

SONG OF JÁNOS BALASSA ON HIS FALCONET

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Abstract Certain researchers think that the poem *Balassa János éneke sólymocskájáról* (*Song of János Balassa on His Falconet*) was written in the 16th century, while others – including the author of this paper – reckon it was penned down in the first half of the 17th century. The mood and style of the poem differ greatly from its surviving contemporaries; it uses a picto-language imbued with unique sexual allusions. Also, it cannot be categorized as popular (rogue) or aristocratic in register – such notions are of no use here. It is something completely different: this picto-language was used by the lexicon of the *Old Testament* (cf. motto), that of sexual mysticism, *commedia dell'arte* and the reversed world of carnivals (including numerous illustrations as marginalias in mediaeval codices), constituting a special supranational system of images and picto-language – however, in different, language-specific forms that survived in each folklore. Moreover, this code system is also used by prolific Renaissance painters, authors of high literature and a good many examples can be found in 15th-16th century Italian painting and literature as well. Thus, the author of the analysed poem – almost surely *not* Gáspár Madách – chose a road often travelled: the eyes, fluids (eggs), the falcon (birds in general), the aperture, the hare: all sexual references, a grotesque piece of art paraphrasing a biblical text in the Marcolphusian way. It covers János Balassa with ridicule and its poem-language is the usual allusion system of the 16th and 17th centuries, based on mediaeval prefigurations. These are not the clouded reveries of an old man but the frolicsome wishes of a man in his prime – and their mockery.

Keywords early modern Hungarian poetry, erotic poetry, Renaissance painting, picto-language

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Motto: "The furnace proveth the potter's vessels"
Ecclesiasticus 27:5

Az én sólymocskám Palojtán vagyon,
Szíviben szerelmem nő igen nagyon,
Belőle ikrája foly igen lágyon,
Kit drága kenetül magamnak tartom.

Gondolkodván érte, nem tudok s mind állok,
Ha eszemben jut, csaknem meghalok,
Szerelmiért Palojtára gyalog ballagok,
Mint ész nélkül járó, szűkös bolondok.

Mikor hozzá megyek, elmosolyodik,
Előmben jővén ő felfosztozik,
Okulárját mutatván szemem tisztíttatik,
Ragyadó szerelme szívemben férkezik.

Ó én sólymocskám, ha közelben lagnál!
Kékkői kapun hozzám bejárhatnál,
Sok jót is nálam gyakran találhatnál,
Megtölteném begyedet, kit azután látnál.

Az én kezemre tégedet vennélek,
Szép nyoszolyámra mellém fektetnélek,
Karjaimmal gyakran téged ölelnélek,
Végre mint az nyúl, által is szöknélek.

Noha kezemen vagyon apertúra,
Mely szemeimet genyettől tisztítja,
De ha sólymocskámnak rám fordul az fara,
Mindjárt szememnek megjün szép világa.¹

¹ "My falconet is in Palojta, / My love for her grows in my heart, / Her eggs [spawn] flow smoothly, / Which I keep as a precious ointment. // Thinking of her, I cannot and keep standing, / If I think of her, I feel like dying, / For her love I walk to Palojta, / Like crazy people that have no brains. // When I go to her, she smiles, / Coming to me, she uncovers herself, / Showing her eyepiece, my eyes are cleaned, / Her shining love slips into my heart. // Oh my falconet, if only you stayed closer! / And could come to me through a gate in Kékkő, / You might find much good there, / I would fill your craw, so you'll see. // I would take you on my hand, / I would lie you down on my bed next to me, / I would hold you in my arms, / Then, as a hare, I would jump you through. // Though there's an aperture [opening] on my hand, /

This song was preserved in the handwriting of Gáspár Madách, on leaf 32 of volume II of the *Rimay-Madách Codex*. The historiography of the text is not insignificant.

The poem was first published by Béla Radvánszky, who considered it to be written by János Rimay.² Rimay's biographer, Zoltán Ferenczi, also attributed the poem to Rimay, calling it "quite ambiguous".³ He may have had this poem in mind when writing: "there are dirty allusions in it". Sándor Eckhardt in his critical edition of the poetry of Bálint Balassi reckoned that the author was Bálint's father, János Balassa (but also admitted that it could have been written by János Rimay's father, Gergely Rimay.) Eckhardt considered the poem "the most interesting, and perhaps the only fully surviving product of early Hungarian love poetry", paralleled in character to Western-European, primarily Italian poetry. He saw it as a "Daring, précieux image".⁴

Rabán Gerézdi had a totally different approach to the authorship of the poem, and his opinion is basically the accepted view in Hungarian literary history today. As he writes, the poem is a "tremendous bawdiness", a "Filthy obscenity: but if I'm naive or unsuspicious, I may just as well read it as an infatuated love poem"⁵ – that is to say, a rogue rhyme parodying courtly love. And, according to Gerézdi, written in all probability by Gáspár Madách.

This view of a rogue rhyme authored by Gáspár Madách was also accepted by Béla Stoll,⁶ and the editor of the critical edition, Imre Varga as well.⁷ Varga also brought archival evidence in favour of the authorship of Gáspár Madách, and also to identify János Balassa of the title as János, son of Zsigmond Balassa, who lived in the early 17th century.⁸

Which cleans my eyes of pus, / But if my falconet's bottom turns over me, / My eyesight returns at once." All translations of Hungarian quotations, if not marked otherwise, belong to Emese Czintos.

