

## SWEARING AN OATH BY SHOUTING THE POEM PETŐFI AND PERFORMATIVE LANGUAGE IN POETRY

In the 1840s, literature, including poetry, appears more openly than usual in the public sphere of political action in Hungary, sometimes even daring to perform acts (speech acts) that shape history. One of the most decisive speech acts of the 1848 Revolution is an oath, uttered in verse in a *National Song* (Sándor Petőfi's *Nemzeti dal*, transl. by Frank Szomy)<sup>1</sup>, the genre designation of which is perhaps somewhat misleading from this point of view, at least considering that the Romantic genre convention of "song" does not necessarily embrace such a text without any constraints. Petőfi's poem is based on the division of voices in such a way that it culminates, as indicated by the plural of the refrain, in speech acts performed by a crowd that simulate (and, as it actually happened that year, in fact enforce) synchronous speaking. It carries out ceremonial acts of speech, emphatically performed in public. While thoroughly reconstructing the framework of the poem's reception at the time, primarily its use in cultural and political contexts, Péter Dávidházi argues that *Nemzeti dal* may be closer to the genre category of the so-called *verbunkos*, a (partly musical) genre that served the purposes of military recruiting<sup>2</sup>. The text was indeed used, quite successfully, to call armed men to war, men who were inducted as soldiers or home guardsmen – though not without some additional elements – precisely by reciting the chorus part of the poem.

The lyrical voice calling for an oath in the poem – partly assuming the role of the "oath-taking military chaplain" – conveys, or embodies, and verbalizes the call of the homeland, an explicitly political instance ("hí a haza", "the homeland calls"), the status of which is of course not entirely independent of the poem. One could even say that its existence and meaning is shaped or at least confirmed by the text. On the one hand, the call is also a call for help (the homeland in danger is given a voice, i.e. its existence is confirmed by the prosopopoeia – which does not necessarily imply personification), on the other hand, the revolutionary, mobilising force of the text also suggests that the homeland itself is in a certain sense

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<sup>1</sup> The Petőfi poems discussed in the paper are quoted from the edition *Összes művei* [Complete Works]. Edited by Márton Szilágyi, vol. 6: *Költemények* [Poems], Budapest, Universitas – OSzK, 2024. Frank Szomy's translations appeared in the volume Sándor Petőfi, *His Entire Poetic Works*, Boca Raton (self-published), 1972.

<sup>2</sup> See Péter Dávidházi, "'A magyarok istenére esküszünk'" ["On the God of the Hungarians We Swear"], in *"Vagy jőni fog". Bibliai minták nemzetiesítése a magyar költészetben* ["Or It Will Come". The National Appropriation of Biblical Patterns in Hungarian Poetry], Budapest, Ráció, 2017, pp. 167-173.

indefinite, diffuse, perhaps only taking shape through the confirmation of the oath. For, as will be discussed below, one of the stakes of the revolutionary programme is precisely to define or rethink what the homeland really means and who, and under what conceptual and social conditions, belongs to it. This poem, endowed with a quite multifaceted performativity – it is at once “mobilising, warning, appealing, exhorting, encouraging, promising” – does not, however, entirely follow a predetermined ceremonial or even textual pattern. As is well known, the text written two days earlier, on 13 March 1848, was not intended for the event, for the day (of the Hungarian revolution) that made it famous and during which it was recited several times, but for a revolutionary “reform feast” ceremony planned for a later date. It obviously did not fully adapt to the oath-taking ceremonies available at the time. From this point of view, the instantiation of the oath, the invocation of the “a magyarok istenére” (“God of the Hungarians”) who is called upon or rather evoked as witness and authenticator of the oath (and perhaps also as the authority that sanctions its breaking), is the most telling. Who is this god that is exclusively linked to the nation, to a national identity the existence of which the text obviously does not take as given, since it seems, rather, as though the poem takes upon itself precisely the task of creating and reconstructing this identity? The address that opens the poem can be attributed, according to the second half of the line quoted above, to this “homeland” (and that could be read as a kind of stage instruction), positions above all the addressee in a kind of paralysis or lifelessness. “Talpra magyar!” (“On your feet, Hungarians”) – as if its performative power were directed on reviving the Hungarians, on resurrecting them from a dead passivity (thus bringing them to a state where they are capable of swearing). In this sense, the poem *mobilises*, in the most literal sense of the word. This of course immediately implies that only such a regained liveliness would make Hungarians Hungarian again. What the poem addresses is only instantiated through the (re)animation performed by this very address.

The swearing of the oath took place before the revolutionary seizure of the Landerer printing house in Pest – that is, before the actual publication of the text of the oath in verses. One of the most interesting accounts was given by the actor Gábor Egressy, who would recite the poem himself, later on the same day, the 15<sup>th</sup> of March, under remarkable circumstances (one might even say, within the frame of a remarkable staging), and who, seen from this stance, actually characterises Petőfi’s performance as a collegial, expert observer. The poet, who is himself impersonated here, embodying precisely the awakening of the suffering nation from its apparent death (“as an otherworldly figure, as an embodiment of a suffering people, as Tantalus’ thousand-year thirst, as the death angel of doom”), steps forward and “shouts his national song!”<sup>3</sup> Moreover, he knows his poem by

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<sup>3</sup> Gábor Egressy, “Képek a pesti forradalomból” [“Pictures of the Pest Revolution”], *Életképek*, VI, 1848, 14, p. 405.

heart, in fact, he carries it in his mind, since the text – obviously due to the precaution dictated by revolutionary tactics – arrives at the printing house only via Petőfi's memory; the manuscript is not there<sup>4</sup>. After the performance, Egressy adds, "the people swore under God's free sky". It is as if this oath, the oath itself, serves as the main guarantee or legitimation of the recorded text of the oath, which – that is, the exact wording – would be verified by the printed flyers only after the event. The oath thus authenticates itself by its occurrence, it produces or at least fixes the oath-formula, which can affect the conditional structure that Austin believes is inherent in the speech act of the oath<sup>5</sup>: in particular, it raises the question of the authority that (or who) is not only the witness but also the object of the oath. The text, of course, swears by "the God of the Hungarians", but this formula is approved – as an oath – by its own echo (or, at the same time, its repetition, its citation).

