

ANXIETY OF IDEOLOGY: RESISTANCE TO ALLEGORY IN THE LITERARY NARRATION OF HISTORY

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The efforts of the communist regime, following the Revolution of 1956, to channel discussion of the events of the Revolution into a simplistic ideological opposition exerted (and arguably continue to exert) a powerful influence on political discourse in Hungary, in spite of numerous challenges issued against the validity of this opposition by historians and political scientists. It is possible that literature may offer new perspectives from which the terms that have exercised such a constrictive influence on this discourse can be reevaluated. This discussion of works of poetry by French, German, and American poets on the events of 1956 in Hungary examines the ways in which not only these events, but also the terms in which they were cast were perceived and thrown into question by writers living outside Hungary, several of whom also wrote influential essays on politics. Moreover, it considers how literary theory, specifically because it makes language and the creation of meaning the object of its inquiry, provides critical strategies through which the terms of this discourse can be deconstructed and deflated, creating opportunities for new (re)constructions of our understanding of these events.

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In the months and years following the uprising against Russian occupation in Hungary in 1956 numerous poets and authors from the United States and several countries of Western Europe composed works memorializing the events of the uprising and its aftermath. For several of these writers, especially those who at some time in their lives had sympathies with communism, the uprising and particularly its suppression represented a challenge to communist ideology. In this context the events in Hungary of late October and early November 1956 acquire the character of an abstraction. Their relevance becomes a function of the place they assume in an ideological framework of constructed oppositions (the most obvious example being the frequently invoked opposition of revolution and counter-revolution in the rhetoric of Marxist ideology). In contrast to this, however, the writings of several other poets seem to evince an uneasiness with and desire to avoid abstraction.

In their attempts to transform these historical events into language these writers sought rhetorical strategies that, far tending towards allegory, strive to resist parabolic readings. These two approaches to the depiction in poetry of the events of the uprising in 1956 can be thought of as emblematic of two divergent aspirations of literary (and arguably historical) discourse: the desire to assert and ascribe meaning and the desire to insist on the purely representational function of discourse that figures independently of any mediating, interpreting presence.

In the following analyses of several poems written on the events of the uprising in Hungary I attempt to isolate rhetorical strategies that are instrumental in the construction of allegory on the one hand and the resistance to allegorical readings on the other. I seek in particular to illustrate how specific critical techniques developed in the study of literature can reveal the rhetorical processes through which allegorical readings are encouraged and discouraged. I offer reflections concerning the different functions of these contrasting approaches to the literary depiction of historical events in the process of shaping historical memory. In conclusion, I make tentative suggestions concerning the potential uses of such critical techniques in the study of historical and political discourse, suggesting how they may allow more sensitive understandings of the textual artifacts (be they literary, historical, political, etc.) through which these events are memorialized by foregrounding the processes through which they are constructed.

There are any number of rhetorical approaches to the construction of allegory that merit attention. These include the personification of abstract concepts such as in the poem *To Hungary, that American Might Explain* by American Neil Bradford Olson, in which freedom is referred to as a loving woman:

... freedom never loved best
Those that bled the less for loving her.¹

Similarly, in the poem *Hautes Saisons* (High Seasons) by Paul Chaulot one finds the personification of Budapest as a metonym for Hungary coupled with a metaphorical assertion of the emblematic significance of the struggle:

Sang de Budapest, affiche de chair
Aux murs de Paris.
(Blood of Budapest, placard of flesh
On the walls of Paris.)

However, rather than enumerate such techniques and examples I'd like to focus on one of the more salient approaches to the abstraction of the events of 1956 and examine the implications of this approach, namely the allusion to historical events that have themselves acquired an iconic status. Such allusions are particularly significant in the poetic depiction of historical events specifically because they attempt to confer onto the events they allegorize the same historical significance,

implying that in time they too will become iconic. Moreover, they ascribe to these events a transnational significance by linking them to moments in national histories that have taken on the stature of global history and become metonymic in world historical narratives. An example of this invocation of an iconic moment in European history is the poem *Politische Drucksache* (Political Pamphlet) by German poet Heinz Winfried Sabais. Each of the first two stanzas of this six stanza poem begins with an explicit reference to the French Revolution of 1789:

Seid getrost, ihr Unterdrückten, Verzweifelten:
Jede Bastille ist noch abgebrochen worden.

...

Seid getrost, irgendein Morgen wird wieder
Der vierzehnte Juli sein.

(Be consoled, you oppressed, you desperate,
Every Bastille will eventually be torn down.

...

Be consoled, eventually some tomorrow
Will be the 14th of July.)

