How others see …: **landscape and identity in a Radnóti poem**

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Abstract:

Miklós Radnóti's poem *How others see …* is often recited in Hungary at school celebrations as a poetic expression of patriotism, a description of laudable national identity, and this interpretation is supported by some literary critics. A stylistic analysis of the poem, however, also admits the reading that it is a humanistic pacifist poem that redefines patriotism as opposed to the expected historical view. This article aims to describe the textual pattern and give some explanation for the differing readings. The textual pattern presents sets of contrasts between landscapes for bombing and landscapes for life, above and below, far and near, ignorance and knowledge, collective sin and individual innocence. The great number of allusions to textual and historical contexts, however, creates the possibility of reading the poem as a defence of true, grass roots national identity. The same landscape indirectly characterises the pilot, who, tragically, only sees what he should destroy, and the poet, who sees and remembers idyllic moments of life. Yet it is not simply the essential, the national, relation to the landscape that shapes people's identities, but their attitude to war and peace, the roles they play in the landscape, the identities they construct. As a coda to the analysis I shall describe how I would teach stylistics to advanced learners of English through this poem.

Key words:

patttern: the internal linguistic design, formation of relationships between words

pointer: allusions that tie the text to contexts and other texts

implied reader: a construct that can appreciate most values and allusions in the text

1. Introduction

The title, *How others see…* harks back to the saying that beauty is in the eyes of the beholder. The poet, having rhetorically asserted his ignorance of how others see this land, will proceed to reveal a thorough knowledge of what he thinks the war pilot sees of the country. (His pretended ignorance is emphasised in the original Hungarian title, which is *I cannot know.*) The foreign pilot does not see people, only destroyable objects, while the local poet sees individuals, and not just the present, but the past and the future too. Who the people are in the poem and what identity assignment and claiming takes place in it, will be an issue to examine but first let's look at the text.

Miklós Radnóti:

HOW OTHERS SEE...

1 How others see this region, I cannot understand:
2 to me, this little country is menaced motherland
3 engulfed by flames, the world of my childhood swaying far,
4 and I am grown from this land as tender branches are
5 from trees. And may my body sink into this soil in the end.
6 When plants reach out towards me, I greet them as a friend
7 and know their names and flowers. I am at home here, knowing
8 the people on the road and why and where they are going --
9 and how I know the meaning when, by a summer lane,
10 the sunset paints the walls with a liquid flame of pain!
11 The pilot cannot help seeing a war map from the sky,
12 he can't tell below the home of Vörösmarty Mihály;*
13 what can he identify there? grim barracks and factories,
14 but I see steeples, oxen, farms, grasshoppers and bees;
15 his lens spies out the vital production plants, the fields,
16 but I can see the worker, afraid below, who shields
17 his labour, a singing orchard, a vineyard and a wood,
18 among the graves a granny mourning her widowhood;
19 and what may seem a plant or a rail line that must be wrecked
20 is just a signal-house with the keeper standing erect
21 and waving his red flag, lots of children around the guard;

22 and a shepherd dog might roll in the dust in a factory yard;
23 and there's the park with the footprints of past loves and the
24 flavour of childhood kisses -- the honey, the cranberry I still savour,
25 and on my way to school, by the kerbside, to postpone
26 a spot-test one certain morning, I stepped upon a stone:
27 look! There's the stone whose magic the pilot cannot see
28 for no instrument would merge it in his topography.
29 True, guilty are we all here, our people as the rest,
30 we know our faults, we know how and when we have transgressed,
31 but there are blameless lives too of toil and poetry and passion,
32 and infants also, with infinite capacity for compassion --
33 they will protect its glow while in gloomy shelters until
34 once more our land is marked out by the finger of peace, then they will
35 respond to our muffled words with new voices fresh and bright.
36 Spread your vast wings above us, protective cloud of night.

(Jan. 17, 1944)

Translator: Thomas Lang

2. Patterns and Pointers

2.1 Starting from the opening two lines:

'How others see this region, I cannot understand:
to me, this little country is menaced motherland'

one can see that the title is front shifted, foregrounded, the object is this region which will be qualified in what follows as a motherland, and the third element is the poet's not understanding, which will prove to be a rhetorical statement, as the poet is going to compare his view with what he thinks the pilot's view of the country is. The first ten lines relate the poet's unalienable attachment to his country, he was born there, lives there, hopes to be buried there, speaks the language, can understand the people. Line 11 starts the series of contrasts between the pilot's and the poet's views, that will be carried on until line 28.