It is obvious that for a literary text it is perhaps impossible to come any closer to the status of real speech act than *Nemzeti dal* does, that is, to the refutation of what Austin's famous distinction called the necessary *etiolation* of literary speech acts: "a performative utterance will, for example, be *in a peculiar way* hollow or void if said by an actor on the stage, or if introduced in a poem, or spoken in soliloquy"<sup>6</sup>. Dávidházi gives numerous examples to show that the contemporary context of the reception of *Nemzeti dal*, often simply referred to as *Eskü* [Oath] in the press<sup>7</sup>, allowed the oath dictated by the poem to be validated as a real action (also in a political or institutional sense) – and thus obviously (at least implicitly) sanctionable. Petőfi's oath formula, for example, preceded and in a sense anticipated the text of the oath ceremony of the new national guardsmen militia, which it accompanied several times during actual recruiting campaigns<sup>8</sup>. It was thus able to create or form political institutions or bodies through the power of words. This is a performance that contemporary rhetoric did not consider poetry capable of<sup>9</sup>. Yet the question arises whether it did not carry, or reflect, all those threats that may also haunt (in Austin's words) "serious" speech acts but can obviously come to the fore more sharply in literary textuality than in strictly regulated ceremonies. What we have here is, first, theatricality. Egressy, the actor,

<sup>4</sup> Márton Szilágyi, "A vers napja" ["The Day of the Poem"], *Irodalomtörténet*, 96, 2015, 3, p. 311. See further György Spira, *Petőfi napja* [Petőfi's Day], Budapest, AKk, 1984, p. 30.

<sup>5</sup> See John L. Austin, "Other Minds", in *Philosophical Papers*. Edited by J.O. Urmson and G.J. Warnock, Oxford, Clarendon, 1970, p. 102.

<sup>6</sup> John L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*. Edited by J.O. Urmson, Oxford, Clarendon, 1962, p. 22.

<sup>7</sup> Dávidházi, "'A magyarok istenére'", pp. 195-196.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 210-211.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 180-182. See the reference to Pierre Fontanier's and Lajos Szeberényi's rhetoric. On the foundation of the rhetorical concept of the oath in Ancient rhetoric, see Manfred Kraus, "Gottesurteil – Beweismittel – Stilfigur. Funktion und Stellenwert des Eides in der antiken Rhetorik" ["Divine Judgement – Evidence – Figure of Speech. Function and Significance of the Oath in Ancient Rhetoric"], in Laurent Pernot (ed.), *New Chapters in the History of Rhetoric*, Leiden & Boston, Brill, 2009, pp. 427-443.

described himself Petőfi's recitation as a theatrical event, and in this respect his own turned out to be even more striking at the National Theatre on the evening of 15 March, where, following a change of programme forced by revolutionary events, József Katona's historical play *Bánk bán* [*Bánk the Palatine*] was on the stage, but the performance was interrupted by the crowd entering the theatre to celebrate the liberation of revolutionary politician Mihály Táncsics. Egressy, dropping his dramatic role and dressed in Hungarian national costume, recited *Nemzeti dal*, the refrain of which was echoed by the audience<sup>10</sup>. There is no need to explain that the abandonment of the dramatic role, the breakdown of the conventions of theatrical performance, or, to put it more broadly and to borrow the subtitle of Carl Schmitt's *Hamlet or Hekuba*, the intrusion of Time into the play, still could not have neutralised the theatrical circumstances of the oath-taking. There is rather a whole series of roleplays and personifications: the actor who plays a role in Katona's piece calls the Hungarians to life, and to swear an oath in the name of (and thus personifying) the homeland, and acts now in the position (or role) of the poet Petőfi addressing the people of the revolution, who masquerade themselves as theatre audience (or vice versa!). The exclusive moment of "most vagy soha" ("now or never"), which "condenses the redemptive gesture of the restoration of time into an apocalyptic moment of the singularity of action"<sup>11</sup>, is split into different layers of presence.

Of course, as, by that time, Edmund Burke had already shown, a revolution, perhaps by definition, cannot lack theatricality. A different challenge to the status of the oath as a speech act may arise from a certain indeterminacy of the community of those addressed (the Hungarians). First of all, the poem – in its contemporary context – does not give precise clues as to the socio-political circumstances in which the liberation of Hungarians would take place: which forms of subjugation does the freedom envisaged (or almost already achieved) by the oath ("Esküszünk, hogy rabok tovább / Nem leszünk!"; "We swear that slaves no more / Shall we be!") deny?<sup>12</sup> Does it also deny the entire authority of the law? In other words, Petőfi, whose political programme does not take its most radical form here<sup>13</sup>, avoids making explicit what he is swearing to – just as the poem in general is somewhat silent as to what exactly it would mobilise, beyond the breaking of the chains of slavery<sup>14</sup>. This does not mean, of course, that the speech act is null and

<sup>10</sup> Egressy, "Képek a pesti forradalomból", p. 408. Cf. Ferenc Kerényi, "A Nemzeti Színház és közönsége (1848–49)" ["The National Theatre and Its Audience (1848–49)"], *Irodalomtörténeti Közlemények*, 86, 1982, 5–6, pp. 686–687; Dávidházi, "A magyarok istenére", pp. 200–203.

<sup>11</sup> Róbert Milbacher, "Dózsa György unokája" ["The Grandson of György Dózsa"], in *Bábel agoráján Bábel agoráján: Esszék, tanulmányok a nemzeti irodalomról* [*The Agora of Babel: Essays and Studies on National Literature*], Pécs, Pro Pannónia, 2015, p. 82.

