

## Orsolya Kaszás (Jyväskylä): Gender aspects in the Love Poetry by and Monograph on Árpád Tóth

My purpose is to apply the perspective and methods of feminist research to the analysis of love poems by the 20<sup>th</sup> century Hungarian poet, Árpád Tóth, and to the reflection upon these poems in a monograph about the poet by a male author (László Kardos). My supposition is that in this case, literary theory can be used productively in light of how the disposition of the poems and monograph are linked to the basic ideas of feminism. I will approach my topic from a wider perspective. At the beginning of this article, the chosen branches of the research will be introduced in brief with respect to my topic. The next step, which is the most adequate one regarding my work, is to analyse the love poems and the given chapter of the monograph from a feminist point of view. The main conclusions of the article will follow a summary of my results.

In my article, the first phase of feminist literary criticism, which took place particularly in America during the 1960's, is especially significant since my purpose is to show how the great Hungarian male classic, Árpád Tóth, can be connected with typical perspectives of early feminist criticism, particularly regarding the images of women in his love poems. Having a place in the patriarchal literary canon, and following the disposition of other 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> century men writing about women, he can be seen as an ideal target for feminist criticism. Early feminist criticism observed the texts of 18-19th century male classics and considered them to give an inaccurate and false image of women. As a conclusion, it disclosed how male writers introduced women in a black and white fashion, either as angels or whores. In poems they are generally without concrete characteristics, their presence only emphasizing the lyrical 'self'. They appear passive in contrast to men who are often active. Men are the incarnations of positivity, while women only represent something that men are not – negative identities whose characteristics reflect men's own fears and desires. Women receive values only in relation to men, not on their own merit<sup>1</sup>.

In analysis regarding the love chapter of the monograph about Árpád Tóth, I also, to a large extent, use ideas from third phase feminism by employing the classification of Jonathan Culler (1998)<sup>2</sup>. According to Culler, during this phase feminist critics analysed binary oppositions and general values connected to males and females. They additionally started investigating articles by male critics, and their purpose was to prove the presence of a "phallic" perspective in these works. The chapter can be interpreted as a representative of conventional male criticism and as such, it can be deconstructed revealing its "phallic" disposition without difficulties posed by the reading methods (against the grain) of feminist criticism.

I begin by investigating Tóth's love poetry<sup>3</sup>. It clearly has two detached groups which follow each other chronologically: poems belonging to the first group were written before 1912, and poems belonging to the second group were written after

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<sup>1</sup> TODD, Janet (1988): *Feminist literary history. A Defence*. Cambridge, Polity Press, pp. 20-24

<sup>2</sup> CULLER, Jonathan (1982): *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982. pp. 31-84.

<sup>3</sup> Tóth Árpád összes versei és novellái, edit. URBÁN, László, Szeged, Szukits Könyvkiadó, 2001.

1912. The first type of love poems represents many women who do not have any significance for the lyrical 'self', they merely mean temporary joy for him. In contrast, in poems belonging to the second type there is only one woman who means almost everything for the suffering 'I'. Nonetheless, they have something in common – none of the women mentioned were given any characteristics. Their single ambition and purpose of existence is to reinforce the message, that is the sorrow, which has the 'self' entirely in its power and does not enable him to live a normal, happy life and the lyrical 'self' simply has to accept this fate and the closeness of death.

Still there are some differences between the two groups. Women's role in the first one is to remind the 'self' of the meaninglessness of life by their insignificance. Their attitudes and forms of their appearance show variety – they are sometimes ex-lovers whom the 'self' recalls with bitterness or pure sorrow:

“...szépíti a lankadt tájat újra  
A setét ujjú alázatos este. ...  
Mint régen egy lány, ki mióta elment,  
Oly fáradt illatú nekem az élet,  
Mint most a mély és elsötétült kertek...”  
(*Esti szonett*, 1909)

“The dark-fingered humble evening  
Beautifies the tired scenery again...  
Like a girl a long time ago ever since she left,  
Life is so tired-smelling  
Like now the deep and darkened gardens...”  
(*Evening Sonnet*)

Sometimes they are almost whores who do not have real, deep feelings, especially not for the 'I'. Thus, they are not what the 'self' would imagine them to look like, and in turn he feels disappointment:

