

Vera Prontvai

The poetics of agon

Abstract

The case study explores the poetics of judgment, suffering, competition and the reversibility (or irreversibility) of fate in poetic theatre through Attila Vidnyánszky's production of *Agón*. The director places brutality, death and confrontation with the sins of humanity at the centre of the performance, using the means of Artaud's theatre of cruelty, based on the music and text by Péter Pál Józsa. Through the use of a language that he calls poetic theatre, Vidnyánszky depicts the historical and moral struggles of humanity: the collective sins of mankind, events of war and history, from antiquity to nuclear catastrophe. The Gesamtkunst staging is inspired by the spirit of Lucifer's rebellion, the desire to destroy man, to eradicate himself, integrating both the martyrdom of the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste and the burial of Christ, which is typical of contemporary thinking. The performance can also be interpreted as a Madách paraphrase, because at the end, next to the man and woman entering the stage, there is a child who (perhaps) can bring about the reversal of humanity's fate, and who (perhaps) will be able to build a cathedral from swear-words.

Keywords: agon, agonal run, poetic theatre, Gesamtkunst, Madách-paraphrase, Vidnyánszky, Péter Pál Józsa, Walter Benjamin, Gesamtkunstwerk

As the integration of the agonal moment into the concept of *poetic theatre* has not yet been carried out (although it is arguable that this aspect would make the already established, partly fragmentary, approach to *poetic theatre* more complete), I will attempt to examine how the poetics of the representation of the agon structures the space, time, text and scenic design of theatrical

performance. I also seek to define the conditions under which performance can function as a site of *agonal run (escape)*, *pronouncement of judgment* and *reversibility of fate*, while bearing the characteristics of *poetic theatre*, nonlinear storytelling, powerful musicality, metaphoricality and allegorisation inscribed in space, the centrality of the human body, the specific use of space, the universality of time or the universalisation of individual experience.¹

The *agon* has been a component of theatre from the very beginning (as Walter Benjamin's conception of tragedy points out, see Benjamin 1980), but not only in the sense that the protagonist, in the course of a moral and intellectual struggle, clashes his world order with the views represented by the chorus, but also in the sense that tragedy can be a site of escape and of the possibility of changing fate, where the judgment of the gods on human beings can be reversed. This connection is highlighted, among others, by Carrie L. Asman in her study "Theater and Agon / Agon and Theater,"² analysing in detail Benjamin's conception of tragedy, which was greatly influenced by his work with the German philosopher Florens Christian Rang and the latter's *Historische Psychologie des Karnevals* (Asman 1992, 611). Asman publishes Rang's diary entry "Agon und Theater," which introduces the term "agonal run," representing sacrifice in the theatre, "Agonal run in the theatre is also a sacrifice, see the sacrifice of the archon basileus. The agonal run in the theatre is also a judgment, because it represents the final judgment."³ The agon is a form of public display: the ancient Greeks understood *agonal struggle* as both a physical contest and a competition between talents in poetry and music, and the judges were called *agonotes*.

1 By *poetic theatre*, I mean the creative workshop centred around the National Theatre and the form of theatre described by András Visky. Ernő Verebes, dramaturg, believes that poetic theatre is a theatrical language referring to intangible, intellectually indeterminate things. According to the dramaturg, this is a paradox which can only be accessed through poetry. This type of theatre is defined by an expansion of the mode of representation and a constant broadening of its boundaries, a representation of reality imbued with verticality. See Verebes 2015. In Visky's book of essays *What is theatre for?*, identifies as characteristics of what he considers poetic theatre the interpretation of time as a universal time, the perception of personal and seemingly incidental events as a universal experience, the alteration of the relationship between "*petit récit*" and "*grand récit*", the intensification of the musical tone of the language spoken on stage, and the intense bodily experience of the spectator (Visky 2020, 62).

2 "Benjamin sees tragedy not only as a place of agony, struggle, debate, competition and sacrifice, but also as a place of revolution, rupture and escape where the judgement of the gods over humans is reversed." (Asman 1992, 607.)

3 "*Der agonale Lauf ist auch im Theater noch Totenopfer, siehe das Opfer des Archon Basileus. Der agonale Lauf ist auch im Theater Gericht, denn er stellt das jüngste Gericht vor.*" (Ibid., 612. The above quote is my own translation.)