<sup>12</sup> See the example of the observations of contemporary politician Miklós Wesselényi in Dávidházi, "A magyarok istenére", pp. 187–190.

<sup>13</sup> See István Margócsy, *Petőfi Sándor*, Budapest, Korona, 1999, p. 231.

<sup>14</sup> See Szilágyi, "A vers napja", p. 315.

void, but it does mean that the dimension of its consequences (its perlocutionary aspect) cannot be precisely explored. What it does may be clear in terms of illocution: it swears an oath. In terms of perlocution, however, that is, regarding the consequences it strives to bring about, it remains quite obscure. The choice implied in the verse “Rabok legyünk vagy szabadok?” (“Shall we be slaves, or shall we be free?”) is, of course, a pseudo-question, a rhetorical question, on the one hand because the lyrical voice does not really leave the answer to its audience, but dictates it itself, reinforced by the refrain, as if prefiguring the oath, and on the other hand because it does not present it as a choice. The fact that it is possible to choose is in itself a sign of freedom, that is, in a certain sense, the question already *enforces* freedom, confers freedom, one could even say that it liberates the people addressed even before the actual swearing of the oath. This, of course, no matter how strange the conclusion it may give rise to, is paradoxical: the text is violently coercive, since it presents the choice between slavery and freedom as a free choice. That is, being forced to make a choice, the addressee is forced to freedom, which in a sense is a kind of constraint, a kind of bondage. Because they are forced to choose, the Hungarians in *Nemzeti dal* cannot escape the freedom of choice from the outset; they cannot in fact choose, their choice being restricted to freedom. This is a very effective rhetorical technique on Petőfi’s part. It is hardly a coincidence that a caricature was made of the poem, in which imprisoned criminals (i.e. those who already have no choice) cite the refrain<sup>15</sup>, and this is perhaps the perspective from which Péter Esterházy’s short anecdote *Akartok-e rabok lenni?* [*Will you settle...?*] in his *Kis Magyar Pornográfia* [*A Little Hungarian Pornography*] (1984) proves to be a quite insightful reprocessing of Petőfi’s revolutionary gesture. Here, Esterházy sheds light on the unmarked or suppressed side of Petőfi’s rhetoric in the context of a very different historical situation, namely the period of the so-called consolidation of socialism:

The butcher János Besze was blessed with the strongest voice of any of the available civilian spokesmen. When he spoke, the walls would shake to their foundations. Hoping to capitalise on Besze’s outstanding qualities as an orator, the Executive Committee for the Year of Transmission [*sic!*] asked, would he kindly address the spontaneous Independence Day gathering assembled before the steps of the National Museum? At the decisive moment, Besze, eager to oblige, stood at the top of the steps. His red nose shone into the far distance, and his humble check shirt, which he would not part with for weeks on end, billowed in the wind. Then he let out a mighty roar. *Will you settle for slavery?* he intoned, which is all the eager crowd needed to hear, who, not waiting for the rest, thundered in unison, *Yes we will! Yes we will!* And with that his speech came to an end<sup>16</sup>.

<sup>15</sup> Ferenc Kerényi, *Petőfi Sándor élete és költészete* [*The Life and Poetry of Petőfi Sándor*], Budapest, Osiris, 2008, p. 365.

<sup>16</sup> Péter Esterházy, *A Little Hungarian Pornography*. Transl. by Judith Sollosy, Evanston, Northwestern, 1995, p. 70. For the original version see Péter Esterházy, *Bevezetés a szépirodalomba*,

Another important rhetorical trick of *Nemzeti dal* is the flexible representation of the community of “Hungarians”, which is obviously important, since one of the stakes of the revolution is precisely the declaration of who belongs to or shapes this community and on what political basis. Whose god is it, exactly, in whose presence and, at the same time, *to whom* the community united (or produced) by the poem swears? Milbacher convincingly argues<sup>17</sup> that the vision of Hungarian history sketched in *Nemzeti dal*, on the one hand, brings together the most important components of a nation-concept based on Hungarian nobility (forefathers unable to rest in an enslaved land; the juxtaposition of the glorious past and the present that contaminates it: “A magyar név megint szép lesz, / Méltó régi nagy híréhez; / Mit rákentek a századok, / Lemossuk a gyalázatot!”; “The Hungarian name will again be beautiful, / As befitting its ancient great fame; / We shall wash off the shame / That the centuries have smeared on it”; the tradition of armed service defending the independence of the homeland: “régi kardunk”; “ancient swords”), but does so in such a way that the text does not subscribe to the mentioned concept (which could not include, for example, slaves, and which would hardly tolerate the assumption of historical discontinuity marked by Petőfi’s moment of the oath). It uses these elements to assert a concept of a people which is also rather vague or broad. Moreover, the rhetoric of the poem uses every means to emphasise the fact that the one who speaks here, the one who recites the oath, is a member of this people, speaks on behalf of this people, and even – as the shifts of voice in the stanzas, i.e. the shifts between the first semi-stanzas that introduce or prepare the oath and the plural oath itself repeated as a refrain indicate<sup>18</sup> – enters and perhaps creates this community by the performative event of their speech! It dictates, one could conclude, the agreement through which the Hungarian people, as a member of which Petőfi speaks out even before the oath has sealed its unity, will reinvent itself. The reception history of the poem shows that this structure could prove to be a considerable burden for the aesthetic appreciation of the text, primarily because it makes it difficult to trace the individuality of the voice that speaks in the poem. Although the grammar of the mobilising calls that pervades the first semi-stanzas may in principle guarantee the speaker’s separation, his isolation from the crowd he addresses, and from this point of view it can indeed be stated that Petőfi “did not

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Budapest, Magvető, 1986, pp. 445-446: “Besze János hentes és mészárosnak a legerősebb hangja volt a szerepvivő egyéniségek között. Ha egyszer beszélni kezdett, megdördültek a falak. Kiváló népszónoki erőit értékesíteni vágyta a Fordult Éva Intéző Bizottsága, sic!, s evégből azzal bízták meg Besze Jánost, hogy a Nemzeti Múzeum *lépcséjéről* szónokoljon a spontánul összegyűlt tömegnek. Besze készséggel vállalkozott is. Felállt a lépcső tetejére – rezes orra messzire piroslott, egyszerű kockás ingét, melyet hétszámra nem vetett le, meg-meglobbantotta a szél – s kiengedte dörgedelmes hangját. *Akartok-e rabok lenni?* A tömeg nem várta be a mondat végét, hanem egyhangúlag rázúgta: *Akarunk! Akarunk!* A szónoklatnak vége volt”. Esterházy borrows the name of the speaker, János Besze, from a politician of the 1848–1849 War of Independence.

