

Contemporary and Recent Hungarian Fiction

Reception and Cross-Cultural Interpretations

Edited by
TIBOR GINTLI – JÁNOS KENYERES

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HUNGARIAN FICTION**

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Budapest, 2022

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Preface



There has been considerable international interest in Hungarian literature in the last few decades, as evidenced by the numerous literary prizes granted to a virtual pantheon of Hungarian authors. In addition to Imre Kertész's 2002 Nobel Prize in Literature, other authors such as László Krasznahorkai, Péter Nádas, Péter Esterházy and Magda Szabó, to name but a few, have likewise received prestigious international awards. Films based on Hungarian works of fiction, such as director Béla Tarr's *Satantango* (1994), *Werckmeister Harmonies* (2000) and *The Turin Horse* (2011), and Oscar-winning director István Szabó's *The Door* (2012), have also contributed significantly to arousing international attention. This volume modestly aims to contribute to perpetuating and deepening this revived interest.

In compiling this book, we have sought to provide international readers with a useful guide to contemporary Hungarian fiction. The target audience of this collection is, therefore, not exclusively that of literary scholars but a wider educated readership open to encountering the gems of smaller national literatures.

Both the content and structure have been designed to fulfil this mediating function. It is also why the collection deals exclusively with narratives and the oeuvre of authors known primarily for their short stories or novels. Behind this decision lies the intention to offer interpretations of works which international audiences may already be familiar with or which they can access in English should the studies in this volume, as we hope, pique their interest.

Accordingly, one of the primary criteria for selection was the availability of an English translation of the works concerned. Although the aesthetic output of contemporary Hungarian poetry is by no means inferior to that of fiction, the number of poetic pieces translated so far is limited compared

to prose works. Besides, since the avowed aim of this volume is to popularize Hungarian literature abroad, we had to consider reader habits and the fact that most readers show more interest in prose than poetry. These two considerations informed our decision to present international readers insight into recent and contemporary Hungarian prose.

This volume obviously cannot fulfil the role of a systematic overview of Hungarian literature. Therefore, we have not sought to present the traits and internal processes of contemporary Hungarian prose with the objective of a detailed literary history. However, the book is more than a set of randomly juxtaposed interpretations. As a whole, it sets out to outline the intrinsic network of interrelations traceable in recent Hungarian fiction and offers a survey of the last seventy years through a careful selection of authors and works presented in chronological order, highlighting the main junctions crucial for the understanding of texts.

Nyugat (West), the most influential journal of Hungarian modernity, remained a key point of orientation for writers who distanced themselves from artistic representation in the socialist realist manner enforced by the authorities during the Sovietisation of Hungarian literature. The prose of *Nyugat*, represented in this volume by Dezső Kosztolányi and Sándor Márai, was seen as a guiding tradition by younger writers who subsequently clustered around the 1946–48 journal *Újhold* (New Moon). These included Iván Mándy, Géza Ottlik and Miklós Mészöly. After a period of silence imposed on them by the authorities in the 1950s, this later generation gained significant publicity starting from the 1960s. Consequently, the new group of prose writers emerging in the 1970s looked to the legacy of this creative circle as a guide. Péter Esterházy considered the oeuvre of Géza Ottlik, as well as that of Dezső Kosztolányi, to be a tradition worth continuing; while Miklós Mészöly was of stimulating impact on the poetics of László Krasznahorkai, Péter Nádas and László Márton, among others. Complex as these interrelations are, we hope that much of them unfold as an empirical reading experience for our audience.

This collection is intended to be comprehensive in the sense that it offers a survey of the past 70 years of Hungarian fiction. For reasons of space alone, it does not systematically examine the processes of the artistic

development of Hungarian prose, nor does it include all the prominent authors who have attracted international attention. Hungarian fiction, past and present, is so rich and voluminous that to provide a wider historical scope would require several volumes.

Tibor Gintli and János Kenyeres
Editors

ANDREA TIMÁR

Ordinary Perpetrators of
Dehumanization: Dezső Kosztolányi's
Anna Édes and Doris Lessing's
The Grass is Singing: An attempt
at Reading with Hannah Arendt



“while such comparative memory cultures can sometimes elide differences between distinct histories, they also have the capacity to forge ... ‘differential solidarity.’ ... Comparison and connection do not require equation and erasure.”

(Michael Rothberg)

My study aims to inscribe Dezső Kosztolányi's *Anna Édes* into world literary scholarship by arguing that the novel can be read as a paradigmatic, and perhaps paradigm-setting literary presentation of the domestic, ordinary, and eminently female perpetrator of dehumanization. I outline first the theoretical framework that helps us examine literary representations of *ordinary* perpetrators of dehumanization, and their difference from criminals or perpetrators of genocides. Then, I compare *Anna Édes* to Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing*. The two novels, at first sight, seem to constitute worlds apart. However, I show how both novels stage female perpetration in a typically domestic setting, how both hinge on some displaced or misplaced sense of intimacy, and how both present, albeit differently, the revolt of silent victims, who eventually turn into murderers. Doing so, I shall equally elaborate on the politics of the intimate, the domestic, and the public, with a focus on the phenomenon of “recognition.”

Dehumanisation is the consideration, representation, and/or treatment of certain human being as if they were “less than” human (animals, machines, objects) so as to exclude them “from various forms of politically relevant aspects of human life, such as rights, power, etc.” (Kronfeldner et al. 1). The

stakes of the “as if” are high: perpetrators do not think that their victims really *are* animals, machines, or objects, but treat them *as if* they were, in order to make “their shared humanity disappear” (Littell, *The Kindly Ones* 624). As Mr Moviszter, the bystander witness typically claims at the trial of Anna Édes: the Vizys “did not deal with her [Anna] as with a human being. To them she was not a human being but a machine” (211). Dehumanisation is systematic, that is, it does not happen only once, and is always unjustifiable: it derives from the perpetrators’ essentialization of the victims’ group membership (their race, gender, age, social standing, sexual orientation, etc), destroying their human uniqueness. At the same time, dehumanization is performative: it has serious ethical, social, psychological and political consequences.

The emergence of Literary Trauma Studies in the 1990s prepared the ground for a thorough (re)examination of the way in which victims of dehumanisation are represented in literature. Typically, accounts of Anna Édes’s creatureliness, her silence, her animal-, human- or machine-like presentation in Kosztolányi’s novel abound. More recently, with the boom of literary perpetrator studies, scholars started to focus on the fictional representation of perpetrators, since—as Robert Eaglestone puts it—it yields a better understanding of “the nature of evil” than the examination of the victims; it may even make us engage with the potential perpetrator in ourselves. However, contemporary literary perpetrator studies tend to investigate, on the one hand, the fictional representation of the perpetration of war crimes, or genocides, such as the Holocaust. On the other hand, they engage with fictional perpetrators of individual, sometimes serial crimes, such as rape, murder, or paedophilia—the kinds of crimes we encounter in Nabokov’s *Lolita*, or Bret Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho*.

Hence, there is a gap in scholarship concerning the literary representations of ordinary perpetrators and everyday processes of dehumanization. By these, I mean systematic and systemic treatment of others as less than human, which treatment, however, is not necessarily violent, and certainly remains within the frames of legality. In what follows, I shall suggest that the examination of non-violent, ordinary perpetrators may prove more fruitful than the examination of perpetrators of genocides or serial killers, since this analysis could better make us engage with the potential perpetrators in ourselves. For while it is highly unlikely that we become

criminals or perpetrators of genocides, it is somewhat more probable that we turn into ordinary, legal perpetrators of dehumanization.

Hannah Arendt phrases the difference between total dehumanization, proper to the concentration camps, and ordinary, everyday dehumanization in her essay *On Violence*. She writes: “it is no doubt possible to create conditions under which men are dehumanized—such as concentration camps, torture, famine—... and under such conditions, not rage and violence, *but their conspicuous absence* is the clearest sign of dehumanization” (64). And in these situations, when dehumanization is *not* perpetrated by violence, “a violent act may be the only appropriate remedy” (64). And, as if to explain (though not to exculpate) the reactive violence of silent victims, she goes on to say “rage and the violence ... belong among the ‘natural’ human emotions, and to cure man from them would mean ... to dehumanize or emasculate him” (64). In other words, victims may revolt against their “non-violent” dehumanization precisely by violence as the only means to reassert their humanity: they “tear the mask of hypocrisy ... to unmask ... the manipulations that *permit him to rule without using violent means*” (65, italics added). Following the opposition Arendt establishes between the “hypocritical” non-violence of perpetrators of dehumanization and the reactive violence of some of their victims, it would be possible to frame ordinary dehumanization with the help of what Hannah Arendt means by “the social” too, which she associates with some sort of hypocrisy unaware of itself. In *The Human Condition*, she argues that modernism witnessed the “emergence of society,” which is based on conformism, where uniform “*behavior* has replaced action as the foremost mode of human relationships” (41, italics added). This society governed by “the social” equates the individual with his rank within the social framework, and imposes a set of rules to “normalize” its members. Modern society, according to Arendt, is characterized by the “substitution of behavior for action, and its eventual substitution of bureaucracy, the rule of nobody” (45). The rule of behaviour (erasing speech and action which, for Arendt, are expressive of freedom and human uniqueness¹) may not only remind one of the “banality of evil” theorized by Arendt in the Eichmann report, but has more general, and, therefore, threatening implications too: the normalization of evil.

¹ On Arendt’s understanding of “the social” as opposed to the public realm of freedom, of action and speech, see Pitkin.

Drawing on Hannah Arendt's conception of the "banality of evil," Simona Forti makes a historical distinction between, on the one hand, the old image of evil conceptualised as revolt (epitomised by Milton's Satan or Shakespeare's Richard the Third), and, on the other, our contemporary concept of what she calls the "normality of evil." This latter manifests itself in ordinary, perfectly law-abiding citizens, who both respect *and* perpetuate existing social norms. These "normal" perpetrators also, and quite obviously, partake in what Arendt calls the banality of evil: they lack self-reflection, that is, moral awareness; they are "empty" (see Timár, *Against Compassion*). Hence, what these everyday perpetrators of dehumanization epitomize, I would argue, is the absence of legal transgression and the presence of moral transgression, thus revealing an aching gap between ethics and law (see also Timár, *Dehumanization*).

Meanwhile, and much more importantly for our literary purposes, they are, like Arendt's Eichmann, totally unable "ever to look at anything from the other fellow's point of view" (Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* 47–48). This latter characteristic, the normalized refusal of perspective-taking or cognitive empathy, can be presented with relative ease in fiction through narrative techniques. In fact, Arendt's basic point that "to try to see *like* the other—to imagine the world from their perspective" (Lang 176) is the 'possibility condition' of our relationship with reality that will help us compare the narratological features of Kosztolányi's *Anna Édes* and Lessing's *The Grass is Singing* in the proposed framework.

The novel *Anna Édes* (1926) by the Hungarian poet, novelist and journalist Dezső Kosztolányi, and *The Grass is Singing* (1950) by Doris Lessing seem diametrically opposed. *Anna Édes* is set in Hungary, 1919, right after the collapse of the short-lived Hungarian Soviet Republic, while *The Grass is Singing* is set in Apartheid-ridden South Africa. For Hungarian readers, *Anna Édes* is absolutely familiar, but non-Hungarian readers may be more familiar with Doris Lessing's Nobel prize-winning work. I shall therefore briefly summarize both. As one reader helpfully describes it on *goodreads* (see <https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/654438.Annedes>), *Anna Édes* is built around Mr and Mrs Víz (a bourgeois couple), who seek out a new maid for their household, during the anxious time after World War I. Mrs Angela Víz obsesses about how to replace the unsatisfactory maid. Then enters Anna, the perfect servant, hard-working, reliable, honest, docile

and submissive. The Vizys and their playboy nephew Jancsi exploit her mercilessly, using the girl for their own ends. Anna Vizi shows Anna off to friends and acquaintances, and pressures her to give up her only chance at happiness through marriage. Jancsi, the nephew, seduces her, promising love, yet making her abort their unwanted child. Eventually, Anna kills both Mrs and Mr Vizi; but her prime target seems to be Angela Vizi.

The Grass is Singing is set in South Africa under white rule. It follows the murder and life of a white woman, Mary Turner, the wife of a white settler. At the very beginning of the novel, we get to know that she was killed by her black servant, Moses, and the plot itself is the explication of the tragic murder. Mary Turner is the daughter of an abusive alcoholic father. Before her marriage to Dick Turner, she lives a relatively happy life until she hears town gossip about her being strange. She marries Dick Turner, who brings her to his farm, where they soon sink into poverty. There, Mary's racism becomes more and more vehement. She becomes obsessed with her search for the perfect domestic slave, one who does not steal, and who is not lazy like all others. She finds Moses, and gradually some strange, undefined intimacy develops between them. Eventually, the relation between Moses and Mary is found out by the neighbours. Mary leaves the house one night (perhaps with a premonition to meet Moses), and in the dark, Moses kills her.

"'Class' is not a South African word ... its equivalent [is] race" (*The Grass is Singing* 36). Of course, class is far from being equivalent to race: indeed, one of the most revealing differences between the two novels concerns the way in which the voice (or voicelessness) and the perspective of the victims are presented. The voicelessness of the African slave has been often commented upon: we can never hear Moses's own language, his mother tongue, and never get to know anything about him apart from his relationship with Mary. As often remarked, it is Moses's ability to speak English that provokes Mary's first outrage: "Don't speak English to me"—she says before whipping him across the face once seeing his "insolent" glance. Although, as opposed to the black slave, the Hungarian domestic servant could share her masters' mother tongue (though she spoke in a different dialect and sociolect), she is just as voiceless in the bourgeois household as Moses is among the whites.²

² Gábor Gyáni's *Women and Domestic Servants: The Case of Budapest, 1890-1940* offers us a socio-political context to understand Anna's voicelessness. "Not even [archives

Meanwhile, even though neither Anna, nor Moses have a “voice” of their own in the world of the novels, the main focalizer of *Anna Édes*, is Anna herself, the victim of dehumanization. In other words, while Anna is deprived of voice, she does have a perspective. (As has been often noted, this goes together with Kosztolányi’s presentation of her as creature-like, as devoid of rationality, which is, obviously, a dehumanizing move from Kosztolányi’s part.³) That Anna is one of the main focalizers of her story makes it possible for the helpful but, in fact, helpless witness, Mr Moviszter to urge us, readers, as well as the visitors at the Vizy household to feel compassion for her. And even though Moviszter’s compassion seems to be politically irrelevant,⁴ the way in which Anna’s story is told by the narrator seems to mark the presence of a narratorial intentionality akin to Moviszter’s: the narrator is presented as being able to imagine another person’s perspective.⁵

and libraries] give us sufficient knowledge about the servant as a person, about her individual thoughts or will. All this only underscores the fact that the servant did not have a history of her own; that her fate and the history that determined her situation were made by forces outside her control. She is rather silent and remains anonymous” (1). Meanwhile, domestic servants in Hungary had more human rights than black domestic slaves in Rhodesia: for example, servants had the right to recognition as a person before the law, they could, in principle, own property, and they also had the freedom to move, or to start a new life (generally as a wife and a mother, see Gyáni), or to marry whoever they wished. Anna, obviously, could not exercise these rights (see also Bónus).

³ The most comprehensive Hungarian analysis of *Anna Édes* is offered by Tibor Bónus. Here, I shall restrict my analysis to the most revelatory points of comparison between the two novels, those points of contact that can shed new light on both *Anna Édes* and *The Grass is Singing*.

⁴ During a social gathering at the Vizys, in the heat of a debate about servant’s right and/or willingness to eat from the sweets that they serve, one guest exclaims: “There is no such thing as human equality ... Let them remain the servants’ / ... There is no alternative.” Here, Mr Moviszter emphatically replies: “But there is. ... Compassion” (Kosztolányi 83).

⁵ The difference between perspective-taking, empathy, compassion, and sympathy is significant; scholars use different criteria to define the degrees and forms of the cluster of intersubjective emotions variously termed sympathy, empathy, or compassion, and frequently describe the historical and cultural contexts in which they have been put to use. (For a comprehensive account, see Breyer and Timár, *Dehumanization*.) Hannah Arendt’s rejection of compassion (understood as emotional contagion) in favour of the ability to make present to one’s mind other people’s perspective (i.e. cognitive or perspective-taking empathy) is discussed by Timár (*Dehumanization*).

In contrast, the main focalizer in *The Grass is Singing* is Mary, the perpetrator. Moses, the black household slave, is deprived of both voice *and* perspective in the story world, and only presented as the object of Mary's racist gaze. In the same vein, as opposed to Moviszter, who publicly testifies in favour of Anna and blames the Vizy's dehumanizing treatment of her at the trial,⁶ Tony Marston, Lessing's bystander witness remains silent, and does not give any *public* testimony, although he is equally convinced that "a terrible injustice" was being done to Moses, and blames Mary for her own fate. "If you blame somebody, then blame Mrs Turner. You can't have it both ways. Either the white people are responsible for their behaviour or they are not. It takes two to make a murder—a murder of this kind" (27). Meanwhile, unlike Moviszter, Tony is unable to feel compassion for Moses. He can well imagine the kind of woman Mary the focalizer had been, but Moses's consciousness is shut from him. As he ponders:

What sort of woman had Mary Turner been, before she came to this farm and had been driven slowly off balance by heat and loneliness and poverty? And Dick Turner himself—what had he been? And the native—but there his thoughts were stopped by lack of knowledge. *He could not even begin to imagine the mind of a native.* (28, italics added)

The difference between the two narrative techniques puts in sharp relief the difference between Moses's and Anna's respective historical, geographical and political predicaments. A white peasant girl serving a bourgeois Budapest household was deprived of a narrative voice, but her perspective could be imagined: both the helpful but helpless witness and the narrator have a degree of imaginative access into her mind. Moses's

⁶ "“They [the Vizys] behaved coldly towards her [Anna], ... I always felt so. They gave her no affection. They were heartless.’ / ‘And how did this heartlessness show itself?’ / ‘It is hard to say precisely. But it was distinctly my impression.’ / “Then these are only feelings, doctor, mere suspicions, such delicate shades of behaviour that this bench, faced by such a brutal and terrible crime, can hardly take them into account. Because on one side, we have facts: bloody facts. And we too require facts. ...’ / ‘My impression,’ he stubbornly repeated, ‘my impression is that they did not deal with her as with a human being. To them she was not a human being but a machine’” (Kosztolányi 210–11).

perspective, on the other hand, cannot be imagined: neither the bystander witness, Tony, nor the narrator have access to it. The household slave in apartheid-ridden Rhodesia could have neither voice, nor perspective.

At the same time, both Kosztolányi and Lessing offer us more than these political platitudes. Lessing, by using Mary as the main focalizer and presenting her dehumanizing perspective on Moses, equally draws the reader into her (i.e. Mary's) borderline situation of being *both* a perpetrator of dehumanization *and* a victim of patriarchy, trapped in the domestic sphere. Kosztolányi's narrator, on the other hand, shows the perpetrator, Angela Vizi, and her dehumanizing perception of Anna ironically, in free indirect speech, thus creating an emotional distance between the reader and the perpetrator of dehumanization.

Ordinary, female perpetrators of dehumanization

Both *Anna Édes* and *The Grass is Singing* are domestic stories, set mostly in the household, and in both novels the name of the victim-perpetrator alliterates with that of the perpetrator-victim: we have an Anna and an Angela, a Moses and a Mary. Even though the alliterating names of masters and servants suggest that these characters are each other's doubles, the murders cannot only be considered a psychological rebellion of the oppressed, nor can they be seen merely as a consequence of dehumanization. Despite Arendt's claim that violence is a natural human reaction to dehumanization, it does not happen as a matter of course: historical studies have shown that dehumanizing treatment, in itself, does not trigger revolt. Indeed, my intention is *not* to psychologize dehumanization away; I would rather suggest that whereas dehumanizing treatment of others is not necessarily caused by any recognizable psychological pattern (cf. it was not necessary for someone mistreated as a child to turn into a Nazi), the lack of intimacy, and its misplacement may be generative of violence.

Differently put, I would argue that it is precisely the 'ordinariness' of dehumanization, and the everyday character of the dehumanizing treatment in a specifically *domestic* setting that allows for violence to emerge. The perpetrators of dehumanization are both females, enclosed with their victims in the intimate space of a household, which they cannot leave. While

being the perpetrators of dehumanization, they are also the victims of patriarchy. Both Mary and Angela are mistresses of a house, both are white, married, childless women, living in a dispassionate, sexless marriage, suffering from past traumas. Mary had been abused by her father, Angela had lost her daughter due to illness. Both Angela and Mary are mentally unbalanced, and become more and more disturbed in the course of the novels. In their married life, they have to endure both intimacy and a lack of intimacy: with the husbands, they share a house but do not have sex. Angela Vizi's husband is an important man, who works for the Ministry, cheating on his wife, while Mary's husband is trying (in vain) to make a living outside, on the farm, cautious not to beget a child. Hence, both women spend most of their time alone in the domestic space they share with their servants, and, in the course of the novels, the servants gradually come to substitute for the intimacy these women had lost: Anna becomes an object of obsessive attachment for Angela Vizi, and a replacement for her daughter, while Moses is coming to replace Mary's weak and often absent husband.

In both novels, domesticity allows for a sense of pseudo-intimacy to burgeon. Mary transgresses the codified mistress/servant and white/black relation by what the narrator calls a "personal relation" (145) with Moses. Although scholars examining Lessing's novel tend to place the emphasis on the possible sexual encounter between Mary and Moses, the juxtaposition of *Anna Édes* to *The Grass is Singing* may shift the emphasis from sexuality to intimacy. Moses could "force her [Mary] to treat him as a human being" (156), in the sphere of intimacy. Moses strikes Mary dead when he realizes that his recognition as a human being can only happen in secrecy: once revealed in and by the public, Mary disavows their human relation. The murder committed by Anna follows a somewhat similar pattern, but is complicated by the presence of a lover: Anna too is recognised as a unique human being by Jancsi in private, in secret, in the intimacy of the love affair: "After the kisses and the squeezings of the hand came the moment when he began to address her as a social equal. ... He asked her ... to drop the 'young master tag'" (124), but then, he forces Anna to abort their child. Anna's murdering of her masters is immediately preceded by a party organized by the Vizys, where Jancsi is flirting with the doctor's wife. After the party, Anna sits on Angela Vizi's bed, the way Jancsi sat on hers, and, as the English version goes, she literally "embraces" Mrs Vizi before

killing her.⁷ In both novels, the murder is committed with a knife, piercing through the bodies, marking the domestic, and at the same time deeply sensual character of the deeds. The domestic thus turns out to be the “natural” (see Arendt above) human sphere of intimacy and violence, while also constituting a threshold, a borderland between the secret, the hidden, the affective on the one hand and the public, the political, the discursive on the other.

In *The Human Condition*, Arendt argues: “Speech and action reveal [man’s] unique distinctness. Through them, men distinguish themselves ... *qua* men. ... A life without speech and without action [...] is literally dead to the world; it has ceased to be a human life” (176). “Only sheer violence is mute” (26). By human life, Arendt means political life, lived publicly, and in a web of human relationships. Arguing that life without speech and action ceases to be a human life, Arendt does not dehumanize silence, nor violence: she much rather means that speechlessness, implying the lack of discussion and argument, cannot partake of politics, of a life meaningfully lived (*bios*). At the same time, as we have seen, Arendt also admits that the rage violence stems from is eminently human, and that, rather than being entirely non-political, it is, sometimes, pre-political. For there are situations with no other means to “set the scales of justice right again” but by means of violence. As she puts it: “under certain circumstances, violence—acting without argument or speech and without counting the consequences—is the only way to set the scales of justice right again” (*On Violence* 60). In these rare cases (Arendt particularly refers to revolutionary scenarios), pre-political violence has an exquisite potential to institute the political.

However, in both *Anna Édes* and *The Grass is Singing* mute violence remains beyond the pale of the political: these are domestic murders, committed by lonely victims of dehumanization, fuelled by what Arendt calls “rage” (see above). Violence is thus necessarily penalized, and Anna and Moses are reduced to utter silence and inaction: in Arendtian terms, their lives cease to be a human life. However, narratives have a singular capacity, according to Arendt, that nothing else possess. On the one hand, they are able

⁷ Gerda Széplaky argues that there is a lesbian attraction between the two women, Anna and Angela. This claim may further strengthen the argument about the domestic as the “natural” human sphere of the circulation of intimacy, and violence.

to show the “who” and not only the “what”: rather than merely presenting “what” one did, literary narratives reveal “who” that particular person was, his or her individual human uniqueness.⁸ As Kosztolányi likewise puts it, giving us insights into the president’s thoughts at Anna’s trial: “He [the president] knew that ... behind every action stood the whole person with his whole life, which a court of law was incapable of examining” (*Anna Édes* 204). Meanwhile literary narratives, according to Arendt, are also able to transfer the hidden, the domestic, the secret, the natural, into the political, into the public sphere of speech and visibility:

For us, appearance—something that is being seen and heard by others as well as by ourselves—constitutes reality. Compared with the reality which comes from being seen and heard, even the greatest forces of intimate life—the passions of the heart, the thoughts of the mind, the delights of the senses—lead an uncertain, shadowy kind of existence unless and until they are transformed, deprivatized and deindividualized, as it were, into a shape to fit them for public appearance. The most current of such transformations occurs in storytelling and generally in artistic transposition of individual experiences. (*The Human Condition* 50)

It is in this sense that novels can play a public, political role, in Arendt’s philosophy. Echoing Freud’s Schellingian definition of the “uncanny,” one may say that in artistic transpositions of individual experiences (whatever these mean) something that should have remained hidden, nevertheless comes to light—to the light of the public and into the political, where it can be seen and heard by others.⁹

⁸ Arendt evokes the example of Socrates: “we know much better and more intimately who he was, because we know his story [from Plato], than we know who Aristotle was, about whose opinions we are so much better informed” (*HC* 186). See also: “The chief characteristic of this specifically human life ... is that it is itself always full of events which ultimately can be told as a story” (*HC* 97).

⁹ On the capacity of literature to advocate for universal human rights, by (re)presenting silenced voices and hitherto unimagined minds, see Hunt.

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FREDERIK VAN DAM

Taking Offence at the World:
The Reception of Georges
Rodenbach's *Bruges-la-Morte* (1892)
in Sándor Márai's *Sirály* (1943)



Since the turn of the century, Sándor Márai's writings seem to have recovered a European audience. The success of German and Italian versions of *A gyertyák csonkig égnek* (*Embers*, originally published in 1942) has been followed by a spate of new translations. As Adam Zagajewski wrote in 2010, "Sándor Márai ist aus dem Pantheon der Weltliteratur nicht mehr wegzudenken (It has become impossible to think about the pantheon of world literature without Sándor Márai)" (220). Definitions of world literature often depend on critics' own location in the world, however; to many outside of Europe, indeed, Márai's resurgence has appeared enigmatic. Writing in the *New York Review of Books*, for instance, J. M. Coetzee confesses himself to be mystified by the "flare-up of interest in Márai in Europe" (Coetzee 108). One cannot help but notice, though, that the "austere fatalism" (Coetzee 99) for which Coetzee faults Márai's work—and which, one might note, is shared by some of Coetzee's own characters, such as David Lurie in *Disgrace* (1999)—presents a possible explanation for its appeal: many of Márai's books express a nostalgia for the accomplishments of a vanishing European culture. These accomplishments were as illusory and fraught in the interwar period as they are now, but their attraction remains potent. An appreciation of this sense of fatalism, and of the resentment or sense of offense by which it is accompanied, may perhaps account for a part of Márai's allure in contemporary Europe. The goal of this article is to come closer to the origins of this fatalism. Building on recent investigations that have situated Márai's work in the context of European literary history (e.g. Kányádi), I aim to probe into some lesser-known literary sources of

Márai's worldview and to explore its aesthetic and political ramifications. While his fatalism cannot be understood without reference to the works of Friedrich Nietzsche and Oswald Spengler, I hope to expand our understanding of this element in his thinking by dwelling on the intersection between Márai's modernist prose and the symbolist and decadent writings of Georges Rodenbach.¹ I would argue that in *Sirály* (*Seagull*, 1943) Márai creatively rewrites Georges Rodenbach's *Bruges-la-Morte* (1892) and that this intertextual relationship sheds some new light on Márai's bourgeois conceptualisation of European culture, just as it was about to be erased.

Sirály opens with a striking passage, as the novel's protagonist, a high-ranking civil servant who remains nameless, closes the fountain pen with which he has written a declaration of war. Given this task, one may assume that he is stationed in the foreign office. He is visited by a Finnish girl, Aino Laine, who has come to ask him for support in her visa application, so that she can work as a teacher. This girl is much more than she appears to be, in a figurative as well as a literal sense: her outer appearance is identical to that of Ilona, a young woman whom the protagonist had loved and who killed herself five years earlier. After overcoming his initial befuddlement, the protagonist invites Aino Laine to the opera and then to his home, where he confronts her with the fact that this is the second time that she—or at least her outer form—appears in his life. But for her, too, the events of the day are a repetition: she recounts how one year earlier she was in Paris, where she enjoyed the company of a man who knew that France was about to declare war. After a gap in the narrative, suggesting an erotic interlude, the narrator reveals to her that Hungary will be at war on the following day, too. A phone call interrupts him: he is informed that the declaration of war will be shelved for the time being. As he prepares coffee, he hears her making a phone call in a language that he does not understand, but which seems Slavic. Eventually, they part ways.

¹ While symbolism and decadence, like all art movements, are notoriously nebulous, they have been often defined as diametrically opposed to modernism (not in the least by modernists themselves), with the former representing the values of a civilisation in decline, and modernism representing a desire to 'make it new,' as Ezra Pound famously put it. This opposition hides the fact that these two movements were "mutually constitutive and thoroughly implicated in each other's aesthetic development and textual politics" (Hext and Murray 2; cf. Mahoney and Sherry).

Márai's novel contains many allusions and references to older works of European literature. Many of these can be traced to the *fin de siècle* and the years before the First World War. Márai's longing for a time when death and grief were unique, for instance, is reinforced by an allusion to a short verse from Rainer Maria Rilke's *Das Stunden-Buch* (*Book of Hours*, 1905): "Man muss seinen eigenen Tod haben (People should have a death of their own)" (Márai 47).² Anton Chekhov's play *Чайка* (*The Seagull*, 1895), as Tünde Szabó has shown, plays a significant role in *Sirály*, a fact that is signalled by the novel's title, the symbolism that surrounds Aino Laine, and a narrative style that shares certain features with Chekhov's later prose. From a more impressionistic point of view, one could detect a similarity between the novel's final scene and the final paragraph of James Joyce's "The Dead" (1914). Reflecting on his wife's grief for an old lover, Joyce's protagonist, Gabriel Conroy, turns to the window, "[h]is soul swoon[ing] slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead" (Joyce 223). Watching Aino Laine disappear into the night, the protagonist of *Sirály* similarly looks out of an open window and sees the snow drift across the night's sky: "As if silence is falling on the sleeping city, the hermetic, soft silence, some unearthly, heavenly silence, thick and white soundlessness (Mintha a csönd hullana az alvó városra, a sűrű, puha csend, valamilyen földöntúli, mennyei csend, vastag és fehér hangtalanság)" (221). In addition to the shared teichoscopy, both stories associate the return of departed lovers with songs. Gabriel Conroy's wife's old lover is briefly revived when at the evening's party one of the guests sings a sorrowful Irish ballad (of Scottish provenance), "The Lass of Aughrim." Likewise, Márai's protagonist is haunted by his lover's repetition of the refrain from an English song by Lord Lyttelton, "Tell me, my Heart, if this be Love?" (Márai 24). Within such a dense network of intertextual allusions to decadence and symbolism, of which these examples are just a sampling, Georges Rodenbach's *Bruges-la-Morte* is a natural fit.

In broad strokes, the plot of *Bruges-la-Morte* follows a pattern that is reminiscent of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice and that anticipates the

² This quotation seems to be a slightly modified adaptation of "O Herr, gib jedem seinem eignen Tod" (Rilke 82).

events in *Sirály*.³ Rodenbach's story revolves around a widower, Hugues Viane, whose wife passed away five years earlier and who has retreated to the melancholy solitude of Bruges. He has transformed his drawing room into a mausoleum, filled with precious souvenirs that are meant to keep the memory of his wife alive: "He felt that Her touch was everywhere in the intact, unchanging furnishings, sofas, divans, armchairs where she had sat and which preserved the shape, so to speak, of her body" (Rodenbach 27). He is particularly attached to a braid of her hair, which he keeps on display under a glass casket on top of the piano. During his long and solitary walks, he finds her face in the waters of the canals and hears her voice in the song of the bells until, one fateful day, he encounters a woman whose face and gait present a complete likeness. Having discovered that she is an actress, Jane Scott, Viane begins to pay court to her in an obsessive way: "Hugues gave himself up to the intoxicating effects of Jane's resemblance to his dead wife, just as in the past he had rejoiced in the resemblance between the town and himself" (Rodenbach 62). He installs her in a pleasant house and tries to make her conform even more his wife's image, an attempt that ends in disillusion when he has her try on one of his wife's dresses. Taking advantage of Viane's infatuation (or increasingly aggravated by his stalking—the novel gives us only Viane's point of view, as a result of which one can only guess how she is feeling), she insists that she join him at his own home for dinner on the day of the Procession of the Holy Blood. Mocking the photographs of his wife and disturbing the various relics in the drawing room, she picks up the braid of hair and wraps it around her neck; infuriated, Viane strangles her.

From the outline above, it will be apparent that the novels' plots correspond: they revolve around protagonists who are in their forties, who have been in mourning for five years, and who are confronted with women who resemble their beloveds. There are also notable differences, which illustrate how Márai expands on Rodenbach's original and how he measures his difference from his symbolist predecessors. Márai ends the novel in a more uncertain way: mystified by their shared fate, the characters

³ Márai does not allude explicitly to the myth of Orpheus and Euridice, but the classical past would become an interest in his post-war works, such as *Béke Ithakában* (*Peace in Ithaca*, 1952) and *Rómában történt valami* (*Something Has Happened in Rome*, 1971).

part ways in peace. Whereas Viane's obsession turns him into a murderer, Márai's protagonist remains calm and detached, even though at one point he does imagine a scenario that is reminiscent of the ending in *Bruges-la-Morte*: "If she has been sent, if she is playing a part, if tomorrow I have to hand her to the security services, if I have to personally take her by her beautiful white, familiar neck to drown out the redundant words..." (199). The motif of the souvenir, too, is modified. Whereas Hugues Viane arranges his life around memories of the vanished past, including many photographs, Márai's protagonist has kept only one photograph; he even refuses a collection of Ilona's letters, thus avoiding the mistake of choosing an unsuitable transitional object, such as the braid in *Bruges-la-Morte*.⁴ To use Freud's terms, Hugues Viane is a melancholic being, who has failed to accept the reality of loss and whose self-reproach leads to aggression, whereas Márai's protagonist is in mourning, insofar as he can consciously perceive what he has lost. One of the most complex points of contact, which refracts the novel's concern with repetition into a maze of mirrors and on which I would like to expand, is the central place that both texts accord to the opera.⁵

In Rodenbach's novella, Viane falls under the spell of the *Doppelgängerin* during a performance of Giacomo Meyerbeer's *Robert le Diable* (*Robert the Devil*, 1831), which was based on a libretto by Eugène Scribe. Viane has followed Jane Scott into the theatre; since he cannot find her in the auditorium, he assumes that she will appear on stage. She is part of the famous

⁴ Not only do photographs play an important role in the narrative *Bruges-la-Morte*, they also do so in the paratext: the novella includes photographs of the city in its pages. The result is a multimedia form that makes the novella, according to some critics, one of the first instances of a phototextual narrative. Most recent criticism of the novel has focused on this formal aspect; see Blatt, Edwards, Henninger, and Rion. Using ideas from Winnicott's work, Roderick Cooke argues that in his attachment to the braid Hugues Viane failed to choose a suitable transitional object.

⁵ If one were to consider only the bare bones of the plot, then Arthur Schnitzler's *Die Nächste* (1899)—which was consciously modelled on *Bruges-la-Morte*—would have been a more likely source of inspiration for Márai, given his own proficiency in German, his translations of Schnitzler's work, and his affinity with Austro-Hungarian literature. It is, of course, not unlikely that Márai's reading of Schnitzler made him turn to Rodenbach. On Márai as a reader of Schnitzler, see Fried ("Márai lecteur de Casanova et/ou Schnitzler"). On Márai's engagement with Austro-Hungarian literature, see Fried ("Márai and the Literature of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy" and "Das Wien-Bild Sándor Márais").

ballet of the nuns: tempting the opera's eponymous hero, the nuns rise from their graves and throw off their shrouds and habits. Viane is not as resolute as the hero on stage, who resists these advances, but is transported into a different realm: "Hugues felt a shock, like a man coming out of a black dream and into an illuminated ballroom where the light flickers in the teetering balance of his vision" (Rodenbach 46). To Viane, the scene stages his desire, i.e., the return of his wife from the grave. This fantasy involves a grave misunderstanding: readers familiar with the opera know that in this scene the nuns are possessed by a demonic force. As the narrative of the novel plays out, the scene from the opera materializes in real life: Jane Scott torments Viane, even as Viane, who is a devout Catholic, remains in thrall to her.

In *Sirály*, too, a visit to the opera forms a lynchpin in the narrative, but the characters are both spectators, and both maintain a more detached attitude. After their encounter at the ministry, the protagonist invites Aino Laine to the opera, which seems to defuse the tension: "Now they are both liberated, like dancers at a masked ball who laugh at each other at the moment of unveiling (Most mindketten, felszabadultan, nevetni kezdenek, ahogy álarcosbálban nevetnek egymásra a táncosok, a leleplezés pillanatában)" (37–38). The image of the ball resonates with the thoughts of Viane, but the experience that the image conveys is vastly different: while for Viane the idea of the ball conveys a moment of terror, for Márai's characters it is a moment of joy. We find a similar example of repetition with a difference in the subject of the operas. Aino Laine and the protagonist are attending a performance of Giuseppe Verdi's *Un ballo in maschera* (*The Masked Ball*, first performed in 1859). On the one hand, Márai's choice for this opera can be understood as a metafictional reflection on the way in which his novel imitates Rodenbach's novella: Verdi's opera was based on *Gustave III, ou Le bal masqué* (1833), which was based on a libretto by Eugène Scribe, who also wrote the libretto for *Robert le diable*. In other words, in imitating Rodenbach, Márai suggests that he is imitating Verdi's imitation of Scribe. Furthermore, Márai's novel duplicates Rodenbach's stratagem of letting the opera echo the action of the novel. *Un ballo in maschera* revolves around secrets and hidden identities, which is a major concern of the novel. Like the page boy Oscar, who knows the king's disguise, the protagonist of *Sirály* is one of the few who knows that war is about to be declared: "Oscar knows, but he does not tell (Oszkár tudja, de

nem mondja)" (100). He, too, will eventually reveal his secret. The action of the opera also returns in one of the novel's subplots. At the centre of the opera there is a love triangle between the king, his trusted adviser, and his adviser's wife; believing the king to have had an affair with his wife, the adviser kills him. *Sirály* duplicates the literary device of the love triangle: in his love for Ilona, the protagonist was vying with one of her professors, who, according to her father, bewitched her and bound her to him, like an infectious disease (Márai 63).⁶

If we move from the level of description to that of interpretation, we might wonder what shades of meaning are added by the reference to Verdi. In this regard, the opera's political subtext is significant. *Un ballo in maschera* originally revolved around the 1792 assassination of King Gustav III of Sweden but was revised multiple times to meet the demands of censors in Naples and Rome, with the action being moved from Stockholm to Boston. These changes must be seen in the context of the Risorgimento, or the struggle for the unification of Italy. The Risorgimento was a watershed moment in nineteenth-century history, prompting many advocates of realist schools of thought to recognize the impact of a liberal approach to European geopolitics.⁷ While the plot of Verdi's opera is melodramatic and concerned with love, it is inseparable from its political context, despite the censors' efforts. In *Sirály*, too, what may seem (and what publishers often market) as a love story is a tale in which espionage and the matter of war occupy an arguably much more important role. The protagonist has been charged with writing a declaration of war, after all, while the Finnish girl seems to be a secret agent.

The characters themselves seem to be receptive to the opera's subtext and to use it as a mirror for the present time. The performance prompts Aino Laine to reflect on the bombing of Helsinki. "Is this what you were thinking about this evening, in the opera? (Erre gondolt ma este, az operában?)" (114),

⁶ On triangular desire in Márai's work, see Bollobás.

⁷ For recent accounts of the impact of the Risorgimento on nineteenth-century geopolitics, see Bayly and Biagini and Isabella. On Verdi's views on the Risorgimento, see Gossett. Some thinkers have argued that the opposition between realist and liberal approaches to international relations remains alive today, as the conflict in Ukraine illustrates (e.g. Mearsheimer).

the protagonist asks her. In an uncanny monologue, she describes how her family's house collapsed as they were hiding in the basement. After three weeks of bombing, and after the third bombing of the day, she has become attuned to the noise and to expect the inevitable. When spiders begin to crawl up the white walls and her old dog, Castor, begins to howl, she knows that the fateful moment has come:

Don't think this noise is very loud. One has heard the hoarse thunder of anti-aircraft guns for half an hour, so close, as if each gun is firing in the basement. And then there will be silence at once. There will be a moment of silence, such a silence ... no, this cannot be said or learned from postcards or the cinema. This silence must be heard, once in a lifetime, when the parental house collapses over one's head. Is this minute terrifying? I don't know ... Not really. It is quite different from anything that one has ever imagined or known. It's like birth or death, something that only happens once in a person's life ... Do you understand? (107)⁸

In this passage, Márai gives a subtle and insightful description of the kind of trauma instilled by the experience of bombing. As Paul Saint-Amour has recently shown, the practice of bombing that escalated during the First World War occasioned a transformation in the experience of time. In traditional accounts, such as Freud's *Studies in Hysteria* (1895) and *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) trauma was associated with belatedness: traumatic symptoms were thought to emerge from the reactivation of latent experiences of unprecedented violence (Bond and Craps 24–27). Saint-Amour argues, however, that the interwar period witnessed the emergence of traumatic experiences that were not retrospective but proleptic. The return

⁸ “Ne higgye, hogy nagyon hangos ez a zörej. Az ember már fél órája hallja a lég-elhárító ágyúk rekedt kiabálását, oly közléről, mintha minden egyes ágyú ott ropogna a pincében. S aztán egyszerre csend lesz. Egy pillanatra csend lesz, olyan csend... nem, ezt nem lehet elmondani, sem megismerni a képeslapokból vagy a moziból. Ezt a csendet hallani kell, egyszer az életben, mikor az ember feje fölött összedül [sic] a szülői ház. Félelmes ez a perc? Nem tudom... Nem is félelmes. Egészen más, mint minden, amit az ember valaha képzelt vagy megismert. Olyan, mint a születés lehet vagy a halál, valami, ami csak egyszer van az ember életében... érti?”

of shellshocked soldiers to their home countries, reports about the practice of bombing in the colonial peripheries, and the practice of air-raid alerts turned “cities and towns into spaces of rending anticipation”: “in the immediate wake of the First World War, the dread of another massive conflict saturated the Anglo-European imagination, amounting to a proleptic mass traumatization, a pre-traumatic stress syndrome whose symptoms arose in response to a potentially oncoming rather than an already realized catastrophe” (Saint-Amour 7–8). Aino Laine’s description highlights this double-barrelled dynamic: on the one hand, the experience of bombing is described as a routine, an event to which one gets adjusted, while on the other hand she points out that the destruction of one’s house is a singular and incommensurable event, like birth or death. As such, she is giving the protagonist an inkling of what—so he knows—is to come. Budapest is to become a dead city, like Helsinki (and, as the allusions to Rodenbach’s work in the background suggest, like Bruges):

Soon people will be hoarding, eagerly and frantically, old gold and silk stockings—but they will also collect experiences, in a hurry and between two bombings they will devote themselves to stockpile the convulsive excitement that they religiously believe to correspond with experience and love. (71)⁹

Márai’s articulation of this weird sense of anticipation ties in with the novel’s more general concern with time and temporality. In *Sirály*, the present is marked and interrupted by the losses of the past. Figures of the past commingle in the world of the living, just as Márai’s book is haunted by Rodenbach’s: Jane Scott returns as Ilona, Ilona returns as Aino Laine. In trying to understand what is happening and to communicate his astonishment, the protagonist begins by asking her if she has ever been in his rooms before:

⁹ “Most gyűjtenek majd mindent, mohón és eszeveszetten, a tört aranyat és a selyemharisnyákat –, de gyűjtik az élményeket is, sietve, két bombatámadás között iparkodnak tárolni azt a nyavalyatörős izgalmat, melyről szentül hiszik, hogy egyértelmű az élménnyel és a szerelemmel.”

So they listen for a while.

And it was as if the room around them for a moment disappears. It is as if they are listening in the depths of a forest or in the depths of the sea. It is as if the greenish twilight is one of the old, familiar spaces of life, water or memory, a memory that is older than they, who, with slithery fins, float helplessly in this green haze. Indeed, haven't the two of them been together, in that fearful and indifferent coincidence that is life, the whole of appearances and coincidences? Now the room is big and deep like the past. (119–20)¹⁰

This passage presents an exquisite variation on the way in which Márai often formulates “a moral, psychological, social, in one word, human truth, which is confirmed and generalised by the sensuality of a natural (body, seasons, weather etc.) phenomenon or observation” (Varga 29). In the space of one single paragraph, the perspective moves between the fate of two individual humans in a room and the deep time of evolution, as represented by the depth of a forest or the depth of the sea. In short, in *Sirály* events are marked by prefiguring and fulfilment more than by clock time. Márai was not the only interwar writer to advance such a view on temporality. By portraying the present as a surface in which underlying temporalities break through, Márai is joining a chorus of thinkers (including Heidegger, Bergson, Husserl, Lukács, and Simmel) who sought to rehabilitate the notion of lived, immediate experience, and thus qualified “the perception that modern society, constituted by a combination of capitalism and technology, was increasingly being directed by quantitative and objective forms of measurement and the regime of calendar and clock time” (Harootunian 479).

This notion of the present as weighted with sediments has political implications. As Benedict Anderson has argued, building on Walter Benjamin's

¹⁰ “Így hallgatnak egy ideig. / S mintha eltűnne körülöttük a szoba egy pillanatra. Mintha egy erdő mélyén vagy a tenger mélységeiben hallgatnának. Mintha a zöldes félhomály az élet egyik régi, ismerős térfogata lenne, víz vagy emlékezés... s emlékek, melyek régiebbek, mint ők, olajos-súlyos uszonyokkal, nesztelenül úsznak ebben a zöld homályban. Csakugyan, együtt voltak már ők, ketten, abban a félelmes és közömbös véletlenben, ami az élet, a tünemények és esélyek összefüggései? Most nagy és mély a szoba, mint a múlt.”

ideas, the modern, capitalistic notion of time as “homogenous” and “empty” was fundamental to the emergence of the idea of a nation: the nation is an imagined community in which events at different places are connected only because they happen to take place at the same time (Anderson 26). The modern novel was an important catalyst in the articulation of imagined communities. In Anderson's view, it is a technology for “re-presenting” the *kind* of imagined community that is the nation” (25); through its forms and structures of address, “fiction seeps quietly and continuously into reality, creating that remarkable confidence of community in anonymity which is the hallmark of modern nations” (36). Nationalism is, of course, an important concern in *Sirály*: as a civil servant, the protagonist has been accustomed to the structure of feeling that nation represents. The encounter with Aino Laine, however, prompts him to adopt a wider, cosmopolitan point of view. He dwells on the affinity between the Finnish and the Hungarians as speakers of Uralic languages that do not belong to Indo-European languages; he is particularly intrigued by the fact that Aino Laine's name can be translated as “Egyetlen Hullám” (“Single Wave”). In other words, he imagines themselves as being part of a larger ethnic group that, importantly, does not coincide with the nation. At the same time, he also frequently adopts a European perspective:

The European man was living a life of discontent: with discontent he travelled and walked, listened to music, read books, loved and divorced, within his own European fate, as if he was insulted. Was it not the discontent of the civilised man who sees the barbarians with raised axes throng together in front of the artfully decorated gates? (73–74)¹¹

Here, too, the reader is made to share a vision of a community that transcends the boundaries of the nation–state. This vision is remarkably negative: the common ground that its members share is a form of resentment.

