

Kaláka's Musical Interpretation of Attila József's "Tudod, hogy nincs bocsánat"
("Mercy Denied Forever")

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1. Introduction

Attila József is probably one of the most influential poets in Hungary, yet his poems are not well known in the United States. I have no intention to change that today; I chose to talk about him only because I believe that his work remains relevant to us today.

Attila József was born in 1905 and during his short lifetime – he died at the age of 32 – created a rich life work that, besides poetry, includes philosophically oriented writings that deal with questions of the absolute, God, and society. He was influenced by Hegel, Marx, and Freud, but his work can not be described as a continuation of his intellectual ancestors, because he gave a different answer to those questions.

His work is widely considered innovative in terms of his use of poetic language and the new perspective he introduced. This perspective could be simply described as a 'bounded infinity' as described in his essay 'Inspiration and Nation.' This bounded infinity expression derives from Einstein's worldview as a dynamic and constantly changing universe as opposed to the Newtonian static kind.¹ In this respect a poem could be described as a bounded infinity in which some elements of reality become important and outshine others, thus becoming our reality. This reality is temporary, but within it, one can create a worldview that is in some ways cosmic or universal. In my presentation I would like to talk about this 'universal aspect' that

¹György Tverdota, *Határolt végtelenség: József Attila-versek elemzése* (Budapest: Osiris Kiadó, 2005).

Attila József has created, alongside a musical interpretation, by the Hungarian band Kaláka, of his poem 'Mercy denied forever', to show how his poetic structure is built.

2. About the poem

This poem was published in 1937, the year he died, and it shows explicitly that in his final years he still struggled with the concept of sin, which is the key to understanding this poem. He tries to reconcile the sinner and innocent, which gives the poem a beautiful direction toward the possibility of love. Also, the sinful aspect shows us a very personal relation to God.

The poem in English

Mercy denied forever

Mercy denied forever,
pain's but a vain endeavour,
be what you should be: manly.
Grass in your footsteps ever.

Sin is beyond endurance,
weeping, vain self-abhorrence.
Even for this, be grateful,
warrant for your existence.

Renounce self-flagellations,
promises, accusations,
both conquest and surrender,
the call of crowds and nations.

Avoid another's uses,
nor spy into abuses.
And do not scorn the human:
you are what it produces.

You begged for pity, croaking,
in vain, remember, choking,
and bore yourself false witness
in your own trial's convoking.

You sought a father, even
on earth, if not in heaven.
In Freud the wicked children
you found, still unforgiven.

You trusted words' illusions,
paid comforters' delusions,
but no one ever trusted
the goodness of your visions.

They loved you by their lying,
your lying killed your loving,
therefore the pistol-barrel
aimed at your blank heart dying.

Or cast out doctrine's power,
hope true love yet will flower,
doglike, you'd trust whoever
trusted you for an hour.

Zsuzsanna Ozsváth and Frederick Turner

First, I would like to point out that the first line, 'Mercy denied forever' can be considered somewhat problematic in the poem. The word 'mercy' in the original Hungarian could be translated as forgiveness (*bocsánat*). This forgiveness or the lack of it has many connotations that battle for meaning in the poem. Is it a general kind of forgiveness, a forgiveness of sins, mercy itself, or salvation? The translators, Zsuzsanna Ozsváth and Frederick Turner, chose the word 'mercy', which has a religious aspect. Why do we need mercy? Because of the original sin, or because of something else?

Secondly, we don't know what the poet refers to that there is no forgiveness for. The poem, like many of his poems, starts with a cryptic statement that nonetheless gives a feeling of revelation. As if God could tell us what was in store. This is a common poetic expressive pose: the lyrical 'I' is coping with some serious subject while disowning responsibility, because he is only talking in the name of someone else.

It's not that surprising that Attila József's whole oeuvre battles with sin and guilt. Consider the final stanza of his poem 'Sin'² in my translation: "Maybe my sin is childish / and

² Attila József, "Bűn." The original in Hungarian: <https://epa.oszk.hu/00000/00022/00596/18820.htm>

very simple. / The world becomes small / and I let it play. / Because I don't believe in God, / and if there is one / don't mind me / I will absolve myself / sin is undeniable.”

Attila József's way of thinking is closely based on the existentialist philosophical tradition.³ Heidegger's term 'Selbstein' (önmaga-lét) is the closest to the poetic self that can be seen in action in its relation to the 'absolute'. In the mentioned poem the (lyrical) *I* and the *World* are the realisations of these categories. This pair of opposites results from sin: the existence of the *World* and the existence of the (lyrical) *I*.⁴ These two can never fit together. These ontological opposites roughly show the unknowable *World*'s majesty and the *I*'s finite pitifulness compared to it. 'I will absolve myself': the act of absolving is determined to fail, yet this poetry tries again and again to do so, which gives it a religious aspect like mercy. Why is it sinful to constantly try to absolve myself? Because it ruins the order of the Christian world. It becomes an act of rebellion that tries to reach the unknowable, the majestic. I would like to give another example to make this clear.