The ancient Greek *ἀγών* (meaning 'competition') had an integrative and interactional function, referring to the gatherings of the *polis*, where competitions to assess physical ability and talent constituted the defining elements of the democratic public sphere. According to Asman's study, the theatrical event (like the *agon* and justice) takes place in front of the public (the spectators), awaiting the verdict of those present. An interesting aspect of Rang's thought is that he derives the *agon* from the ritual sacrifice made to the deceased, the death sacrifice, from which the individual can escape, that is, be pardoned. "Dialogue is a contest, or competition. Both voices that accuse and excuse man or God are competing for the common goal of escape. This is the final judgment on God and man."⁴ In other words, the events on stage can suspend the direction of the development of fate that has been evolving up to that point, the scene on stage is the space and time where and when the agonal run of the fugitive can be interrupted for a time (the time of the judgment) or permanently.

Benjamin illustrates the connection between the *agon* and theatre with the story of the *Oresteia* and the motifs of struggle that appear in it. The person condemned to run makes a sacrifice, flees and asks the gods for help. In the final part of the *Oresteia* trilogy, the tragedy of the *Eumenides*, a judicial reckoning takes place, with legal consequences regarding the situation of the matricidal son. Orestes flees from the Erinyes, the goddesses of vengeance, to Athens, where hearings are held before the Areios Pagos to hear his accusers and his own defence. The jury acquits the matricidal son, Pallas Athena and Apollo testify in favour of Orestes, and the son is pardoned by the Erinyes, who become the guardians of justice, the Eumenides. To quote Benjamin (Benjamin 1980, 294), "Death thereby becomes salvation: death's crisis. A archaic example of this is the overcoming of human slaughter at the altar through an escape from the sacrificial knife, that is, the running around the altar, with the final embrace of the altar by the one consigned to death, whereby the altar turns into an asylum, the angry god into a merciful one, and the doomed victim into a the captive and servant of the god. This is precisely the schema of the *Oresteia*." That is, the sacrificial victim tries to avoid his fate, touches the altar, and the angry gods, now propitiated, are transformed into merciful, compassionate gods.

4 "Als jüngstes Gericht nimmt dieser Wettlauf die menschlich-göttliche Vergangenheit in sich, der Lauf vollzieht sich im Bild der den Lauf schon vollendet habenden großen Toten. Die Gemeinde anerkennt das Opfer, den Tod, aber dekretiert zugleich den Sieg, so dem Menschen wie dem Gott." (Ibid. The above quote is my own translation.)

The duality of the *agonal run* that takes place in public, linked to the final judgement, is played out in Attila Vidnyánszky's staging of *Agon*⁵ adapted from the work of the philosopher-composer Péter Józsa Pál (perhaps inspired by Benjamin's concept of tragedy). The production is the latest piece of *poetic theatre* represented by the director (presumably inspired by the Russian-Ukrainian war), which, just like the work *Mesés férfiak szárnyakkal* (Fabulous Men with Wings), seeks to create a new theatrical form, in this case a combination of elements of ancient Greek and contemporary poetic theatre, for which Józsa's text provides an excellent opportunity. The author's only theatrical work, written in 2012, can be defined as both an opera and a two-act tragedy.⁶ Józsa wrote the script and composed the music himself. At the beginning of the poem, he defines his composition as an opera, while he also evokes the initial phrase of the opening line of Zarathustra's passage 342—*incipit tragoedia*—"The tragoedia begins" (ibid., 241)—from Nietzsche's *The Gay Science*,⁷ which also announces the death of God (Józsa 2022, 4): "L. Ottó Horváth: To good fortune—incipit opera, are you writing? (Peti: I'm writing it, don't worry!)—or perhaps to the misfortune of us all, well, you found me, my loyal friends from the wine bar. (Martin: My loyal friends from the wine bar.)" The staging, with its elements of poetic theatre, depicts an extended moment of humanity's *agonal run*, giving the spectator the opportunity to make his own judgement on history and humanity (which he himself has shaped). A particular feature of Vidnyánszky's poem is that during the voting on stage (using black and white balls, reminiscent of Roman times), the audience becomes both accused and accusers, confronted with the catastrophic events of the past centuries.