¹¹ “Az európai ember sértődötten élt, utazott, járkált, hallgatott zenét, olvasott könyveket, szeretkezett és szakított kedveseivel a maga európai végzetén belül – mintha megsértették volna. A művelt ember sértődöttsége volt ez, aki gyanítja, hogy a bárók felemelt buzogánnyal ott állanak már a nemesmívű kapuk előtt?”

As the previous paragraphs have suggested, this sense of offence at the state of the world intersects with the condition of proleptic mass traumatization in the era of world wars, as well as with the impossibility of agency in the timeless age of capitalism. One may fault the protagonist here for thinking from a Eurocentric point of view, as the reference to the barbarians suggests, were it not that in the course of the paragraph his perspective shifts to that of the barbarians: “But they, the others, the ‘barbarians’ in front of the gates, were they not offended as well? (De ők, a többiek, a ‘barbárok’ a kapuk előtt, nem voltak-e sértődöttek ők is?)” (74). This note of sympathy for the colonial other suggests that the condition of proleptic mass traumatization and lack of agency is also tangible in parts of the globe that are, literally and figuratively, in different time zones. Towards the end of the novel, for instance, the protagonist poignantly reflects on the way in which ‘European’ resentment is inescapable:

Can anything in life be foreseen, and calculated—not just in your precious life, of course, but in the lives of the two billion people who populate the earth? In the jungle, bombs fall on the heads of unsuspecting natives among the breadfruit, in lands where white men have never visited one day an African or Asian bush begins to burn unexpectedly because a phosphorus grenade has fallen from a stray plane into the deep ... (194)¹²

In its content as well as its style, this passage articulates a form of cosmopolitanism. The protagonist manages to distance himself from his own main cultural affiliations and critically reflects on the precarity of local conditions in the face of globalizing forces. He does so in a passage of free indirect speech, which exemplifies the tone of restless self-reflection that characterizes the book.

¹² “Van-e még számítás, valószínűség az életben – természetesen nemcsak a te becses életedben, hanem két milliárd ember életében, akik benépesítik a földet? A dzsungelben a kenyérfák között esik gyanútlan bennszülöttek fejére a bomba, tájakon, ahol fehér ember nem járt soha, egy nap váratlanul égni kezd az afrikai vagy ázsiai bozót, mert egy foszforos palack pottyant egy kószáló gépről a mélybe.”

This adoption of a cosmopolitan ethos jars with the references to a novel that, in its detailed depictions of a Flemish mediaeval town, is distinctly regional: by translating Rodenbach's story to the capital of Hungary on the eve of a new world war, Márai is transforming a provincial past into the global present.¹³ This contrast in space and time informs the contrast in the kinds of subjectivity that the stories portray. *Bruges-la-Morte* confines itself to the plane of individual consciousness. It is a study of one man's melancholy obsession with Eros and Thanatos; walking in a borderland, Hugues Viane is torn between a 'decadent' desire to see traces of the dead in the physical world of the present and a 'symbolist' faith that there is an otherworldly, spiritual realm from which we are exiled (Stone and Troyanos). The protagonist of *Sirály*, in contrast, is not melancholic but nostalgic: he conforms to Svetlana Boym's analysis of the nostalgic as one concerned with "the relationship between individual biography and the biography of groups or nations, between personal and collective memory" (Boym xvi). Such a diagnosis may clarify his fatalism. Márai's protagonist believes that violence can be held at bay, but only for a limited amount of time:

I want to do everything to keep my country free from the powers that in that memorable night destroyed the beautiful house in Helsinki where you were a child. This is my task. Every day and every week that we can postpone this fate is a great gift, and without regard to the art of phrasing, which is my profession, or precisely by using it, do I want to fulfil that other duty of mine, so that the houses where people live whose fate is bound to mine, may remain in place, together with everything that their walls hide. (187)¹⁴

While the tone of this passage is pessimistic, the protagonist does take responsibility: despite his misgivings about the homogenizing impact of

¹³ For recent revaluations of modernist cosmopolitanism and modernism in a global context, see Bru et al., Berman, Lyon, Kalliney, and Walkowitz.

¹⁴ "S mindent el akarok követni, hogy távol tartsam hazámtól az erőket, melyek lerombolták az emlékezetes éjszakán a szép házat, Helsinkiben, ahol gyerek voltál. Ez a dolgom. Minden nap, minden hét, amellyel odázni tudjuk ezt a sorsot, nagy ajándék, s a fogalmazáson túl, ami mesterségem vagy annak segítségével, teljesíteni akarom ezt a másik kötelességemet: hogy a házak, ahol emberek laknak, akiknek sorsa közös az enyémmel, megmaradjanak helyükön, mindennel, amit a falak rejtegetnek."

the forces of modernity, he cares enough about the world as it is to ward off the fate that awaits it. As such, his nostalgia is not what Boym would call restorative: he does not argue that we must rebuild the lost homeland of the nation by reviving (or inventing) its vanishing traditions. Instead, his nostalgia is reflective: as the various passages that I have cited illustrate, he is not so much concerned with the truth of his lover's reappearance but uses it as an occasion to linger "on ruins, the patina of time and history, in the dreams of another place and another time" (Boym 41). In combination with the cosmopolitan stance that the novel adopts, the nostalgic ethos with which it is suffused adds some colour to the 'austere fatalism' that Márai expresses in his non-fiction writings.¹⁵ For the protagonist, the prospect of total destruction is not frightening: he ponders that "it is almost reassuring (s ez csaknem megnyugtató)" (74). Instead of looking to the future, the protagonist looks sideways: he aims to find a common ground in the fact that we all partake in the search for a sense of continuity in a fragmented world. Such a view of the condition of Europe may not provide a roadmap to a new future, but it has the benefit of being clear-sighted. At the moment of writing, in March 2022, the cities of Kyiv and Kharkiv are subjected to indiscriminate bombing, thus being made to share in the same fate as Aleppo and Palmyra in the previous decade, or Budapest and Helsinki eighty years ago. One can see why, in the face of such wanton devastation, a voice that cautions us against the illusion of progress exerts a certain appeal; at the very least, it prepares us for the catastrophe that is to come.

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¹⁵ The distinction between fiction and non-fiction in Márai's work is a complex one (cf. Mekis).

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TIBOR KOSZTOLÁNCZY

“Wake up”: Ethical Dilemmas in the World of Iván Mándy



1 Crisis

In Iván Mándy's short story “Dinnyevők” (“The Watermelon Eaters”), mother, daughter, and son—members of a rather well-to-do family—are sitting in a restaurant booth. A blind man begins to beg, and the waiter tries to remove him somewhat forcibly. To hit a blind man?!—A general uproar breaks out, the act astounding even to the reader. It is revealed, however, that it only seemed as if the waiter had hit the blind man. It was mere provocation on the part of the beggar, a pre-arranged action, as new and new beggars arrive to “siege” the restaurant. They get into fights with the waiters, vandalize the furniture, and take anything that is moveable. When we, as readers, in our minds call for the help of the police, we are already on the side of the waiters. And we have always been on their side, haven't we?

The protagonist of another short story entitled “Nagyvilági Főcső” [“Hotshot of the World”] is a newly matriculated young boy. Nagyvilági Főcső—whose name is probably quite a challenge to translate into any other language—behaves provocatively at home, on the streets, on the bus, and in the café: he picks fights with passers-by, and even causes minor injuries. But where are the police?, asks the reader. Főcső boasts and tells all kinds of lies to his friend. And then, a moustached man comes forward, who has been following the two friends for some time. He does not show a licence, but begins to question Főcső, and will not let him go. Főcső starts to cry—he is now broken—and is thrown into a police car. In jail, he is seated on a chair, held down by two men and has his head shaved: “As if he was scalped!” (307). But still! How could the authorities behave in such

a manner?—Főcső said that he “only wanted to have a good evening...” (Mándy, “Nagyvilági Főcső” 308).

Suddenly, we are unable to decide what to think of the outcome of the two short stories. The writer obviously builds on the conventional topos that people are not always who they seem to be. But in stories—in both movies and literature—that follow this pattern, the wrongdoer is traditionally caught, the good gains its reward, and the reader can acknowledge these developments with a sense of moral satisfaction. Mándy, however, offers a more complex scheme of things, and thus uncertainty remains with the reader for some time to come.

If we try to uncover how Mándy performs this “stunt”, in both cases it is striking that after a long preparation, the events follow each other very quickly, the elements that destabilize the readers’ moral standpoint are introduced suddenly, confusing their usual schemes of interpretation—just as in a magic trick. However, these stories are not based on illusions or visions; a palpable violence breaks into the lives of the protagonists. A further excellent example of this is the short story entitled “Lélegzetvétel nélkül” [“Without Breath”]. We are in 1944, and Soviet troops have almost encircled Budapest. Son and father meet again, and the boy pours out all his old grievances on his father. Gyárfás, the father, cannot deny that he is a foul man. He has long ruined the boy’s mother: he took her money, sold her belongings, and “pushed her” out onto the streets. He did not even attend her funeral. The father also seduced the boy’s girlfriend. He cheated and lied—and this is only the surface. He talks about his old sins cynically and liberally, and teaches his son to cheat and pretend. The boy is almost suffocated by his father’s sins. Then, by the end of the short story, it all suddenly comes together: the father is arranging shelter for the persecuted, relays messages, and, by jeopardizing his own life, saves his son from being drafted by the Hungarian Arrow Cross Party.

The moral uncertainty in these short stories obviously cannot be separated from the fact that, considering the stories’ social background, the relationship of law and order itself becomes problematic. This is paralleled by the turmoil of the inner world of the protagonists, all of them young twenty-something men (or rather, boys). In the milieu of “The Watermelon Eaters,” order is disintegrated suddenly: the insufficient public security

following the Second World War unexpectedly turns into anarchy, or rather, a minor “revolution” occurs, the main aim of which is robbery. But Károly, the boy, is not only confused by the attack of the beggars. In the framework of an unfolding family drama, he has just been confronted with the fact that his mother had probably married his father for the sake of her own self-interest, and now the mother wants to persuade her daughter, Károly’s sister, to follow her on this path.

Nagyvilági Főcső pursues rebellious behaviour in the mid-1950s. He is frustrated, because he was not admitted to university, and his father wants him to get accustomed to physical work. However, Főcső was excluded from higher education because of his social standing, and he and his friend perceive daily that the laws in force in this respect (also) contradict basic ethical norms. On the other hand, Főcső, even if he has committed an offense (which is probable), cannot expect a fair trial.

2 *Learning*

If we now turn to the older protagonists in the above-mentioned short stories, we can see that they are all confident and know what they want. Their occasional indecision is only apparent. The waiter already knew how the group of beggars operated. He knows that they do not want “moral compensation,” and by referring to this, they only want to obtain a situational advantage. For them, words have only tactical value—they want to act, that is, they want to pillage.¹ They unscrupulously exploit those young people, who would still believe in social justice. The beggars, in fact, corrupt the ethos of solidarity, and thus worsen their chances of reintegration into society.

The moustached detective is also an heir to old and ethically questionable police traditions. His aim is not to prevent crime, but to produce a criminal. Though he intervenes at the right moment, his intentions are still unrecognizable, and he makes his opponent feel insecure from within. The

¹ Mándy shared his thoughts on social revolution quite early, since “Dinnyevőök” was first published in the periodical *Kortárs* in November 1947.

detective compliments Főcső's pants, especially their style, as well as the boy's haircut. He mixes irony and ridicule in his remarks. Later, his gestures reveal that he wants to savour his desire to rule over another person: he expressly enjoys that he is able to shatter and break young people. His ultimate goal is intimidation.

Most interesting, however, is the father's personality. He takes his own moral contradictions for granted: he is simultaneously a petty swindler and a hero, who not only saves the life of his own child, but those of others who are also persecuted. Ferenc Sántha's novel, *Az ötödik pecsét* (*The Fifth Seal*), shows us a similarly strong, but in its realization a somewhat didactic, moral conflict, when, at a certain point, Gyurica undertakes foul behaviour—the price of his returning home to the children in hiding. The foulness and heroism of Gyárfás appear in mutual presupposition: he is capable of heroic deeds because, in a given situation, he is able to successfully apply only purposeful, but in themselves dishonest, techniques. His son watches as he is taken by the men of the Arrow Cross Party, but with lies and deceit, he gets himself out of the tight situation. The same tactics, however, were used previously to exploit and push his loved ones into misery. Nothing in the short story indicates that Gyárfás's basic nature has changed over time.

Károly, Főcső, and the son of Gyárfás are all ahead of a long learning process. They have to understand that contrary to the "great" ideas whirling in their minds, everything is moved by obscure intentions, as well as by diverging individual and group interests. The rules are mostly primitive, and, similarly to barter transactions, it is not guaranteed that these are even kept. They also must learn that every explanation is simply a presupposition—and that all these together are uncertain. "Wake up", says Gyárfás to his son, right before they leave the boy's hiding place (Mándy, "Lélegzetvétel nélkül" 574). Zsámboky, the protagonist of the short story "Tépett füzetlapok" ["Torn Booklets"], also receives an important lesson. We are deep in the 1950s, and a young teacher, who has previously lived in a safe environment, is suddenly faced with an unknown world. In the boarding school, where he is about to take a job, there are no teachers, and nobody cares about education. The structure transforms the director, the instructors, and the old and new residents; everybody is humiliated and broken by a world built on sheer interests. Here, everything has a price,

and everything that has value can be exchanged for power over another person. Zsámboky’s “mentor”, his older acquaintance, Gráf Micu, has already been involved in embezzlement at the university, was taken to prison, and later busted for an illegal border violation. Zsámboky flees at the end of his first day: “I leave the house and start running down. I will never return here. I do not want to remember this place” (Mándy, “Tépett füzetlapok” 270). But does he have any financial reserves? Can he endure indignity?

3 Aggression

In connection with Iván Mándy’s prose, it has often been said that it depicts static life situations and hopeless human destinies (Béládi 53–56; Hajdu Ráfis 101; Kajetán 17; Konrád 468–72; Molnár Gál 6). However, it is also clear from the above-mentioned short stories that several works found in his oeuvre carry a dramatic tension within them, and these tensions often culminate in sharp and violent clashes.

Undoubtedly, Károly, Nagyvilági Főcső, and the son of Gyárfás had encountered aggression earlier in their lives, but these young people from the middle class have only recently become aware of the *dreariness* of aggression. Gyárfás’s son was almost paralyzed as he began to look at the world through his father’s eyes. Főcső was silenced after the humiliation he suffered at the policemen’s hands. In the closing scene of the short story, he spends the afternoon with his parents and their acquaintances, and the parents tell a lie, saying that the boy’s hair had to be cut off because of a workplace accident. As Főcső remains silent, we have no way to know whether he was broken by the events or whether he has become more radical in spirit as a result.

Károly was also mesmerized by the close-up experience of violence, but he is able to get over the events with some humour. It is not known whether this stems from his infantilism, whether he finds their flight from the restaurant entertaining, or whether it is already a “masculine” reaction in opposition to his mother’s horror. The mother already knows that anything can happen in such tense situations, and she instinctively gets her children out of the place where men are fighting. Still, Károly is not a child any more. We can assume that the chaos in the restaurant, after the first shock

and paralysis, starts to act as an emotional catalyst, and forces Károly to learn new patterns of behaviour. (Only one word indicates in the short story that Károly's father has died, and he is being raised solely by his mother.) All in all, in these unexpected situations, the previously hidden, and not necessarily positive characteristics of these young people are also revealed. These changes have little impact on the current affairs of the world, but the protagonists of these stories are far from being the same as they were at the outset.

Many of Mándy's short stories testify that aggression is an "ordinary" and accepted means of resolving conflicts in the world of the lower strata of society, the so-called 'lumpenproletariat', and even among the "hawkers and vendors." "We need a tough man here, as there is a lot of fighting," says the owner of the pub in Mándy's short story "Vendégek a Palackban" ["Guests in the Palack"] (77). In the pub, instead of the authorities, it is a bartender named Zoli who keeps order. The main conflict within the story is that Zoli falls in love with the lover of a merchant, Dsidás, who returns to the city around the same time. Neither Zoli nor Dsidás sees any other means of resolving their conflict than fighting. Their clash is motivated by emotions, but their fight is not motivated by emotional aggression; rather, they merely consider it a tool in an otherwise unsolvable conflict. Though Mándy probably has not read analyses of human behaviour, his presentation nevertheless captures the differences between emotional and instrumental aggression perfectly (Ranschburg 128; Tóth I. 207–18). Zoli does not spare the unruly in the pub, and when fighting Dsidás, the two men also cause serious injuries to each other. Although their violent behaviour is against the law, they maintain their moral integrity. Zoli appears in a social role "accepted" by the micro-community of the pub (A. H. Buss's theory is referred by Ranschburg 126–27); on the other hand, the norm he accepts with Dsidás is as valid as the law, and probably even stricter. These people live in such environments and choose certain means to cope within them.

Zoli and Dsidás keep the scope of their aggression under control. Guszti, the barman says to Zoli about Dsidás: "Don't be afraid, he won't stab you with a pocket-knife" (Mándy, "Vendégek a Palackban" 86). The self-limitation shown by Zoli and Dsidás signals a certain level of maturity (even if

it sounds ironic in a situation where adults beat each other until one loses consciousness). In contrast, we can mention the figures from another short story entitled “Egyérintő” [“Ball Game”]: a few obscure instructions and some money as a promise are sufficient for Kis Opra and Nagy Opra to kill a competing receiver of stolen goods. The Opras are barely aware of what they have done, they cannot even be called humans, still their instigator has a nickname with a meaning: Rat.

Mándy illuminates the dangers of individual aggression without being didactic. A small quarrel can turn into a human tragedy within moments. In Mándy’s world, people in altered states of consciousness are often caught up in the whirlwind of aggression—they cross the boundaries that would be respected under normal circumstances. In the short story “Fagylaltosok” [“Icecream Vendors”], we see how emotional aggression spreads over a group of otherwise friendly and harmless people. One morning, some drunken “tough guys” at the Ludovika Garden decide to have some fun, and seize all the stock belonging to Blum, an ice cream vendor. Blum is even humiliated because he did not obey immediately. Blum gathers his friends to take revenge, but he is no longer an ice cream vendor; in his mind, he has transformed into Teddy Bill, a western film hero. Reaching Ludovika Garden again, Blum calms down, but his friend, Epfele, provokes a fight with the “tough guys.” From now on, Blum has to fight for his own life like “a scared animal,” and his behaviour reveals different elements of defensive aggression (see Hárđi 44–45). Then tragedy happens, but not in the way we expect. Blum is an inexperienced fighter, an *outsider*. Not only does he want to defeat his opponent, Müller, but he also wants to change him. Blum is overwhelmed by his emotions; he overcomes Müller and falls into a trance-like state—and, though not intentionally, he kills his opponent.

*

For me, the most exciting are the short stories, in which the adult “heroes” resort to aggression with premeditated intent but manage to keep their plans secret. Many of them rely on their intellect, others set a trap for their opponents.

A case when a violent outcome is simply not prevented can also be discussed in relation to these. In the short story “Szoba a harmadikon” [“The Room on the Third Floor”] a workplace conflict gets out of hand. A store manager embezzles money, and Pártos, an auditor, is ordered to investigate the matter in an expert manner. But when the embezzler threatens him, he remains defenceless. Nevertheless, the circumstances offer Pártos the possibility of a perfect crime. During the night, the embezzler breaks into the empty building, where Pártos has a small room on the third floor. Pártos does not even have to do anything, just let things happen. The house is under construction, and Pártos watches silently as the embezzler climbs up the half-finished staircase. The reader is cheering for Pártos. We are excited for the embezzler to die (!) in an accident—and he does indeed fall off the staircase, and Pártos escapes. The auditor’s behaviour would be considered sinful in a world where the interests of the community and the individual are in harmony; here, however, the norms of the community have become corrupted, serving individual interests. If we were to prosecute the auditor for failing to provide help, how would we decide as a member of an imaginary jury?

From a moral point of view, an even more acute situation unfolds in the short story entitled “A besúgó” [“The Informant”], where circumstances also “offer” a solution. After the German occupation, an informant living in a house in Budapest begins to report on the neighbours at random, without distinction. Some men from the house make a tacit pact to kill the informant, who is an older woman. She is murdered during an air raid, amid chaotic circumstances in the basement. We are aghast but feel that for the habitants, there was no other solution. Though a bit far-fetched, we can link this outcome to Zsámboky’s story: Zsámboky, after seeing many horrors, indeed flees the boarding school, but he returns later because he has to support his elderly mother: he thus assumes a participative role in the machinery of violence.

If we now consider the readers’ emotional responses, it seems that we tend to excuse the perpetrators, if violence ensures the survival of the individual, the family, or any other smaller community. It is an important factor that defensive aggression remain separate from any other types of crime. Mándy advocates for the primacy of the instinct of survival. This, from the loser’s point of view, is also confirmed by the short story entitled

“A fűtő” (“The Heater”). The protagonist, an intellectual who has come down in life, tries to find shelter after the war in a school’s boiler room, citing official papers that his stay there is legitimate. However, the school’s principal attempts to remove him. Therefore, the man in the boiler room tries to find allies in the students, who prove to be unreliable supporters. He only has strength for an infantile form of resistance. His life becomes unmanageable, and by turning his aggression against his own person, he hangs himself.

In Mándy’s oeuvre, every micro-environment—be it a school, a house, or a restaurant—is the model of a bigger complex. In turbulent times, his adult heroes can only rely on themselves, or perhaps some very close allies. Their own moral convictions often conflict with social norms and laws. They are stubborn, and only accept the inner voice of morality as their guide.

4 Instead of peace-making

In the period following turbulent times, we would expect Mándy to depict the youth of the 1960s as a generation “at peace.” But we find quite the opposite. The Vera stories, contained in the collection *Mi van Verával?* [*What’s up with Vera*] testify that aggression has become an infeasible part of everyday life. Teenagers show no emotions towards their parents, look down on them, and consider it “funny” to make jokes about them. Lovers are not attached to each other, and will often break up with a strange gesture and without any explanation. They are aggressive towards their peers, and will beat or have the weaker ones beaten simply out of a wish to show off or out of boredom; their days are characterised by fear and uncertainty.

The motto of *Mi van Verával?* is as follows: “You say I look at them with the envy of an aging man?” (Mándy, *Mi van Verával?* 2). After having read the book, I do not think any reader would say yes to this question. Nevertheless, Mándy does not moralise. His puzzles have more than one solution.²

² I would like to express my special thanks to Janka Kovács for her help in the translation.

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SZILÁRD TÁTRAI

Suspicious Minds: A Social Cognitive Approach to Géza Ottlik's *School at the Frontier*



This study adopts the perspective of functional cognitive pragmatics. Its central question is how our attention is directed in the course of construing the social world of *Iskola a határon* (*School at the Frontier*), Géza Ottlik's novel from 1959. Analysing the reader's orientation in the story's social world, this article does not simply explore implications of the fact that two participants constantly determine the focus of attention. Rather, what becomes significant is that these participants' position regularly functions as a centre for orientation in the story's social world. More specifically, this article aims to show that these two characters' vantage points play a key role in the construal of social relations, and give rise to various conflicting patterns (which thus relativize each other) for construing the relationship between individual and community, power and solidarity, involvement and distancing. Moreover, these conflicting patterns are associated with different social strategies which also relativize each other.

To illustrate the above, this article presents a case study showing that the novel depicts the temptation to *School at the Frontier*. In the case of Bébé, however, the role of the tempter is not played by Tibor Tóth (who succeeds in getting Merényi and his gang expelled), but by Gereben Énok, a close member of the Merényi circle. For a detailed presentation of Gereben's role in the novel, this article also draws on the analysis of *Továbbélők* [*Those Living Onwards*], an earlier version of *School at the Frontier*, in which Gereben—unlike in *School at the Frontier*—is not among the students expelled.

1 The perspectivity of social cognition

A key insight of functional cognitive linguistics is that by employing linguistic symbols, humans always provide mental access to objects and relations in the world from a certain vantage point. In fact, we can say that the specificity of linguistic symbols lies in their perspectivity. In particular, linguistic symbols allow objects and relations in the world to be construed (mentally processed) in highly flexible, elaborate ways, from a variety of perspectives, tailored to the communicative needs of discourse participants (Langacker 55–89; Verhagen, “Construal”; Verhagen, “Introduction”; Sinha).

Construal, in turn, crucially presupposes the social cognitive capacity for joint attention (Tomasello; Croft). Discourses can be interpreted as scenes of joint attention, whose participants share their experiences of the world by directing their attention to various referential scenes. The speaker prompts for the joint observation and comprehension of referential scenes by using linguistic symbols, getting her/his discourse partner to attend to, and interpret, a given referential scene in one way rather than another (Tomasello 161–200).

From this it follows that the joint observation and interpretation of referential scenes is fundamentally shaped by how the speaker implements her/his own context-dependent vantage point, in other words how s/he is directing her/his partner’s attention, exploiting the opportunities inherent in the perspectivity of linguistic symbols (Sanders and Spooren; Verhagen, “Introduction”). The way in which the speaker’s perspective builds up can be described by a combination of three context-dependent vantage points: (i) the speaker’s spatiotemporal position, situated in the physical world of context, in which participants interpret each other as physical entities; (ii) the speaker’s socio-cultural situatedness within the social world of context, in which participants interpret each other as social beings; and (iii) the speaker’s stance of consciousness in the mental world of context, in which participants interpret each other as mental agents (Tátrai, “On the perspectival nature” 110–14). These vantage points work in parallel and jointly support the intersubjective construal of a referential scene.

This article focuses on a particular narrative discourse for studying the way in which these context-dependent vantage points unfold, with special

regard to the speaker's socio-cultural situatedness. The aim is to demonstrate what cognitive pragmatics can offer to the study of narrative understanding using Géza Ottlik's novel *School at the Frontier* as an example. In this context, my primary goal is to highlight a few aspects of how the story's social world is construed in the novel, and what implications derive from them.

2 Attention directing in narratives

The understanding of narrative discourses demands a specific kind of interpretative attitude from the addressee because the latter needs to construe a referential scene on the basis of linguistic symbols which collectively designate a story; that is to say, a world in which (according to the general schema) certain agents perform certain actions under particular spatial and temporal circumstances in order to achieve certain social goals (Brown 15–18). Therefore, narrative understanding is successful when it becomes possible for the addressee to track characters in space and time while also finding temporal and causal links between their social actions.

As mentioned before, the way in which linguistic symbols are referentially interpreted (in other words, epistemically grounded) is strongly bound up with orientational possibilities within the discourse universe, as shaped by the functioning of context-dependent vantage points. Consequently, the understanding of referential scenes (adding up to stories) in narrative discourses is fundamentally affected by which discourse participant directs the processing of narrated events, and how s/he does so; in other words, from where and how the following aspects of the story are construed: (i) the conceptually processed physical world of the story's characters, along with its spatiotemporal relations, (ii) the characters' social world, comprising socio-cultural relations, and (iii) the characters' mental world, involving mental states (intentions, desires, beliefs, emotions) (Tátrai, "Context-dependent vantage" 12–16). All this means that the production and understanding of narratives crucially require both the construal of these narratives' physical and social worlds, in which the characters' actions and the events involving them unfold, and the narratives' mental worlds, in which mental processes in the participants' active consciousness are played out (Bruner 11–22).

3 The reconfiguration of schemas of fictional narrative discourses in the novel

The literary character of a narrative may influence construal meaning fundamentally and in a variety of ways. Here, however, I primarily focus on the fictional nature of Géza Ottlik's *School at the Frontier*, only tangentially addressing the poetic potential that comes with this. The novel is a literary narrative in which the story's events are narrated by a single person, Benedek Both, who acts as a fictional narrator and is basically in charge of directing attention throughout the novel. Hence, in terms of the directing of attention, the novel can be interpreted as a single, albeit highly complex narrative utterance, which also involves several embedded utterances (Tátrai, "Pragmatika" 981–1006; Bakhtin). As a consequence, the physical, social and mental worlds of the story are construed from the referential centre for orientation which is marked by the spatiotemporal position, socio-cultural situatedness and stance of consciousness of the storyteller in the fictional scene of joint attention. Any partial or complete shifting of this centre for orientation can only be interpreted with respect to this vantage point.

In Benedek Both's fictional narrative discourse, the functioning of context-dependent vantage points is fundamentally affected by the deictic relation that holds (in the context of fiction) between the story's world and the world of storytelling (see Tátrai, "Az Iskola a határon perspektivikussága"). The basis of this deictic relation is the contiguity that can be presumed between the physical worlds of the referential scene (i.e. the story) and the scene of joint attention (the storytelling) in terms of spatial and temporal relations (Tátrai, "Context-dependent vantage" 17–18). To put it simply: it can be presumed that the narrated events unfold in the same world as that in which the storyteller and his addressee/s are living and engaging in a narrative discourse.

This relation is made even stronger and more evident by the fact that Benedek Both, the fictional storyteller of the novel, is narrating a story in which he himself also appears. At the same time, the spatiotemporal contiguity mentioned above is not without relevance for the construal of the story's mental world either. Specifically, the reader needs to take into account the restricted cognitive horizon of the storyteller, who must

recall the events rather than imagining them, or making them up. As a result, the storyteller can only rely on what he himself experienced or what he has inferred from these experiences, and what he learnt from others or inferred from such second-hand information.

However, the status of the novel's fictional storyteller is also fundamentally determined by the inclusion of another hand's manuscript, which can be considered as a reinterpretation of traditional fiction-writing. On the one hand, the "novel in the novel" device allows for the participation of two storytellers. On the other, it allows the secondary storyteller Medve's text to be subordinated to the interpretative activity of the primary storyteller, Bébé. And Bébé, for his part, interprets (or more precisely, uses) the authorial narrative about M (that is Medve) as an autobiography, which is a considerably one-sided and arbitrary interpretation. In particular, as the novel progresses, the narrative strategy of the primary storyteller undergoes significant changes: first he only adds further details to the story in his comments on excerpts from the manuscript, then he increasingly takes the initiative, attempting to tell the story of their three-year experience by using his own memories as well as the manuscript. Bébé's procedure can be considered arbitrary because in Medve's narrative there is no evidence that the storyteller is telling a story about himself, with the intention of establishing a deictic relation based on spatiotemporal contiguity between his own world and the world of his story.

The narrative technique employed in the novel is made special by the fact that, beyond his own version, the storyteller can also use another person's (Medve's) full account of the world surrounding the events he intends to report. Accordingly, it becomes possible for Bébé to present two versions of the same event, and to expand orientational opportunities in the story's physical, social and mental worlds by incorporating the manuscript into his own text (Szegedy-Maszák 94–102). However, the novelty of the book's narrative technique does not simply lie in the fact that it uses a double participant viewpoint in an I-narration. By treating Medve's narrative as autobiography, Bébé disregards its fictional character featuring an authorial narrator, and thus his narrative technique also becomes unstable. To put it differently, by reconfiguring the schema of authorially narrated fiction, the novel also brings about a reconfiguration of the narrative schema involving a fictional narrator. By this, it prompts attentive

readers to discard conventional, entrenched interpretative routines linked to these schemas, or at least to treat them with suspicion, looking for new opportunities for interpretation. When reading the novel carefully, we are forced to confront not only the high level of indirectness but also a similar degree of uncertainty in our illusion of reality.

At the same time, the novel's reader had better also face the paradox that despite these reconfigurations, the narrated events still seem to be told as a coherent story. It looks as if it was still possible for the reader to construe the story's physical, social and mental worlds in a coherent way, by establishing the relevant temporal and causal relations, so that orientation in these worlds would also be possible.

The key consequence of the above is that the novel's peculiar reconfiguration of two types of narrative fiction (that with a fictional storyteller and that with an authorial storyteller) opens up the possibility for perceptive readers to assign an ironic interpretation to the novel, one in which the validity of interpretative and evaluative vantage points are constantly relativized (Tátrai, "Context-dependent vantage" 31–33).

4 Orientation in the novel's social world

From the perspective of orientation in the story, such reconfiguration of the two basic types of narrative fiction has one more crucial implication. In terms of the interpretation of the physical, social and mental worlds of the story, it is of fundamental importance that the centre of referential orientation is frequently shifted to two child characters, Bébé and Medve. The novel is characterized not only by the fact that two characters are constantly or alternately in the focus of attention, but also by the fact that these two characters appear (constantly or alternately) in the position of observers, offering context-dependent vantage points for orientation in the story's social world as well as its physical and mental worlds. The true peculiarity of this in the novel comes, in part, from the asymmetry that follows from the primary storyteller's (the adult Bébé's) different attitude and access to the two characters' vantage points. As mentioned before, whereas for accessing the child Bébé's perspective in the context of fiction, one needs to be mindful of the implications of a deictic relation based

on spatiotemporal contiguity: access to the child Medve's perspective is rendered problematic by the primary storyteller's arbitrary handling of the manuscript. In addition, the operation of the two characters' vantage points is also made special by the fact that explicit reflections on their asymmetry are gradually becoming less and less prominent as the novel progresses. This in turn may lure the reader into assuming that they are both equally valid; the child Medve's perspective may obtain similar status and significance as the child Bébé's vantage point.

In terms of orientation in the story's social world, this entails a construal of social relations in which two, in several respects alternative character vantage points receive prominence. Thus, the novel presents diverse patterns in the relationship between individual and community, loneliness and belonging, power and solidarity, involvement and distance; and accordingly, it also implements varied social strategies that relativize each other to different degrees and in various ways.

In Bébé's interpretation (and we might as well adopt it as a relevant construction), Medve attempts to position himself as an outside observer: "And you had to hand it to him, he'd stood his ground sullenly and bravely, and, what's more, entirely on his own. Medve wasn't all that willing to relinquish this sort of role to anybody" (*School at the Frontier* 357).¹

This attempt at self-positioning is reinforced by the much-discussed way in which Medve is tempted by Tibor Tóth. In particular, Tibor Tóth highlights the charm of a counter-power that can be operated as an alternative to Merényi's power (and as later events testify to it, this counter-power has a very real potential for action). On the other hand, Bébé in his self-interpretation (which also seems relevant) plays the role of a participant observer: "Sure, sure, that would be just great, Beebee, thought something within me. Or somebody. Or someone whose thoughts and feelings were akin to mine in some subtle way" (*School at the Frontier* 344).²

¹ "S végeredményben bátran ellenállt, és dacosan magára maradt. Márpedig ezt a szerepet Medve nem szívesen engedte át másnak." (*Iskola a határon* 218)

² "Nono, Jól néznénk ki, Bébé – gondolta valami bennem. Vagy valaki. Vagy valakik, kikkel szellősen átjártuk egymás lelkét." (*Iskola a határon* 211)

As can be seen, Bébé foregrounds involvement and identification with others rather than an outsider's status or resistance when he construes his social situatedness in childhood. Consequently, Bébé's understanding of Medve and his understanding of himself result in observer positions that relativize each other, and imply patterns of behaviour that might be considered adequate by themselves but are portrayed as alternatives to each other. Bébé's readings do not only relativize Medve's pattern of behaviour but also his own in relation to it. In addition to this, the behavioural patterns presented by Öttevényi, Jaks and Apagyi must also be considered, with Szeredy's self-positioning (again having a strong relativizing function) also deserving attention.

An important feature of the novel is that at certain points in the discourse, foregrounded characters can be interpreted not only as agents of specific social actions but also as instantiations of distinct survival strategies (patterns of behaviour), each with a dubious claim of success for various reasons. This is true not only for the characters mentioned above, but also for any character receiving individual characterization, including Czakó, Colalto, Drágh, Mufi, Varjú, Homola, and even Elemér Orbán and Béla Zámencsik. The special construal of the story's social world thus invites a reading that activates the schema of parables. However, the great variability of survival patterns goes against an interpretation of the entire novel as a parable inasmuch as it casts doubt on the adequacy of any reading that would assign absolute value to a particular pattern of behaviour.

5 The story of Énok Gereben

By way of illustrating what has been suggested above, the present section explores the construal of a participant who can be interpreted in the story's social world as the child Bébé's tempter. In the novel, not only Medve but also Bébé is exposed to temptation. However, in Bébé's case, the tempter is not the previously mentioned Tibor Tóth but rather Énok Gereben, who despite his carefree independence still belongs to Merényi's inner circle of power. Gereben primarily exposes the child Bébé to a pattern of behaviour that seems viable. Thus, it cannot be regarded as a coincidence that in the story's social world, this character is primarily depicted from Bébé's perspective, i.e. Gereben's story typically unfolds with respect to the child Bébé's position.

5.1 *The end*

In the novel, it plays a crucial role for Énok Gereben's story that along with Merényi's group, he is also expelled from the military school.³

They were standing in the main entrance, by the porter's lodge, surrounded by luggage. They wore their tight, outgrown civilian clothes. Peter Halasz grinned and wiggled his eyebrows up and down at me. I waved at him. Good-bye, Peter. I also waved to Gereben; he smiled faintly and shrugged his shoulders. I was sorry for Gerzson Szabo too. Merenyi and Burger were standing with their backs to us. Homola, silent, his chin dropped on his chest as usual, was staring at the company that was marching past. On account of the civilian clothes, however, those names doesn't suit them any longer, and we looked at them rather as "the one who used to be Homola," "the one who used to be Burger," perhaps with the one exception of Enoch Gereben. He still somehow remained Enoch Gereben. (*School at the Frontier* 352)⁴

From this passage it becomes clear that among those who are expelled, Gereben is in a privileged position in that, even after being expelled, he alone can still (at least partially) retain his previous identity: "Ő némiképp most is Gereben Énok maradt" ("He still somehow remained Enoch Gereben"). Moreover, from the quote we can see that this continuity is construed from the child Bébé's perspective. In particular, this follows from the fact that in the flashback narrative adopting past tense forms, the interpretation of *most* (now) hinges on a centre of orientation marked by Bébé as a participant—just as his position is also a centre of spatial

³ In Kathleen Szasz's translation of the novel, Hungarian names are spelled without accents, and the Hungarian "Énok" is given as "Enoch."

⁴ "Mind a hatan szűk, kinőtt civil ruhában voltak. Halász Péter vigyorgott, húzogatta rám a szemöldökét. Intettem, szervusz, Petár. Gerebennek is intettem, halványan elmosolyodott, vállat vont. Szabó Gerzsont is sajnáltam. Merényi és Burger háttal állt. Homola némán, leesett állal nézte az elvonuló századunkat, Ugyanúgy, ahogy mindig. A civil ruha miatt azonban ezek a nevek már nem illettek rájuk, s inkább úgy néztük őket, hogy 'aki valaha Homola volt,' 'aki Burger volt,' talán az egy Gereben Énok kivételével. Ő némiképp most is Gereben Énok maradt." (*Iskola a határon* 215)

orientation, as suggested by the sentence “Merényi és Burger háttal állt” (“Merényi and Burger were standing with their backs to us”).

As a further point, it is interesting to consider the fact that in Ottlik’s *Továbbélők* [*Those Living Onwards*] which can be considered as a previous version of *School at the Frontier*, Gereben is not among the expelled.

Homola snorted with rage, and grabbed the boy’s nose. He couldn’t do more because Istenes, Szebek and Gereben immediately held him down. ... The era of slapping and fighting was clearly over. While even Damjáni wouldn’t have minded slapping Homola in the mouth, he still preferred this new fashion. Gereben’s group didn’t let others fight either. ... But this is the only reason they defended Tibor Tóth, they had no further motivation. Nobody identified with Tibor Tóth, nobody took his side; neither Gereben, nor Szebek or the others, as it had slowly become clear. (*Továbbélők* [*Those Living Onwards*] 72–73).⁵

This quote from *Those Living Onwards* also reveals the fact that Homola is not among the expelled either. However, Gereben appears here as a member of not only the old but also the new power group—with the Damjáni–Szebek–Istenes circle that is comparable to the Bébé–Medve–Szeredy group. What is more, he is construed as a key member of the new power group (“Gerebenék másokat sem hagytak verekedni”) (“Gereben’s group didn’t let others fight either”), whose behaviour represents a viable alternative to what Tibor Tóth stands for. *Those Living Onwards* adopts authorial storytelling as its schema of narrative fiction. It is simpler than *School at the Frontier* not only in terms of the narrative devices it employs (with the *School* displaying a much more complex discursive structure)

⁵ “Homola fújtatott a dühtől, s megragadta a fiú orrát. Egyebet már nem tudott csinálni, mert Istenes, Szebek és Gereben nyomban lefoglák. ... A pofozkodások és verekedések korszakát határozottan lezárták. Homolától ugyan nem sajnált volna Damjáni se egy-két szájonvágást, mégis jobban szerette ezt az új divatot. Gerebenék másokat sem hagytak verekedni. ... De Tóth Tibort is csak ezért védték meg, más okuk nem volt. Senki nem azonosította magát Tóth Tiborral, senki nem tört lánczát mellette; sem Gereben, sem Szebek, sem a többiek, amint ez apránként nyilvánvaló lett.” (Ottlik, *Továbbélők* 72–73)

but also due to the foregrounded and contrasted patterns of behaviour that contribute to the construal of the story's social world.

5.2 *The beginning*

When not only qualitative but also quantitative criteria are involved in the study of what characterizes Énok Gereben's position in *School at the Frontier*'s social world in comparison with *Those Living Onwards*, the following can be ascertained. According to data from the Hungarian Electronic Library (mek.oszk.hu), *Those Living Onwards* contains 33,421 word tokens, and the name Gereben occurs 28 times (mek.oszk.hu/01000/01004/index.phtml). By contrast, in *School at the Frontier*, which contains 104,080 word tokens, the same name appears 78 times (mek.oszk.hu/02200/02285/index.phtml). This comparison ignores pronominal or inflectional constructions also referring to the same character, therefore it is only meant to highlight gross tendencies. However, the data still suggest that the name Gereben's number of appearances does not decrease significantly in *School at the Frontier*, which features a much higher number of characters and has three times the length of *Those Living Onwards*. Similar proportions are also found for Merényi (108 vs. 292), Petár Halász (36 vs. 82) and Öttevényi (35 vs. 94). For other characters, however, the changes are much more pronounced. For example, Miklós Szebek's name is mentioned 119 times in *Those Living Onwards*, but the character more or less corresponding to him in *School at the Frontier*, namely Medve, is mentioned by name 951 times. With regard to Damjáni and Bébé, a similar comparison cannot be made in this simple way, because the latter is marked by default by first person singular forms. A similar boost in number of occurrences is also attested in the cases of Istenes and Szeredy (39 vs. 332), Colalto and Colalto (14 vs. 125), and even in the Végh–Varjú relation (40 vs. 161). At the same time, changes in the opposite direction are also documented, for example in the cases of Czakó (128 vs. 177) and Tibor Tóth (94 to 120). In *School at the Frontier*, Gereben with his 74 name mentions only just surpasses Drágh (68) and Mufi (73), and among those expelled he is the one with the lowest number of mentions (Merényi 292, Homola 98, Gerzson Szabó 87, Petár Halász 82, Burger 77). This actually also points to the limited explanatory value of such quantitative data.

Gereben attracts the child Bébé's attention not only when he is expelled but also since the beginning:

I didn't know all the boys who were playing football with Merényi, I only knew Burger, the redhead, and the latern-jawed Homola. But they seemed like a gay, noisy, lively crowd. I was especially attracted to one whom, I believe, they were calling Gereben. (*School at the Frontier* 87)⁶

In the quote, the pattern “különösen azt találtam rokonszenvesnek” (“I was especially attracted to one”) gives clear evidence that the child Bébé’s perspective is implemented for the purpose of positioning Gereben in the story’s social world. At his first mention in *Those Living Onwards*, Gereben is profiled as peculiar rather than likeable.

There stood Merényi, Homola with his mouth and fists full, and there stood the others. Énok Gereben had managed to get hold of Damjáni’s letter. This was the lively-eyed boy who’d made a football with Péter Halász on the first day, and chased Damjáni away. Gereben was not a repeating student, but next to the three repeaters he was more than an ordinary minion, like Péter Halász; he was almost the fourth of them.⁷

What is more important, though, is that at the beginning of *Those Living Onwards*, Gereben typically receives the spotlight of attention as a member of the power group, and this also holds true for *School at the Frontier*.

5.3 The powerful

If (exploiting the possibility of digital reading) we follow Gereben’s story along the path of particular mentions in *School at the Frontier*, we can

⁶ “Nem ismertem a többieket, akik Merényivel futballoztak, csak a vörös Burgert és a leasett állú Homolát. De láttam, hogy vidám, zajos, eleven fiúk mind, s különösen azt találtam rokonszenvesnek, akit, ha jól hallottam, Gerebennek szólítottak.” (*Iskola a határon* 60)

⁷ “Ott állt Merényi, Homola tele szájjal, tele marokkal, ott álltak a többiek. Gereben Énoknak Damjáni levelét sikerült megkaparintania. Ez volt az az élénk szemű fiú, aki az első napon Halász Péterrel futballt fűzött, és elkergette Damjánit. Gereben nem volt ismétlő, de a három ismétlő mellett több volt a Halász Péter-féle közönséges csatlósnál; szinte a negyedikük volt.” (Ottlik, *Továbbélők* 43)

observe that at first Gereben appears as a powerful figure with a measure of independence who belongs to the inner circle of power around Merényi.

Énok Gereben was not a repeater, indeed he wore two stripes and two buttons on his collar, yet he did belong to the powerful ones. Enoch Gereben was not a “repeater”; what’s more, he had two stripes and two buttons of distinction on his collar, but all the same he was one of the mighty. (*School at the Frontier* 106)⁸

As shown by the quoted passage, the apparent peculiarity of Gereben’s position comes from the fact that that besides his high rank in the informal power hierarchy of students, he also holds a prominent position in the military school’s formal hierarchy. However, in and by itself this would not make him special for Bébé.

When the Warrant Officer left the classroom, Enoch Gereben pitched into Medve all of a sudden. It was unexpected, because Gereben never made personal remarks. He stopped in front of Medve and frowned angrily at him. “You ... You ...” He couldn’t say outright what was on the tip of his tongue. ... Enoch Gereben’s indignation seemed therefore quite gratuitous. He found at last the insult he was looking for: “You boy scout!” These words expressed the deepest possible contempt. ... Gereben, seeing Matej intervene, realized at once how undignified it all was, promptly turned on his heels, and went back to his place. (*School at the Frontier* 231–32)⁹

⁸ “Gereben Énok nem volt ismétlő, sőt két sávot és két gombot viselt a gallérján, mégis a hatalmasok közé tartozott.” (*Iskola a határon* 71)

⁹ “Mikor a tiszthelyettes kiment a tanteremből, Gereben Énok váratlanul nekitámadt Medvének. Váratlanul, mert Gereben tulajdonképpen soha nem személyeskedett senkivel. Megállt Medve előtt, és haragosan ráncolgatta rá a szemét. – Te... te... Nem tudta kimondani, ami a nyelve hegyén volt. ... Érthetetlennek látszott Gereben Énok felháborodása. Végre megtalálta a szitkot, amit keresett: – Te cserkész! A legmélyebb megvetést fejezte ki ez a szó. ... Gereben viszont Matej közbelépésén ráeszmélt, hogy mindez méltóságán aluli, s nyomban sarkon fordult és a helyére ment.” (*Iskola a határon* 143)

In the quote, the constructions “váratlanul” (“it was unexpected”) and “érthetetlennek látszott” (“seemed quite gratuitous”) reflect the child Bébé’s construing activity. In the observed referential scene, Gereben presents himself not only as a representative of informal power among students but also as a firm critic of the behavioral pattern followed by Medve, which he considers inadequate in the context of the military school. Remarkably, later even Bébé comes to share this critical attitude. This is also important because the critical attitude just mentioned later comes to be shared by Bébé, too—see e.g. “Nagyon nehéz civileknek megmagyarázni” (*Iskola a határon* 12) (“It is awfully hard to explain this sort of thing to civilians”; *School at the Frontier* 10)—indeed, not even Medve himself is opposed to it. Having said this, we can also find scenes in the novel in which Gereben is clearly construed as a representative of power.

