Memoir as Motherly Word: Processing Trauma in Biographies of Attila József by Judit Szántó, Flóra Kozmutza and Márta Vágó

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ABSTRACT
This article analyses biographical memoirs written about Attila József by three women, Judit Szántó, Márta Vágó, and Flóra Kozmutza, each also a lover of the poet at some point in their lives. These works have hitherto been primarily used only as source material for research on Attila József. This article provides close readings of these biographies for the first time, highlighting their main themes and looking at them in light of the notion of mirror autobiography within the framework of women’s writing. Developing the key concept of the ‘motherly word’ (the phrase taken from Attila József’s poem ‘I Might Disappear Suddenly’), the essay focuses on how the authors work through their trauma and loss by creating mother-images of themselves in their texts, referring, on the one hand, to the mother–child relationship that all three memoirs stage retrospectively in the narratives, and, on the other hand, to the mirror-effect in the speech of the mother. The article draws here on Winnicott’s theory of the mirroring mother and on the developmental psychology of Stern. Touching upon the widely analysed issue of the childhood trauma of Attila József, the article offers new insights for psychoanalytically oriented Attila József-criticism.

KEYWORDS
Mirror-autobiography; trauma-processing; women’s writing; poetry of Attila József

There are some terrible rooms where the old wallpaper is now hanging from the walls like pieces of old rag. I have also become a wallpaper like this out in the world and I might end up dumped. But even so, nothing can take away from me the dream of being on your wall.
- Letter from Attila József to Márta Vágó (Vágó 1975, 150)

There are three biographies written about Attila József by women, each of whom was at some point in an intimate relationship with him. The first of these women, Márta Vágó (1903–1976), was born into a wealthy family, her father an economist and essayist for the newspaper Pester Lloyd. She studied sociology in Heidelberg, Berlin and London, and...
later worked as an editor and translator. She met Attila József in 1928, and they had a brief affair. They separated after she left for London, but resumed their affair around 1935, when Vágó moved back to Budapest after her divorce. The second biographer, Judit Szántó, born Judit Ludman (1903–1963), was Attila József’s lover between 1929 and 1935, in the period of his estrangement from Vágó. Szántó was a performance artist who also worked in an umbrella factory to support herself throughout her relationship with József. She had previously been the wife of Gyula Szántó, a writer and activist in the illegal Communist Party under the name Antal Hidas. József’s third biographer, Flóra Kozmutza (1905–1995), only met him in 1937, shortly before his death. Kozmutza completed her studies in Budapest, and was a psychologist and special education teacher. Two years after József’s death, she married Gyula Illyés, a prominent writer and poet. She had been friends with Illyés, who was married at the time, while she was close to József.

Rather than focusing on the truthfulness or reliability of the accounts that each of these texts offer in their depiction of Atila József, as have previous commentators, in this article I analyse them as mirror autobiographies/memoirs and as examples of women’s writing (see Yalom 1990; Shari 1998). While the works function as biographies of Attila József, they were written in the form of memoirs of these women’s lives, concentrating on the authors’ relationship with the poet; thus, they can be considered mirror autobiographies/memoirs. The complex genre of mirror autobiography was more easily accessible to women writing in the twentieth century than memoirs written directly about themselves: in writing mirror autobiography, women were writing about somebody else, usually a man, while at the same time they could speak about themselves. Their writing became legitimate through memorialising the often famous man (see Mackay 1990; Napier 2001, 10, 115).

My article provides close readings of the memoirs written by these three women writers, focusing on how they work through the trauma connected to the death of their lover by retrospectively creating mother-images of themselves in their texts. Throughout this study, I apply the term ‘motherly word’, originally a phrase in József’s poem, ‘I Might Disappear Suddenly’, to name this practice of retrospective self-projection as a mother figure. My analysis draws on the concept of the mirror-role of the mother in Winnicott’s developmental psychology (Winnicott 2005, 149–159; Lacan 2006, 75–81), which has a complex and interesting connection to Lacan’s concept of the mirror-stage (Luepnitz 2009; Vanier 2012; Kirshner 2010), and on Daniel Stern’s analysis of the role of speech in mother–child relationships during the developmental phase of language acquisition (Stern 2000, 162–182). At the theoretical level, I thus offer a reading of how the ‘motherly word’ can be thought to be helping the three memoirists to process their trauma retrospectively through the act of writing.

The three women’s memoirs contain two different types of texts. While Judit Szántó’s memoir comprises a diary and a text that she dictated to somebody (it is still unknown to whom), the other two comprise memoirs and letters. In her book, Márta Vágó places all her letters to Attila József and his letters to her separately at the end of her text, in contrast to Flóra Kozmutza, who cites the letters placed within her text. The authors finalised their own works to a different extent. Flóra Kozmutza, who writes under her married name, Mrs Gyula Illyés, wrote, edited and published her volume herself. Márta Vágó’s editor supplemented the text with his own comments. Judit Szántó’s text is an unfinished piece: as she dictated it to the still unknown transcriber, the editor corrected and edited the typed text, and provided comments. Judit Szántó died in 1963, and the memoir was published in
1972 for the first time, edited by György Vértes; however, the publishing editor of the second, 1986 edition, Gábor Murányi used a different typed manuscript as by that time the original had been lost.