² János Rimay, *Munkái: a Radvánszky- és a Sajókazai Codexek szövege szerint* (Works: according to the texts of Radvánszky and Sajókazai Codices), ed. Baron Béla Radvánszky (Budapest: Magyar Tudományos Akadémia, 1904), 35–36.

³ Zoltán Ferenczi, *Rimay János (1573–1631)*, ed. Lajos Dézsi, Magyar Történeti Életrajzok (Budapest: Magyar Történelmi Társulat, 1911), 120.

⁴ *Balassi Bálint Összes Művei* (Complete Works of Bálint Balassi), ed. Sándor Eckhardt, 2 vols. (Budapest: Akadémiai kiadó, 1951, 1955), vol. 1, 279.

⁵ Rabán Gerézdi, "Balassa János éneke sólymocskájáról" (János Balassa's Song on His Falconet), *Irodalomtörténeti Közlemények* 6 (1965): 693.

⁶ Béla Stoll, *Pajkos énekek* (Frolicsome songs) (Budapest: Szépirodalmi, 1984), 95, 138.

⁷ Béla Stoll, gen. ed. *Régi Magyar Költők Tára. XVII. század* (Collection of early Hungarian poetry. 17th century), vol 12., *Madách Gáspár, egy névtelen, Beniczky Péter, Gróf Balassa Bálint, Listius László, Esterházy Pál és Fráter István versei* (Poems of Gáspár Madách, an anonymous author, Péter Beniczky, Count Bálint Balassi, László Listius, Pál Esterházy and István Fráter), ed. Imre Varga, Ágnes Cs. Havas, Béla Stoll (Budapest: Akadémiai, 1987), 9–68, 661–732.

⁸ Imre Varga, *Tallózások Madách Gáspár körül* (Browsing around Gáspár Madách), *Irodalomtörténeti Közlemények* 1 (1968): 67–74.

József Jankovics questioned Gerézdi's opinion to some extent. "I cannot think of anything else than that Gerézdi forced his own moral standard onto the text" – he writes.⁹ While not countering Gerézdi's important insights, he thinks that the "tremendous bawdiness" claim is exaggerated. Jankovics understands the song as a situational parody which, despite many sexual references, is nevertheless a moderate, decent product of the popular "rogue rhyme" genre.

László Szilasi pointed out the contradictions of Gerézdi's analysis. He writes: "Gerézdi's interpretation states in fact the opposite of his famed outburst."¹⁰ In fact, he argues all along that Gáspár Madách is "being bawdy" in an ornate manner: employing a spectrum of the tools of eloquence."¹¹ And: "What Gerézdi states or reveals here is precisely that vileness, in his opinion, is ultimately parody. The ambiguous text is dirtier than raw outspokenness. The verse that has no unambiguous meaning is a rogue rhyme. And perversion is that what is unclassifiable."¹² He summarizes Gerézdi's claim, correctly, as follows: "(...) he states with some evasiveness that (let's not be naive, nor unsuspicious): the 'falcon' stands as an allegory for the lover, the 'heart', 'eyepiece', 'crawl' and 'opening [aperture]' for the vulva, the 'egg' and 'ointment' for its fragrant fluids, the 'love' and 'eye' for the penis, the verbs 'stand' and 'fill' for its way of functioning, and the cleaning of the eyes and the regained eyesight for the coitus itself." At the same time, he has in mind Gerézdi's more sophisticated interpretation as well: "for, although not taking it very seriously, he remarks, in passing, that just as the apostrophe is the dominant trope of the (vituperative) whore-mocking rhyme, the prosopopoeia is the dominant trope of the (mocking) falcon-song." However, I cannot always follow Szilasi's interpretation of the text.¹³

⁹ József Jankovics, *Ex occidente...* (Budapest: Balassi, 1999), 56.

¹⁰ "tremendous bawdiness"

¹¹ László Szilasi, *A nyúl és a sólyom. Trópusok és funkcióik: Madách Gáspár Balassa János éneke sólymcskájáról című versének példája* (The hare and the falcon. Tropes and their functions. The example of Gáspár Madách's poem János Balassa's Song on His Falconet) <http://szelence.com/tan/solymocska.html> (accessed 14. 02. 2015).

¹² Ibid. All quotations from László Szilasi are from the abovementioned article.

¹³ Ibid.: "The poem's personifying fiction creates a narrator who is completely uninformed about the terminology of love poetry, and in his haste to embellish, ancient dilettantism is at hand for him: his is a versed attempt (perhaps somewhat original, yet completely bungled) to throw together and use for an amorous purpose the terminology of hunting, fishing and medicine. Falcon, eggs [spawn], ointment: Ferenczi is right, such a mix of concepts can indeed be called ambiguous. The depressing pair of lack of education and strong will is continued, in the second stanza, with bodily symptoms, the harsh descriptions of the proximity of death, of complete social and spiritual erosion: the narrator is a victim of the madness of love, the al'ishq, but, since he knows neither the concept, nor its conventional ways of expression, and fails to come up with new ones, he is forced to express it with the prosaic, direct, unsophisticated simplicity of the confession. János Balassa in a poet's disguise demolishes precisely the highly desired image of him as a poet by every word of his. The process reaches its apogee in the third stanza: now really, let's imagine a falcon, with an alluring smile on its beak, who undresses with exciting and promising slowness like a flower undoing its petals when seeing the loved man – and even has an

