

## **It Cannot Answer**

### **A Platon Karataev Song Inspired by the Oeuvre of Sándor Csoóri**

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This article is about the Hungarian poet Sándor Csoóri and about a project in which bands are writing songs based on his work. In addition to presenting Sándor Csoóri and the project, I will write about my own band, Platon Karataev, about the lyrics of the song we created from Csoóri excerpts, and about the relationship between lyrics and poetry in general. In particular, I will examine how a text—or, in this case, a collection of text fragments—can be transformed into the lyrics of a song.

#### **Sándor Csoóri**

Sándor Csoóri (1930-2016) was a Hungarian poet, essayist, and prose writer, one of the most significant Hungarian-language authors of the 20th century. He was born in 1930 in Zámoly to a Protestant peasant family. After graduating from high school, he studied at the Russian Institute of the Eötvös Loránd University but did not complete his studies. He worked for various cultural and literary magazines and newspapers and was a dramaturg for films. The Communist authorities soon realised that Csoóri was not an absolute supporter of the Communist government. In his writings, he criticised the dictatorship's destructive impact on individuals and society, with particular reference to the plight of the rural population. He was often under surveillance and censorship, sometimes for years. He could not receive any major recognition or awards. His first volume was published in 1954, when the influence of

the great Hungarian poet of the 19th century, Sándor Petőfi, was still felt. It was in the 1960s that his poetry came of age, with a metaphysical radiance radiating from his images, a series of unexpected and surprising associations, a personal tone that is always a mark of authenticity, and a commitment to the community.

In 2019, the publisher IAT published all his poems in four volumes, which allow us to follow his creative career in broad outline: *Poetic Journeys* (1951-1967), *Poetic Self-discovery* (1967-1977), *Poetic Arrival* (1980-1989), *On the Parnassus* (1994-2014).

For reasons of space and to avoid overemphasis, I have attempted only a brief biographical overview.

### **An album based on Csoóri's poems**

In 2021, a joint project was launched by the Hungarian actor Miklós H. Vecsei and the Nomad Generation Foundation, which manages the Csoóri legacy, to have contemporary artists compose songs to Csoóri's texts, thus reintroducing the writer's oeuvre more intensively into the literary conversation. Ten contemporary Hungarian bands, including Fran Palermo and the Balázs Szabó Band, are involved in the project. The compilation album will be released in December 2022 in digital and physical formats.

### **Platon Karataev**

Our band, Platon Karataev, was invited to take part in the Csoóri project. The ensemble was founded in 2016 in Budapest; its members are Sebestyén Czakó-Kurály, László Sallai, Soma Bradák, and Gergely Balla. The band is named after a character in Lev Tolstoy's *War and Peace* and has released three albums so far. The first album (*For Her*, 2017) is mainly inspired by Anglo-Saxon folk traditions and is acoustically orchestrated. 2020's *Atoms* explores more existential themes and moves towards a grander sound. And *Partért kiáltó* (*Crying for the Shore*), released in January 2022, is Platon Karataev's first Hungarian-language album, with water as the central element, a symbol of unity, identity and boundlessness. The band plays sold-out concerts in Hungary and at the biggest festivals,

and they have also toured Europe and performed at festivals such as Roadburn, Reeperbahn, Moscow Music Week and Zandari Festa Seoul.

### **Poetry and song lyrics**

There are and can be many definitions of a poem, but perhaps none of them is conclusive. Somewhere in the end, it is entirely subjective where a text becomes literature, and within this, where it becomes a poem. The borderline is even narrower and more relative when it comes to fathoming the nuances between poem and lyric. Since I believe that there is no universal truth regarding what makes a poem a poem, everyone has to come up with their own criteria in this regard. For me, a poem begins where, at the level of words, the fabric of the language cannot be woven any denser than the word phrase, line, or stanza that is being composed. So in my own—infinately subjective—definition, I approach the poem in terms of the conciseness of the text. Sándor Csoóri writes in his essay *The Remote Bored Man* that "We must now embark on a kind of writing in which the meaning of a single utterance is equivalent to the meaning of life." I think that this *ars poetica* is entirely parallel to my own approach: a struggle for meaning, perhaps illusory, reducing language to its highest density. But such concise lines can also occur in song lyrics, so we can see how free the passage between poem and lyric is. The big difference, however, is that in the latter case, the melody, the instrumentation, and the performance style can lend nuance and support to the lines, but when the poem is left to itself, everything stands or falls on the weight of the written or spoken word.

