

MEMORY, INNER SPEECH AND CORPORALITY IN IMRE ORAVECZ'S *WHEN YOU BECAME SHE*¹

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»[...]one must always begin with remembering[...]«
(Derrida: *Mnemosyne* 1986, 5)

In the 80's a radical change happened in Imre Oravecz's method of writing: the focus was placed from word to sentence, and it opened a particularly rich, almost endless way of self-interpretation of the subject in Hungarian prose poetry. It was the 1988 publication of *When You became She* that brought to Imre Oravecz wide critical acclaim. The paper states that in the prose poems of Oravecz the recollection and the inner speech perform the attempt of the self-identification, and the artistic text is the result of this process. However, this text is not only a simple consequence of introspection, structure and poetic practices, but also the tool of a successful self-analysis. It rewrites the conventions of everyday language and thinking, while performing the radical rethinking of the I-You relationship's significance in the subject's identity. We attempt to prove it by demonstrating the connection existing in Oravecz's work between memory, language and body. The significance of corporality makes the body a meaning-making factor in the volume of prose poems, similarly to memory and inner speech. This worldview and method of writing makes Oravecz's work a masterpiece in Hungarian contemporary literature.

Keywords: *prose poem, memory, inner speech, self-identification, corporal textuality*

1. Introduction

The poetic career of Imre Oravecz stands alone in Hungarian poetry: his manner of speech completely differed from the voice of politically supported poetry of Hungary in the 60's. The characteristics of his poetry are lyrical speech focusing

¹ The original title in Hungarian: 1972. szeptember, Budapest, Pesti Szalon, 1993. In English: Imre Oravecz, *When You Became She*, transl. Bruce Berlind, Riverside, Xenos Books, 1994.

on language, a relative indifference regarding marking genres, and making use of the borderlines between genres (Z. Kulcsár-Szabó 1996, 69).

In the 80's of the XX century a big change took place in Oravecz's manner of writing: the poetic emphases of creating texts were transferred from word to *sentence*. This gives the main specialty of *When You Became She* (first published in 1988), which is a volume of prose poems. In my opinion, this volume received less attention from the reception compared to its significance. There is no interpretation based on the language and the monologic characteristic of the prose poems, thus in this paper I attempt to reveal the significance of the monologic and dialogic character of speech in this text.

It seems that in the 80's of the XX century Oravecz managed to find a form of speech that made possible to talk about everyday topics, such as disappointment in love. He did it with the greatest awareness and by a surprising method of writing: he denied the condensed, fragmented poetics and started to talk about the direct and momentary impressions of the subject (Z. Kulcsár-Szabó 1996, 72). As one of the prose poems demonstrates it:

[...] as in an improvised melodrama, in vain I stomp out the door in tears, with the hastily assembled bundle under my arm, and in vain I go here, go there, land up in strange or familiar beds, don't speak with the psychologist, who's been unsuccessfully treating me for you, about my emotional bottleneck, I can't put an end to this odious situation, in which the putrid part conceals from me the healthy whole, and over and over again I return to you.[...] (I should really)

The most essential lyrical characteristic of the prose poems, in spite of their erotic topic, is that they continuously direct the attention to the manner of speech and the speaker. The epical poems are able to give the impression of par excellence lyrics. The speaker's retrospective manner of speech can be described as a conversation with the past, where understanding mostly depends on the nature of the language, formed by rhetorical devices. I argue that this retrospective manner of speech that addresses the Other (who is the former lover) leads to the identification of the speaker, constructing a special, speculative language based on the artistic transformation of the inner speech and memory, which reconstructs and deconstructs the Other at the same time. The speaker's aim is not to evoke the events of the past, but to interpret and understand the events.

In my view, by the help of the artistic transformation, the rhetorically and poetically formed sentences are the results of the subject's inner speech. Corporeality joins this union by setting the body to a meaning-making position in the

volume of prose poems. In my paper I attempt to prove this concept by demonstrating the connection formed between memory, language and body.

2. Memory, Inner Speech and Resituating

The speaker tells the story of a love relationship, the end of the relationship and the self-analysis of the speaker in 95 prose poems, each of them constituting one extremely long sentence. The author's aim is not to revitalize the events of the past, but the interpretation and understanding of the events. In the text:

[...] well, it's funny, isn't it, that the details still bother me, they continue to live in me, almost independently of me, they obsess me, the hows and whys torment and torture me, even now when I'm beyond the sum of details, beyond the whole. (It may have begun this way)

Oravec's work is not the imaginative continuation of the love relation, but the definitive separation of the I from the You (E. Kulcsár Szabó 2003, 15). The I-You relation is a construction-forming power in the volume, that is why it is relevant that the intention of the work is self-interpretation, that is processed with the help of evoking events from the past. The recollecting I is connected to the Other by memory, but it is not a simple reconstruction: so remembrance as a psychological process cannot be the simple recollection of the events.