An interesting and imaginative interpretation was penned by Sándor Bene,¹⁴ who returns to Eckhardt's argument, at least concerning the protagonist of the poem: he also thinks that János Balassa of the title is the 16th century person, father of Bálint Balassi. Bene's most important argument is the explanation of the word "apertura" (an opening, a hole), referring in his opinion to János Balassa's widely known hand wound. Again, he identifies the "eye pain" (which is also mentioned – metaphorically, of course – by Bálint Balassi in his first extant letter written to András Balassa, dated 11 July 1577) with a venereal disease, which can be cured by a regulated sexual life (marriage?). He thinks that the poem offers three different cures for the "painful eye". The first – let's name it – is masturbation (Szilasi thinks the same, but he also draws attention to the radical polysemy of the structure "there's an aperture [opening] on my hand"), the second is the traditional way ("eyepiece", bottom), the third – and here I quote the author – "(...) the preservation of the results of looking into the eyepiece or the bottom, the storage of the fluids extracted from the falconet, the later lubrication of the "eye" (between encounters). This is more than vulgarity, it is criminal sarcasm, a conscious caricature of the vulgar-Petrarchist doctrine of amorous salvation."¹⁵ The last sentence responds to Szilasi's interpretation: "Here, at the very end of the poem, the Neoplatonic conceptions of love meet (incidentally) their oppositional criticism. It means that we can be part of the (apocalyptic) brightness of seeing face to face only down there and inside it."¹⁶

Both Bene and Szilasi pay attention to the biblical reference of the text: "in this case too, the allegory of the eye does not mean to distort the terminology of love poetry, but that of the Bible. For this poem is, if at all, a parody of a locus of John's Apocalypse: 'anoint thine eyes with eyesalve, that thou mayest see.' (Apoc. 3, 18) The allegory of the eye is, like on so many occasions, again apocalyptic."¹⁷

eyepiece. The prosopopoeia keeps of course its natural attraction to the theme of reflection/mirror: the falcon's eyepiece cures the narrator's eyes, and in the last verse of the stanza the relations (reported in verse two of the first stanza) between the attributes of love and of the heart (whatever they mean) are reversed. I think János Balassa's fictive confession of love could have been ridiculous for the audience because it reports an erotic union (in the shameful and extremely clumsy language of complete self-revelation) in which the narrator was unable to keep its original macho identity. You've become a woman. (...). And even admits to it!" Or: "The last verse of the third stanza, if Gerézdi's interpretation is taken seriously, informs explicitly that the falcon (also) has a penis, and the narrator (also) has a vulva – which to me seems quite improbable nevertheless."

¹⁴ Sándor Bene, *Balassi Bálint tréfája* (Bálint Balassi's jest), in *Magyar Művelődéstörténeti Lexikon LX. A főszerkesztő, Kőszeghy Péter hatvanadik születésnapjára* (Lexicon of Hungarian Cultural History LX. For the 60th birthday of the chief editor, Péter Kőszeghy), eds. István Bartók, Rumen István Csörsz, József Jankovics, Géza Szentmártoni Szabó (Budapest: rec.iti, 2011), 28–31.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Szilasi, *A nyúl és a sólyom*.

¹⁷ Ibid.

Basically, I also agree with Gerézdi's interpretation,¹⁸ at least inasmuch as I do not agree with Eckhardt's prudish opinion, and do not consider Rimay the author. However, I think Gerézdi's moralizing overtones – that József Jankovics rightly disapproves of – are exaggerated, and, in agreement with László Szilasi, I also do not think that this poem could be read as a rogue rhyme or a courtly verse; something else is the case.

What is it then?

Or, on the contrary: what is it *not*?

I am absolutely certain, together with Gerézdi, that the poem is not authored by any of the two János Balassas, but it is a satire on the 17th-century János Balassa. Not a parody, that would be different. Rather: grotesque. Bakhtin writes about Rabelais's art: "the grotesque body is not separated from the rest of the world. It is not a closed, completed unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits. The stress is laid on those parts of the body that are open to the outside world [...]. This means that the emphasis is on the apertures or the convexities, or on various ramifications and offshoots: the open mouth, the genital organs, the breasts, the phallus, the potbelly, the nose. The body discloses its essence as a principle of growth which exceeds its own limits only in copulation, pregnancy, childbirth, the throes of death, eating, drinking, or defecation. This is the ever unfinished, ever creating body, the link in the chain of genetic development, or more correctly speaking, two links shown at the point where they enter into each other."¹⁹

This explains the words in this poem – eyepiece, eggs (spawn), aperture – which do not fit into a poem. At least, to my knowledge, none of them appear elsewhere in the poetry of the age. But then again, what do we know about this type of Hungarian poetry of the 16th-17th century? Practically nothing.