<sup>17</sup> Milbacher, “Dózsa György”, pp. 76-84.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Dávidházi, “‘A magyarok istenére’”, pp. 201-202.

allow his self to be dissolved in the individuality-lacking crowd, the addressed majority”<sup>19</sup>, it is still hard to ignore that the stanzas culminate precisely in such a dissolution, and that the oath, by taking place, eliminates precisely the speaker’s separation. In his groundbreaking 1922 monography, János Horváth insisted with great efforts on reconfirming the generic self-characterization of the poem (i.e. the classification of Petőfi’s oath as a song). On the one hand he acknowledges the “imperceptible exchange of persons” in the structure of the stanzas but still tries to describe this as a specific transformation and thus preservation of “personality” on the other hand (“the expansion of personality, the identification with the nation takes place in the song”). It is very interesting to see how, starting from this assumption, Horváth uses this notion of personhood that can be extended or conveyed to the audience (in essence, a kind of personalisation of the people united by the oath) to distinguish the rhetorical character of *Nemzeti dal* from that of political public speeches:

Well, in this speech there is no trace of forms of convincing and persuasion, still less of a conscious confrontation with the listener, since this effect of the refrain also disappears as the song progresses. The form of speech thus loses the regulating consciousness of an address to an audience and reveals a spontaneous, idiosyncratic process of thought in the lyric utterance, a lyrical process that takes place in the poet’s soul by virtue of his own will, in the form of a positive will arising from a sense of lack. The course of the song realises the poet’s own lyrical sense of need, and although it begins with the formality of a desire to persuade, it continues as a statement of a final conviction. Petőfi’s agitations and enthusiasms are mostly such role reversals of lyrical realisation: he takes the place of his listener and speaks on his listener’s behalf by enthusiastically testifying to his conviction. His persuasion is a lyric contagion, a poetic octroi, an occasional assertion of his old naive but large-scale role plays<sup>20</sup>.

This may not be entirely *convincing* but draws attention to an important mechanism of action: the oath performed or enforced by the poem takes on the form of a kind of self-suggestion, the *poetic octroi* uses the power of language to revive or call to life the independent Hungarian people, which bears witness to itself in the form of an oath.

The oath, of course, remains conditional and requires further authentication. The pledge of its validity is, on the one hand, an extreme or finite (and in a certain sense, final) testimony, namely that of martyrdom, whose performative power is nourished by the fact that the validity (sincerity and, to paraphrase Austin, “seriousness”) of the oath is guaranteed by something that is unique and

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<sup>19</sup> Margócsy, *Petőfi Sándor*, p. 97.

<sup>20</sup> János Horváth, *Petőfi Sándor*, Budapest, Gondolat, 1989, pp. 455-456. Unless otherwise stated, the quotations are translated into English by the author of this paper. See further László Gerold, “Nemzeti vagy vers?” [“National or Poetic?”], in Márton Szilágyi (ed.), *Ki vagyok én? Nem mondom meg... [Who Am I? I Won’t Tell...]*, Budapest, PIM, 2014, pp. 391-393.

irreversible: one can hardly sacrifice more than one's own life for a speech act. Those who don't perform this martyrdom in advance, in the oath, "ki most, ha kell, halni nem mer" ("Who now, if necessary, does not die", literally: "dares not die"), cannot be part of the community that takes the oath. Of course, it is worth adding that this structure has a somewhat self-contradicting consequence. In this way, life in the economic sense is namely deprived of its privileged status, of the incomparability of its value: a "rongy élet" (a "ragged life") cannot be "drágább", "more precious", cannot compensate for the honour of the homeland. This contradiction is perhaps partly resolved in the final stanza of the poem, which suggests the sanctification of the names of the dead: "Hol sírjaink domborulnak, / Unokáink leborulnak, / És áldó imádság mellett / Mondják el szent neveinket." ("Where our gravemounds shall rise, / Our grandchildren shall prostrate, / And with prayers of blessing / They shall call our sacred names.").

Be that as it may, martyrdom also implies the supreme authority of the conditional structure of the oath, its divine authority. The oath always implies – even quite openly in its Ancient practice<sup>21</sup> – a conditional (self-)curse as an indispensable structural element. In *Nemzeti dal* this is made explicit in the stigma of "sehonnai bitang ember" ("a nothing stray of a man") – thus also in the threat of exclusion from the nation –, something that in the rhetorical tradition is associated with the judgment of God and with a bloodless form of divine violence<sup>22</sup>. It should come as no real surprise that the conditional curse implied in Petőfi's poem soon got explicitly expressed in lyrical form after the surrender at Világos, which ended the War of Independence on 13 August 1849, namely in Mihály Vörösmarty's poem *Átok* [Curse], targeted at General Artúr Görgei who commanded the Hungarian troops. In the poem, dated 10 October 1849, the contrast between the enslaved land (now identified with the Világos plains) and the sword is applied to the general who dared not die:

Than he who has become a master there is no one greater,  
Bent down towards the foot-stamped field.  
In his hands was the heart and sword of the country,  
And he, like a slapped and kicked servant,  
Cowardly gave up all this precious treasure<sup>23</sup>.