Noticeable in this poem is the fact that although it was composed as a tribute to the uprising of 1956, it makes no explicit mention either of Hungary and Hungarians or of Russia or Russians, referring instead to “the oppressed”, “the agents of oppression”, and “the dictators”. Thus the events in Hungary serve as an occasion for abstraction, as an example of an inexorable historical truth, as a human tragedy but not as a national tragedy.

A similar example is found in the poem *Aux poètes hongrois* (To the Hungarian Poets) by French poet Georges-Emmanuel Clancier. This poem, which contains references to Hungary and more specifically Budapest, compares the Hungarian capital to other cities devastated in conflicts of the not distant past:

Jeunesse, sang de la liberté,

...

Ta lumière est celle de l’amour
Et leur hideuse nuit est la même
A Budapest que l’ombre d’Oradour
Et la ténèbre de Guernica.

Youth, blood of liberty,

...

Your glow is the same as that of love
And their hideous night the same
In Budapest as the shadow of Oradour
And the obscurity of Guernica.

Perhaps less iconic than the Bastille or July 14th, these allusions to the bombing of the city of Guernica in 1937 and the massacre by German soldiers of 642 inhabitants of the Limousin town of Oradour-sur-Glane in the Haute-Vienne department of France in June of 1944 constitute not only an attempt to ascribe the significance of historical allegory to the events in Hungary. They also represent a challenge, more explicit than that in the poem by Heinz Winfried Sabais, to the ascription of the term counter-revolution by the Kádár regime to the events of 1956. They situate 1956 in the context of recent conflicts that themselves had been appropriated by the Communist party as emblematic, inverting, however, the opposition. Thus, the poem implicitly affirms the ideological opposition explicit in the Marxist conception of revolution and counter-revolution, locating 1956, however, on the other side of the antithesis.

These comparisons of the events in Hungary to other events in European history can be interpreted as gestures of consecration that confer upon 1956 not only historical significance but also a stable meaning that defies reevaluation. By equating 1956 to moments in history that have assumed the stature of icons they sever it from a specific historical context and assign it a mythic value. In doing so, however, they aggressively depersonalize 1956. By situating it in a mythologized past these comparisons (and the poems in which they figure) reduce 1956 to an ideological opposition. Rather than constitute a set of events the meanings of which remain open to interpretation, it becomes one of two antithetical signposts on an abstract ideological spectrum. The poetic text, far from attempting to render through its metaphors a distinctive vision of particular events, deprives 1956 of any historical specificity, reducing it to a sign that implicitly affirms the value of the opposition central to Marxist ideology of revolution and counter-revolution.

An interesting critique of the functions of historical allegory as exemplified in these poems can be found in the writings of French dramatist, novelist, and philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre. In an essay entitled *Search for a Method*, published along with the longer essay *Critique of Dialectical Reason* in 1960, Sartre expresses his frustration with the tendency among French communists to insist in their analyses of the events in Hungary on what Sartre thought of as an adherence to a dogmatic interpretation of Marxist ideology. Writing dismissively of the contention made by communists in France that “world imperialism” lay “at the origin of the events in Hungary” in 1956, Sartre contends that for these Marxists analysis

consists solely in getting rid of detail, in forcing the signification of certain events, in denaturing facts or even in inventing a nature for them in order to discover it later underneath them, as their substance[.]²

Sartre notes that the portrayal of reactionaries alleged to have had a role in the uprising attempts to transform these figures into allegorical characters in a reenact-

ment of a parable of Marxist dogma. "These reactionaries", he writes, "pass over into eternal Reaction; they are brothers of the counter-revolutionaries of 1793, and their only distinctive trait is the will to injure."³ This objection invites questions concerning the implications of the comparison drawn by Heinz Winfried Sabais between the events in Hungary in 1956 and the events of the French Revolution. While for the German poet 1956 falls at the other end of the ideological spectrum, he nevertheless tacitly affirms the validity of the opposition invoked by the French communists whom Sartre criticizes. Both viewpoints insist on the purely ideological rather than on the historical relevance of 1956 and both encourage one to ignore the contexts of these events in order to facilitate an alleged similarity that is meaningful only as an abstraction.

For Sartre himself, however, 1956 represented the first persuasive challenge to Marxist doctrine as he and other Western intellectuals had interpreted it. Far from reifying his conception of the politically engaged Marxist intellectual expressed in earlier writings such as the 1948 play *Les Mains Sales*, 1956 radically altered Sartre's attitudes towards the Soviet Union and communism. Although he never abandoned his Marxist sympathies, he fundamentally rejected in his later writings what he thought of as the simplistic oppositions that sought to ignore or even efface historical specificities.