What we do know, however, is that the basic formula, the falconet on the hand, is also the basic formula of the Hungarian Petrarchist, courtly-aristocratic poetry from Bálint Balassi to Pál Esterházy. "Téged pedig, sólymom, én édes vad ráróm, az én sok kiáltó szóm / Kezemre nem hívhat (...)" (poem no. 57.)²⁰ The falcon is youth itself, "Tudjátok, úgy illik ifjú aggal öszve, / Mint az íkes sólyom az bagoly físzkébe"²¹ in Benedek Tatár (Tar)'s *Házasságról*

¹⁸ Who also argues for the similar style of the poem *Bendő Panna komáromi asszony éneke* (Song of Panna Bendő, mistress of Komárom). He writes: "Their identical source may also raise the suspicion that they are related. János Balassa's song, as we know, is copied on page 34 of volume 2 of János Rimay's book of verses, and Panna Bendő's adorns the preceding page 33." No. Mistress Panna's verse is indeed on page 33, but it does not precede, but follows the poem written in the name of János Balassa. However, this detail is (may) be important for a philological analysis of the relationship of the two poems. Cf. Gerézdi, "Balassa János éneke sólymcskájáról", 691.

¹⁹ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 26.

²⁰ "And you, my falcon, my sweet, wild hawk, my many-a cries / Cannot call you on my hand (...)" (Bálint Balassi, *Versei* (Poems), eds. Péter Kőszeghy and Géza Szentmártoni Szabó (Budapest: Balassi, 1994), 116.

²¹ "You know, the young fits the old / Like the proud falcon an owl's nest", in József Jankovics, Péter Kőszeghy, Géza Szentmártoni Szabó, eds., *Régi magyar irodalmi szöveggyűjtemény II.* (Textbook of old Hungarian literature, vol. 2) (Budapest: Balassi, 2000), 27.

való dicséret (The praise of marriage, 1541). In Mihály Czobor's story of Chariclia (around 1600) the beautiful woman "Mosolgott szájával, sólyom-szemével is" and "Sólyom-szeme villag, mint égnek gyertyája".²²

The metaphoric use of painful eyes and the cure of the eye is also clear: the former is lust, the latter is fulfilment.

Titian's famous painting, *Amor Divino e Amor Profano* (Divine Love and Profane Love), is clearly a product of high culture. Let's measure János Balassa's base message to this.



Titian: *Amor Divino e Amor Profano*

The title was added to the painting by the moralizing 18th century, it is called this way since 1792, leaving it uncertain whether this artwork, painted around 1514–1515, mirrors indeed this Neoplatonic conception. (Rather, it depends on what one means by divine and profane). Titian painted the work for the marriage in 1514 of the Venetian Nicolo Aurelio and Laura Bagarotto (her coat of arms is on the sarcophagus). One popular interpretation claims that the bride sits clad in white, and Venus is helped by Amor in person. The vase and jewels symbolise the passing joys of this world, while the burning flame is the love of God, the eternal heavenly bliss. These days²³ the widespread view is that the two women look so alike because they are the same person: the chaste bride still has her clothes on, while the wife who has already experienced the pleasures of marriage is naked, the lamp in her hand burns with the flame of love. (This interpretation is somewhat flawed, as the bride has been married before, so she could already be acquainted with these pleasures).

²² "Smiled with her lips and hawkish eyes", and "Her hawkish eyes flicker like sky's candles". In Jankovics, Kőszeghy, Szentmártoni Szabó, eds., *Régi magyar irodalmi szöveggyűjtemény II.*, 730, 742.

²³ Ian G. Kennedy, *Tiziano* (Budapest: Taschen–Vince, 2007).

Yet others make reference to the Spartan custom that virgins go around unclad, while matrons wear clothes (Mario Praz).²⁴ But is there any virgin here? Or was the first husband impotent?

Other art historians argue for Platonic and carnal love; the wise and the foolish virgin; and the “dual Venus” is also a prevalent view, interpreting the painting according to Ficino’s ideas and the concepts of Neoplatonism.²⁵ Another option is to identify the two women as Aphrodite Pandemos in clothes (to the left) and Aphrodite Urania (Petersen, Panofsky, Lucia Calzona).²⁶ Yet others claim that it contains a coded message on the innocence of Bagarotto, father of the bride, who was executed for high treason, just like the lady’s first husband. Nadia Gaus (2004)²⁷ notes that one way of understanding the image is exactly the opposite of the customary one: the well dressed woman is the profane love, the naked woman is the sacred love. Walter Friedländer finds a similarity between the painting and Francesco Colonna’s *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* (Venice, 1499), the famous amorous dream novel of the Italian Renaissance. Based on this similarity, he thinks that one of the women is Polia (lover of Polio, the protagonist of the novel), the other is Venus, in the allegorical system elaborated by Pietro Bembo. Serge Jodra lists several interpretations, then summarizes his opinion, also leaving room for his uncertainty: “La volonté de l’antithèse est évidente, sans qu’on puisse saisir exactement le sens de cette antithèse. Quelle qu’ait été l’intention de Titien, nul n’échappe à la séduction, à la magie de cette peinture, véritable chef-d’oeuvre.”²⁸ And indeed, the two women are opposites of each other (dressed–naked, white–red) – that much is true. However, the establishment of the precise meaning is unlikely. Whatever Titian’s intention was, nobody can escape the marvel and seduction of this masterpiece.

Let us take a look at the painting.

Two ladies, one nicely dressed and the other nearly naked, sit on the edge of a well; a well, which actually is a sarcophagus.²⁹

²⁴ Mario Praz: *Emblem, Device, Epigram, Conceit*, in Idem, *Studies in Seventeenth Century Imagery* (Roma: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1964). In Hungarian translation: <http://www.bibl.u-szeged.hu/jatepress/praz.htm> (accessed 14. 02. 2015.)