“Ez, ez hát a derű? ez a túlkönnyű játék?...  
– Ez hát az élő öröm, mely kinná sose  
dermed?  
A boldog szerelem?...  
S oldalt hajlok mosolygva, lustán s a lány  
szemébe  
Fúvom szivarom füstjét...”  
(*Derű?*; 1911)

“Is this, this the serenity? This too-easy play?...  
– Is this the living joy which never becomes pain?  
Is this the happy love?....  
And I lean aside and blow the smoke  
into the girl's face...”  
(*Serenity?*)

“Egy asszony kellene... ne lenne más, csak  
asszony,  
Kinek csak vig enyeltés, ha fáradt homlokom  
Kecses mellére hajlik s tréfa, ha átfogom...  
Ki tettetőn figyelne, ha szóba kezdene  
Arról ajakam: mi az, mi olykor elsetétít  
S titkon tükörben nézné fénylő csecsebecsét,  
Míg halkán felnevetné...” (*Vergődés*, 1909)

“I would need a woman... She should not be else  
than only a woman,  
For whom it is only a joyful flirt as my tired forehead  
Bends upon her charming breast, and it is a joke  
when I grasp her...  
Who would pretend to listen when  
My lips began to speak what it is that sometimes  
darkens me,  
And who would watch her shining trinkets in the  
mirror,  
Until I quietly burst out laughing...”  
(*Struggling*)

They can also belong to an imagined world in which they become entirely obscure and unapproachable:

“Vörös márványból építék neked  
Házat fehér madarak bús szigetjén,  
Ahol örökös, rózsaszín, hideg fény  
Borong a végtelen vizek felett...”  
(*Szobák*, 1909)

“I build you a house of red marble  
On the sad island of white birds,  
Where there is an eternal, pink, cold light  
Over the endless waters...”  
(*Rooms*)

Belonging to a dream or a fantasy, the women also refer to the unreachability of perfect happiness. The reason for the inconceivability of the mistress is certainly not

the lack of poetical tools, yet there is apparently no will to make an exact description of her. The hopeless love belonging to the imagination, the fantasy or the past is only a pretext for the 'I' to meditate on the emptiness and meaninglessness of life and to communicate his resignation and desire for death. Consider the following three examples – in the poem *Tavaszi elégia* (1909) the contemplation about the mistress ends with these lines:

“Hazaindultam aztán, bús dolgokon tünődve:  
E furcsa földi létre mi végre kelle lennem?  
Vágynom melegre, fényre és karcsu testü nőkre  
S bolyongni félszegen, magányos esti  
csendben?”

“Then I left for home thinking of sad things:  
Why I had to be born into this strange earthly life?  
To desire warm, light and slim-bodied women  
And to clumsily wander in the lonely evening  
silence?”

Similarly, in *Légyott* (1909) the description of the empty and valueless mistress in the first stanza changes into the closeness of death which is the central motif of the poem in the second stanza. The dark atmosphere had in practice already been made in advance by the first one.

“S búsongva eltünődtem: egy-két perc, s  
csendesesen  
Majd útra készülök, kabát, kalap, bot... s vége.  
Lassan leballagok a hús feketeségbe... S a  
halálra gondoltam...”

“And I was grievingly thinking: one or two minutes  
and then  
Quietly I will prepare for leaving, coat, hat, stick...  
and then it ends.  
I will be trudging down into the cold blackness ...  
And I was thinking of death.”

In *Esti könnyek* (*Evening tears*) the unfulfilled love and desire for the lover form only an introduction to some deeper thoughts of suffering.

“Lehunytam a szemem, s jaj, az ő arcát láttam,  
Jaj, az ő testét láttam szűz ágya tiszta vásznán,  
S csodáltam mélyen és szelíden és paráznán,  
S úgy jajdult el szívemben vérző, ledöfött vágyam  
Oly búsan s elvetetten, mint harc után a tarlón  
Az átszúrt katona...  
S egyszerre felzokogtam...s elzuhantak hosszan  
bús kezeim  
Az asztalon s átfonták egymást kétségbeesve  
S imádkoztak...s szemem tétován, tágan leste,  
Mint csavarja szép ujjuk torzzá a szörnyű kín...”

“I closed my eyes and alas, I saw her face,  
Ah, I saw her body on the clean linen of her virgin  
bed,  
And I admired her deeply and gently and lustfully,  
And my bleeding, stabbed desire of my heart  
wailed  
So sadly and lonely like the soldier  
on the stubble-field after the fight  
And all at once I started to cry... and my sad  
hands fell down... and my eyes were watching  
hesitatingly, wide-opened  
How their beautiful fingers were being turned  
deformed by a dreadful pain...”

