

# “Funeral oration and prayer” – From the 12th century to the present

István Ladányi\* 

University of Pannonia, Hungary

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

Received: April 2, 2022 • Accepted: January 16, 2023

© 2023 The Author(s)



### ABSTRACT

This study is a representative text written as part of the project “Hungarian Literary Culture in a Transcultural Perspective”. It aims to convey to readers versed in other cultures the effects of the first complete text in the Hungarian language, the “Funeral Oration and Prayer” (*Halotti Beszéd és Könyörgés*), as an element of the living literary tradition manifesting in writing and reading. The study consists in a commented and annotated version of the basic text that will serve as a basis for the chapters adapted to the specificities of the different language versions of the book. The text gives a brief overview of 12th century Hungarian texts, and then introduces several 20th century Hungarian poems that share as their precursor the “Funeral Oration and Prayer”.

### KEYWORDS

funeral oration and prayer, history of influence, Dezső Kosztolányi, Lajos Kassák, Sándor Kányádi, Sándor Márai, Imre Oravec

This study is a representative text written as part of the project “Hungarian Literary Culture in a Transcultural Perspective”. By complementing and linking traditional literary historical narratives, it aims to convey the inspirational presence of the “Funeral Oration and Prayer” as a living literary tradition to readers unfamiliar with Hungarian culture. As an example of the Gadamerian projection of historical effect on our writing and reading (Gadamer 2004, 299–306), it

\* Corresponding author. E-mail: lada1594@gmail.com

also demonstrates the tradition of the “Funeral Oration and Prayer” in literary works that do not explicitly name it as their antecedent.

This text is an annotated version of the basic text, which serves as a basis for the writing of the chapters adapted to the specificities of the different language versions of the book. These shortened chapter texts will be adapted to the main text of the publication in the respective language, to any existing Hungarian literary translations in the respective culture, as well as to the presumed expectations of the readers. The wording of the subject matter of the study will thus be adapted to the aims of the planned publication, while the explanations and references will be adapted to the aims of the present publication.

## THE FIRST COMPLETE HUNGARIAN TEXT

The “Funeral Oration and Prayer” is the first complete, coherent text in Hungarian preserved in a hand-copied Latin book, the Pray Codex. The codex was written between 1192 and 1195 and is named after the Jesuit monk and historian György Pray (1723–1801) who gave its first scholarly description. The codex was created for ecclesiastical use, for a Benedictine monastery in Hungary. It was bound together from several separately copied parts as early as the 13th century. The largest part is the so-called *Sacramentarium*, which contains prayers to be recited during masses and other ceremonies (such as funerals). The Hungarian “Funeral Oration and Prayer” is at the end of the Latin text of the funeral service. Today, the codex can be found in the collection of the National Széchényi Library in Budapest (Madas 2007, 59–61).

The text of the “Funeral Oration and Prayer” was also copied into the codex between 1192 and 1195, although both the oration and the prayer had presumably existed earlier. The manuscript Hungarian text consists of two parts, the 26-line funeral oration and the 6-line prayer. Neither the author nor the copyist is known. Given the period in which it was written, the important thing is not the authorship of the work but its use. The Hungarian funeral oration is a free adaptation of the Latin oration, which is regarded as the original, while the prayer is a faithful translation. The Hungarian discourse is concise, simple in structure and in argument; a discourse that could be understood by a lay audience who did not know Latin. The Latin source of the prayer that follows the oration is also found in the codex, on the page preceding the funeral oration in Hungarian. The Hungarian prayer is a literal translation of the source, using Latin grammatical structures.