It is typical, that the remembrance evokes former *linguistic realities* and not facts, thus the former experience becomes a perception and understanding executed by language. It is not by chance that the key-sentence signaling the shaken faith in the trustfulness of the language is contained by the poem which gives the title of the volume: »[...]assuming that speaking still makes any sense anyway. « (*September, 1972*). The definite separation of the I from the You happens in this prose poem, that is manifested by raising onanism – that signifies corporal loneliness – into discourse. It suggests that the text intends to lift sex to the existential-ontological level of the intersubjective relation fostered by language. The effort of memory to evoke the past is interwoven with the insufficiency of the language and the problem of temporality. It explicates that memory and language are bound tightly together in the volume:

[...] the years passed, slowly in my sense organs the suction of infinity came to a stop, I forgot you completely, and you became totally abstract, unintelligible, just like an extinct word which I still keep on repeating, though I no longer know what it means. (Behold, a feeling)

In my opinion this manner of speech fits into the concept of »memory monologue« created by Dorrit Cohn. During memory monologue the events of the past surrender to the events of present recollection and become radically dechronologized (Cohn 1978, 260). It is analogue to the phenomenon that can be detected in the prose poems. Memory is insufficient to reconstruct the past, even approximately:

»[...] the details lost coherence, they didn't hold together anymore, time leached the personal character clean out of them, you vanished from them, all traces of you disappeared [...]« (At first it was easy).

Recollection is not only unable to depict the Other's character exactly, but it intensely indicates the outstanding role of mortality and trace-leaving of the subjects:

Everything was in its place, everything was there, the corner where you planted your back, the ledge I held onto, the stucco, the capital, the salient, the archway, the marble, the place preserved it all, much like a fossil, only we were nowhere to be found, only we vanished with our recklessness, our defenselessness, our prodigality, along with our youth, only we were swallowed up by time, which, like a lecher, lay in wait for us there along. (I was visiting the institution)

It is worth to pay attention to the phenomenon that the different pieces of texts are in dialogue with each other by association. This mosaic-like technique deconstructs the continuity of the story and creates a new connection-system. It is formed to be the story of recollection, and the act of memory rewrites the story at the end.

The soliloquizing speech of the subject is a vocalized inner speech put into an artistic form. During recollection, the subject uses a predicative, condensed language to evoke the past. In my view, this structurally basic inner speech is enriched in the process of the artistic creation, while the original associative feature of inner speech is preserved in the poetic language. If we have a look at contemporary psychological research (Ehrich 2006, 12-25; Wiley 2006, Morin 2005, etc.) and we find that inner speech has been unfortunately neglected, whereas its significance in the identity creation process of the subject is a wildly acknowledged fact. Inner speech is a non-vocalized manner of speech that evolves from the egocentric speech of early childhood. This speech fulfills a key role in the subject's self-controlling activity, and although by the age of 6-8 its vocal nature

disappears and thus it develops into inner speech it remains an essential tool for thinking, conceptualizing and remembering (Vygotsky 1962, 361). Research definitely connects inner speech with the subject's self-definition and self-awareness. The specific of meaning – mentioned by Vygotsky – is possible to become manifest in an authentic way in the process of artistic writing.

In the case of Oravec, the main purpose of the poetic subject is not the reanimation of the Other, but a kind of processing of the painful memories, traumas. In prose poems, the procedure of recollection is realized in a way in which the original story is only partially restored, the relations of time and space are mixed and confused. The primary effect of the recollection is precisely to diminish the story and to reconstruct it into a new narrative. The You, the Other is constructed in a way that it won't become a whole, it is composed of several, obscured female characters – this is how You becomes She:

[...] I forgot you completely, and you became totally abstract, unintelligible, just like an extinct word which I still keep on repeating, though I no longer know what it means. « (Behold, a feeling).

According to Freud, oblivion always originates in an unpleasant experience, thus it can be the device of sublimation. Freud reckoned psychoanalysis as a method that provides narrative structure to memory. Similarly to Freud, Lacan states that psychoanalysis is a kind of labour with words. Also, he emphasizes that psychoanalytic narratives do not reconstruct the past, but recreate it by replacing the signifiers connected to the past into the context of the present. The paradox of narratives follows from this directly: by disrupting the causality, the present shapes the past (Ricoeur 2004, 353). The concept of memory that appears in the volume is parallel to Ricoeur's view: memory constitutes the meaning of the past, is able to erase time and go backward in it. Ricoeur also writes that our memory helps the formation of personal identity (Herman, Jahn, Ryan 2005, 471).