Let's first see the words used to express place, space, : 1.*region*, 2.little country, menaced motherland, 3. world of my childhood, 4, this land, 5.this soil 7. at home here, 8. on the road, 9. summer lane 10.walls, 11. *war map*, sky, 12 home, 13. *grim barracks, factories*, 14. steeples, farms, 15. *production plants*, *fields,* 17. singing orchard, vineyard and wood, 18. graves, 19. *plant, rail line*, 20. signal-house, 22. factory yard, 23. park, footprints,25. way to school, by the kerbside, , 26. a stone, 27. the stone, 28. *topography*, 29. here 33. gloomy shelters, 34. our land, 36. protective cloud.

The underlined words all stand for the country as a container of the other elements of the landscape. Not once is the country named, as you can see from the list; it's only an allusion to Vörösmarty Mihály that would need a footnote to reveal the name of the country.
The indented words belong to what the pilot sees and which can be grouped under the semantic set of bombables. In this poem the pilot is an intruder, a destroyer, but if we look up his person in Radnóti's oeuvre, immediately the Second Ecloga (1941) springs to mind, in which the pilot is individualised; he is frightened, wants to go home to his love, and is interested in the work of the poet, even asks him to write about him, about his work as a miserable destroyer. The poet's answer is yes, he would, provided he survives. In that poem the idea that this region is only a map from above and below the world is hiding in shelters is already mentioned, and here too there is no military engagement between attacker and victim. The pilot in *How others see*.. mechanically creates havoc, nothing further about his mission or person is known that would humanise him.

2.1 Above and below, far and near

The poet looks at the land on the ground and sees every place filled with people who all belong there and who go about their everyday tasks and doings. He himself feels, line 4, that he has grown out of this land as tender branches grow from trees. While in Auden's *Musée des Beaux Arts* the people ignoring historical events seem indifferent, even callous, here the historical events are despicable and the people's obliviousness is not presented as reprehensible. The negative view of historical heights, ignominious death that blows *above* us who are *down*trodden (allusion to a poem in which Radnóti says that he lived in an age when people got so debased that they came to killing even without orders) is a recurring idea of Radnóti's. Ferencz, (2005) in his monograph, quotes a letter Radnóti wrote to a friend,

Aladár Komlós, in which Radnóti states that he finds his nation down here on the ground, not high up on bookshelves: ‘ …my “nation” does not shout at me from the hEight of bookshelves, get lost stinky Jew, the landscapes of my country open up before me, the shrub does not tear larger on me, the tree does not stand on tiptoe, so that I should not reach its fruit. ‘ Ferencz: 625 (IHN 190) Compare this quote with lines 6-7

6 When plants reach out towards me, I greet them as a friend

7 and know their names and flowers. I am at home here,…

I deliberately withheld the information that Radnóti was a Jew who had been shot into a common grave during the Holocaust, whose last poems were found on his decomposing body after exhumation, (Pomogáts, Kiss) for stylistics primarily deals with patterns of the text under investigation and not pointers to other texts or social contexts. However in certain cases it is impossible to even describe, let alone interpret, a text, without its background. The pattern without its pointers is not interpretable. The truth of that statement becomes evident in cases where the real reader’s culture is far removed from the culture of the implied reader.

The contrast between high and low is supplemented with vision from far and near: from above, from far, important details are lost. The pilot’s view is flat, like a map. The poet’s view is deep, shows grades of size, see line 14, where he sees steeples, oxen, farms, grasshoppers and bees, and, most importantly, the poet can see how things change in time.

The motive of change is reflected in the cradle to grave idea: 3. childhood, 4. grown from this land, 5, body sink into the soil, 12. Vörösmarty Mihály, 16. worker, 18. granny, wiDowhood, 20. keeper, 21. children, 23 footprints of past love, 24. childhood kisses, 25, on my way to school, , 29 people, 32. infants. That the seven ages of man are more or less enumerated in the above list is probably an acceptable finding. Vörösmarty Mihály stands out, the PRoper name is definitely foregrounded in the poem and in our cradle-to-grave list. For the Hungarian ‘real reader’ the reference should be clear: Vörösmarty was a 19th century poet, who wrote our National Song, (*Appeal*, in the translation below) tying the nation to the ’landscape’, the territory, and offering the cradle to grave perspective of faithfulness. The relevant lines are as follows:

> ’Oh! Magyar, keep immovably
> your native country’s trust,
> for it has borne you and at death
> will consecrate your dust!

No other spot in all the world
can touch your heart as home
let fortune bless or fortune curse,
from hence you shall not roam!'

/translator: Watson Kirkconnell/

Vörömarty is already in the picture, and soon Kölcsey will be conjured upt too, his National Anthem is the other song we sing, one before and one after the school ceremony, and it goes:

'Bless the Magyar, Lord we pray,
Nor in bounty fail him,
Shield him in the bloody fray,
When his foes assail him,
He whom ill-luck long has cursed
This year grant him pleasure,
He has suffered with the worst
Time beyond all measure.'