The “Funeral Oration” is free of Latinisms, and had developed in the Hungarian language. Its language and style are exacting, its structure is complete. Concerning its genre, it is a sermon, a funeral oration spoken over a grave. Edit Madas describes it as a unique memorial in its genre, even in the European context (Madas 2007, 59). Above the Hungarian text, written in dark ink, the genre is indicated in Latin in red letters as a title heading: “*Sermo sup[er] sepulchrum*”, i.e., “An Oration Over the Grave”. As a funeral oration, it serves both to introduce the prayer for the soul of the deceased and to explain the mystery of death in biblical terms. It was written in the spirit of the belief that the funeral service is not only a farewell to the deceased, but rather an act of support offered by the common prayer of those present for the eternal salvation of their brother’s soul. The discourse in Hungarian is intended to create a sense of communion in death, preparing the participants for the common prayer. This is achieved through the rhetorical devices of the text, through addressing and warning all those around the grave that we are all



“dust and ashes”, and then through the narrative telling the story of the biblical original sin of eating the forbidden fruit because of which the human race became mortal and was expelled from paradise “into the world of toil”.

The discourse also holds a special value from the point of view of historical linguistics, and offers not only specialists but also lay readers the opportunity to encounter the Hungarian language of eight or nine centuries ago. It offers an experience of distance and proximity at the same time: despite the many linguistic changes that have taken place in the meantime, it is a recognisable and comprehensible Hungarian text from an era in which many new concepts and words were incorporated into Hungarian from Latin and the languages of the surrounding Slavic peoples in a relatively short period of time. We can encounter words in a state of fresh adoption, such as the Latin word (perhaps transmitted through Slavic mediation) *angelus* (angel) in the forms ‘archangel’ (archangel) and ‘angelchut’ (angels), the Slavic word *brat* (brother) in the form ‘bratim’ (brothers), the Slavic word ‘timnuce’ (dungeon, dark tenement serving as a prison), a word that has been preserved almost unchanged in Romanian in the form *temnița*, the expression ‘munkás világ’ (literally working world, a world of torment and suffering) originating from the Slavic *muka* (torment, suffering), from which the Hungarian word *munka* (work – also transmitted in Romanian in the form *muncă*) is derived.

Ever since its discovery, Hungarian literature has treated this almost thousand-year-old oration as its own living heritage, i.e. as a literary text: many authors refer to it, paraphrase it or write their own funeral oration in connection with some particularly distressing, mournful event. The phrase “funeral oration” itself, or a quotation from this old Hungarian text, is recognisable to any Hungarian reader, and is able to create the temporal expansiveness of a current 20th or 21st century text, opening it up to the past.

## A UNIQUE SPECIMEN

The poem “Funeral Oration” (*Halotti beszéd*), written by Dezső Kosztolányi (1885–1936), a modern Hungarian poet in 1933, is clearly based on its more than 700 years precursor, albeit conveying a completely different attitude to death. According to the 12th century concept of the “Funeral Oration and Prayer”, the burial of the body is also the release of the soul from the earthly world. Kosztolányi’s poem, on the other hand, captures the unrepeatable, unique miracle of each and every life. And while the old Hungarian funeral oration is about the community, Kosztolányi’s modern poem is about the individual: the unrepeatable individual is an irreplaceable value, a “unique specimen”, and its loss is the individual loss of those left behind.

He begins with the same words as the 12th century orator: “My brethren, you see”; what follows, however, is a lamentation about loss, disappointment and betrayal: “My brethren, you see, he died suddenly/and left us here alone. He has deceived us.” In the following, the poem emphasizes the ordinariness of the deceased: “He was not great and excellent”, but he was “A unique specimen”, “No other like him has ever lived nor lives now”, and “never in the vast time will there be another like him”. The details of the daily life of the deceased, not specifically named (who thus could be anyone), are recalled in the generally 11-syllable, even-rhymed lines: eating cheese, drinking wine, smoking cigarettes, making phone calls and dreaming like everyone else. The radical reduction in the number of syllables resulting in 3–5 syllable lines occurs in the particularly emphatic statements, which in effect break up the series of 11-syllable



lines that can be considered as complete: “But he is no more”; “turned into stone”; “Never again”, etc. Similarly, the regularity of the even rhymes is broken by cross-rhymes in only one instance: in these shorter, “irregular” lines, which state the event of death.