When we marched up to the dorm after dinner Homola picked a quarrel with Mufi; then they suddenly surrounded him: Merényi, Burger, Enoch Gereben. They took him by the arms and walked him slowly into the latrine; the swinging door swung to. Mufi’s muffled screams were heard for a moment, then silence; we knew that they had gagged him with a handkerchief and hung him out of the window, holding him by the wrists. ... Gereben led Mufi back to his bed, with serene calm. He even said something to him, but Mufi didn’t hear it. Gereben was laughing with frank enjoyment, and so was Burger. (Ottlik, *School at the Frontier* 297)¹⁰

From the quoted passage it becomes clear that Gereben complies with the rules of the game even when they allow raw brutality as dictated by the need

¹⁰ “Amikor vacsora után felvonultunk a hálóterembe, Homola belekötött Mufiba, aztán hirtelen körülvették, Merényi, Burger, Gereben Énok. Karon fogva, lassan kísérteltették az árnyékszékre, becsapódott a rugós ajtó. Mufi fojtott ordítása hallatszott egy pillanatra, majd csönd; tudtuk, hogy teletömték a száját zsebkendővel, és kilógatták az ablakon, két csuklójánál fogva. ... Gereben kísérte vissza Mufit az ágyához, derűs nyugalommal. Beszélt is hozzá valamit, de Mufi nem hallotta. Gereben őszintén nevetgélt, Burger is.” (*Iskola a határon* 182)

to maintain power. What is more, as shown by the expression “őszintén nevetgélt” (“[he] was laughing with frank enjoyment”), he does not only comply with the rules but also gets assimilated to this nature of power.

5.4 *The tempter*

The next phase in Gereben's story begins after the case of 'Bébé and Medve's checkered exercise book' unexpectedly subsides, creating the risk that the two boys (or one of them) could meet Ötvenyi's fate.

Then, in the middle of March, when it began to thaw in earnest..., Merényi and his pals, just by themselves, started to kick a few shots in the goal, and one fine day Enoch Gereben called me in too. I joined the team. (*School at the Frontier* 313)¹¹

As the passage above shows, it is Gereben who lets Bébé know that the affair had indeed subsided, and Merényi's group would not punish them. A little later, Bébé receives an even greater honour than being allowed to join the football game: “And then one evening after Taps I climbed up with Merényi, Gerzson Szabo, and Gereben to the clock tower” (*School at the Frontier* 315).¹²

Merényi and his group do not only take Bébé to the clock but also involve him in bedroom lootings aimed at seizing food that has been hidden there. This means that Bébé seems to have a new path opened up before him that Gereben had carved for himself before, also making it attractive for Bébé (cf. “Rájött az ember, hogy igazuk van; azaz, hogy igazunk van; hogy érdekes, izgalmas multság; hogy igazságot szolgáltatunk.”) (*Iskola a határon* 198).¹³

¹¹ “De március közepén, ahogy megindult a komoly olvadás..., Merényiék néhány napig csak kapura lőttek, magukban, aztán egyszer Gereben Énok engem is hívott. Beszálltam.” (*Iskola a határon* 192)

¹² “Aztán egy este, takarodó után, Merényivel, Gerebennel és Szabó Gerzsonnal felmentem az órához.” (*Iskola a határon* 193)

¹³ “You realized that they were in the right, or rather, that we were in the right; that it was an interesting and exciting sort of entertainment; and that we were really serving justice.” (*School at the Frontier* 323)

I wasn't frightened of Gereben, though it was only lately that I'd stopped being afraid of him, and that was a very good feeling. It was true to say, I thought, that Gereben was not afraid of the Crow, at least not in the way I was; besides, it never showed on his face. He used to watch him, wide-eyed, and laugh, almost unsuspectingly, at the things the Crow did. As a matter of fact, Gereben totally lacked coarseness; it was only his high spirits that sometimes run away with him. He was always on the lookout for something to laugh at. (*School at the Frontier* 319)¹⁴

The quote above occurs at the beginning of the episode in which Bébé and Gereben start throwing Elemér Orbán's apples at each other, soon to be joined by Homola, Burger and Merényi. On the one hand, the passage directly preceding the story of a carefree game with the innermost circle of power helps illuminate Gereben's privileged position (cf. "Gerebentől nem féltem") ("I wasn't frightened of Gereben"). On the other, it also reveals how the child Bébé sees Gereben, why he finds his behaviour attractive, for what reasons he is excusing him as well as himself. (For evidence that the child Bébé's perspective is being adopted, see the contextualizing expressions "gondoltam" ["I thought"] and "tulajdonképpen" ["as a matter of fact"].)

The Merenyi gang seldom got parcels; naturally they didn't have to hide theirs, nor share them. This was why I was amazed when Enoch Gereben called me upstairs once with particular enthusiasm, together with the Merenyi gang, and spread out before us in the dorm his newly received parcel. He was beaming. "Come on, you too," he said to me. I kept an orange; I didn't eat it but took it with me into the classroom. I gave three sections to Szeredy and I took

¹⁴ "Gerebentől nem féltem. Nemrég tanultam meg ezt, és jó érzés volt. Igaz ugyan, gondoltam, hogy Gereben például egyáltalán nem fél a Varjútól. Legalábbis nem úgy, mint én, és semmi esetre sem lehetett észrevenni rajta. Nyílt szemmel bámult a Varjúra, figyelte, mulattatta őt, amit csinált, szinte gyanútlanul nevetett a dolgain. Gerebenből tulajdonképpen hiányzott a durvaság; csak sokszor elragadta őt a jókedve. Mindig azt leste, hogy lehet-e valamin nevetni." (*Iskola a határon* 195)

three to Medve. “I got it from Gereben,” I said. He accepted them quite amiably. (*School at the Frontier* 325)¹⁵

The quote reports on yet another gesture of Gereben’s towards Bébé (cf. “*Te is gyere*”) (“Come on, you too”), which again places Bébé in Merényi’s circle. However, the quote also makes it evident that for Bébé, his friendship with Szeredy and Medve makes for a much more important and tighter bond (cf. “*Elég barátságosan fogadta el*”) (“He accepted them quite amiably”).

5.5 *The ally*

Even though it may be an exaggeration to say that Bébé resisted temptation, it is still possible to conclude that the temptation attempt was not successful, as he did not end up becoming one of Merényi’s minions. Concomitantly, a key change occurs in Gereben’s status as well, even though not too conspicuously or radically.

He wore his drill trousers and no shirt. He snatched a penknife out of his pocket, opened it, and grpped it in his fist. “Kneel down!” he ordered Medve. From both sides, Gereben, Szeredy, Gerzson Szabó, and I drew nearer to Merenyi. ... I don’t know whether it was Gereben, Szeredy, or I who’d moved first. We surrounded Merenyi from Both sides at the same moment as Medve knelt down. ... Everything was smeared with blood: the sleeve of his [Merényi’s] shirt as he dragged it on carelessly, his penknife, the floor of the dorm as he went ro the washroom. Gereben spread it around with his slippers. ... Gereben left, but even then he threw a backward glance at me. (*School at the Frontier* 339–40)¹⁶

¹⁵ “Merényiék ritkán kaptak csomagot; persze nekik nem kellett dugdosni, és nem is adtak belőle másnak. Ezért ámultam el, amikor egyszer Gereben Énok lelkesen felhívott Merényiékkel együtt engem is a hálóterembe, és kitálalta elénk az asznap érkezett csomagját. Ragyogott a képe. ‘Gyertek! Te is gyere’ – intett felém. Egy narancsot nem ettem meg, hanem lehoztam a tanterembe. Adtam belőle három gerezdet Szeredynek, hármát pedig odavittem Medvének. ‘Gerebentől kaptam’ – mondtam. Elég barátságosan fogadta el.” (*Iskola a határon* 199)

¹⁶ “Zsávolynadrágban volt, ing nélkül. Bicskát rántott ki a zsebéből, kinyitotta, megmarkolta. ‘Térdelj le!’ – parancsolta Medvének. Gereben, Szeredy, Szabó Gerzson és én is kétoldalt közelebb húzódtunk. ... Én mozdultam meg vagy Gereben, vagy Szeredy, nem tudom. Abban a másodpercben fogtuk körül két oldalról Merényit,

The quote above highlights parts of the episode in which Medve first challenges Homola and then Merényi for a duel. It portrays Gereben in a role and position similar to what he assumed earlier during a duel between Mufi and Varjú. However, the social relations are entirely different. Instead of taking Merényi and Burger's side, Gereben now allies with Szeredy and Gerzson Szabó; he accompanies not the defeated Mufi but Merényi, who has suffered the real blow. It is a key difference, moreover, that Gereben does not talk to Merényi as he did to Mufi; instead, he is seeking contact with Bébé (cf. "egy pillantást vetett hátra, felém") ("he threw a backward glance at me"). The episode can also be compared to the one quoted above from *Those Living Onwards*, but the difference is again crucial: here, Gereben stands by Szeredy's and then Medve's side during the reign of the Merényi group. These changes in the social world, and more particularly in its informal power relations, prompt the child Bébé—whose perspective is marked by the contextualizing expressions "tudtam" ("I knew") and "talán" ("perhaps")—to formulate the following wishful thoughts:

Yet I knew they could no longer count on Gereben and Gerzson Szabo if it came to a showdown. Perhaps they wouldn't start anything up against Medve after all, because we were stronger, even without Burger. Merenyi would hardly attempt anything again unless the outcome was certain. That was why it was up to us to take the initiative. (*School at the Frontier* 344)¹⁷

From this, however, the reader also learns that Bébé now sees Gereben as his ally rather than a powerful figure like Merényi; an assumption that is not completely unfounded based on the above.

amikor Medve letérdelt. ... Merényi összevázta az inge ujját, ahogy rángatta magára. Csöpögött a vér a kezéből; a hálóterem padlóján Gereben a papucsával törülgette, maszatolta szét mindenütt a nyomában, ahogy mentek a mosdó felé. ... Gereben még elmenőben egy pillantást vetett hátra, felém." (*Iskola a határon* 207)

¹⁷ "És mégis, tudtam, hogy már nem számíthatnak Gerebenre, se Szabó Gerzsonra, ha arra kerül a sor. Talán már nem is mernek semmit kezdeni Medve ellen, mert mi még Burger nélkül is nagy túlerőben lennénk. Kíllátastalan dolgot Merényi nem fog megkockáztatni többé. Éppen ezért kellene nekünk kezdeni." (*Iskola a határon* 210)

[The Crow] looked at me for some time, his eyes giving me the onceover, then he turned in his heel and left. I was a little scared. But Gereben did not go either and we again managed to skip P.T. We did some training and I soon forgot my fear. (*School at the Frontier* 347)¹⁸

Athletics, as the quote above reveals, makes it possible for Bébé to portray himself and Gereben as equal members of the same group that can even protect him from Varjú.

5.6 *The evil spirit*

However, this increasingly idyllic relationship comes to an abrupt end. As a consequence of conversations between Monsignor Hanák and Tibor Tóth, six students including Énok Gereben are expelled from the military school: Homola and Énok Gereben were cast in the roles of the evil spirits of the group, and along with them they expelled Burger, Merényi, Péter Halász, and Gerzson Szabó as well (*School at the Frontier* 352).¹⁹ In the light of prior events, it can hardly be considered particularly surprising that Gereben came to be one of the expelled students. Nevertheless, Varjú's missing out is indeed rather surprising. In *Those Living Onwards*, his counterpart Végh is among those expelled, with Gereben, Homola and Gerzson Szabó missing out. The most stunning aspect is that in Monsignor Hanák and Tibor Tóth's construction, it is not Merényi who is presented as leader of the informal power circle; rather, besides Homola, Gereben is construed as their *evil spirits*. To understand this, it is worth taking a quick look at the events immediately preceding their expulsion.

It was the previous Sunday that the Merenyi gang had dragged Tibor Toth into the latrine. ... Homola had kicked everybody out of

¹⁸ "[Varjú] nézett egy darabig szótlanul, járt a szeme rajtam, aztán sarkon fordult, és otthagzott. Félttem egy kicsit. De hát Gereben sem ment, és a tréninggel megint sikerült kihagynunk a gyakorlatot, hamar elfelejtettem hát a félelmemet." (*Iskola a határon* 212)

¹⁹ "Homola és Gereben Énok volt a rossz szellemük, s velük együtt Burgert, Merényit, Halász Pétert és Szabó Gerzsont is kicsapták." (*Iskola a határon* 215)

the latrine. But Enoch Gereben and I went back all the same time. We stood in the door. They weren't hurting Tibor Toth, only the Crow was questioning him. Merenyi glanced at us fleetingly, then turned his almost gentle gaze back onto Tibor Toth's silly blushes. We stepped a bit closer. Gereben said something short and snappy. I didn't say anything. ... The little virgin backed hesitantly out of the latrine, but it was not impossible to believe that the seed of his future plan had been sown by one of the Crow's remarks: "Go and complain to the Monsignor!" he recommended, ironically, of course, amidst other jeering, ominous, bloodcurdling suggestions. (*School at the Frontier* 354)²⁰

Beyond the fact that *Gereben said something short and snappy*, which may have hurt *the little virgin*, a more crucial contrast can also be discerned between the behavioral patterns and survival strategies of the two characters. And this opposition between the two tempters makes the tension between the attitudes of Medve and Bébé even clearer in the story's social world, a tension that the novel does not dissolve in a reassuring way—despite all efforts by the author and the readers. When we focus on Bébé in this episode, it can be remarked that in all cases he did well to stay silent (cf. "Én nem szóltam") ("I didn't say anything").

Finally, the last mention of Gereben's name closes the story of a complexly construed social being in the novel's world with subdued nostalgia: "Csak Gereben hiányzott egy kicsit a négyszer százas stafétából" (*Iskola a határon* 2019) ("Gereben was badly missed, though, at the four-hundred-yard relay race"; *School at the Frontier* 219).

²⁰ "Még vasárnap este történt, hogy Merényiék kicipelték Tóth Tibort az árnyékszékre. ... Homola kikergetett mindenkit a helyiségből. De én Gereben Énokkal mégis visszamentem. Megálltunk az ajtóban. Nem bántották Tóth Tibort, csak a Varjú kérdezgette. Merényi egy pillantást vetett felénk, aztán nézte tovább, majdnem szeliden, Tóth Tibor hülye pironkodását. Közelebb léptünk. Gereben mondott valamit kurtán, nevetve. Én nem szóltam.

... A kis szűz vonakodva indult kifelé az árnyékszékről, de nem lehetetlen, hogy a Varjú egyik megjegyzéséből vette az ötletét. 'Eredj a Monsignorhoz panaszra!' – ajánlotta neki a Varjú gúnyosan, persze számos egyéb javaslat, csúfolódás és fenyegetés közt, mellékesen." (*Iskola a határon* 216–17)

5.7 *Later*

Finally, by way of epilogue, it is worth drawing attention to a passage (with one of the first mentions of Gereben's name), which offers crucial contextualization for Gereben's story, including why Énok Gereben was such a special person for Bébé:

Yes, this is the truth. I mean, that's how it was and not the way he says it happened to M. We have been good friends for thirty-four years, but we have never talked about these things. I was beatens, too, and so was Szeredy and everybody else. They broke us in, one by one, and made us toe the line. But we've never talked about it, neither I nor Medve, nor Szeredy, nor Enoch Gereben. nor any of the others. And not because we were ashamed of it or ashamed of the way the world was made, but because it immediately ceased to be interesting and because we did not consider it important. After all, these things came to nothing, and they came to nothing precisely in order that we need never talk about them. We only talked about those much more interesting and important things which gradually made other things dissolve into thin air, perish and disintegrate into nothing. (*School at the Frontier* 88–89)²¹

The quote reveals that Bébé and Gereben's shared story did not necessarily end in the military school. In the construction "soha erről nem beszéltünk később" ("we have never talked about these things"), the first person plural form profiles a group including not only Bébé and Gereben but also other participants (Medve and Szeredy) with whom Bébé stayed close friends

²¹ "Ez az igazság. Úgy értem, hogy ez történt, s nem az, amit ő M.-ről leírt. Harmincnégy éven át jó barátom volt, de ezekről a dolgokról soha nem beszéltünk. Engem is megverték, Szeredyt is, mindenkit. Egytől egyig valamennyien beletörtünk az engedelmességbe. De se Medvével, se Szeredyvel, se Gereben Énokkal, se a többiekkel soha erről nem beszéltünk később. Nem azért, mert szégyelltük magunkat, vagy szégyelltük a világ szerkezetét, hanem azért, mert már nem volt érdekes, és nem tartottuk fontosnak. Mindez végül is semmivé vált, és éppen azért vált semmivé, hogy ne kelljen soha többé beszélni se róla. Csak azokról a sokkal érdekesebb és fontosabb dolgokról, amelyek lassan-lassan szétfoszlatták, széttróntották, semmivé mállasztották mindezt." (*Iskola a határon* 62)

even as an adult. Thus, in the mysterious Gereben's case it is possible to risk an interpretation whereby he remained a good friend of Bébé's.

6 Summary

This article in functional cognitive pragmatics has been primarily linguistic in scope, focusing on the way the story's social world is construed in Géza Ottlik's *School at the Frontier*. Its goal was to answer the question as to what language is capable of, or more precisely, what those who participate in the understanding of such literary narratives as this novel are capable of through language. At the same time, the present linguistic approach can enter into fruitful dialogue with literary studies that primarily focus on the novel's interpretation from a poetic point of view.

From this study of how the novel's social world is construed, the following insights can be gained. The primary storyteller Bébé's interpretation of Medve and himself result in observational vantage points mutually relativizing each other as well as different constructions of behavioural patterns that in turn depend on these vantage points. The functioning of varied perspectives brought into play by the fictitious storyteller does not only relativize Medve's behavioural pattern but also his own in relation to it. In the same way, behavioural patterns linked to other characters in the story's social world are also relativized. A case in point is Énok Gereben's story, who contributes to an increase in tension between various social attitudes and strategies construed in the novel, and also to an increase in the novel's referential complexity, by appearing as Bébé's tempter and therefore as a counterpoint to Medve's tempter, Tibor Tóth.

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SAROLTA OSZTROLUCZKY

“The Granite Core of Changelessness”: Géza Ottlik’s “Nothing’s Lost”



It was for him, in his soul’s picture, the earth’s pivot, the granite
core of changelessness, the eternal place where all things came
and passed, and yet abode forever and would never change.
(Wolfe, “The Lost Boy” 2)

Medve called the ground of our existence a ‘platform’:
the multifarious silt deposited at the bottom of your soul.
And that bottom-most layer that is still visible he named
the ‘alluvium.’ He needed a distinguishing name for this
most important, ultimate layer, more solid than the rest
(even though all of them consisted of alluvial silt).
(Ottlik, *Buda* 255–56)

Géza Ottlik’s short story “Nothing’s Lost” was first published in Hungarian in 1968. However, the reception of the work became significant only after the mid-1990s, following the publication of Mihály Szegedy-Maszák’s monograph on Ottlik’s oeuvre. The interpretations over the past twenty-five years have studied the text from the point of view of the narration, the portrayal of consciousness, the techniques of remembrance, the time structure, the system of motifs, the creation of metaphors, as well as Biblical and mythological allusions. On the other hand, the history of its creation and the contemporaneous Hungarian and foreign-language prose sources that influenced Ottlik’s literary art and which may serve as a context for the interpretation of “Nothing’s Lost” have not been studied to date. In order to fill in this gap, in the present study I intend to offer a comparative analysis of Thomas Wolfe’s “The Lost Boy” and Géza Ottlik’s “Nothing’s Lost,” and will attempt to point out a hitherto unexplored connection

between the two texts, and, on a larger scale, between the two oeuvres, including Ottlik's *School at the Frontier* and *Buda*, as well as the short stories by Wolfe. Before embarking on a closer examination of the texts, I wish to discuss briefly the dissimilar personalities of these two authors and the differing writing methods used in their respective oeuvres, which nevertheless show similarities in several respects.

Thomas Wolfe was a member of the American generation of writers who worked in the 1930s, between the two World Wars. He was a contemporary of Steinbeck, Caldwell, Dos Passos, Wilder, Faulkner, Fitzgerald and Hemingway. His biographer, Malcolm Cowley, calls Wolfe, who died young at the age of 38, the *homo scribens* (156). He wrote copiously and continuously. His correspondence reveals that he kept count of how many words he wrote every week, or when he managed to break his own previous records. He stored the manuscripts in three huge pinewood chests in his Manhattan flat, and used them later to complete his novels with the help of his editor. His most important works include four autobiographical novels, two of which, *Look Homeward, Angel* (1929) and *Of Time and the River* (1935), were published in his lifetime, while the other two, *The Web and the Rock* (1939) and *You Can't Go Home Again* (1940), were printed posthumously, edited by his publisher, who radically reduced the length of the original manuscripts. The writer George Webber, the protagonist of the posthumous novels and one of Wolfe's alter egos, says the following about his creative methods: "You almost forget to sleep, and when you do try to you can't—because the avalanche has started and it keeps going night and day. ... You can't stop yourself—and even if you could you'd be afraid to because there'd be all that hell to go through getting started up again" (Cowley 169).

Ottlik, who died in 1990 at the age of 78, and who, thus, lived more than twice as long as Wolfe, had different thoughts about the writing process. He writes the following in an interview published in his volume *Próza [Prose]* (1980):

[T]he writer should keep silent if he has nothing to say. This is not as simple a requirement as it may sound. After all, a poet is driven, above all else, by the desire to communicate. ... Therefore, he never stops talking. ... He does this with skill and competence,

and everything he writes is correct, useful, and true. What could be wrong with that? Well, this is as if someone who had learned division and multiplication would keep dividing and multiplying for thirty years, and then publish the—correct (and) true—results as a book. (Ottlik, "Félbeszakadt beszélgetés" 29)

Ottlik's career as a writer is, in his own words, "as full of holes as Emmental cheese" (Ottlik, "Félbeszakadt beszélgetés" 25). His writing is interrupted by long silences lasting for years, breaks which he spent translating, playing bridge, and travelling. The reason for these interruptions is at times external and political, but they are mostly due to the rejection of "derivative literature."

It is believed that Wolfe worked on a single book all his life: "the" book, in which he wanted to capture or arrest time and his own life. "It is true enough in a sense to maintain that all his life Wolfe wrote only one novel. The hero, whether titanic and called Eugene, or simian and called George, is still Wolfe, and his adventures are Wolfe's adventures either in fact or in desire" (Johnson 40). According to his contemporaries, he had an exceptional, sensory memory, which preserved every moment of his life in its original clarity, thus providing unlimited material for his verbal genius. "'His ambition,' announced by George Webber, was 'to use myself to the top of my bent. To use everything I have. To milk the udder dry, squeeze out the last drop, until there is nothing left'" (Cowley 170). He continued writing his serialised autobiographical novel until the end of his life, the present time of his retrospective narration, therefore his last two novels could only appear after his death.

Similarly, Ottlik's *Buda* was only published posthumously because, as Medve tells Miklós Szebek at the end of the novel *Buda*, the author "procrastinated because he was afraid to ruin the fine raw material of his life by writing it down too soon" (Ottlik, *Buda* 271).

[W]hen you have some fine, unused material that you have lived and experienced—regardless if it is ten, or thirty years old, or only yesterday's, it remains saved in your memory. Saved in its entirety,

always accessible, just the way it was. If you start writing prematurely and botch the work, that's how it will stay for ever, it can't ever be undone. You may delete your sentences, but it's no use: they are etched into memory, and even if they put a gun to your head you won't know precisely how it went originally. (Ottlik, *Buda* 271)

When asked about the purpose of saving and guarding this raw material, Miklós Szebek provides an answer he intends as a joke: “So, you're planning to take it with you?” asked Miklós Szebek, laughing. ‘Yes, indeed!’ There was a gleam in Medve's eyes. What a terrific idea. ‘Yes, I'd love to. And very much hope to. That, indeed, seems to be the solution, Miklós’ (Ottlik, *Buda* 271).

Thomas Wolfe's short career and his feverish, uncontrollable urge to write, with the final aim to “squeeze out the last drop” and ultimately abolish the self by transforming it into text, may be contrasted with Ottlik's long career, which started relatively late, and which was characterised by slow writing and by retaining the raw material of memory for as long as possible. However, even if the characters and methods of the two authors differ significantly, the two oeuvres show remarkable and essential similarities. The motifs of homecoming and remembrance, the rediscovered childhood, the experience of “nothing's lost,” the tangible substance of things, the “attainable, ... communicable particle of the elusive moment” (Ottlik, “Nothing's Lost” 92) constitute those links which produce unexpected correspondences and “flashes of harmony” between Wolfe's and Ottlik's texts.

Before embarking on a comparison of “The Lost Boy” and “Nothing's Lost,” we have to exclude the possibility that these similarities are purely accidental. Thomas Wolfe's short story “The Lost Boy” was first published in *Redbook Magazine* in 1937, then in the volume *The Hills Beyond* in 1941. In my opinion, Ottlik did not read the story in English, but in Örkény's Hungarian translation, which appeared in the April 1958 issue of the literary journal *Nagyvilág*. That he knew this translation is proved by the fact that when Európa Publishing House asked Ottlik in 1962 to prepare a collection of short stories with the title *Mai amerikai elbeszélők* [*Contemporary American Storytellers*], he included this story by Wolfe in the anthology in Örkény's translation. Whether the translation of the story may have

inspired or influenced Ottlik at the time of writing “Nothing’s Lost,” the idea of which already existed in 1962, will be borne out by a comparison of the two texts.

The fundamental situation of the two short stories is similar. The protagonist, Péter Jacobi in Ottlik, Eugene Gant in Wolfe, returns to the scene of his childhood after thirty years, and while his memories come to the surface, he meets other people and undergoes an internal transformation as a result. I will now discuss those details of Wolfe’s text which may have served as an inspiration to Ottlik at the time of writing “Nothing’s Lost” and later *Buda*.

Wolfe’s narrative is divided into four numbered sections. Part I takes place on an April day thirty years before the present of Part IV (*The Brother*), and it is shown through the eyes of Eugene’s brother, Grover, who died at a young age. Grover was a special child, as we learn from Parts II (*The Mother*) and III (*The Sister*), in which we listen to the monologues of Eugene’s mother and of his sister Helen remembering the late Grover. According to his mother, who had six children, Grover was “the brightest boy I had, the one that surpassed all the rest of them in sense, and understanding, and in judgment—the best boy I had—the smartest boy I ever saw” (Wolfe, “The Lost Boy” 20). This is what Elise tells from the distance of thirty years to Eugene, Wolfe’s alter ego, who had become a famous writer in the meantime. The adroitness, responsible behaviour, and amazing conversational skills of Grover, who was only twelve at the time of his death, are revealed to us indirectly, through the above-mentioned female monologues, while his extraordinary sensitivity, his way of thinking, his ability to recognise the essence of existence and the interconnections of space and time are shown directly, through the portrayal of his consciousness:

It seemed to him that the Square, itself the accidental mason many years, the chance agglomeration of time and disrupted strivings, was the centre of the universe. It was for him, in his soul’s picture, the earth’s pivot, the granite core of changelessness, the eternal place where all things came and passed, and yet abode forever and would never change. (Wolfe, “The Lost Boy” 2)

Discovering the passing time, making it fixed, eternal and visible in the present moment, the place of childhood as the “granite core of changelessness”—all these elements may remind us of the world of *Buda*, Medve’s “platform” and “alluvium” (Ottlik, *Buda* 255–56), the dining room window of the house at 15/b Fehérvári Road, or the December morning gloom of Krisztina Boulevard, etched into memory for ever, and preserved like a “negative”:

You looked up, acknowledged that such a thing existed, stored it on the map you were always making for yourself, unconsciously and proficiently, of each room, house, city, street, world. ... And, since it was still there, in the same place: was it still the same? The room you slept in; your bed; the dining room, the apartment; in it your mother, Júlia, Aunt Terka; the building, the staircase; outside, Fehérvári Road—all had been verified so often and consistently that you have come to accept their existence and perceivable sameness. (Ottlik, *Buda* 59)

In Part IV (*The Brother*) of the story, Eugene Gant, like Jacobi, returns to the (temporary) location of his childhood, St. Louis, to the house into which they moved for seven months for the time of a fair, and where his brother Grover, the protagonist of Part I, died at the age of twelve. As Eugene was only four when they were living there, his memories are rather fuzzy. It is on the basis of a few fragmented images, a few deeply entrenched sensory impressions that he, like Jacobi, starts searching for lost time in the city. He asks around and addresses passers-by, but he does not remember the name of their street, only the noise of the streetcar circulating nearby, the characteristic smell of the ties in the hot summer air, the stone steps leading to the front door of the house, and the fact that it was only one or two blocks from King’s Highway, with a name straight out of a fairy tale:

King’s Highway had not been a street in those days but a kind of road that wound from magic out of some dim and haunted land, and that along the way got *mixed* in with Tom the Piper’s son, with hot cross buns, with all the light that came and went, and with the

coming down through Indiana in the morning, and the smell of engine smoke, the Union Station, and most of all with voices lost and far and long ago that said ‘King’s Highway.’ (Wolfe, “The Lost Boy” 31)

The name *King’s Highway*, surrounded by a web of fantastic meanings born of childish imagination, may remind the reader of the word *guarantee* in “Nothing’s Lost,” the meaning of which emerges from the reconciliation of the ideas layered on top of one another in the child Jacobi’s mind. When Jacobi, who is stuck at a childlike level of language acquisition, rediscovers his mother tongue, he reconstructs the childhood history of filling the word *guarantee* with meaning. The meanings unfolding from one another combine into a single, monolithic complex of meanings, or are “woven” into one, as in the case of Gant:

The unusual combination of words, though obviously the result of a mistranslation not uncommon in children’s books, potently evoked that remote and alien world and filled it with magic. From there, from elsewhere, various other meanings were steeped, soaked, drenched and *woven* into the guarantee of the dyer, meanings that bore a nuance of adventure, of valour, such as *salvus conductus*, security, endurance, perseverance, word of honour, plighted faith, or, more tangibly, flight across the Cordilleras, a rumbling express above the precipice, the discovery of a long-lost father shipwrecked on a desert island. (Ottlik, “Nothing’s Lost” 74–75)

There is a startling similarity in the way both Gant and Jacobi experience the incommunicability of personal memory; neither the St. Louis passers-by nor the official questioning Jacobi at the airport office can understand what the stranger coming from afar wants to or is unable to tell them.

Gant finally finds the street on his own and recognises the house where they lived thirty years before from its stone steps and the strong stone frame of the windows, just as Jacobi recognises Ottó’s house on his own from the familiar stone he notices in the side of the doorway. Gant accidentally meets the new owner of the house, a woman who is wary of him at first, but when

she learns that Gant used to live in the house as a child, she shows him around and lets him enter the rooms. Gant looks at everything, but, in fact, he is interested only in one room, in which Grover's bed once stood, and where the boy died thirty years earlier. In Ottlik's story, Ottó repeats twice that "nothing's lost, everything's the same" (Ottlik, "Nothing's Lost" 99). Gant comes to the same conclusion when he sees their former home: "Inside it was just the same" (Wolfe, "The Lost Boy" 37). This sentence recurs several times in the short conversation between Gant and the woman, and like in Ottlik, its meaning changes on every occasion. For Ottó and for the woman seeing Gant around, this sentence only means that the house, the room, its objects and furnishings have not been changed over the decades, time seems to have passed without leaving a mark on them. However, for Eugene Gant and Péter Jacobi, the sentence has a much deeper meaning: it means that the passing time can be arrested, that the past can be experienced in the present at a specific place in the world, the place of childhood, and from a well-defined viewpoint, that of the former child; that the sensory completeness of childhood, its vast, untouched, seemingly infinite world can be relived and experienced. Ottlik's protagonist views the scenes of his past from "bottom-height" in order to find his former self, whereas Gant regards the second step of the hall stairs in the old St. Louis house as the origin of a sensory experience that precedes language:

And he felt that if he could only sit there on the stairs once more, in solitude and in absence in the afternoon, he would be able to get it back again. Then he would be able to remember all that he had seen and been—that brief sum of himself, the universe of his four years, with all the light of Time upon it—that universe which was so short to measure, and yet so far, so endless, to remember. Then he would be able to see his own small face again, pooled in the dark mirror of the hall, and peer once more into the grave eyes of the child that he had been, and discover there in his quiet three years' self the lone integrity of "I," knowing: "Here is the House, ... and here in this House, this Absence is my core, my kernel—here am I!" (Wolfe, "The Lost Boy" 37–38)

The story of "Nothing's Lost" ends when Jacobi and the blind music teacher play an old foxtrot at the end of their concert just for the pleasure of it, "as if they were alone on a desert island" (Ottlik, "Nothing's Lost" 101). We do not learn with what emotions Jacobi leaves behind the scene of his childhood once again. In contrast, Wolfe's short story describes this moment as well: after experiencing the completeness of "nothing's lost, everything's the same," Gant leaves the town with the bitter reflection of "everything's lost":

And he knew that he would never come again, and that lost magic would not come again. Lost now was all of it—the street, the heat, King's Highway, and Tom the Piper's son, all mixed in with the vast and drowsy murmur of the Fair, and with the sense of absence in the afternoon, and the house that waited, and the child that had dreamed. (Wolfe, "The Lost Boy" 42)

In the short story, as well as in the novel series, Gant turns his back on his former home, the scene of his childhood, to make his dream come true and become a famous writer. However, according to another short story which was published together with "The Lost Boy" following Wolfe's death, he returns once more to the town of his birth and to his father's home, which he left like the prodigal son. "The Return of the Prodigal," like *Look Homeward, Angel*, makes us read the stories about Gant, including "The Lost Boy," as paraphrases of the prodigal son, which, in my opinion, is another strong link to Ottlik's story. "Nothing's Lost" is also a paraphrase of the prodigal, as shown by the allusion to János Pilinszky's "Apocrypha" at the beginning of Chapter 4: "He had not come for this. It was not for this that he had learned to walk, it was not for this that he had learned to speak the language of men" (Ottlik, *Nothing's Lost* 80). The relevant passage of Pilinszky's poem reads as follows: "And this is why I learned to walk! ... I do not speak your words / the human speech. ... I do not speak your language" (Pilinszky 415).

Jacobi, the famous violinist who wants to discover his own lost self, returns to his former home with an empty soul and an empty art, but during his search he unexpectedly discovers the "brother" who remained at home,

and his “father” in the blind fellow musician. The free, abandoned music at the end of the story, which is elevated into timelessness, is a paraphrase of the feast in the parable, a metaphor of wordless forgiveness and reinclusion.

Wolfe’s prodigal son, the alter-ego of the author, drew upon himself the ire of an entire town while he was away, because the inhabitants of the town, including Eugene’s relatives and acquaintances, all recognised themselves in the characters of his first novel. However, reinclusion takes place in this case as well, although not without words as in Ottlik’s story: the people of the town greet the returning Gant in the street, then bombard him with phone calls, seeking his favours and an opportunity to meet him. However, the conversations between them reveal their true opinion about Gant: the re-inclusion is false and hypocritical, the real celebration, the agape is absent in Wolfe’s story.

What did you think? He’s thirty-six years old, and he never was very much to look at, anyway. He’s just Eugene Gant, a snout-nosed kid who used to carry a paper route in Niggertown, and whose mother ran a boarding house, and whose father had a tombstone shop upon the Square. ... And now just look at him! The snout-nosed kid who went away and wrote a book or two—and look there, will you!—look at all those people crowding round him! They called him every name they could think of, and now they’re crawling over one another just to shake his hand. (Wolfe, “The Return of the Prodigal” 134)

It is also important to mention the angel motif, which appears repeatedly both in “Nothing’s Lost” and in Wolfe’s other writings. The stone angel plays a key role in “The Lost Boy” (Wolfe, “The Lost Boy” 11), in “The Return of the Prodigal” (Wolfe, “The Return of the Prodigal” 133), and in *Look Homeward, Angel* alike. At the beginning of the latter, Eugene’s father, fifteen-year-old Oliver Gant, walks the streets of Baltimore and sees a smooth granite tombstone in a small store, with the statue of a stone angel upon it, which faces him “poised upon cold phthisic feet, with a smile of soft stone idiocy” (Wolfe, *Look Homeward, Angel* 4). Years later, Oliver

has a family of his own and settles in Altamont. He builds the family home from which Eugene will set out many years later, and puts the heavy simpering figure of an angel on the porch, by the front door. The angel, which has a role every time Eugene leaves or returns home, acquires a symbolic meaning in the novel. Its presence transforms Eugene's everyday destiny into salvation history: with its gaze, it shows the path to heaven to the protagonist, the one that his father had once missed. At the end of the novel, Eugene talks to the spirit of his dead brother, Ben, in the presence, or rather in the guise, of the angel, who shows him all of the opportunities he allowed to pass: "there, by the curb upon the step, [Eugene] stood, peopling the night with the great lost legion of himself—the thousand forms that came, that passed, that wove and shifted in unending change, and that remained unchanging Him" (Wolfe, *Look Homeward, Angel* 609). Gant asks the spirit manifested in the image of the angel for guidance, and this can be compared to the angels in Ottlik's story, for whom Jacobi "was a spy in the world of humans" (Ottlik, "Nothing's Lost" 80). Eugene Gant does not receive the ultimate answer to his questions about the past and the future, and he is forced to realise that he has to find the answers on his own: "In his moment of terrible vision he saw, in the tortuous ways of a thousand alien places, his foiled quest of himself" (Wolfe, *Look Homeward, Angel* 611). Gant cannot receive an answer to his ultimate question "Who am I?" from the outside, he has to restart the quest of himself from within himself. On the other hand, Jacobi cannot give an answer, he cannot "report" to the angels, because he does not spy on others, but on his own past self, on the experience that preceded language, which cannot be communicated, or only in part, as "deep down even the perceptible attributes contained non-physical features" (Ottlik, *Buda* 45):

I stood in this doorway, one day in March, we were about to set off on a journey, and it made me think of an earlier March; and I have now remembered that earlier recollection, or if not that recollection, then something else. A state, a quality that cannot be defined by human language. A feeling, a condition, a climate? A noun, an epithet, a verb, an adverb? The moment of creation perhaps, Jacobi thought, in the perfection, the simplicity of its namelessness. Something that precedes language, the sound of the violin, how can I then report it

to the angels? I must be satisfied with the tangible, minute particles of the moment. (Ottlik, “Nothing’s Lost” 91–92)

The “tangible, minute particles of the moment,” the fragments of a sensory perception that precedes language, become defining, subject-shaping features in both Ottlik and Wolfe. The colours and hues, the play of light and shadow, the characteristic smells, the tangible surfaces and the various external and internal sounds appear in both stories as sensory perceptions that trigger and guide remembrance, similarly to Proust’s madeleines. In “Nothing’s Lost,” the paramnesia triggered by the senses comes almost as a shock to Jacobi. The March sun is setting just opposite Ottó’s front door, and the carved stones decorating the door are “brought to life.” The “hitherto unknown but true spirit” and “essence” of the objects is revealed to Jacobi:

This twilight sunshine was clear but weak. It shone directly upon the doorway and as it brushed against the grain of the stone slabs—languidly, wearily—it seemed to blaze up from them, tracing long, black needles, finely drawn threads of shadow, patterns of unrivalled ferocity, making the stones sparkle and flash, *bringing them to life* as though it were illuminating the secret, tender, hitherto unknown but true spirit of roughness, of coarseness. ... The shape, the location of the staircase was familiar, but it was the stone that he had recognized. Not its grain, not its pattern of shadow, but its essence. Its content, its meaning, at all events its music. It was in C minor. ... My God, Jacobi thought. I have known this land. (Ottlik, “Nothing’s Lost” 85)

In “The Lost Boy,” Gant’s avalanche of memories is triggered by the heat. The languid afternoon heat evokes a veritable cascade of past feelings in the narrator. The smells (the smell of oil upon the floor), the noises (the swishing of the beady chains), and the lights (the “varnished darkness” and “stained light”) mingle with the old feeling of loneliness and absence. While in Ottlik the stones, the objects surrounded by sensory experience “are brought to life,” in Wolfe it is the feelings, lights, and smells themselves that seem to be alive:

The house would seem so lonely, and sometimes he would sit inside, on the second step of the hall stairs, and listen to the sound of silence and of absence in the afternoon. He could smell the oil upon the floor and on the stairs, and see the sliding doors with their brown varnish and the beady chains across the door, and thrust his hands among the beady chains, and gather them together in his arms, and let them clash, and swish with light beady swishings all around him. He could feel darkness, absence, varnished darkness, and stained light within the house, through the stained glass of the window on the stairs, through the small stained glasses by the door, stained light and absence, silence and the smell of the floor oil and vague sadness in the house on a hot mid-afternoon. And all these things themselves would have a kind of life: would seem to wait attentively, to be most living and most still. (Wolfe, "The Lost Boy" 34)

These relatively long and detailed descriptions, only short excerpts of which have been presented here, slow down the narrative pace and make time stand still; however, their interruption of the plot and suspension of action is only apparent. In fact, they dissolve in the narration, because they are part of the intense, intellectual, and often physical contemplative process of the protagonist. Both Jacobi and Gant explore the scenes of their childhood, Jacobi crouches and Gant sits on the steps in order to regain the perspective of a child and thereby rediscover themselves in a less reflexive, but more authentic world, that of children, which is defined by sensory rather than intellectual perception.

The comparison of the texts reveals the main motifs of the related worlds in Wolfe's and Ottlik's prose: the presence of autobiographically inspired protagonists (artists) featured in a considerable part of the oeuvres, the actual or imagined return of the protagonist to the scene of his childhood, the remembrance of the past as the totality of all moments "standing still, projected upon the dome of the universe" (Ottlik, *School at the Frontier* 115), the experience of rediscovering childhood and realizing that "nothing's lost," and finally, the "surplus" of existence, the tangible substance of things, which, even if it cannot be expressed with words, may perhaps be condensed into a work of art—an old foxtrot played together in Jacobi's case, a novel or the statue of a stone angel in Eugene Gant's fictitious life.

The similarities of the above-mentioned motifs can convince us that the intertextual connections between these two texts are probably not accidental. This parallel reading of the two short stories sheds light on a hitherto unknown literary influence in Ottlik's oeuvre. It is not only Ottlik who reads Wolfe, but both of them read and rewrite the parable of the Prodigal Son from the Gospel according to Luke. From this perspective, despite the similarities the main difference between the two texts and the worlds of the two authors also becomes more visible. This difference is perhaps best illustrated by Wolfe's lack of agape and its timeless re-enactment in Ottlik's short story. In other words, Ottlik's protagonist believes in salvation, while Wolfe's alter-ego seems not to.

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DÁVID SZOLLÁTH

Halfway to Success: Miklós Mészöly's Departure for a West-European Career and the Hungarian Literary Émigré Network



Miklós Mészöly had a promising start in becoming an international success in the mid-sixties. His first novel of critical acclaim, *Death of an Athlete* (*Az atléta halála*), which had been restricted from publication for years in Hungary, was first translated into French by Georges Kassai and Marcel Courault and published in 1965 under the title *Mort d'un Athlète* by the prestigious Parisian Éditions du Seuil. The French edition was considered a minor victory over the Hungarian communist cultural policy, and was soon followed by the German translation of György Sebestyén, published as *Der Tod des Athleten* by Hanser Verlag. Mészöly's literary works were published in Czech, Danish, Estonian, Finnish, German, Italian, Japanese, Polish, Romanian, Spanish and Slovakian during his lifetime¹—but despite this promising start and extensive list of translations, Mészöly did not become a popular, nor even a well-known writer on an international level.

Our principal informant on this topic is probably Mészöly himself, although he is not always a reliable one. In a book-length interview with László Szigeti, *Párbeszédkísérlet* [*Experimental Dialogue*] (see Mészöly and Szigeti), Mészöly reflects upon his international career that started well but did not eventually reach the heights hoped for. Before digging into

¹ For the detailed publication data of Mészöly's works in translation, see the appendix of my monograph on Mészöly (Szolláth, *Mészöly* 657–87). On the Miklós Mészöly Society's initiative a group of researchers started to build up an updated bibliographical database in 2021 regarding the writer's critical reception abroad.

details, however, we should first see briefly what obstacles were in the way of a Hungarian writer who ventured forth from the fortified borders of his Communist country.

Today Hungarian publishing houses do their best to sell their authors on the international book market. Authors are assisted by agencies, supported by grants for translators, and take part in a European network of literary exchange that facilitates crossing political and linguistic borders. In the 1960s, however, the state authority made leaving the country difficult for most writers, sometimes even impossible. The *Correspondence* of Mészöly and his wife Alaine Polcz (see Mészöly and Polcz) makes it clear that they had to negotiate almost constantly with the authorities to get a passport. When Polcz was allowed to visit her family in Transylvania, Romania, Mészöly was usually made to stay home in Hungary. In 1966, Polcz had to beg György Aczél, the infamous minister of cultural affairs, to allow her husband to visit a writers' meeting in Vienna (Mészöly and Polcz 430). When he was invited to the Netherlands, Mészöly was cautioned that he would get passport only if he did not give a lecture at the meeting. He was threatened that in the case that he did give a public speech abroad, publication of his forthcoming books would be blocked. Ágnes Nemes Nagy, Balázs Lengyel and Polcz also asked Mészöly not to provoke the authorities, but Mészöly was rather stubborn in his resistance (Mészöly and Polcz 431). After he met Ferenc Fejtő in Paris, Mészöly was asked by a secret agent to report on the famous Hungarian émigré, though he naturally refused (Mészöly and Szigeti 188). Some years later, probably the same agent suggested informally that Mészöly should accept the Kossuth Prize as a friendly gesture towards the regime, which he also refused.

In spite of all the political harassment that Mészöly was subjected to for decades, he made long journeys to Western Europe whenever he was given a passport. He went to Austria, England, France, Germany, Italy, The Netherlands, Spain, and Switzerland. His most important journey was a one-year DAAD writer's grant in West Berlin (1974–75), where he finished his most provocative novel: *Film*. During his year in West Berlin he also visited Scandinavia and Spain.

During the decades of Communist rule, a network of Hungarian literary émigrés in Western countries tried to counterbalance the negative effects

of Socialist Hungary's cultural policy. Writers, editors, scholars, translators and journalists living in exile, most of them fervent anti-communists and engaged with Hungarian literature, were editing journals and books almost without resources. Their public was a handful of Hungarian readers living abroad in different countries; they organized conferences and a literary life among themselves, without the faintest hope that their work could reach readers at home. Mészöly was grateful for their help, as he told Szigeti in the *Párbeszédkísérlet* mentioned above, "... if I weren't surrounded by people looking out for me, half of my books wouldn't have been published" (Mészöly and Szigeti 185). Since the publication of the Mészöly–Polcz correspondence, we can see more clearly who Mészöly's key partners and supporters in Western Europe were:

György Kassai (1922–)	Paris, linguist, translator of <i>Mort d'un Athlète</i> , <i>Saül</i> , and other works by Mészöly
László Cs. Szabó (1905–1984)	UK, writer, essayist, editor
László Gara (1904–1966)	Paris, journalist, translator
Győző Határ (1914–2006)	London, writer, poet, critic, translator
Eva Haldimann [Éva Román] (1927–)	Geneva, translator, journalist
Gyula Sipos [penname: Pál Albert] (1935–)	Paris, critic, journalist
Cécile Nagy (1929?)	Paris, translator, teacher
Ibolya Virág (1950–)	Paris, translator, publisher
André / Endre Karátson (1933–)	Paris, writer, critic, scholar

The three most important Hungarian émigré literary circles in Western Europe helping Mészöly were as follows:

Mikes Kelemen Kör	The Netherlands
Magyar Műhely	Paris
Szepsi Csombor Kör	London

These men of letters in exile were eager to show the world that Hungarian culture and literature differed greatly from what Socialist Hungary's retrograde cultural policy was trying to disseminate abroad. Miklós Mészöly was considered to be an aesthetically innovative and politically blameless uncorrupted writer, and therefore he was a perfect choice for them for that purpose.