The interpersonal relations are the basis of the interpretive horizon of the story, in other words: the shifts of the speaker's identity are derived from the linguistic utterance that comes into existence beyond the individual:

[...] the only thing I did not understand, which ensued at home, was how after the other you could immediately make love with me, or, if you will, I quite understood, the act magically metamorphosed me into something novel, so that I was suffering for your sake, and in fact it wasn't I who was pleasing you, but this novelty, with which I divested the other one of novelty, who thus at one stroke was accustomed,

and that is why you didn't notice that while I was nailed on you, I felt the whole time that this time you were cheating on him. (As you recall)

This mirrors the Derridan concept that made the poetry of Oravecz unique in the poetic atmosphere of the 80's of the XX century: the soliloquizing speaker fails to realize themselves as a coherent whole in language, and thus becomes confronted with language in order to look at themselves not as an object, but as a selfsame entity. The soliloquizing I is not able to regard itself as a unified whole in spoken language, thus it continuously gets into conflict with the language: it masses the sentences and repeats itself.

According to Bakhtin's concept, dialogue means an infinite discourse between nonfinite, internally free subjects. This can be connected with the relativity of the speaker and the addressee of Oravecz's prose poetry and their continuous interpersonal transformation into each other (Bakhtin 1986). As it is clearly demonstrated in the prose poems: »[...] because I know it's not easy to love, when you're loved, as it wasn't easy for me, when you loved me and I didn't love you.« (*You don't love me any more*). Thus, knowledge is not only discursive in dialogue, but also in monologue. Analyzing the mnemotechnique of the text, the argumentation of Tengelyi proves to be relevant: the stories of our lives are inseparably interwoven with those of others, it is more striking when our shaken self-interpretation needs stabilization, which can only be acquired through our already existing relationships (Tengelyi 1998 27-28)

3. Oblivion, Passing and Corporality

It is worth noticing that the text moves from memory to oblivion. The end of the work presents future without memory:

[...] when I'll give up even you, and there'll be no past, no present, no pleasure, no pain, and there'll be no you either, because I don't want you to be, there'll be only future, beautiful and merciless.« (I want only)

As though self-identification was only complete with diminishing the Other and the dialogue with the Other. Oblivion appears together with the motif of the I's loneliness. This means that by the act of recalling the Other, the I finds itself. In the beginning of the volume, being alone is not a positive experience, but a trauma, and self-identification is brought along only at the end of the volume:

I can't find the entrance in the wall of years, I'll never discover the gate through which you lured me out and following the call of the

flesh took me with you on the round-the-world trip of passion from which I returned, plundered, exhausted, alone. (Again and again)

According to Derrida, this is a series of shifts within the subjects, during which an internalizing idealization process annexes the Other, or takes on its form and voice by figuratively and also literally devouring it. This means that the Other does not seem to be an Other any more, because it is carried within the mourner. As Derrida writes:

And where faithful interiorization bears the other and constitutes him in me (in us), at once living and dead. It makes the other a part of us, between us – and then the other no longer quite seems to be the other, because we grieve for him and bear him in us, like an unborn child, like a future. (Derrida 1986, 37)

Yet the Other can only be preserved as a disparate, fragmentary entity. (»[...] all that remained of you were tights, breasts, gestures, screams, beads of perspiration.« [*At first it was easy*]). As a result of the break up, the Other leaves a trace, and interestingly it is precisely this void that initiates repositioning of the speaker in the text: »[...] at night I wake up with a start in your empty place.« (*My time's running out*). Lacan states that the subject is constituted through loss and that the structure of the subject corresponds to the structure of language, which is an infinite chain of signifiers (Lacan 1968, 30). The shift of the signifiers in relation to one another and the wish to find meaning is explicitly present on a textual level as well:

[...] when, to speak plainly, I want you, it's a long time now since I wanted only to satisfy my fleshly needs, the dark instinctual one, to set free the sexual drive, to direct it into your channel, instead I'd like to invest my body with meaning by means of union of yours, and thereby make my sensuality bearable. (But I don't want it)

The motif of the mirror-stage appears and gets connected with the incompetent signifier in the text:

[...] when, standing in front of the mirror, I examined my face, sure enough I discerned among my features the sign of what you called good, a certain, maybe the angle of the trenches was different [...], I couldn't tell, transfiguration, which hadn't been there before, but, well, it was there then, since when everything has changed, I stare

in vain in the mirror, I look in vain for it, I don't find the sign in my face [...] (It looks like)

This may be connected to the fact that the aim of psychotherapy is precisely to produce self-narratives that prevent the development of repressions. It is important to mention that hermeneutical and narratological researches also emphasize that the human psyche has a narrative structure, too. By this structure we form the order among the events. The paradox of narratives derives directly from this: turning over causality present tense forms the past. Summarizing it, it is obvious that soliloquium as genre is a meaning-giving act to the past events. As in psychotherapy, memory gives a picture of the experiences lived through by the self itself, and it necessitates the understanding of the complex connection between temporality and personality.