Many readers of these books are not really interested in the authors; they mostly read them out of interest in Attila József. Only a few reviews have been published about the memoirs (even though Flóra Kozmutza’s was a bestseller), which indicates they were not seen as sufficiently valuable in themselves to be praised or analysed. Such critical reception as there has been has been preoccupied with judging the truth-value of the texts, and by comparing the texts with their own memories and information found elsewhere, critics have corrected certain parts of the memoirs (Ignotus and Fejtő 1973; László 1976; Fodor 1976). Tibor Melczer’s review, which deals with the potential usefulness of Márta Vágó’s book, is characteristic of this approach. According to Melczer, Vágó’s book is useful only for those seeking biographical data. It is less for scholars of József’s poetry because only a few Attila József-poems are dedicated to Márta Vágó and those are ‘not the best poems’. He adds that literary critics may gather information from Vágó on changes in the poet’s philosophy and outlook, while, he remarks in an explicitly gendered comment, the reader will need to ‘plough through a badly-written romance’ for some interesting bits (Melczer 1975). Even the editor of Judit Szántó’s book, Gábor Murányi, formulating his own reading of the text in his comments, argues that Judit Szántó is deliberately inaccurate, that she is not mistaken, but falsifies facts. The editor’s bias is obvious as early as the prologue and it is especially striking in the notes, for example by the positioning of quotation marks. In a case when both Flóra Kozmutza and Judit Szántó describe a visit to Attila József in Siesta Sanatorium, Gábor Murányi indicates with quotation marks that he accepts Flóra Kozmutza’s version of the story over Judit Szántó’s: ‘The meeting is described by Flóra the following way … while Judit Szántó in her memoir adds “some extra” to the story’ (Szántó 1997, 207, n. 16); ‘We may conclude that this is one of Judit Szántó’s “usual” mistakes’ (233, n. 217); ‘It is obvious that this is one of Judit Szántó’s “usual” exaggerations’ (243, n. 295); ‘Judit Szántó must have been tricked by her memory’ (230, n. 206); ‘Judit Szántó must be exaggerating here’ (205, n. 6); ‘Judit Szántó does not write the facts but the way she sees the facts’ (204, n. 1).

Even if the editor’s remarks are correct, the tone is inappropriately pejorative. His distrust of Szántó’s account is further evidenced in the ways he frequently corrects the text and compares it to another diary by Judit Szántó (published in the same volume) that he finds more authentic, even though the latter diary was accidentally found in a second-hand bookshop and it was not clear whether its author had intended to publish it. Judit Szántó’s text thus becomes vulnerable. While the editor finds Szántó’s account objectionable in that he doubts her honesty, his attitude inadvertently calls attention to the fact that it can be read in a different way, namely as a literary text that invites interpretations based on questions of narrative identity.

An instance in Mártá Vágó’s book further illuminates the preoccupation with the honesty (or dishonesty) of these biographers. Vágó describes how, in 1935, her affair with Attila József resumed. She begins with a soft-focus love scene, written in an emotional and lyrical tone, and only mentions a kiss. However, she later casts doubt on her own account by adding the following remark:
I’ve faced the complaint of hiding details, of not exposing a part of our relationship, which should not be hidden if I wish to confess about him in an open way. Should I confess then that in the above described scene I was not sitting but lying behind him having a little cold or flu and when he came to rest while writing he came to rest by me, that we already had an affair? ... That he was already my lover? So, how did it begin? (Vágó 1975, 242).

She then rewrites the previous scene, with Attila József writing naked at his desk at night. However, it is impossible to define from which point she starts rewriting. The two versions complement each other and complicate a reading that is focused on pinning down what really happened, as Vágó leaves both versions in the book together, so that what follows may be the continuation of either. This episode in Márta Vágó’s book invites my own focus on the non-documentary character of the memoirs.

... mother,

don’t you hear it? Tell me off. (József 2018a: ‘Belated Lament’)

Several studies of Attila József’s poetry have argued that its representation of his relationships with his mother and women points to the most significant issue of his life, namely that he was continually seeking a mother in his relationships. If, however, he received motherly care, he would become disappointed that he was being treated like a child and not like a man. Psychologically or psychoanalytically oriented scholars have analysed the poet’s mental illness, drawing on the theme of the (loss of) the mother, a theme I will discuss in more detail in the last part of this article. At this point, I will turn to the topic of the mother as it appears in the memoirs.