As Benjamin sees it, the performance, by its unrepeatability, is a decisive and cosmic event, for which "the community is invited to perform and judge" (Benjamin 1980, 310). Józsa's tragedy in free verse is both a speech of accusation and defence, centred on a defendant on trial, who is portrayed by several actors (e.g., Lajos Ottó Horváth, Martin Mészáros) in Vidnyánszky's production. The trial

5 Józsa, Péter Pál. *Agon*. Directed by Attila Vidnyánszky, National Theatre, Budapest, premiere: 4 March 2022, actors: Lilla Borbála Fogarasi, Hanga Martos, Mari Nagy, Nándor Berettyán, Péter Herczegh, Lajos Ottó Horváth, József Kovács S., István Madácsi, Martin Mészáros, Domán Szép, with the participation of the Honvéd Férfikar Choir, conducted by Kálmán Strausz.

6 Józsa, Péter Pál. 2022. *Agon*, script.

7 "God is dead, but given the way people are, there may still for millenia be caves in which they show his shadow.—And we—we must still defeat his shadow as well!" (Nietzsche 1926, 126.)

is a paraphrase of the trial of Socrates, and like the ancient philosopher, Józsa's defendant is sentenced to death after he makes his case. The judge and the jury, however, are not analysing the fate and context of a specific individual, but those of humanity, and within that, they are passing judgement on the history of Hungarians. The passage, spoken by Martin Mészáros, invites those present in the space of the theatre to revisit together, before the death penalty is pronounced, all that has happened to humanity so far (Józsa 2022, 5): "So sit around me before the ship docks from Delos." (As tradition has it, the execution of Socrates was carried out after the holy ship of Delo docked.) The interplay of different historical and temporal planes can be interpreted as the timelessness of the destruction wrought by humanity. The leading theme of the poem, rich in associations, is the indictment of the world, and in a narrower sense of Hungarian history, the doubt and disillusionment with civilisation and contemporary society. The judgement, the voting, is done with black and white balls, and thanks to visions of apocalyptic events, the judges (actors, chorus members, spectators) can decide on the history of humanity, people's mentality and behaviour patterns.



Picture 1. Scene from the National Theatre's production of Agon (Photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó)

The arena-like space of the performance is reminiscent of ancient amphitheatres and battlefields: the audience is seated in rows of seats around the stage, sloping down from the top, between the symphony orchestra and the Honvéd Male Choir. The scenes take place in the centre of the arena, in a narrow space a few metres in diameter, around a rotating rectangle. The horrors of the 20th century are re-enacted in a set invoking antiquity and become part of the *agon* along with it, with an ever-increasing number of instruments evoking torture or totalitarian regimes on stage. The costumes, designed by Alexander Bilozub, resemble ancient masks and long, baggy dresses, but at the same time there are characters appearing on stage wearing period costumes appropriate to the historical event. The performance presents the great events of humanity in a mostly linear sequence, but at the same time it stages collective and individual sins in parallel, which are expanded into an apocalyptic vision by numerous allusions, back and forth, story fragments, interjections. From ancient history to the atomic bomb, the system of contexts and allusions is designed to intensify the agonal situation in which aggression becomes uncontrollable. The amplified impulses analyse the main stages of the history of humanity (and of Hungary), mentioning among others Teiresias, George Dózsa, Cardinal Mindszenty, and Lenin. In the grand visions and vistas, literacy, Chernobyl, the Janssen vaccine, Kiev and Kharkiv all coexist. (The latter references are presumably not in Józsa's written text but may have been inspired by the director or the actors.) However, the specific historical events are placed in universal time by the metaphors written into the spatial structure of the scenery, suggesting that the agonisation of humanity began with Adam and Eve and continues to the present day.

The written text, as well as the text spoken on stage (with a sentence or phrase added by the director and the actors), contains echoing phrases, repetitions of parts, long periodic sentences. The acoustic pulsation of the text spoken by the actors is an integral part of the music Józsa composed. So much so that the Liszt Prize-winning conductor Kálmán Strausz recited the text to the actors beforehand so that they would learn the correct rhythmic pattern. "It's very difficult, because you have to keep the rhythm even within a sentence, because the choir responds to what is being said, and they say it where it is written in the score. Not before, not after," Vidnyánszky said of the performance.⁸

⁸ "Kifeszített pillanat: Vidnyánszky Attila rendező az *Agónról*" ("A Strained Moment: Director Attila Vidnyánszky on *Agon*"). *Nemzeti Magazin* 2022/2: 8.

