

The Muses of Cataclysm: Neoclassicism in Eastern European Holocaust Poetry

"Inter arma silent Musae" or "Among arms, the Muses are silent". The haunting literary echo of the cataclysmic events in Eastern Europe during the 1930s and 1940s not only challenges this adage¹ but also complements it with a particularly poignant twist: the Muses, it seems, are hauntingly vocal in the midst of the most horrendous of arms.

This essay aims to examine the impact and significance of classical antiquity on literature during one of the most calamitous periods in European history, the Holocaust, with a special focus on Eastern European Holocaust poetry.

To thoroughly understand the tendency, or rather, artistic reaction in question, it is essential to take note of the creative shifts that characterized the early 20th century. Partially in response to civil alienation, the military-technical revolution, the deterioration of faith in the traditional world order, and God, and the experience of the disintegration of communities, a series of interdisciplinary art programs emerged in the first third of the twentieth century, commonly described as avant-garde, which impugned the existing constructions of art, bringing forth new theories on aesthetics, tradition, and artistic value. While some movements dismantled artistic forms (e.g., Dadaism or Surrealism), others rebuilt them (e.g., Cubism or Constructivism), thoroughly reestablishing the affinity between the artist and art itself, instituting the ideal of the "inventor-engineer-artist" (Bière *et al.*, 2023). However, from the

¹ This maxim is often attributed to Cicero, despite the fact that the ancient orator never actually wrote this exactly. The actual Cicero quote (from Pro Milone IV. 10) is "Silent enim leges inter arma" or "For among arms, the laws are silent". "Inter arma silent Musae" is a paraphrase by Prussian art historian Wilhelm Bode (*Sapper and Weichsel, 2022*), which posterity nevertheless generally credits to Cicero.

1920s onwards, there was a marked shift away from the rebellious extremism of avant-garde movements, which rejected cultural continuity, towards directions that fostered artistic continuity as a counterbalance to the cultural pendulum. During a period when extreme ideologies were gaining ground, with the simultaneous emergence of the far-left (the Bolshevik takeover in Russia in 1917, the establishment of the Soviet Union in 1922, which preserved the transcontinental expansion of Soviet Russia's power, and the consolidation of Stalin's totalitarian dictatorship in 1927-28) and the far-right (the fascist takeover in 1922, Hitler's election as chancellor in 1933, Franco's Falangist acquisition of power in 1939), a demand became apparent in the art world for a return to artistic tradition as the preservation of moral values and humanity. One of the stylistic trends that emerged in this spirit was Neoclassicism, which, due to its ethical and theoretical foundation, had a particularly substantial influence on Eastern Europe during World War II, with antiquity, classical heritage, and the Greek-Latin tradition serving as a sort of retaining force, refuge and a form of resistance for authors of regional Holocaust poetry².

Neoclassicism³ encompassed numerous forms of conscious, strongly intertextual references to classical texts, ranging from the usage of ancient paratexts and philosophies, the metaleptic rewriting and paraphrasing of Ancient Greek and Roman literary works, to the adaptation of classical meters, genres, structures, and verse forms. In line with this, distinctive elements derived from the great figures of antiquity, who served as the ultimate embodiments of

² It is intriguing to take note of the fact that Fascist regimes are often associated with Neoclassicism as well. Hitler always favored classicism as opposed to experimental or modernist works and styles. (Silver, 2013) He considered the ancient Greeks to be the Nordic ancestors of Germans, and ancient symbols to be metaphors of power, superiority and greatness. In contrast, classicism appears in Holocaust poetry as a counterpoint to the destructive power of fascism, as a bearer of eternal human values, humanism and dignity, continuity and morality.

³ This specific terminology is used in Eastern European (e.g., Hungarian: újklasszicizmus; Polish: neoklasycyzm) literary theory to primarily refer to the period of literary history from the 1920s to the end of World War II, which is the subject of this essay. In contrast, Western European literary scholars tend to use this term to refer to the style of the Enlightenment period.

culture, knowledge, humanity, and civilization, became increasingly prevalent in the lyrical writings of a drifting Eastern Europe, and then in the poetry of the millions of victims of the Endlösung⁴. Thus, Virgil's shepherds and one of his most representative genres, the eclogue, alongside Horace's *Ars Poetica* and Anacreon's favored genre, the epigram, were revived, with the mass reappearance of hexameters, distichs, and iambs. The vocabulary, the motifs, clarity and the value communication of antiquity, its pillar- or heroic compass-like nature opened up new dimensions for the Eastern European poets of the Second World War and the Holocaust where they were able to form a dual connection with their ancient predecessors, relating to them in both an artistic and a human capacity, simultaneously carrying millennia of knowledge and honouring those who gave a special dictionary for speaking about the world in a unique and unprecedented way: a dictionary for creating art.