It is noteworthy that Vörösmarty's curse, regarding its realisation, actually recalls the dual structure of the oath-taker and the collective oath in *Nemzeti dal*: the condemnation, a kind of "pre-curse", carried out in the first stanza of the poem

<sup>21</sup> See on this Alan H. Sommerstein, Isabelle C. Torrance, *Oaths and Swearing in Ancient Greece*, Berlin & Boston, de Gruyter, 2014, pp. 6-19.

<sup>22</sup> See Kraus, „Gottesurteil – Beweismittel – Stilfigur”, p. 429.

<sup>23</sup> Mihály Vörösmarty, *Átok* [Curse], in *Összes költeményei* [Collected Poems], 3<sup>rd</sup> revised ed., Budapest, Osiris, 2021, p. 261: "Ki úr leendett, milyennél nagyobb nincs, / Meghajlott a lábtúrta fővenyig. / Kezében volt az ország szíve, kardja, / S ő mint pofonvert, megrugdalt inas, / Feladta gyáván mind e drága kincset".



(“May the wrath of God chase him / From and beyond the grave”<sup>24</sup>) is echoed in the three concluding stanzas, where a markedly collective voice, that of the “bús harcfiak” (“mournful warriors”), utters a “kihalhatatlan átok” (an “undying curse”): “May misfortune chase him like / A pack of wild dogs chase a frightened beast. / Let him live in misery and torment till death, / And when he dies, let damnation strike him”<sup>25</sup>.

The oath not only holds the swearer hostage – since it commits him to a future that is foreshadowed – but is also a disciplinary (and, in this respect, also performative) instrument for the coercion and production of sincerity, something that is not far from the torturous techniques of interrogation. In one place Kant calls it *tortura spiritualis*, “the means for extorting truthfulness”<sup>26</sup>. This is possible because the oath is self-reflexive also in the sense that it is itself a statement of belief in the instance – the supreme, divine power – which then regulates and sanctions the oath-taking. The legal or moral obligation which compels a man to tell the truth or to be truthful is only secondarily derived from the oath, since, as Kant also says, it is primarily the fear of divine judgment which compels him to do so<sup>27</sup>. That this was not confined to the field of theoretical-theological explanations in Petöfi’s time but also present in the historical consciousness of law and even in legal practice, is also evidenced in literature. In his ballad *A hamis tanú* [*The Perjurer/The False Witness*], written four years after *Nemzeti dal*, János Arany, a third giant of 19<sup>th</sup> century Hungarian poetry, tells the story of a strange legal case, a so-called boundary dispute known from the legends of the village Köröstarcsa and with authentic references to legal history<sup>28</sup>, focusing on the false oath taken by the hero of the ballad, Márkus, the falsity of which the swearer tried to nullify by a tricky referential manoeuvre. Márkus, who, in the absence of decisive documentary proof, is called upon to swear that the land on which he is standing to swear belongs to neighbouring Ladány and not to Tarcsa, verifies his oath by putting soil from Ladány on his boots, as the impersonal voice of a witness in the ballad reveals: “Well old Márkus had a mind to go ahead: / He put it under his feet, and so

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*: “Kergesse őt az istennek haragja / A síron innen és a síron túl.”

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*: “Kergesse őt a balszerencse, mint / Szilaj kutyák a megriadt vadat. / Éljen nyomorból, kínból mindhalálíg / S ha elhal, verje meg a kárhozat.”

<sup>26</sup> Immanuel Kant, “On the Miscarriage of All Philosophical Trials in Theodicy”, in *Religion and Rational Theology*. Edited and transl. by Allen W. Wood and George di Giovanni, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012, p. 35.

<sup>27</sup> Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals. A Critical Guide*. Edited by Lara Denis, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991, pp. 118-119: “No other reason could be given which could bind men as a matter of right [*rechtlich*] to believe and acknowledge that there are gods than that they could thereby swear an oath and be constrained to be truthful in what they say and faithful in keeping their promises by their fear of an all-seeing, almighty power whose vengeance they would have solemnly called down upon themselves in case their declarations were false”.

<sup>28</sup> Attila Horváth, “Arany János jogi esetei” [“The Legal Cases of János Arany”], in Balázs Fekete, István H. Szilágyi (eds.), *Iustitia modell áll* [*Iustitia Poses a Model*], Budapest, SzIT, 2011, pp. 32-33.

he swore on the land”<sup>29</sup>. With no slight exaggeration, one could even say that, here, a Hungarian is directing a response to Petőfi’s address (“On your feet now”) who is evading his oath by manipulating his footing! According to Arany’s explanatory note, Márkus “prepared a smear of land under his feet in advance, and thus made use of the mental reservation of his oath”<sup>30</sup>. This reminder of the fact that Márkus in fact has kept his oath in an implicit manner (which is, of course, more of an interpretation) also warns that the ruse which, seen referentially, made his declaration true still cannot control the coordinates that actually determine the validity of the oath.

Such self-certification can never be limited, to borrow de Man’s formulation, to “an epistemological use of language in which ethical values of good and evil are superseded by values of truth and falsehood”<sup>31</sup>. The oath, which gets corrected in a referential sense, remains false, since it testifies to insincerity – and from this point of view it is irrelevant whether the reader assumes that the “mental reservation” is a conscious action on the part of Márkus or not. In any case, this does not invalidate the oath in a legal sense, but it does not neutralize its moral falsity either. Márkus swears by the three divine persons with his three raised fingers, and he does so by reciting a conditional self-curse in detail:

Hold up three fingers: swear by heaven,  
 Father, Son, Holy Spirit, triple deity [...]  
 Swear – “I swear by the living God,  
 My last day and my eternal salvation”.  
 –“Swear” – “I swear, and if I speak falsely,  
 I shall not be happy in heaven or earth;  
 May earth cast out my body, may heaven banish my soul:  
 Let that swift whirlpool tumble me. –”<sup>32</sup>

A certain sensibility and astuteness is displayed in the fact that the ballad does not allow the reader to identify without any doubt the instance to whom Márkus swears his oath. Since the impersonal narrative voice calls upon the protagonist right at the poem’s opening addresses (“Állj elő, vén Márkus! vedd le a süveget”; “Step forward, old Márkus! Take off your hat”), and thus, in a sense, leaves behind the role of a witnessing narrator, the calls can be seen as performative gestures of narrative representation (the narrative voice instructs one of the characters) as

<sup>29</sup> János Arany, *A hamis tanú* [*The Perjurer/The False Witness*], in *Összes költeményei* [*Collected Poems*], vol. I. Edited by József Jászberényi, Budapest, Szépirodalmi Könyvkiadó, 1962, p. 198: “Lám a vén Márkusnak esze volt előre: / Talpa alá tette, úgy esküdt a földre.”