/translator: George Szirtes/

This hymn asks the Lord to shield the suffering nation, to be compared with the last line of our poem:
36 'Spread your vast wings above us, protective cloud of night'.
In the light of allusions to such texts and many others from Hungarian literature, Radnóti's other poems and even The Book of Psalms in the Bible, *an inner landscape*, so to speak, the genre of the poem resembles a prayer for protection.

2.2. Magic

In the first version of the poem the poet asked the Virgin Mary, Hungary's patron saint, to shield us with her cloak, but he changed it, making the last line not so overtly Hungarian, nor so religious. Radnóti converted to Catholicism and took the change of religion seriously: to all intents and purposes he was a practising catholic, which of course did not mean that he would not have to be branded with the yellow star and be persecuted. In Kőlcsey's hymn the Lord is also asked to avert ill-luck for some time, which is not alien to Radnóti hoping for, in line 34,

the land to be marked out again by the finger of peace. Magic is needed, like AS in the case of the stone, which ends the enumeration of the contrasting set of things the pilot and the poet can see. Lines 25-7 25 ’
to postpone
26 a spot-test one certain morning, I stepped upon a stone:
27 look! There’s the stone whose magic the pilot cannot see’
In this translation the word magic appears, which prompted me to notice that only magic, miracles can help, the people cannot defend themselves more than in the parallel situation the schoolboy defending himself by stepping on a stone.
But in Gina Gönczi’s translation:
‘And walking off to school on the edge of the road,
to avoid being called on, I stepped on a stone;
look, here's the stone, but from above, this cannot be seen,’
magic is not mentioned, and the deictic direction is changed too, there’s the stone is brought closer and becomes here’s the stone.

Finally in Zsuzsana Oszváth and Frederic Turner’s translation.

‘and on the way to school you'd not step on a crack,
let you'd forget your lesson or break your mother's back;
the pilot cannot see that paving-stone, that grass:
to see all this there is no instrument or glass.’

the stone becomes both a crack and a paving stone, or rather an irregular paving stone, and the rhyme, I believe, brings in the mother’s back, a good lesson for the stylistician who takes every word seriously in a text. Here we have three translations, three versions of the same text, and each might lead to a different slant of interpretation, and what’s more, a different pattern in the description. However differently this stone is translated its essence is unchanged: this stone stands out, it is memorable. Almost everyone who has read the poem, studied it at school, according to my informal inquiry, will remember the stone, it has such great appeal. The stone, as I have pointed out earlier, ends the list of things the poet sees and the pilot cannot see, and so it has a significant place in the pattern, it works in fact as a full stop.

3. Guilt and identity

Line 28 has always been found shocking. After being lulled into the cosy feeling of 'us' being innocent victims, suddenly the poet says

' True, guilty are we all here, our people as the rest,'

Is this a reference to original sin, as everyone is involved? Radnóti continues to plead for mercy for all of us, for amongst us there are the compassionate, the innocent too, those who will carry on the 'glow' when wartime ends, when our generation disappears, see the change in personal pronouns from 'we' to 'they'.

Before trying to explain this sudden statement in terms of identity, let us clarify the term identity.

Identity is category into which a person or thing can be read as belonging. (Joseph, 2004, chapter 2) It is not static, as it keeps finding expression within the confines of sameness and selfhood. Ricoeur (1991) distinguishes sameness (in Latin *idem*) from selfhood (in Latin *ipse)* making the first exactly identical, of extreme resemblance and the second recognisably identical, seeS uninterrupted continuity between the first and the last stage of development. Oscillating between the two extremes, identities of temporal permanence appear, whose coherence reflects a momentary constellation of multiple identity, a palimpsest of belonging.

Propositions can be true or false, but representations can only be interpreted relative to the situation in which they appear. Identities, being part of representation, are situated transitory coherences that can only be interpreted in context, in time and place. The individuals 'down below' in the poem belong to the same nation at war yet they show no belligerence, they do not perform a war-like patriotic identity, completely in contrast with to the pilot's perceived identity.

Ascribing identity to someone partly depends on the attitude of the person doing the ascribing. There must be some difference between how the pilot feels and the impression he makes, but in this poem the poet does not present that side of the pilot's identity, clearly the pilot is only a part of the war machinery, not a full human subject, he only acts in role.

Role expectations may vary radically from one social encounter to the other. Wartime social encounters between enemies differ significantly from peacetime encounters, so it is unfair to ascribe an essential, one faceted identity to the pilot. But we cannot help going too far. Joseph, (2004, p.38), calls this over-reading, since the scant data on which it is based cannot adequately support the inferences made.