Mészöly was appreciated throughout the entire emigrant society. For example, László Cs. Szabó, probably the most prominent of the Hungarian writers abroad "was singing odes" after reading *Accurate Stories on the Road*, a novel of Mészöly based on the travel notes of his wife, Alaine Polcz (Mészöly and Polcz 553). Gyula Sipos [a.k.a. Pál Albert] reviewed four of his books, and one might agree with István Margócsy that for Sipos, Mészöly and Dezső Tandori were the two greatest living Hungarian writers: he saw them as heralds of a new age of Hungarian literature (see Albert; Margócsy). In his representative handbook, the *Oxford History of Hungarian Literature*, Lóránt Czigány writes, "The leading author of modern Hungarian fiction is undoubtedly Miklós Mészöly" (Czigány). Győző Határ, one of the most progressive Hungarian writers of fiction at that time, wrote three reviews of Mészöly's works, praising his art in all of them. The one he wrote on Mészöly's collection of short stories *The Glory of Colonel Sutting* [*Sutting ezredes tündöklése*] begins with this line: "All that Mészöly wrote is a masterpiece by definition, all books by Mészöly contain masterpieces" (Határ 239). As one can see, it was not their fault that Mészöly did not reach wider international fame.

Self-management was not Mészöly's strongest attribute. Without the help of his friends, he would not have had any chance for foreign publications and premieres in theatres. In an interview with László Szigeti, he relates that one of the obstacles was just bad luck. He gives two examples. Paul Flamand, founder and director of Éditions du Seuil, strongly supported Mészöly. He was planning to publish his collected works in nine volumes, but after *Death of an Athlete* only *Saulus* came out, because

Flamand retired (not because he died, as Mészöly mistakenly remembered in *Párbeszédkísérlet*) (Mészöly and Szigeti 186). The famous French stage director Pierre Chabert, who already had rehearsals of Mészöly's *Window Cleaner* [*Ablakmosó*], was injured in a car accident before the premiere so it was cancelled.

But Mészöly did not just blame circumstances in *Párbeszédkísérlet*, he was rather self-critical. He recalled bad decision-making, too. Flamand's successor at Éditions du Seuil, Michel Chodkiewicz, suggested to him that *Death of an Athlete* should be advertised as a "*roman du sport*," that is, a sports novel. German journalists also presented the novel as such, and there was a British publisher—we do not know which one—who rejected the manuscript by claiming they would not publish another sports novel shortly after the success of Alain Sillitoe's *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*.

Mészöly's refusal to allow *Death of an Athlete* to be advertised as a sports novel was just one of his unfortunate marketing decisions. He turned down an interview with a journalist from the French daily *Le Figaro*, who was interested in portraying him as an oppressed writer from behind the Iron Curtain (Mészöly and Polcz 668). Presumably, it was not the only time he did so, since Mészöly repeatedly wrote and talked about similar situations. He felt offended every time Western European writers or journalists asked him about the political circumstances of his country. He feared that it was only the "political sex-appeal" ("*politikai pikantéria*") of his situation as a persecuted writer that aroused public interest instead of the merits of his work (Mészöly 427–28). One can suppose that as a writer inexperienced in Western Europe's capitalist book market, he expected that in "the free world" (as it was described in those times) the public would be interested in *literature in itself*. Reviewing all of his reflections on the subject from his letters, essays and interviews, we can assume that Mészöly hoped his introduction to the French and German audience would be free of political and economic components. It is probable that Mészöly, who firmly rejected any compromise with Hungarian politics, would also have resisted all the temptations of the free book market.

Mészöly told Szigeti that he was not good at managing his affairs and neglected his career altogether. His late self-criticism can be confirmed

with various testimonials by his friends such as László Márton and Endre Kukorelly. As Márton says in a documentary film on Mészöly:

He wrote one of his masterpieces in Berlin, the novel called *Film*, but he did not care about building up social capital. That is why after his grant period was over, he came home to Hungary, and they slowly realized that he was not one who would win a Nobel Prize. (Dér and Gerőcs 10)

Kukorelly says in the same film:

Once he said to me: “Bandi—I fucked up my life.” By that he meant that he was more interested in dating and chasing girls than his career as a writer. (Dér and Gerőcs 10)

This picture of Mészöly letting his career drift away ought to be balanced by what we learn from his correspondence with his wife. Although Mészöly felt himself uneasy in situations when he had to promote his books, they often exchanged letters about translations of his works, invitations from abroad, and contracts with foreign publishers, etc. Polcz backed and encouraged her husband who was noticeably motivated by the interest in his work. Boglárka Nagy, the editor and publisher of the *Correspondence*, even states that Mészöly’s lack of interest in foreign publication is nothing more than a myth (Nagy 867–68). The late Mészöly’s self-image probably contradicted the actual practice of his earlier years. Documents from his archive housed at the Szekszárd Museum of Mészöly (Mészöly Miklós Emlékház) supports this suspicion. The museum keeps three handwritten address books that belonged to Mészöly which are full of foreign telephone numbers. Hundreds of contacts are listed and sorted by countries. There are publishers, translators, journalists—some of them Hungarians living in exile, some of them foreigners.

The question of whether or not Mészöly was adept at self-management can only be answered after deeper research into Mészöly’s reception abroad.

In the following part of this study, I will try to give a brief reconstruction of the viewpoints of those Hungarian émigrés who selflessly helped Mészöly's career. I will mention three of them: Gyula Sipos, Endre Karátson and Győző Határ.

The first common feature is obvious, almost trivial. Most Hungarian exiles were fervent anti-Communists, which evidently left a mark on how they perceived and valued literature. Some of them considered their literary work as an alternative to contemporary Hungarian literature produced within the country's borders, others attempted to influence Hungary's literary life from the outside. Their journals, such as *Új Látóhatár* [*New Horizon*] in Munich and *Magyar Műhely* [*Hungarian Atelier*] in Paris proposed alternative literary canons. In one of his articles on the topic, Sándor Hites uses the term "correction of values," meaning correction of the aesthetic, literary and political values which were propagated in Communist Hungary (Hites 708). Émigrés favoured writers who were tolerated ("tűrt") or even banned ("tiltott") in Communist Hungary over those who were supported ("támogatott"), to use the magical triad of terms of the Aczél period. The Parisian journal *Magyar Műhely*, for example, published special issues on Miklós Szentkuthy, Sándor Weöres, Lajos Kassák, and on the neo-avant-garde.

In the articles and reviews written by the three critics discussed here, a modernist *aesthetic* system of values is often intertwined with *political* values. Unconventional works of a modernist flavour are usually associated with the categories of freedom and independence, while more conventional ones tend to seem politically opportunist. The works that provoke the official social realistic canon are usually highly valued due to their countercultural status, beyond their own artistic merit. This is most clear in the reviews of Gyula Sipos. For example, he praises Magda Szabó's earliest novels for their modern ways of narration, their Faulknerian touch, and the use of interior monologue, but later criticizes her for becoming an established woman writer of the regime and for abandoning modernist narration (Albert 12–14, 52, 53). Sipos wrote his most fervent reviews against books of literary history and anthologies edited or written by French and Hungarian Communist authors, like the Hungarian special issue of the journal *Europe*, and the works of Endre Bajomi Lázár and Vilma Mészáros (Albert 22–27, 46–51, 116–21). In general, in Sipos's view a

work of art could not be modern and Marxist *at the same time*. We can suppose that if Mészöly had accepted the Kossuth Prize or had made political concessions to Hungary's ruling party, then he and his work would not have been welcomed in such a warm manner in émigré circles.

We also have to point out that linking aesthetical and political considerations was certainly not a privileged distinctive feature of the literary émigré community. Blending together assumptions about artistic modernism and political independence in a literary critical judgement was probably one of the most widespread traits of oppositional literary criticism in Hungary before 1989. The main difference is that outside Hungary, the connection between Marxism and retrograde art was expressed in a more straightforward way.

The second common feature is connected to the first, and this is a less banal one. What probably most strikes the present-day reader is that the language used by Hungarian critics in exile seems to be more relevant and contemporary than the language of the same period's criticism published within the borders. In order to understand Hungary's literary criticism of the State Socialist era, one needs first to study history, and this becomes all the more clear when one compares two critical texts of the same year about the same work, that only differ in place of publication. In his review of the collected criticism of Gyula Sipos, István Margócsy made a very similar observation. He says that:

Reading the open style of Sipos's texts we can only regret how much literary criticism was crippled at home. In the mirror of Sipos's texts one can see in depth that even those critics who did not follow official cultural policy were forced to use an untrue language and that how badly the actual discourse focusing on works was needed. (Margócsy 289)

Mészöly's books became a veritable critical battlefield during the decades of State Socialism. For today's literary historian, it is surprising to realize that in the debates over Mészöly, it was not the actual works but something else that was at stake. The debates went on about worldviews, *Weltanschauung*,

the political content of a literary style, about a philosophical movement (like absurdism or existentialism), and, of course, about historical and political taboos (like the Trianon Treaty, the Holocaust, Hungary's role in the Second World War, Stalinism, or the 1956 Hungarian Revolution). These were questions that could not be discussed openly in journals, so they infiltrated other media genres, such as literary criticism. That is why that the critical debates in the decades of State Socialism in Hungary were basically encoded *political debates* and only rarely actual literary debates. We can take as an example the scandal of the *Window Cleaner*, Mészöly's piece from 1963. It was clear for both sides that the dispute had little to do with the philosophical meaning or aesthetical value of absurd theatre and existentialist thought. It was all about power. The *Window Cleaner* was banned after two nights in the Miskolc Theatre, and Tibor Tüskés, the editor-in-chief of the journal *Jelenkor* who published the play, was relieved of his office. The critical charge against Mészöly's supposed existentialism in the following decade was nothing but pretext for blocking his publications.

The fall of Communism in Eastern and Central Europe happened more than thirty years ago. Linguistic techniques of political denunciation disguised as literary criticism on the one hand, and the rhetoric of oppositionist apology on the other—all that has been forgotten by now. The system of coding political connotations in criticism was a skill, even an art of that age that became hermetic shortly after the changing of regime. In the more detailed Hungarian version of this article (Szolláth, *Félbemaradt* 328–29), I analyse the causes of the rapid slipping of memory of this language. Here I only mention that the archaization of the language used in criticism before the 1990s in Hungary is more striking if we compare it to the Hungarian criticism published outside the country, for example in Yugoslavia and in the Western European countries. Although these publications were sometimes considered peripheral, today they often seem to be more durable, their arguments more easily comprehensible, because they are free of such political coding, of the subtle hints of a forgotten political context, and not compromised by omitting the untouchable subjects impervious to criticism.

But perhaps it was not as free as one might suppose? One of the well-known practices of Hungarian oppositional criticism was the careful and gentle way they treated writers who were politically banned. If a critic

was harsh on a writer considered to be oppositional, he or she would risk being seen as collaborator. A politically persecuted writer should not be sharply judged aesthetically. In the case of Mészöly, there were only a few exceptional events, when a friendly critic negatively judged one of his works in public. In one of these cases, Miklós Béládi, a friend and probably the best critic of Mészöly in the seventies, stated that his short fiction *Alakulások* [*Formations*] is not the direction that Mészöly should follow (see Béládi). His critical interpretation was originally given as a lecture at the Institute of Literary Studies of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in 1974. The Institute in those years was considered to be a kind of “safe place” for progressive literature and especially for Mészöly. At least seven researchers who worked in the Institute wrote positively about Mészöly before 1989 (Béládi himself, György Bodnár, Edit Erdődy, Béla Pomogáts, László Szörényi, László Varga, András Veres). It was one of the rare occasions when surely no one misunderstood Béládi’s critique of Mészöly.

Sometimes even the Hungarian critics living in Western Europe felt that they had to consider Hungary’s political situation. And that is why we can say that perhaps their texts were not entirely free from political encoding either. As Gyula Sipos recalls in a recent interview (Sipos 8), he was sometimes afraid that praising a Hungarian writer on Radio Free Europe would worsen that person’s situation at home, so he sometimes included some phrases in the style of the Marxist critics Pál E. Fehér or Vilmos Faragó in order to counterbalance his own evaluation. Despite examples of this sort, Hungarian criticism published outside Hungary had a higher level of freedom. Or, to put it in another way, its aesthetic judgement was less restricted. The examples here are the articles of Endre Karátson on Mészöly. For Karátson, Mészöly was undoubtedly one of the leaders of contemporary Hungarian fiction, but this evaluation did not prevent him from criticizing Mészöly’s essays in a long study (Karátson, *Képipró*). Karátson was also the first to analyse the relation between Albert Camus and Mészöly from a comparativist point of view, putting aside all the political connotations about Mészöly’s so-called existentialism (Karátson, *Mészöly*). Karátson and Sipos were able to analyse or even criticize Mészöly without the risk that their aesthetic critique would be taken as a hidden political message. It is not by chance that the critical writings of Karátson and Sipos—although their value is beyond question—remain largely uncited or seldom cited even after the publication of their books at the turn of the millennium. Probably, the independent position

they took and the autonomy of their judgement were too unfamiliar, and their texts simply did not fit into the usual canonical structures.

The third difference is again an obvious one. Hungarian intellectuals living in a foreign country had first-hand experience of the given country's culture while their colleagues at home were basically cut off from the European circulation of culture. In Hungary, foreign books and reviews were hard to get, and they could not afford to visit theatres, exhibitions, or conferences abroad, etc. Few of them succeeded in becoming an efficient a mediator such as Gyula Sipos. His articles in the *Irodalmi Újság* and *Új Látóhatár* and his reviews for Radio Free Europe were legendary. I quote András Pályi's recollections from the introduction of his interview with Sipos:

"The Sipos," living in Paris, knew everything there was to know about Hungarian literature and what took place in Hungarian theatre—in the seventies and eighties he was already a legend. We listened to him secretly on the radio and increasingly openly cited him. He was insightful and well-versed in not only the Hungarian and French artistic scene and trends, but the global artistic scene and trends—with beguiling effect. (Sipos 8; my translation)

Sipos was a mediator between contemporary French and Hungarian culture, and he was also something more. He was the Paris-based contact person of a network for diffusing foreign books to visitors from Communist countries. The network had other Hungarian participants with a similar objective (Zsuzsa Szőnyi in Rome, József Molnár in Munich, Mátyás Sárközy in London) and it was funded by the CIA through international organizations such as Radio Free Europe and the International Advisory Council. As Dániel Véri points out, the CIA used books as a means of cultural warfare and the book distribution programme targeted the Eastern Block (Véri). Art historian Krisztina Passuth, one of the Hungarians who visited Sipos in Paris, says in the interview made by Árvai and Véri:

Gyula Sipos was the book dealer in Paris. He lived in a rather sketchy apartment, but his two rooms were packed with books, even

more than ours, which was an accomplishment. As it later turned out, he earned his living this way. A foundation—I do not know what kind—trusted him with keeping these books in his home, and providing them to Hungarians who happen to come to Paris.

Those who visited Paris and received the address of Sipos on Rue Tombe Issoire went there and were given political, social historical, social science books as a present. These were mostly English language books. First I went there with my husband. We did not understand exactly why we received books from Sipos. Then it turned out it was not exactly a gift, as it was not from him personally. He also worked for Radio Free Europe, like my husband. The only problem was that these books had to be smuggled home. This was not safe but it was part of the deal. (Árvai and Véri 168)

Of course, not all Hungarian exiles were book smugglers, but being a part of two cultures and carrying out the duty of mediation gave them a special viewpoint on Hungarian literature. Translatability of texts had become of upmost importance. This is a critical norm evidently at work in the critical judgements of Sipos, Karátson and Győző Határ also. All three of them emphasize that Mészöly's work is not only good literature but literature worth showing to the world. Határ says that Mészöly meets the criteria of a writer who could reach international success, and he is a rarity in Hungarian literature that mostly isolates itself by turning in on its own problems of history and society, and is hard for foreigners to understand even with a good translation (Határ 239). (In the longer version of this study mentioned above, I point out that Mészöly's own ideas about the isolation of Hungarian literature have a lot in common with Határ's. The London-based writer's ideas possibly even had an impact on Mészöly's essays on the subject.)

Sipos, Karátson and Határ wrote simultaneously on Hungarian, English and French literature for decades. Karátson measures Mészöly and Esterházy by the literary standards of Kafka, Gombrowicz, Camus, Beckett, Borges and Nabokov. Though being a professor of comparative literature, Sipos might as well be called a "comparatist literary critic" by his bicultural situation as a mediator. His collected reviews and articles on French

literature, theatre and film present an impressively well-informed man of letters and a critic with high expectations.

Twentieth-century Hungarian literary émigrés had a special role in interpreting, translating and distributing Hungarian literature, but their work is still seldom analysed in literary studies. The reception and critical approval of Mészöly's work is only one example of the valuable alternative their writings offered in understanding literary processes from an intercultural point of view.

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The Spectacle of Intimacy: Exposed Corpses in Miklós Mészöly's Short Story "Winged Horses"



"Touching the eyes of horses with my eyelashes—it doesn't leave me tempted. Maybe death holds this experience" (Mészöly, *A pille* 182). We can read this note in Mészöly's workshop diary from the end of the seventies, and it can indicate a poetic challenge in Mészöly's prose like verbalizing stifled aggression, facing death and the stages of grief. My essay will provide an interpretation of the short story "Winged Horses" ("Szárnyas lovak") as an example of this effort, it will examine the metaphorization, the complexity and the contrast of timelines, the narrative techniques of freeze frame and slow motion, the focalization and the dynamic of the face-to-face interactions. "Winged Horses" was first published in the monthly literary and art magazine *Jelenkor* in December 1977, two years later it emerged as the opening text in a larger tapestry of short fiction under the same title; six years later it was the closing story of *Magasiskola* [*High School*], and it was repeatedly included in anthologies, which in itself illustrates the text's prominent place in the oeuvre. In his recently published monograph, Dávid Szolláth underlines that the volume also entitled *Winged Horses* is a consensual turning point of Mészöly's prose, and Szolláth stresses the new demand for integrative narration (Szolláth 26). Mészöly fictionalizes the past of that area and the family history in a historical and imaginary mythological frame, and this short story is an emblematic example of this ambition. *Winged Horses* (1979) contains fictional and non-fictional texts as well, the genre designations of titles (like map, notes, fieldnotes, reports, interviews) indicate the claim to connect the two groups of text, and to create new genres. Sándor Bazsányi underlines the connection and the differences (of the main character's and the eyewitness's attitude) between *Winged Horses* and a chapter of Nádas Péter's *Parallel Stories*, entitled

“A Fecund Apricot Tree.” The key aspects of his analysis are an examination of focalization, the characteristics of the protagonists, the system of rites, and the naturalness of amorality.

As mentioned, “Winged Horses” presents from the perspective of an anonymous narrator the drama of Teleszkai who discovers the corpses of his wife and her lover on straw scattered at the bottom of a tub—as the cellar air had suffocated them while they were making love in Teleszkai’s wine-pressing shed. The narration focuses on the description of the day after, instead of identifying the aetiology, it records the impenetrable silence, the confused motion and state of mind of the mourner. The narrator, younger than Teleszkai, does not remain a mere eyewitness or interpreter, because he is being forced by his inexperience, perplexity, and benevolence to be the assistant, the interlocutor, the audience, and the therapist of the husband and even the victim of his aggressive impulses.

In the *Memoires for Paul de Man*, Jacques Derrida writes:

... with the dark light of this nothing, we learn that the other resists the closure of our interiorizing memory. With the nothing of this irrevocable absence ... death constitutes and makes manifest the limits of a *me* or an *us* who are obliged to harbor something that is greater and other than them, something *outside of them within them*.

... And the figure of this bereaved memory becomes a sort of (possible and impossible) metonymy, where the part stands for the whole and for more than the whole that it exceeds. An allegorical metonymy, too, which says something other than what it says and manifests the other (*alios*) in the open but nocturnal space of the agora—in its *plus de lumière*: at once no more light, and greater light. (Derrida 34; 37)

The bewildered and obsessive gestures of Teleszkai, who discovers the corpses by chance “with loud animal snort” are in perfect consonance with Derrida’s insights: he does not touch the cadavers with his hands but observes them meticulously, then frames them like a director or a photographer, securing their immobility:

What still remained for him, though, was to engrave everything in his memory. He again rested his elbows on the rim of the tub, not taking his eyes off the two corpses. In point of fact this lasted for almost a whole hour. The manner in which the two bodies might be fixed was obviously not yet clear to him, but the recognition that there was no other choice was decided in that first hour. (Mészöly, “Winged Horses”)

More than oral or written narratives, stresses Marianne Hirsch, photographic images outlive their subjects, and enable the spectators to try to reanimate the past. The retrospective irony of every photograph consists precisely in the simultaneity of this effort and the consciousness of its impossibility (Hirsch 37). Teleszkai seems to bother predominantly to fix the dead models and the setting, but the text indicates the uncontrollable aggression of his interpretative framing gestures. In his book on trauma photography, *Spectral Evidence*, Ulrich Baer stresses the parallelism between the workings of the camera and the structure of traumatic memory. A photograph can be understood as a device that mechanically freeze-frames virtual chunks of time that is, in reality, always moving on. However, the desire of Teleszkai is not the preservation of time, but access to an explosive, distinct experience, and the translation of the event into a mythological language with the aim of private rituals. With Flusser, we can see photographs not as frozen moments but as “states of things [that photography] translates into scenes” (Baer 9). The difficulty of traumatic memory, as Baer argues, is not limited to its unavailability and resistance to representation. Very much like a photograph, traumatic memory can be characterized by the excessive retention of details that cannot be integrated into a non-traumatic memory or comprehension of the past. The recovery of traumatic memory—and the process of healing—consists often in making the event seem less unreal by draining it of its vividness, its persistence, its haunting details, its colour (Baer 80).

The straw wreath stuffed around the embracing couple stabilizes the corpses and pulls them in a complex metaphorical net, and it reveals and exposes them (in several ways). This complex metaphor raises ontological, theological and philosophical questions about the cadavers’ afterlife: do their bodies have any identity-based utility after burial? Will they be raised and reunited with their souls? His perception has distinctly nineteenth-century elements:

the corpse is determined by its liminality, the former living is continued to be associated with the remains that are seen as unstable, indeterminate, and ambiguous (Ashworth 569). Teleszkai draws attention to the trans-generational aspect of plaiting (and the eyewitness to that of narrating), since his father set traps this way: “‘The only trouble is one never remembers well enough,’ and with a few deft movements he had woven a compact plait and knotted the end, ‘My father could do it between his knees with one hand. A trap took his other arm away.’” The quoted phrases can signal the dangerous aggression of the metaphorical process: the wreath set like a trap attacks the hunter, the appearance of new meanings from the frame are threatening the monument of the corpses. The qualifier ‘other’ alludes not only to the father’s severed arm, but also to Teleszkai’s trapped wife and the lost one of his father, the chain of movements between the knees absorbs autoerotic meaning. The first clause of the previous quotation (“The only trouble is one never remembers well enough”) realizes the imperfection of the trap for oblivion and the failure of transmittance.

The tin board ironically mentioned in the first paragraph is metonymically connectable here, and in this manner the metaphor of the trap refers not only to the narrated situation, but also enlarges it to an existential metaphor that indicates the failure of the sacred and the profane equally. The intertext of the emblematic butterfly metaphor in Mészöly’s prose reverses it self-ironically to the gesture of writing. “He had nailed a tin badge of the Providencia insurance company onto a butterfly net (as a joke?), though few on the upper terrace could have known what this foreign word meant.” In the context of this issue, we can identify several textual references to the representatives of power (the police, the priest). It is desirable to beware of them, or at least taking your cue from them even in their absence, even when they are unavailable or devoid of any real protective or conciliatory power. The scene cuts in rapid succession in the first, achronological part of the short story are moderated in the quasi-linear narration of the profane procession that is reinterpreted by the tin board. The disruptive and reorganizing metaphors of the story dominate and render impossible the forming of the narrative identity like the intrusive memories experienced in PTSD.

The double trauma of adultery and grief are personally unbearable for Teleszkai, and he therefore seeks to transcode them mythically. The reference to Helios and Pegasus in the title are evident, the myth of Prometheus

provides a narrative for his solitude and sense of betrayal ("They take your liver out and you watch some bird sticking its beak in..."), the straw wreath refers the Ovidian story of Vulcan discovering the adultery of his wife Venus and her lover Mars. Vulcan fashioned a fine iron net to catch the couple in bed and publicly expose them to the other laughing gods. Aby Warburg saw archival images as a broad cultural storehouse of pre-established expressive forms, but rather than giving information about that past, its function as "points of memory" tell us more about our own needs and desires, our own fantasies and fears, than about the past to which they supposedly bear witness (Warburg 277–83). In Mészöly's short story only the priest and the narrator are the representatives of the very limited publicity of the case. The Ovidian interpretation can underline Teleszkai's role conflict: is he responsible for the adultery or is he a victim or a tragic hero or a loser?

The complex time-structure of "Winged Horses" intensify the profanation of Jesus's life story. Teleszkai identify the place of the secret/hidden intercourse, the tub filled with straw as a manger ("Now it's a manger and a wreath as well,") and the text alludes to the tomb of Jesus too. The two men discover the couple's death at 3 pm on Friday, and the husband remarks bitterly later: "If it were possible to choose who should be resurrected, do you suppose it would be Jesus? You would want even her blood, because it's hers..." We can realize with Ulrich Baer that the frozen picture of the corpses preserved by the photographic memory is the evidence proving the essential inaccessibility of the other, but in this short story it becomes the object of sarcasm, repugnance and disdain connected to the dynamically changing affective intensity.

The consistent focalization results in a very concentrated necroerotic ekphrasis of the cadavers, actually a list of personal objects and body parts:

They had only fitted into the tight space by interlacing their bent legs, with Rachel's underneath. Estván Töttös had lain on her face down towards the slit of blouse that was open to the waist and a pearl button ripped off with the teeth had stuck with saliva, dull side up, between the two breasts. "The blue ring isn't on her finger!" Teleszkai said in astonishment, and he wiped his mouth. Their clothes were open to the point that they were fully clothed and yet not, and their groins were tightly pressed together, with that not having been

changed by the sudden swooning. As is the case with men who are executed, Estván Töttös still had something of an erection; the iridescent film had begun to flake on Rachel's thigh. (Mészöly, "Winged Horses")

The graphically detailed description of couple's post-mortem appearance starts from the perspective of the younger, anonymous eyewitness, but turns to the husband's point of view, which focuses on the body of the seducer and on the evidence. "The transitional circles the final, and it is always going around; that is all it is. Which is why it is important that our claims meet the need to come up the scratch of occasional finiteness" (Mészöly, *Műhelynaplók* 411)—we can recognize the working method of the writer in the description of their observation. The description does not represent the medicalization of death watches, nor disgust of the uncomfortable simultaneity of life and death, nor the fears of transition, contagion, and death itself. The narrator aims to control his own voyeurism being conscious that Teleszkai follows his every single motion with his gaze and later provokes him too:

"So, what are they like? Have you looked at them?" I had managed to turn a deaf ear to the earlier question, but not this time. The two bodies were lying by and large as they had been, except Rachel's nipple looked as if it had shrunk more, and the angle of their arms was different. All the same, they were as unchanged as two Palm Sunday straw men; the only thing I couldn't decide was how I was going to tell him all this. Should I say that they hadn't moved a hair's breadth? It could be that my answer was of no interest; he just wanted a stranger to look at them, while he knew precisely could be seen behind his back. (Mészöly, "Winged Horses")

The view is turning from the intimacy to the publicity by the gaze of the narrator. In "Winged Horses," the personal, intimate, and private can only be represented through their violation. The gaze of the narrator, of the priest and of the reader are repeating the gaze of the seducer that violates the boundaries of marital intimacy; the presence of living characters is insulting.

The spectacle of the couple raises doubts in Teleszkai about the previous sentiments of Rachel and about the chastity of their marriage: the photo-like view becomes the evidence of the hidden rot and the cradle of lies. One of the characteristic manifestations of the inherent black humour of “Winged Horses” is that Estván Töttös works in a jam factory where the second shift begins for the guards at the beginning of the text.

The narration is rewriting the clearing up of the landslide in the gorge to the excavation of the dead and their exposure to viewers. The grieving husband consistently breaks every unwritten, sometimes superstitious communal rule of last honours: he leaves the corpses uncovered, does not prop their heads up, does not facilitate postures to stimulate an illusion of sleep, to ensure rest for the undead, or even to defy death. He closes the window-panes, puts them on his cart and carries them around like trophies and almost covers them up before the altar. The volume of the correspondence between Alaine Polcz and Mészöly informs us that in autumn 1976 Mészöly read *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* (Mészöly and Polcz 29), fashionable at that time, and mentions Alaine Polcz’s upcoming article entitled “The School of Death” (Polcz), which Mészöly later proposed for publication to *Valóság* (719). They used remarkably different discourses for the topic. Alaine stresses that the visual aspects of death are hidden by the contemporary European cultures; our inherently ambivalent relation to passing is burdened by a system of suppressing, averting and shuffling off (Polcz 63). Her argumentation and examples focus on the gap between the costumes of traditional communities and the lack of means in that regard in our societies (Polcz 68). She highlights in the conclusion of the article the meaningful human relationship to the ground and the different phobia of soil (Polcz 75), that has important references in Mészöly’s text too.

One of Levinas’s most important notions about death is the *no-response* (*sans-reponse*) that is referred to as the point of masking someone within his face (Levinas 9). “[I]n the form of an imprisonment within a labyrinth of uncertainties, lacking any connection between faces, which are only masks or appearances” (Levinas 169). The ekphrasis quoted before does not show the lovers’ faces, the absence experience of the grief is, first of all, a deprivation of the Other’s singularity. The intertextual density of the short story in this context is more meaningful, involving the rewriting of Mikszáth’s “A bágyi csoda” [“The Marvel of Bágy”] and “Szegény Gélyi

János lovai” [“The Horses of Poor John Gélyi”], the allusion to Arany’s ballade, “Vörös Rébék” [“Red Rebecca”] (Thomka 516). The description of the embracing corpses refers to Chapter 5 of Part 6 of Émile Zola’s *Germinal*. The destruction of the mine-shaft leads to Etienne, Catherine and Chaval being trapped together underground in a fight to the death. The corps of Chaval, the seducer killed by Étienne floats up the incline towards the couple in their agony on the rising water (513).

We can see similar layering of the frames of reference in the time structure of the short story as well. The folkloristic allusions detailed by Tímea Urbanik (for example: Palm Sunday straw men) are combined with and connected to the Catholic liturgical year circle (Palm Sunday, Good Friday and Holy Saturday before the missing resurrection), and to Biblical references (like the gesture of doubting Thomas). These references provide a liturgical frame to Teleszkai’s liminal temporal perception: the couple looks as if they were still alive, they do not decay, there is not any manifestation of putrefaction that excites disgust, they are clearly the proxy for the lost subjects, remaining vital to the dead person’s subjectivity and their previous relationships. The role of the priest would be to stabilize and control the grieving process, but he is incapable of finishing the service in his grotesque and ridiculous situation (kneeling in front of the corpses in sexual intercourse).

The dichotomy of the temporal perception is linked to the figure of the wife:

When we broke off for our first breather, he broke off four sprigs of acacia, on one of which there were still a few late blooms. “Rachel could get this as payment” he laughed out ... There were times when he would hum even while engaged in the digging work once it was *Flame-red flower, colour of love, the wind blows*, at other times vulgar tap-room ditties. (Mészöly, “Winged Horses”)

The natural background builds the set for the second wedding of Rachel. The refflorescence of acacia is the signifier of the second love and of the tragic consequences (in connection with Mikszáth’s short story). There is a characteristic marked contrast in these metaphors between the cyclical time of renewal, flowering and the finality of fate that oppose the symbolic order

of Teleszkai’s world. These oppositions result in textual “gaps” that create a carnivalistic condition, and shift the text towards the humour and the removal of fixed order (see the metaphors of the horses ploughing bunches of flowers, and the acacia leaves used for butt wiping).

This mythical time perception is contrasted by the profane ceremony of the Party that uses remarkably similar tools, decorations as the Church. A good signal of this parallelism that we read ‘alternate priest’ instead of ‘vice minister’ in the English version of the text (“At the cannery, where a week and a half ago an alternate priest [in the Hungarian text: vice minister] had opened a new plant, the floral decorations on the entrance gate had not yet been taken down”). Teleszkai himself points out the emptiness of the official celebration and struggles for his own, strange private ritual. “You should know that the police keep their eyes on everything. Of course nobody came out here in yesterday’s storm, when the lightning conductor was snapped off...”—the priest warns Teleszkai. The representative of the Church is present, but he is unable to stabilize and control the grief, he struggles to find a right ceremony-text too, because the official ones are inappropriate in that situation. The scene of Teleszkai breaking down and his resignation in the short story is marked by the abandoned, old ferry station by the Danube, scattered with garbage. Teleszkai’s insight remains silent, never specified, but put in a complex cultural-political context.

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STEPHANIE BIRD

Imre Kertész: Complicity and Comedy



Imre Kertész wrote in 2001 that “It was not Auschwitz—which I bore—that made me into a writer, but the military prison—the situation of the executioner, the *Täter* [perpetrator]” (*Einkehr Tagebücher* 69).¹ Kertész is not commonly thought of as a writer interested in representing perpetrators. He survived deportation to Auschwitz–Birkenau and Zeitz as a fourteen-year old boy, and his writing is more immediately associated with the victim’s experience; his best-known novel, *Fateless* (1975), is about the experience of such a boy who survives the camps. Yet under the Kádár regime, Kertész had to do compulsory military service and was assigned to the role of prison guard. Kertész’s work is centrally concerned with the themes of perpetration and complicity, and the enforced collaboration exacted by dictatorships and society more generally. His fiction offers some of the most complex and provocative explorations of perpetrators and of the relationship of perpetration to the whole society, and the responsibility of those who are complicit with or conform to the demands of the state.

This study considers how Kertész’s work challenges our understanding of complicity by offering a provocative engagement with two traditions of thinking about the relationship of literature (and art more generally) to questions of complicity. In one, literature allows us to understand complicity with wrongdoing and how it occurs, not least by exploring the complex motivations and emotional dispositions of characters and how they are situated within and respond to their social context. Novels can expose the tension between individual actions and the social processes that

¹ “Nicht Auschwitz—das Erduldeten—hat mich zum Schriftsteller gemacht, sondern das Militärgefängnis—die Situation des Henkers, des *Täters* [German in the original].”

normalise types of thought and behaviour. Another tradition of thinking about complicity, in which Adorno has been so influential, holds literature itself up for scrutiny, looking at the complicity of culture and scholarship in sustaining relationships of power and shoring up an undesirable *status quo*. In this tradition, aesthetic production and reception do not stand above any analysis of complicity, and textual analysis exposes the power dynamics within which the text is situated and which it perpetuates.

1 Executioners and conformists

In *Fiasco* (1988), the executioner is awaiting trial for the murder of 30,000 people. He does not speak of what he has done but theorizes that individual perpetrators like him are locked together in “miserable camaraderie” with his audience; they all belong to a world, “which allowed, tolerated, and thus wished for” (308) his fate. The executioner refuses any simplistic reduction of guilt to an individual, monstrous figure. He points to the “vitality of the relationship” (305) between him and those who condemn him; the “tacit agreement” (307) whereby he is found guilty of deeds the world did nothing to prevent but where his guilt serves to redeem others (305). He accuses his audience of using moral censure to silence him, thereby denying the relevance of his actions to their lives. He also insists on the significance of his account for understanding the human condition generally and for exposing the self-righteous innocence of the “not-guilty.” The old boy in *Fiasco*, the writer depicted in the novel’s framework narrative and author of the novel ‘Fiasco,’ is also vexed by the relationship of an individual perpetrator to her context. He muses on Ilse Koch’s motives and the way that Buchenwald was created by one “state of affairs,” which in turn created many others. In this cumulative “state of affairs,” each step contributes to a given and, at one level, impersonal fate. Yet at the same time as being impersonal, everyone takes the steps that enable that fate to occur. For this reason, everyone is implicated.

Throughout his work, Kertész points to the responsibility of wider society both in facilitating mass murder and in continuing to deny the conditions that enable it to occur. In *Detective Story* (1977), state-condoned violence occurs in a society whose members have, within only a few months, “grown accustomed” (31) to the state police and the repressive dictatorship. In *The*

Pathseeker (1977), complicity most obviously takes the form of a cover-up of a historical atrocity, with Weimar's baroque beauty disguising the murder scene of Buchenwald. The oppressive daily reality of dictatorships and the threat of state violence is the context within which Kertész's characters generally move. In *Fiasco*, the customs men shadow Köves, he witnesses people being arrested or transported off in the back of trucks (151), and he recalls that executions took place (336). In *The Union Jack* (1991), the narrator remembers the period of the 1956 uprising, a time of mass arrests and summary courts, "when everybody outside prison walls, everybody indiscriminately, could be regarded only as a prisoner released on indefinite parole" (44). At the same time, there is widespread complicity, for despite the visibility of state violence, it is also an "era of denunciations" (62). Crucially, however, the notion of complicity does not stem from the narrator. Indeed, he challenges the expectation that the response to the trials should be a moral one, for the only truth that existed was "the truth of arrest, imprisonment, execution, the shot in the head, and the noose." He has only retrospectively been "obliged ... to attribute significance to something which has only subsequently acquired significance in the public mind ... but which in the reality of those days, at least as far as I am concerned, had only very slight, or an entirely different, significance" (22).

In *The Union Jack*, the narrator's experience of 1956 and his later construction of it testify to a system in which the very means by which actions and events might be morally evaluated are absent. In a world in which the only truth is that of existential threat, the very nature of "choice" is put into question. In *Fiasco*, Köves describes his experience of becoming a prison guard and how, trying to behave with the best of intentions, he ended up striking a defenceless prisoner in the face, "the first and decisive step" (*Dossier* 129) into becoming a perpetrator. Köves recalls the unreality of the moment when he signed up to the job, of how his "existence went to sleep" so that he felt no "twinge of unease" to alert him to the importance of his decision. But he questions whether it was even a decision: "it wasn't me who chose the situation in which I had to make a choice, moreover a choice between two things, neither of which I wished to choose"—sign up or be punished (*Fiasco* 335). The "pressure of external compulsion" that is evident in dictatorships permeates daily existence. Totalitarianism promotes a "mindless situation." The most mindless aspect of a regime's "primitive trick of organization" is its enforced collaboration. B, the narrator of *Kaddish*

for an Unborn Child (1990), tells his wife that “merely by sustaining our lives, we ourselves contribute to sustaining totalitarianism” (71). Kertész reiterates this view when discussing the successful entertainment pieces he wrote as the Kádár regime stabilised: “That’s a well-organized dictatorship for you! The need to make a livelihood turned me into a collaborator” (*Dossier* 179). This point spans both his experience of National Socialism and the Kádár regime. Indeed, it is the Kádár era which, like Proust’s madeleines, revived “the tastes of Auschwitz” (*Dossier* 69).

Kertész repeatedly points to the way that mass murder, including Auschwitz, is an organic and necessary part of wider society and culture and this is why the experience of the camp epitomises something more universal:

The ordeal of the death camps becomes a human experience where I come across the universality of the ordeal, and that is fatelessness, that specific aspect of dictatorships, the expropriation, nationalization of one’s own fate, turning it into a mass fate, the stripping away of a human being’s most human essence. (*Dossier* 68)

Kertész’s emphasis on the “state of affairs,” the “world order,” and the expropriation of the individual’s fate, as well as his portrayal of violence and the fear of violence under dictatorship, seem to absolve individuals of responsibility for violence. There appears to be little scope in this view for a subject position that is not that of perpetrator, victim or collaborator, each of which involves the deadening of personality and with it, choice. Yet despite insisting in *Dossier K.* that “the secret of survival is collaboration” (66), Kertész is far from empathetic to the general population. He refers disparagingly to the “emergence of a collective morality (or rather immorality) of the functional man” (*Dossier* 170) in Hungary. Although he admits that consensus was motivated by survival and “an acceptance of realities,” it remains only “cheap conformity that undermined every moral and intellectual stand” (*Dossier* 170).

Resistance and opposition do not fare any better and are depicted as either futile or based on suspect motivations. In *Someone Else* (1997), the narrator disparages the active resistance movement, which rivals his revulsion for the regime (25). And B insists in *Kaddish* that he has always guarded

himself “against the cheap and perverted seductions of any sort of communal idea” (59). Mass complicity and the seductions of the resistance movements have in common that they refuse to recognise their own role in how they live and the deceptions of self-affirmation that they sustain. In contrast, the perpetrators in Kertész’s work are characterised by their ability to recognise the logic they have operated within. In *Fiasco*, the executioner describes the inner peace he feels, the state of “strange grace” that comes from the ability to look back on his life “with composure” (306). In *Detective Story*, Martens’s defence lawyer is positive about the torturer’s desire to write and his “wish to speak out and make sense of his fate” which “is the rarest case of all” (5). For the lawyer this is a sign that the “sovereign human person” is once again stirring to make sense of his fate. In his view, “everyone has the right to do so, and to do it in his own way” (5). The right to speak out is a sentiment that is at the heart of Kertész’s work and is inseparable from the need to recognize the truth.

2 *Writing and non-conformity*

In *Ich – ein anderer*, the narrator states that “life is either demonstration or collaboration” (86).² The demonstration he evokes is not the political demonstration of opposition movements, but the demonstration of truth, achieved by assuming one’s fate and writing about it. But the process of assuming one’s fate, far from being heroic, is a fiasco. Köves’s final realisation that he must write a novel leads to his becoming the old boy, a writer for whom writing is a struggle, and who is searching “for where he lost his way, why he couldn’t disappear, submerge, into the anonymous mass of history” (*Dossier* 124). For Köves, the decision to write a novel was a choice that felt like a necessity, and this is why the old boy’s search leads inevitably to the same choice and the same outcome: “the creative life proves to be an inescapable curse, its end product failure—the fiasco” (*Dossier* 124). Köves’s compulsion to write is also the old boy’s, who muses about whether to start work on his new novel again “(...like someone who still has a choice) (but all the while knows full well that he doesn’t)

² *Ich – ein anderer* has been translated as *Someone Else*. However, not all sections are included in the English translation.

(even though we always have a choice) (and we always choose ourselves...)” (*Fiasco* 86). Focalising the old boy’s thoughts, the narrator wonders what sort of freedom it is if the only choice is to choose ourselves, and suggests at the end of the novel that the choice of self is what “subverted necessity” (360). Such a choice is a struggle and presents a relentless demand. It requires a transformation of anecdotal, personal experience into the “realm of the whole and the general” as the narrator of *The Union Jack* says, quoting Dilthey (73). Indeed, anecdotal episodes must even be repudiated, as they are explicitly four times in *Dossier K*. (48; 54; 78; 139).

Aesthetic transformation necessitates the abstraction of the self into a generalizable truth “that ... follows the rules of art” and the “Remorseless ... laws” of fiction (*Dossier* 10). These laws demand that the artist tell the radical truth (*Galeerentagebuch* 317) which has nothing to do with the normal expectations of morality, for a moralist cannot be an artist; he merely judges the world in which he moves and merely re-creates the *status quo* (*Galeerentagebuch* 13). So when Kertész’s alter-ego expresses concern over the argument that the first steps into perpetration can “easily happen,” claiming that this position makes it “impossible to call any mass murderer to account,” Kertész is unambiguous in his response: “You are forgetting that as a writer I am not concerned with calling people to account but with accurate portrayal” (*Dossier* 129).

Accurate portrayal is the counterpoint to anecdote, kitsch and the popular combination of what Kertész describes as “blood, lust and the demon.” In *The Pathseeker*, the Commissioner, a survivor of Buchenwald, is critical of Goethe’s *Iphigenia in Tauris*. According to him, it is not only “tawdry romanticism” (83), it is also “cheating and lies set in blank verse” (84). Goethe’s play dramatizes how Orestes seeks to flee the Furies by stealing the statue of Artemis from Tauris to bring back to Athens. Like Euripides’s version of *Iphigenia*, Goethe’s Orestes succeeds in his task, pacifying the Erinyes and bringing his exiled sister Iphigenia back with him. For the commissioner, however, the benevolent and forgiving outcome of Goethe’s play represents “what they want us to believe” (86), and is a cover-up of real violence. He presents his own version of what happened, one that reflects the reality of his concentration camp experiences near Weimar, the centre of German classicism. He describes a *mise en abyme* scenario: Iphigenia is raped by the king’s soldiers in front of Orestes and his men, who are then hacked to pieces

in front of her. After finally murdering her too, “they all went to the theatre to watch the barbarian king exercising clemency on the stage as they, snug in the dress circle, sniggered up their sleeves” (87). In the commissioner’s version, the familiar image of perpetrators enjoying culture at the end of a hard day’s murdering is intensified into a scathing criticism of art’s complicity in deceit. Indeed, art’s aesthetic cover-up itself becomes a further source of satisfaction and amusement for the perpetrators.

The popular combination of blood, lust and the demon is tantamount to lying for Kertész. The mass murder of totalitarian regimes involves organization, not personal passions or proclivities. Unlike tragic murderers like Richard III, who vow to do evil, totalitarian regimes claim to be working for the common good. There is no place for tragic individuals or tragic representation in response to mass murder, and nor can “the demon” be found in individuals like Ilse Koch. Far from being “a great sinner worthy of Dostoevsky’s pen” (*Fiasco* 49), she epitomized a moral order rather than opposing it; she was the product of a state of affairs devoid of any aggrandizing demonic traits. In a totalitarian world equipped for murder, the demon cannot be found in an individual, for individuals have no fate. The hunt for the demon is part of the attempt to “salvage your souls” (39), as the narrator of *Kaddish* accuses his readers, part of the strategy of denial that comes with the assertion that there is no explanation for Auschwitz. What is left for modern literature is to show that the demonic can only be understood as meaning the destruction of the individual. Literature that does not do this is akin to artistic perpetration: “Like the records that are played in torture chambers to drown out the screams of those being tortured, the muffled rumbling of truth is suppressed by the cheap racket of so-called humanist literature” (*Galeerentagebuch* 33).

This rigorous demand for a non-complicit literature depends on the writer as the source of authenticity, since in a society in which one cannot decide one’s fate, the only identity is that of writing: “An identity writing itself” (*Ich* 56).³ Like the wardrobes in the old boy’s flat that are re-fashioned into shelves, the self is the subject that is constantly re-worked. This endless circularity reinforces the notion that freedom cannot come from the outside in an age when the “horrific social milieu” (*Liquidation* 55) denies

³ “Eine sich selbst schreibende Identität.”

the self. Kertész assumes his own fate by bearing witness to the truth of fatelessness, a life that is externally determined in a world that has not changed since Auschwitz. As a result, his whole oeuvre can be seen as made up of “ever-developing auto-fictional representations that together form a sort of life-novel” (Sarin 11).⁴ This is an ethical position for Kertész and one that is not limited to the constraints of dictatorship, even if it is dictatorship that crystalizes the modern condition.

Yet if the necessary choice to assume one’s own fate is the only form of freedom available, the question arises whether there are alternative possibilities that would offer a way out of the determining state of affairs that deprive individuals of their fate. What is the point of bearing witness if this is not possible? A frustrated Köves asks Berg precisely this question in response to the executioner’s account: “Does there exist another world?” And in response to Berg’s denial, Köves persists: “In that case, ... who is your ‘executioner’ addressing all along?” (*Fiasco* 312). This is also the problem Kertész laboured with when he started writing: “If power is totalitarian, and the accommodation to it is total, then for whom is one to portray man dominated by totalitarianism? ... Who would be left and be in a position to judge outside of the totality?” (*Dossier* 149; *Einkehr* 10). One answer to this question is that the glimpse of another world comes through the abstraction of the self through writing. This is not the freedom associated with free will, but freedom and distance from the self (*Galeerentagebuch* 243). Ironically given the terminology, in its negative form it is what Kertész presents as the “state of grace” of the perpetrator and victim, a “release from the burden of personality” (*Dossier* 131) that both roles share. In a less provocative manifestation, it is Kertész’s “embrace” of Kant’s notion of the supersensible, which Michael J. Shapiro describes as his “second freedom” (163) after the first liberation from the camp.

