

“The silence of the hook is what you must note.”

János Pilinszky’s Centenary (1921-1981)

by Nicole Waldner

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János Pilinszky, circa 1955, photo from divany.hu

In 1946, a year after the Hungarian poet János Pilinszky returned from the war to which he’d been conscripted in the eleventh hour, he published his first volume of poetry *Trapeze and Parallel Bars* (1940-1946) to national acclaim. In this slim volume, and all of his subsequent slim volumes, Pilinszky wrote of what he had seen in the war: the hell and horror of the death camps, a turning

point for humanity from which there would be no return. In 1948, after failing to win in Hungary's first ever democratic elections, the Communists staged a hostile takeover and established the dictatorship that would rule the country for over forty years. Pilinszky's voice, along with all other non-conformist voices from across Hungarian society, would be silenced for the next decade, and beyond. It was not Pilinszky's anti-fascist stance to which the Communists objected; it was his Catholicism. Born and raised in a middle-class, intellectual, religious family, Pilinszky retained a lifelong relationship with the church, writing and editing for the small Catholic periodicals that just barely managed to survive the Communist era. Pilinszky's Catholicism was both intimate and intimately bound up in sacrifice, suffering, responsibility and atonement. It is from this place of quiet fixity that Pilinszky's poetry was born, and it influenced all of his existential and poetic choices.

After more than a decade of enforced silence by the Communists, Pilinszky published *On the Third Day* (1946-1958). From this time on his poetry was neither forbidden nor supported by the state, but it would be tolerated. Within this narrow, ambiguous corridor of latitude, Pilinszky was able to publish again, and even explore such ideologically murky subjects as faith. His poetry often engaged in an open monologue with God, for example in "Complaint", which is full of longing and a passionate desire for absolution. His faith, however, is never expressed as a *fait accompli*, but rather its all-too-human struggles are laid bare, as in "Under the Winter Sky". Sometimes though, Pilinszky's faith is so luminous and so generous that we are swept up in its all-encompassing embrace, as in "Straight Labyrinth". (Unless otherwise stated, all of the Pilinszky quotes are taken from *The Desert of Love*, selected poems translated by János Csokits and Ted Hughes, Anvil Press Poetry, London 1989.)

"Complaint", from *On the Third Day* (1946-1958) – stanzas 4 & 5

Only let me count on you, God.
I want your nearness so much,
shivering
makes the love of loves even fierier.

Bury me in your embrace.
Do not leave me to the frost.
Even if my air is used up
my calling will not tire.

“Under the Winter Sky”, from *Trapeze and Parallel Bars* (1940-1946) – stanzas 4 & 5

I shall not deceive myself any longer.
There is nobody to help me.
Suffering cannot redeem me.
No god will protect me.

Nothing could be simpler than this
or more horrible.
The biblical monsters
start slowly towards me.

“Straight Labyrinth”, from *Splinters* (1971-1972)

How will it be, that flying back
of which only symbols tell—
altar, shrine, handshake,
homecoming, embrace,
table laid in the grass, under the trees,

where there is no first and no last guest—
how will it be, in the end how will it be
the wide-winged ascending plunge
back into the flaming
common nest of the focus?—I don't know,
and yet, if I know anything,
I know this—this hot corridor,
this labyrinth straight as an arrow
and fuller and fuller, freer and freer
the fact that we are flying.

In an interview about his wartime experiences, Pilinszky described the journey on the train into Germany in 1944, to the fringes of civilisation's collapse: "I took a large pile of books with me to war. And I kept throwing them out of the railway carriage one after the other. Every book became anachronistic. But the Gospels underwent a miraculous metamorphosis." The metamorphosis of which Pilinszky spoke was a "stripping away of lesser realities" and this stripping away, along with his determination to never look away, became his life's mission. Deploying language that was seemingly simple and unadorned, with a brutal economy that was nevertheless lyrical and radiant, Pilinszky wrote about humanity's bleakest acts. Below is "Harbach 1944", named for the German town to where Pilinszky was initially drafted, and first saw the prisoners of the concentration camps.

"Harbach 1944", from *On the Third Day* (1946-1958) – stanzas 1 to 3

At all times I see them.

The moon brilliant. A black shaft looms up.

Beneath it, harnessed men

haul a huge cart.

Dragging that giant wagon

which grows bigger as the night grows

their bodies are divided among

the dust, their hunger and their trembling.