### **"It Cannot Answer"**

For the project I read through Csoóri's poetic work, which, it is important to stress, is only a fraction of the writer's oeuvre, since he also has a number of essays, studies, sociological novels, and political writings to his name. However, since we were originally invited to create a musical arrangement of a poem, I stuck to the poems, from which, after reading, I decided not to select a single text, but rather a collection of texts to which I would add my own lines. I

also often turned the original quotations inside out or put them in a different context, but I think the end result still bears a strong Csoórian flavour, sometimes illuminating the original lines from a new perspective.

I think that, from the point of view of the recipient, the author's expressive intentions in this case are completely irrelevant. From the reader's or listener's perspective, the author is dead, non-existent; the only thing that matters is to listen to himself, to what moves him. The lyrics may or may not accomplish this, but for the sake of the conference I will now briefly describe the process through which they were created. The lyrics are provided here in English translation.

### **The text of the song\***

#### *It Cannot Answer*

a plunging bird  
drops church towers onto the land  
the wind grates in the pits of its wings  
it alights on a needlehead

no more can the bird's lightweight  
body warm the cooled sky  
you covered the Sun  
the way flags drape the holiday

a congested, coughing birdsong  
rips a sea from the horizon  
please put an acacia compress  
on my tongue chafed with prayers

I listened to you closely  
but you didn't say  
that every church pew  
is a trench

I listened to you closely  
but you didn't say  
that every trench  
is a church pew

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\*This is an English translation of the lyrics. For the original Hungarian text, see the end of this document.

before my door  
a mute magnificence  
stands wordless

infinity  
hangs from it  
in rags

in its hand  
a long whip  
drives skyward

a star-forest  
my question  
it cannot answer

here is a sea  
I would trade  
my face for

there is no sea  
I would trade  
your face for

here is a sea  
I would trade  
my face for

there is no sea  
I would trade  
your face for

### **The song**

The song's genre is difficult to define precisely; it is guitar-based, so maybe rock is the basic genre, which definitely suits it, but it also draws from a wide range of subgenres, including progressive, alternative, indie, and psychedelic, with folk elements as well. If we want to categorise it definitively, perhaps "art rock" would be the best solution. Although the song has a traditional song structure, it differs from the usual forms. It starts with a stripped-down guitar, then come the vocals, later the drums, the bass, the other guitar and, which is typical for the band, two more vocal parts. The first half of the song builds gradually until it reaches

its climax. After that, there is a change of pace and rhythm, as if a new song were starting: a monotonous, psychedelic rush begins, which is interrupted by an a capella part, until the instrumental conclusion. The song is medium-tempo and written in a minor key. In this case, there are no abstract connections, beyond what is evident, between the melody and the text, so I will focus on detailing the latter.

### **Background to the lyrics, Csóóri influences**

Sándor Csoóri's poetry is permeated with mysticism, the confrontation with forces greater than himself, and psychedelia—not in the pop-cultural sense of the word, but as a way of exploring the deepest manifestations of the soul and mind. Over the years, we have moved more and more in this direction with Plato Karataev; the texts are in some way about wholeness and experiences of oneness, with mystical overtones. We want to speak in the most personal way about the most universal questions, and we also want people to come to our performances not to tune out but to tune in.

This realm beyond the person, beyond the self, that we want to speak about, is inarticulable, beyond the horizon of words. The very intention of expression distorts the experience, especially if it ends up being expressed at the level of words, that is, if silence becomes text. To speak of Oneness at the level of words is to offer the ocean a glass of water. It is futile and doomed to fail, but there is an inexplicable driving force that compels the author to do so nonetheless. One can only stammer about this subject, so what give nuance to these texts is the degree of stammering, that is, the extent to which one can approach the limits of language. I think that the verbalizable part of these experiences has almost without exception all been expressed in antiquity; an incredibly deep immersion can be found in the Bible, the Kabbalah, the Koran, Sufi mysticism, Vedic, Buddhist or Taoist writings, just to name a few. Csoóri drew primarily from the Christian tradition, particularly the Protestant tradition, but his images and lines are imbued with a mysticism and spirituality that transcends religions and denominations.

