the defects in the relationship between humans and nature. The mythical perspective of the relationship with nature adds to the sense of the disruption of harmony. The relationship between ancient sacred architecture and the landscape is foregrounded in the travelogues, with some elements of nature becoming part of cultural memory through their relationship with humans, but Greek architectural monuments can also be interpreted as violent repressions of nature. Animal motifs with mythical backgrounds warn against the treatment of the destruction of an animal as a spectacle. If Devecseri's poems are interpreted in terms of the relationship between image and text, cultural memory and biopoetics, the relationship between vegetative metaphors and temporal images, and the intersection of plant forms and metrical harmonies, also point

to an interdisciplinary and pluriform multiplicity, to the embeddedness of humans in nature.

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