In Appreciation of Gyula Klima

Joshua P. Hochschild

Évezred hanyatlik, évezred kel újra,

Míg egy földi álom e világba téved,

Hogy a hitlen ember imádni tanulja

A köd oszlopában rejlő Istenséget.

—János Arany, “Dante” (1852)

One millennium sets and one millennium rises,

Till a mortal’s dream into that world will stray,

Till the unbelieving person recognizes

That mist-hidden Godhead to which he must pray.

(trans. David Hill, 2010)

What began as a peaceful student protest in Budapest on October 23, 1956 quickly turned violent. Soon many strategically placed buildings had become staging grounds for confrontation between communist and populist forces. Within days, a Soviet tank had driven through the maternity ward at Saint Margaret Hospital in Óbuda. So on October 30, in the midst of the Hungarian Uprising, a midwife was called to a modest house on Bercsényi Street, and Gyula Klima was born at home.

**A MAGYAR MIND**

It is not uncommon to suggest that there is a distinctively Hungarian temperament, linked in part to the distinctiveness of the Hungarian language. The historian John Lukacs (who emigrated from Budapest to the United States in 1946, at the age of 22) noted “the loneliness of the Magyar language,” having “no relative among the great families of European languages” (*Budapest 1900: A Historical Portrait of a City and Its Culture* [Grove Press, 1988], p. 65). Not only the vocabulary, but the grammar and syntax, isolates Hungarian from Germanic and Romantic languages. Its structure is “agglutinative,” which linguists also call “synthetic”: its syntax is strictly rule-based and conspicuous through added syllables, rather than inflections and prepositions. Lukacs links this to “the frequent linguistic abilities of Hungarians” (and we might conjecture that such a mother tongue would be an advantage especially in studying both Latin and formal logic).

The grammar and syntax also gives Hungarian speech a distinctive sound. In appropriately musical English, Patrick Leigh Fermor described how in Hungarian “changes of sense are conveyed by a concatenation of syllables stuck on behind the first; all the vowel sounds imitate their leader, and the invariable ictus on the leading syllable sets up a kind of dactylic or anapaestic canter which, to a new ear, gives Magyar a wild and most unfamiliar ring.” (Fermor, *Between the Woods and the Water* [NYRB 2005; originally published 1986], p. 31)

Lukacs describes the language as strongly “declarative… rational rather than mystical, lyrical rather than metaphorical,” which he takes to explain why “there is little that is sly and secretive in the national character” (Lukacs 110). The Hungarian literary scholar Antal Szerb, linking this to the style of the nation’s parliamentary politics, said the Hungarian mind “tends to monologue, rather than to dialogue” (quoted in Lukacs 109).

We draw out these cultural reflections because language is central to Klima’s philosophical project, not only an object of study, but for its range of persuasive power – a range that somewhat confirms, and somewhat challenges, Lukacs’ comments on Magyar rhetorical habits. Klima’s writing moves comfortably between technical formalization and elegant, often poetic, composition. And anyone who has heard him speak knows his playfulness with language, his love of elegant turns of phrase, and his intense animation, which is perfectly fluent in English but takes on a rushing intensity when speaking in his native tongue.

The Magyar language’s “loneliness” inspires an almost unsharable pride in national literature, especially poets. It was a reading of Sándor Petőfi’s 1848 “National Song,” an anthem for freedom asserting independence from Austria, that also roused some students’ spirits to begin what became the 1956 Uprising. And Klima’s personal favorites include Miklós Radnóti and János Arany, modern poets who yet confirm the Hungarian habit of preserving and persisting: “Many of the most enduring achievements of the nation consist of conservative efforts of recovery and rebuilding after its worst disasters.” (Lukacs 110)

This helps to illuminate another feature of Klima’s work. Hungary is often described as a nation mixing melancholy and hope, nostalgia and perseverance. Lukacs finds that spiritually, Hungarians are more conscious of “that blending of major and minor, of optimism and pessimism, of light and darkness that is, after all, the inevitable human condition, and also the condition of any culture that is worthwhile” (Lukacs 24). Preserving culture involves both protecting against threats but assimilating valuable contributions from outside.

**INTELLECTUAL MIDWIFERY**

The title of this volume, “metaphysics through semantics”, points to a third crucial dimension of logic in Klima’s work: the role of dialectic. What narrative is to ethics in Alastair McIntyre’s *After Virtue* – the means of reconstructing a “teleological” alternative to modern confusion – dialectic is to metaphysics in Klima’s overall project: the means of making intelligible a lost a conceptual framework, not to assert victoriously over other alternatives, but to learn to enter into and occupy from alternative frameworks.