<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem*: “egy darab ladányi földet készített jó előre talpa alá, s így az eskünél mentalis reservatával élt”.

<sup>31</sup> Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1979, p. 279.

<sup>32</sup> Arany, *A hamis tanú*, p. 198: “Tartsd fel három ujjad: esküdjél az égre, / Atya, fiú, Szent-Lélek hármasságára [...] Esküszöl – ‘Esküszöm az élő Istenre, / Utolsó napomra és örök időmre. –’ / Esküszöl – ‘Esküszöm, s ha hamisat szólok: / Se földben, se mennyben ne lehessen boldog; / Föld kidobja testem, ég kizárja lelkem: Ama sebes örvény hánytorgasson engem.’ –”.

much as citations of an official procedure where the authority is calling for an oath. In any case, as the second stanza makes clear, the divine judgment is projected on Márkus even before he takes the oath, as if he were already fulfilling the conditional curse on himself at the very moment he is about to pronounce it (“Eléalla Márkus; térdben összeesve, / Görnyedező háttal, mintha sírt keresne”; “Márkus stepped to the fore, collapsed on his knees, With his back bent as if he were looking for a grave”).

The punishment does not fail to be meted out, and the perjurer won’t find rest even in his water grave (“Kivetődik a sír dobbanó partjára”; “He is thrown out on the beating bank of the tomb”). He then rises as a ghost: he stands up on his feet again, though seemingly frozen in his false gesture of swearing the oath, as if he will forever hold up three fingers to the sky<sup>33</sup>:

The body shakes and leaps to its feet,  
With the whites of its eyes looks around grimly.  
And as he lifts his three fingers to the sky

later again:

Márkus can often be seen – with his fingers to the sky –  
Emerging from the depths and  
Falling out of the abyss and sinking back again<sup>34</sup>

Márkus is indeed a victim of a *bloodless* divine judgment: he haunts the living like a strange aquatic creature, and Arany suggests in a quite sophisticated manner that this presence beyond the grave can, in a sense, also be seen as a form of revenge – against the community in whose (territorial) interest he had taken the false oath. This can be a quite peculiar response to the above-mentioned structural ambiguity of the oath performed in *Nemzeti dal*, since Arany reveals here the vulnerability of the performer who identifies with (and dissolves in) the community through the oath he is forced to swear<sup>35</sup>. Márkus conveys to the survivors the predicament that determines his own action when he asks the fishermen he encounters a question with allusions to the Gospel (to the covenant of divine and earthly law – Matthew 16,19; 18,18):

<sup>33</sup> The same gesture accompanied the contemporary performances of *Nemzeti dal*. See Dávidházi, “A magyarok istenére”, pp. 204-209.

<sup>34</sup> Arany, *A hamis tanú*, p. 198: “Megrázkodik a test és talpra ugorván / Szeme fehérével körül néz mogorván. / S amint három ujját emeli az ég re”; “Gyakran látni Márkust – ég felé az ujj – / Mélységből kibukni s elmerülni újra”.

<sup>35</sup> According to László Imre (in *Arany János balladái [The Ballads of János Arany]*, Budapest, TKK, 1988, pp. 43-44) *A hamis tanú* can be linked, if only indirectly, to the defeat in the Independence War, to “the loss of illusion and the crisis of values that followed after Világos”: “The tragic collisions, mental breakdowns, hopes and doubts, terrible disappointments, imagined and real, self-destructive states of mind drove Arany into a state of extreme excitement, an almost terrifying sense of threat, to which the misty, gloomy, haunting atmosphere of the ballad comes very close”.

And, as his whole life was excitable,  
 So he tied his words together: "shall I loosen, shall I bind?"  
 Don't answer him, you fishermen of Körözs! The question is double-edged,  
 It would bring you trouble;  
*To bind*: he would bind your nets in a knot,  
*To loosen*: he will dissolve them in the river's long foam;  
 Row past here in silent prayer;  
 And do not swear an oath unless it is in true faith<sup>36</sup>.

The narrator of the ballad is no longer addressing Márkus the false witness, but the fishermen, the community, the witnesses of Márkus and of the divine judgment over him (which also means: the representatives of the community who share, witness or confirm the perjury). The alternative offered by Márkus between loosening and binding, which is more blatantly false or misleading than the choice between slavery and freedom in *Nemzeti dal*, implies a kind of warning, cautioning against bearing witness, but above all against responding!<sup>37</sup> And this, of course, cautions against taking oaths (for which, as is well known, the Gospel of Matthew also provides instructions: Matthew 5, 33-37). "Do not swear an oath unless it is in true faith" – this is in fact the message not only of the anonymous narrator, but also of Márkus, since it reveals the knowledge that his *mental reservation* in fact expressed.