In the mirror-autobiographies/memoirs written by Márta Vágó, Judit Szántó and Flóra Kozmutza, as is typical of the genre, the writing women see themselves through their subject, in their dialogues with the man, and thus their own story turns into somebody else’s biographical document. However, the authors seem to deal with something else, too. In spite of the fact that they name different aims and reasons for writing, and that there were differences in the nature of their relationship to the poet, and in the way they depicted this relationship in their respective books, nevertheless there is a common, urgent and unspoken need, the need to put something in words, to reinterpret past events and keep them alive in memory. The books seem to be written not about Attila József but to him. Ferenc Fejtő remarks in his review of Flóra Kozmutza’s book that ‘it is pervaded with guilt, with the effort to prove innocent, yet one cannot find the wrongdoing’ (Fejtő 1989, 536). Over the course of this article I explore how these three mirror autobiographies produce the impression of guilt. All three memoirs are filled with emotions ranging from grief and remorse to self-validation, and some feeling of lack is perceptible in the background. I argue that these women, these past lovers, feel that there is something that they could not give to Attila József, the man. The remembering, writing women seek, I argue, to resolve their feeling of lack and the urge to compensate retrospectively through writing and in writing. This experience is not at all uncommon. Such feelings of guilt have clear connections to the cult of Attila József, which emerged soon after the poet’s death among his contemporaries, was kept active during the communist period (burdened at the time by political pressures), and survives today. The cult of Attila József, the guilt of both his contemporaries and later generations, and the impact of politics on these
emotions constitute a larger issue than this article can fully tackle (Tverdota 1998; Takáts 2003), but it is worth considering an example of how it emerges even amongst today’s readers. In her paper about the relationship of Attila József to women, Anna Valachi describes her own reading experience as a wish for ‘posthumous jurisdiction’. She adds that it is quite common among later devotees of Attila József to fantasise about making up for the losses the poet suffered throughout his life, and women readers often imagine themselves in the roles of the mother and lover of Attila József (Valachi 2003).

All three of Attila József’s lovers discuss his emotional dependence on them. For instance, Judit Szántó writes that, ‘Attila was unable to become attached to anyone because anyone who he did become attached to was not his mother, and thus unaccomplished love haunted all of Attila’s romantic relationships’ (Szántó 1997, 96). Márta Vágó gives a similar description of Attila József’s personality and behaviour: ‘[He] could only show love by seeking emotional support and – just like a baby – he never considered what this support consists of’ (Vágó 1975, 262). Similarly, Flóra Kozmutza analyses József in the following way:

This type of escape to unconditional (motherly?) love demonstrated more clearly than previously and thus forcing me into realizing it without lulling myself into optimistic ideas that it was just a mania. But let it be. I took all of his words seriously and decided to do my best to save him. (Illyés 1988, 91)

It is remarkable that in all three of the memoirs the theme of psychoanalysis plays a central role connected to the theme of the mother. The three authors have very differing opinions on psychoanalysis and therefore on the effects of therapy on Attila József. Judit Szántó was living with Attila József during the time he was undergoing therapy, so she could directly sense the effect of the analytic sessions. She blames all the problems that both József and consequently she faced in their lives, and in their relationship, on József having undergone psychoanalysis with therapist Edit Gyömrői. Szántó is convinced that psychoanalysis had harmed József by turning him against communism and his comrades, leaving him even more alone with his psychological problems (Szántó 1997, 96). She often mentions how the image of the mother that was awakened in Attila József invaded their lives and how the poet was taken back to the past through analysis (38). Szántó recounts that, for example, after his first session with the psychiatrist Sámuel Rapaport, József imagined that he may have committed a murder when he was a child and asked Szántó:

‘Tell me, don’t you know what kind of child I was? Maybe there, so long ago, I killed someone.’ … ‘Look my child,’ I said, ‘if you had killed someone, you would have known about it for a long time – this is foolish.’ … ‘You are right but why do I feel this way?’ ‘Come here my son, I will tell you,’ and I told him everything I knew from him about his bitter fate. ‘Mum, mum,’ he cuddled me so strong as if he was afraid I would leave him, because I knew that the person he called out for was not me, it was that ‘mum’ who was no longer alive. (37).

Márta Vágó was going into psychoanalytic therapy herself; she trusted the method and that it could cure them both. She had a vast knowledge on the topic and drew on it to analyse Attila József and his poems in her book. The topic of the mother regularly emerges in these accounts and, according to the memoir, it was an important topic of the analytical sittings as well. Vágó recollects:
He then decided to go to an analytical session, the thought either just popped up in his mind or he was just completely restless. He went to these occasions terribly irregularly. In the evening though he appeared half an hour before the others and he brought along his poem: Belated Lament. [A powerful mother-theme poem.] He grumbled, ‘she [the therapist, Edit Győmőri] says that I am looking for my mother again, the complete and unconditional devotion that only a baby can receive when it is like a helpless little animal and while looking, one can only be disappointed’ (1975, 263)

Flóra Kozmutza is different from the other two lovers of Attila József in that her profession made her intimately familiar with psychoanalysis. She was a psychologist, and a colleague of Leopold Szondi, the well-known Hungarian psychiatrist and inventor of the Szondi test. At the beginning of her book she states that she will not analyse Attila József psychologically, and although she does not do so directly she often builds psychologically oriented retrospective assessments about his character into the narrative. For example, when recounting that József fell in love with her on their very first meeting, she explains his reaction with the man’s lack of a mother:

We only spent an hour together and then I went to meet my friends. However, this single hour was enough to leave me astounded what storm-like feeling developed in him. Or it actually did not develop then. I hardly knew anything about his life but I thought that his whole life, obviously from the disappearance of his father and especially after the death of her mother was spent with an endless yearning for love that replaces the mother and can be trusted. (Illyés 1988, 14)

Flóra Kozmutza made a Rorschach test with Attila József at their first meeting. She does not disclose the results of the test in her book, because, in accordance with the role of the wife of the renowned writer Gyula Illyés she takes on in the memoir, she does not reveal any professional knowledge of Attila József’s mental state. However, we know what she must have learned from the test, because the psychologist Emőke Bagdy’s, who was asked years later by Flóra Kozmutza to assess Attila József’s test without knowing who it belonged to, reveals that the test shows early emotional damage in the area of the mother–child bond. This damage, arguably, led to his inability to maintain trusting and lasting relationships with women in adulthood (Bagdy 1992).

Márta Vágó

Márta Vágó began writing her memoir in 1942 during the brief bombing of Budapest by the Red Army. The book is a bequeathal, a testimony, a text written with clearly literary aspirations that shifts timelines. On the cover of the manuscript she had written that it was to be published only after her death. However, in 1967, following requests by several people, she decided to publish it, although according to the foreword she experienced publishing the book as a form of self-exposure (Vágó 1975, 7).

There is a definite difference between the memoir and the attached correspondence regarding the type of relationship between Márta Vágó and Attila József. The memoir often characterises Attila József as a child, who ‘whimpers’, in a ‘child’s voice’ (211), smiles in a ‘sad and childish way’ (35), who is ‘my baby who keeps waiting to be nursed’ (228) and whose kiss is like ‘the dragging of a desperate child drowning in water’ (35). Before Márta Vágó’s journey to England Attila József is frightened, and she describes him as a panicky child who is left by his mother (122). On another occasion,
Attila József invites her to a café and pays the bill, and Márta Vágó speaks about him like a child who could not be expected to make such a grown-up gesture. She even involves the waiter in the scene as if he saw Attila József as a child, too:

When it was time to pay I begged to pay at least for my own. The amount he received was indescribably small. He protested, didn’t allow me to pay: ‘Can’t you see it? It makes me happy!’ he said. Even the waiter smiled. I had tears in my eyes. The effort to be a normal grown-up man touched me deeply. Just a day before he accepted it naturally that I paid for his glass of milk in the small milk canteen in the castle district just as a mum pays for his son’s milk. (46–47)

Their correspondence shows a different relationship. They are equal partners, which is shown both in the style and tone of the letters, in their mutual verbal indulgence, the way they often call each other ‘my baby’ and ‘my little one’. Thus, a shift appears in Vágó’s memoir, and as a result the ‘written’ Attila József, the protagonist of the memoir, steps in front of us as a child, while Márta Vágó is shown as a woman whose main problem in her relationship is that she does not get an adult return of her love. Looking back, she feels that she should have taken on the role of the mother but she was unable to do that.

Towards the end of the memoir, there are two scenes in which Attila József defines roles for Márta Vágó, given that their relationship at that point is no longer a romantic one. The roles are those of the biography writer and the mother. In one scene, Attila József would like to dedicate one of his poems, ‘Homeland’, to Márta Vágó or, in a way, give it to her as a present, which she rejects. That is when she gets the role of the biography writer:

‘So you don’t want it? […] I don’t understand. I thought that after all, you have always been very kind to me and I just wanted to return it somehow. […] And you would get one of the greatest Hungarian poems.’ He looked at me in an expectant way. ‘So what now?’ he asked in air in front of him. ‘Will you be my biography writer?’ he asked in a playful and a bit poetic way. ‘No,’ I said, ‘it will be Lucie [Attila József’s sister] or the two of us.’ (309–314)

In another scene, Attila József is reading out a love poem addressed to Flóra Kozmutza, then asks Márta Vágó if she has a relationship with somebody, and then says: ‘I thought that I could keep you somehow, that you could be my mother maybe and you could get to know each other but she doesn’t want it either’ (318).

Vágó Márta thus writes her memoir in the double role of the struggling mother and the biography writer, while the most important question from her own point of view is why their relationship was not functional in the conventional sense. Attila József had encouraged her to write, but Márta Vágó was afraid of writing because it posed too much stress and emotional pressure on her (286–287). When she finally started to write, she was striving to be a constructed (hypothetical) mother who was giving everything that she could not in real life (due to the adult woman–man nature of their relationship) to her constructed son.

**Judit Szántó**

As in Vágó’s book, in Judit Szántó’s memoir we can also observe the shift in the man–woman/child–mother relationships. With Szántó, the shift appears between the two different texts, the private diary and the text that was dictated for public use, and it is connected
to the difference in the position of the narrator with regard to authority and to the woman writer’s fear of being insignificant, a dynamic described elsewhere by feminist literary critics (see Singely and Sweeney 1993; Heilburn 1999).