²⁵ Cf. e.g. József Pál, *Az újjászületett Isten-képről* (On the re-born image of God), *Korunk* 7 (July 2008) (<http://epa.oszk.hu/00400/00458/00139/pali.html>) (accessed 14. 02. 2015.)

²⁶ <http://www.gliscritti.it/blog/entry/2418> (accessed 14. 02. 2015.)

²⁷ <http://web.archive.org/web/20080113213145/http://www.mazzinipancaldomartini.it/martini/webmaster/manierismo/tiziano.html> (accessed 14.02.2015)

²⁸ <http://www.cosmovisions.com/artAmourSacreAmourProfane.htm> (14. 02. 2015)

²⁹ The interpretation to follow is mostly based on the article: Patricia Simons, *The Sex of Men in Premodern Europe. A Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 245–246.

It must be noted nonetheless: the latter lady does in fact have clothing, she could cover herself up in her red robe, but she chooses to show her nudity.



Cupid is splashing in the water of the well. We do know: in the conception of the age, coitus is the mixture, the blending of fluids.

The dressed woman holds flowers in her hand (roses), which are also there on the edge of the well, and the fluid also pours onto a rose (through an obviously phallic symbol).



On the right, a pastoral idyll, a greyhound chasing a hare, on the other side two other hares – animals which, according to Aristotle, symbolize the vulva and female fertility, as they are “rich in sperm”.



A violent episode is depicted on the sarcophagus: the beating of a naked man, while other naked figures are watching from the background. What do they stand for? Sexual desire? Or the memory of the executed father and husband, related to the meaning of the sarcophagus?

Male and female eggs equally exist; the fluid (eggs/spawn/seed, ointment, oil) is the same that Cupid stirs up; jumping as a hare is nothing else than the hares in Titian's painting.

The dressed woman holds the same kind of flower that the water flows on from the phallic pipe; she may be the wife, the legitimate and proper receiver of pleasure. Under her left arm, drawn close with a gesture of possession, there is a bowl, a *large, closed* container.



In the hand of the other, naked woman there is a *small*, smoking vessel: fire. An oil lamp. She is the falconet.



Describing Christophoro Giarda's *Icones Symbolicae* (1626, 1628),³⁰ Ernst Gombrich speaks about the raw, material form of the invisible entity: "The ideas in the Mind of God would either elude or dazzle us. It is through the admixture of grosser matter that became visible." Then he cites Giarda: "Just as fire, when it is nourished by grosser matter, can be seen, but when it returns to its proper abode it eludes, by its purity, the power of human vision, so the most noble Arts and Disciplines, as abstracted from the senses, are less apprehended by as the clearer they become in themselves; but made concrete by some medium accommodated to our minds, through the excellent admixture of colours, they can be grasped more easily..."³¹



And an open bowl in the centre of the sarcophagus: *anything can happen*.

The aperture – the opening, the hole – has several meanings. Clearly, it is an act of compensation, for the real pleasure is the coitus with the falconet. It is impossible to decide whether this act of compensation is masturbation or intercourse with the wife (as Gerézdi thinks). The aperture of Titian's painting is just as ambiguous: it is a phallic reference, so – one

³⁰ The 1626 edition Gombrich refers to (which does not contain the appendix): <https://archive.org/stream/bibliothecaalex00giar#page/n0/mode/2up>.

³¹ Ernst H. Gombrich, "Icones Symbolicae. Philosophies of Symbolism and their Bearing on Art," in Idem, *Symbolic Images, Studies in the art of Renaissance* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1972), 153.

might say – masturbation is more probable. But it all refers to the lady in clothes and with the rose, the wife, so it might refer rather to playing with one's wife. Even more so, as, if art history has it right, the painting was commissioned for a wedding.



The second image is an engraving from Francesco Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*³²

Summa: Titian's painting can be interpreted in the same context of imagery that is used by the Hungarian (undoubtedly, dilettante) poem.

More recent studies put forward the idea of an old János Balassi as the author. Why is that so? There is *no reference whatsoever* in the poem to this fact.³³ In Sándor Bene's case it is understandable, because he thinks that the title refers to Bálint Balassi's father (who was indeed elderly at a certain time). But Szilasi follows Gerézdi in this question (correctly, I say): the narrator, he thinks, is the 17th century János, of whom we know that he was the youngest son of Zsigmond Balassa.³⁴ Since Sir Zsigmond married Erzsébet Zborowski in 1595, and since they had three sons and one daughter, and we have no knowledge of twin birth, we can assume at most one birth per year. Accordingly, János could have been born in 1598–99 the earliest, or much later, for Gerézdi claims – although I do not know based on what source – that János was still a minor in 1623.³⁵

³² Cf. with Walter Friedländer's abovementioned views.

³³ Szilasi has a different opinion: "(...) an elderly man who at times must resort to manual solutions even in the case of intercourse." (Szilasi, *A nyúl és a sólyom*)

³⁴ It was he who rebuilt Kékkő after the Turkish raids. The inscription on the marble memorial plaque commemorating it published in: Horányi Elek, *Nova Memoria Hungarorum (...)*, Pars I, Pestini [Budapest] 1792, 265–266.

³⁵ Gerézdi, "Balassa János éneke sólyomcskájáról," 890.

It is certain, however, that Gáspár Madách (who is, in all probability, *not* the author of the poem – although almost unanimously claimed in the secondary literature) had already died by 1642 or 1643. The most probable date when the poem was written is therefore the second half of the 1630s. At that time, János Balassa, even with the most permissive calculations, was in his thirties.³⁶ Even if the 17th century had a different perception of old age, a man in his thirties could by no means count as old.