Swearing an oath is always risky. In any case, Petőfi – from this point of view, one could say for strategic reasons – did not identify his oath with a divine judgement in general but linked it to the conditional curse of the "God of the Hungarians". Among other things, this is one of the differences that can be noted between *Nemzeti dal* and the text of the national guardsmen's oath, the latter swearing to "the only living God" and, of course, also swearing allegiance to the king<sup>38</sup>. As he emphasises in the poem *A király esküje* [*The King's Vow*] of May 1848, which can be read as a specific commentary on *Nemzeti dal*, the "szent esküvés", "sacred vow" of King Ladislaus V before the beheading of regent László Hunyadi ("Esküszöm az égre, / Az ég istenére, / Bántani nem foglak."<sup>39</sup>; "I vow to heaven, / To the God of heaven, / I shall not harm you"<sup>40</sup>) was also sworn to God as a false oath. The instance of the "God of the Hungarians", which seems so important that Petőfi found it necessary to convince his audience of its existence shortly after the composition of *Nemzeti dal* („Kik nem hiszitek, hogy egy erős

<sup>36</sup> Arany, *A hamis tanú*, p. 198: "És, mikép izgága volt egész élete, / Így kötődik szóval: 'Oldjak-e? kössek-e?' / Ne feleljetek rá, körözszi halászok! Kétélű a kérdés, bajt hozna reátok; / *Kötni*: összekötné hálótok egy bogba, / *Oldni*: széjjeloldná hosszan a habokba; / Halkan imádkozva evezetek itt el; / S ne mondjátok esküt, ha nem igaz hittel".

<sup>37</sup> See on this Katalin Hász-Fehér, "A szemlélődő elbeszélői szerepkör Arany balladáiban" ["The Contemplative Narrative Perspective in Arany's Ballads"], *Tiszatáj*, 50, 1996, 10, pp. 6-7.

<sup>38</sup> Dávidházi, "A magyarok istenére", pp. 211-212.

<sup>39</sup> Petőfi, *A király esküje*, in *Összes művei*, p. 782.

<sup>40</sup> Petőfi, *The King's Vow*, in *His Entire Poetic Works*, p. 580.

istenség / Őrzi gondosan a magyar nemzetet! / Él az a magyarok istene, hazánkat / Átölelve tartja atyai keze” – *A magyarok istene*<sup>41</sup>; “You, who do not believe that a strong God / Stands alertly guard over the Hungarian nation! / That Hungarian God does live, / His fatherly arms embrace our home” – *The God of the Hungarians*<sup>42</sup>), and on whose existence and nature even Mihály Babits would present a quite relevant meditation in a poem written few years after a no less traumatic historical experience (in 1927)<sup>43</sup>, combines here at least two traditions that have strongly shaped the historical discourses of Hungarian national identity. On the one hand, a tradition that derives from the primarily Protestant topos of the Hungarian-Jewish parallel fate (and through this the notion of the Hungarians as a chosen people in alliance with its separate god), and on the other hand, a tradition deriving from pre-Christian, “pagan” beliefs<sup>44</sup>. However, Petőfi does not simply rely on these traditions, which would be inconsistent, if only because the oath of *Nemzeti dal* seeks to produce a moment of interruption or a new beginning, rather than historical continuity. Its stake is perhaps not only to produce a henceforth valid meaning of what (who) is “Hungarian”, but also – closely related to this – to decide what (who) exactly is the authority that validates and sanctions the oath that defines this meaning. This god cannot exactly be the same as the one that had been

<sup>41</sup> Petőfi, *A magyarok istene*, in *Összes művei*, p. 771.

<sup>42</sup> Petőfi, *The God of the Hungarians*, in *His Entire Poetic Works*, p. 565.

<sup>43</sup> Mihály Babits, *A magyarok Istenéhez [To the God of the Hungarians]*, in *Összes versei (1902–1937) [Collected Poems (1902–1937)]*, Budapest, Athenaeum Kiadása, 1942, p. 383: “Vagy-e? S ki vagy? S mienk vagy-e? Csupán / mienk és senki másé? Szabad-e / hogy csupán a mienk légy? És lehetsz-e / az, aki vagy, ha csupán a mienk vagy? / S mégis: lehetsz-e aki vagy, ha nem tudsz / csupán-mienk is lenni? Lehet-e / világod végtelen, ha nem vagyunk / mi is középen, és sorsunk a Tengely? / Mi vár reánk? És jön-e még igazság? / Vagy mi leszünk a keresztrefeszített / a nemzetek közt? Akkor is középen / áll a Kereszt, s ki szenved: Messiás. / És ez van talán hátra még. Az embert, / az aprót, megváltottad már. A népek / váltása jő most. S bizonytalán mienk vagy, / Isten, amíg mi hordjuk a keresztet. / Mert nem lehetsz a mérges kis Wotanok / öccse te, egy a sok közül, pogány / csillag, hanem ki eljött, csillagoltó / nap, s kinél kisebb nekünk nem elég: / magyarok és mindenek Istene.”; “Do you exist? / And who are you? / And are you ours? / Just ours and no one else’s? / Are you free to be ours alone? / And can you be who you are if you are only ours? / And yet, can you be what you are if you cannot be ours-alone? / Can your world be infinite if we are not in the middle, and our destiny the Axis? / What awaits us? / And is justice yet to come? / Or will we be the crucified among the nations? / Even so in the middle stands the Cross, and he who suffers: the Messiah. / And this is perhaps still to come. / Man, the little one, you have already redeemed. / Now comes the redemption of nations. / And you are surely ours, God, as long as we carry the cross. / For you cannot be the brother of angry little Wotans, / you, one of many, a pagan star, / but who has come, a sun extinguishing the stars, / and any less than whom we do not need: / God of the Hungarians and of all.”