Accordingly, in every case women confirm the sorrow and this is expressed through them, by the thoughts of being awakened in the 'self' by them. One can come to the conclusion that they are simply used for better visualizing the sorrow.

In the second group this is no longer the case. The female character has changed radically, to being the very opposite of the ones in the previous group. This is known from the 'self's attitude towards her. His feeling is a deep one, no longer the feeling of unimportance and indifference. The poems *Hajnali szerenád* and *Tárcámban egy kép*, which introduce this new love theme in the year of 1912, are sound examples of the difference:

“Annuska, alszol? bús utcák során  
A bús hajnalban járok egyedül,  
S hogy vigasztaljon, halkan hegedül  
Fantáziám, a magános cigány:  
Erdőkkel, éggel, ajkad mosolyával  
Hangfogózza dalát, míg ballagok,  
Jó volna most megállni ablakod  
Alatt egy édes, fájó szerenáddal...”  
(*Hajnali szerenád*);

“Annuska, are you sleeping? I am walking the line  
of sad streets  
In the sad dawn alone  
And in order to comfort, my fantasy, the lonely  
gipsy plays the violin quietly:  
plays his song about forests, sky, the smile of  
your lips  
While I am wandering,  
It would be good to stop now under your window  
With a sweet, painful serenade...”  
(*Serenade at dawn*);

„Mért jó: meleg szemedbe nézni hosszan?...  
Mily jó is: elfáradtan öledbe ereszkedni...  
E két sovár, égő szem végigragyogja vállad,  
Ó mint két nyomorú és félnék tolvajlámpás,  
Mely csak téged kutat éjben, magányban s  
búban. ...  
Mily furcsa, hogy nekem most tőled el kell  
mennem,  
Mily furcsa, hogy az utcán majd szivarozva lépek  
S lekötnek majd ügyek, gondok és emberek.  
S csak úgy viszlek szivemben, mint tárcámban  
egy képet,  
Mit futó pillanatra s csak nagyritkán lehet,  
Hogy megcsókoljam én, titokban elővennem.”  
(*Tárcámban egy kép*)

„Why is it good: to watch into your warm eyes for  
long? ...  
How good it is: to descend wearily to your lap...  
These two eager, burning eyes are shining your  
shoulders over,  
Ah, like two miserable and shy thief-lanterns,  
Which are searching for you only in the night, in  
the loneliness and the sorrow...  
How strange it is that I now have to go away from  
you,  
How strange it is that I will step smoking on the  
street,  
And cases, cares and people engage my  
attention,  
And I am carrying you in my heart just like a  
photo in my pocket-book,  
Which I can take out in secret, only for a moment  
and rarely in order to kiss it.”  
(*There is a Photo in my Pocket-Book*).

She means everything to him but in a curious way. She gets all of her great values in relation to sorrow, since she is able to compensate somewhat for this frightening power which determines everything in the ‘self’s life. Compensation, the easing of pain lasts only for a moment, nevertheless it is still something and makes it reasonable for the ‘self’ to love the woman who can give him momentary peace. Yet, she is not merely somebody who can stand and fight against this sorrow, rather the lyrical ‘self’ asks her to join him in the sorrow and share it with him:

“A szívem adnám oda hegedűnek,  
A szívem, melyből bú és vágy zokog,  
Lopjon szivedbe enyhe bánatot...  
Álmodban, mit reggelre elfelejtesz,  
Sirasd el az én züllött életem.”  
(*Hajnali szerenád*);

“I would give my heart as a violin,  
My heart, in which sorrow and desire are crying,  
In order to steal mild sadness...  
In your dream which you forget before morning,  
Mourn for my decayed life.”  
(*Serenade at dawn*);

“Csönd. Ajkaim lezárva.  
Ringass: árva az árvát,  
Igy, sírj csak, rámhajolva,  
Megalni volna jó ma.”  
(*Rímes, furcsa játék*)

“Silence. My lips are closed.  
Swing me: like an orphan does an orphan,  
It would be good to die today.”  
(*Rhymed, strange play*)

The very occurrence of this odd union means consolation for the ‘I’. For he does not need to undergo the sorrow on his own anymore, but with a companion, which makes this situation easier. Nevertheless it is a strange enough interpretation of love

– living together is not situated in the perspective of a hopeful and bright future but in the perspective of sorrow. In spite of the facts that the female character and her significance have changed strikingly and that she now refers to one person, the ‘self’ has preserved his disposition, his way of valuation, which is definitely sorrow-centered. In this sense, the two types of poems are not to be investigated as isolated, but instead from the point of view which connects them. As in the works of most great male 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> century classics, this love poetry preserved the general male perception which puts emphasis on personal experiences, activity and characteristics of the male ‘self’ in relation to whom female individuals remain obscure and passive.