There are two further aspects of Kertész’s work that gesture to the possibility of another world and that act as irritants to the notion of total accommodation. The first is the centrality of dialogue to his work and the progressively growing voice of women in those dialogues. The second is the comic aesthetic that, though characteristic of his work, is often overlooked due to its unsettling intersection with the centrality of the Holocaust.

⁴ “...immer weiter fortgeschriebenen autofiktionalen Darstellungen, die zusammen eine Art Lebens-Roman bilden.”

3 *The challenge of women*

The aesthetic transformation that turns the author into an object and effects the move from autobiography into fiction is also manifested in the shift from the first person to the third person. Thus, for example, the old boy's notes are written in the first person, but *Fateless*, the novel about which he is writing his notes, is written in the third person. This is the "single bound" with which the old boy "switched from the personal into the objective and the general" (*Fiasco* 75), a bound that characterizes Kertész's work and is still evident in *Letzte Einkehr* (2014), when the "I" of the diary switches into the third person for the two planned novel extracts. It is the process of abstraction, the postulation of I as someone else, that leads to the prevalence of dialogue in the texts. As B states in *Kaddish*, "if one writes, one *engages in a dialogue*" (18), which, as Sára Molnár comments, ensures that "polyphony appears in the language of one narrator" (164). As soon as there is dialogue, different perspectives and challenges to any single position are voiced. Frequently, these dialogues are conducted between figures who can be understood as Kertész's alter-egos, such as Berg and Köves, Federico and Enrique Salinas, the commissioner and Hermann, the two interlocutors in *Dossier K.* (2006), "I" and "K" in *Someone Else*, and Kingbitter and B in *Liquidation* (2003). The dialogues might be ironic in tone, as in the case of the old boy's internal dialogues, or they may take place with the figure of the narrator's wife. It is through these dialogues that the cost of non-conformity is exposed.

Dialogue by no means leads to compromise, resolution or certainty. In particular, the polarity between theory and life runs through the texts, assuming its most radical form in the relationship with the narrator or protagonist and his wife. In this relationship the dialogue is of a different order from the dialogues between two more obvious alter-egos, however robust and unreconciled they may be. The figure of the wife is not a writer and represents a radically different "someone else" in the texts. Bernhard Sarin argues, for example, that the female figures are allegories for Hungary and the reading public, and represent Kertész's developing relationship with them (Sarin 29; 99). In Kertész's early works, the wives and women are negatively portrayed through their alignment with the trivialities of life. In *Detective Story*, Jill is a superficial conformist. In *The Pathseeker*, the commissioner's wife is "absorbed in ... female whimsy" (14), but nevertheless

presents a threat with her liking of normal pursuits. He is filled with “ill-tempered resentment” that she is trying to assist him, for he wants to carry his secret and his “consuming emptiness” alone (76). He dismisses the question of why he does not feel gratitude towards her, for even to think about this would be a deflection from his work. His wife remains a distraction. Similarly, in *Fiasco*, Berg’s partner Alice is subdued in his presence, worried about disturbing him if he is working and anxious about his wellbeing. In response to Alice’s concern, Berg’s expression is “accusatory even in its plaintiveness, irritated even in its wordless sufferance” (211). This unflattering portrayal of Berg, and Köves’s more sympathetic response to Alice, opens an alternative perspective on Berg’s obsessional writing and the cost of its “authenticity.”

The commissioner’s wife and Alice are marginal in the two novels, but the figure of the wife becomes more clearly developed later in Kertész’s work, where the opposition of writing as bearing witness on the one hand and “life” on the other is starkly manifested in the opposition of living the truth of Auschwitz as opposed to love and children. The wife is increasingly important as someone who plausibly challenges the narrator-protagonist’s position. In *Kaddish*, B regrets any encroachments by his wife into the sanctum of his work, his “*real life*” (86). B’s wife does not understand his need to write, suggesting that if he is not successful, “then why bother writing at all?” (16). She cannot comprehend that he must write because, in Paul Celan’s words from “Death Fugue,” he is “whistled up every day to drive the spade deeper” (84). It is impossible for B to combine writing, a process of self-liquidation, with its being “*put to use*” (85) by anyone, including his wife, for this is what success would bring. However, the tone with which the wife is presented has fundamentally shifted. B recognises that her desire for his success would help her forget her own bad luck in life. Both her parents were Auschwitz survivors and she has grown up under its “mark” (77), feeling that “she herself no longer existed” because by being “born a Jew she could have only *Jewish feelings* and *Jewish thoughts*” (79). By thinking about his wife’s views, B gives them credibility, even if he is unable to exist any differently. Furthermore, he reports her view on the relationship at length; how she had hoped to save him with her love but that he constructed freedom by creating a dependence on her, in order then to struggle against it. He allotted her this shameful role “like a hangman to its victim” (116).

The wife's point of view is in reported speech, but is no less powerful as a result. It is delivered with the same uninterrupted vigour and emotional force as the rest of *Kaddish*, which is a non-stop, vehement outpouring, punctuated with B's repeated "No!": his refusal to have a child. His waves of words are a passionate elucidation of his position, in which the repeated interweaving and elaboration of themes and phrases (something "bellowed and howled inside me") offer a formal re-working in prose of "Death Fugue." Alongside the quotations from Celan's poem, B thus reinforces the necessary choice of bearing witness. At the same time, B's narrative waves are engulfing. The "I" dominates, and the increasingly frequent repetitions of "I said to my wife" reinforce precisely the relationship of speaker and audience that the wife has described. B's narrative replicates the process his wife has experienced, that he first "bowled her over with [his] mind, then aroused her sympathy, then ... made her [his] audience" (116). The outcome cannot be compromise. She leaves him and has two children.

In *Liquidation*, B's wife Judit speaks for herself. Judit has been entrusted with B's manuscript and his request that she burn it. She recounts the story of her relationship with B in very similar terms to B's wife in *Kaddish*, describing how living with him was to live "a voluntarily accepted, domesticated Auschwitz" (*Liquidation* 110), for he sought to "apprehend Auschwitz ... in the way he lived" (111). She feels humiliated by the fact that she "[sank] to the Auschwitz horizon" with him, for it meant reaching "the point where a person loses her bearings, her will, abandons her goals, loses herself" (108). Judit's "instinct for life awakened" when she met Adam on a trip to Venice and she left B, telling him "I wish to see the world as a place in which it is possible to live" (117). She also then has two children.

Alongside the wives' gendered positioning on the side of "life," they are also aligned with love. In *Liquidation*, Judit declares that love is "our only chance" (125) and Sarah, B's lover, asserts that "it was easier to hate than to love, and love for losers was hate" (81). In contrast, Kingbitter sees love as an obstacle to "[finding] our way back to ourselves" (48), just as Berg rejects love as a humiliating tyranny that "eats away at the conscience like the disgrace of the bloodiest crime" (*Fiasco* 315). The repeated "No" in *Kaddish* is B's passionate refusal to have children in a murderous world, so that his wife, and also Judit, can only have children once they have left a "voluntary Auschwitz." But as with so many of the dialogic juxtapositions

in Kertész's work, there is no resolution. B commits suicide and Judit's hope for love's redemptive force is relativized. Not only are her words taken from a draft ending of the play manuscript written by B, but this draft then has Judit and Adam laughing hysterically over the word "love", verbally flinging it at each other along with other objects around them, as though it is a frivolous game between two people. Furthermore, there is no escape from Auschwitz. B's request for Judit to burn his final manuscript is an action which he describes as "revoking Auschwitz" for her and her alone (*Liquidation* 121). Adam, assuming the familiar role of the man for whom Auschwitz undermines the possibility of "life," insists that Auschwitz cannot be revoked, for "everyone is Jewish" (*Liquidation* 122). Life is only possible if Auschwitz is denied, and such denial is impossible.

Nevertheless, love does not go away: "It survives. Like shame, like anguish" (*Galeerentagebuch* 301).⁵ In *Someone Else*, love promises happiness: the narrator refers to M's talent for making him happy (86) and he thinks he was happy sitting with M at the foot of Mont Blanc (95). In *Dossier K.*, Kertész not only describes "love as [Magda's] sole implement" (208), but also how she persuaded him to rent a workspace in Berlin to achieve the inner freedom to write. Here, the opposition of truth and life that is so stark in Kertész's earlier work is breaking down. Magda is also a key figure as the narrator's wife and constant presence in *Letzte Einkehr* and as the mother of a son with his own family, the narrator is also occasionally drawn into family life. It is significant that *Liquidation* is dedicated to Magda, for the novel marks an end for Kertész. He later said in interview about the book: "With *Liquidation* I brought something full circle, and this circle really is complete Now I'm interested in age and death."⁶ The burning of B's final manuscript is one sign of this transition, as is B's suicide. Kertész encourages the reader not to read this suicide literally when he writes in *Letzte Einkehr* that we should imagine *Liquidation* as a novel written by B, the narrator of *Kaddish*, who is exploring possibilities and dangers that B recognizes within himself (*Einkehr* 232). B's death can be understood as a feasible mirroring of other survivor-artists' suicides, but also as the

⁵ "Sie überlebt. Wie die Schande, wie die Pein."

⁶ "Ich habe mit *Liquidation* einen Kreis geschlossen, und dieser Kreis ist wirklich geschlossen. ... Mich interessiert jetzt das Alter und der Tod." Quoted in Sarin 140.

symbolic death of a self. Such a death is powerfully portrayed at the end of *Someone Else*, when the narrator expresses his complex anguish over the death of his wife, A. The self that dies with her, with all its history and creative struggle, means that whoever makes the next step “will no longer be me but someone else...” (346).

4 *Comedy and pleasure*

As Molnár has observed, the irony and self-irony of Kertész’s work have been misunderstood, facilitating interpretations that focus on his texts as autobiography and simplistically identify the author with the protagonists (Molnár 163). I wish to argue that the comic dimension of Kertész’s work adds a vital and radical dimension of freedom to his writing, gesturing to another world. Kertész castigates Adorno’s dictum that “To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” as “a moral stinkbomb,” for “as far as aesthetic ‘pleasure’ is concerned, did Adorno expect these great poets to write bad poetry?” (*Dossier* 105–106). “Like it or not,” says Kertész, “art always regards life as a celebration” (*Dossier* 104). Kertész’s comic aesthetic replaces a moral stinkbomb with an ethical explosion. The intrinsic ambiguity of the comic, its playful ability to generate and hold together incompatible perspectives, challenges convictions and questions the sacrosanct, universal nature of normative values. The comic challenges what Michael Mulkay refers to as “serious discourse” by ignoring its demand for congruity. Comedy’s “interpretative duality,” including those dimensions of comedy that elicit a feeling of strangeness (as conveyed in the German “das Komische”), is unsettling and refuses moral and political schematization (Mulkay 37).

The abstraction of the self and its aesthetic transformation into someone else or another frequently creates the distanced tone that enables irony to flourish. This is evident already in *Fateless*, when on seeing the crematoria in Auschwitz, György comments that they elicit in him a “sense of certain jokes, a kind of ‘student prank’” (111). This reaction is provoked by the incompatibility of murder and the civility he witnesses, with the gas chambers surrounded by lawns and flower beds and people being treated with solicitude. He gets the impression of a stunt: gentlemen in imposing suits, smoking cigars, who actually came up with the idea of the gas, then the bathhouse, next the soap, the flower beds, “and so on” (111). In *Dossier K.*,

Kertész ascribes the initial rejection of *Fateless* to the challenge it represented to the authority of the Hungarian dictatorship, and refers to the “sarcasm inherent in its language” (*Dossier* 183). The language of *Fateless* also incorporates his sense of the absurd, for György observes the torment of the camps while at the same time remaining fascinated by the “most peculiar” (119) impressions. So the tightly and ruthlessly controlled column of marching prisoners at Buchenwald, of which he is part, reminds him “of those caterpillars in a matchbox that as a child I had guided with the aid of slips of paper and prods, all of which somehow slightly intoxicated, even utterly fascinated, me” (122). The physical and mental degradation of the prisoners are registered by György when he nearly fails to recognize one of the boys he was deported with. The once dapper Fancyman is now a “strange creature ... his face all sunken, pinched, and peaky” (154), who shuffles past unable even to respond to György’s greeting: “and I thought to myself: Can you beat that! Who’d have thought it!” (155). György’s startlingly laconic observations continue once he returns home, and in response to the journalist who refers to “the hell of the camps” (248), the boy responds: “I had nothing at all to say about that as I was not acquainted with hell and couldn’t even imagine what that was like” (248). He goes on to assert that “In any case, ... I didn’t notice any atrocities” (256).

In *Fiasco*, the old boy’s notes about the process of writing about the concentration camp offer a surprising and funny metaphor for remembering his time there, which was not “exactly a bowl of fun.” The reality of Auschwitz swells within him like “a yeasty dough,” its presence like an “undigested dumpling, its spices belching up” (71). His metaphor encapsulates the mixture of pleasure and difficulty he feels, as well as illustrating the comic edge of his self-representation. This trait dominates the framework narrative of *Fiasco*, which is characterized by self-deprecation, irony, and an often incongruous combination of hyperbole and scrupulous accuracy. This results in some very funny writing, not least when the old boy is harsh in his self-deprecation, repeatedly exclaiming “Good God!” or “My God!” in response to his own notes (17; 34), or chuckling in response to “the question of my future, my social status” (38). The old boy’s former writings also demonstrate this trait, especially when he compares Goethe’s opening assertion in *Dichtung und Wahrheit* that “*the constellation was auspicious*” with the “earthly signs (I have no idea about the heavenly ones)” into which he himself was born, which “attested to the superfluousness ...

of my birth" (91). Such self-irony is matched by his often extreme and witty responses to his environment. He refers to the "odious street" he lives in as "The Slough of Deceit," not made any better by the signposts, which are "symbols of futility" (3). The old boy's all-consuming task of writing the truth is hampered by the noise made by Oglütz, the overweight, television-watching female Cyclops in the flat above. The old boy intones a special text as he softens the wax of his earplugs, which is in marked contrast to the narrator's overall tone: "You fucking miserable, scummy, old Nazi bag" (22). And, resorting to an absurd comparison, this noisy neighbour has forced him to lay in a stock of earplugs so large that they, "(like Josef K.'s shame) (would in all likelihood outlive him)" (21). So startling is the metaphor of the old boy's mother's voice, that "drilled like a laser beam into mashed potatoes" (95), that the narrator himself comments on it as neither "graphically [nor] logically apposite" but nevertheless a faithful representation of the old boy's thoughts.

Hyperbole underlies much of *Fiasco's* framework, often combined with exaggerated pedantry. One of its most obvious visual and formal manifestation is the constant use of parentheses. The narrator's descriptions of the old boy and his environment are qualified by comments in parentheses, which are at the same time both detailed and superfluous, as when he offers the product specifications of Maya II model armchairs or the name and place of manufacture of his German earplugs. Often the parentheses combine precision with a surprising and incongruous emotional response, as when he describes a bit of protruding wall, the purpose of which has never been established, as being "covered over (out of bashfulness, so to speak) by a glued-on (and very messily glued-on at that) wooden board (an appurtenance of the bookcase, as it were)" (3). These parentheses even build up into whole paragraphs of step-by-step elaboration, such as when the narrator relates the situation at the wife's bistro and ends up referring to eternal recurrence (30), or describes the paperweight lump of stone and then digresses into commenting on general ignorance (16). The parenthetical comments are sometimes opportunities for a notable change of tone from ironic distance to a momentary flurry of flamboyant metaphor. The narrator describes people of about fifty as coming to a standstill "(on the hook of time ...)" which may pull him "(... into the wasteland of the other shore, into a shadowy, desiccated abstraction amidst succulent colours and palpable forms)" (8).

Kertész's comedy has a powerful satirical edge to it, pointing to the absurdity of life under a dictatorship. Thus, the endless parentheses formally reinforce the enclosed world in which the old boy lives and writes. He recalls the ludicrous situation years before, when his wife-to-be was released from prison and assigned her old flat which was in fact now confiscated and sealed off. She then returned to the officer who had released her so that she could at least sleep in her cell and ended up sleeping in his office. Later, she and the old boy tried to clear her name, but could not do so because—in the absence of any wrongdoing and record of arrest and imprisonment—there was “nothing to be cleared” (*Fiasco* 68). The absurdity of memory culture is starkly conveyed in *The Pathseeker*, when a funny-looking man with gold teeth, dressed in plus-fours and checks, directs the commissioner and his wife to Buchenwald's entrance. This is a fitting portent for the ludicrousness of the camp itself, which has become a tourist attraction with guided tours and a cinema; good for a Sunday outing (58). It reinforces the difficulty of speaking of atrocity and how to respond to it, which also takes on a comic aspect as Hermann and the commissioner's difficult discussion disintegrates into a ridiculous search for the commissioner's umbrella.⁷

However, as with all facets of Kertész's work, the absurdity of the dictatorship is generalized to become existential. The murderousness of the world is pithily conveyed by the narrator of *The Union Jack* when, after eagerly reading thrillers, he is suddenly “uninterested in who the murderer was: everybody was” (17). And with an Auschwitz metaphor so extreme it becomes funny, he describes his feeling of alienation after being re-categorized as an untalented journalist: “The diabolical wooden spoon had once again scraped the very bottom of the human soup in the cauldron of so-called world history in which we all stew” (*Union* 32). The accumulation of parentheses in *Fiasco* reflects how the old boy can only live as though incidentally, constantly having to qualify himself as a result of having no fate, compared to the figure of Goethe who lives his fate as his main text, and whose coherent self attracts no interruption. The old boy exemplifies the

⁷ It is difficult not to think of Borislav Pekić's *How to Quiet a Vampire*, published in 1977, the same year as *The Pathseeker*. An umbrella is central to Pekić's exploration of atrocity and the absurd dimensions of totalitarian logic.

general condition of man as B explains: when man is reduced to nothing he is “not tragic but comic, because he has no fate”; but “he lives with an awareness of tragic fate” (*Liquidation* 18).

The discrepancy between the awareness of tragedy on the one hand and having as one’s only ethical choice the necessity of choosing one’s own questionable and accidental existence on the other, means that writing itself must be comic if it is to articulate truth: “To produce a literary work ... nowadays, here, in this situation, is in any event a humorous if not to say comic act” (*Galeerentagebuch* 86).⁸ The comedy at play here is ironic and absurd and echoes Adorno’s insistence on the importance of the absurd, not because it has no meaning, but precisely because it demands a negotiation of meaning: “The logical figure of the absurd ... negates all the meaningfulness logic seems to provide in order to convict logic of its own absurdity” (Adorno 263). The absurd is only one dimension of comedy, one in which elements of weirdness and alienation are most distilled, but they are intrinsic to “the situation,” in contrast to comedy written for entertainment. Writing light comedy for a living is very different. It is “an onerous, depressing” labour (*Fiasco* 255) and forms part of a complicit life, with a refusal to acknowledge the murderous world. As the old boy very funnily says to his mother when she asks him why he no longer writes comedy pieces: “Because I don’t want people to laugh. It makes me envious” (60).

Thus, the comic in Kertész’s work is a necessary articulation of having no fate while having an awareness of a tragic fate, and is frequently a product of the narrative mode. In *Kaddish*, it arises out of B’s highly excitable and uncontained tirade, which combines intense, sustained emotion and his desire to convey his alienation with his horrified rejection of a murderous world. B assumes the “faculties of a comic or fool” (Molnár 104). The relentless outpouring tips into hyperbole, not least in the repeated expressions of horror with which he recounts his shocking adolescent encounter with an aunt, the “bald-headed woman ... in a red negligee.” The “traumatic disruption” (Zolkos 158) of B’s recurrent memory, which triggers his examination of what it means to be Jewish, does not exclude its comic effect. It does,

⁸ “Ein schriftstellerisches Werk hervorzubringen ... ist heute, hier, in dieser Situation, auf jeden Fall eine humoristische, um nicht zu sagen komische Handlung.”

though, complicate B's perspective and the modes of identification it elicits, undoubtedly adding a self-critical component. And the very conception of *Liquidation* points to a playfulness in Kertész's work that is often overlooked, with the narrator of *Letzte Einkehr* describing it as a game with the reader and as the "satyr play" (232) to *Kaddish*. In the novel, characters are faced with extracts of a play by B entitled *Liquidation. A Comedy in Three Acts*, a play that accurately predicts how they react to B's suicide. Even the play with names has a comic edge, for B is short for Bee, as B "liked to call himself," joking with the reader's desire for coherence between the Bs in *Kaddish* and *Liquidation*. In *Dossier K.*, the exchange between Kertész and his alter-ego is often witty and ironic, with echoes of the old boy's acerbic comments. So Kertész asserts at one point, in contradiction of much of his oeuvre, that "I'm on the side of cheeriness. My error is that I don't elicit that feeling in others" (*Dossier* 59). And of his mother's survival of the war he remarks that "Faust made a pact with the devil, my mother with a Gestapo officer, and she came off best" (*Dossier* 93).

In *Letzte Einkehr* the comic aesthetic often manifests itself as self-deprecating irony, as when the narrator sees watching tennis on television as evidence of his concerning condition. The condition is caused by the new form of conformity that Kertész's life has assumed: as a brand. He cannot keep pace with the operating speed of the new writing business (90). The brand "Kertész" causes a new form of alienation, for he carries a person around within himself who he has nothing to do with (121) and whose existence he has to perform before he can fall back into becoming a mistake-making nobody again (154–55). Yet he appreciates the fact that "Kertész de luxe" (131) allows him to stay in excellent hotels and earns him a good income (105). He has become an institution and is sent books about Auschwitz daily, which is a perversity as he says (221), but also has its ironic funny side. As with his previous works, the comic inheres in the mismatch between the writer's alienated reality and his awareness of a tragic fate, which in his role as feted "Holocaust writer" is now being projected upon him. But as he re-iterates, "humour is like plot: you should have both" (265). Indeed, he regrets the lack of comic appreciation in those close to him. When he discusses with M the question of who should look after his literary estate after his death, he feels unable to say "we can discuss that when I'm dead" because his family "are characterized by a total lack of cosmic humour" (280).

Kertész certainly cannot be accused of lacking a sense of humour, let alone a cosmic one. His comic aesthetic points to a key facet of his work, which is that even if its “raw material looks fairly cheerless, the form is able to transform it and turn it into pleasure” (*Dossier* 58). Indeed, the comic is itself a crucial element in turning content that is not a “bowl of fun” into aesthetic form. Kertész’s emphasis here is on writing: “writing ... is heightened life” (*Dossier* 58). So although, as Philipp Schönthaler argues, comedy, as the awareness of the impossibility of a tragic fate, can be understood in Kertész’s work as a symptom of “the loss of an ethical order” (250), comedy is not limited to this negative function. Undoubtedly, the act of writing is central to Kertész’s highly individual conception of an ethical stance, whereby the transformation of the self into the abstracted aesthetic object is the only way to secure freedom and with it, the legacy of bearing witness. The necessary choice of the self results in the capacity to make other choices that might be deemed forms of resistance, such as feigning illness to escape, being a prison guard (as Kertész and Köves do), risking one’s life to bring a boy his food ration (as “Teacher” did for B when he was in the camp), or refusing to write literature for the satisfaction of the state or his readership, and struggling with the marginal and impoverished lifestyle that it brings. These choices remain resolutely individual; they are neither political nor collective, and they have no pre-determined outcome. Crucially, however, even though Kertész’s ethical emphasis is on the act of writing, his persistent comic aesthetic, involving not just irony but humour and wit, opens an ethical space for readers. This space eludes what Robert Eaglestone describes as Kertész’s “negative space” (“Aporia” 47) or later as “stasis-as-resistance,” his refusal of “the basic principles ... of narrative” (*Broken Voice* 70). It ensures that readers are challenged in their response to his work and potentially liberated from totalizing schemes in the texts. The unpredictable and arbitrary dimension of comedy exceeds narrative control and safeguards individuality against dehumanizing systems. As Simon Critchley writes in his critical study of the philosophical privileging of the tragic paradigm, laughter acts as “a site of resistance to the alleged total administration of society” (Critchley 235). It also acts as a site of resistance to any totality that Kertész seeks to portray.

5 Coda

In *Letzte Einkehr*, the narrator points a few times to the gulf between the brand “Kertész” and himself the writer. His new public role in his view enforces a different type of conformity from that of a dictatorship, but it results in the impossibility of saying things openly. He has started to understand the pressure that feeds a general lie and which he feels it is impossible to fight against for fear of losing his popularity: “Lying and total self-abandonment belong to having good manners” (194). This view seems uncontroversial, and it adds a further layer to Kertész’s explorations of complicity and the extent to which an individual necessarily conforms. However, the narrator’s regrets about the need to lie follow his assertion that Europe is being flooded by Muslims, who will destroy it. Europe is facilitating its own decline through its suicidal liberalism and the stupidity of democracy, a view linked to his assertion that stupidity and sales statistics are democratic, unlike the “lonely and aristocratic task” of writing (100). The narrator feels unable to state his view on Islam openly and so is drawn into the lie (193–94). This is one of three places in the text where the narrator expresses islamophobia. He is of the view that Islam knows only the language of hate in relation to other peoples and religions (190) and he positions Europe as being in a clash of civilizations against the East, starting with the war against the Persians (168). He condemns Europe for its self-destructive and naive liberalism; it produced Hitler (190) and has been unable to get out of its moral quagmire since Auschwitz.

For those lulled into believing that Kertész would assume the mantle of liberalism as a result of his experiences of Auschwitz and the Kádár regime, these are shocking and challenging assertions. But any such response should alert the reader to her own assumptions and projections. The status of these comments is of course debatable, for *Letzte Einkehr* is, after all, a fiction in Kertész’s terms and to that extent one more articulation of “someone else.” And, contrary to what the narrator says, he very much does go public with his views in the form of the text *Letzte Einkehr*. Nevertheless, these moments remain disquieting. Kertész seems to offer an example of precisely the sort of crossing over into “collective accusation” and “ideology” that he condemns as destructive in *Dossier K.* (115). The islamophobic utterances seem to lack the aesthetic framing of many of the other challenging areas that Kertész explores. In contrast, for example,

to Köves hitting the man in the face, in which the self is implicated, the generalizations about Islam place the narrator above the situation he is condemning. As it is, Kertész's work offers a powerful criticism of Europe and its failed liberalism, without raising the spectre of an external threat. As a result, the narrator's remarks seem more akin to post-9/11 moralizing than the pursuit of truth through writing. And as such, the remarks are instructive, for the narrator's islamophobic words recall Kertész's insistence that "you can't know" who is "the sort of person who would strike somebody in the face" (*Dossier* 129).

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JÁNOS SZÁVAI

Dream Narratives in the Hungarian Novel: Mészöly, Kertész, Krasznahorkai



The representation of the rhythm of sleeping and waking has a long history. Plotinus reversed the everyday formula: in his works, waking up means stepping out of everyday existence, and stepping into a higher reality.

Many times it has happened: Lifted out of the body into myself; becoming external to all other things and self-encentered; beholding a marvellous beauty; then, more than ever, assured of community with the loftiest order; enacting the noblest life, acquiring identity with the divine. (357)

Thus, we live two lives: a conscious and an unconscious one. As Carl Gustav Jung wrote, the unconscious period, which makes up if not half then at least a third of our lives, is a period in which free will cannot manifest itself, in contrast with the conscious period, in which—provided it exists at all—it has the opportunity to prevail. The time spent in an unconscious state is also the time of dreams. We know how great a significance Friedrich Nietzsche attributed to this part of human life: he regarded it as the source and origin of all art. He made this claim in *The Birth of Tragedy*, and further elaborated on it in an aphorism in his *Human, All Too Human*:

In the dream, mankind, in epochs of crude primitive civilization, thought they were introduced to a second, substantial world; here we have the source of all metaphysic. Without the dream, men

would never have been incited to an analysis of the world. Even the distinction between soul and body is wholly due to the primitive conception of the dream ... (26)

Dreams (and visions) naturally and self-evidently appear in written literature as well. In Homer's *Iliad*, Zeus sets events in motion with the help of a dream; in order to convince the hesitating Agamemnon of the necessity of starting a war, he resorts to the intervention of the god of dreams. The dream, which is repeated three times, is integrated into the text in a fully natural manner; the narrator is situated above the story, as it were, he knows and sees all that passes at the human and divine levels. Thus the language of the narrated story is entirely homogeneous, the acts and speeches regarded as referential appear in the same manner in the poetic text as those seen and heard in the dream. The distinction between them is due to the narrator alone, who simply announces that the recounting of a dream will follow the description of the preparations for war. Whether the audience follows actions presented as realistic or as part of a dream, we remain in the same world, the world of language, which Nietzsche called a separate world created by mankind. The difference between the two lies in their function: the dream narrative reveals the truth to the characters within the narration, the truth which they would have attained with less certainty in any other manner.

In the Judeo-Christian tradition, it is similarly a truth of a higher order that manifests itself in dreams. In the *Gospel According to Matthew*, Joseph has three dreams, all three of which have life-changing consequences. In the first dream, the angel of the Lord speaks of Mary conceiving a son, in the second he warns Joseph that they will have to flee to Egypt, and in the third the angel tells him that they may return from Egypt to Israel. What is more, Joseph is also warned to go to Galilee instead of Judea. The essence of the mechanism operating in the dream narrative is that only errors and mistakes are possible outside the dream, and only the Lord may guide men to the right path in the wilderness of life.

In the above-mentioned texts, the dream narrative is located in a threefold structure consisting of the narrator, the addressee, and the audience of the text. The situation within the text is clear, the addressees—Agamemnon,

Joseph, and so on—never doubt the truth of the message they receive. The character situated outside the text, i.e. the reader, only receives this truth conditionally, in the event that they accept the superior nature of the sender of the message, the existence of God or the gods.

The novel is different. The world of the novel, as Georg Lukács puts it, is “a world without God” (93), “[t]he novel is the epic of a world that has been abandoned by God” (88). The novelist recognizes the duality of the world; hence the ever-present irony, which, according to Lukács’s theory, is a “formal constituent of the novel form” (74). This is the only way in which unity can be achieved, that “internal form” or “totality” which makes the novel “the representative art-form of our age: because the structural categories of the novel constitutively coincide with the world as it is today” (83).

It logically follows from the above that the realistic novel that regards itself as referential does not deal with dreams. We will not find dream narratives in the novels of Balzac, Stendhal, Flaubert, or Tolstoy. After the ideological victory of the Enlightenment, those elements that had previously formed an integral part of the discourse on the world and humanity no longer had a place in serious discourse.

In *The Theory of the Novel*, Lukács becomes uncertain when discussing Dostoevsky: apparently, he is unable to integrate this author into his carefully elaborated model. He would probably need to amend the above-cited criteria in order to include Dostoevsky among the authors listed as references in his theory of the novel. One point where the theory and the novel clash is precisely the re-inclusion of the dream narrative in Dostoevsky’s novels. It is well-known that the novelist was inspired by *Acis and Galatea*, a Claude Lorrain painting exhibited in the Dresden Museum, when formulating his most important dream narratives. Dostoevsky evokes the idyllic world depicted in Claude Lorrain’s painting as a dream image on three occasions: first in *Demons*, where Stavrogin visits the monk Tikhon and tells him about his dream. In his written confession, Stavrogin reveals that he accidentally ended up in Dresden, where he visited the museum and saw *Acis and Galatea*, which he refers to as *The Golden Age*. The memory of the painting is related to Stavrogin’s grave crime: he seduced the ten-year-old Matryosha, and did not intervene when the child subsequently hanged herself. In *The Adolescent*, it is another sinner, Versilov, who sees the dream evoking the golden age.

The idyllic image of the golden age appearing in a dream of the protagonist receives its most detailed elaboration in the short story *The Dream of a Ridiculous Man*. This time the narrator makes no references to Dresden, Claude Lorrain, or *Acis and Galatea*. However, the idyll, the sinless, paradisiacal world is similar to the world appearing in Stavrogin's dream. The narrator, the ridiculous man, also states that the dream reveals truth, that is, the dream is truth itself. The narrator would assign to the dream narrative the same function that we have seen in Homer or the Bible: this is the only road to attaining truth.

The modern, enlightened world, however, works in a different way. The first two sentences of the short story already invalidate the conventional threefold structure: "I am a ridiculous person. Now they call me a mad-man" (5). That is, the harmony seen in the dream, the golden age, the sin-free world is only relevant to the narrator, and is not valid for anyone else. We may perceive the impossibility of attaining the desired goal in two ways. The first and more important of these is the problematic nature of the role played by language. Structuring and transposing into words the images appearing in the dream, which seems to be problem-free in the dream narratives of Antiquity and the Bible, here seems to come up against insurmountable obstacles. The narrator wishes to tell the story he experienced so that it may present an example to follow for all of his listeners; if they understand and believe it, then earthly life may at once be transformed and brought in line with the images seen in the dream, and the once existing paradisiacal state may be restored. However, the narrator cannot find the right words and is unable to recount what he saw on the Island in a manner which would have the desired effect on his listeners.

The other problem lies in the interpretation of the painting itself. Similar to the protagonist of his novel, Stavrogin, when Dostoevsky speaks about the golden age after visiting the Dresden Museum, he does not take into account the title of the painting, which alludes to the story with a tragic ending in Greek mythology. The painting depicts the idyll of the two lovers; Acis is sitting, Galatea embraces his neck, there is an Amor figure in the foreground, and two others in the left corner; we see a man in a boat, and a ship a little farther off at sea. Only Polyphemus is missing from the story as told by Ovid, the giant who is in love with Galatea, and who will in the next moment crush his rival to death with a rock. The golden

age exists, and it is indeed evoked by the painting, but this golden age is extremely fragile and bound to end soon, just like the dream recounted in fiction, which evokes the Garden of Eden. It is the ridiculous man himself who will provoke the Fall that will bring an end to the world, which is a paradisiacal version of the earthly one, and the new world will henceforth be identical with its earthly counterpart. The ridiculous man who sets out to prophesy wishes to convince his fellow humans of the superiority of a world that may have existed once, but certainly does not exist at the time of his prophesying; of course, he appears ridiculous and even as a madman to others. However, this part of the narrative points out something, an entity that Carl Gustav Jung in his writings on dreams calls the common heritage of humankind, part of the collective unconscious occasionally manifesting in our dreams.

Thus, among the great realists of the nineteenth century, Dostoevsky is the only one who considers it important to use dream narratives, and he finds the appropriate method to incorporate these into his narrations. In the twentieth century novel, the problem remains the same as in the previous century. It was Thomas Mann who continued to apply the solution proposed by Dostoevsky. *Doctor Faustus* would not work without a devil; the novelist solves the problem with the procedure borrowed from Dostoevsky. Like Ivan Karamazov, Adrian Leverkühn has a conversation with the devil while in a delirious state, splitting his own self. What is more, Mann used dream narratives decades before *Faustus*. In *The Magic Mountain*, for example, Hans Castorp sees a golden age-type dream when he is caught in the snowstorm. If we take it as our starting point that *The Magic Mountain* is a Bildungsroman, and thus its narrative is composed of several threads—those of Castorp, Naphta, Settembrini, Doctor Behrens, Doctor Krokowski, Peeperkorn and Madame Chauchat—then the dream narrative is also one, if not the most important, of these threads. However, dreams acquire an even greater significance in the life or rather the death of Gustav Aschenbach, the protagonist of *Death in Venice*.

The dream narrative, which recounts the invasion by the half-animal, half-human horde of the alien god, i.e. Dionysus, occupies a relatively short space in the story. Nevertheless, it is not unexpected, as the entire short story is in fact a preparation for this dream. The classicist writer arriving at the Venetian Lido believes he has a glimpse of beauty itself in

the adolescent Tazio. In the beginning, he tries to describe and interpret what he sees and what he feels when seeing this beauty by using the elements of his classical education. A quote from the *Odyssey* indicates that Aschenbach has read and quotes classical authors in the original, and this is followed by Plato's *Phaedrus*, which he uses on several occasions to depict the situation, by imagining himself in the role of Socrates, and casting the beautiful Polish boy in the role of Phaedrus. The writer, portrayed as a modern incarnation of Apollo, increasingly becomes a thrall to Eros. Freed from his irony, he falls out of the role of Socrates completely, and delightedly identifies with the clamouring, raging, destructive, cannibalistic horde. "The interpretation is earlier than the dream, and when we dream, the dream proceeds from the interpretation" (297), says Joseph to the butler and baker in the Pharaoh's prison, when they ask him to decipher their dreams. This observation in *Joseph and His Brothers* remains valid in Aschenbach's case: the transposition of his experiences into Antiquity requires a continuation: this is the dream, and the dream narrative clearly indicates the only possible conclusion to the plot.

It is certain that Thomas Mann, who places himself in the position of the omniscient narrator, integrates the description of dreams into his narratives in a convincing manner. The problem of dreams has been an important topic of the discipline of psychoanalysis since the time of Sigmund Freud. Nevertheless, even in the twentieth century, the novel makes scant attempts to include the dream in its still strongly ironic world. Albanian author Ismail Kadaré's 1985 novel, *The Palace of Dreams* is an interesting experiment, which is set in a country (in the last days of the Ottoman Empire), in which a regime bent on achieving totalitarian power attempts to control the dreams of its subjects as well; a separate institution is established in order to record the dreams of each subject so that nothing may remain outside the authorities' control.

I present here three Hungarian examples, *Saulus* by Miklós Mészöly (1968), "Jegyzőkönyv" ["Sworn Statement"], a short story by Imre Kertész (2002) and two novels by László Krasznahorkai. Miklós Mészöly's novel is an attempt to solve a mystery. Approaches to the Saul/Paul transformation have appeared and reappeared in the history of European thinking from medieval fabliaux to Pasolini's text (which remained a script as the film could not be made due to Pasolini's death), or to János Térey's verse novel

Paulus. The original biblical narrative consists of three parts. The first is the realistic story of the persecutor of Christians. The second represents the miraculous element, the vision: Jesus speaks to the persecutor. The third is another realistic story, the story of the man changed from Saul to Paul. In classical manner, the vision or dream conveys the divine will, the divine message, thus contains the unquestionable truth.

The historical approach lends particular weight to the Saul/Paul story. In his 1869 book on St Paul, Ernest Renan, who submitted the history of Christianity to a positivist analysis, attempts to explore and prove the thesis that the Pauline turn also marks a turning point in the history of humanity. Renan claims that Paul's actions, i.e. the expansion of Christian thought and faith beyond the Jews and to the pagans, set a new direction for European history.

Mészöly's novel presents only the first two parts of this triptych. More precisely, the first part takes up almost the entire length of the novel, whereas the retelling of the mysterious transformation fills only the last few pages. The novel begins with two mottoes. The first is a Pauline text, the second is the famous question that Camus poses in *The Stranger*, the questioning of the mysterious and insoluble moment: Why does he fire four more shots into the dead body lying on the floor? (93). The Camus intertext can be approached in several different ways. In the following, I wish to present an approach which is absent from secondary literature. This approach focuses on the phrasing of the French author's sentence about the Hungarian Revolution and involves the word pair persecutor–persecuted, which Camus used to describe Kádár in one of his articles on the Revolution. There is no difference, Camus writes, between Rákosi, the bald killer, and János Kádár, the persecuted persecutor. This is a word pair that also defines the essence of the Paul–Saul metamorphosis.

Saul is also a persecuted persecutor. The mystery suggested by the narrative is how Saul fulfils both of these roles. Mészöly places a surprising insertion at the centre of the narrative:

I was lying up on the roof in front of my tent, watching the stars. ...
I had never had the kind of vision that prophets speak about: but

I had seen myself all the more often in the middle of a terrifyingly vast space, at the very bottom of my own empty presence. At these times, I dived into the waking dream as one who continued the investigation even there... (80)

This is followed by the evocation of six waking dreams, six narratives that move the plot along. The narrator clarifies in advance that these are not prophetic visions, not narratives of a divine origin that set out the future or determine the line of action. Saul recalls dreams of a Freudian character, whose origin is clear: the passion consuming his every moment, the continuation or completion of the investigation. Thus the dream is fed by the life of the dreamer, and it coalesces into a peculiar narrative from the fragments of this life, unspoken, incomprehensible, and banished into the subconscious.

The descriptions of the dreams follow one another in a seemingly unconnected manner. The narrator does not comment on or try to interpret his dreams, the interpretation of which thus remains a task that falls on the reader. This, of course, follows naturally from Mészöly's writing method. The first dream contains a bewildering moment: "Tamar comes towards me, herding seven piglets" (81). Saul castrates the piglets. In the meantime, the roles are reversed, and the woman draws the stranger to herself. For the reader, this dream means recalling Saul's series of failures.

In the second dream the dreamer walks down the wide Straight Street. The definite article indicates that there is only one such street. In the first part of the novel, Saul is continuously compelled to follow narrow, winding alleys. At last, however, the dreamer can walk down a wide and straight road. This is the kind of dream that Sigmund Freud calls wish fulfilment.

The third dream recounts the burial of the centurion. After the burial, the dreamer sees a huge boat with dead fish underneath. The interpreter of the law, who also attended the burial, steps under the wreck, and moves no more. Everything speaks about death here: the burial, the boat evocative of Charon's ferry, the dead fish, the fate of the interpreter of the law. If we continue this line of thought with the biblical parables in mind: in contrast with the gospel, there is no fish here to serve to the crowd.

The fourth dream is the opposite of the third. The dreamer is invited to the feast of Rabbi Abiathar, the leader of the investigators. The three-terraced house is surrounded by a moat, which the dreamer enters at the end of the dream narrative, and sees it teeming with fish. He starts fishing with his bare hands. The interpretation of the dream is obvious: there will be something at last with which to feed the multitude. In the fifth dream, night has already fallen, and the dreamer thinks he sees a man move in the darkness. He cannot make out the man's face, nor does he know who it can be. The reader interpreting the dream can see here the prelude to the wish fulfilment. This is then stated in the sixth dream. "An endless, large, flat body of water. A hand rises out of the water. There is a man upheld by this hand, who at the same time sustains the hand" (85).

This is an open reference to the Old Testament narrative. The difference between the original dream and Saul's dream is obvious. In the former it was God who sustained the arm so his man could defeat the sinner, whereas in the latter there is no divine intervention, the hand belongs to a human, who is aided by another—or perhaps the same—person.

The dream narrative also plays a special role in Imre Kertész's work titled "Jegyzőkönyv" ["Sworn Statement"]. The author places the double reminiscence at the beginning of the text, immediately following the pre-ambles. It is a recurring dream, a dream about the Saviour appearing outside his door. In the first instance, which is remembered at the moment the second is taking place, the Saviour appears as a positive character, a handsome young man. In the second, however, he is an ill-favoured figure who looks like a homeless person. This is a nightmare: the Saviour peers inside through the peephole, and his hand suddenly reaches into the flat, which fills the narrator with terror.

Since Sigmund Freud, dreams have become a scientific topic, but nothing more: dreams remain a marginal phenomenon, and the contemporary novel treats them accordingly. I will exemplify this with two of László Krasznahorkai's novels. In the bar scenes of *Satantango* (Chapters 4 and 6), nearly all the characters of the novel are present, with the exception of Irimias and his companion. Sooner or later all those present fall asleep. First to do so is Kerekes, the farmer, who dreams, but we learn only as much about his dream as the others perceive: a few incoherent words and a gesture.

From the deep pit of Kerekes's stomach rose a quite unclassifiable grumble that eventually reached his lips and issued forth in words like "... bitch" and "really" and "or" and "more" though that was all they could make out. The grumbling culminated in a single movement, a blow aimed at someone or something. (116)

We may suspect that the farmer's dream is a continuation of his rough daily existence. There is nothing here of the duality which characterizes Dostoevsky's dream narratives, or, to use Bakhtin's terminology, there is no enthronement or dethronement; the dream is in fact irrelevant, without significance. Its function lies in this very irrelevance, as this is the point in the novel at which the protagonists, Irímias and Petrína, appear, and Irímias's enthronement takes place. The dream exists, yet it is not important. The essential is happening elsewhere.

The dream scene in *The Melancholy of Resistance* (*Az ellenállás melankóliája*, 1989) shows a similar approach; we see the sleeper from the outside, and we learn only indirectly that she is dreaming. This is the dream of Mrs Eszter at a special moment in the novel which may be regarded as the turning point of the story. After intercourse, when her lover, the chief of police has left, the woman falls asleep. The narrator first describes the manner in which this takes place, presenting it as a sudden separation from the material environment surrounding the dreamer: "all disappeared; floor, walls and ceiling had no more meaning for her; she herself was nothing but an object among objects" (202). It is not surprising that Mrs Eszter, the objectified human being, although she soon "penetrated to the dense core of her dream" (203), does not dream of anything that the reader should be informed about. Here, too, the narrator describes the dreamer from the outside: "for a moment her face contorted ... and [she] kicked off the eiderdown, stretching her limbs as if about to wake" (205). The narrator presents the different stages of the dream, and in the meantime he also tells the story of three rats cautiously appearing and searching for food. The rats chew half a loaf of bread, but Mrs Eszter, upon waking, does not object to this, mainly because she awakens from a nightmare: "like someone recoiling from a scene of horror, she gave a disconsolate snort, trembled, turned her head rapidly from left to right a few times, beating

it on the pillow, then, staring-eyed, suddenly sat up in the bed” (207). In spite of the rats, waking up means an escape here.

I have brought Krasznahorkai as an example because his novels synthesize, as it were, the problems of the genre of the novel in the second half of the twentieth century, including that of the dream narrative. In fact, it does not matter whether there are dreams in this world or not, as they do not affect existence and have no role. What remains is the description from an external perspective, the image of the objectified, sleeping human being, which fits perfectly in the world evoked by the novels. The twentieth- and twenty-first-century novel sets other directions for itself. If its main target is archaeology, then, as Emmanuel Bouju puts it, it does not search in dreams, but rather behind the obscure points of history, trying to unearth forgotten or suppressed memories.

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IMRE ZSOLT LENGYEL

Literature as/against Culture: Magda Szabó's *The Door* (*Az ajtó*)



The New York Review of Books published Len Rix's translation of *The Door* by Magda Szabó in 2015—the same year the English translation of the last volume of Elena Ferrante's widely read and disputed Neapolitan tetralogy (*The Story of the Lost Child*) appeared. As several reviewers and commentators have noted, and as was discussed with Ferrante herself in an interview by Sheila Heti, the two have conspicuous thematic similarities. Both are quasi-autobiographical works that portray a peculiar friendship between a highly cultured female writer and a woman virtually untouched by high culture—seemingly providing a self-critique of the former and a glorification of the latter:

In Magda Szabó's *The Door*, Emerence—the intelligent cleaning woman with a strong inner code of behaviour, who keeps house for the intellectual woman-writer protagonist—reminds me a bit of your Lila, and Szabó's protagonist is reminiscent of your Elena. Yet Emerence is somehow the superior of the pair, as is Lila. Is there something in the figure of the intellectual woman writer that pales in comparison (from the perspective of the woman writing) to the (comparatively) uneducated woman who yet knows and understands the world? (Heti 26)

Both Szabó and Ferrante have created magnificent, outsize portraits of women to which their writer-narrators are destined to miserably compare themselves. Lila and Emerence are the real thing, women who live so close to the bone that they know only the urgency of feelings. In *The Door*, as in Ferrante's series, it is the writer who is the vulture, feeding off her friend's inner strength and stories. (Mehta)

It is uncertain whether or not Ferrante knew of Szabó's novel when she conceived her series, but I find Ferrante's prologue very instructive for the reading of *both* works. In this prologue, one learns immediately that the idealized protagonist of the following one and a half thousand pages "wanted to disappear without leaving a trace" (Ferrante 20)—which suggests that the building of a monument can at the same time be an act of treason or revenge and that despite all the self-deprecation, it may still be the narrator who gets the upper hand. This way, the reader is emphatically reminded not to regard homodiegetic storytelling as a neutral frame but as an integral part of the games of power being represented.