Sartre was by no means the only prominent Western writer-intellectual for whom the events in Hungary of 1956 constituted a challenge to Marxist ideology. Prominent poets and authors such as Albert Camus, Marguerite Duras, E. E. Cummings, and Archibald Macleish wrote in contemporary periodicals expressing their outrage at the Soviet occupation of Hungary and the suppression of the uprising. Some of these writers, for instance Cummings, had what could be described as socialist leanings. Others, Camus and Duras, had at some point been members of the communist party. By the early 1950s, however, none of them had any illusions about the Soviet Union. For these authors the events in Hungary were not a cause for surprise. They merely further discredited communism and the Soviet Union. There were however other prominent writers who, like Sartre, maintained their faith both in communist ideology and in the Soviet Union as a liberating, democratizing force in Central Europe up until October 1956. Martinique poet, dramatist and political essayist Aimé Césaire, who had been elected as mayor of Fort-de-France in 1945 running on the communist party ticket, tendered his resignation from the party in 1956, making specific reference in his letter to the Secretary General of the French Communist party to events in Hungary.⁴ British novelist, poet, and essayist Kingsley Amis, who was a member of the Communist Party up until the suppression of the uprising in Hungary and later went on to become a staunch political conservative, wrote in a letter to the communist periodical *The Daily Worker* dated February 14th 1957, "I used to say that some of my best friends are communists. I can't after Hungary."⁵

If one of the meanings of 1956 is the inadequacy of abstraction, this raises difficult questions for the poet seeking to craft a textual monument. He/she is immediately confronted with the essentially abstract nature of language itself. The poet seeking to discourage allegorical readings must adopt rhetorical strategies through which the figurative nature of language does not obscure its alleged representational function. Far from serving as a tool through which events can be metaphorically represented, discourse becomes an obstacle that interposes itself between the text and the reality to which it attempts to refer. The poet must devise means of overcoming this obstacle.

One such strategy that has had a long history in the literatures of Western Europe is the insistence, explicit or implicit, on the inadequacy of literary figuration itself. Paradigmatic examples include the opening lines to Shakespeare's sonnet 130, in which the poet insists "My love's eyes are nothing like the sun", or the prefatory passages to Balzac's *Père Goriot*, in which the narrator insists "this drama is neither fiction nor romance". This emphasis on the insufficiency of literary representation becomes a trope itself. It expresses the poet's thwarted yearning to transcend the limits of sedimented literary language and devise new approaches to poetic representation that do not transform a unique event into a literary platitude.

Numerous poems written on the events of the uprising in 1956 deploy this strategy in forms more and less explicit. French poet Gerard Prevot insists in his poem *Aux poètes hongrois* that "Nous ne vous donnerons rien qui puisse être appelé Littérature" ("We will give you nothing that might be called Literature") spelling literature, in the original French, with a capital L, as if to denote an institution as much as a form of art. In a poem entitled *Tract pour les insurgés hongrois* and dedicated to Géza Képes Alain Bosquet writes,

Nous vous jurons de ne rien dire qui soit beau;
Nous vous jurons de ne rien faire qui soit grand.

(We swear to you not to say anything that might be beautiful;
We swear to you not to do anything that might be noble.)

In the opening lines of his poem *Hungary* English poet C. S. Fraser adopts a more ironic approach, using a simple declarative sentence to subvert the famous saying attributed to Patrick Henry: "'But give me liberty or give me death!' / They gave them death." The poem continues, an ironic mix of literary figuration and the explicit rejection of figuration:

Come, look at the rubbish of a season.
Cracked leaves and crumpled newspapers
On the patchy scruff of a back green!
Why should we cut rhetorical capers?

Last week's courage is this week's treason:
That is what moving armies mean.

Yet if the rejection of formulae constitutes an expression of the poet's perception of the uniqueness of the event depicted, it nevertheless fails to stage (literarily) the event itself, for doing so would be to imply that the event can be reduced to language. This raises the question what rhetorical strategies are available to the poet who wishes to stage the event with language without reducing the event to a mere literary phantasm? In an essay entitled *The Reality Effect* French literary theorist Roland Barthes offers an answer to this question. In a discussion of so-called realist narratives of the nineteenth century Barthes identifies the enumeration in a novel of descriptive details that bear no relevance to plot or theme as a device deployed to impress upon the reader the reality of the object described. While details which seem to have thematic or metaphorical significance may appear as the fantastic creation of the imaginative poet, details which defy integration into a larger thematic whole suggest – specifically because they defy this integration – that they figure in the text simply because they are true. They are the elements of reality that exist outside of the structuring activities of the poet. As such, they are an assertion both of the reality and of the uniqueness of the event, a uniqueness that resists reduction to allegory.