Generally nationality, class and race are considered as essentially given. Most identity work, however, is constructivist; individuals construct categorical belonging both for themselves and for others. The people on the ground essentially belong to one nation and it turns out that as a nation they are not innocent. Only some of them are without sin, and they are the ones who will, in the future,
35' respond to our muffled words with new voices fresh and bright.'

Relationally we can speak of an exclusionary view of identity that separates the self from the other, while the inclusionary view claims allegiance, highlights connections between self and other. The norm for one is what it is not, separation, and for the other what it is, connection. The first emphasises standing alone, the second being related. Reading the poem one feels that the non-exclusionary aspect dominates: everyone is guilty, as a nation we all are at war. It is not belonging to a nation but belonging to the compassionate that ensures that we can still construct a guiltless identity.

3.1. Reception

When Radnóti read out this poem to his friends in Budapest it created consternation. How could he write a quasi-patriotic poem when his motherland disowned him? When the ruling elite, the leaders of the nation, those above us, allied with the Nazis? Tamás Major, a well-known actor went so far as to suggest that Radnóti should write another poem, because, he said, the British pilot was fighting for the A good cause, the regime that supported Hitler must be defeated at any cost. The logic of the poem is lopsided, but the feeling is correct: everyone was horrified by what was happening to the country, to the people, BY what war can do to us all and the Aesthetic beauty of the poem gave voice to that feeling. It is difficult to categorise Radnóti's view of his national identity, or of the patriotic tradition that in his time went awry and excommunicated racially different members of society, but as Ferecz says:
'…for him, excommunicated and sentenced to death, nothing else remained but to take stock of what could not be taken away of FROM? him: his identity, which had nothing to do with slogans or historical greats, but which he pieced together from tiny flickers of the world.' (Ferencz: 622.) When some months later Radnóti read out the poem to fellow sufferers in a labour camp, everyone was moved and asked him to read it again. By then the Germans had overrun the country, the bombing had become fierce, the Red Army was approaching, hundreds of thousands of Hungarians, soldiers and civilians, had died, all out war was

ravaging the country. Those much-tortured people heard the voice and did not analyse the logic.

4. Teaching

What follows is a brief description of what I would do in an advanced language class of Hungarian students learning English to exploit this poem for teaching both language and stylistics. As language learners cannot but creatively guess at meanings, versions of the same text help them understand the essence of the text while the complete analysis of one single version might not only limit their creativity, but also overwhelm them with descriptive detail. This way essential and incidental features can be told apart and the significance of slight differences in couching can be appreciated. What follows is not a final lesson plan, with pacing, interaction pattern, etc, but a tentative staging which could be adapted to the needs and wants of a particular class.

1. First I give them the Lang translation and ask them to translate it back into Hungarian. They will probably know parts of it by heart. I help with the new words, and finally distribute the original Hungarian poem.
2. We compare our translations with the original and then try to interpret the poem
3. After discussing their views, I ask whether they prefer a patriotic or a compassionate reading, and how they would describe the kind of patriotism that appears in the poem.
4. Then I ask what linguistic evidence they can find to support their choice
5. We look for linguistic patterns, first without any terms, and later I explain the meaning (as in Short) and uses of
   focaliser, point of view, perception, deixis
   deviation from external and internal norms
   foregrounding
   parallelism
   identity construction (as in Joseph)
6. Once the students are reasonably familiar with the terms, *they jot them down as vocabulary*, we look for examples in the text and 'decorate' the texts by underlining, etc.

7. Vörösmarty is foregrounded, he serves as a pointer. We discuss the relevance.
8. Radnóti also is a pointer, we talk about his life and possible motivation.
9. We read another of the English translations mentioned above and compare it with the Lang translation, find happy, appropriate solutions and less suitable ones from the point of view of rhythm and turn of phrase.
10. Homework: Read the third translation

    Choose and learn five useful new words from it.

    Write one paragraph about

what you think may make the poem popular

or

your view of the third translation

or

any aspect of the poem that appeals to you

5. Conclusion

Radnóti's poem allows the stylistician to investigate a case of the relationship between inner and outer landscapes, focaliser, and identity construction. It also provides an opportunity for trying out a combination of linguistic patterns and allusion-carrying pointers, to discuss and re-qualify two dominant interpretations of the poem, pacifist and patriotic, and rely on both kinds of elucidation, paying attention to both textual and contextual features. As stylistics is concerned with the text, the textual pattern was decisive in the analysis, but without clarifying the message of the pointers, this text-based description could not have said enough about the poem, and certainly could not have lead to an understanding of its reception.

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