Even more, dialectic allows one to find those alternative frameworks within oneself. The Platonic contrast of *mythos* and *logos* is not between supernatural and natural explanations, but between modes of persuasion: the narrator is invitational, calling one to trust a vision proposed. The dialectician is maieutic, assisting one to recognize intelligibility in and from one’s own participation in reasoning.

So it was not only an act of humility, nor as plausible deniability for the accusation of “teaching,” that Socrates compared himself to a midwife. It was part of his understanding of human reason, as containing within it forgotten truths, or (in more Aristotelian terms) potencies waiting to be actualized. In its Platonic development, this points to spiritual heights more mystical than conventional *mythos*: ideas themselves as traces of an original intelligibility, a transcendent Truth and Goodness and Being inarticulable in words but the source and end of our participatory intellectual activity.

One might not know it from his most technical papers in medieval Aristotelian semantics, but Klima has a deep and sincere affection for Plato (and for the Platonist tradition, as in Augustine). Without compromising a commitment to hylomorophic anthropology, a favorite film is *Shawshank Redemption*, which Klima interprets as an overt analogy of the soul’s struggle for emergence into freedom from the oppression of embodied suffering.

And always for Gyula, Socrates is model for argument, as not competitive, but communal. Not every philosopher who loves to argue is as committed to the Socratic principle that we should be as glad when shown wrong as when shown right: either way we end up closer to the truth.

Dialectic as “art of arts” is a recurring theme of Klima’s work, and one he finds especially well articulated by Buridan:

…we should note that dialectic (that is, logic) is rightly said to be the art of arts, by reason of a certain superiority it has over other arts, [namely], in virtue of its utility and the generality of its application to all other arts and sciences. Due to this generality, which it shares with metaphysics, it has access to disputations that concern not only the conclusions, but also the principles of all sciences. (quoted in Klima’s Buridan book, p. 8)

This vision of dialectic offers to unify intellectual pursuits, not in a reductionist way imagined by positivists and rationalists, translating complex ideas into a simple conceptual framework, but making ideas intelligible in and across conceptual frameworks. In Klima’s conception of dialectic, we don’t translate different worldviews, as if to eliminate them, but inhabit them and seek to understand them, and learn how to move between them. The Gadamerian “fusion of horizons” is not a resolution, such that one framework ceases to be different from another, but a network, so that one is capable of moving from one to another, and perhaps occupying both at the same time.

Hence comprehending dialectic as *ars artium* suggests more than that it is a foundation for all the sciences; it is also the foundation of society and friendship. Dialectic is a common pursuit of truth, not competitive manipulation. Notwithstanding its Socratic and Platonic heritage, for even this function of dialectic Klima has drawn inspiration from the scholastic nominalist Buridan:

Dialectic, when applied in speculative matters or utilized in a speculative manner, is directed toward opinion; for both disputants aim at acquiring an opinion about the point of the discussion; they take contradictory stances, and each of them should produce probable arguments for his position, if he has any. He should also solve his opponents’ arguments, if they also have probable solutions—and not in a litigious manner, just in order to win, but in order that both of them should assent, in agreement with each other, to the position that they have seen to have been supported in the disputation by more probable and less soluble arguments; and if they do otherwise, then they slip into a sophistic disputation, which often happens. (SD 7.1.3. p. 499)

Teasing out the political and spiritual stakes of this conception of dialectic, Klima glossed this this passage from Buridan remarks introducing his recent conference on “The Metaphysics and Theology of the Eucharist” (Budapest, September 2021):

[T]he point is that *a dialectical disputation is not a zero-sum game*. It is all too often that we see the deterioration of such worthy discussions into petty quarrels, indeed, we shall see historical examples of how they can turn into something worse: fights, schisms, even wars (in which we know truth is the first victim), all for winning by vanquishing the opposing party. But a dialectical discussion is not for vanquishing one’s opponent: it is a win-win encounter for both parties, from which both come away with the prize of *deeper understanding*.

As Klima’s philosophical project attests, at stake in the dialectic’s maieutic persistence is not only political but spiritual communion. Hence even Klima’s most sober technical papers do not shy away from gesturing to the more mystical implications of Thomistic metaphysics, and its ascent to a simple God Who transcends discursive reason. Dialectic rightly pursued improves the human condition; it fosters productive harmony. It is thus a noble service to persist in dialectic, building the community of truth-seekers, and anticipating a life without it only in union with truth’s perfect source, the ineffable Divine.