The poem, in my reading, is a grotesque paraphrase of a biblical locus in a Marcolphusian style, mocking János Balassa, written in the *customary* reference system of the 16th-17th century *based on mediaeval prefigurations*. In close reading, with commentary added:

*My falconet is in Paloja, the settlement today called Alsópaloja,*³⁷ *some 6 kilometres from Kékkő. For her love I walk to Paloja, / Like crazy people that have no brains.* Why does the author walk? This way it takes around one hour and a half. On a galloping horse it's less than ten minutes.³⁸ Because a man riding on a horse is conspicuous, whereas a walker mingles with the other walkers? It's hard to think of any other reason. That is to say: he must go to Paloja in secret. It is crazy people with no brains who do anything like this.

Coming to me, she uncovers herself. Szilasi³⁹ renders the text as *felfeshőzik* ["uncover"], following Eckhardt, which is indeed a meaningful word today, but *this is not what is written in the manuscript*. What is written there is *felfosztozik* [an archaic word, no longer used]. The critical edition has it the right way, the editor Imre Varga's note is accurate: "The word occurs in Károlyi's Bible translation, in the Book of Samuel, book II, 6:20." Let us quote it: "(...) Mily dicsőséges vala ma Izráel királya, ki az ő szolgálóinak szolgálói előtt *felfosztóztott vala* ma, mint a hogy egy esztelen szokott *felfosztózní!*"⁴⁰ The same in Latin is *nudatus est*, that is, naked/nude.

Showing her eyepiece, my eyes are cleaned – why eyepiece? Both sexes have eyes (in this context: genitals), which is the instrument of attraction and desire, so the author could just as well write: *showing her eyes, my eyes are cleaned. But that's not what he writes.* Why? Eyepieces were rather valuable things back then, accessible for just a few. The frame increased the value; the word (*okulár*) appears for the first time in 1544: "foglaltatik volt egy okulárt aranyba"⁴¹ ([he] had had an eyepiece encased in gold). This is not just any kind of genital then:

³⁶ Gerézdi's note correlates with this observation: "He was a contemporary of Gáspár Madách (1590?-1647), some twenty years his junior. (Madách's death date is incorrect here).

³⁷ The inscription on its bell from 1670 refers to it as Vásáros-Paloja. Cf. Kőrösy József, *A Felvidék eltótosodása. Nemzetiségi tanulmányok, Pozsony, Nyitra, Bars, Hont, Nógrád, Pest, Gömör, Abauj, Zemplén és Ung megyék területéről* (Slovakization of Northern Hungary. Nationality studies) (Budapest, 1898), 31. Its present-day name can be dated back to the 18th century.

³⁸ A walker's average speed is 4 km/h. A galloping horse may reach a speed of 80 km/h.

³⁹ Szilasi, *A nyúl és a sólyom*.

⁴⁰ 2 Samuel 6:20 "How glorious was the king of Israel to day, who uncovered himself to day in the eyes of the handmaids of his servants, as one of the vain fellows shamelessly uncovereth himself!" (King James Version)

⁴¹ Lóránd Benkő, chief ed. *A magyar nyelv történeti-etimológiai szótára, II.* (Dictionary of history and etymology of the Hungarian language) (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1970), 1072.

it is an organ of great value, encased in gold, one that makes seeing – in this context, intercourse – better and clearer; it is about the falconet's bottom turning over me that brings back vision to my eyes, makes me capable of intercourse.

János Pataki Füsüs says: "Az asszonyembernek szép színe miatt sokan vesztenek el. Eszesen cselekedte világbíró Sándor, hogy Darius királynak rabbá tölt leányit nem akarván nézni, hanem szemeit rólok elfordítván, azt mondotta: Perficas puellas esse dolores oculorum. Az perzsiai leányok az szemeknek fájdalmai. Kábaság volt Democritus dolga, kiről Tertullianus azt írja, hogy midőn az asszonyokat kívánság nélkül nem nézhetné, tehát szemeit kitolta, mely esztelenségét nyilván megmutatta. Isaeus kedig, midőn egy néminemű embertől kérdettetnék, látván egy asszonyi állatot, mint tetszenék az személy, azt felelte: (...) Id est. Desii laborare ab oculis. *Megszüntem betegeskedni az szemeimre.* Ékes szemérmetességnek beszédi, érdemes követni."⁴²

"(...) and anoint thine eyes with eyesalve, that thou mayest see." – suggests the Bible.⁴³ János Balassa observed this teaching, though not quite in the Biblical sense. He wanted to see clearly and well, and he was interested in what was to be seen in Paloja rather than in Kékkő.

*

Obviously, this is not the place to list all the preliminaries and sources of these complex linguistic and visual elements. It is clear to me that this metaphorical picto-language has been productive from the Old Testament (see Motto) to sexual mysticism, the language of the upside down world of the commedia dell'arte and carnival (including marginal illuminations of codices), creating an imagery and language extending over nations and times, in forms varying by vernaculars. And, of course, this language was used at times by the great Renaissance masters of painting, as well as of high literature.