Let me continue this discussion with another example taken from the third phase of feminist criticism. This example is from László Kardos’s monograph on Árpád Tóth (1955)<sup>4</sup>. The Marxist concept of ideology stimulated feminist criticism in the 1980s to attain critical awareness when dealing with texts. It suggests reading the texts against the grain in order to reveal – using the terminology of psychoanalysis – the “unconscious”, the deep structure of the texts. Especially the British version of feminist literary theory realized this method by searching for marks of ideology in the text<sup>5</sup>.

László Kardos seems to take a positivist conception in his book, since many times he explains the phenomena in poetry with biographical details. He notices the main difference between the two groups of Tóth’s love poems, which concerns the attributions of female characters: While the woman of the late poems appears valuable, “female characters flashing in the early poems are always playful, kind, beautiful, young and often flirtatiously provoking. Their life’s only content is to bring light into the man’s life... the female characters flashing in the poet’s imagination never give the impression of being his equals”. Kardos goes further by finding the latter characters referring to the lovers of the unmarried poet and the former one to his wife (Lichtmann Anna).

Herewith, Kardos seems not only to have forgotten the fact that literary works are not equal to their author’s biography, but this point of his monograph also reveals something else. He finds these two types of love poems natural in their relation to the poet’s real life – the worthless women of the first group become the numerous, unimportant lovers before marriage and the woman of the second group becomes the wife who is above all. It also seems that he considers the progression of these two types to be obvious and trivial in a man’s life, including the opinion that it always happens in that order and in that quality – women before marriage or outside of it do not have any significance in relation to the wife who can enjoy the privileges of “the only woman” and has a special place in the man’s heart. Although the love poetry seems to undergo a change approximately at the same time when Tóth met his future bride (1911), it cannot be assumed that his poetry refers to this fact so expressly. Further, this cannot make the two phenomena equal purely because of the attributions of the lyrical characters (identical with the values of patriarchal ideology and its system of signs). For that reason we have to take a reserved attitude towards

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<sup>4</sup> KARDOS, László (1955): *Tóth Árpád*, Budapest, Akadémiai Kiadó, pp. 76, 218.: “A korai versekben felvillanó nő-alakok mindig játékosak, kedvesek, szépek, fiatalok és gyakran kacéran kötekedők. Életük korlátolt tartalma: fényt vinni a férfi életébe.” (76.), “Az is kitetszett az első korszak verseiből, hogy a költő képzeletében megvillanó nő-alakok sohasem hatnak a férfival egyértékű valakinek...” (218.)

<sup>5</sup> TODD, Janet (1988): *Feminist literary history. A Defence*. Cambridge, Polity Press, pp. 85-91.

the whole monograph, since it proved to be concerned with showing the male ideology.

In sum, in my article I have tried to illustrate that the love poetry of Árpád Tóth and the love chapter in the monograph about him, written by László Kardos, can be set in the framework of feminist literary conception. The former can be linked to the particular means of interpretation and perspective used at the very beginning of feminist criticism, the latter to the later stage of establishing accounts of male critics' works. As a conclusion, I can say that this method illuminates the poems slightly differently than the conservative mode of interpretation. This is due to the fact that it shows how the two groups of poems, which superficially seem to be isolated from each other, can belong together in the sense of their images of women. In addition, this theory can also be interesting in the case of the monograph as it discloses the very male perspective and disposition, which makes its conclusions and valuations almost invalid.

Although feminist critical awareness appears useful in this case by showing that we cannot believe in the sentences of a clearly concerned text without doubts, I am not sure as to whether we can go further in our analysis of Tóth by making use of the criticism. Using feminist criticism as a point of departure seems to be new and exciting as there have not been any feminist analyses of Tóth's poetry to date. Yet, we may only be able to make trivial statements about the presence of male ideology in the texts, the presence of which was certainly natural at that time.