Judit Szántó dictated her memories in 1948 at the request of Márton Horváth, writer and politician, a leading figure in literary life in the Communist era. This dictated account is perhaps best described as a life-interview or testimony, its tone suggesting that the speaker is talking to somebody with a given aim in a given situation. Judit Szántó had strong party connections, as she was active in the illegal Communist Party before 1945. She even had a personal connection to János Kádár, who later became the General Secretary of the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party, presiding over the country from 1956 until his retirement in 1988, as in the 1930s they worked in the same factory. These connections contributed to Szántó’s being asked in 1948 to establish the Attila József Memorial Collection. As a co-worker of Petőfi Literary Museum she was responsible for the Attila József heritage (see Murányi 1997; Szántó and Kovács 1958).

Judit Szántó got direct political support for writing her book, which was considered to be the official version of Attila József’s life story. Unlike the other two memoirists, she put forward a categorical opinion regarding Attila József’s poetry and its values, since her position allowed the gestures of political canonisation. She was authorised and empowered to speak, and this support made writing a necessity for her. Judging from her diary, which has a completely different tone, it is doubtful whether she could have and would have written her memoir without this authorisation. In contrast to the memoir, she wrote the diary for herself during moments of hardship after Attila József’s death, and later during the Second World War when she had no news from her daughter who resided in Moscow.

Szántó’s diary illustrates the functioning of mirror autobiographies connected to women writers’ fear of being ‘insignificant’ (see Menyhért 2013, especially the discussion of Ilona Kosztolányiné Harmos): the fact that texts from diaries, notes and personal testimonies written by women do not satisfy the requirements of traditional genres, and thus may become excluded from the canon of the given era, makes women afraid of being not significant enough when seeking their own voice. Judit Szántó had entertained writing ambitions, she wrote and published fairy tales and, according to the memoir, she gave these up because Attila József asked her to do so. She obeyed him, because she thought a woman should not get her way against the wishes of a man (Szántó 1997, 112). Whereas in her diary Szántó commented that she would write and ‘write about who Attila really was’ one day, when she ‘became free’ (1997, 70). In the course of dictating her memoir she was able to resolve her anxiety through being authorised with political support. The fear of insignificance and of the control by the man, a fear that had stopped her writing, were both resolved by the official request that legitimised writing for her, helped by the fact that she did not need to write directly about herself, but about the famous man. In this way she was able to avoid confrontation with the traditional norms of being a ‘woman’. She did not write against the man but about him; she was able to continue looking after the man in her writing. Thus, Judit Szántó wrote a mirror-autobiography; through the other, the man; she was able to speak about herself to others. As she put it: ‘I wanted to write about my own life too, after all it is not so insignificant’ (1997, 51).
In contrast to the dictated part of the book, in the diary, almost every time Attila József is mentioned, the text uses second person singular. Later, during World War II, in her diary Szántó would often address her daughter in the second person singular as well, missing her terribly and not knowing if she was alive in Moscow. It thus seems that for Szántó, using the form of dialogue serves to help her cope with anxiety, or, as in the case of speaking about/to Attila József, work through trauma and loss. In the diary the narrator establishes her own position through talking to the other. This is also a mirror-autobiography with the difference that it is not for others but for herself only, in front of the picture of the other. She starts writing in his mirror and the possibility of talking and writing is provided by addressing the other. For this reason in the diary her relationship to József is mostly pictured as a mutual woman–man relationship, as the following excerpts illustrate:

You died Attila. You are resting in Szárszó and nothing hurts you anymore. I am lonely. …
You’ve been dead for two months. … My head and heart are empty. I have never written about myself. I’ve just paused by your picture and I asked you to take care of me. Protect me from the temper of writing differently about you, myself, and others than how it actually happened. (Szántó 1997, 29)

And:

I don’t feel that you didn’t love me or that you didn’t belong to me. I don’t care that you are a great poet or were in the past, I had known that before. I loved you for what you were, your honest, suffering, inordinately seeking, hungry self. (15)

Unlike in her diary, in Szántó’s dictated memoir the reader can witness the same phenomenon as in Márta Vágó’s case: the man turns into a child and the woman into a mother. Szántó keeps writing about herself as a mother looking after her child: ‘Attila was like a very pure and very kind child, not like a man’ (81); ‘During the six years I never had a headache, never fell sick as I couldn’t do that. Just like the mother who works, fights for her child and looks after him’ (111);

Before leaving for work, whether he was awake or not I made him drink from a medicine cup like they do with the patients in a hospital and I cut the sandwiches into soldiers just as people do with children and I fed him while reading out tales to him. (93)

**Flóra Kozmutza**

Compared to the other two memoirs, Kozmutza’s is entangled in a more complex situation regarding romantic relationships and writing: a woman writes about one man, her past lover, long dead, to clear another man, her husband. Yet, in her book, as in the other two memoirs, we can also observe the shift from the adult–adult relationship to the mother–child relationship, at the point when she accepts József’s offer of marriage. Flóra Kozmutza originally began her notes in 1962 with the plan that they would be used to tell only her daughter privately about her nine-month relationship with Attila József. However, in 1980 she published her memoir, explaining that the main aim of her writing was to remove the stigma from her husband (Illyés 1988, 8). Kozmutza’s husband, Gyula Illyés, one of the most prominent writers of the era, and in a way a rival to Attila József, was still receiving anonymous letters decades after József’s death.
in which he was accused of being Attila József’s murderer, as a result of the fanatical attitude of Attila József’s followers and his widespread cult.