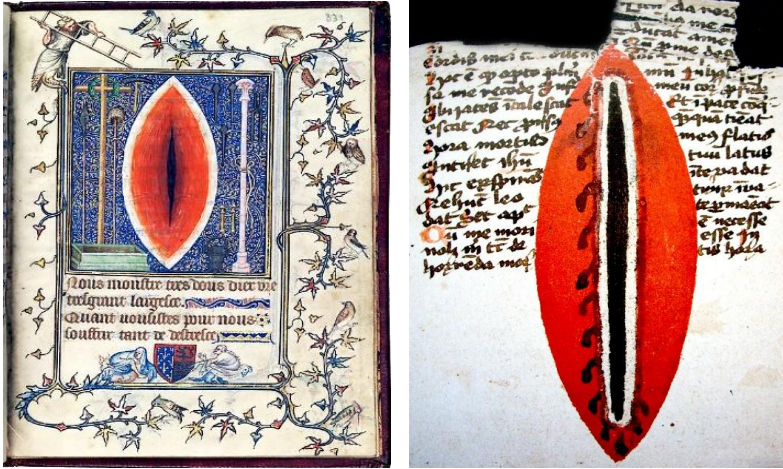
Let me present some interesting paintings for our purposes from the 14th-15th century.⁴⁴

A similarity between Christ's wound and János Balassa's aperture is easily observable:

⁴² "Many have been lost because of the beauty of women. Alexander the Great acted wisely when he, refusing to look at the captive daughters of King Darius, and turning his eyes away, said: Perficas puellas esse dolores oculorum. The Persian girls are pain to the eyes. Democritus's action was silly, of whom Tertullian wrote that, because he couldn't look at women without desire, he took his eyes out, which clearly proved his folly. And Isaeus, when asked how he liked a woman he saw, said: (...) Id est. Desii laborare ab oculis. *I stopped ailing for my eyes.* The speech of chastity is wise, it is worth following." (My emphasis, P. K.)

⁴³ Revelation 3:18 (King James Version)

⁴⁴ Most examples from: Martha Easton, "Was It Good For You, Too?" *Medieval Erotic Art and Its Audiences*, Different Visions – A Journal of New Perspectives on Medieval Art, September 2008, <http://differentvisions.org/issue1PDFs/Easton.pdf> (2015. 02. 14.).



Christ's wound

1. Psalter and prayerbook of Bonne of Luxembourg, before 1349, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Cloisters Collection, MS 69.86, fol. 331r
2. Piece of paper serving as a bookmark, cut out from a larger text-image unit. Found among the breviary (H:S 460 2° Helmst.) of the Augustinian nuns of Steterburg.⁴⁵

Christ's side wound was especially revered during the Late Middle Ages, it appears in several codex illuminations. The wound symbolized Christ's entire injured body and through this, his sacrificial death for the salvation of the entire human race, as well as the promise of the forgiveness of sins for the Christians.

In the legend of Saint Catherine of Siena, written by Raimondo da Capua, Catherine's intimate relation to Christ was also indicated by Christ's personally calling on her to drink from his wound. A German translation entitled *Geistlicher Rosengarten* of Capua's biography of Catherine was widely known. The German legend has an extremely erotic episode, when Saint Catherine cleaved to Christ's wound, drinking lengthily from it, and her soul and afflicted body were both renewed to such an extent that she needed no food or drink for almost two weeks. That is to say: while the image clearly indicates the vulva, the mystical-erotic meaning may just as well imply a male, and even a divine principle.

On the bookmark, around the wound, a 15th century hand wrote in cursive Gothic script some stanzas of the famous meditative hymn, *Ad singula membra Christi patientis* (incipit: *Salve mundi salutare*)^{46, 47}.

⁴⁵ *Rosenkränze und Seelengarten. Bildung und Frömmigkeit in niedersächsischen Frauenklöster*, herausgegeben von Britta-Juliane Kruse, Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz Verlag, 2013 (Ausstellungskataloge der Herzog August Bibliothek Nr. 96, Ausstellung der Herzog August Bibliothek Wolfenbüttel, vom 3. März bis zum 25. August 2013). Description: Britta-Juliane Kruse and Bertram Lesser, 228–229, the image: 229. Brought to my attention by Csilla Utasi.



In a Flemish book of hours the road to hell is decorated by explicitly erotic, even sexual scenes. On the top, crowning the initial, lies a hare:

The Gate to Hell, Book of Hours, Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Douce 6, fol. 160v

There is a hare also at the bottom of an erotic scene in a manuscript made in Paris around 1320; and the examples could go on and on:



London, Victoria and Albert Museum

⁴⁶ Found in Hungarian in the *Thewrewk Codex* and *Peer Codex*, and in prose in the *Gömöry Codex*. Also lived on in János Kájon's songbook, in the *Cantus Catholici*, and in religious popular literature as well. Cf. *Szent Sebek*, in *Katolikus Lexikon*, <http://lexikon.katolikus.hu/S/Szent%20Sebek.html>.

⁴⁷ This hymn was attributed for a long time to Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, but the author was actually the Cistercian Abbot Arnulf von Löwen (around 1200 – around 1251). The fragment mentions Christ's sacrificial death and its redeeming power. The believers should not drink from Christ's wound, but penetrate into it by meditation, right to Christ's heart, uniting with the Saviour in eternity.



In a late medieval book of hours the oral sex (?) happens with the participation of a bird with big eyes (almost like an eyepiece) and a very long beak. (It looks most like the toucan bird, which lives in the rainforests of South America, and America had not been discovered yet...)