In the text of "It Cannot Answer," there is an opposition between institutionalised religions and mystical experiences, which is ultimately dissolved in unity and does not mark either with greater significance. The opening lines (a plunging bird / drops church towers onto the land) is a paraphrase of the lines from his poem "Early Dawn Lines" ("The delicate hour of suicides is passing. / From under the umbrella-dark trees the gaze emerges, / with mist in its wake and Danube-reflected light, / while a bird drops towers from its beak"). The image of the church emphasises the thematic marking mentioned above, and the act of falling creates tension, because we do not know whether it is an active or passive fall. In the dropping, there is the same dichotomy: it is an active action because of the letting go, but also passive because of the release, as opposed to throwing, hurling, which involves the target or the distance as the medium to be traversed. The sky as a realm beyond man, the landscape, the earth as something that can be received from man's perspective, the bird that can connect the two. In the Hungarian text, the first line is dominated by the letter "T" (Templom TornyoKaT ejT a TáJra), which is not so common in the language, and which could be, within the texture of the text, the church towers in the landscape, from the perspective of the bird falling upside down: ⊥.

The line "the wind grates in the pits of its wings / it alights on a needlehead" comes from the poem "Close the door on me": "and in the wing-pits of the bloodsuckers / does the breathing sand grate?" Instead of the sand, the wind creaks, an image that begins to move us away from the tangible state that corresponds to the physical laws of this world. As for the condensation of "on a needlehead," it includes the great scholastic question (How many angels can fit/dance on the head of a needle?), as well as the Christian proverb from the biblical Gospel of Matthew (It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God); meanwhile, the bird still lands on an object that can be understood from a human perspective.

"No more can the bird's lightweight / body warm the cooled sky / you covered the Sun / the way flags drape the holiday." The connection between heaven and earth, transcendence and man is broken; the two are finally separated. The Sun, as the Essence,

the symbol of the innermost Identity, is also covered, no who or by what is said. "Branch-fans cover their breasts / like flags draping the Feast," writes Csoóri in the poem "I Turn Toward the Wall," whose last line holds a poignant image: the Feast as the Essence covered by flags, which are merely a man-made symbol, a layer superimposed on reality.

"The sea was loosed from the horizon by a hand", says Csoóri in the poem "Farewell to Cuba," from which the line "a congested, coughing birdsong / rips a sea from the horizon / please put an acacia compress / on my tongue chafed with prayers" was developed. The sea as a symbol of unity, identity, boundlessness, which is beyond the realm of human perception and experience. The bird that connects the two worlds sings in vain, it is sick. ("in vain the trees wait / for your caresses, / for your crumbs the congested thrushes" – from the poem "Whispers for Two Voices"). Acacia is a symbol of immortality, rebirth, purity, but I only looked into this later, when I had already written the text. I went to a parochial school in Budapest, with a lot of acacia trees in the yard, which had a great effect on me every spring. Perhaps it was these experiences that led me to these words.

The next two stanzas concur with the musical climax and are also crucial to the lyrics. "The rows of pews are as long as the trenches," Csoóri writes in "Church Silence." in his poem. "I listened to you closely / but you didn't say / that every church pew / is a trench / I listened to you closely / but you didn't say / that every trench / is a church pew." Through this change of perspective, the contradictions found in the omen at the start of the first verse have likewise been dissolved.

There is then a big shift in the song, which is can also be perceived in the lyrics. The structure and rhythm change, four-syllable lines tumble forth, and the thematics move toward the mystical. The second half of the song is influenced by these Csoori lines: "black birds fly over the grassy steps, / I wait impatiently for someone / who in the emptiness of the dawn / will appear wordlessly at my door. / I don't ask him who he is, / but if infinity hangs from him in rags, / I smile." ("I'm Waiting for Someone"). "And you drive the stars into the sky / with a whip" ("An Rare Candidate for a Gust of Wind") "There was no country on earth to which I would have gone, / no sea for which I would have traded my face" ("In a Swish of Wings").