Gyula Illyés had a strong opinion as to why and how his wife should write about her memories. He treated with revulsion Márta Vágó’s ambitions to become a writer; according to him Flóra Kozmutza’s task was to report the facts. He notes in his diary:

29 March 1980, morning with Flóra; should she publish the letters received from Attila József? With comments? Should she write about their relationship? And should she publish the short answers she sent back to Attila? [She always wrote short and reserved letters to everyone.] I am deterred by Márta Vágó’s writing ambitions. Flóra has already written about this in a memoir for Ika [their daughter]. I never read that and do not want to. I am still of the opinion that she should write about her memories in a way that I will never see them. She should have a look at the letters one by one, and by giving a description of these a whole biography fragment may unfold, without any literature added to it thus granting its authenticity and in the end a real piece of writing could appear. (Illyés 1994, 227; see also Valachi 2005)

The husband’s expectations and instructions about tone are realised in Flóra Kozmutza’s memoir. In the preface she states that she has no intention of writing fiction, she would not be able to do so anyway because she is not a creative writer. She confirms that she will describe only the facts, devoid of any professional-psychological arguments, in order to clarify misunderstandings (Illyés 1988, 7).

Over the course of their relationship, Flóra Kozmutza primarily supported Attila József with her words; in her letters she offered friendly love, help and partnership. Attila József, however, wanted love and marriage. Even though it is not explicitly stated, it is clear from the memoir that Flóra Kozmutza was in fact in love with Gyula Illyés (see Fejtő 1989, 544), who was still married at that time. She was unable to reject Attila József (Illyés 1988, 24), and she finally fell ill (Illyés 1988, 30). The illness, diagnosed as myocarditis, started with symptoms often associated with anxiety such as increased heartbeat and breathlessness (Illyés 1988, 30). The condition gave Flóra Kozmutza the chance to be weak, prevented her from being Attila József’s support and helped her to step out of their relationship without being forced to say no to the man (Illyés 1988, 32). After her recovery she followed Attila József’s life, she stood by him, visited him in the sanatorium and later in Balaton-szárszó; finally she even promised to marry him.

Zsuzsa Beney claims that Attila József’s love poems to Flóra Kozmutza, written in 1937, can be read as death poems, directed towards the acceptance of death (Beney 1999, 261–268, 269–280). If we accept this interpretation, we may conclude that in providing help in accepting death, Flóra Kozmutza’s role is the mother’s who nurses her son to death. This role, just as in the case of Márta Vágó being the autobiographer, is ‘prescribed’ by Attila József, not in a conscious or explicit way but slowly and gradually through the letters he sent from the sanatorium. József writes in a letter of 13 June 1937, for instance, ‘your task is to forgive my sins, even the gravest ones retrospectively and prospectively’ (Illyés 1988, 42). ‘All I can remember,’ he writes in a letter of 13 August 1937, ‘is that I fall in a deep sleep at the thought of loving you. This is the first time I feel that I am going to die’ (Illyés 1988, 70). And, in a letter of 23 August 1937: ‘Honestly, all I want is you grieving for me as the person she has loved most in her life and then die. … I want to know if it is good for
you that I love you very much? This is a selfish thing – the only thing that makes me cling onto life’ (Illyés 1988, 75). And again, in a letter of the 24 August 1937:

If you have every loved me as I have noticed this now and then – well, you do not need to love me anymore. I still love you very much but I have to let it go – the days that will follow will see me not answering questions and then fading away. Why couldn’t you be with me, by my side? (Illyés 1988, 76)

A comment by Flóra Kozmutza shows that, even if unconsciously, she understood the message of these letters: ‘I still could not draw back. I was his last hope, the last resort, and thus I could not leave him’ (Illyés 1988, 33). As a result of the hints in their correspondence, Flóra agrees to marry him.

Her comments in their correspondence stick to practical matters. While talking about what she thinks about the man’s illness, the efficiency of the treatment or encouraging him to eat more, she can keep her emotional distance. However, at a certain point, having agreed to marry him (3 September 1937; Illyés 1988, 89), the texts start featuring details that also appeared in Márta Vágó’s and Judit Szántó’s case and which describe Attila József’s behaviour as childish: ‘He clung onto me with the trust of a little baby to his mother’ (Illyés 1988, 90). In another passage, she reflects:

What should he do? He is ill and has no one and nothing. He is suffering terribly and he has headaches. He started sobbing, hiccupping like a baby and then cried on silently for a long time complaining and squeezing my hands. I can do anything with him if I want to stop his headache. And when I stroked his forehead, the headache was gone. He was expecting a miracle, some supernatural thing from me even though I was in a difficult physical and mental situation and in need of support myself. (Illyés 1988, 103)

Referring to her own promise of marrying József, Kozmutza even phrases explicitly that she is taking on the role of the mother: ‘Finally we made an agreement soberly and seriously; I will be his dead mother and faithful wife in one person’ (96). Attila József, however, does not need the actual Flóra Kozmutza in his life, he needs her to give him the peacefulness before death. ‘He dreamt,’ she writes, ‘that I kissed him and wants me to do it again and then he will die’ (Illyés 1988, 107).