Parallel to oblivion, death and passing are also in the focus of Oravec's work:

while we pursue our increasingly narrowing circles, and slowly but certainly get older, and, in the end, will give in, as to each other, to death. (And it's been going on like this)

It is highly important to notice the gesture that love (surrendering ourselves to each other) and death are semantically connected to each other is highly important to notice. Some of the prose poems lift the abandonment connected to love to the existential level of death:

[...] basically you didn't complain, but took leave of me with dignity, for which I envied you then, as I also envy you now, years later, when, as I read it in the newspapers, you took leave of life also, voluntarily, because you already knew back then, and I still haven't heard, how to loose. (It promised to be a casual affair)

The experience of passing is directly connected to a physical experience in the volume. Changing of the body is a meaning-making power. Trace-leaving also manifests itself by this as this becomes the indicator of the prose poems' topic:

I've traipsed around in the earthly spaces, I've done my business, I've looked for warmth in other laps, I've married and divorced, made one mistake after another, while my hair has thinned out, wrinkles have developed in the corners of my eyes, my back's bent over, my stomach's got a hole in it, and my nervous system is shot to hell. (If you knew)

It has to be noted that the corporeal subject appears in a fragmented and dismembered form in the text. This evokes the concept of Freud that describes the self as primarily a physical self in psychosomatic cases, leaving corporeal existence the only channel for experiencing the self. Contemporary psychoanalytic research connects physical suffering to the concept of self-loss. (In the text: »[...] the past will no longer exist for me, I'll be empty, like a disemboweled nut [...]« (*Someday too the pains will past*). In conclusion, the subject, the process of recollection and the text are also structured like a mosaic, what is more, the basic form of the inner speech is also fragmentary. This mosaic of thoughts may control the interpretation, when the text places the I into a recalling and interiorizing position:

[...] and your tears ran down my cheeks, only then did it cross my mind that you too had fallen into a trap, because you too had been thinking of somebody else, you too had substituted someone else for me. (It happened I had no place)

This short part of the text demonstrates that soliloquizing manner of speech opens up space for the body, voice or the psyche. The interiorizing process places the »other's life, thought, voice and look« inside, yet at the same time assumes the Other as an individual creature. This latter concept already shows a shift from the Derridan thought. In the text: »[...] all that remained of you were tights, breasts, gestures, screams, beads of perspiration, and all you were good for an object of erotic day-dreaming [...]« (*At first it was easy*). As Derrida writes:

The movement of interiorization keeps within us the life, thought, body, voice, look or soul of the other, but in the form of those hypomnemata, memoranda, signs, or symbols, images or mnesic representations which are only lacunary fragments, detached and dispersed – only »parts« of the departed other. In turn they are parts of us, included in us, in a memory which suddenly seems greater and older than us. (Derrida 1986, 37.)

It is an extra-ordinary characteristic, that the act of erasing and the subjects' change of roles happen in most cases simultaneously:

[...] and from then on I let you help me, though I knew that this help was no longer meant for me, for whom you still were who you've been, but for the stranger, who was no longer for you who he had been, but with whom I had to go on living, so that you too should be

just as alien to me, and so that I should think of you as someone who was, but who no longer is. (And then you said)

In these lines trace-leaving and the thought of resituating the subject are interwoven: in consequence of the abandonment in love the Other leaves a trace (»[...] at night I wake with a start in your empty place...«) (*My time's running out*), and interestingly this absence induces the resituating of the speaker. In this sense, self-identification and self-interpretation is generated by the fact that memory proves to be insufficient to reconstruct the past true to reality, but it creates a space based on lacks, absences and deformities. The deformed semantic space gives chance to the subject to form »new cognitive bridges«, and to resituate the I-You relationship by the narrative created this way. In my view, in the texts of Oravec, corporal materiality is not only the object of perception, which presents itself in its rare materiality, but – stepping out of the body-soul dichotomy – becomes the inherent factor of cognition. This way body can be imagined as a symptom, as an imprint, that wears the effects caused to the subject.