The recurring symploces of the poem's text (for example, "the final dose of the coveted democrat-curse, the holy cesspool!" and "If we don't go to the mass latrine, they will pour it out for us"—Józsa 2022, 5, 8) always reappear throughout the performance, adding different aspects. A frequent motif in Józsa's text is the latrine, accompanied by concepts related to the outhouse, such as faecal matter and plumbing. Since the text is a monologue rich in associations, metaphors and metonymies, it provides an excellent platform for the director's fragmentary dramaturgy, for the elimination of linear storytelling and the development of allegorical representation. Péter Pál Józsa's play has not yet appeared in print, so we can only infer from the National Theatre's script what changes the director made to the author's writing. Other texts, presumably inserted afterwards (by the director or on the basis of actors' improvisations), are in larger type (*ibid.*, 10): "József Kovács S.: Printing started out as an inherent linguistic and conceptual quirk. Are you listening?—Simmonides?! / Chorus member: I'm listening! / That which is distorted in conception remains bull-headed in every way. We're poisoned to the core, but we're not dead yet. / H. L. O.: Not yet. / To the columns of Heracles I say: Cloaca multorum diabolorum!" In a passage reflecting on literacy, Mari Nagy calls out to the audience as she shoves the parchment into the mouth of the huge face on the stage and wounds her hand (*ibid.*, 7): "Let go! Mother! Fake blood. Don't worry!"

The script of the performance consists of five parts. After a situation recalling the Socratic defence, Józsa reflects on literacy (*ibid.*, 9), "It is worth examining together how we have come from the dawn of Gutenmorg's movable lead types to the luminously pitch-dark forgery of our spirit encoded in the binary number system." Then, referring to the *Credo* of Beethoven's *Missa solennis* (written by the master in deafness), he points out the duality of music and art (*ibid.*, 15), "It's nice, nice what you've created, but you'll be punished for it, you earthly mortal. The gods, your judges have assembled and adjudicated. No more shall you listen to your celestial music, the music of the spheres." As an opposition to the height of art, the actors lay Hanga Martos on top of the rotating rectangle in the middle of the arena, paint her dress red and rape her. In the third stage, in addition to the events taking place in the world (Great Wall of China, Kharkiv, Kiev, Mariupol), the references to Hungarian history become increasingly dense and concrete (for example, the mention of Stalin, Ratko, Hitler, Tisza, and Teleki). The script suggests that some of the references were integrated into the text by the director and his creative collaborators, and scenes were built on them. In the fourth part, the act

of hanging of the first defendant on meat hooks begins as the vote is concluded. The final part of the script concludes with the nuclear disaster (ibid., 30: "The hot rocks mix with air, cool, solidify and seep into your brain. The incandescent cloud of ash falls on your body, your teeth and bones crack, your brain boils and explodes.") and the ritual funeral ceremony and burial of the accused (and Christ).

Vidnyánszky has divided the free verse text, written by Józsa as a monodrama, between eight characters, who also use performance techniques to illustrate individual story fragments. The latter is alluded to in the second part of the subtitle chosen by the creators of the performance: *A cathedral from swear-words performance, only YOU get it*. Lajos Ottó Horváth appears as the main accused in the performance, but sometimes other actors (Martin Mészáros or Hanga Horváth) take the position of the accused. Péter Herczegh, József S. Kovács, István Madácsi and Domán Szép play mostly negative characters. Hanga Martos and Mari Nagy represent the feminine principle, integrating into the performance phenomena that initially appear in the world as positive values. To quote a passage from Mari Nagy (ibid., 6), "You live in a sad security, you poor imperishable ones... You cannot know the divine moments of man, when we fall into each other like stars, destroying ourselves, to be reborn as spheres." Yet it is the female principal that suffers the most agonistic brutality: the white dress of Martos Hanga is painted with authoritarian signs, she is raped, and a deformed child is torn from her body. At the end of the performance (like Madách's Eve), it is she who gives birth to a child, although this allusion is more indirect in *Agon* than in Madách's *Az ember tragédiája* (The Tragedy of Man).