A door always signals a border, a passage between two worlds. It separates the known from the unknown, and it can only exist in the realm of duality, where points of reference are still intelligible, where things and concepts have boundaries. With speechlessness, silence, the beyond-words encounter with the sublime, with the transcendent, is intensified. The domain beyond the signs, the unity at the level of language, can only be spoken of in paradoxes, as shown in the following line: "infinity / hangs from it / in rags".

"in its hand / a long whip / drives skyward." The whip is a symbol of power, domination, leadership, and punishment. Because the sentence is broken here, it leaves tension, as we don't know who or what the whip is chasing up into the sky. "a star-forest / my question / it cannot answer." Here again the tension is released, as we are now in a reality beyond the person, beyond the individual, where everything is happening on a cosmic scale. Why can't he answer? Can he not answer? Is he not allowed to? Or does he not want to? We do not know, just as the question remains silent, perhaps because it cannot be articulated.

"here is a sea / I would trade / my face for // there is no sea / I would trade / your face for." The Self is completely dissolved, an experience of unity.

### **Links to Essay and Poems Cited (all by Sándor Csoóri)**

"A hosszútávú unatkozó" ("The Remote Bored Man"),  
<https://konyvtar.dia.hu/html/muvek/CSOORI/csoori00246a/csoori00248/csoori00248.html>.

"Kora hajnali sorok" ("Early Dawn Lines"),  
<https://konyvtar.dia.hu/html/muvek/CSOORI/csoori00526/csoori00893/csoori00893.html>.

"Zárd rám az ajtót" ("Close the Door on Me"),  
<https://konyvtar.dia.hu/html/muvek/CSOORI/csoori00526/csoori00841/csoori00841.html>.

"Befordulok a fal felé" ("I Turn Toward the Wall"),  
<https://konyvtar.dia.hu/html/muvek/CSOORI/csoori00526/csoori00545/csoori00545.html>.

"Búcsú Kubától" ("Farewell to Cuba"),  
<https://konyvtar.dia.hu/html/muvek/CSOORI/csoori00526/csoori00608/csoori00608.html>.

“Sugás két hangra” (“Whispers for Two Voices”),  
<https://konyvtar.dia.hu/html/muvek/CSOORI/csoori00526/csoori00789/csoori00789.html>.

“Templomi csönd” (“Church Silence”),  
<https://konyvtar.dia.hu/html/muvek/CSOORI/csoori00526/csoori01070/csoori01070.html>.

“Várom valakire” (“I’m Waiting for Someone”),  
<https://surlottgradics.wordpress.com/2012/05/07/csoori-sandor-versei/>.

“Egy-egy szélroham jelöltje” (“An Occasional Sign of a Gust of Wind”),  
<https://epa.oszk.hu/01300/01343/00068/pdf/20070925-94847.pdf>.

“Szárnysuhogásban” (“In a Swish of Wings”),  
<https://konyvtar.dia.hu/html/muvek/CSOORI/csoori00526/csoori01030/csoori01030.html>.

### Further Reading: Translations of Sándor Csoóri into English

Csoóri, Sándor. *Memory of Snow*, trans. Nicholas Kolumban. Lincoln, Mass.: Penmaen, 1983.

Csoóri, Sándor. *Selected poems*, trans. Len Roberts. Port Townsend, Wash.: Copper Canyon Press, 1992.

### Original Hungarian text of “Nem felelhet”

#### Nem felelhet

templomtornyokat ejt a tájra  
egy zuhanó madár  
csikorog a szárnya tövében a szél  
egy tű fokára száll

már nem melegítheti könnyű madártest  
húsa a kihűlt eget  
takartad a Napot  
mint zászlók az ünnepet

tengert oldoz a láthatártól  
egy hurutos madárdal  
imákkal horzsolts nyelvemet  
borogasd akáccal

én figyeltem rád  
de te nem mondtad

hogy lövészárók  
minden templompad

én figyeltem rád  
de te nem mondtad  
hogy minden lövészárók  
templompad

ajtóm előtt  
szótlantul áll  
néma fenség

lóg le róla  
rongyokban  
a végtelenség

kezében egy  
hosszú ostor  
égre kerget

csillag-erdőt  
kérdésekre  
nem felelhet

itt egy tenger  
melyre arcom  
elcserélném

nincsen tenger  
melyre arcom  
elcserélném

itt egy tenger  
melyre arcom  
elcserélném

nincsen tenger  
melyre arcom  
elcserélném