József stuck to this relationship even in his farewell letter, in his answer to Flóra’s last letter to him (‘Dear Attila, I am sending these apples to the kids with my warmest greetings. Please, let me know how you are feeling. I would love to know that you also believe in miracles. F.’ (Illyés 1988, 128)). József writes back to say that he has stolen and eaten the apples Flóra had sent to his sister’s children. Although his last words are, in form, serious and adult, his gesture shows that he wanted to be parented even though he knew that she reserved parental care for real children. He writes:

Dear Flóra, please forgive me. I believe in miracles. There is only one miracle for me and I will do that. I know that you loved me and you knew that I loved you. The rest did not depend on us. As Kosztolányi [another great poet of the era] says: ‘Why are you crying when our fate is written?’ I am sending you my regards with friendship and love. We have to thank you for the apples, I have also eaten some even though you sent them to the children. I did not even ask for it, I just took one.

Attila

P.S. Do not come on Sunday, please. (Illyés 1988, 128)
Trauma and language: the motherly word of the memoirs

She just, giving me no look or thrashing,
Went on, and in silence spread out the washing
(József 2018b: ‘Mother’)
Out of defiance I never comprehended
the sense of the motherly word.
(József 1937: ‘I Might Disappear Suddenly’)

As I have shown, József’s three lovers retrospectively staged their relationship with him as a mother–child relationship. Although for my analysis it is unimportant whether Attila József actually did behave as a child, and although we could safely state that most probably he did if it is so much agreed upon by all the writers, I will describe briefly the existing hypotheses on the poet’s mental state/illness.

The critical literature on Attila József’s contains recurrent suggestions that his mental problems were caused by his early trauma experiences (Nemes 1994, 91–125), and that he got into a regressive state (Beney, 1989, 11–98) in the period of his analytic sittings. The reconstructed diagnosis of his illness as borderline disorder is now widely accepted. Originally Attila József was diagnosed as suffering from schizophrenia by many contemporary and mid-twentieth century therapists (Bókay 1982; Cserne 1992) until borderline personality disorder was recognised as a mental disease in 1980. Borderline personality disorder could account for the poet’s behaviour in his adult relationships, as this disorder is characterised by unstable interpersonal relationships and sense of self, concerns about abandonment, suicidal behaviour, depression, etc.

Psychoanalytically oriented Attila József criticism often focuses on his childhood trauma (Szőke 1983), but little attention has been paid to the aspect of speech and language. Lívia Nemes wrote about this topic, claiming that early object relations problems and the damaged relationship with the mother hindered the development of the word that would serve to recall the mother when she is absent, as described by Winnicott in his theory of transitional objects (Nemes 1994, 104). Hypotheses drafted by György Szőke, reviewing the poem ‘Loathing’ (‘Korai traumatikus …’ 1983; see also Szőke ‘Lágy őszitájból 1983), parallel István Cserne’s claim (1992, 46) that the loss of the father and the resulting depression and rejecting behaviour of the mother affected the senses of hunger and being well-fed, causing oral frustration and leaving permanent marks on the poet’s psychological development, which surface in his adult stomach problems. Many have also suggested further traumas connected to the village of Ócsöd, where József was in foster care, his identity was questioned through being deprived of the name Attila, and he developed castration anxiety as a result of being smacked for peeing himself. However, these hypotheses need to be extended by adding the aspect of language to the analysis of troubled childhood especially because Attila József was a poet who had a more complicated relationship with language than the average person. Poetry can be considered a form of resilience following a childhood trauma, since, according to resilience theory, childhood trauma may not only cause regression but also a sudden spurt in development, post-traumatic growth (Nemes 1994, 105; see also Aldwin et al. 1998). If the abilities of language use exceed average in the case of a poet, it might be concluded that the linguistic aspects of childhood trauma have an accentuated role in it.
Attila József was two and a half years old when his father left the family. He was learning to speak. His sister, Jolán József, reports an episode when Attila got lost in the marketplace, and when they found him he explained that a woman gave him a sausage. Jolán József imitates the child-talk of Attila József, indicating the stage of language development he was at the time. When the father leaves them, the mother breaks down. Jolán József’s book clearly depicts how the trauma of losing her husband made her dumb; she would just put things from one place to another or would just sit there without a word to her children although she had often read out or told tales to them before (József 1995, 15–16, 11). She withdrew the words from them. The little boy was deprived of the motherly word exactly at a stage of his life when he would have needed it the most, to learn to differentiate between his own self and the other.

According to Daniel Stern, the child is enabled to identify and define itself as a separate entity, as a ‘verbal self’ through speech. Children initially have an unshareable interpersonal knowledge that is based on nonverbal communication. With the emergence of speech ‘infants become estranged from direct contact with their own personal experience’, and there appears a difference between what is lived and what is represented. When infants learn to speak they become able to share their feelings with others. Any defect in this process may cause neurotic problems in later life (Stern 2000, 182).