<sup>44</sup> See on this László Péter, “A magyarok Istene” [“The God of the Hungarians”], *Acta Historiae Litterarum Hungaricarum*, 1994, 26, pp. 102–103; László Szörényi, “Petőfi és a nemzeti ősbűn” [“Petőfi and the National Original Sin”], in Judit Ambrus, Tibor Bárány, Rumen István Csörsz, Béla Hegedüs, Gábor Vaderna (eds.), *Margonauták [Margonauts]*, Budapest, reciti, 2009, pp. 411–412; Dávidházi, “A magyarok istenére”, pp. 218–219.

sworn to earlier (among others by kings)<sup>45</sup>, which of course obviously reveals all those dilemmas that will be made explicit in the Babits poem (“Are you free to be ours alone? And can you be who you are if you are only ours? And yet, can you be what you are if you cannot be *ours-alone*?”). *Nemzeti dal*, on the other hand, believes in the overwhelming power of a speech act that, at least at a given historical moment, appears to be capable of producing – or *inventing* – by itself those instances (executors and its authenticators) that make it valid. In those days in March, Petőfi came as close as possible to a sense of the maximum performative power of poetic language.

Of course, this has not established an all-encompassing paradigm for modern political poetry in Hungarian literature. Although *Nemzeti dal* has often been recited at political demonstrations of historical significance even in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, political poetry (e.g. the poems of György Petri who frequently alluded to Petőfi) has increasingly focused on the critical analytical examination of the validity conditions of linguistic action. In any case, the example of *Nemzeti dal* shows that these conditions are more loose and historically more variable than Austin’s brief considerations suggested.

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<sup>45</sup> According to Milbacher’s idea, since “it is precisely the historical time dominated by the Judeo-Christian God that has created the inequality which, in turn, is against God, it follows that the universal God is not a just God, so we must turn to the God of the Hungarians to do justice to the people.” (Milbacher, “Dózsa György”, pp. 92-93).

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SWEARING AN OATH BY SHOUTING THE POEM.  
PETŐFI AND PERFORMATIVE LANGUAGE IN POETRY  
(Abstract)

The paper raises the question of the effect literary speech acts might have on the political public sphere and, thus, on the field of social action. Furthermore, it asks what it may mean for the performative structure of literary texts to be transposed into the dimension of political action. The public sphere of the 19<sup>th</sup> century sheds a particularly strong light on this question. One of Sándor Petőfi's best-known poems, *Nemzeti dal [National Song]* (transl. F. Szomy) calls its audience to

swear an oath, and even performs an oath. The poem played a central role in the Hungarian Revolution of 15 March 1848 – Petőfi recited it several times at public assemblies. It contributed to shaping the concept of nation during the War of Independence. It became part of real legal and political ceremonies, e.g., the initiation of members of the freedom fighters' militia. The paper focuses on the contribution of *Nemzeti dal* to the discourse on (literary) speech acts. It briefly touches upon the contemporary ethical context of the concept of the oath (primarily Kant), and then looks at how a scene from Péter Esterházy's *Kis Magyar Pornográfia* [*A Little Hungarian Pornography*] (1984, trans. Judith Sollosy) evokes Petőfi's oath in the socio-political context of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, primarily in relation to the concepts of freedom and slavery. Finally, the performativity of *Nemzeti dal* will be confronted with the issues of cursing and bearing false testimony in literature. An example of the former is provided by Mihály Vörösmarty's 1849 poem *Átok* [*Curse*], which can be read as a kind of reaction to the unconditional surrender that ended the Hungarian War of Independence. The latter is represented by János Arany's 1852 ballad *A hamis tanú* [*The Perjurer*], which can also be understood as an implicit response to the dense presence of performatives that determined the political publicness of the struggle for freedom.

*Keywords:* curse, nation, oath, performative language, speech act.

#### DEPUNEREA UNUI JURĂMÂNT PRIN DECLAMAREA POETICĂ: PETŐFI ȘI LIMBAJUL PERFORMATIV AL POEZIEI (Rezumat)

Articolul problematizează impactul pe care actele de vorbire literare îl pot exercita asupra sferei politice și, implicit, asupra acțiunii sociale. În mod particular, studiul explorează semnificația transpunerii performativității textelor literare în acțiunea politică. Sfera publică a secolului al XIX-lea oferă un cadru privilegiat pentru analiza acestei problematice. Un exemplu elocvent este unul dintre cele mai cunoscute poeme ale lui Sándor Petőfi, *Nemzeti dal* [*Cântec național*], care își cheamă publicul la depunerea unui jurământ și, în același timp, înscenează efectiv acest jurământ. Poemul a jucat un rol central în Revoluția maghiară din 15 martie 1848, fiind recitată de Petőfi în repetate rânduri în cadrul adunărilor publice. De asemenea, a contribuit la conturarea conceptului de națiune în timpul Războiului pentru Independență și a devenit parte integrantă a unor ceremonii juridice și politice reale, de ex., inițierea luptătorilor pentru libertate. Articolul se focalizează pe modul în care poemul *Nemzeti dal* poate contribui la înțelegerea mecanismelor actelor de vorbire literare. De asemenea, studiul abordează pe scurt contextul etic contemporan al conceptului de jurământ (pornind, în special, de la filosofia lui Kant), pentru ca apoi să analizeze evocarea jurământului lui Petőfi într-o scenă din *Kis Magyar Pornográfia* (*Un strop de pornografie maghiară*) de Péter Esterházy, în contextul socio-politic al celei de-a doua jumătăți a secolului al XX-lea, în relație cu conceptele de libertate și sclavie. Nu în ultimul rând, performativitatea poemului *Nemzeti dal* este pusă în relație cu reprezentările literare ale blestemului și ale mărturiei mincinoase. Cazul blestemului este abordat prin analiza poeziei lui Mihály Vörösmarty din 1849, *Átok* [*Blestem*], care poate fi interpretată ca o reacție la capitularea necondiționată de la finalul Războiului pentru Independență al Ungariei. În ceea ce privește mărturia mincinoasă, aceasta este ilustrată de balada lui János Arany din 1852, *A hamis tanú* [*Mărturisorul mincinos*], care poate fi înțeleasă ca un răspuns implicit la cât de influente au fost formulele performative pentru expunerea luptei politice pentru libertate.

*Cuvinte-cheie:* blestem, națiune, jurământ, limbaj performativ, act de vorbire.