I find this consideration regrettably missing from most interpretations of *The Door*. The articles written upon the original Hungarian publication of the book were virtually unequivocal in their opinion that the novel is basically a didactic one, whose ultimate goal is the celebration of Emerence and of everything she symbolizes—and what is more, many reviewers also made clear their sympathies for the values she represented. According to these evaluations, *The Door* has "the power of biblical parables" (Bakó 74), and it is like a "profane canonization process" (Györffy 148); Emerence is like "the hero of a legend, or even a symbol" (Földes 6), of whose superiority the book leaves no doubt (Pomogáts 157); and Szabó, driven by "pedagogical furore," holds her protagonist up as an example (Tüskés 381) or "builds an altar" (Fenyő 7). The meaning of the figure of Emerence also seemed quite obvious: Endre Bakó speaks of her as "a naïve, instinctual person" (76); István Fenyő as of "a creature ... outside of the rigidified society" (7); Lóránt Kabdebó mentions her "ancient-archaic humanity" (341); and Miklós Györffy her "instinctive knowledge" (149) and "ancient animal roots" (150). This largely uniform picture has remained fundamentally undisturbed by later studies too. Emerence is seen rather consistently as an extra-societal, extra-political, extra-rational, and extra-cultural being, who—with all these properties—stands for values the author and her book want, for a good reason, to propagate.

These hagiographical readings of the book deem it unproblematic to condemn the narrator-character for betraying Emerence while at the same time commending the narrative for artistically portraying her fate and her admirable attitude. However, this overlooks the complications caused by the highly emphasized autobiographical form, which suggests the identity

of not only the character and the narrator but also of the narrator and the author (the narrator is a national prize-winning, once sidelined writer called Magdushka (Szabó 225) who has relatives named Rickl (Szabó 72), and so on). It seems that the purpose of this narratological device is to enclose the novel within the story being told. For the author–narrator, the point of writing this novel, as the reader learns early, is to confess her sin publicly, also providing “that explanation, those details” (Szabó 3) that are not needed at a Calvinist public rite of confession. The crime to be confessed is the killing of Emerence, which one comes later to understand to mean being the indirect cause of her death. “Emerence no longer wished to live, because we’d destroyed the framework of her life and the legend attached to her name” (Szabó 199). What supposedly destroys this legend is that her humiliating situation is made public after she suffered a stroke and decided to refuse medical help—which is something, of course, of which the novel paints a vivid and sickening picture. So while the author spends long passages detailing the remorse of the narrator for failing to cover up for Emerence because of her own business, the novel itself seems interested in uncovering her secrets; *The Door* is very different from the fabulous crypt Emerence wished for that could monumentalize her without disclosing any details of her life. All of this means that the novel is built upon a paradox: once we believe that a betrayal has taken place, its confession must also be considered a betrayal. If the reader, however, concludes after finishing the book that one can feel love and respect for someone like Emerence despite her questionable decisions and her being debased by sickness—and these can all form parts of her legend—this calls into question both the grounds of the narrator’s guilt and Emerence’s outlook upon life.

The paradoxical nature of the novel becomes even more obvious if we concentrate on the question of the arts. It is a very important, often-repeated part of the characterization of Emerence that she is not merely outside culture, but she is actively in opposition with it. As the narrator summarizes:

Without consciously arriving at the concept herself, or being aware of and using the phrase “anti-intellectual,” she was the thing itself, an anti-intellectual. Her feelings allowed her to admit a few exceptions, but her idea of a professional person was of a ruling class of

gentlemen in suits. As far as she was concerned, anyone who didn't finish a job with his own hands, but had someone else do it instead, qualified for the term. ... In her eyes, men who didn't handle tools, however important their function—the Lieutenant Colonel was an exception, he kept order—were all parasites; and their women, whatever fine phrases they might embroider their speech with, just empty mouths needing to be fed. At first, I was included among them. Emerence looked with suspicion on every piece of paper, every brochure, every book or writing desk. (Szabó 104–105)

If it had been up to her, she would have locked the youth of 1848 away in a cellar and given them a lecture: no shouting, no literature; get yourselves involved in some useful activity. She didn't want to hear any revolutionary speeches, or she'd deal with them, every single one. Get out of the coffee houses, and back to work in the fields and factories. (Szabó 118)

Her hatred of art seems to arise on the one hand from social reasons, and on the other from theoretical ones: she wants art to be completely artless, natural, and an uninterrupted part of reality. Emerence appreciates a “somewhat tattered statue of a brown dog” (Szabó 74) for it has “got everything—ears, paws, a tail” (Szabó 80), but she comments on Petőfi's poem *My Mother's Hen*: “nobody spoke like that” (Szabó 117). And because they produce illusions with machines and special effects, she says of the filmmakers: “You're all clowns, and more contemptible than clowns. You're worse than con men” (Szabó 135). The narrator, of course, participates passionately in filming, loves Petőfi, and hates the statue of the dog, which she considers “kitsch” (Szabó 79). And while numerous passages indicate the superiority of Emerence's worldview as compared to that of the narrator, the novel itself is very far from Emerence's artistic ideals: the book mythologizes her but does it with the help of allusions to Medea (Szabó 65), Latin quotes from the *Aeneid* (Szabó 69) and scenes that are highly stylized and theatrical. But even the very fact of spending time writing, reading, and interpreting literary texts instead of real work is something Emerence would never have approved of. In the centre of the novel is thus a double-bind: it seems to try to get the reader convinced by Emerence's philosophy, who would like to see culture destroyed, but at the same time one is led to appreciate the

culture that alone could make it possible to get acquainted with such a character and her attitudes. The reviewers who sympathized with Emerence's supposed authenticity never reflected on the fact that the novel indirectly comments on their position as reviewers as well.

If we take into account all this, *The Door* appears to be quite far from being simply didactic: it seems to be constructed in a way that prevents the system of values from becoming fully stable and that does not let the position of Emerence become absolutized in any way. This tendency is further established by certain remarks in the text, such as: "it never occurred [to Emerence] that in her eternal negativity she was political" (Szabó 110). While the narrator calls Emerence a "mythological being" (Szabó 253), seemingly giving ground for all the talk about outsideness and primordiality, the novel in its entirety cannot be said to represent her as standing beyond society. By focusing on those parts of the text that may be described as an investigation into Emerence's past or an attempt to reconstruct the roots of her personality, a very different picture of her may be assembled. Judging by these passages she seems to be first of all a victim, a deeply traumatized person trying to cope and compensate: someone, who tries to attribute high value to physical work into which she was forced at the age of nine after becoming an orphan; someone, who disdains the culture she had to abandon after three classes in school; someone, who hates all ideas since a man she loved left her to join politics; someone, who distrusts people after being robbed by a lover and having her cat killed by a tenant; and so on. This perspective can help to make sense of those pieces of information, which imply that she is prone to irrationality, superstitions, and conspiracy theories ("Injections, she maintained, were given only to make money, and stories of rabid foxes and cats were spread so that doctors could earn more") (Szabó 40), and that she seems mostly to lack discernment and empathy. This latter is suggested by a whole series of scenes, perhaps most prominently by that concerning "an aid parcel from Sweden":

The news duly reached her that fellow Christians abroad had sent gifts for the congregation. Her friend Polett had run straight to her with the news. When the distribution began in the chapel Emerence, having never shown her face in church before, suddenly appeared in her black Sunday best and stood waiting for her name

to be called. People from the immediate neighbourhood knew who she was, but none of them thought for a moment that she was counting on receiving anything. The ladies in charge, who had acted as translators for the visiting Swedish mission, looked on in embarrassment at the gaunt figure standing there, blank-faced, waiting. They realised that even if she didn't attend church she was still a member of the congregation, but by then all the woollen and cotton garments had been shared out. All that remained at the bottom of the basket were some evening dresses, which some kind Swedish woman, weeding out her unwanted bits and pieces without considering the real situation here, had thought fit to include. They didn't want to send her away empty-handed. As it later emerged, they hoped she might be able to sell the garment at a theatre or community arts centre, or perhaps exchange it for something to eat. In no way did they intend the mockery Emerence felt, as she hurled the dress at the feet of their leader. From that day on, not work but a private vow kept her from church, even on those rare occasions when she did have an hour free. Henceforth, both God and the Church were identified in her mind with those charitable ladies, and she never passed over an opportunity to take a dig at the worshipping classes. (Szabó 23–24)

Here Emerence seems to be neither willing nor able to grasp the (good) intentions of others, basing her actions on convictions and projections alone; and she seems to be generally incapable of adapting to situations, or imagining and accepting other points of view, other tastes, and other aspirations as well. A recurring theme in the book is, indeed, how she oversteps boundaries to try to force her will on other people without considering their reservations: she never seems to be affected by alternative notions regarding whether one should be religious, be fasting, have children, or have a statue of a dog on one's shelf.

The enumeration of the details of her hard and hardening past can thus be construed as an attempt to explain her chronic lack of circumspection. Such an endeavour, however, even if it is successful, may obviously lead one only to compassion and acceptance, not glorification. But the former definitely turns into the latter in the course of the novel, causing a structural

imbalance: it is no wonder that many reviewers were unsure what to make of these passages, and the social determinants of the character in general; several of them have deemed these superfluous, the product of secondary considerations, or, in the case of a newer study, simply a “red tail,” a measure to appease the communist publishers (Lipták 76, 80). There is certainly a high degree of incompatibility between Emerence, the hero of a myth, and Emerence, the broken victim, but I deem this double vision to be not a defect, but an important feature of the work. This duality again reminds the reader how the homodiegetic narrator is a participant in the story with considerable stakes in it: it is she who tries to assemble the story of Emerence, but it is also she who then diverges from the paradigm of victimology:

I was about to run after the old woman, but then the thought returned: I had to break her habit of demonstrating her attachment to me by these undisciplined, insane means. I know now, what I didn't then, that affection can't be expressed in calm, orderly, articulate ways; and that one cannot prescribe the form it should take for anyone else. (Szabó 83–84; translation modified)

Emerence's insanity gets reinterpreted as deeper wisdom *along the way*, and it seems to me that *The Door* is primarily the story of this change of opinion. This feature is at once emphasized and obscured by the narrative discourse, which resembles a palimpsest of the diegetic world viewed from asynchronous standpoints: it is never quite possible to decide whether the narration tries to create the effect of retrospection or simultaneity. And the framing devices, I would argue, are used to emphasize that the actual protagonist of the novel may be the narrator and that the novel's central concern is probably much less the construction of a myth than an investigation into the formation of myths and the need for them.

The question thus becomes: what is this narrator-character like, and what is it that changes her? The list of properties we can assemble from the text regarding her expose a mirror-like structure at the foundations of the novel: it is not only that Emerence detests culture, while the narrator is highly cultivated; where Emerence is anti-political and anarchic, the narrator tries to make her way in an oppressed land, and thinks of her job as a writer as

a service to the country; where Emerence disdains those who do not work manually, the narrator hires help to completely liberate herself even from housework to be able to spend all her time doing intellectual labour; where Emerence believes only in totally exclusive relationships and does not “want anyone unless they are completely” hers (Szabó 165), the narrator enjoys having a large and varied network of acquaintances; where Emerence is unempathetic, distrustful, and has unshakeable convictions, the narrator goes to great lengths to understand others, especially Emerence, to explain away her faults and to try to satisfy her wishes. It is this latter, that then upsets the symmetry of this mirror structure. To take seriously Emerence’s desires, the narrator has to integrate into her worldview elements foreign to it: for example, Emerence’s determination to remain, at any cost, unseen by others while being sick only makes sense if one accepts her somewhat paranoid assumption that the otherwise affectionate neighbours would immediately begin to dislike her because of this, and her legend would be retroactively destroyed. The novel makes it very obvious that this suspicion is completely unfounded: in the last chapters the neighbours have all learned of Emerence’s humiliating episode, but they still treat her with utmost sympathy. But the narrator seems already to have interiorized Emerence’s notions, which leads to the feelings of remorse at the root of the novel; and Emerence’s “shame, ... anger and hatred” (Szabó 224) remain unrelenting, reinforcing the narrator’s guilt. The scenes in the hospital show clearly that Emerence exercises a moral maximalism or purism that considers everything less than perfect to be wrong: that is the reason she thinks her legend is destroyed, and also why she treats the narrator as a traitor and puts her categorically on the side of sinners, despite the complexity of the situation, the details of which, recounted by the narration, seem to demonstrate the power of circumstances, the fragility of good intentions, and a conflict of duties, rather than simple negligence. So, the novel again seems to play a double game: while the explicit content of the narrator’s discourse puts great weight on Emerence’s judgment, the pieces of information disclosed along the way may serve to undermine it in the reader’s mind and make it look more like a product of fanaticism.

But this play again does not lead to equilibrium: the guilt cannot be explained away without a remainder, because there is inevitably something suspicious in the enumeration of explanations; and what this describes is a moral zone of different shades of grey, which may easily seem faint

against the background of Emerence's blacks and whites. This rhetorical effect returns many times in the novel; an obvious example may be the episode in which the narrator presents Emerence with a television, which she cannot watch on Christmas Eve because she has to sweep the snow; the narrator then scolds herself for failing to take over the work from the old Emerence and for watching a movie instead:

We were standing at the window, above the streetlight, whose rays flooded in even in the wildest snowstorms, gazing in wonder at the winter and the feathery flakes dancing, when suddenly the image of Emerence swam into our picture of the street. She was sweeping. Her headscarf, her shoulders and her back were turning white under a thick veil of snow. She was sweeping, on Christmas Eve, because the pavement couldn't be left uncleared.

The blood rushed into my face. From above, she looked like the straw man in *The Wizard of Oz*. Sweet, kind Jesus, newly born, what sort of gift had I brought this old woman? How often would she be able to sit at home in peace, with her chores tugging at her from one breakfast time to the next? That was why she had given us that special, wounded look. If the fabric of her emotional life hadn't been woven with a finer thread, and more sensitive strands, than mine, she might have refused the set; or asked us if we'd sweep the snow off the streets for her, or do her duty in the laundry, since by the time she'd be able to sit herself down on the lovers' seat, Budapest would have stopped transmitting.

We didn't dare say a word to each other. My husband had come to the same realisation. We were too ashamed to continue looking, and turned our backs on Emerence and her broom. Viola scratched at the door to the balcony, wanting to go out, but I didn't let him. Neither of us spoke, and why should we? The need was for action, not words. But we went back to our own television. Even now I cannot forgive myself when I am reminded of what I ought to have done, but went no further than the thought.

I've always been good at philosophising, and I wasn't ashamed to admit that I had done wrong. But what didn't occur to me was that,

compared to her, I was still young and strong. And yet I didn't go out and sweep the snow. I didn't send her home to watch the film, though I could have handled the broom perfectly well. As a girl in the country I had danced with one often enough. I was the one who kept the front of the house clear in those days. But I didn't go down. I stayed right where I was. It was Christmas, and I too exchanged my usual taste for savoury and bitter things for something sweet—for that sweet, sad, lovely film, after all those grotesque, existentialist productions. (Szabó 170)

The circumstances we learn about at other points of the text do much to rationalize this situation: Emerence works for high pay, she has already collected so much money, that she would not have to work anymore, and she has consciously rejected chances to learn and do less fatiguing labour, so her sweeping can be seen more of a choice than simply an obligation. But despite all this, or the defensible wish of the narrator to have a free holiday and watch a particular movie, or the concept of the division of labour, which makes holidays and movies possible at all, the situation in its immediacy may still seem problematic and the narrator's remorse not entirely unjustified. In the course of the novel, a long series of such moral ambiguities and grey zones manifests itself, and the empathic and sensitive narrator accumulates a large pile of guilt: she becomes haunted by her social status, her political compromises, her cultivation that leads to the suspicion that her "morality is just discipline" (Szabó 151), the artificial and insincere nature of art, her decisions that make her neglect one thing or person for the sake of another, and so on. The novel seems to suggest that it is this unavoidable guilt of the perceptive modern man, then, that may lead to the idealization of those who are able to live without compromises and ambiguities, or in other words: those who ignore the complexity and the contradictions of the world. It is exactly *because* of her victimhood and her annoying traits that Emerence can become the hero of a myth. *The Door* represents the clash of two paradigms, which both seem less than perfect. The book displays a long list of reasons why the manoeuvring and opportunism made necessary by a complex society may lead to disillusionment. But it may also become obvious that the actualization of Emerence's ideals, which would allow only manual labour, exclusive one-on-one relationships, and no administration of any kind, would make *any* social complexity impossible.

It is, of course, not impossible to choose and absolutize one of these alternatives. Many of the early reviews at the end of the 1980s, for example, reveal a deep scepticism about contemporary politics and society, as these quotations may show:

[Emerence] reminds of the ever-greater necessity of clear, homogeneous, well-arranged human relations, of the today more and more perceivable split between words and deeds, of the indifference that mechanizes the souls, of the corrupting power of mercenary mentality. ... It is obvious that in the sarcastic pout of the old woman, in her sceptic shrug, in her total unconcern towards politics lies thought-provoking authorial criticism of the formalism and mechanicalness of our political practice, of its lack of organization of collectivity. (Fenyő 7)¹

These are serious questions, behind which lie problems that trouble our transitional society. The crisis in which the Hungarian society found itself at the turn of the 1970s and '80s was not only an economic disfunction but a moral-conscious identity crisis as well. The cause of Emerence's tragedy—although she also provokes it—lies in the objective societal and communicational circumstances ... (Bakó 75)²

It speaks of an elemental human matter in our over-politicized, degraded age ... (Györffy 150)³

¹ "A tiszta, egynemű és zavartalanul áttekinthető emberi viszonylatok mind nagyobb szükségességére emlékeztet, a szavak és a tettek összhangjának napjainkban mindinkább érzékelhető megbomlására, a lelkeket elgépiesítő közönyre, az érdekhajászat mentalitásának megrontó erejére. ... Nem kétséges, hogy az öregasszony gúnyos ajkbiggyesztésében, vállrándító szkepszisében, tökéletes közéleti érdektelenségében a mi politikai gyakorlatunk formalizmusának, mechanizálódásának, közösségsszervező tevékenysége hiányának meggondolkodtató írói kritikája is benne rejlik."

² "Súlyos kérdések ezek, átmeneti társadalmunkat örlő gondok húzódnak mögöttük. Az a válság, amelybe a magyar társadalom a hetvenes-nyolcvanas évek fordulóján jutott, nem kizárólag gazdasági diszfunkció, erkölcsi-tudati identitászavar egyszersmind. Emerenc tragédiája tehát – noha nem kis mértékben ő maga is előidézője – az objektív társadalmi-érintkezési viszonyokban keresendő"

³ "Agyonpolitizált, aprópénzre váltott korunkban egy elemi emberi dologról szól"

It is [Emerence] who bears on her shoulders as a caryatid the weight of the past and those valid moral truths that the world has ignored long since. (Földes 6)⁴

This quite general feeling of crisis seems to have made the critics predisposed to look for solutions outside culture and to one-sidedly take Emerence's part in their readings. (This mode of reading may be seen as part of a broader tendency of thinking in the Hungary of the 1980s characterized by a disposition for a critique of civilization: the perhaps most influential critic of the decade, Péter Balassa, for example, also read the works of Miklós Mészöly for signs of an "archaic" and "elementary logic" "beyond history" in one of his pivotal essays; see Balassa 844–45). If someone, on the other hand, is more sceptical about the primitivism of the above position, because, for instance, it seems to echo the misguided twentieth-century idealizations of the peasant or the proletarian, there are enough signals in the novel for it to be possibly read as a satire mocking Emerence's untenable stubbornness and the narrator's flight into irrationality and her hypocritical idealization of a victim of history.

But, I would argue, both of these exclusive choices have to commit interpretative violence on the structure of the text, which, as I have tried to show, is built around unstabilizable tensions. The characters of the narrator and Emerence are, furthermore, not only oppositional, they are also represented by the novel as being, at a fundamental level, very similar: their common pursuit is serving a community (by cleaning the neighbourhood or by writing for a country), their common goal is prestige (the "legend attached to her name" or acceptance by the literary institutions), and their common stake is the judgment of society, which motivates Emerence to hide away and the narrator to reveal their story. The two positions are tightly connected in an irresolvable conflict. This scheme may call to mind Simon Critchley's account of the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas in his book *The Ethics of Deconstruction*. Critchley claims that what Levinas calls "ethics," the infinite responsibility for the Other, is incapable to serve as an exclusive basis

⁴ "Kariatidaként ő hordozza vállán a múlt terhét és azokat az érvényes erkölcsi igazságokat, amikre a világ már régóta nemigen figyel."

for ethics in the ordinary sense in a world full of contradictions, and would in itself lead only to catastrophe. Thus, Critchley argues following Jacques Derrida, politics necessarily has to betray ethics and descend to a sphere of relativism and compromises; but at the same time infinite responsibility has to remain paradoxically active in choices to keep politics from closing in on itself and from becoming reified, Machiavellian, and totalitarian. It is the same play of necessary betrayal and irremovable irritation, I argue, that organizes the structure of *The Door*. Instead of delivering answers, it poses questions, and its metaleptic framework draws into its field of problems the institution of literature itself. What have we gained and lost by entering the world of culture? Is the writing of texts a respectable occupation? Does thinking about them justify one's place in the division of labour? I think we all have work to do with these questions.

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JUDITH SZÖLLŐSY

Péter Esterházy in America: His Reception, Its Whys and Wherefores



There's this writer. I love him. His name is Péter Esterházy. Seven of his books have been published in English to date, in order of appearance—*The Helping Verbs of the Heart* (*A szív segédigéi*, [1985] 1993), *The Glance of Countess Hahn-Hahn* (*Hanh-Hahn grófnő pillantása*, [1991] 1999), *The Book of Hrabal* (*Hrabal könyve*, [1990] 1995), *A Little Hungarian Pornography* (*Kis magyar pornográfia*, [1984] 1997), *She Loves Me* (*Egy nő*, [1995] 1995), *Celestial Harmonies* (*Harmonia caelestis*, [2000] 2003), and *No Art* (*Semmi művészet*, [2008] 2010). The first was translated by the outstanding Michael Heim, the second by Richard Aczél, and the rest by yours truly. *Helping Verbs of the Heart* was published in England and America, *The Glance of Countess Hahn-Hahn* in England. *A Little Hungarian Pornography* was published in England, America, and Hungary, thanks to Corvina publishers. *She Loves Me* was published in England, the U.S., and Hungary, *Celestial Harmonies* in England, the U.S., and Canada. *Not Art*, published only in the U.S., was voted “Notable Fiction of 1994” by the New York Times Book Review, and a year later was the winner of the “New York Times Notable Books” award.

A number of excerpts from Esterházy's *Simple Story Comma One-Hundred Pages*, *The St. Mark Version* (*Egyszerű történet vessző száz oldal – a Márk változat*, 2014), *Esti* (*Esti*, 2010), *Revised Edition* (*Javított kiadás*, 2002), and *Pancreatic Diary* (*Hasnyálmirigynapló*, 2016) have also been published in English, as well as novellas (*The Miraculous Life of Prince Bluebeard* and *The Transporters*), essays, interviews and prose pieces of various lengths, approximately thirty in all. Several of the prose pieces were commissioned by top American journals, including *The Partisan Review* and the *The New Yorker*.

Two plays by Péter have also been translated into English (*I am Your... Modern Review* and *Mercedes Benz*), both commissioned by the National Theatre of Hungary, as well as an opera libretto co-commissioned by the Salzburg Festival and the Vienna Philharmonic, the brilliant *Hallelujah!—Oratorium balbulum*, which one Péter (Péter Esterházy) wrote for another Péter (the composer Péter Eötvös) about a stuttering prophet who, by the time he manages to articulate his prophecy, it is too late.

An impressive number of reviews of Péter's books have also appeared, most of them in the US, though quite a number in the UK, and Australia as well. I know of ninety-three. On the other hand, I have no way of knowing how many copies of his books have been published or how many were sold. Publishers are famously reluctant to divulge such information. Not that it matters. As Esterházy once said, sport and politics belong to the winners. Whoever wins is right. In art, it is not so.

These are impressive numbers, commendable data. But what do they reveal about the reasons behind Péter Esterházy's success in the United States and his continuing presence in a culture that is admittedly so very different from the culture of Central Europe?—Honestly, very little. Besides, at the first superficial glance, everything seemed to work against Esterházy's success in the States. Esterházy is too Hungarian, we insisted, Esterházy is too difficult to read, especially abroad, we said. And this sparkling sleight of hand with language, this Central-European wit, are all sure-fire guarantees of failure. The cultural and historical references will also bar the way to cross-cultural transfer—because we said this too. And we also said that Esterházy can't be translated.

Yet not only has Esterházy been translated into English, as into so many other languages (I lost count at twenty-one), not only is he considered one of the most exciting writers to come out of Central Europe in recent years, he has also been taught at three American universities. Ivan Sanders, the eminent scholar, even wrote an article about his experience teaching *Celestial Harmonies* that was published in *Élet és Irodalom* (Sanders).

The question begs to be asked: When so much seemed to work against them, what is it about Esterházy's books, preeminently his *Celestial Harmonies*,

that has nevertheless guaranteed their smooth sailing across the cross-cultural divide?

The answer is surprisingly simple, a mere cliché, I hardly dare say it: Péter Esterházy's *Celestial Harmonies* is art, and as we know, art transcends cultural boundaries. Except, what is art? What do works that we recognize as art have in common? What is it about them that touches us, what are the components of a work of art that we instinctively recognize, understand, experience and love, regardless of the culture we inhabit? What is it about Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, or the works of Shakespeare, Rabelais, Dostoevsky and—need we add, James Joyce and his *Ulysses*? What is the secret behind the universal appeal of Mozart's *The Magic Flute*, Charlie Chaplin's *The Dictator*, any one of Picasso's paintings, or Fred Astaire's sparkling style of dance? Because others danced as well, but they didn't dance like Fred Astaire. As Péter Esterházy was fond of saying: So what gives? Translation: What's going on? What makes Péter Esterházy's *Celestial Harmonies* so irresistible to American readers? A closer look at the novel should reveal the answer, at least in part. The full answer, alas, is beyond the scope of this study.

Publisher's Weekly, by far the most influential journal within the publishing community, called *Celestial Harmonies* “a belated twentieth-century masterpiece that will reward the reader with a sense of *having submitted* to an astonishing if exhausting *outburst of activity*” [here as elsewhere, the italics are mine]. The reviewer of *The New York Sun* said that *Celestial Harmonies* “promises to be an *enduring part* of contemporary literature.” *The New Yorker* called it *intricate* and *playful*, while John Updike, also in *The New Yorker*, wrote that Esterházy's prose is “*jumpy, allusive, and slangy ... there is vividness, and electric crackle [as] physical details leap from the murk of emotional ambivalence.*” And what writer could ask for higher praise, especially from a fellow writer the likes of John Updike? *The Los Angeles Times*, *The New Republic*, *The New York Times* and *The New York Times Book Review and Literary Supplement* also sang Esterházy's praises. (For a selection of excerpts from reviews of *Celestial Harmonies* in Hungarian, see *Élet és Irodalom*, August 13, 2004.)

My point is that when Péter's reviewers called *Celestial Harmonies* a masterpiece—a word they use only with utmost discretion across the seas—and

when they use expressions such as an “outburst of activity,” “intricate and playful,” “vivid and electric” and so on, they are in fact pointing to some of the components of what we recognize as an enduring masterpiece, regardless of its shape, form, or genre. And masterpieces have one thing in common: we find them irresistible—and it is this irresistibility that knows no cultural boundaries. So let’s see what makes *Celestial Harmonies* such an irresistible book.

In America, *Celestial Harmonies* is to a large extent divorced from its Central European background—by which I mean that it escapes being politicized—a happy circumstance that works to its advantage, because we are left with *the thing in itself*—pure literature and the enjoyment it gives us. How does it do it?

For one thing, *Celestial Harmonies* is monumental in scope. It illuminates, if for a moment, a dizzying array of subjects from the size of olives to Mexican toilet etiquette, from the frogging on Hussar uniforms to the nature of communist dictatorships, from cloning and quantum mechanics to the nature of Esterházy’s elusive God. Add to this the intricate chronicle of his family, of princes, counts, commanders, diplomats, bishops and patrons of the arts, of epic conquest, tragedy, triumph, and near annihilation, and we feel as if we were sitting on a merry-go-round, and we enjoy the ride—for as we know, no one is immune to what Sigmund Freud famously called the pleasure principle.

Esterházy’s works form one grand, profound design. He links his individual works into an elaborate, intriguing web, and this jump-starts our imagination, regardless of which of his works we happen to be reading, because each of his works share his major concerns, though each in a different way and to a different extent. Péter Esterházy is not the sort of writer who takes the thing just as it is and lays it before us, consequently depriving the mind of the delicious joy of believing that it is creating. To suggest, to evoke, that is what charms the imagination—and who doesn’t enjoy a charmed imagination? This experience, too, we find irresistible as we read Esterházy’s works.

No two ways about it: Esterházy jump-starts our creative imagination left, right, and center. With each of his texts he creates a playing field. He, the

exuberant prankster, enjoys surprising us at every turn. He filters an inherently complex story through his playful postmodern style, not that he would call it that; I call it that only for the sake of convenience, all the while knowing full well that labels have the unfortunate habit of limiting the thing they are labeling. He places language at the service of the comic. As he wrote in *Celestial Harmonies*, “My father’s son—meaning himself, of course—is dismayed whenever language is used merely as a means of communication” (367). Rather, he uses indirection, suggestion, and evocation to great effect. He creates a complex association of ideas; he turns idiomatic expressions, folk sayings and the like topsy-turvy and cites cultural references in the most unlikely places. He intersperses his texts with foreign words in the most unlikely places as well, and he wreaks havoc with grammar. One of his cleverest plays with syntax occurs in Book II of *Celestial Harmonies*, where we find the following sentence: “Our bread allowance, *belonging to the lowest cast* (me), intellectual plus class enemy, was 250 grams, and even so, only after the rest of the people got theirs” (*Celestial* 707). We are baffled by the nonsense of someone’s bread allowance belonging “to the lowest caste, intellectual plus class enemy,” and it is not until we proceed to the last part of the sentence that reads, “only after the rest of the people got theirs,” do we realize that it’s not the bread allowance that belongs to the lowest cast, but the Esterházy family, and we smile from the sheer pleasure of having been participants in a clever linguistic sleight-of-hand. To create situational humor, Péter also bases entire passages on *tegezés*, *magázás* and *tetszikelés* (different linguistic modes to address someone formally or informally)—in short, he uses language as plot. Nowhere is this strategy more apparent than in his punning, double, triple, even quadruple, all the while that he knows full well that his text will be translated. Here and there, blissfully straight-faced, he even challenges his translators by inserting “untranslatable pun” into his text. But that just adds to the fun, it makes his texts all the more irresistible, to me, at any rate, by making me a participant in the formation of his meaning. His challenge brings to mind the 1960s television jingle, “Double your pleasure, double your fun with Doublemint, Doublemint, Doublemint gum!”

In short, Esterházy has dropped the illusion of the objective, invisible author in favor of a controlling authorial presence and, along with it, he eschewed the illusion of a piece of literature as a closed entity, finished before it is read. Consequently, his *Celestial Harmonies* is “cool” in the best

McLuhanese sense of the word as explicated in his *Understanding Media*. It calls for intense involvement, an instant sensory awareness of the whole as we are engaged in any one of its parts; it is not *about* something, it is about itself; it is in constant motion, it is dynamic; there is nothing linear or sequential about its field of awareness. This brings to mind Wassily Kandinsky's famous definition of art: "In each picture is a whole lifetime imprisoned, a whole lifetime of fears, doubts, hopes and joys. Whither is this lifetime tending? What is the message of the competent artist? ... To harmonize the whole is the task of art" (Kandinsky 1). An Esterházy text relies on the intonations of spoken language; it utilizes the intonation of a speaker's shifting psychological state, what we may justly call the semantics of melody. He is fully aware of the musical aspect of spoken language—its rhythms, its intonations, not just its semantics—and the ability of intonation to reflect the speaker's shifting psychological state, thereby creating an ideally complex form of consciousness. There is, dare I say it, a melodic truth to his sentences. Even the silence between his words conveys extra meaning, just as it does in music, where without silence there'd be no melody, and without melody, there'd be no silence. Esterházy uses silence to draw us into the depth of meaning. He'd surely agree with Roland Barthes, who once observed that literature is first of all, last of all, language. His works are froth with semantic gestures that evoke meaning beyond the power of words to grasp; they take us on a journey of exploration; they contain what Kandinsky repeatedly called "spiritual hunger" in art.

Which means that his *Celestial Harmonies* is not finished until it is read, and even then it is not finished, because in a sense it is open-ended, inexhaustible. As Péter once said, it is a sorry sign regarding the quality of a work if our book contains no more than what we put into it. Calling for the reader's full participation, how could his books, first and foremost his *Celestial Harmonies*, not be popular in a high-participation culture such as the culture of the United States? How could it not be popular with readers who value adventure and the sense of freedom that every pore of *Celestial Harmonies* conveys? There is an emotional infectiousness to the book that reminds one of Tolstoy's notion of emotional infectiousness as the true measure of art. No truer words have yet been spoken.

Furthermore, when we read Esterházy, who holds that literature is a dialogue between good books, we become participants in the making of world literature, which is exactly what he had in mind, dare I say. The sudden, unexpected appearance of a foreign text in the body of his own, be it just a single adjective from Homer's *Odyssey*, or a lengthy passage from Donald Barthelme's *The Dead Father*—well, we don't have to be aware of the borrowing or recognize the source to enjoy the intrusion, which adds a certain *je ne sais quoi*, a certain sensual as well as intellectual excitement to our experience of the text, thereby changing it, of course. Along with Esterházy's boyish sexual pranks—which, by the way, made me blush as I translated them with the help of a dictionary entitled *Forbidden American English* by Richard A. Spears—which I mention only for the sake of those who might want to have a clandestine look at it—in short, this close-up, physical experience of the text is also one of the hallmarks of the kind of art that we find irresistible. It calls to us, it engages us on a multiplicity of levels; our initial experience of the text is sensual, only then do we apply our intellectual faculties to it, and as many artists have observed, this is as it should be, because the sensual is a fundamental value in art. As Roland Barthes once observed, "The pleasure of the text is that moment when my body pursues its own ideas—for my body does not have the same ideas I do" (*Pleasure* 17). It is this realization that engendered much of modern art as well and prompted Jackson Pollock to call his drip paintings "energy and motion made visible."

And on a personal note, let me observe that to evoke this sensual experience through the use of another language is perhaps the greatest challenge faced by Esterházy's translator. The other is not to chain content to meaning, thereby impoverishing the text. As Péter said someplace or another, the text should know more than the author. But he also said—this in the first sentence of *Celestial Harmonies*—that fiction is the lie through which we tell the truth or, in his version, "It is deucedly difficult to tell a lie when you don't know the truth"—the opening sentence of his *Harmonies*.

Being children at heart, readers—wherever they may be—also enjoy novelty—and Esterházy's original Central-European take on the novel is—if you'll excuse the pun—truly novel.

À propos novelty: the path to success ultimately lies with the author, and Péter Esterházy's voice is an admittedly highly original Central-European voice. His works bear the imprint of the unique workings of a singular mind that can pack more hilarity and heartbreak into a single sentence than any author I can think of. He can talk about serious things playfully—and this too holds his readers captive. Think of his *Hasnyálmirigynapló* (*Pancreatic Diary*), in which he chronicles his bout with cancer, all the while that he is trying to keep the abject fear of death at bay by personifying his cancerous pancreas, addressing it as “young lady,” “dear young lady” and the like. “The real as the yardstick of aesthetics—what an idea!”, the author cries at one point. At another—this in *Celestial Harmonies*—he observes, “No matter how terrible the moment, there is always humor in the world, except you won’t always find someone to do it justice” (446). Well, these terrible moments have found their match in Esterházy, the philosopher clown, whose individuality and originality, whose wisdom of uncertainty and ideally complex form of consciousness, whose gift for revealing previously unseen possibilities of existence through the element of surprise, who knew that without secrets there is no art and whose words are thoughts magically arrested in space—how could these qualities of the text and its creator not make for the success of his novels, first and foremost, his *Celestial Harmonies*, so widely admired in the United States? In *Michelangelo: A Self Portrait*, the eminent scholar Robert J. Clements observes that Michelangelo’s poetry is both prayer and confession. Péter Esterházy’s prose is also both prayer and confession, evidencing a spiritual hunger that is as infectious as it is captivating—and are these not qualities of author and text that easily transcend cultural divides? Isn’t what is modern, provided that modern is defined as a revolt against the imitation of reality as well as an implicit attack aimed at the inevitable dogmatism of systematic thought—is it not the best conveyor of its time, and is it not, therefore—and not contradictorily—lasting?

Postscript:

À propos the author’s infectious presence as evidenced in his works: In *The Book of Hrabal*, Esterházy tell us that “the writer was the kind who, given a choice between life and literature, would choose literature, because he thought, he firmly believed, that literature was his life” (12). He believed in the freedom of literature in face of the tyranny of fact, he believed in the redemptive and uplifting freedom of fiction, which, by its very nature,

liberates the reader as well as the writer. Let us hope that the works of this stuttering prophet, this philosopher–clown whom Salman Rushdie had called “one of the most significant writers of world literature today,” will continue to find appreciative readers in the future as well, in America as elsewhere—provided there will be enough of us left who will still be able to read, and if they will still be able to read, that they will have enough humanity left in them to appreciate Péter Esterházy’s irresistible books.

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JÁNOS KENYERES

Bluebeard in Cross-Cultural Exchange: Péter Esterházy's "The Miraculous Life of Prince Bluebeard" and Yann Martel's *Self*



This essay references the story and legend of Bluebeard, and intends to demonstrate different forms of cross-cultural exchange and its relation to transcultural and transnational literature. First, I give a brief overview of the origins of Bluebeard's legend and how the plot has changed over the centuries and across cultures. Next, I discuss the story in a Hungarian context, first by discussing Béla Bartók's rendition of Béla Balázs's mystery play *Bluebeard's Castle*, and then Péter Esterházy's short story, "The Miraculous Life of Prince Bluebeard," both of which either relate to or play a part in Yann Martel's novel *Self*. The final portion of this study discusses how inter- and transculturality are encapsulated in *Self*, which both transforms the idea of an external cross-cultural experience to an internalized one through language and gender identity, as well as alludes to the internalized multicultural identity in a Canadian context.

The different forms and variations of Bluebeard's story show an almost bewildering richness and diversity, not only in literature but also in the other arts such as music, ballet and film. The first literary appearance of the story can be traced back to France, where the text, "Barbe bleue," originally a folktale, was published in 1697 by Charles Perrault in the volume *Histoires ou contes du temps passé, avec des moralités*, also known as *Contes de ma mère l'Oye* (*Stories or Tales from Past Times, with Morals, or Mother Goose Tales*). This tale is about a wealthy man, who consecutively kills all his wives save the last one, who manages to avoid the fate of her predecessors.

As is often the case in folk literature, the core of the story not only appears in other tales and survives in several versions but can be linked to real historical figures. One, the notoriously cruel Conomor (or Cunmar) the Cursed (or Accursed), king of Poher in Brittany, lived in the middle of the fifth century. As recorded in the *Vita* of Saint Gildas dating from about the twelfth century, Conomor married Tryphine, who was warned by the ghosts of his former wives that he would kill her should she become pregnant. Expecting a child, Tryphine flees but is found by Conomor who beheads her. Saint Gildas, however, miraculously restores her to life, and together they confront Conomor at his castle, where he is killed as the walls tumble upon him (Warner 261). Another possible historical figure behind Bluebeard is Gilles de Rais (also known as Gilles de Montmorency-Laval), who is remembered as a loyal retainer of Joan of Arc, but who later became known as the kidnapper and serial murderer of children in his castle (Ortutay).

It is probably the intertwining of these two figures, Conomor and Gilles de Rais, that gave rise to the evil character of Bluebeard, who emerges as a wife-killer in legends of over a dozen European countries. The story is largely similar in most accounts: Bluebeard seduces and marries young girls, and when they become a burden for him (because they either get pregnant or he finds pleasure with a new woman), he kills them and stores their bodies in a dungeon in his castle. In many legends, the symbols of locked doors and forbidden rooms and the motif of trial and curiosity are also employed, as the new wife is allowed to visit all the rooms of the castle except for the one where the corpses of the previous wives are kept.

From the first appearance of Bluebeard in Perrault's tale until the 1920s, his character or elements of his story emerged in about twenty diverse artistic works: operas, pantomimes, ballets, fairy tales, plays, incidental music and narratives (Ortutay), and since the 1920s, several additional adaptations have emerged. As for prose works, mention should be made of *Sister Anne* (1932), a novella by Beatrix Potter; *The Robber Bridegroom* (1942), a novella by Eudora Welty; "The Bloody Chamber" (1979), a short story by Angela Carter; *Bluebeard* (1982), a novel by Max Fish; "Bluebeard's Egg" (1983), a short story by Margaret Atwood in a collection of the same title; "Blaubarts Letzte Reise" ("Bluebeard's Last Journey") (1983), a short story by Peter Rühmkorf; "Bluebeard" (1986), a short story by Donald Barthelme; *Bluebeard* (1987),

a novel by Kurt Vonnegut; “Blue-Bearded Lover” (1987), a short story by Joyce Carol Oates; *Blaubarts Schatten* (*Bluebeard’s Shadow*) (1991), a novel by Karin Struck; “A Kékszakállú herceg csodálatos élete” (“The Miraculous Life of Prince Bluebeard”), a short story by Péter Esterházy; “Bluebeard in Ireland” (1994), a short story by John Updike and *Self* (1997), a novel by Yann Martel. Examples of twenty-first century adaptations and spin-offs include Gregory Frost’s novel *Fitcher’s Brides* (2002); Helen Oyeyemi’s novel *Mr. Fox* (2011); Cornelia Funke’s novel *Geister Ritter* (*Ghost Night*) (2011) and Amélie Nothomb’s novel *Barbe-Bleue* (*Bluebeard*) (2012). Together with poetic, theatrical, musical and film adaptations across the globe, the number of versions and reworkings amounts to well over a hundred, not to mention literary references that also abound.

Bluebeard, thus, has become transcultural and transnational while undergoing significant changes. In some versions, the original storyline is radically altered, where the tyrannical husband, the murderer, becomes a victim himself and is killed when the wife or her family members attempt to stop him. Anatole France’s short story “The Seven Wives of Bluebeard” (1920) represents a reversal of the original story to the effect that the protagonist is in fact an “anti-Bluebeard,” a modern-day henpecked husband, exploited by women, who take advantage of his good heart and immense patience so as to strip him of his wealth.

In Maeterlinck’s adaptation, *Ariane et Barbe-bleue* (*Ariadne and Bluebeard*), first published in German translation in 1899, the motif of redemption is given a significant role. Ariadne is the image of a modern woman: self-conscious, proud, the embodiment of light, brightness and happy love. Her mission is to redeem Bluebeard and save his wives, even though she finally fails. Motifs of the Bluebeard story emerge in some of Maeterlinck’s other plays as well: *Aglavaine et Sélysette* (1896), *Alladine et Palomides* (1894), *La Mort de Tintagiles* (1894) and *Pelléas et Mélisande* (1893), demonstrating that variations exist even in the oeuvre of the same author.

In interpretations of the story, attention is often focused on the figure of the wife rather than the husband: on the wife’s curiosity and temptation (to enter the forbidden room), and the weakness of her obedience ultimately leading to her death. The female perspective has a long tradition: already in Greek mythology stories such as those of Pandora and Psyche suggest

that women's curiosity could have severe consequences. In this female context, the legend of Bluebeard "echoes the Fall" and Bluebeard, as the tempter, "is acting the part of the serpent (and his bride the part of the victim held by the serpent's unwavering, mesmeric gaze)" (Bridgewater 238).

It is also contended, on the other hand, that the central meaning of the tale is that women should act freely and not curtail their curiosity by obeying patriarchal rules. Bridgewater mentions "the transgression of patriarchal command" (238), while Maria Tartar claims that Bluebeard's story is on the opposite pole of the implications of *Beauty and the Beast*, in which the main message is that women should not be afraid of sexuality and marriage, and should not make judgements at first sight—whereas in *Bluebeard*, women's worst fears concerning marriage are confirmed (Tatar 247). Other interpretations place emphasis on the forbidden room's key, either on account of the knowledge it symbolises (Estés 50) or the human sexual organs (the key representing the male organ and the blood on it deriving from the broken hymen) (Bettelheim 300–301; Bridgewater 238).¹

Bluebeard's Castle, an opera by Béla Bartók, is undoubtedly the most famous Hungarian adaptation of the story, based on Béla Balázs's 1910 mystery play by the same title. Balázs wrote the play as a libretto and originally intended it for Zoltán Kodály. However, the first reading was attended not only by Kodály, but also by Bartók, who was so much captivated by the theme that he eagerly began to work on setting it to music. The piece, according to Kodály, "cracks open the shell of the old tale and shows the eternally insoluble nature of problems between man and woman" as well as "shocks and seizes the listener with tragic tension from the first word to the last" (Kodály).² Bartók also used elements of folk music in the setting, underlining Balázs's own intention: "I wanted to paint a modern soul with the natural sincerity of a folk song" (qtd. in Ortutay), which is supported by the insertion of the prose text of the "regös," a Medieval singer in Hungarian folk music, at the beginning of the opera. Like her biblical predecessor, Balázs's Judith voluntarily undertakes the salvation

¹ For a comprehensive survey of the various meanings of the Bluebeard narrative, see Osborne.

² Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from Hungarian into English are the author's.

of Bluebeard and uses her wiles and beauty to do so, even though she fails. The piece reveals the psychological depths of the relationship between man and woman as well as the immense difficulty of mutual understanding and reaching a sense of harmony. The conciseness of the work is remarkable: it involves two characters, not in a story proper, but in a dialogue. The setting is also new: in all probability, we are in Bluebeard's soul, and the story traverses the border between fantasy and reality. Even though he was quite content with the text, Bartók eventually made some minor changes to it and shortened the original considerably for his opera (see Ortutay). The opera was completed in 1911 but was only presented on stage in 1918 at the Hungarian Opera House in Budapest.

Among many other literary adaptations, Kurt Vonnegut's 1987 novel *Bluebeard* also puts the story in new light. Here an elderly painter and a young writer are pitted against each other. The novel focuses on the healing aspect of the male-female relationship, in which honesty and confrontation with the past are the key to a happy future. But while Balázs and Bartók's Judith will ultimately be caught between the past and eternal memory, Vonnegut's protagonist is able to redeem the painter "Bluebeard" precisely by confronting him with the demons of his life and freeing him from the grips of the past through an almost intrusive and violent argument (see Ortutay).

Péter Esterházy's short story "The Miraculous Life of Prince Bluebeard" was published as the final piece in the volume called *A halacska csodálatos élete* [*The Miraculous Life of a Little Fish*] in 1991.³ Esterházy changes the story and its adaptations practically beyond recognition, and only the names of Béla Bartók, Zoltán Kodály and Bluebeard indicate clearly that the piece can be seen as a continuation of the Bluebeard literary-musical tradition. The short story falls into several parts, describing episodes from the life of Bluebeard from his childhood up to his death. Each episode ends with the narrator's personal statement as to whether he could say more about the event just described or not, such as: "I could say a few things about this," or "There isn't much to add to this," or, again, "I really

³ All quotes from Esterházy's short story are from its English version entitled "The Miraculous Life of Prince Bluebeard," translated by Paula Balo and Martha Cowan.

don't have anything to say about this." These personal comments by the narrator have a comic effect, of which the funniest is the shortest episode: "Danilo Kiš met Prince Bluebeard in the elevator. I have nothing to add to this" (Esterházy, "The Miraculous Life" 417).

The text incorporates a mix of fictional and real characters, but the latter are also put in a fictional context. Also, the apparently real characters evoked in the short story become actors of seemingly simplified roles, whose features can only be partially linked to the historical figures behind them.

The emphasis on sexuality, which tends towards the erotic, obscene and pornographic, is striking from the very first sentence of the story, as the usual folktale beginning suddenly turns into a text of provocative sexuality:

Once upon a time, east of sodomy but west of oral copulation, out where the short-tailed piggy and the kinky-tailed bluebeard rooted, there once lived an East-, or rather East-Central European Bluebeard, a *tzentraal-yurop-blaubart*. And he lived happily ever after until he died. I could say a few things about this. ("The Miraculous Life" 409)

This beginning sets the tone of the whole narrative, invoking a fairy tale, a specific geographical location, and a specific historical time. The specific historical time is already invoked at this point as the text hesitates on what to call the geographical location in question, finally deciding on East-Central Europe instead of Eastern Europe. This was a typical identity issue around the time of the change of the political system in the 1980s and '90s, when most Hungarians identified themselves as Central Europeans to indicate their cultural ties with the West.