The notion of motherly word I have been using throughout this article draws on the one hand on Stern’s theory, and, on the other hand, it refers to a mirror-effect in the speech of the mother that can be related to the theory of the mirroring mother of Winnicott connected in a complex way (Luepnitz 2009, Op. ct. 961) to Lacan’s concept of the mirror-stage. According to Winnicott, children, preceding the developmental phase of language acquisition, recognise themselves in their mother’s eyes and face as a separate self. The mother helps the baby like a mirror to find itself. Winnicott makes an analogy to the situation of analytical sittings where the aim of the therapist is to hold a mirror to the patient so that they can find themselves. With Lacan, contrary to Winnicott, the mirror phase is not the recognition of the self in the mirror, but essentially the relationship between the ‘I’ seen at the same time as the other and the world (Luepnitz 2009, 961). So, while for Winnicott the mirror is more like a function for transition in the development of the self, for Lacan the mirror is more like the symbol and a non-fixed source of the transition. Thanks to their dialogic relationship, both interpretations of the mirror can be connected to how I interpret the role of the mother in the mirror-autobiographies, with the mothers at the same time functioning as a mirror in the narratives about the past trauma of losing Attila József, and acting out about the impossibility of functioning as a mother in the relationships in the past.

The topic of the mother appears late in Attila József’s poems, after 1933 and more pointedly from 1935 in parallel with the psychoanalytic sittings, resulting in some of his most striking poems such as ‘Belated Lament’. According to Zsuzsa Beney, this mother, however, is not identical to the real person but a fictive mother, the creation of whom represents Attila József’s realisation as an individual, a free and integrated person, and the desire to define his own identity (Beney 1989, 40). Thus while searching for a mother in his relationships, he seems to try to create and compensate in his poems for the stage in psychological development which suffered from the lack of the motherly word.

We have seen that the memoirs suggest that the mirror that these women could offer was not sufficient for József. For example, Márta Vágó, speaking with remorse, describes
how the poet often looked at his own photo, because, as she supposes, she herself was ‘not a good enough mirror’ for him (Vágó 1975, 260). However, while the memoirs search for the mother figure that Attila József needed, they actually create this mother on the level of rhetoric: these written mothers are representations of motherhood, a compensation for lack in the act of writing. The memoirs can provide writing and language, a form of motherly word in which the self can identify itself as the other. In other words, the ability of separating the self-defined and realised in language may only surface in a mutual relationship, in a dialogue. It seems that the written mothers of the memoirs answer the demands of the written Attila József and his poems. These texts speak to and about Attila József replacing the mute mother and creating personal past and narrative identity for him. In this process they become the written mothers, the partners for dialogue.

Taking into account that, according to Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, trauma can be transmitted through reading (1992, 1–56), we may consider that a secondary experience of trauma is thus not only possible through reading poetry or other forms of literature, i.e. it is not limited to instances of language use. The singularity of Attila József’s case derives from its unique connection to language, to the language of trauma. Drawing on Zsuzsa Beney’s above-mentioned thesis, I can claim that the speaker of the poems of this last period of József speaks a language that precedes the developmental phase of formulating own words with the help of a mother. The speaker of such a language needs protection, a motherly word to help him to find himself and his own words. Such a speaker has a very special relationship with language and the mother, the mother tongue; while he searches for it, he cannot find it. He calls for it and chases it and is able to see this process of searching from the outside, through language itself, due to a feeling of being a language outcast. The language, just like the mother, can never be his; he will never be ‘inside’ it without losing himself. Rather than a mutual relationship, it is a constant and heightened demand for dialogue. Language is the desire for the other and a control of the other at the same time through structure and logic, a rivalry between the one who is in a pre-language phase and the one who controls language, where the intermediary phase, the answer, the motherly word is missing.

The three memoirists thus work on processing the same traumatic experience. As they process their trauma, they testify the existence of the poet, and their testimonies become a retrospective resolution of trauma through incorporating shock into language that behaves like the mother. While writing, while creating their mirror autobiographies, the women writers of the memoirs make an attempt to transform themselves into a mother to provide the motherly word retrospectively.

Notes

1. Attila József, ‘I May Disappear Suddenly’ – my translation. This poem was written in 1937, the last year of Attila József’s life. This is one of the most cited of József’s poems and, in spite of its clear logic, it is also one of the most cryptic ones in terms of meaning. A translation by Nyerges (1973, 169) is available, but it loses on the importance of the two lines I cite in the motto (‘I did not obey / my mother for defiance’) by missing the phrase ‘motherly word’. See my earlier paper analysing this poem in connection with the ‘motherly word’ (Menyhért 1997 and 1998).
2. Róbert Bak diagnoses schizophrenia in 1938, just after the poet’s death (Bak 1938). Edit Gyömrői also diagnoses schizophrenia (Vezér 1971) and the diagnosis is the same by Ervin Varga (Varga 1966). The different views are explained and illness and poetry is differentiated in Szabolcsi (1998, 445–453).

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