By studying specific oeuvres, it can be observed how diverse and multifarious the ancient legacy appears in Holocaust poetry. One of the most highly regarded and renowned Hungarian poets of the twentieth century, a victim of the Shoah⁵, Miklós Radnóti's Holocaust poetry primarily connects to the literary heritage of antiquity through structural and stylistic similarities, while also juxtaposing the state of the world and the situation of each individual in his own time with the alluded classical age. One of the most striking manifestations of the neoclassical approach in Radnóti's poetry is his recurring and ingenious utilization of the eclogue form. Radnóti follows Virgil, who revived and transformed the genre originating from Theocritus, both in his depiction of the pain and vulnerability of people oppressed by war (civil war in Virgil's case) and in his use of bucolic idylls as a backdrop in order to tell a sort of philosophical manifesto or artistic statement. Radnóti, “a twentieth-century Vergil” (Takács, 2013) shared his master's aptitude for addressing social, political, religious, and

⁴ English: ‘The Final Solution’, the code name for the program coordinated at the Wannsee Conference and conducted by Adolf Eichmann, under which the deportation of Jews to death camps began in 1942.

⁵ English: ‘a catastrophe’; the Hebrew term for the Holocaust

moral issues in such a way that he not only depicted the dispositions, concerns, and atmosphere of his time and at the most elevated artistic level but also enabled readers to connect with his work through omnipresent human themes. After translating Virgil's Eclogue IX in 1937, Radnóti began to develop his own cycle of eclogues primarily to express the conflict between an inhuman world and the individual's desire for happiness. Seven eclogues were completed (Eclogue VI is missing), of which the First follows the classical ancient tradition in its dialogical form, metric, and paratextual motto, which is taken from Virgil's Georgics ("*Quippe ubi fas versum atque nefas: tot bella per orbem, tam multae scelerum facies;...*"⁶). The question of the artist's role and responsibilities is already present in this piece, as it is throughout the rest of the collection, thus allowing the cycle to be interpreted as an examination of the legitimacy of poetry in times of war:

SHEPHERD

Dead is García Lorca! And no one has spoken a whisper!
News of the war speeds on — but poets are lost in the silence.
Gone in a flash! And Europe, did no one remember to mourn him?

POET

None ever noticed. Perhaps when the wind stirs ashes and embers,
there, it may stumble on fragments — a line that the fire has forgotten,
that is the part that remains: what the future may catch from the ruin.

1938

Eclogue I, lines 18-23, translation by me

⁶ English: "Here right and wrong are reversed: so many wars in the world, so many faces of evil..." (Translated by A.S. Kline, 2001)

POET

Free shall I be; the earth will release me from all binding.
Above the shattered world, the earth slowly blazes and burns.
The writing tablets have cracked and are broken into pieces.
Fly up, heavy-winged thought, rise on your mighty strong wings!

1943

Eclogue IV, lines 43-46, translation by me

Without commas, one line touching the other,
I write poems the way I live, in darkness,
blind, crossing the paper like a worm.
Flashlights, books – the guards took everything.
There's no mail, only fog drifts over the barracks.

1944

*Lager Haidenau*⁷, in the mountains above Žagubica

Eclogue VII, lines 14-18, translation by Steven Polgar, Stephen Berg, and S. J. Marks

However, Radnóti not only conveyed neoclassicism and its enduring moral strength in his eclogues; his resigned, archaic, highly rhetorical poems, e.g., *Fragment* (Hungarian: Töredék) and *À la recherche...* draw on the classical elegy genre, while one of his love poems, written

⁷ Lager Haidenau was a labor camp near Bor, Serbia, where Radnóti was held as a laborer and forced to work on railway construction. It was here, among other places, that he wrote his Arbeitslager poems (Hungarian: lágerversek) in The Bor Notebook (Hungarian: Bori notesz). In September, the camp was liquidated and laborers were forced to march westward. The extremely weakened Radnóti and 21 of his companions died during this march, by a shot in the back of the head by Hungarian and SS officers.

in a labour camp, *Letter to My Wife* (Hungarian: *Levél a hitveshez*), evokes Ovid's epistles and *Wavering Ode* (Hungarian: *Tétova óda*) revives the traditions of Pindar, retaining the tripartite structure and archaic Greek moral ideals, while departing from the epinician themes of the predecessor and instead expressing a blend of existential dread, suffocation, fear, hope, desire, and yearning for the idyl of the past and, most importantly, the loved one.

In addition to Radnóti's rich literary legacy, a significant number of Eastern European poets turned to this literary movement, adopting it as a moral stance and a preservation of universal human values. The fundamentally modernist Polish poet Zuzanna Ginczanka also employs Neoclassical motifs, allusions, and intertextual paratexts in her poem *Non omnis moriar*⁸ (the title is a quote from Horace's Ode III. 30) to highlight the contrast between European cultural tradition and the culturally destructive effects of Nazi atrocities against Jews. While the lesser-known Hungarian Éva Láng and the Yiddish-speaking Abraham Sutzkever, born in present-day Belarus, were more connected to classical antiquity in terms of genre (the latter in his 1930s neo-classical lyrical poetry against the apocalypse [Zaritt, 2020] or in his genre marker poem *Epitaphs*, written in the Vilna ghetto⁹) and imagery, the Polish poet Zbigniew Herbert implemented Neoclassicism more programmatically.