Of Vidnyánszky's *Gesamtkunstwerk* productions, *Agon* is one of the most complex and structured works. The adaptation of the poetic text to the stage, its rhythm, the constant presence of the chorus and orchestra, the amphitheatre-like spatial arrangement, allude to ancient tragedies, demonstrating the interconnectedness of actors, chorus and space. Despite the fact that Péter Pál Józsa, a graduate of music high school, defines his work as a tragedy, the "incipit opera" opening and the low-toned music, as well as the text for male chorus, are essentially an opera or oratorio. According to the Liszt Ferenc Prize-winning conductor Kálmán Strausz, the work features stringed instruments that evoke a fundamentally sad, dark atmosphere.⁹ As the script of the play

⁹ "Zenébe öntött élet: Strausz Kálmán karmester az *Agón*ról" ("Life cast in music: conductor Kálmán Strausz on *Agon*"). *Nemzeti Magazin* 2022/2: 11.

must be in tune with the music, the performance is guided by two conductors, one conducting the orchestra and the other the actors. The orchestra and male chorus members of the play (which is a prequel to the Gesamtkunstwerk *Johanna a máglyán*—Joan of Arc at the Stake)¹⁰ are seated in the audience. The members of the Honvéd Férfikar, embodying the Greek tragedy chorus that traces the fate of humanity, appear in costume, and the set of the performance creates a painting-like scenography. Vidnyánszky's staging is based on a combined effect of various arts (literature, drama, music, dance, painting) and technical devices. *Gesamtkunstwerk* puts different artistic disciplines at the service of a specific work of art, with Richard Wagner being its best-known representative, who considered the unification of the arts his vocation and considered music, fiction, dance and gesture to be of equal importance in his works. Dániel Tibor Hegyi indicates in his study of János Térey's *A Nibelung lakópark* (Nibelung Residential Compound) that "a Gesamtkunstwerk in the Wagnerian sense, which uses music and poetry as 'mere' components in order to give priority to the plot, is far from being equal to performances that use elements of other arts (as an insert) to colour the production without aiming to establish an organic relationship between them in the course of the performance" (Hegy 2023, 161). As a staging using the technique of poetry, the connecting element of the *Agon* is the music and the text as its acoustic element, and it is primarily the interplay of these elements that gives the rhythm, dynamics and visionary quality of the performance.

The production makes use of the means of Artaud's theatre of cruelty. The primary tension is sustained by the drastic depictions of bodies and death, and the brutality of the play is also indicated by the set piece, with the mouth on the huge face swallowing people and bloody body parts, a reference to the phrase "man-crusher" in the text (Józsa 2022, 19): "If long-range writing is invented somewhere, mass latrine camps will be set up there. And the human crusher. Transition from one to the other." The strong imagery of *Agon*, with its particularly disturbing sound effects, often reminiscent of bombardment, its depiction of man's vile instincts (the distribution of *Playboy* pictures to the audience, or the handing over of a male genital organ to an audience member

10 Paul Claudel and Arthur Honegger: *Johanna a máglyán* (Joan of Arc at the Stake), Nemzeti Színház, Budapest. Opening date: 29 November 2013. Lead actor: Kátya Tompos. Directed by Attila Vidnyánszky. Dramaturg: Zsófia Rideg. The performance was a Gesamtkunstwerk with opera singers, choirs, symphony orchestra and actors.

in the front rows), and its illustration of the dismemberment of a child torn from its mother (ibid., 20: "Look what I've been rummaging around! I pulled out his oesophagus. Look what I've found! Ah... I'm pulling his rectum now.") depicting a series of historical events, eventually coalesce into the collective sins of humanity. While the woman lying on the central rotating plinth (table, altar or coffin) is almost dismembered by the characters, there are references to Marx, Engels, Lenin, embryos, and tanks. In Artaud's theatre of cruelty, "language can conquer that part of space which lies outside the realm of words" (Artaud 1999, 137), the strong textual material of the drama, the sombreness of live music, the drastic sound and light effects, violent war and private scenes, the throwing of pieces of flesh, bones and body parts are intended to confront and (shock) the bodies of those present, in the course of which the spectator can bury or recreate the meaning of human existence. After the passage ending in a nuclear catastrophe, Lajos Ottó Horváth, the actor representing the primary defendant, is lifted up (like Sándor Berettyán, playing Adam in Vidnyánszky's staging of *Az ember tragédiája* (The Tragedy of Man)¹¹ in the scene evoking the Spirit of the Earth), hung on meat hooks, and then buried in a symbolic funeral, throwing the cross of Christ into his grave. The dramatic danse macabre on stage finally ends with the burial of man and Christ.