Here it is important to touch the subject-theory of Lacan (2017, 432). According to Lacan, the subject is constituted through loss. The subject travels through the chain of signifiers, the signified increasingly slips forward. The structure of differences and differentiations needed for self- reflection in the mind is formed through repressing the prime instinct-energies and losing the objects of desire (Kiss 1995, 8). Becoming an adult means that the self tries to stabilize and fix this spiral-like and constantly changing structure, and to form a stable meaning, but it is impossible. The integrated self is only an illusion, as it is foredoomed to paradox: it is the confrontation with the integrated self that wears the drama facing the Other. The result of this process in the fenotext of the prose poems is the constant attempt of the I to reach self-identification through the Other. The slip of the signifiers and the desire to find the stable meaning is also presented explicitly in the text:

[...] when, to speak plainly, I want you, it's a long time now since I wanted only to satisfy my fleshly needs, the dark instinctual, too, I'd like to invest my body with meaning by means of union of yours, and thereby make my sensuality bearable. (But I don't want it)

*I assume that the volume performs the deconstruction of the body in a way that it appreciates the body's materiality as a written sign, and it perceives it in the *visuality of the body* (the subject stands in front of the mirror and watches himself in the above mentioned part). This means that we can also talk about corporal*

textuality in connection with the prose poems. This corresponds with those post-modern views, which draw a parallel between the complexity of the self's structure and the undefined source of psychosomatic illnesses. Márta Csabai writes about this in the following way:

[...] somatization symptoms do not have any stable meaning. They show a similar picture with the contemporary descriptions of the self: undefined, obscure, accidental constructions. (Csabai 2005, 35)

If we pay attention to the descriptions of the body in the prose poems, it is to be found that the subject is presented as a dismembered and fragmented entity. This characteristic of the texts invokes the Freudian notion according to which in psychosomatic cases the self appears primarily as a corporal self. It means that the corporal self remains the only way for the patient to experience the whole self. According to modern corporeality theories and psychoanalytic researches, we know that the body is the area, the meeting point of psychic projections and social inscriptions which always takes part in the process of signifying. Modern psychoanalytic research connects physical suffering to the concept of self-loss: during the process of emptiness caused by illnesses, the self gets the possibility to form associative bridges, associations between the present and future self-states. '...the past will no longer exist for me, I'll be empty like a disemboweled nut...' ([*Someday too the pains will past*]). This way the associative structure created by memory can be connected to the mosaic-like nature of the speaking subject. Summarizing it all, it is obvious that the mosaic-like structure is the characteristic of the structure of the volume, the speaking subject's self, memory and inner speech as well. It is worth quoting a psychotherapist Tihamér Bakó:

As a result of the sexual abuse, the self got injured. The dismembered, split self is not able to be integrated. As if two self-states would be structured from this chaotic state: one formed after the trauma and one before the trauma. The one formed after the trauma is injured and protects itself by attacks, and it experiences a constant feeling of danger, thus it is always on the alert. The dominant, injured self-part takes over the control of the psychological functioning. [...] The unity of body and soul splits, the integrated psychological space collapses, pinches and loses the connection with the creative, spontaneous forces of the self that would be able to handle crisis efficiently. (Bakó 2005, 86.)

This description overlaps with the talking subject's characteristics in the volume: it is a desperately insistent, masochistic, almost paranoid subject that becomes empty by the end of the volume. In my opinion, the self that suffers from self-loss in the prose poems is able to regenerate itself by cognitive bridges structured by memory.

4. Conclusion

The volume of Oravecz *When You Became She* stands alone in Hungarian contemporary poetry with its unique methods of writing and expressing the innermost processes of the self. The first prose poem starts with the hopeful words of the beginning of a love affair, while the second part of the poem contrasts it as a counterplay, depicting the demise of the love relationship. "In the beginning..." – so begins the first prose poem, and proceeds with a methodical and very sophisticated catalog of the conditions existing at the beginning of the relationship. The poem continues this way: "and the whole thing began all over again." While the speaker strives with himself, moving in the spiral structure of the ever-emerging memories, this struggle creates a narrative that might be called "anti-biography": Oravecz's language is an effort to prove that biography is deconstructed and finding self-identification is a circular process. The poems describe the events of the relationship with a powerful final thought, creating a chain of prose poems and many versions of the losing of the Other. In the prose poems of Oravecz the recollection and the inner speech perform the attempt of the self-identification, and the artistic text is the result of this process. This volume creates a uniquely sensitive and sophisticatedly developed depiction of love, and represents how trace-leaving operates in language, memory, body and in the *corpus* of the text itself. The interweaving of these different layers and dimensions makes this volume of prose poems outstanding in Hungarian literature.

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