New York, Pierpont Morgan Library, MS M. 754, fol. 65v

However, in the interpretation of Paula Gerson and Michael Camille, that image refers to the biblical locus mentioned on the same folio.⁴⁸ Such medieval indecencies in the codices, as several scholars have drawn attention to it, are always found outside the body text, on the margins, as parts of the reversed world, the reversed value systems, just like János Balassa and his falcon, which also turn the (cited) biblical locus upside down.

It is for certain: in a given context the eyes, the fluids (spawn), the falcon (and birds in general), the opening (aperture), the hare are sexual references. *This is what Gerézdi says as well.* But he does not say that it is a subtle, widely accepted and widely known language, used in codex imagery and even in the Old Testament, partly coinciding with the phraseology of the Italian literature of the age.

Let us look at the Italian parallels.⁴⁹ The eye corresponds to the anus or in some cases to the urethral opening in both Italian and French literature. Eyes in the plural can have several

⁴⁸ Paula Gerson, "Margins for Eros," *Romance Languages Annual* 5 (1993): 47- 53; Michael Camille, *Image on the Edge. The Margins of Medieval Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 53-54; quoted in Martha Easton, "Was It Good For You, Too?," footnote 46.

⁴⁹ Examples are from Jean TOSCAN, *Le carnaval du langage. Le lexique érotique des poètes de l'équivoque de Burchiello à Marino (XVe-XVIIe siècles)*, Vol. 3. (Paris: L'Université de Paris, 1978). While Toscan is

meanings, like “the two female openings”, the “openings of the lower face of a woman”; the clearest meaning is at Machiavelli: the “female aperture, crevice” is *finocchio*, which is “the finer of the two”, while the *occhietto* “the smaller of the two”.

Burchiello recommends a prescription for eye pain, the illness and its cure is precisely the one seen in the case of János Balassa.

It is generally true that in carnival poetry the “*mal di...* + a noun” always means the desire for that given object (the noun) which can be cured with the fulfilment of that desire.

The cure for lust=eyepain is therefore, in the language of Italian poetry, to take your male organ (=the sun), put it into the woman’s cavity (=oven), and complete the act (=cook). You will drink the fluid of a purse hanging on a belly. It is the female genital fluid, which Gabriele Simeoni identifies with *rose water*. The rose often marks the “female genital organ”.

As we have seen: *the correspondences of this picto-language are never unambiguous*, the sexual metaphors always depend on the context: the hare can be a phallic symbol but also a symbol for the vulva (the latter is more frequent). Similarly to the falcon. Christ’s wound has been discussed before. The various fluids and ointments may refer to sperm, as well as to female sexual fluids.

This same language, in a completely different style but identical function, is also used in high literature. Shakespeare’s long poem, *Venus and Adonis*, written on the basis of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, book 10, depicts Venus burning for Adonis in a style not lacking irony and linguistic humour. These are the words of the goddess of love:

(...)
 I'll be a park, and thou shalt be my deer;
 Feed where thou wilt, on mountain or in dale:
 Graze on my lips; and if those hills be dry,
 Stray lower, where the pleasant fountains lie.

Within this limit is relief enough,
 Sweet bottom-grass and high delightful plain,
 Round rising hillocks, brakes obscure and rough,
 To shelter thee from tempest and from rain
 Then be my deer, since I am such a park;
 No dog shall rouse thee, though a thousand bark.'

Titian painted the same subject of Venus and Adonis in two versions. The earlier was created in 1545–46 for the Farnese family, the later in 1554 for the Spanish King Philip II (Prado, Madrid). The latter has probably been preserved only in copy, but it is insignificant from our point of view.

The two versions:

capable of finding sexual (especially anal) references in almost any text, some of his observations are nonetheless correct.



There are two important differences between the paintings: on the first one, near the quiver in the upper left corner, there is a small devil with his tongue sticking out. On the second one, there is no sign of any such thing.



Cupid, according to Ovid, wounded his mother by mistake with these arrows, who because of this little wound fell madly in love with Adonis. This is the didactic solution.

The other conspicuous difference: in the first image, there is no object next to Venus's foot. In the second, there is an overturned vessel. The overturned vessel cannot be an object of storage. Adonis does not mean to use it, to fill it with anything. Although the crow is there, he does not want it. This is the symbolic-playful solution.

Thus, the way was paved thus for the author of János Balassa's mocking poem.

And perhaps Sándor Eckhardt – although his academic eye overlooked the sexual references – was not all that wrong to speak about Italian models and “précieux” images. It can be translated as precious, noble, valuable – is it not so? Well, it is not. *Also, it is neither courtly,*

nor rogue. In a quite complex manner, it is a grotesque disguise of the former, and also of the latter. Nonetheless, the term “précieux”, as Eckhardt probably also understood it, means (also) preciousness, mannerist game, a twirl of meaning. Unfortunately, Eckhardt gave no response to Gerézdi’s article on its publication, which, of course contained extremely important interpretations. Just as he – Eckhardt – failed to realize that Balassi’s *Szép magyar komédia* (Nice Hungarian Comedy) uses the very same picto-language...⁵⁰

Translated from Hungarian by Emese Czintos

⁵⁰ Cf. Péter Kőszeghy, *Utószó* (Afterword), in Gyarmati Balassi Bálint, *Szép magyar komédia*, eds. Kőszeghy Péter and Szabó Géza (Budapest: Szépirodalmi, 1990), 96–101.