The last sentence of the above-mentioned quote exposes the figure of the narrator as well, who comments on the flow of the narrative with much wit and humour. The narrator assumes the persona of a big-mouthed omnipotent story-teller who is nevertheless able to recall essential, often tragic, events in recent Hungarian history, as well as the sad and sometimes traumatic, but at times also cheerful life of Everyman. The story references the German

occupation of Hungary with the Arrow Cross party coming into power, the Holocaust, the 1956 revolution, the change of regime in Hungary in '89, as well as politicians of the recent past, such as Khrushchev, Brezhnev and Honecker. Thus, Bluebeard is forced to live under the circumstances provided by history. As Miklós Horváth observes, "The introduction of the fairy-tale element in Bluebeard and its spectacular deconstruction is done in order to allow, by setting a kind of counterpoint, that type of Central European reality to emerge that becomes increasingly problematic in accordance with the narrative strategies employed in the work" (82–83).

At the same time, as Ernő Kulcsár Szabó points out, Esterházy's prose signals a view in which "personality is constituted not in the opposition between self and world, not in the opposition between consciousness and reality, but in the linguistic experiencing of the world—in the recognition that language precedes things because the world, the experience of time and history can only be had by those who have language" (43). The language and style of the short story employ several tones, which are sometimes abruptly at odds with each other. The most striking example of this difference is the brief dialogue between Kodály and Bluebeard, when Bluebeard explains that he would like to continue his studies with Kodály rather than with Bartók. Here Kodály's elevated style stands in stark contrast to Bluebeard's colloquialism:

- What would be your reason for this, Colleague? – Kodály frowned suspiciously, while doing his impression of Kodály-the-fair-man, and rightly so.
- Oh, fuck off, let's cut the crap, you know very well what the score is. (Esterházy, "The Miraculous Life" 409–10)

Deconstruction of the text constantly takes place, and the devices of obscurity and obfuscation are at work throughout. Esterházy's text nevertheless hints at the sexual nature of Bluebeard's dissatisfaction with Bartók: first he "stumbled upon the terrible secret of Béla Bartók" ("The Miraculous Life" 409) and, after being refused by Kodály to accept him as his student, realised that "it wouldn't be any better with Kodály than it would be later on with women" ("The Miraculous Life" 410). Apart from the erotic and homoerotic implications of the above passage, this sense of drifting between

Kodály and Bartók can also be interpreted as reference to the creation of the opera where Balázs's libretto attracted the interest of both composers.

There are countless perplexing elements in the text, from ones tied in with language, such as the question mark after the conjunction "but," to a series of deconstructions displayed on the level of the plotline. Bluebeard is called a Jewboy by his classmates, which seems to be a mistake, an erroneous external imposition of his identity that others force upon him, which, however, Bluebeard indifferently accepts: "All right, shrugged Bluebeard, so I am a Jew", which the narrator comments by adding in brackets that "namely, deep down he was thinking that he had to be something anyway, or rather he had read that somewhere, but who cares" ("The Miraculous Life" 410). This addition by the narrator illustrates how he seems to diminish the experiences represented, both asserting and detracting from the importance of plot elements and fragments of thought, while in fact they constitute the identity of the protagonist and eventually make up his entire life. The reader learns that Bluebeard is later deported to Mauthausen and that after his return, he has no choice but to live a life allowed by the circumstances of Communist Hungary. Bluebeard's deportation to Mauthausen suggests yet another level of the story: Esterházy's own family history—insofar that the writer's grandfather, who supported Hungary's abandonment of the German alliance, was arrested by the Gestapo and sent to the Mauthausen concentration camp, from where he returned to Hungary in September 1945. Esterházy mentions this incident in his novel *Harmonia Cælestis* (*Celestial Harmonies*) (213–14), where he quotes the text of his "Bluebeard" short story verbatim when describing his own grandfather's ordeal:

Then he was dragged off to Mauthausen. He was ninety pounds when he returned, often burst into tears, and on his skin, which had turned a disgusting gray, festering sores would break out, which took a long time to heal. He became taciturn, trusting neither the living nor the dead, nor the stones, nor the Danube. Then in 1945, barely eighteen, he joined the Communist Party because he wanted to break the silence somehow, but this didn't work out either. He also got involved in some shady dealings, was locked up, then around '56 he was let out, and then all was back to the same old tune, one way or the other. (Esterházy, "The Miraculous Life" 410)

In *Celestial Harmonies*, Esterházy also reveals that in the Csallóköz region of northern Hungary, the Esterházys were called the “Bluebeard Princes” (*Harmonia Cælestis* 13), so the family link with the legendary figure is clearly present. Apart from the family link, the issue of identity and its fluid, ever-changing nature is further reflected by the fact that in each episode Bluebeard assumes a different guise, which is summed up perfectly in the text itself: “That Prince Bluebeard was gay, impotent, sterile—in fact, a woman—I shall barely mention, it seems so obvious in today’s world ruled by irony and despair” (“The Miraculous Life” 413). The mention of “irony and despair,” on the other hand, clearly calls into question the validity of the assertion, providing another example of how the Esterházy’s text subverts itself. The subversion of ideas is also achieved through the references and textual incorporations employed by the short story. For instance, Esterházy inserts the lyrics of András Wahorn’s popular 1980s song “Szerelem” [“Love”] into his own text, here retitled as “Prince Bluebeard’s Hymn,” which verbally posits the burden and futility of love as an all-consuming emotion, while the catchy music (invoked by the reader) imitates sexual union with its increasingly fast and intense rhythm.

The story ends with Bluebeard’s death, expressed by the narrator with a sense of resignation mixed with irony: “When his time had come, Prince Bluebeard died. Now what should I add to this? Perhaps that he buried himself into his beard?” (“The Miraculous Life” 419). Then, with the concluding sentences, we are back to the folklore-style frame again, with a direct address to the reader (and the subtle evocation of Attila József’s poem “Altató” [“Lullaby”]):⁴

When Bluebeard was no more, a void sprang up: it had the prince’s shape to the last millimeter. From then on, people called this nothing Bluebeard (because of the blueness of the beard). This I had to add. Hush little Reader ... Had Bluebeard had a longer beard, I too would have had a longer tale. (“The Miraculous Life” 420)

⁴ “Hush, little Reader” in Esterházy reads “De te már aludj, kis Olvasó” in the original (264), invoking the refrain “aludj el szépen kis Balázs” (“Go to sleep softly, little one, do”) of Attila József’s poem (translated by Vernon Watkins).

As seen above, there is a series of metamorphoses in Esterházy's short story and the text presents sexual ambiguity, including questions of gender, transsexuality and gender change. It also incorporates family history as part of the storyline, which signals (in a covert way) the narrator's (and author's) own involvement in the narrative presented. Meanwhile, the idea of the world ruled by irony and despair, caused by tragic and violent circumstances in the personal and public sphere, also takes central stage. Although the short story displays a sense of playfulness with language(s), this only serves as a disguise for the text's central emphasis on language as an indispensable means of constructing human consciousness and experiencing (and understanding) the world. All the above-mentioned issues present in Esterházy's story reappear, as it were, in the world of a Canadian novel, Yann Martel's *Self*, if in a different form.

Like Esterházy's short story, Martel's novel, published in 1996, is based in part on family history and revolves around identity issues. Its first person narrator tells his story from his early childhood through his adolescent years to the present as an adult, constantly trying to give meaning to the world around him while in persistent search of his own self. His experiences are diverse and intense, including bodily, emotional and intellectual elements, predominantly serving as a tool for his awakening to consciousness and depicting his relationship with his parents, who are diplomats and with whom he often travels abroad. Tragedy ensues when his parents die in a plane crash heading for Havana. Then, on his eighteenth birthday, the first person narrator wakes up as a female. Surprisingly unperturbed by her metamorphosis, she starts university in a fictional city in Canada. She aspires to become a writer and travels abroad. She enters into romantic relationships with males and females alike before meeting Tito, a Hungarian and her final love. Violently raped by a neighbour in her apartment, she transforms back into a male.

Martel's work encapsulates diversity and depicts the role that language, culture and even bodily functions play in constructing one's identity. The author is not afraid to take risks; to talk about the corporeality of the human condition. His descriptions of menses and rape are of the most explicit ever in a novel. It may take one by no surprise that it is with the appearance of Tito, the Hungarian character, in the novel that Hungarian language and music take centre stage in the narrative. Tito originally comes from

the Hungarian minority living in south-western Slovakia. Martel is an informed writer and the fact that Tito is not a typical Hungarian name and that it reminds one of Marshal Tito of Yugoslavia is specifically mentioned by the first-person narrator (250). The question arises why the Hungarian lover is called Tito then. The answer may lie in the fact that the name signifies the transcultural nature of East-Central Europe and it also indicates that from a Canadian and thus “distant” perspective it does not much matter which Eastern or Central European nation one is from. This latter view is clearly evidenced by other Canadian literary works where it is not possible to identify the nationality of some of the characters. For example, in Sinclair Ross’s novel entitled *As for Me and My House*, a boy whose first name is Steve is “Rumanian or Hungarian, about twelve or thirteen, his mother dead and his father a labourer on the railroad” (48). Another example is Margaret Laurence’s novel *A Jest of God*, published in 1966, where the owner of the Parthenon Café is called “Miklos,” with a short “o” (74 and 195). If this is the only typo in his name, he is probably Hungarian, if a caron or hacek is also missing from the letter “s,” he may be a Slovak or Czech. As Marilyn Rose notes the word “hunky” expresses this ambiguity. In the Canadian context, hunky may refer to Hungarians, Lithuanians, Poles, Tyrolians, Russians, Ukrainians, Ruthenians, Galicians, Slavs and Bohemians; it also has a pejorative meaning as a synonym of “bohunk,” denoting “uneducated and unskilled Eastern European” immigrants; however, it may also mean “‘being in a good position’ and being ‘all right’” (93). Again, Martel is fully aware of the national differences but still plays with the name Tito: it is a reference to the communist background of the region and the often merged identities of individuals coming from this multi-cultural part of Europe.

Although both Esterházy and Martel place great emphasis on the role of language in the process by which one understands the world and one’s identity, they follow different paths. Esterházy’s main focus is on the Hungarian language, and although he often evokes foreign languages such as German, these are mostly used to express otherness, often with a sense of *couleur locale*. In Martel, by contrast, multiple languages are part and parcel of the narrative, constituting the transculturality and transnationality of the text. As Oana Sabo observes, “Most models of transnational and world literature ... contend that a literary text becomes transnational when it circulates outside of its national context (Damrosch; Thomsen)” (90). However,

Sabo claims that in the case of Martel's novel *Self*, "the insertion of French, Spanish, Czech, Hungarian, and Turkish (among other languages) into the novel's main English language narrative complicates its literary identity," and that "*Self* can also be viewed as a transnational novel" from the very start: "Martel juxtaposes both dominant and dominated languages in parallel columns, wherein the right-hand column is often, but not always, an English translation of the left-hand column. These parallel foreign-language texts as well as their English translations undermine the centrality of any single national language and invite comparisons across discrete linguistic traditions" (91). In other words, while the Bluebeard story is transnational in the sense that it embarked on its world career in French and spread to other countries, Hungary included, Martel's text has been transnational from the very moment of its conception by being written in multiple languages.

The most prominent Hungarian feature of Martel's postmodern novel is its use of the Hungarian language. Apart from a few sporadic Hungarian words and phrases, four and a half pages of the novel contain two columns. The left column contains Bartók's *Bluebeard's Castle* in Hungarian, while the right-hand column is a lyrical rendering of the scattered thoughts and emotions of the narrator triggered by listening to Hungarians and the Hungarian language.

Although some commentators have criticised Martel's novel *Self* for depicting the Hungarian language as strange and incomprehensible and for placing the Hungarian version of Bartók's Bluebeard before the truly shocking rape-scene of the book, as if the incomprehensible and barbaric nature of the Hungarian language was used to foreshadow the sexual crime (see, for example, Sabo 101), it must also be noted that in other instances the Hungarian language is described in just the opposite terms, offering beauty and peace, capable of soothing the narrator's unsettled soul:

The first time I heard Tito speak his mother tongue, with ease and delight, my draw jopped, as I put it to him later. A new Tito seemed to arise before my eyes. With a changed mien, with a different register in his voice, with expressions and gestures hadn't seen before. I wasn't sure I knew this Tito. I had to tap him on the shoulder and say, 'Tito, is that you?' He laughed. 'Yes, of course it is.' He

was Tito again, and I had another visa stamp in my passport. Even after three years I could renew my sense of wonder at his fluid gibberish. When I didn't want to travel, when I tuned out, then Magyar became a seashore, a soothing background noise amidst which my day-dreams could float. Anyway, whether flying for free on Malev or sitting by the seashore, I was never alone for long. One Hungarian or another invariably interrupted my reverie with words that I understood (Martel 263–64).

In conclusion, it is evident that Bluebeard's Hungarian version by Balázs and Bartók has become a powerful transcultural artwork itself, a point of departure for an important scene in Martel's novel. Esterházy's short story, on the other hand, shows equally important, if more covert, parallels and correspondences with the Canadian work. As mentioned, both feature family history which internalise the otherwise objective storyline and both deal with issues of identity and gender, including transsexuality and gender change. The use of irony mixed with despair in the face of tragic, often violent, events and circumstances also reveals traits that form a bond between the two literary pieces. A belief in the centrality of language and its aesthetic and moral function in various forms of juxtaposition during the unfolding of the respective storylines is yet another essential characteristic that connects the two works in the context of transcultural and transnational literature.

Based on the above, perhaps even Esterházy's narrator would say that he has absolutely nothing to add, even though it is equally possible that he would be happy to say a few more things about this.

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ENIKŐ BOLLOBÁS

Carbonaro's Stories that Heal and Amuse: Local Character Anecdotes in the Short Fiction of Géza Szőcs



“Tell me stories that are outrageous, bewildering, even shocking.” This is what Sultan Shahryar, Carbonaro’s temporary alter-ego in Géza Szőcs’s 2012 collection, *Carbonaro éjszakái* [*Carbonaro’s Nights*], demands of Scheherazade, who—as we know from *One Thousand and One Nights* (or *Arabian Nights*)—will tell endless spellbinding stories for his amusement (for as long as her stories amuse him, he will spare her life). Carbonaro’s stories, published the following year in the first volume of *Ha polip szuszog Kolozsvárott* [*When an Octopus Snuffles in Kolozsvár*], are being told to his dying poet friend, János Sziveri, less with the purpose of amusing his sick friend but rather of healing him—or at least of keeping his spirit alive, and ultimately keeping him alive as well. I will examine Szőcs’s stories in these two collections,¹ written with the intention of both amusing and healing, and show how the two collections both comply with as well as subvert the anecdotal tradition.

In *Carbonaro’s Nights*, the Sultan is very specific about what kind of stories he wants to hear: these must be bewildering, amusing, funny, philosophical, and unbelievable. Indeed, the best stories should shake him with incredulity (so that he would shout, “impossible!”) and bring him to uproarious laughter or to cold sweats and goosebumps; their historical meanings should make him contemplate grave philosophical problems; the stories should have a

¹ In the in-text citations, I will refer to these two collections as *Carbonaro* and *Ha polip szuszog*.

turn as unexpected and elegant as the best sonnets have; and they can be either fictional or non-fictional, complete or fragmentary.²

The Sultan's list of requirements seems to inspire a good anecdote. Overall, it conforms to Archer Taylor's definition of the anecdote as "a brief narrative current in oral tradition that tells something unusual about a person, an event, or a thing. It may involve quotation of a witty remark or description of a remarkable situation" (223). It also complies with most of the features of "anecdotal narration" listed by Tibor Gintli in his recently published monograph, *Perújrafelvétel*. Here Gintli names the features of orality, the punchline mode, comic plot and characters, narrative vein, the desire to entertain, easy pace or tempo, narrative diversions, and familiarity between narrator and reader or listener, as well as between narrator and characters (*Perújrafelvétel* 30) as defining the anecdote.

Scheherazade's stories, presented according to the requirements of Carbonaro/Shahryar, indeed comply with the general features of the anecdote. For one, orality is central, since the stories are being shared by Scheherazade and Shahryar in *Carbonaro's Nights* and by Carbonaro and

² "– Figyelj, Sehe: képerszenek el. A mindenit, ez nem igaz – kiáltsák majd hitetlenkedve, ez képtelenség... Némelyik ezt ne vedd kötelezőnek, meg is nevetethet. Nem árt, ha gondolkodóba fognak ejteni mélységes mély ... históriai és bölcséleti jelentésekkel. Jó, ha van bennük fordulat, de csak elegánsan, mint a legjobb szonettekben. Olcsó poén, lestrapált geg, ócska vicc, banális csattanó szóba sem jöhet. Semmi, ami kiszámítható. Amúgy a mese lehet teljes történet vagy annak egy részlete, max. öt-hatezer leütés. ... a nevetés, amellyel hallgatom majd a mesét, úgy szeretném tehát, hogy leginkább majdnem szörnyülködő legyen, sírva vihogós: amilyent a már-már képtelen valóság fakaszt az emberben. Ilyen nevetésre vágyom. Amilyen egy szakadék szélén kísért meg bennünket, vagy ártatlan elítéltként a villamosszékben. De nem is kell engem örökké megnevetetni, olykor a csendes, szelíd, cinkos somolyoghatnék is megteszi majd. De a fő kiválasztási elv a hideglelős, libabőrös álmélkodás legyen mégis.

– Katarzis legyen benne?

– Ezt rád bízom, Sehe. ...

– [...] Hősiességről is szólnon?

– Nem feltétel.

– Fikciós legyen vagy nem-fikciós?

– Is-is.

– De azt, amit hallani szeretnél, legfőképpen mi különböztesse meg száz egyéb, zseniális történetről?

– Hát az a bizonyos elképesztő, váratlan elem, amittől az ember így kiált fel: az istenit, ez nem igaz – és földhözvágthatnája támad a kalapját vagy egy boroskancsót illetően." (*Carbonaro* 5–6)

his poet friend in *When an Octopus Snuffles in Kolozsvár*. But the immediacy of spoken speech is far from being trivial or unproblematic, since in *Carbonaro's Nights* the stories are retellings—quite like, we might add, the stories of those Arabian nights that were taken, appropriated, and borrowed from diverse authors.

The punchline mode is also prevalent in that the resolution is usually rounded off in a punchline or a “pointe,” serving as entertainment understood as an effort to save lives—those of Scheherazade and Sziveri. Among such anecdotes one could mention the one involving Count Ödön Zichy's tasteless jest, which he planned to perform at the expense of a poor woodcutter by replacing the latter's daily wage of a sausage with a piece of pig turd. However, as the punchline at the end takes the conclusion of the story in a different direction, with the intervention of the always-present Shahryar here taking on the identity of the woodcutter, the turd ends up on the dinner table for the Count's sophisticated guests (*Carbonaro* 22–24).

Another feature complying with the traditions of the genre—the easy pace—is also among the features present in Szócs's collections. This tempo is marked by frequent prolepses that signal the promise that a particular topic will be dealt with later, in due time. Carbonaro often replies to Scheherazade's the urgings by slowing down the pace, saying, “But first” (*Carbonaro* 7) or “That can wait” (*Carbonaro* 14), and to Sziveri by telling him, “You will see for yourself” (*Ha polip szuszog* 54, 62). Such narratorial flashforwards make for an unhurried and relaxed narration, while also having the function of asserting control over the narration: it is Carbonaro who has agency over the narration (not Scheherazade or Sziveri), and his design must be followed in the sense that the discussion of certain topics or characters are postponed to a later point.

Finally, a familiarity between narrator and reader or listener, as well as between narrator and characters is also conveyed throughout. Indeed, the personal tone of the anecdotal narrative is clearly upheld here, and the feeling of familiarity, even intimacy, is extended to Carbonaro's dialogue partners (on this issue, see Gintli, “Anekdotizmus és poétikai innováció” 141, 146; and “Anekdotikus narráció és kompozíció” 68). This is why Scheherazade is often called by Hungarian diminutives, “*Sehe*” and “*Seherém*” (“my Sehe”), and why Sziveri is included in the stories, as in the

one about the Transylvanian girls born every two hundred years to become English queens (with reference to Claudine Rhédey, the great-great grandmother of Queen Elisabeth II) (*Ha polip szuszog* 43).

Now I turn to the two listeners' desire to hear Hungarian or Transylvanian stories, the feature signaling locality. This need for having Hungarians in the stories is what is called "local character anecdote" in critical literature. In this case, the attribute "local character" is to be understood in the broader sense, as being borne out of a nation's collective (historical) memory. Indeed, these collective memories are not officially authorized, nor are the plots and characters necessarily accurate historically or factually. Yet they all serve an important role of functioning, as Kaarina Koski puts it, "dialogically and creat[ing] unity in the community" (37). In the case of the Carbonaro stories, they indeed contribute to reimagining and reenacting the community within and without the present borders. For example, the anecdote entitled "Sztálin és a magyarok hátgerince" ["Stalin and the Backbone of Hungarians"] explains why Stalin wanted to break the Poles and the Hungarians in particular: as he explained to Milovan Dilas, communist ideologue and later critic of Yugoslavia's Tito, it was because they were the "only true nations" in Central Europe. Shahryar agrees with this qualification, even citing the 1522 battle of Szolnok and the 1956 fighting in Budapest's Corvin Lane as examples proving the fierce determination of the Hungarians (*Carbonaro* 29).

Some of the stories are self-critical, ironically regarding the nation's negative character traits. One, for example, gives the parable of Prince Gábor Bethlen's fish, which survived not only in sea water but also in fresh water, moreover, on land as well, where it learned to speak, to read and write, and even to speak Latin. But when it was thrown back into its natural habitat, the sea, it simply perished (*Carbonaro* 10). This message is reiterated in the anecdote about the two hundred galley-slaves who pulled Prince Rákóczi's galleon: reconciled to being slaves, they had no desire for freedom. To which Shahryar adds, "they might have even drowned in that new-found freedom" (*Carbonaro* 14).

Moreover, they comply with another important feature of the local character anecdote articulated by Lionel Gossman, namely its subversion of "established views of history, the world, and human nature" and of "established understandings of the past" (143). As Gossman claims, the local character anecdote

may challenge the historian to expand and revise established or authorized views of a historical situation, event, or personality or of human behavior generally. ... provoke a reconsideration of what we believe we know about history and society and lead us to consider previously unobserved aspects of the past. (167–68)

Among the Carbonaro anecdotes subverting established views of history, one might cite the story about the invisible princes of Transylvania (*Ha polip szuszog* 55), the “doubles” or alter-egos living in Gyulafehérvár (*Ha polip szuszog* 60–61), and the three souls emerging from the Saint George statue in Kolozsvár (*Ha polip szuszog* 65–67). The presentation of nonconformist characters as the protagonists of such subversive stories is also prevalent as, for example, in the stories about Edit Hajós, the wife of film director and scriptwriter Béla Balázs, and Karola Szilvássy, wife of the Baron Elemér Bornemissza, both of whom volunteered to serve as surgical nurses in World War I (*Carbonaro* 54–55).

The community's reimagining is often given in a humorous form. These anecdotes are deeply influenced by the Central-European *Witz* tradition, mixed with the marks of genres with such telling names as “*histoiette*,” “*bagatelle*,” and “*curiosité*” (see Stefanovska 16). Indeed, these anecdotes micrify history, place the events on a smaller, more humanly accessible scale, and show the humorous underside of historical events, while also presenting them not as factual, not as a series of events that actually happened, but as ones that could have happened. Hence the brush of the fictional and the imagined, and hence the lightness that is offered as strengthening the healing process.

Two stories in *Carbonaro's Nights* that are not borrowed from other sources but authored by Szócs himself, serve as the best examples of the *Witz*: “A fogkefe” [“The Toothbrush”] and “A bérgyilkos és a Mester” [“The Contract Killer and the Maestro”], both comprising dialogues between two strangers. In the first one a man wants to borrow the other's toothbrush, who first turns down this unusual request, but then—especially when the would-be borrower refuses to tell him what he would actually use his toothbrush for (citing his right for privacy) agrees to give the man the toothbrush for keeps. Here comes the unexpected turn of

the punchline, as the first man now resents this gesture, taking offense at the man for being so intent to dump on him his (now) disgusting toothbrush (*Carbonaro* 153–56). The second story is similarly witty, presenting the encounter between a hitman and a world-famous violinist, whom he is supposed to kill. In appreciation of the Maestro's legendary performance of Shostakovich's violin concerto, the would-be killer offers to spare his life, only to learn that it was the Maestro himself who hired him to help him thereby to commit suicide. A lively conversation ensues between the two men now almost friends, mostly about possible forms of death, during which the Maestro gives legal arguments concerning the binding nature of the contract, which the hitman must comply with (*Carbonaro* 156–71).

After this brief survey of the ways Szőcs/Carbonaro's anecdotes comply with the anecdotal tradition, I turn now to where he departs from the norms, especially of the local character anecdote. I see three outstanding departures: (i) the mode of quoting, (ii) mixing fact and fiction in the presentation, or better, interpretation, of local history, and (iii) the particular manner of foregrounding the fantastic.

(i) The collection *Carbonaro's Nights* brings together anecdotes from diverse sources. Such appropriations are not unusual in the anecdotal tradition, for customarily anecdotes are traveling stories passed on through generations. The novelty of the book lies in the openness of the appropriation, since the stories are quoted and properly cited, with exact bibliographic reference to where they were originally published.

Acceding to the stipulations given at the beginning of the two books, the narrators plunge into Hungarian/Transylvanian themes. For example, in *Carbonaro's Nights* the Sultan demands that the stories should be about Hungarians,³ while in *When an Octopus Snuffles in Kolozsvár* the poet friend asks Carbonaro to tell him about Transylvania, where he had never been.⁴ By demanding Hungarian/Transylvanian thematics, Carbonaro extends the Arabic context to include Hungarian/Transylvanian texts. In this new context, then, stories appropriated from various authors gain

³ "Magyarok mindenesetre legyenek benne." (*Carbonaro* 6)

⁴ "Mesélj nekem Erdélyről – kérlelt nem titkolt mohósággal." (*Ha polip szuszog* 7)

new meanings as he includes texts from such diverse sources as French composer Hector Berlioz, along with several Hungarian figures from different ages such as Kelemen Mikes, scribe to Prince Rákóczi in the eighteenth century; nineteenth-century writer and public figure Károly Eötvös; nineteenth-century novelist Mór Jókai; various Hungarians from the twentieth century, including poet Endre Ady, fiction writer and journalist Frigyes Karinthy, novelist Miklós Szentkuthy, novelist and dramatist Ferenc Herczeg, emigré author and critic Mátyás Sárközi, actor Oszkár Ascher, film director Géza Böszörményi, poet György Faludy, prose writer István Örkény, author István Szőcs, visual artist Ferenc Bodor, architect László Zolnay, and historian Ferenc Fejtő. As such, part of this book functions as a collection of formerly published stories, following Emerson's dictum, "He that comes second must needs quote him that comes first." Yet the subjective and even personal voice dominating the discourse is upheld throughout by what Hayden White calls, with reference to Émile Benveniste, "the presence, explicit or implicit, of an 'ego' who can be defined 'only as the person who maintains the discourse'" (7). In *Carbonaro's Nights*, the narrating subject is doubled, with Scheherazade narrating the stories and Shahryar controlling the dialogue by selecting and commenting on the stories; yet discourse is maintained through the cooperation of the two, for after each anecdote Carbonaro/Shahryar and Scheherazade reflect upon the anecdotes just quoted, placing the story in their dialogue.

In line with Emerson's dictum that "every talker helps a story in repeating it, until, at last, from the slenderest filament of fact a good fable is constructed," Carbonaro confirms the original meanings by repetition. Yet not only does he confirm old meanings, but he alters them too, by placing the stories in new contexts. In this way, Carbonaro follows the process taken by Jorge Louis Borges whereby his translations and adaptations of *Arabian Nights* lose their meanings attached to them and, as pointed out by Robert Irwin, "acquire quite another when related by a twentieth-century modernist and Argentinian fabulist" (283; quoted in Kennedy 200). But Carbonaro attains something new here too: by citing Hungarian stories and placing them into the classic Arabian/Persian storytelling context, Carbonaro makes them parts of an infinite process. Carbonaro and all the authors whom he quotes thus join that succession of writers of *One Thousand and One Nights*, who, according to Borges, make it an "infinite book," a "species of eternity" (570). Ultimately, the Hungarian stories are thus also aligned with eternity.

Moreover, each appropriation is followed by the reflections of the narrator and narratee, Scheherazade and Shahryar. Given this double framework, the dialogue, which so characteristically structures anecdotes, is brought about in a twofold manner, in that it not only takes place between Scheherazade and Shahryar, but also between the actual narrators and the “original” sources, that is, between the primary and secondary narrators. With this additional form of dialogue, Szócs duplicates the familiar double-voiced discourse of the anecdote, adding to the “heteroglossia and intertextuality” Ray Cashman assigns to the anecdote (394)—a dialogic self-reflectivity carried out by the narrator and narratee as they reflect upon each story.

(ii) Mixing fact and fiction provides the second mode of subverting the norms of the anecdote, applied especially in stories concerning history. In some pieces, this subversion is rather cautious, consisting merely in the recalling of little remembered details. This is the case when familiar events or stories are revived with the intention of strengthening their place in collective memory. This happens, for example, in the story recounting the last night before the great poet Dezső Kosztolányi died in 1936, when his writer friend Frigyes Karinthy visited him with the actor Oszkár Ascher (*Carbonaro* 83–84). Some other stories seem totally incredible, yet since authentic sources are cited, their credibility is sustained. For example, who could doubt the witnesses relating the strange “prison game” in which once chief political players, now political prisoners, set up their imaginary cabinets in 1944 and 1956, ones they could have (or would have) formed outside their cells (*Carbonaro* 108–14). What gives such accounts credibility is quoting, that is, the method in double-voiced discourse whereby one (supposedly) reliable narrator quotes another (supposedly) reliable narrator, who is trusted because he or she is understood to be in the know. Indeed, the truth claim of the *Carbonaro* stories is upheld by the doubling of narrators, in the double-voiced discourse realized by quotation, for as we know from Emerson, “[W]hatever we think and say is wonderfully better for our spirits and trust, in another mouth.” Yet elsewhere *Carbonaro* problematizes exactly the credibility of the eye-witness; this is what happens in the story presenting the recollections of diverse people from the infamous Recsk camp—prisoners as well as henchmen, wardens, jailors, interrogators, torturers—demonstrating how differently they recalled events (mostly because the latter were trying to prove their innocence) (*Carbonaro* 116–24).

Fact and fiction are also mixed in the story telling that Hungarians lost the battle of Mohács to the Turks because of a lovesick young man who, in order to satisfy his lady's desire for pigeon meat, accidentally shot the carrier pigeon with Commander-in-Chief Tomori's message to King Louis II, giving the exact time of the attack (*Carbonaro* 8–10). The anecdotes often give little known background information about historical figures. For example, one describes a photograph that captures Sigmund Freud in the cheering crowd before the Vienna Burg, enthusiastically hurraing the declaration of war on Serbia in 1914 (*Carbonaro* 48). Another such story gives unfamiliar details about the nineteenth-century Hungarian statesman Count István Széchenyi and the physicist János Bolyai, who both wrote poems in German to their sweethearts; moreover, the German poems of Lajos Széchenyi, the brother of István, were put to music by Schubert (*Carbonaro* 150–51). Such additional pieces of information, whether made up (as in the case of the supposed background information on the Mohács battle) or historically accurate (as in the case of the Freud and Széchenyi/Bolyai anecdotes) serve a better understanding (or even just picturing) of otherwise unexplainable events (of Mohács) or a better knowledge of historical characters (Freud and Széchenyi/Bolyai). They seem to suggest that major events might fail for very quotidian, earthly reasons; that great minds might have unexpected political alliances; and that historical figures might have artistic aspirations (when moved by love).

Some other anecdotes about the justice done to those who are usually considered the underdogs of society also mix fact and fiction. One among these tells about how the virtuoso gypsy violinist Bihari, who could not even read musical notes, humiliated some self-conceited German musicians by performing Ruzitska's parliamentary music the Gypsies picked up while the Germans were just rehearsing the piece (*Carbonaro* 16). Another story on justice served, which I mentioned earlier as an example of the punchline mode twisting the conclusion, involves the high-class guests of smug-faced Count Zichy having to eat the pig-turd their host prepared for the unsuspecting woodcutter (*Carbonaro* 22–24).

The emphasis on exaggeration approximating the surreal or the absurd is also a feature of Carbonaro's anecdotes; we read stories that are totally absurd yet read as if they are real. For example, one of them, taken from the master of "one-minute stories," István Örkény, relating a harness race using

humans instead of horses (*Carbonaro* 116–24) proves that the reality of totalitarian oppression is better captured in such absurd narratives than in realistic accounts. Absurdity can also give meaning to events, as—to use White’s words—one of the “instruments by which conflicting claims of the imaginary and the real are mediated, arbitrated, or resolved in a discourse” (9). This is what happens, for example, in the story about József Tróznér, the former headmaster of the Protestant Collegium in Marosvásárhely, whose portrait hanging in the school was hit in 1946 by a bullet right in the heart, after which he went home, laid himself down, and died (*Carbonaro* 147–49).

(iii) The third way Szőcs departs from the local character anecdote concerns the foregrounding of the fantastic. Carbonaro’s own stories told in the *Octopus* collection (*Ha polip szuszog Kolozsvárott*), are clearly fictionalized, approximating the fantastic. States of affairs told in some of the stories contradict the laws of physics, as, for example, the one about the stairs in the house on Horea Street, which make going up more leisurely than going down (8), or the one in which a pulsing star fallen from the skies turns into a breathing-snuffling octopus on the floor of a Kolozsvár café (26). Other stories involve miraculous events, as does the one about the grandfather’s garden containing elements of the Garden of Eden (with its tree of life and a monkey called Adam), as well as the Hungarian myth of origin (complete with the miracle stag) (14). The impossible is brought about by a literal understanding of metaphoric language, as, for example, in the story narrating how poet Attila József set his hair on fire, proving his “blazing courtship,” as the title (*Lángoló udvarlás*) indicates, his lady demanded (18). In fact, the whole collection is geared to present Kolozsvár as a city where miracles happen; one could mention the story of the Reality Theatre, where the actors literally get drunk, fall in love, and die on the stage (28–31); of the wives’ market, where husbands sell the wives they have grown bored with (35–36); of the girls born every two hundred years in Transylvania to become queens of England (44); of the gate where Transylvania and the ‘other world’ meet (49); of Házsongárd cemetery, where, due to the scarcity of vegetables brought about by the destruction of the surrounding villages, city dwellers had to plant vegetables on the graves, which thereupon always exhibited the image of the dictator or his wife (75–76). The collection closes with the narrativization of a well-known song about János Virág and the nine locks of Kolozsvár’s gate whose keys always seem to be getting lost (77–79).

One group within the above anecdotes stands out in having the fantastic taking its departure from language. Much like the poetry grounded in the immanence of language as described by Pál Hegyi, these anecdotes take language as their source and construct a narrative out of the given linguistic material. Indeed, Szőcs takes language seriously, trusting the knowledge contained in it. So when, for example, Carbonaro describes the grandfather's garden as an Edenic place with a baobab tree growing in it, he listens to language: the Hungarian word for baobab is *majomkenyérfa* (literally, 'monkeybread-tree'), so he must mention the monkey, Adam, who lives in the garden (14–17). Or in the Attila József story, when the lady whose heart the poet wants to win calls together young Kolozsvár poets to sing her praise and conduct a "blazing courtship," as the title insists "Lángoló udvarlás", József takes the metaphor literally and after pouring kerosene on his hair, lights it and leans out of a high-speed train, so that a long fiery chevelure lights up the sky (18–20). The final anecdote of the volume attests to a similar trust in not just language, but in a well-known linguistic artifact, a popular folk song, *Kolozsváros olyan város* ("Kolozs-city is such a city"), telling about the city with its gate of nine locks, and giving the name of one of its inhabitants, the butcher János Virág. Out of this simple song, Szőcs constructs an elaborate fantasy about the house that his grandfather bought from János Virág, with the nine-locked gate in its basement. We learn that all the keys got lost except one, which still opens the gate—into eternity (77).

This, I believe, is where Szőcs subverts most visibly the local character tradition: in his reliance on language to give meaning to events, by constructing fantastic stories as vehicles of making sense. It is helpful to recall White's claim insisting that "the value attached to narrativity in the representation of real events arises out of the desire to have real events display the coherence, integrity, fullness, and closure of an image of life that is and can only be imaginary" (27). What is important, therefore, is not whether factuality characterizes the presentation of events or not, but that interpretation can only be part of the imagined—in this case, the fantastic.

To conclude, Szőcs's Carbonaro stories align with the anecdotal tradition in their emphasis on orality, the punchline mode, the desire to entertain, the easy pace or tempo, and the familiarity between the participants of the dialogue situation. Yet he also departs from this tradition, subverting

the established norms of the genre. First among these departures or subversions is his original mode of quoting, whereby dialogicity is doubled, so that it exists between both primary and secondary narrators, as well as between two persons in speech situations, as occurs with Scheherazade and Shahryar on the one hand, and Carbonaro and Sziveri on the other. I locate the most radical departure from the norm in the second collection, where all the stories are Szöcs's; here the narrator gives meaning to phenomena through the imagined, the fictioned, and even the fantastic. This method of underscoring the real by the surreal or the fantastic is coupled with the use of language as a source of knowledge. While in the first collection he relied on published textual sources to support the credibility of the stories, here he finds a new authority, language, devising a new mode of quoting: unearthing the knowledge stored in language and quoting that.

This seems to be the poet's hand at work in prose: assigning meaning derived from language and then returning to language; in other words, knowing *from* language, and telling *in* language. The narratives unfolding what language knows are written in a beautiful "poet's prose"—generative sentences mixed with conjectural prose and translative prose—to evoke Stephen Fredman's terms. By such language adventure the author substantiates White's claim that the narrative is actually a "metacode, a human universal on the basis of which transcultural messages about the nature of a shared reality can be transmitted" (White 6).

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EDIT ZSADÁNYI

Posthuman Perspectives in Some
of László Krasznahorkai's Works:
*A Mountain to the North,
a Lake to the South, Paths to the West,
a River to the East;
Satantango and The Turin Horse*



In Hungarian literary history, László Krasznahorkai was often considered to be a late modernist artist. Emphasis was laid on the central position of the storytelling in his art accompanied by tragic world view and prophetic narrative style (Szirák 44). Other scholars, on the other hand, accentuated the relevance of postmodernist poetical functions in his works, such as challenging basic oppositional categories of Western culture, deconstructive narrative patterns and metafictional references (Zsadányi 9). From the present circumstances of the pandemic and the global environmental crisis, Krasznahorkai's apocalyptic views, occurring in several works of his, might as well be considered as foreseeing the disasters on a global scale in the twenty-first century. The prophetic visions and the tragic attitude of his artistic discourse have gained new interpretive potential in our presence, in the age of globalization, global health and environmental crisis.

In my article, I wish to call attention to the relevance of global perspectives and the concept of posthumanism in understanding László Krasznahorkai's works. The international reception of Krasznahorkai's work clearly shows that the author is capable of mediating Central European heritage for a globalizing world. Perhaps, this capacity is closely related to the fact that his sense of Eastern Europe is defined by its relationship to both Western Societies and to the Far East. We may speak of a globalizing turn

in Krasznahorkai's oeuvre when his interrogation of Eastern Europeanness leads him to the cultures of the Far East and to the United States. The author's first two novels (*Satantango* [*Sátántangó*, 1985], *The Melancholy of Resistance* [*Az ellenállás melankóliája*, 1989]) are set in Eastern Europe in the period of state socialism, whilst his later works, rather, can be regarded international. Some of them (*The Prisoner of Urga* [*Az urgai fogoly*, 1992], *Destruction and Sorrow Beneath the Heavens* [*Rombolás és bánat az Ég alatt*, 2004], and *A Mountain to the North, a Lake to the South, Paths to the West, a River to the East* [*Északról hegy, Délről tó, Nyugatról utak, Keletről folyó*, 2003]) are set in China and Japan.

My present study focuses on the novel *A Mountain to the North, a Lake to the South, Paths to the West, a River to the East*, which takes place in the Far East, namely in contemporary Japan. I wish to argue that the narrative discourse of the novel is able to convey some posthumanist concepts, and I will focus on how the textually represented world about searching for a mysterious garden is transformed into a materially sensible entity. Referring to Rosi Braidotti's notion of the posthuman, I intend to illustrate that the novel's key concepts are in accordance with some key posthuman principles, as they emphasize not the difference but the common features between humans and their social and natural environment, between humans, plants, animals and natural landscape. In the second part of my article, I wish to point at the fact that posthumanist ideas can also be detected in Krasznahorkai's other works, the novel *Satantango* and the movie *The Turin Horse* (*A torinói ló*, 2011; screenwriter: László Krasznahorkai; directors: Béla Tarr and Ágnes Hranitzky) which are related to the notion of East Europe.

1 Posthuman perspectives in László Krasznahorkai's A Mountain to the North, a Lake to the South, Paths to the West, a River to the East

In her book *The Posthuman*, Rosi Braidotti sees posthuman theories as a further development after the postmodern views. She argues that the notion of the posthuman seems to her the most adequate concept for coming to terms with our contemporary globally linked and technologically mediated societies. She considers the theoretical tendencies after postmodernism and

poststructuralism and creates an itinerary in the intellectual developments that leads from humanism through antihumanism to posthumanism. In her view, poststructuralist continental philosophers, feminists, and postcolonial thinkers can be considered as representatives of the antihumanist turn in which they challenge the unitary humanist notion of the subject with its Eurocentric core and imperialist tendencies. They reject the classical definition of European identity in terms of Humanism, rationality, and the universal—not merely in opposition to Humanism but in terms of creating other visions of the self. Braidotti proposes an affirmative and critical posthuman position that builds on the anti-humanist legacy and moves further (38). In her opinion, “a posthuman ethics for a non-unitary subject proposes an enlarged sense of interconnection between self and others, including the non-human or ‘earth’ others,” including our living fellows, animals and plants, the natural environment we live in (49).

The repetition of the subject matter, the rewriting of stories, and the recurring figures may lead to the conclusion that Krasznahorkai's works do not comprise a series of individual pieces; rather, they add up into a single, continuously developing large composition. We are on our way, and we are travelling forward in the line of works. For instance, it is as if the novel *A Mountain to the North, a Lake to the South, Paths to the West, a River to the East* continued the intercultural and spiritual journey that started in *The Prisoner of Urga*. *A Mountain to the North...* begins with Chapter 2, which also promotes the feeling that we have already been on our journey. It is suggested, just like in *The Prisoner of Urga* that we have come to a border situation:

it is not a fence, but the internal dimensions of something, the representation of which in this wall is only to warn the newcomer: soon they will need different units of measurement from those they have been accustomed to, soon they will be governed by different scales from those to which their lives have been confined to¹

¹ “[N]em kerítés ez, hanem a belső mérete valaminek, melynek megjelenítése e falban csak figyelmeztetni akarja az érkezőt: hamarosan másféle mértékegységekre lesz szükség, mint amiket eddig megszokott, hamarosan másféle léptékek lesznek az irányadók, mint amik közé eddig az életét zárta...” (Krasznahorkai, *Északról* 9)

The traveller of *The Prisoner of Urga* departs towards his goals obeying his inner call. The journey in the East leads to the recognition that stepping over into another culture is not compatible with the storytelling tradition that targets an audience with European thinking. Thus, the journey has laid to the acceptance of the limits of the European traveller–storyteller rather than to entering another culture.

In the novel *A Mountain to the North, a Lake to the South, Paths to the West, a River to the East* the border between East and West is crossed, and we enter an abandoned Japanese monastery. The other space is also another mental space where we cannot maintain the position of an outside onlooker. The view of space and viewer cannot be expressed as categories of object and subject. The space changes the viewer's position and reshapes his or her mental spaces. The controversies inherent in the intersection of the Eastern and the Western cultural circles are not resolved in the novel as in *The Prisoner of Urga*, where the traveller returns to the Western world, acknowledging his limitations; instead, the narratee of the story is thrown into a position in which he is addressed from the other world, from the Eastern culture.

In his article, Péter Nemes analyses the novel from an ecocritical point of view. He claims that nature has a unique function in the novel, it is the proper protagonist. Natural environment described in the text neither serves as background for the events, nor is it the illustration of the inner and outer conditions of humans (Nemes 392). He also states that László Krasznahorkai managed to accomplish two formidable tasks at once:

establishing a deep connection with the aesthetics of the Japanese garden, a cultural phenomenon far from the world of a Hungarian novelist in both distance and essence, while at the same time re-thinking the relationship between nature and humankind, one of the most pressing issues of our time. (Nemes 390)

The protagonist, Prince Genji's grandson, inherited his legendary beauty from his grandfather—indicates the book at one point. Prince Genji, renowned for his unparalleled beauty is the protagonist of the Japanese work written by Ms Murasaki in the eleventh century, consisting of

fifty-something chapters, entitled *The Tale of Genji*. In the novel *A Mountain to the North, a Lake to the South, Paths to the West, a River to the East* Prince Genji's grandson is looking for the original of the hundredth garden depicted in the illustrated book entitled *One Hundred Beautiful Gardens*. The story of the book in our hands is about a quest for finding in its fictional reality the picture of a garden seen in a book. Thus, the story of seeking a picture tells a beautiful story of finding one's dreams, of realizing the perfection once dreamed of. Also, it is depicted as a bridge between the Eastern and the Western culture, the Eastern and the Western reader.

The reader follows a simple narrative, namely, the visit of Prince Genji's grandson at the monastery where the beautiful garden may be hidden. The quest later expands and becomes hyperbolic: it turns out to span several decades from the end of the Tokugawa era (1603 to 1867) until the early Meiji era (1868 to 1912), but elsewhere the text also says that the quest has been under way for centuries. The scientists engaged to find the garden are of the view that it is impossible to separate reality and fiction:

for it has more than once appeared that this whole thing is utterly hopeless and hopeless and hopeless, that this whole thing has been just a hopeless venture from the very beginning, that perhaps this garden is only in the imagination of the author of the "One Hundred Beautiful Gardens" and it exists only as his personal, confidential, misleading joke²

In the novel *A Mountain to the North, a Lake to the South, Paths to the West, a River to the East*, we find ourselves in an unknown world; the Hungarian language is practically the only thing that connects us to our own culture. Krasznahorkai's intricate, long sentences keep us *here*, although we are in a totally different place. Nevertheless, we will not be excluded when

² "[M]ert bizony nem egyszer tűnt fel úgy, hogy ez az egész teljességgel reménytelen és reménytelen és reménytelen, hogy ez az egész csak egy kilátástalan vállalkozás már a kezdetek kezdete óta, hogy talán ez a kert csupán a 'Száz szép kert' szerzőjének a képzeletében létezik, csak az ő személyes, bizalmas, félrevezető tréfája teremtetten meg ..." (Krasznahorkai, *Északról* 85)

the Japanese Buddhist monastery is described because we are gradually transforming during the walk. The walk also becomes the metaphor of this slow ongoing mental transformation.

Switches of the fictional levels also add to complex formation of our notions of space. Zoltán Danyi gives a similar interpretation of the novel as he also emphasizes the materiality of the textually described spatial elements in the novel.