One of the strongest claims of Vidnyánszky's production is that those present on stage are both the perpetrators and the sufferers of the brutality in the world. The expansion of historical events from antiquity to the present day into a global catastrophe puts the audience in a situation of judgement, and during the performance everyone can decide for themselves whether they vote life or death for humanity using the black and white balls that repeatedly appear, signifying the ancient Roman vote. According to Hans-Thies Lehmann, when the boundary between real and fictional experience in post-dramatic theatre disappears, "the metaphorical-symbolic space becomes metonymic" (Lehmann 2009, 180). Metonymy as a figure of speech brings together two things that correspond to each other by asserting the part as a whole. In this relation, the space of the stage can be considered metonymic in so far as the events that begin on it incorporate the bodily space of the spectators. To use Lehmann's formulation, the main defining feature of the stage space, the fact that it is

11 Imre Madách, *Az ember tragédiája* (The Tragedy of Man), Nemzeti Színház, Budapest. Opening date: 19 October 2018. Directed by Attila Vidnyánszky.

“highlighted and filled as a real part or continuation of the theatrical space, can be called metonymic” (ibid.). In the performance of *Agon*, the spectator (just like the actors, chorus members and musicians present) becomes both accuser and accused, passing a fateful judgment on himself or herself.

Asman points out that in Benjamin’s theory of tragedy, the polarization of body and language plays a significant role: tragedy is not only the site of bodily but also linguistic sacrifice. Its central paradox is that the ritual of the sacrifice of the body is replaced by the sacrifice of language, the essence of “self” and “meaning” can only be preserved by their negation, allowing through silence the questioning and rewriting of hitherto valid meanings.¹² And all this is prepared by the silent struggle and the silent flight on stage.¹³ According to Benjamin, the *agonal match* that preceded the drama and concluded the rehearsal usually took place in silence, the “tragic hero knowing only one language that suits him perfectly: silence.” (Benjamin 1980, 295). The philosopher also points out, in the context of the *Oresteia*, that the sacrifice of the body is here substituted for the sacrifice of language, and that in the final part of the trilogy, Orestes no longer speaks, his silence introducing a tragic silence, a site of the questioning of meanings. The sacrifice is saved from literal death, which becomes the contractual death of muteness and bondage, the body is saved, but language is sacrificed; the sacrifice of body, *physis*, is exchanged for the voluntary sacrifice of language.¹⁴ The deepest silence of the *agon* is brought about by the cross thrown to the ground by Martin Mészáros and the burial of that cross. At one point in the performance, the actor throws away the crucifix, crying out “*Iesus Nazarenus Rex Iudeorum*”, which is also heard in the *Csíksomlyói passió* (Passion of Csíksomlyó)¹⁵ (according to the notations in the script, this sentence was not part of Józsa text), and the crucifix is buried along with the primary accused. The extended moment of humanity’s *agonal run* is interrupted by the

12 “The ritual sacrifice of body is replaced in tragedy by the sacrifice of language (in place of body), thus enabling ‘self/body and ‘meaning’ to be redeemed through silence.” (Asman 1992, 614.)

13 “The wordless struggle (‘wortloses Ringen’) and mute escape (‘stummes Entlaufen’) are necessary processes which prepare the stage for the un-folding of dialogue and speech in tragedy.” (Ibid., 608.)

14 “The transformation of myth is completed by substitution; the sacrifice of body, *physis*, is exchanged for the sacrifice of language.” (Ibid., 615.)

15 *Csíksomlyói passió* (Passion of Csíksomlyó), based on 18th century Franciscan school dramas and Géza Szócs’ *Passió*, National Theatre, Budapest. Opening date: 10 March 2017. Directed by Attila Vidnyánszky. Choreographer: Zoltán Zsuráfszky. Dramaturg: Zsolt Szász.

pronouncement of death, bringing with it the traumatised silence of millennia of suffering.