They are carrying the road, they are carrying the land,

the bleak potato fields,

and all they know is the weight of everything,

the burden of the skylines

Pilinszky's startling gift for economy was an aesthetic choice after Auschwitz, but it also stemmed from a seminal childhood experience: "Should someone ask, what after all is my poetic language, in truth I should have to answer: it is some sort of lack of language, a sort of linguistic poverty." Pilinszky's maternal aunt, from whom he had first learned to speak, later met with an accident which left her with aphasia. In "Conversations with Sheryl Sutton: The Novel of a Dialogue" (translated by Peter Jay & Eva Major, Sheep Meadow Press, New York, 1992), he recalls trying to teach his aunt some new words with little success, and how weeks later a breakthrough came with a single word: "The few words that she did employ were uttered with a fearful intensity."

In "The Passion", in just six, short, loaded lines, Pilinszky pits the transience of life against the eternity of the universe, making it clear that, as Faulkner put it: "The past is never dead. It's not even past."

“The Passion”, from *Big City Icons* (1959-1970)

Only the warmth of the slaughter-house,
its geranium pungency, its soft shellac,
only the sun exists.

In a glass-cased silence
the butcher-boys wash down. Yet what has happened
somehow cannot even now finish.

In “Conversations with Sheryl Sutton”, Pilinszky also wrote of the enduring influence of the war on his writing: “It gave me the words of poverty and the touch of the anonymous poets.” This humility, more readily found among saints than artists, was key to Pilinszky’s moral authority and his enduring popularity in Hungary, a country riven by corruption, then and now. His unblinking, sustained confrontation with the depths of human suffering was communicated with such taut, electric urgency that it could not fail to catch the eye of his greatest translator, a man who was himself no stranger to tragedy.



(left to right) Ted Hughes, János Csokits & János Pilinszky, circa 1977, photograph Carol Hughes

In 1964, Olwyn Hughes introduced János Csokits (pronounced Chockitch) to her brother Ted. Csokits was a Hungarian poet/journalist living in exile in Paris. When Hughes told Csokits he was looking for poets from behind the Iron Curtain to feature in a new poetry magazine he wanted to start up, Csokits told him about János Pilinszky: “He is burning with a white-flame, dry, intellectual, powerful and his poetry has the clarity I have rarely met in lyric poets.” That poetry magazine was, of course, *Modern Poetry in Translation*, which Hughes co-founded with Daniel Weissbort in 1965. Pilinszky was not published in their inaugural edition, but many other eastern European poets were, among them Herbert, Holub and Popa. Weissbort explained that what Hughes was looking for was: “...the East European, post-war sound.” It would take Hughes over a decade to capture Pilinszky’s sound, and the key to its success would be the literal, word-for-word translations, painstakingly prepared by Csokits. Csokits spoke fairly good English, but crucially he was not a native English speaker. As a result, the literals sounded odd and jarring, but this very quality appealed to Hughes because he wasn’t looking for polished English, he was looking for the unmediated urgency he felt was lacking in the local poetry scene at that time. He called Csokits’ literals “a mass of pure finds” and repeatedly stated that in many places they could not be improved upon. In their rawness, Hughes sensed a freshness, a kind of un-English English, and he seized upon that as a way into Pilinszky’s post-Holocaust subject matter.

In their strict faithfulness to the literals, what was lost in the Hughes/Csokits translations were the formal elements of Pilinszky’s originals. In “*Translating Poetry: The Double Labyrinth*” (edited by Daniel Weissbort, University of Iowa Press, 1989), Csokits explained the impact this choice had on their versions: “Without the softening effect of the original metre and rhyme

scheme the impact of some of these poems can be very painful; they sound harsher and Pilinszky's view of the world appears grimmer than in Hungarian." Csokits went on to say: "...by sticking to the 'linguistic poverty' of Pilinszky's poetry we remained faithful to the inner core of his message and its mode of expression: the unadorned poetry of the dispossessed."

In the later Clive Wilmer/George Gömöri translations, the rhyme scheme has in many places been reinstated, so that technically they are closer to the Pilinszky originals, but with their somewhat distracting melody they feel further removed in spirit. Here are two examples comparing the Wilmer/Gömöri translations with the Hughes/Csokits versions (Wilmer/Gömöri poems taken from *Passio*, translated by Clive Wilmer & George Gömöri, Worple Press, London, 2012).