Kosztolányi’s poem is one of the best-known Hungarian poems, a favourite reading for amateur and professional poetry reciters and poetry readers, a text recited at funeral services not only because it is based on the oldest known Hungarian text. What makes it special is the linguistic and semantic contrast between the sublime and the ordinary; the juxtaposition of the general and the concrete; the peculiar rhythm whose predictable sublimeness is tinged by agitation due to the unexpected irregularities that evoke sobs; the rhyme technique so characteristic of Dezső Kosztolányi’s poetry, which here overrides the unexpected rhythmic irregularities and yet holds the poem together; the metaphors and similes, both novel and traditional: “here is this hand, [...]/turned into stone,/like a relic/and on it is etched in cuneiform the ancient secret of his rare and only life”. All this is a combination of tradition and modernity that offers an experience of both novelty and comprehensibility. The linguistic and temporal expansiveness provided by the first Hungarian literary text is, of course, part of this effect. By evoking the minute details of the everyday life of a person who is nothing special, Kosztolányi’s poem captures the unrepeatable, unique miracle of each life, presenting the death of every human as an irreparable loss.

Lajos Kassák (1887–1967), the most significant poet of the Hungarian avant-garde, also wrote a poem entitled “Funeral Oration” (*Halotti beszéd*). The title itself, as well as the situational context of the funeral speech and the associated communal expectations allow for the manifestation of the tradition; nevertheless, in the spirit of the avant-garde, they reject the awe stemming from religion or the loss of a single earthly life. Kassák’s poem is a slap in the face both of death and of the false, self-pitying reverence of the mourners. “He’s gone I said he sneaked through the keyhole/and so he became the truly lucky one./With a naked body he departed without anguish/beyond the bounds of space and the vortices of time./And we were left here with the heavy burdens of everyday life/that we carry on our shoulders in our lap between our teeth./Why should I extol the merits of the deceased who escaped through the keyhole/and now lies in peace or I should say contentedly in the ground.”

“Suppressed Words in the Házsongárd” (*Visszafojtott szavak a Házsongárdban*), the title of a poem by Sándor Kányádi (1929–2018), a poet of Hungarian nationality from Romania, does not refer to the “Funeral Oration”, but Hungarian readers will recognise the quotations in the text. The poem is in fact contextualised as a funeral oration: it is recited among the old graves in the Házsongárd Cemetery in Cluj, at the grave of fellow writer Sándor Kacsó, as specified in the dedication. The time of the funeral of the Transylvanian intellectual, who died in 1984, was a period of “suppressed words” for the Hungarian community in Romania, when the communist dictatorship threatened the Hungarian minority’s national identity and every word spoken was fraught with danger. The lyrical self of Kányádi’s poem opens the eulogy with the lines, “neither prayer nor song/funeral speeches from verses clad in mourning/we murmur, we mumble/what will become of us what will become of us”; then, quoting the 12th century poem, he creates a sense of unity of the congregation mourning almost silently, inwardly—a unity not only in grief and loss, but also in a shared cultural tradition: “no one in creation/can escape this grave/we are all heading towards it”.

Sándor Márai (1900–1989) was already a popular prose writer when he emigrated from Hungary in 1948, first to Italy and then to the United States of America, to escape the



Communist takeover. His novels have been translated into many languages, but Hungarian readers also regard him as a poet, perhaps most notably for his poem “Funeral Oration” (*Halotti beszéd*). He wrote the poem in Naples in 1951, already as a reaction to the experience of emigration and expression of his fears (Szigeti, <https://pim.hu/hu/marai-sandor/marai-sandor-halotti-beszed-cimu-versenek-keletkezestortenete-es-fogadtatasa>). He is simultaneously distressed about the world political processes of the Cold War period and the increasingly brutal dictatorship in Hungary; in both, he sees the annihilation of the individual and the culture. “Hungarian literature began with the ‘Funeral Oration’. It is not impossible that it will end with a funeral oration, which this literature will be forced to deliver over itself and over the Hungarian culture”, he wrote in his diary (Márai 2001, 207). At the same time, the poem also looks beyond the Hungarian emigrant’s perspective: it sees their dispersal in the world as the final plundering of the Eastern European fugitives who have been driven from their homeland and fled, and who compare their fate to that of individuals belonging to more fortunate nations and ask the question, “Was I worse than these?” The lyrical self of the poem answers with bitter irony: “You were Hungarian, that’s why./And you were Estonian, Lithuanian, Romanian... Now shut up and pay.”