From the point of view of poetic theatre, it is important to note Asman's warning: in the common thought of Rang and Benjamin, the free word can rise above the written law, and the persuasive power of live speech can give rise to a higher truth.¹⁶ The silence of the *agon* can be broken by the *ecstatic word*, because it can break out of the power of the written form and break through the system of the *agon* established up to that point. To quote Benjamin (Benjamin 1980, 305–306), "For Athenian law, the important and characteristic element is the Dionysian irruption – namely, the fact that the intoxicating, ecstatic word can break through the regular encirclement of the *agon*, that a higher justice could spring from the force of conviction in living speech than from the trial of factions opposing each other with weapons or prescribed verbal forms. By means of the *logos*, in freedom, the ordeal is broken through. This is at bottom the cognation of juridical process and tragedy in Athens." In the transition from the sacrifice of body to the sacrifice of language, the silence of the *agon* can thus be broken by the *ecstatic word*. In Vidnyánszky's staging, this word is (in my opinion) none other than the blessing in the final scene of the performance, the folk song *Where I am going, even the trees weep*, sung by an opera singer, rising above the coffin of the accused, the coffin of humanity. The blessing acknowledges what has happened to mankind and conveys a salvific power; it is an irrevocable word and gesture that brings good. A call to humanity to become a promoter of salvation.¹⁷ Blessing also carries with it the possibility of changing fate: the *ecstatic word* can make those who judge and/or survive merciful and change the fate of humanity. Humanity's flight from its self-inflicted traumas is brought to a close at the time the blessing is being sung, the accumulated horrors are silenced, the funeral takes place. The time and ritual effect of the blessing, however, creates a possibility for change.

In the logical structure of the dramatic text, Józsa has reached the point that Béla Hamvas reached in his essay on the *agon*: the *agon* is a form of life that "embezzles the soul-world" (Hamvas 1993, 383), whereas the "master of the soul-

16 "According to the letter from Rang, of central importance is the fact that the free word, 'das freie Wort' as the spoken word, is allowed to assert itself over the power of the written law (dictamen) and that a higher justice arose out of the persuasive power of living speech in contrast to the trial by weapons and the formulaic phrases in the dialogical debate of the feuding parties." (Benjamin 1980, 614.)

17 See *Katolikus lexikon*, I, edited by Dr. István Diós. Budapest: Szent István Társulat, 2004, 129.

world is love. [...] And love is absolute freedom" (ibid., 389–390). This appears in the last lines of Józsa's text (Józsa 2022, 32), "Divine One, thou seest my inmost soul, thou knowest that therein dwells the love of humanity and the desire to do good." The poem presents the soul-murder of humanity on itself, but in its final, funeral phase, there is a glimmer of hope: the ecstatic word that breaks through the circle of the *agon*. In Józsa's text, there is a reference to the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste, condemned to death in Cappadocia by Emperor Licinus because they were Christians. They were martyrs who died by freezing to death for Christ, and the thoughts they professed are echoed by Lajos Ottó Horváth, who appears in the role of the sacrificial victim (ibid., 25): "I have power over my body, which I have learned to despise. My soul, however, is not subject to any external violence." It is not evident, but the script suggests that the sentences from the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste were inserted afterwards, i.e., the director reinforced the reference to them in Józsa's text. A similar intertext is the subtitle chosen by the director and his fellow creators, which quotes László Nagy, "a cathedral from swear-words". Socrates, in his defence (from the basic situation of which the poem unfolds), points out that he has spent his whole life seeking the good of the people, avoiding all acquisition of wealth and fame, and reproaches Athenian citizens for doing the opposite (Platón, n.d.): "... so are you not ashamed that, while you take care to acquire as much wealth as possible, with honour and glory as well, yet you take no care or thought for understanding or truth, or for the best possible state of your soul? The basic idea of Socrates, the possibility of the betterment of the soul, is as much in line with the quote of László Nagy as the phrases attributed to the Forty Martyrs of Sebastián. Although Józsa's text implies that the relationship between mortals on earth and the gods in heaven has ceased (Józsa 2022, 26: "Tonality has disappeared – we have buried it with us. Through the overtones and the rings of the spheres, the axis has crumbled. The message between angels and men is broken."), the final thoughts of the written text on philanthropy, the intertexts inserted by the director and the final image of the performance suggest that it is philanthropy and freedom of the soul (i.e., not submitting to the dominant ideological systems) that can lead the survivors out of the failures and traumatic lows of humanity.