"Harbach 1944" – 5th stanza

(W/G)

Villages keep clear of them
and gates avoid their feet.
The distances approaching them
falter and retreat.

(H/Cs)

The villages stay clear of them,
the gateways withdraw.
The distance that has come to meet them,
reels away back.

"The Passion of Ravensbrück" – 2nd stanza

(W/G)

Fearful to be self alone:
The pores are visible,
With everything around so huge
And everything so small.
And that was it. As for the rest –
for the rest, without a sound,

simply forgetting to cry out,
the body hit the ground.

(H/Cs)

He is horribly alone.

His pores are visible.

Everything about him is so gigantic,
everything is so tiny.

And this is all.

The rest—

the rest was simply

that he forgot to cry out

before he collapsed.

Pilinszky once famously, and rather ambiguously stated: “I would like to write as if I had remained silent.” In the introduction to *The Desert of Love*, when considering Pilinszky’s statement, Hughes wrote: “He is not alone among modern poets, particularly those of his generation and experience, in his obsession with personal silence.” But instead of retreating into silence, Pilinszky created work in which the spaces of silence become possible, like the silence of penitent prayer, a silence that amplifies after every close reading of his poetry. The title of this essay is taken from “Exhortation”, Pilinszky’s burning plea to us to bear witness, both to human suffering and the terrible silence that surrounds it. It reads like a poet’s credo, and a priestly admonition.

“Exhortation”, from *Splinters* (1971-1972) – 1st stanza

Not the respiration. The gasping.

Not the wedding table. The falling
scraps, the chill, the shadows.
Not the gesture. Not the hysteria.
The silence of the hook is what you must note.

In “As I Was”, Pilinszky writes of the silence that surrounds those who return from war. Away from pat inspirational heroism, there is walled silence, a two-way incomprehension that radiates out from those who return, and from those to whom they return.

“As I Was”, from *Splinters* (1971-1972)

As I was at the start
so, all along, I have remained.
The way I began, so I will go on to the end.
Like the convict who, returning
to his village, goes on being silent.
Speechless he sits in front of his glass of wine.

Perhaps the most difficult silence of all in Pilinszky’s poetry, is the silence of complicity and evasion. In Hungary, this complicity is rooted in historical events, as the Hungarians were in allied lockstep with the Nazis, decimating over half a million of their Jewish citizens.

“On the Wall of a K-Z Lager”, from *On the Third Day* (1946-1958) – stanzas 1 & 2

Where you have fallen, you stay.
In the whole universe, this is your place.
Just this single spot.
But you have made this your utterly.

The countryside evades you.
House, mill, poplar,
each thing strives to be free of you
as if it were mutating in nothingness.

To read Pilinszky's poetry is to be confronted by the knowledge that silence assumes many guises; that evasion is a lie; and that without humility, responsibility and atonement, there can be no grace. In the lean, laser clarity of his unsparing words we see what he wanted us to see: man-made destruction and suffering that knows no end. Pilinszky's poetry challenged the injustice and brutality of both Fascism and Communism, just as it continues to challenge the hypocrisy, intolerance, greed and corruption of Viktor Orbán's regime in today's Hungary, where his poetry is revered, and his acclaim and stature live on. Pilinszky's masterpiece "Apocrypha" was a poem that Hughes called Pilinszky's "summary, ultimate statement". It feels like a fitting way to end this centenary tribute to the great master.

"Apocrypha", from *On the Third Day* (1946-1958) – part 1

1

Everything will be forsaken then

The silence of the heavens will be set apart
and forever apart
the broken-down fields of the finished world,
and apart
the silence of dog-kennels.
In the air a fleeing host of birds.

And we shall see the rising sun
dumb as a demented eye-pupil
and calm as a watching beast.

But keeping vigil in banishment
because that night
I cannot sleep I toss
as the tree with its thousand leaves
and at dead of night I speak as the tree:

Do you know the drifting of the years
the years over the crumpled fields?
Do you understand the wrinkle
of transience? Do you comprehend
my care-gnarled hands? Do you know
the name of orphanage? Do you know
what pain treads the unlifting darkness
with cleft hooves, with webbed feet?
The night, the cold, the pit. Do you know
the convict's head twisted askew?
Do you know the caked troughs, the tortures
of the abyss?

The sun rose. Sticks of trees blackening
in the infra-red of the wrathful sky.
So I depart. Facing devastation
a man is walking, without a word.
He has nothing. He has his shadow.
And his stick. And his prison garb.

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