The poem is framed by the same two lines, the first two sentences of the 12th century “Funeral Oration and Prayer”, evoking the dawn of Hungarian literature at the beginning and foreshadowing the destruction of the Hungarian language and culture at the end: “My brethren, you see with your own eyes what we are,/Surely we are but dust and ashes.”<sup>1</sup>

Imre Oravecz (1943), a contemporary Hungarian poet and novelist, also has a family heritage of emigration: his father had returned from North America to Szajla, a small village in Northern Hungary, before WWII. This experience is evidenced in his poem “In the Cemetery of Windsor” (*A windsori temetőben*). The poem is also a speech over a grave, although it is not spoken at a funeral or in a mourning community, but in almost complete solitude. The lyrical self is saying farewell to the grave of a long-dead grandfather, buried in foreign soil, in the cemetery of Windsor, Canada. He speaks to the dead grandfather, detailing the circumstances of the present situation, the state of the grave and the cemetery, listing the family members who have since been buried, and introducing his son—the great-grandson of the departed—who accompanied him, while also ascertaining the absence of the long-dead grandfather: “I believe you’re not wholly here”. The visitor’s discourse is also the final farewell speech: the lyrical self notes that he is on the threshold of old age, as well, and will probably be the last to visit this grave; from here, he will return to the distant Hungarian village from where they set off. In this way, the mourner expands the space of personal discourse, saying goodbye to the one who is buried in a distant land in the name of the community, the family and the homeland, as well: “Farewell, grandfather,/take care of your bones, of your hair,/don’t let them be scattered,/if they ever dig you up,/and raze the graveyard,/I am your last visitor,/no one comes from Szajla anymore,/now the homeland dismisses you forever.”

The oration over the grave in Oravecz’s poem also reflects on the 20th century experience of emigration and migration, while keeping the lyrical self-distanced from the political contextualisation seen in Sándor Márai’s work, the accusation of a homeland that expels or does not

<sup>1</sup>Translated by Alan Jenkins. See: [https://www.babelmatrix.org/works/hu/Nyelveml%C3%A9kek/Halotti\\_besz%C3%A9d\\_%C3%A9s\\_k%C3%B6nyv%C3%B6rg%C3%A9s\\_%281192%E2%80%931195\\_k%C3%B6z%C3%B6tt%29/en/3505-Funeral\\_oration\\_%28cca\\_1200%29?tr\\_id=1055](https://www.babelmatrix.org/works/hu/Nyelveml%C3%A9kek/Halotti_besz%C3%A9d_%C3%A9s_k%C3%B6nyv%C3%B6rg%C3%A9s_%281192%E2%80%931195_k%C3%B6z%C3%B6tt%29/en/3505-Funeral_oration_%28cca_1200%29?tr_id=1055).



retain its natives. Rather, it reflects the rupture between the tradition of attachment to the homeland and the modern individual's search for the possibility of personal fulfilment.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

---

- Gadamer, H.-G. (2004). *Truth and method*, 2nd, Revised Edition. Translation revised by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall. Continuum, London–New York.
- Madas, E. (2007). A szóbeliség és írásbeliség határán. In: Jankovits, L. and Orlovsky, G. (Ed.), *A magyar irodalom története. A kezdetektől 1800-ig*. Gondolat Kiadó, Budapest, pp. 59–70.
- Márai S. (2001). *Ami a naplóból kimaradt. 1950–1951–1952*. Vörösváry, Toronto.
- Szigeti J. Márai Sándor *Halotti beszéd* című versének keletkezéstörténete és fogadtatása, Márai Sándor, Petőfi Irodalmi Múzeum, Available at: <https://pim.hu/hu/marai-sandor/marai-sandor-halotti-beszed-cimu-versenek-keletkezes-tortenete-es-fogadtatasa> (Accessed: 29 November 2021).

---

**Open Access.** This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited, a link to the CC License is provided, and changes – if any – are indicated. (SID\_1)