The moralist poet experienced the war years from a unique perspective, as a member of the resistance (Armia Krajowa or Home Army), which served as one of the cornerstones of his poetry: his works center around the question of personal responsibility, the borderline situations of human life, as well as oppression and freedom, through the lens of ethics, philosophy, history, and morality, operating a masterful balance between simultaneous ironic detachment and the deepest involvement possible. His distinctive, ironic, and intellectual

⁸ English: "Not all of me will die".

⁹ The World War II Jewish ghetto established in Vilnius, where Sutzkever and his wife were forced to live in from 1941, and from which they escaped through the woods in 1943 together with poet-musician Shmerke Kaczerginski.

poetic style is capable of encompassing the European classical heritage in a way that effortlessly connects the experience of modern man, subjected to institutionalized ideologies, with the threads of the gradually unfolding antique allegories. This duality is often accompanied by linguistically deconstructive forms (e.g., the absence of punctuation, the challenging of traditional typesetting), while the content of the poems holds the key to humanity's cultural history within its lines. The resistance his poems convey is proof of cultural continuity, as they display the artist as an ethical compass, as well as a need to describe the indescribable, and the importance of reflecting on eternal human values, or lack thereof. His frequent alter-ego, Mr. Cogito ¹⁰(Pan Cogito), is the poetic mouthpiece, the *raisonneur*, who appears in the universal dilemmas of human existence, between moral and non-moral, right and wrong. With Herbert's parallels between antiquity and the present day, contrasting the eternal with the ephemeral, he created an ethical symbol in the person of Mr. Cogito, who represents both intellectuals and the deeply moral yet doubt-ridden Everyman. In certain poems, idyll and reality, the mirage-like values of the distant past and the limitations of the modern individual stand in painful, self-reflective tension with each other:

[...]

and also the Acropolis, which I never fully understood,
patiently revealed to me its mutilated body.

– I ask You to reward the grey-haired old man
who, uninvited, brought me fruit
from his garden on the sun-scorched native island of Laertes' son.

and also Miss Helen from the misty isle of Mull
in the Hebrides, for receiving me in Greek fashion
and asking me to leave a lit lamp at night

¹⁰ The name derives from Descartes' famous quote, "Cogito, ergo sum," or "I think, therefore I am."

in the window facing Holy Iona,
so that the lights of the earth could greet each other.

Modlitwa Pana Cogito – podróżnika or *The Prayer of Pan Cogito - Traveller*, lines 30-41, translated by me

Nevertheless, one of Zbigniew Herbert's most programmatic poems, *Why the Classics*, in which classical culture emerges as a symbol in the life of a world overshadowed by war, scapegoating, pettiness, and gradual decay, is not a Mr. Cogito poem.

The lyric I of *Why the Classics*¹¹ is truly intriguing: at once infinitely impersonal, with no specific reference to the narrator, and at the same time infinitely evocative, presenting a terse yet precise image of a person who represents the unshakeable values of a bygone world, firmly and fiercely, but quietly - as the future around him begins to drift further and further away from his moral creed:

if art for its subject

will have a broken jar

a small broken soul

with a great self-pity

what will remain after us

will be like lovers' weeping

in a small dirty hotel

when wallpaper dawns

¹¹ The title can be interpreted both as the basis of an argument and as a rhetorical question. Therefore, the decaying present and future described in the poem anaphorically refer to the opposite of the title, i.e., the absence of classics.

What Will Happen (Co będzie), a poem that unpacks this idea further, is highly connected to *Why the Classics*, as the former describes a world without classics. In this future, there is no place for the lyrical self, since real art, the force that can elevate humanity, ceases to exist:

What will happen
when hands
fall away from poems

when in the other mountains
I drink dry water

this should not matter
but it does

what will poems become
when the breath departs
and the grace of speaking
is rejected

will I leave the table
and descend into the valley
where there resounds
new laughter
by a dark forest

Herbert's questions echo through the history of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, as they continue to gain new layers of interpretation while remaining pertinent. In this way, the poet has truly achieved what his ancient masters did: to be a moral reference point and a pledge for the preservation of culture.

The muses of Eastern European Holocaust poetry are the voices of perseverance, resistance, humanity, and hope. From Virgil to Pindar, Radnóti to Herbert, classical antiquity has served as a sustaining force that is remarkable not only in literary history but also in from a personal point of view: in this way, a stylistic trend was able to provide refuge, reassurance, security and connection during one of the darkest and most despairing periods in human history.

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