Vidnyánszky's staging can be interpreted as a paraphrase of Madách's *Tragedy*, thus going beyond and complementing Józsa's work. Both *Agon* and *Tragedy* analyse and list the greatest mistakes humanity has made. Józsa depicts the events of Hungarian history, Madách those of world history; at the end of *Agon*,

humanity comes to the atomic bomb, and in the last scene of *Tragedy* Adam is determined to commit suicide. Both representations of the world originate in Lucifer's rebellion: the desire for man's destruction, his self-annihilation. Adam would commit suicide as proof of free will, while the forty of Sebaste embrace death for the sake of Christ, whom the world is constantly burying. "And thou too, Lucifer, art yet a link / Within my universe. Work on, work on! / Thy fond denial and thy knowledge cold / Shall be the leaven in the mind of man, / And though he stray a brief space from the road, / It matters not, he shall return to it." (Madách 2023, 65), says the Lord in Madách's work. In other words, despite the Luciferian power, God is present even in crisis, and (if man does not put obstacles in his way) he will carry through the work that has been begun. No specific reference to redemption does appear in Józsa's text, but it does in Vidnyánszky's production: in the last minutes of the performance, after the scenography of the slaughterhouse and the burial of "humanity", during the singing of the blessing, Hanga Martos and Martin Mészáros appear as a couple on the top steps of one side of the arena, with a small child between them. After the extended moment of humanity's *agonal run*, the final judgment is made: death to humanity. The appearance of the child, however, may bring with it the reversibility of the fate of humanity, for it may be he who will build a cathedral from swear-words, if he is able to preserve the freedom of his soul.

References

- Artaud, Antonin. 1999. "Rendezés és metafizika." In *A színház és az istenek: Válogatott írások*, translated by János Betlen. Budapest: Orpheusz.
- Asman, Carrie L. 1992. "Theater and Agon / Agon and theater: Walter Benjamin and Florens Christian Rang." *MLN* 1992 April, Vol. 107, No. 3: 606–624. German Issue, The Johns Hopkins University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/2904948>
- Benjamin, Walter. 1980. *Angelus Novus*, Hungarian translation by György Bence, Ferenc Kőszeg, Péter Pó, László Rajnai and Dezső Tandori. Budapest: Magyar Helikon.
- Hamvas, Béla. 1993. "Az agón." In *A babérligetkönyv / Hexakümlion*. Szombathely: Életünk Szerkesztősége – Magyar Írók Szövetsége.

- Hegyi, Dániel Tibor. 2023. "A *Nibelung-lakópark* mint összművészeti alkotás." In "A szellős térben és a szűk időben": *Tanulmányok Térey Jánosról*, edited by Ágnes Balajthy, Gergő Melhardt and Dániel Szabolcs Radnai. Budapest: Petőfi Irodalmi Múzeum.
- Lehmann, Hans-Thies. 2009. *Posztdramatikus színház*, Hungarian translation by Beatrix Kricsfalusi, Budapest: Balassi.
- Madách, Imre. 2023. *Az ember tragédiája*. Budapest: Magvető.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1926. *Vidám tudomány*, Hungarian translation by Ödön Wildner. Budapest: Világirodalom Könyvkiadó Vállalat. Online access: <https://mek.oszk.hu/15200/15256/15256.pdf> (last visited: October 3, 2024).
- Platón. N.d. *Szókratész védőbeszéde*, Hungarian translation by Gábor Devecseri. Online access: <http://mek.niif.hu/00400/00460/00460.htm> (last visited: March 1, 2024).
- Verebes, Ernő. 2015. "Don Quijote." In *A titkok kapuja*, edited by Vera Prontvai. Budapest: Mária Rádió. Online access: https://www.mariaradio.hu/musor/554/A_titkok_kapuja (last visited: March 28, 2023).
- Visky, András. 2020. *Mire való a színház? Útban a theatrum theologicum felé*. Budapest: KRE–L'Harmattan.