An example of a text that incorporates such details is the poem *Chanson pour la Hongrie* by Janine Mitaud. This poem, rich in abstraction, also includes moments of description that seem to bear little or no thematic significance. The opening stanza of the poem recalls the poet's acquaintances among members of a Roma community in Hungary:

Mes frères d'une fête
Mes amis d'un été[.]

(My brothers of a fête
My friends of a summer[.]

These lines can be read literally or figuratively, words like “fête” and “summer” bearing numerous metaphorical and even allegorical connotations. Yet alongside such descriptions the poet also mentions that her Roma friends had laughed upon learning that she had gotten lost:

Un soir vous avez ri
Que je me perde dans la ville
Pour avoir confundu
Syllabes-sœurs en votre langue.

(One evening you laughed
That I had gotten lost in the town

Having confused
Sister-syllables in your language.)

Apart perhaps from suggesting the poet's foreignness, this passage serves no function other than to render real this experience. While the opening lines might invite the reader to interpret the poem as a parabolic idealization, this passage defies such a reading or rather supplements it, preventing the reader from reducing the characters of the poem to the figures of an abstraction or allegory.

Similarly, Jerome Mazzaro's poem *In Praise of the Generation After World War II* uses what Barthes refers to as "futile" details to preclude the reduction of the central figure of the poem to a literary personification of an abstraction. The poem describes the despair of a woman who had fought in the underground against the occupying German forces and later boasted of her bravery. Now, caught in the machinegun fire of a different struggle, she feels ashamed to have served as a "banner" of an alleged "freedom". The poem is explicitly about this woman's frustration to have been depersonalized in the conflicts between different occupying powers. Note how, in the opening paragraph, the precision of a detail irrelevant to the struggles that form the context of the poem asserts the reality and the individuality of this woman:

In the machinegunfire
Waking from hope as if
From sinking,
She cuts through the cobbled streets
Alone, her dress waved in
The brisk...
Winds[.]

Neither the woman's dress nor the brisk winds in which it waves appear again in the poem. They figure a single time, lavish in their irrelevance, serving in the text only as a confirmation of the reality of the scene described. By suspending for a moment the metaphorical activity of the text exemplified in such images as "waking from hope", this insertion of an extraneous detail suggests that the poem, however personal a vision it may be, nevertheless follows reality submissively. It thus forestalls any attempt to reduce the poem entirely to the product of the structuring activity of the subjective imagination of the poet, insisting on the descriptive, rather than interpretive, value of the text. Ironically, far from being irrelevant, these details are crucial to the theme of the poem, which is the inadequacy of ideological abstraction as a means to describe the fates of individuals.

This discussion of several poems written in Western Europe and the United States following the uprising in 1956 has attempted to identify two divergent tendencies in the structuring of literary monuments to historical events: commemoration through the creation out of specific events of allegorical meanings and com-

memoration that attempts to preserve these events from the oversimplifications inherent in allegory. In doing so it has sought to give precise description of rhetorical techniques through which allegory is both constructed and resisted. The question with which I would conclude is to what extent an analysis of the use of such rhetorical techniques in historical and political accounts might yield insights into the tendencies underlying these accounts. Arguably historical texts must also grapple with these contradictory demands to assign meaning, while at the same time rendering objective descriptions. Such an analysis of accounts of 1956 might be of particular interest specifically because these events, the subject of dogmatic categorization under communism, have undergone and continue to undergo such radical evaluations since the fall of the Kádár regime.

Notes

- ¹ All poems cited in this paper are contained in the multi-lingual anthology *Gloria Victis: Az 1956-os magyar szabadságharc költői visszhangja a nagyvilágban*. Budapest: Szabadsajtó, 1987 (fourth edition). All translations are mine.
- ² Jean-Paul Sartre. *Search for a Method*. Translated by Hazel E. Barnes. New York: Alfred A. Knopf: 1963. p. 27.
- ³ Sartre, *ibid.*, 30 (footnote).
- ⁴ See Aimé Césaire. "Lettre à Maurice Thorez". In: *Aimé Césaire: Œuvres complètes. V. III: Oeuvre historique et politique*. Paris: Editions Désormeaux, 1976. pp. 463–473.
- ⁵ Kingsley Amis. *The Letters of Kingsley Amis*. Edited by Zachary Leader. London: Harper Collins Publishers, 2000. p. 503.