In his poem 'Our Poet and His Age' (Költőnk és kora), the constant struggle is shown metaphorically by a body stuck to Earth and a balloon attached to it, always trying to lift its subject into the air. It is not hard to spot the pair of opposites constantly struggling, for example the mortal and the immortal, the body and the soul, an opposition that gives structure to these poems. In this dialectical system, one can leave this burden behind only through love, through letting the lyrical *I* go.

We can feel that the poem 'Mercy denied forever', the focus of this essay, also offers us a kind of moral, practical guide on how to achieve the desired result, how to let go of the self, of the *I*. 'Renounce self-flagellations,/promises, accusations,/ both conquest and surrender.' Avoid another's uses, / nor spy into abuses.' A downsizing, the dismantling of a human image

³ András Lengyel, "József Attila önlét terminusáról," *Irodalomtörténet* (2001), 611-623.

tempted by sin. Sin becomes a condition of Attila József's poetics, and the attempt to break it down is a task. What remains is a memory, the radical act, the release of the one who testified against himself in his own trial.

This creates a third existence—a kind of synthesis—in which the *I* is always reflected by the universal aspect of the world. This is most evident in the shift from individual to general modes of speech. The connection of the general and the individual (the *World* and the *I*) is a characteristic of a cosmic language, where the attempt to dissolve the difference is key: 'You sought a father, even / on earth, if not in heaven.' This could be distressing in its own way, when it takes the form of continual helplessness or complete resignation. This is also the phase of the possibility of creating something new – often a new self that is somehow a synthesis of the *World* and the *I* – but that would be too long to explain here.

3. The musical interpretation

Without continuing to analyse the poem, I would like to show how Kaláka's musical interpretation illuminates what I've been discussing. Kaláka is a Budapest-based band founded in 1969, most famous for their many musical interpretations of Hungarian poems. Their repertoire also includes religious, folk music and children's songs. They play an important role in preserving Hungarian culture by making literature more appealing and understandable to the public.

What is important to us, in the music as well as the poem, is the emerging duality and the desire to resolve it. Many times, musical arrangements can show more than philological or even philosophical ideas, because they allow us to see (or hear) the given subject from a new perspective, which the current methodology overlooks. The LP that includes the track 'Mercy

denied forever'⁵ contains 18 other musical renditions of József poems, which share a general, structural characteristic: a breaking point or peak in the songs, which can be heard musically in the counterpoint of the refrain and the lyrics. This feature is presented in almost every song, but is most prominent in 'Mercy denied forever'.

The musical arrangement is similar to the construction of the poem. In the poem the state of being sinful is contrasted with the state of being innocent, resulting in a rupture. In the song, the tension is created by the piercing sound of the flute. Here, moreover, there are no lyrics, only the melodic part remains, which creates an impact that makes you feel the breaking point that appears in the text.

The song builds gradually to a peak, with instruments and intensity increasing. The whole poem is sung (except for one stanza, which is omitted), and then the first stanza is repeated before the flute comes in. After the flute, part of the poem is sung again, and then once again the song returns to the first stanza. This circularity is, as it were, intended to present eternity, the story of a failed life path, which again flows into our basic thesis into the duality, the paradox of the *I* and the *World*. As for why there is no forgiveness, we can answer here what that really means in this poem. There is no excuse for not using one's own life to release guilt, for making excuses. Sin here is a concept analogous to original sin, which brings death. However, this death can also be redemptive. The almost ecstatic musical passage, which is not repeated (the only thing repeated is the lyrics), can also be interpreted as a kind of response to a gesture that is both huge and untouchable, but on the other hand loving and present everywhere.

⁵ The album which contains the song 'Mercy denied forever' can be found at: <https://open.spotify.com/album/OLB4kd2wFH2CnPLPMI060j?autoplay=true>. The song itself can be found here: <https://open.spotify.com/track/2Zku8R0QmCQTTxnI0RIT57?si=ac9d0fa758e34889>.

Love is presented to us in a verse similar to a revelation: ‘Or cast doctrine’s power / hope true love yet will flower’. Love is similar to sin. It can enter the emptiness of the human vanities that have been demolished so far. For those who have managed to reach the state that the poem built, all that remains is love. Yet, the ending turns ironically and with criticism towards love as well, since it is nothing more than a constant desire to be understood and accepted by someone. Like a dog, “who would trust whoever trusted it for an hour.”

4. Summary

We can see that concepts such as love and sin become unintelligible without a pair of radical opposites. This split can usually be seen in the creation of the *World* and the *I*, or other pairs of opposites (usually a particular and a whole existence), through which the work of art, in this case the poem, tries to give a new meaning to the *I* in a cosmic worldview by breaking down and reinterpreting the conventional, assumed concept of the *I*.

This strongly appears and becomes perceptible in the musical arrangement of a pair of musical opposites--the opposition of the lyrics and the melody--which gives rise to a perception of a cosmic opposition in the text. Through the music, we can intuit an old order breaking down and a new one possibly coming into being—through a struggle and release that we know as our own.