The novel gives a detailed description of the position of the garden, of the layer of moss covering the ground, and of the eight hinoki cypresses with their mighty branches. Moreover, it describes the composition, origins and formation of the soil with the precision of a scientific treatise, it relates the series of “divine accidents” required for the growth of the moss and the cypresses, and the “inexplicably complex and immensely serious play” of various forces necessary for the creation of such a garden. Through this magical description, the novel essentially writes the garden, and its triumphant message of beauty, into actual existence. And with this gesture, just like the grandson of prince Genji, the novel becomes one with the garden: it becomes the found garden and the reality of the inner image. (Danyi)

In my interpretation, posthumanist views can be related to the characteristic narrative technique of the novel, namely to the fact that textuality and materiality are intertwined at several points in the novel. For instance, Chapter 7 presents a beautiful description of a ginkgo tree. The narrator provides long details of how the tree stands out from its surroundings:

alone, this ginkgo did not belong to anything or anyone, it stood alone in the clearing, as if it could not be connected to anything, as if it could not belong to anything, as a rampant, wild dangerous creature rising far above all buildings and roofs and trees, and the unusually early mild already in spring, full of fresh crowns, tens of thousands of leaves reminiscent of a strange, fan-shaped, or rather heart-shaped

leaves sighing in the middle wind, it is this ginkgo, with the immeasurable, frozen depth of earth history ages behind him, and his thick trunk wearing only the paper ribbons of a Shinto rope, and at the bottom, the wild density of a holly bush that grew to its side, so it was the only one that stood out from this peaceful world³

In the list filling up long lines, in the accumulation of adjectives and adverbs, the subject and the predicate are visibly separated and *stand out*. In the midst of longer words and very complex sentence structures, the monosyllabic predicates “stood” and “was” (*állt* and *volt* in Hungarian) are striking. It feels as if the pages of the book were transforming into a three-dimensional space, as if the lines of the text had depth. Such materiality of the signifier, the expansion of the two dimensions fits well into Krasznahorkai's poetics pushing boundaries and expanding spaces. With spaces in the centre, crossing the borders also involves the rearrangement of mental spaces. While reading, space is transformed, and during such transformation the character–narrator and the subjectivity of the reader is also transforming. The reader can undergo a learning process and a personal transformation understanding more and more about post-humanistic views, in which humans are not separated from but are rather part of natural environment.

The spectacular descriptions typical of Krasznahorkai depict what is described in their tangible materiality; we see the green plants in front of us, follow the walls of the monastery, and sense the material of the buildings. The structure of the book reminds us of the structure of the abandoned monastery. It consists of fifty separate chapters, each a short story on its

³ “[E]gyedül ő, ez a ginkgó nem tartozott semmihez és senkihez, állt egymagában a tisztáson, mintha nem is lehetne mihez odakötni, mintha nem is tartozhatna semmihez, amolyan féktelen, vad veszélyes lényként messze minden épület és tető és fa fölé emelkedve, s a szokatlanul korai enyhe tavaszban már teljes, friss koronával, az enyhe szélben sóhajtozó, különös, legyező alakú, vagy sokkal inkább egy-egy közepén megtört szívre emlékeztető leveleinek a tizezreivel az ágain, ő, ez a ginkgó, maga mögött földtörténeti korok mérhetetlen, dermedt mélységével, s vastag törzsén mindössze egy shinto kötél papírszalagjait viselvén el, s alul, egy az oldalához odanőtt magyalbokor vad sűrűjét, volt tehát az egyetlen, mely kiemelkedett e nyugalmas világból.” (Krasznahorkai, *Mountain* 16–17)

own, from which a larger structure is emerging. The overall picture emerging from the chapters and the story of seeking dreams are in harmony with the group of separate buildings described: the picture of the ruined monastery. On the one hand, the novel points out its own structural nature, its material state, whereas on the other hand, we can recognize the poetic, artistic aspects in the construction of the monastery. Especially, the chapter (Chapter 14) telling the story of the decades' long construction of the monastery illustrates that art and architecture, creation and construction, subject and space-like nature are inseparable.

Prince Genji's grandson sees the ruins and fragments of a once flourishing, lively culture of the monastery. We are also given textual fragments; the numbered chapters are the pillars of this gone structure only readable in its traces. Paratextual indications also call attention to the object-like nature of the work. The lines are shorter than usual, one scarcely sees paragraphs, thus the text on each page gives the impression of columns. The book consists of nice thick pages that are rough to the touch, thus we can be aware upon turning each page and upon reading each chapter that we are holding the building blocks of the work itself.

Prince Genji's grandson follows the traces, proceeds from open spaces towards closed ones, further into the core of the monastery buildings. Most often we interpret and read the building through his perspective. Proceeding inwards from outside, we are entering deeper and deeper into the unknown world: deep inside the shrines, the hall of teaching, the golden hall, the hall constructed for the treasures and the books owned by the Buddhist order, finally, the residence of the order head. The process from the external into the inner space also tells the story of getting to know the other. Step by step, line by line, we understand more and more of a world unknown to us.

The narration of events and descriptive sections alternate during the reading process. The events are told by a third person narrator, at times representing the viewpoint of Prince Genji's grandson, other times taking the neutral position of an outsider. In the parts about searching and describing the monastery, the reader follows the events from a twofold perspective: we see the surroundings through the eyes of Prince Genji's grandson; he is scanning the environment with a glance that feels at home at the sacred

places but also with one that understands only a little of what he sees. At the same time, we look at him from an outside point of view, and it is the reader who interprets his behaviour.

The creation of inner spaces implies interpretation; the architect determines the space set. Spaces can be redefined and reinterpreted if their function changes with use. We witness such reinterpretation when we follow Prince Genji's grandson along the sections of the monastery. The sanctuaries, the libraries, the service buildings are abandoned, there are no people inside. The reader is not informed about what has happened, one can sense a post-disaster state. The places are reinterpreted, we are at a point in time when decay starts to take over the reins of power from the achievements of the human world. We see it from a human perspective, from the point of view of Prince Genji's grandson how authorities beyond man take over a world that was once defined by human scale.

Traces of human activities are present; these lead us into another world. This is also a *crossing* of sorts, as we return to the order of nature from that of civilization. A unique, deconstructive set of values is evolving and continues to reveal the dismantling and degrading processes of *Satantango* and *The Melancholy of Resistance*. We return to nature but not in the Rousseauian sense, not in the spirit of bringing man's natural abilities to the surface and mastering the wisdom we can learn from nature. The traces of human civilization, the ruins of life in the monastery all lead to decay and destruction. From a world of human principles, we step into an order that precedes and goes beyond man. This anti-enlightenment attitude can also be linked to the ideas of posthumanism.

In the middle section of the novel, in Chapter 24, we arrive at the most important venue of the monastery, where, at the Seat of Honour of the altar in the golden hall, we encounter the great saint, the Buddha sculpture of the monastery. Surprisingly enough, it is very small, looks like a child. We receive two explanations why the little Buddha turns his head away: he turns around to hear the words of Eikan, the wonderful speaker, or turns his head away from the evil, from human depravation.

[F]or that slightly turned head will speak unequivocally of the inalienable history of meanness, for that slightly turned head will speak of beauty forever, of immovable evil and helpless nobility, or incurable ordinariness and of the slightest human presence, and ascendant exaltation of ineffective compassion.⁴

Readers can decide which interpretation they deem correct; one can read the two together and also in contrast with each other. One can admire and look at the little Buddha that stirred many storms. Interestingly, the introduction of the object (i.e. of the Buddha statute) is so illustrative that we practically see the statue presented in front of us.

Talking of the garden is, in fact, not possible. Nevertheless, the novel *A Mountain to the North, a Lake to the South, Paths to the West* attempts the impossible: to tell what is unspeakable, to imagine what is inconceivable. Krasznahorkai demands hard work from his readers: broadening their lexical knowledge, consulting manuals, searching for contexts. Certain chapters resemble science dissemination descriptions, which is not uncommon in Krasznahorkai's prose. We need to tackle enigmatic pictures to be deciphered, and we need to work hard to understand various cultural references. The possibility of getting lost, a constant play of interruption and repetition creates a labyrinthine reading pattern.

The novel *A Mountain to the North, a Lake to the South, Paths to the West* is a beautiful, extraordinary and especially international piece of contemporary Hungarian prose. Its major value is perhaps the fact that it does not leave us alone also in exotic spaces, the novel maintains its compassion with those left outside, maintains solidarity with the reader. It offers an approach whereby the reception process also means a widening perspective of reception, thus reading becomes an event where we can experience a call

4 “... mert az a félrefordított fej az aljasság menthetetlen történetéről fog beszélni félreérthetetlenül, mert az a félrefordított fej a szépségről fog beszélni mindörökre, a mozdíthatatlan gonoszságról és a tehetetlen nemességről, a gyógyíthatatlan közönségesről és a legenyhébb emberi jelenlétről is elporló emelkedettségéről, a kiirt-hatatlan ostobaságról és a hatástalan együttérzésről.” (Krasznahorkai, *Északról* 62)

from an Eastern culture, another space and time. The reading experience about the search for a beautiful garden can be interpreted as a learning process—as an inauguration into a non-anthropocentric posthumanistic worldview in which the emphasis lays not on the distinction between humans and the environment, but rather on their common nature.

2 Posthumanistic ideas in Satantango and The Turin Horse

The posthuman idea of the community and a fusion of the human subject and nature can also be observed in Krasznahorkai's other works, such as the novel *Satantango* and the film *The Turin Horse* (screenwriter: László Krasznahorkai; director: Béla Tarr). The subjectivity associated with the posthuman creates a kind of negative identity that finds communion with nature in decay and destruction. In these two works, the hopelessness and lack of perspective often found in Eastern European novels can be linked to certain ideas of posthumanism.

In *Satantango*, fatalism as a way of thinking is combined with a de-anthropomorphic, non-human perspective, with the idea that human degradation is a kind of return, a kind of blending into the environment. The lack of social opportunities and the destructive power of nature are presented as mutually reinforcing processes in the minds of the characters. The natural processes of decay—the way time and nature defy human creations, the way houses are constantly attacked by nature, the forces of wind and rain—are linked to social fatalism. The protagonists experience their own social situation as an unchangeable fate, attributed to forces beyond their control, just as they experience the erosion and desolation that is taking hold of the place.

We learn about the characters' psyches one by one, the narrative follows the characters' inner worlds one after the other, and we get a glimpse into their thoughts and desires. At the same time, we find detailed and graphic descriptions of the ongoing degradation of the living environment. We learn that houses are slowly falling apart, plaster is peeling, walls are moulding, doors and windows are ruined, and weeds are growing in the interior corridors. The residents watch all this helplessly and resignedly, doing nothing about it.

In the first part of the novel, the reader finds out about the mental processes of the characters and their thoughts and desires. Parallel to this, the continuous decay of the lived environment is described in vivid detail.

The Schmidts hadn't used the room since spring. At first green mildew covered the cracked and peeling walls, but the clothes in the closet, a closet that was regularly cleaned, were also mildewed, as were the towels and all the bedding, and a couple of weeks was all it took for the cutlery saved in the drawer for special occasions to develop a coating of rust, and what with the legs of the big lace-covered table having worked loose, the curtains having yellowed and the lightbulb having gone out, they decided one day to move into the kitchen and stay there, and since there was nothing they could do to stop it from happening anyway, they left the room to be colonized by spiders and mice. (7)⁵

In this section, it is clear that the characters interpret the current situation, the amortization of the environment, as fate, and therefore do not take any steps that could improve their situation: "because there is nothing they can do about it anyway."

In *The Turin Horse* the connection between the hopelessness of human lives and the closeness of nature becomes even more apparent. In black and white, we can follow the human figures as they become part of the desolate environment. In this film, a father and his daughter spend their bleak and hopeless lives in poverty and with very hard work. They communicate using minimal vocabulary, their rhythm of life is increasingly shaped by the basic needs of eating, drinking and sleeping. Their environment

⁵ "A szobát már tavasz óta nem használták Schmidték. Először zöld penész lepte el a falakat, az ütött-kopott, de mindig tisztára törölgetett szekrényben megpenészedtek a ruhák, a törülközők és az összes ágynemű, pár hétre rá megrozsdásodtak az ünnepi alkalmakra eltett evőeszközök, kilazultak a csipketerítőkkal letakart nagyzsztal lábai, s amikor aztán megsárgultak a függönyök, s egy nap kialudt a villany is, végérvényesen kiköltöztek a konyhába, s hagyták hadd váljon az egerek és a pókok birodalmává, hisz úgysem tehettek az ellen már semmit." (14)

suddenly takes a turn for the worse, incomprehensible things happen, the horse refuses to move, the water in their well runs dangerously low, and they decide they must flee the place. They move away, and then soon return to the old house, back to the old ways and further degradation. The story, set over six days, is interpreted by critics as an apocalypse, a reverse creation story.

The starting point is nothing other than the mechanics of human existence: dressing, eating potatoes, carrying water, catching a horse, cleaning its stall, etc. Here, it's all there is. It is the passing away of these that triggers the apocalypse: the horse won't move, they can't bring water because the well is dry, etc. These situations are interspersed with the wind, screaming in agony and menacingly, which finally extinguishes all light and is silenced on the last day (Ritter).

In the view of András Bálint Kovács, in this apocalypse, people are no longer given the chance to decide anything.

This is an apocalypse, not an ordinary hell. The characters are not 'lost' in their own lives because there is no life for them, and they have no choice. There is no conspiracy, there is no betrayal, because nothing that happens here is the result of human activity. (Kovács)

In the film, we see the relocating family with the horse and cart slowly moving away. Their image becomes smaller and smaller, eventually blending completely into the landscape. As long as we see the receding figures, we perceive a moving image, after they disappear from our view, having blended into the scenery, the movement stops and we perceive the environment as a still image, the moving picture frame becomes a static freeze. This could be a closing shot and the end of the story, but that is not what happens, we slowly perceive movement on the horizon again and see figures no other than the characters just left.

The spectators do not understand what is happening, what could have happened to make them return. Secretly, we hope that while they were out of sight, out of the horizon of the viewer and the film, something hopeful

emerged that made them decide to turn back. However, the final images and the sharp crunching sound of raw potatoes clearly indicate that the characters have returned to definite degradation, they no longer even have a stove running to prepare the meagre daily meal of cooked potatoes. Despite this, the characters resume their old way of life, sitting down to dinner as before and accepting their daily routine leading to certain decline.

In the movie scene, the question of free will is also raised since the characters voluntarily choose to return to destruction. Just as in *Satantango*, we see a kind of negative free will, a voluntary renunciation of escape, of a possible better fate, and a return to foreseeable final destruction. The characters unload the carriage with determination, each of their movements suggesting a conscious decision. This is the reason why the situation is deceptive, why the final scene has such a shocking effect: it is about activity, not indecision. At this point, the work goes beyond the pessimistic ending of Orwell's novel *1984*, the idea of 'I love big brother,' because here no dictatorial intervention or direct physical violence has occurred. In the novel *Satantango*, anxiety and a lack of self-belief and self-doubt led to a voluntary renunciation of one's own decision, the possibility and freedom of choice; in the movie *The Turin Horse* we saw at least one attempt to escape, followed by a return to the unchangeable.

We may conclude that the blurring of boundaries between subject and environment, between man and animal can be interpreted as a posthuman effect, often present in Krasznahorkai's work: the emphasis is not on difference, but on the shared experience of existence. Man, surviving one day after another, finds community, companionship in the indifference of a bleak and uncompassionate environment, in the self-evident existence, in the meaningless progress of the "must live" principle. The combination of posthuman subjectivity and Eastern European fate has resulted in a dark and sad vision of the world. On the other hand, *A Mountain to the North, a Lake to the South, Paths to the West, a River to the East* focuses on just the opposite: the common characteristics between nature and human creation comprise rather positive values. Beauty, perfection and harmony in nature are indistinguishable from the pursuit of beauty, perfection and harmony in human textual and architectural artworks.

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MARKO ČUDIĆ

László Krasznahorkai's Collection of Short Stories *Megy a világ (Ide svet / The World Goes On)* from the Serbian Translator's Point of View*



The case of the gradual metamorphosis of the Hungarian and Western reception of the contemporary Hungarian writer László Krasznahorkai seems to confirm the assumption that there are essential, ontological differences when it comes to how contemporary novels are read on the opposite sides of the former Iron Curtain. And although the Iron Curtain has been gone for a long time now, the mental reflexes, the poetic premises from which interpreters start, seem irreconcilable. There is no space or need in this study for a more detailed overview of Krasznahorkai's creative path, nor for a meticulous elaboration of the very rich Hungarian and foreign reception of his works. However, if we had to look for a clearly defined watershed in his oeuvre, we could make a seemingly banal division based on the actual place where the stories of his novels and short stories take place, as well as the nationality of the protagonists of his works: in other words, in a very broad sense, we could divide his oeuvre into Hungarian and non-Hungarian works.

* This article is a slightly abridged version of an almost identical article on the same topic, published in Serbian (Čudić, "Zbirka priča *Ide svet*"). Since this English version of the aforementioned article discusses the problems of translating the book from Hungarian into Serbian, not taking into consideration the English translation, and since this article will presumably be read by English-speaking readers, extensive, illustrative citations from the original and the translation have been omitted.

As I do not intend to list all the works of this writer published so far, here is just one proposal for a thematically based division: the first, Hungarian part of Krasznahorkai's oeuvre would, thus, include his first novels *Sátántangó* (*Satantango*, 1985), *Az ellenállás melankóliája* (*The Melancholy of Resistance*, 1989), the collection of short stories *Kegyelmi viszonyok: Halál-novellák* (*Relations of Mercy: Tales of Death*, 1986), the novels *Háború és háború* (*War and War*, 1999) and *Báró Wenckheim hazatér* (*Baron Wenckheim's Homecoming*, 2016). The plot of these black-humoured, dystopian books takes place entirely or partly in Hungary, and their main characters are either Hungarians, Central Europeans, or people from the Balkans in a somewhat broader sense, but certainly people from *this side* (*our side*) of the former Iron Curtain. The second, non-Hungarian type of Krasznahorkai's books would include almost all the other works of this writer, among which the most significant ones are the semi-autobiographical travelogue novels *Az urgai fogoly* (*The Prisoner of Urga*, 1992) and *Rombolás és bánat az Ég alatt* (*Destruction and Sorrow Beneath the Heavens*, 2004), as well as the collections of short stories *Seiobo járt odalent* (*Seiobo There Below*, 2008) and *Megy a világ* (*The World Goes On*, 2013). Among the most important topoi in this non-Hungarian part of Krasznahorkai's oeuvre are Mongolia, China, Japan, India, the Mediterranean and the Middle East.

From a reception standpoint, it would not be an exaggeration to say that Western, and especially German and Anglophone enthusiasm for his books *Seiobo There Below* and *The World Goes On* is relatively disproportionate to the obvious decline of the interest of Hungarian critics in his recent works, especially in those dealing with the non-Hungarian thematic spectrum. The domestic (Serbian) market of translated literature, being only part of a small and, unfortunately, now quite provincialized and somewhat snobbish literary and cultural scene, when choosing which works to translate, is guided above all by the success of a book in large markets, such as the Anglophone one, completely ignoring the specifics, dimensions, and absorption power of the domestic readership, i.e. the local critical-interpretive community. The aim of domestic publishers is, therefore, to provide readers with translations of those works by the author in question which are currently popular in the West, without any prior preparation. It is clear that within such a constellation of forces the translator, as one of the very few members of the domestic interpretive community who has had the opportunity to read the works of the author in question in the

original, cannot have too much influence when it comes to suggesting to profit-oriented publishers which particular book(s) should be translated.

Krasznahorkai's style is specific, with extremely long, "sprawling sentences" (Novey) that often extend to several pages; in that sense, the main task of the translator is to somehow try to maintain or approximate the rhythm and the "textual avalanche" of the original, which after a few lines "submerges" the reader, and sucks him/her into its world. Even in the rare cases when he deliberately does not use his trademark long, almost endless sentences (some as many as forty pages long), the translator would most probably have to face the bitter bleakness of the target language. As Otilie Mulzet, one of Krasznahorkai's English translators puts it, "there are sentences—or, in Krasznahorkai's case, subclauses—of just two or three words. I'm intrigued by all of this elision, and fascinated by the problem of conveying it in a recalcitrant language like English—just trying to get English to do something it's not really meant to do" (Stivers). However, it appears that it is not only the grammatical and syntactical structure of the given target language—English in Otilie Mulzet's case—that constitutes the greatest burden the translator has to overcome, but also the *Krasznahorkaian syntax* created in the agglutinative Hungarian language that needs to be transposed somehow into the target language. It is quite likely that it would be equally difficult to adequately re-create this syntax in other, structurally different languages, such as Serbian, in this case. In other words, almost every (not only an English) translator, of Krasznahorkai's works may at some point get the feeling that his/her language is "recalcitrant" when it comes to translating this specific prose. Many critics, including Serbian ones, tend to compare Krasznahorkai's style with the style of Thomas Bernhard (see Pančić 37). However, it is more likely that this is not so much due to poetic or thematic similarity, but to graphic (technical) similarity, in the sense of writing en bloc, that is, not dividing the text into paragraphs. When translating Krasznahorkai's rather extensive novel *The Melancholy of Resistance*, it is difficult to maintain a uniform level of translation in all parts of the book at all times, without occasional setbacks. The illusion of a continuous "textual avalanche" is not always easy to maintain.

In the case of short stories—although they are also mostly written in the typical Krasznahorkaian style—presumably there is a greater chance of maintaining a more uniform level of translation. However, here the pitfalls

and translation “traps” and “landmines” appear on another textual level. Unlike the novels, where the narrator’s voice speaks in more or less the same mode throughout the book, and where (sometimes) radical deviations from the standard language are placed, contrastingly, in the mouths of the main or the supporting characters of the given novel, in this case literally every story is written in a style that differs either drastically or in subtle nuances from the style of each preceding one. This is dictated, among other things, by the requirements of different narrative points of view, a process which in Krasznahorkai’s novels unfolds much more slowly than in his short stories. One of the characteristics of the above-mentioned collection of short stories is that, as opposed to his novels, here Krasznahorkai sometimes, quite surprisingly for many of his readers, experiments with shorter sentences as well. According to Idra Novey “Krasznahorkai executes these staccato sentences as skilfully as his signature expansive ones, and witnessing such a distinctive writer deviate a bit in sentence style is an unexpected pleasure of this new book.” Whatever the case may be, Krasznahorkai’s specific style distracts readers who focus exclusively on the plot. And the number of such readers, even among translators, is not negligible: “there are obviously many readers who still adhere to the principle that a novel consists primarily of paraphrasable material content that can be translated straightforwardly” (Bassnett 119). Perhaps this may explain the fact that no more than 400-500 copies of any of his books can be sold in Serbia.

However, previous experience with translating Krasznahorkai certainly cannot be a bad thing. As the Serbian translator of *The Melancholy of Resistance* (Krasnahorkai, *Melanholija otpora*, 2013) I have already written about some of the problems I encountered while translating that particular novel (Čudić, “The Place of Hungarian Literature”). The Serbian translation of Krasznahorkai’s collection of short stories (Krasnahorkai, *Ide svet*, 2019) was published six years after *The Melancholy of Resistance*, which was his first work ever published in Serbian.

The title is, of course, extremely important in every book, and the stronger the allegorical potential of the work in question, the more important it becomes. In that sense, the responsibility of the translator becomes even more essential. The title of the book, which will be discussed in this article from the translator’s perspective, can also be seen as a kind of trap, and for all its apparent simplicity, it puts the translator in an unpleasant situation.

Megy a világ in Serbian literally means *Ide svet* 'the world is going', 'the world keeps moving.' However, the first impression of the Hungarian reader when he/she encounters this title could be that it is a kind of a proverbial saying, a commonplace phrase, an expression frequently used in everyday Hungarian speech, the meaning of which could most easily be described by phrases like 'so it goes,' 'that's how it is,' 'life goes on,' etc.

The problem, however, is that Krasznahorkai is not only an extraordinary writer, he also seems to be an excellent illusionist of a kind. Namely, such an expression *does not exist* in the Hungarian language—it may resemble some expressions of this type, but in this exact form, it is not used, though. Ordinary and phraseological dictionaries of the Hungarian language, namely, do not record or contain this expression. Nor does googling the title phrase yield any particular result apart from offering the title of this particular book by Krasznahorkai only. Such a pseudo-saying posing as the title itself could, therefore, lead the translator to the wrong conclusion, to the idea that it is some specifically Hungarian idiom, that it belongs to some cultural realia (culture-specific elements) of an abstract-phraseological type. Translators are usually very sensitive to these cultural realia because they are aware of the fact that these culturally marked lexemes can be a non-neglectable distinguishing feature of the given text, since "Their additional importance lies in the fact that they are perceived as bearers of certain colours and exoticization not only by target-language readers but also by the readers of the source-language text ..." (Đorić-Francuski 186–87). And while this latter observation refers mainly to single words and not necessarily to (pseudo-)phraseologisms or idioms, such as the one in the title of Krasznahorkai's book, the mere concept of *exoticization* by means of deliberately using national realia could be operational in this context as well. However, in this particular case, it would be the wrong path to choose.

A glance at the already published translations of the same title in other languages can sometimes be helpful, but in this case, unfortunately, it is not very helpful: the English translation, namely, is entitled *The World Goes On* (2017; see Krasznahorkai, *World*). The German title *Die Welt voran* also emphasizes the fact of moving forward, moving on (2015; see Krasznahorkai, *Welt*). The Croatian translator Viktorija Šantić opted for *Svijet ide dalje* (*The World is Moving On*) (2017; see Krasznahorkai, *Svijet*). The already complex problem of solving this title is further complicated, however, by the fact

that in the title of one of the texts in the book the writer plays with the main title of the book: namely, the title of that particular short story is *Megy a világ előre*,¹ (Krasznahorkai, *Világ* 27), which literally means *The world is moving forward*. This subtle play with the title of the book and the title of one of the stories in it seems to undermine attempts at incorporating the word *forward*, *further* and the like into the main title. If we were to do this, i.e. if the main title, unlike in the Hungarian original, happens to be exactly the same as the title of one of the stories incorporated in the book (and that is exactly the case in the English, German and Croatian translations), we would just get yet another book among the thousands whose main title is identical with that of one of the texts in it. This book by Krasznahorkai, however, through this unique interplay between the two titles, seems to be something of a counter-example to this cliché. Not to mention that it is in this very story that Krasznahorkai's mysticism-prone narrator makes a bitter statement about "unshackling Satan" yet again, that is, about the return of (unbridled) Evil to this world (Krasznahorkai, *Világ* 27–30). The narrator sets September 11, 2001 as the specific date of the Devil's unshackling of his chains. This fact at least indicates the ambivalent and ironic character of the added word *előre* (*forward*).

Sometimes, when dealing with books written by extraordinary writers, a very literal translation of a title could, in fact, be the proper solution, that is, it can sometimes be precisely the solution that first comes to the translator's mind. Back in elementary school, Serbian language teachers often warned us that it was not stylistically acceptable to start a title with a verb. And yet, here, because of the fact that the original title is in a way an unusual, strange combination, where a verb is in the first place, it is precisely this inversion that could attract the reader's attention. From the translator's perspective, this, of course, is not about the desire to support the sale of the book, nor about any sensationalism of the journalistic type, but about the desire for the title to sound as powerful and as unusual as possible in

¹ If the main title, *Megy a világ* resembles a (non-existing) Hungarian phraseological saying, then the title of this particular story, extended by this single word *előre*, with its rhythmical, poetic character, could remind us of the first verse of a naive, children's poem or song, which could, for example, continue like this: *Megy a világ előre / Én pedig a mezőre* etc. (literally: "The world goes forward / Meanwhile I'm going out in the field").

the target language as it sounds in the original—even at the risk of error or failure. However, this return to the option that came to mind first was considered appropriate, of course, only after we considered other possible solutions, after we thoroughly and critically examined what we had originally conceived. During this cognitive process, one of the options that came to mind was *Život teče* [Life flows], or, as a reminiscence of the title of Federico Fellini's 1983 movie, *E la nave va* (*The Ship Sails On*), with an inserted conjunction *i* (*and*) at the beginning (*I teče život*), meaning something along the lines of *And life flows* (*goes*). In this variant, however, an important element of the title is lost, and that is the noun *world* itself, which, as we have already seen, has been retained (and justifiably so) by all the other translators.² On the other hand, the variant with the usual word order, *Svet ide* would probably sound too banal, too profane for a speculative–apocalyptic work of the (semi)mystic that László Krasznahorkai increasingly seems to be turning into in his latest books.

Here, however, the problems with the titles (as such) do not end yet. One of the longer texts in the book, which consists, as the subtitle suggests, of a series of *secret academic lectures*—or, as Márton Szilágyi puts it, “pseudo-orations” (Szilágyi 132; Zsadányi 138)—given by a certain speaker (who seems to be in detention) in front of an obscure audience, in an environment most reminiscent of a military dictatorship, is entitled *A Théseus-általános* (*Universal Theseus* in the English translation). The intuition of the author of this article proved to be correct when he assumed that it was some kind of a pseudo-mathematical concept, because *általános* resembles the standard Hungarian mathematical technical word *állandó* (*constant*) (Krasznahorkai, *Világ* 31). It is a noun that does not exist in this form

² If Krasznahorkai's first and, to this day, most influential novel, *Satantango*, was interpreted by many critics as a novel of exodus (where the characters (of the novel) get a false promise from a fraudster, a demagogue figure who tells them that if they just leave the current poor settlement where they live, their lives would suddenly change for the better), then this collection of short stories could be interpreted as an autopoetic confession of the author's own exodus from the world itself and from the type of literature he had been writing until then. Since some of the texts in this collection have been published earlier in other books by Krasznahorkai (*Universal Theseus* has been published in Hungary as a separate book back in 1993), some scholars have already speculated about the autopoetical nature of the “lectures” given in *Universal Theseus*, especially the final one, where he talks about a special kind of bird on Okinawa island which cannot fly (Zsadányi 153).

in the Hungarian language, which means that the translator should also try to think up some pseudo-terminology which resembles a standard one but is generally not in use. Finally, I decided on the term *univerzala* (Krasnahorkai, *Svet* 31), which is reminiscent of the standard mathematical term *konstanta*, relying on the English equivalent of the word in doing so, of course, even though the English version suggests the universality of Theseus himself without alluding to mathematics.

The stories collected in this book take place in various locations and meridians of the world and in different historical epochs, although the present or the very recent past dominates. For instance, the story *Nine Dragon Crossing* takes place in today's Shanghai, and the main character is an unnamed 60-year-old European (most likely Hungarian) simultaneous interpreter (from Chinese), who has only one unfulfilled wish in this life, and that is to be given the opportunity, at least once in his lifetime, to see some of these three waterfalls: Victoria Falls, Angel Falls and, in case of missing out on these, at least the Schaffhausen Falls. This obsession accompanies him as, after successfully completing that day's interpreting shift, he stumbles, totally drunk, through the streets of Shanghai and wanders into the famous expressway called Nine Dragons, where he gets trapped and cannot find a way out. Unlike most of Krasznahorkai's stories, however, this one ends with a kind of a happy ending, since the protagonist somehow manages to get out of the labyrinth of the notorious expressway (which, of course, can be understood as a metaphor in terms of a turning point in his life, an enlightening moment etc.), and finds his way back to the hotel. In the hotel, however, while the exhausted man, tired and still hungover, is falling asleep, something incredible happens: on that fragile border between reality and dream, he experiences something like a transcendental experience—such motifs are, by the way, very common in Krasznahorkai's prose—while, sinking into sleep, he watches a TV program where a man (who resembles a priest, a pastor, or a charismatic leader of an obscure cult) addresses his congregation from a podium and talks about the essence of the world, the meaning of life, and other big, last issues of life and humanity in general. However, he does so in the South Chinese, “ever vivid Cantonese dialect” (Loomis), which is considered “softer” than the standard Mandarin variant, at least when it comes to acoustics. And while the main character of Krasznahorkai's story is falling asleep, to him, that rustling

Cantonese speech suddenly turns into the roar of a waterfall, regardless of whether it is the Victoria Falls, Angel Falls, or maybe the Schaffhausen Falls.

In terms of translation, however, the problem manifests itself when the need suddenly arises to somehow graphically distinguish the “normal” voice of the narrator from the “softened” speech of the prophet speaking on TV. In the original, those parts of the text—the text of this story is, by the way, almost entirely composed of a single sentence, and, knowing Krasznahorkai’s main stylistic feature, it is not even necessary to emphasize that it is not divided into paragraphs—are devoid of the diacritical signs, so the Hungarian vowels do not have the so-called ticks on them (it is important to emphasize that, in the Hungarian language, it is only some vowels, that have these signs on them), which greatly changes their quality, as well as their quantity. In that sense, considering the extremely tonal character of the Chinese language, i.e. the fact that intonation primarily determines the meaning of a word, but also determines to which specific dialect it belongs to, this change of vowel structure appears like the proper solution in the Hungarian text, which tries to convey the situation from the perspective of a simultaneous interpreter for the Chinese language, who can relatively easily and routinely differentiate between different dialects of Chinese and quickly localize them.

On the other hand, the removal of diacritical marks in the Serbian language is feasible only when the text of the translation is written in Latin (which is the case with this book), and not in the Cyrillic script; however, this shifts the focus from the vowel as the primary distinctive feature of a dialect to the consonants, which already manifests an important layer of the story. However, something must be sacrificed in translation, and it seems that this sacrifice is somewhat less painful, because this detail is not central to the structure of the story. So, in the end, I decided to remove the diacritical marks from the Serbian consonants in the part containing the speech of this mysterious cult leader, which is given without quotation marks. However, an indication that this might not have been the ideal solution came from none other than the proofreader of the translated text, who thought that omitting the diacritics had been a technical error, and suggested to me that I correct that mistake, i.e. put back the missing diacritics. When I later explained to her that this was intentional, she asked

me to explain this in a footnote. I finally had to obey the rules and include that explanatory footnote in the text of the translation. However, as we know, footnotes can be the sign that the translator was defeated in a sense, and this is especially problematic when dealing with Krasznahorkai's prose and its specific rhythm, which is meant to be followed by the reader without major interruptions such as this one.

Critics and scholars tend to point out the great degree of stratification—in terms of different functional styles—in Krasznahorkai's prose, referring to what it means in the stylistic and even existential layers of his works. In this book, these contrasts are perhaps most emphatically in evidence: it is difficult, for example, to imagine a greater contrast in functional styles than the slang of bank employees, on the one hand, and a highly stylized ancient liturgical language, on the other. It is precisely such contrasts that we find in the stories *Bankárok* (*Bankers/Bankari*) (Krasznahorkai, *Világ* 153–77; Krasznahorkai, *Svet* 155–81) and *Járás egy áldás nélküli térben* (*Journey in a Place Without Blessings / Hodanje neblagoslovenim prostorom*) (Krasznahorkai, *Világ* 259–66; Krasznahorkai, *Svet* 267–75). Of the three characters in the story *Bankers*, the plot of which is set in today's transitional reality of post-Soviet Ukraine, the relatively minor character Mürsel stands out (all three characters are, by the way, Danes by nationality). His only function in the text seems to be his empty and highly annoying, non-stop blabbering while, together with Ixi Fortinbras and a character named Paul, they drive towards the zone of high radioactivity around the former Chernobyl nuclear power plant. The hysterical and, so to speak, yuppie manner of Mürsel's chatter cannot be further from the biblical–liturgical style in which a cleric, the main character of the other aforementioned story, *Journey in a Place Without Blessings*, having lost his faith in humanity, addresses the believers in the church which actually, from that point on, after his specific counter-liturgy, will cease to be a church. This unique counter-liturgy, this Very Last Mass by which he acknowledges his own moral collapse and the collapse of all mankind, which has not proven itself worthy of God's grace, consists of exactly thirty catechetical parts marked with Roman numerals.

It is clear that, when confronted with texts written in a biblical or preaching style, in which there are some covert and less covert quotations or paraphrases from the Bible, the translator, in order to make the text

communicable to today's reader, cannot stick to just one translation of the Bible, especially not the classical, nineteenth century Serbian translation by Vuk Karadžić and Đura Daničić, since the layers of meaning in Krasznahorkai's text are often at least slightly shifted from their original focus(es), not to mention the common and deliberate stylistic inconsistencies. Fortunately, though, many credible online Bible search programs can go a long way towards creating a specific, albeit hybrid, but relatively convincing (pseudo-)biblical language.

The types of difficulties faced by a translator of Krasznahorkai's shorter prose forms (it remains an open question whether they can be called short stories in all cases) are very diverse, as may be seen from even this small number of examples. And when a translator comments on his or her own solutions, there is always a trace of doubt concerning his/her motivation for writing this type of text at all; some might even think that it is a matter of subsequent self-justification. It is possible that this motive should not be rejected either. However, only the readers themselves and the degree of seriousness of the reception—translation criticism as a (sub)discipline does not have a long tradition in the Serbian cultural milieu—can give their indirect judgment about the qualities of a particular translation. Only then will it be possible to talk about whether the translation had the same or at least a similar effect on the readers of the target language as it once had on the readers of the same work in the original language.

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GÁBOR REICHERT

Depicting “Rural Hungary”: Anachronistic Structure of Time in László Krasznahorkai’s *Baron Wenckheim’s Homecoming*



In the last couple of years, the reception of László Krasznahorkai’s works has been characterized by a strengthening approach that singles out the pieces of his oeuvre that are held more significant than others, based on the criteria of either the lack or presence of a balance between “sociographical authenticity” and “visionary fantasy” in them.¹ Those analyses that follow this distinction, of course, hold two early works—*Satantango* from 1985 and *The Melancholy of Resistance* from 1989—in great esteem. Krasznahorkai’s latest novel, *Herscht 07769* published in 2021, however, was not well received. This is mostly due to the “disintegration” of the previously mentioned balance, namely the typifying of relations in contemporary public life and of public opinion that was viewed as inauthentic by some of the critics.² The surprisingly negative reception of the new novel gives new incentives to re-read *Baron Wenckheim’s Homecoming* published in 2016, which by and large deals with a similar theme in a similar narrative structure. The 2016 novel, as opposed to other pieces of Krasznahorkai’s oeuvre, plays exceedingly more with the topos of “modern rural Hungary,” amalgamating both sociographic and fantastic elements. Therefore, as for the relation of the two “essential dimensions” (Nemes 75)

¹ See Radnóti, “Apocalypsis cum figuris”.

² Some typical examples of the reception to the novel (close to the criticism cited above): Margócsy, “A Krasznahorkai-jelenség”; Köröszötös, “Bent szürke, kint nevet”; Nemes, “Sodoma és Gomora ehhez képest egy nuku”; Bárány, “A regény: hiba”; Szalay, “A hihetetlen angyal.”

of Krasznahorkai's poetics, there is much more at stake than in the case of his other novels.

The novel—similar to the author's first works—was read by critics as an absurd and tragic criticism of our own age with its general reception being rather positive—as is evinced by the Aegon Prize awarded to Krasznahorkai at the beginning of 2017. Due to the clear references to and interrelations with *Satantango* and *The Melancholy of Resistance*—there are some similar places and characters in the novels—several analyses considered it a comprehensive work, a high point of Krasznahorkai's career, that depicts “contemporary Hungarian reality” with the tools of *cruel satire*. Though many reviewers called attention to the inconsistencies of the world portrayed in the novel—which could be understood as the occasional imbalance of “sociographical authenticity” and “visionary fantasy”—,³ the book's critical reception is basically characterized by overall appreciation and a cultic devotion to the person of Krasznahorkai himself. Due to this, most reviewers failed to notice that the explicit and implicit statements in the novel about “modern rural Hungary” were, in many instances, nothing else but the literary version of commonplaces taken from the contemporary press. In the following, I will analyse the anachronistic time structure of *Baron Wenckheim's Homecoming*, which—as I will argue—is fundamental to the diegetic world and narrative structure of the novel, and in doing so, I will try to reconstruct those statements, based on which the novel construes the image of “modern rural Hungary.”

The novel, by making—seemingly—obvious references to geographical locations, real-life events, and existing persons, helps the reader determine the place and time of the story. Parts of the city, its streets and squares named in the novel with minute accuracy, can all be found in Gyula, László Krasznahorkai's hometown. The town, however, is not named in the novel—except for a hint on the book cover containing the author's biographical data. This raises the question of whether we can state with absolute certainty that the story takes place in Gyula. The simple answer, of course, would be no, as, due to the nature of the literary text, the fictive place construed within a fictive story can only be interpreted within the

³ Most emphatically in Sipos, “A történelem angyalaiért.”

diegetic—and therefore also fictitious—world of a given text. However, the novel's almost provocatively precise topography—the most vivid example of which is when the narrator describes the route followed by the Baron with precision reminiscent of Google Maps, sometimes even giving the house numbers⁴—constantly maintains the reader's uncertainty of whether the validity of these statements does not go beyond the boundaries of the diegetic world. Therefore, it is not easy to decide whether its "creator" considers it as a typified space—a condensed essence of "modern rural Hungary" in a way reminiscent of the methods of realist prose—as parodistic, or even as a very specific space.

A similar method is observable if we consider how time is handled in the novel. Strongly referential moments associated with specific dates strangely contradict each other, gradually making the conditions of time uncertain as the plot unfolds. In the following, I will cite some examples to illustrate this.

The band of motorcyclists, which plays an important role in the novel and whose embodied ideology evokes an association with the Gój Bikers registered in Hungary in 2006, gathers in a pub called Biker, where the television plays the second season of a reality series, *Való Világ* (that is, *Real World*).⁵ This season of the show was broadcast on RTL Hungary between January and May 2003, and—as far as I know—was not broadcast again on any of the RTL Group channels until after the novel was completed. However, there is a reference to a much later date in the second chapter of the book. While the Baron travels from Vienna through Budapest to South-Eastern Hungary, he engages in a conversation with a conductor, whose monologue suggests another date:

⁴ See for example: "the taxi arrived, he told him the address, and they drove off along Peace Boulevard toward the old German Quarter, then as they turned into Jókai Street—and it seemed they would have driven further, alongside the low houses of Scherer Ferenc Street—suddenly just there, where Jókai Street intersected Scherer Ferenc Street, there stood his traveling companion who'd vanished from the train" (Krasznahorkai 259). Or: "a silent vehicle arrived at 23 Sinka István Street" (Krasznahorkai 274).

⁵ "[T]he leader said nothing else, he only motioned for Joe Child to come over, he had something to talk over with him, and then he just quietly drank his beer and looked up at the TV in the corner of the room, just then the second season of *The Real World* was on ..." (Krasznahorkai 244)

[H]ere's this nearly empty train, hardly anyone on it, but you'll see, once we get to Keleti, how they rush around like madmen, because the refugees will descend on that place, lugging whatever they can: plastic bottles, food bags, little bottles, big bottles, they're carrying everything, who even knows, they're like beggars, with neither country nor even, so they say, a roof over their head, and for years now they've just been coming and coming, and they're just lying around everywhere ... (Krasznahorkai 110)

By mentioning the crowd of refugees at Keleti Railway Station and the inner city of Budapest, Krasznahorkai clearly evokes the events of the summer and autumn of 2015. It cannot be decided, however, whether the monologue of the conductor echoes the exaggerated opinion of a Hungarian citizen magnified by the Hungarian press, or whether the reader is faced with a fictional element that is emphatically distant from reality. In the various segments of the Hungarian media, there are controversial claims of whether the migrants are indeed “coming” or not, but the conductor’s argument, claiming that the migrants have just been “lying around everywhere” “for years” cannot be supported by the facts. From this, we could even conclude that the novel is set in a dystopian near future, in which Hungary has sunk into anarchy, perhaps sometime around the turn of the 2010s and the 2020s. This is reinforced by passages, sometimes reminiscent of the word of *Mad Max* films, which mention the “horrendous piles of garbage, the homeless” and “the child beggars that continually overran the streets” (Krasznahorkai 165). This interpretation could also be supported if we consider the recurring complaint about the general lack of fuel, the complete unpredictability of public services and public transport, and also the only scene of the novel set in Budapest that describes the mass of protesters flooding Kossuth Square as an almost natural scene for the city-dwellers, but “decidedly frightening” for those “coming from the provinces” (Krasznahorkai 439).

The appearance of Dante from Szolnok, one of the supporting characters in the novel, can also give a clue about the time period the novel is set in. To support the paltriness of the world portrayed in the novel, Krasznahorkai names the small-scale criminal who joins the Baron in Szolnok—I think, quite forcibly—emphatically not after the medieval poet but “because of

this enormous skein of yarn on his head here, because supposedly (he smiled modestly) it really resembles Dante’s, by whom I mean the famous rear-guard player for Bayern München—as he too has a huge head of black hair” (Krasznahorkai 136). Dante Bonfim Costa Santos played for Bayern München between 2012 and 2015, which could also orient the reader, but a page later the character of Dante states that “he knew his own worth, which he was now making available to the Baron, and this value had been associated with the name of Dante for more than two decades” (Krasznahorkai 137). This could be taken either as a lie by the sketchy figure, or as the writer’s inattention, or even as another hint that the story takes place in the future—based on this passage, sometime in the 2030s. At the same time, we also learn about Dante’s job: he earns his living from the operation of slot machines in pubs, however, since 2012, Hungarian regulations prohibit the placement of such machines outside of casinos.

We could make a long list of similar anachronistic elements in the novel, but here, I will only mention one more, which also makes a specific reference to the exact time period the story is set in by evoking the figure of a real-life person. Shortly before his fatal accident, the Baron recalls his meeting with a then-unknown priest named Jorge Mario Bergoglio. The narrator then concludes his recollections as follows:

[I]t was many years later, more precisely when he’d been in prison, only a few months ago, that he had discovered that his archbishop of that evening had become the Roman Catholic Pope, well, he thought then, and he thought again now, but it’s really a shame that I didn’t know who I was talking with, because then I could have asked him why I have to live ... (Krasznahorkai 371)

Pope Francis I was elected and inaugurated in March 2013, so both this reference to “only a few months ago” and one of the scenes in the next chapter (Krasznahorkai 442–48) imply that the Baron returned home and died at the end of 2013. Therefore, in the novel, we can find references to the present time, if we consider the time periods just listed from the early 2000s through the 2010s to the alternative near future—but the obvious fact that time is “out of joint” in the novel is never made explicit by the narrator.

Critics of the novel typically either did not problematize the tension⁶ between the temporal references or simply suggested authorial or editorial inaccuracy behind it. Tibor Bárány considers the latter case probable: “If we cite contemporary references, they should be clearly made. Unfortunately, the second season of *Való Világ* was broadcast in 2003, but I do not think either the author or the editor knew that, because the plot clearly takes place later” (Bárány et al. 21). Unlike Bárány, I think that because of the large number of “contemporary references” that almost invariably contradict each other, we should view it as a concept that defines the whole novel, instead of simple inattention on the part of the author. The irony characterizing the novel is inherently accompanied by inaccuracies and the strikingly negligent treatment of topics connected to public life, daily politics, and especially the contents of consumer and popular culture. The narrator, for example, is unable to list more than four motorcycle brands, and to highlight his ignorance, during the parade of the band of motorcyclists he repeats a brand name several times instead of looking for a few more on Wikipedia: “almost everyone came with a Kawasaki or a Honda or a Kawasaki or a Yamaha or a Suzuki or a Kawasaki or a Honda” (Krasznahorkai 50). The same technique is repeated when listing car brands, and almost every time when it comes to consumer goods.

On the one hand, these seemingly conscious errors serve to prevent the reader from submerging into the diegetic world of the novel, as they can never be sure whether the narrator conveys “reliable” information to them. On the other hand, due to a large number of inaccurately sketched topical references in the novel, it is as if the narrator’s sense of superiority and his contempt for the world he presents can be sensed. He seems to believe that brands, TV shows, or public affairs *do not deserve* to be documented accurately, as their significance is overridden by the impending apocalypse. Nevertheless, the innumerable characters in the novel live within the web of the references that are not deemed noteworthy by the narrator, as a result of which the corruption of the world portrayed in the novel is—not so originally—illustrated by the uncultured and backward character of the unnamed rural town. To support my argument, in the following I will focus on the motif that runs throughout the novel and relates to the question of

⁶ An exception to this is Makai, “Elvéteni az időt.”

anachronism discussed earlier, namely the media relations portrayed in the novel and the relationship of the local residents of the unnamed town to the media.

The characters’ image of the outside world in the novel appears to be shaped by a single product of the national press, a tabloid entitled *Blikk*. Unrealistic expectations towards the Baron are also raised by an article that appears in the tabloid. At the beginning of the story, *Blikk* publishes an editorial note about him:

[H]e is a true patriot, that’s the right expression, they wrote in the front-page article along with the photograph taken in Vienna, or at least originally published there, for he could not only be compared to Count István Széchenyi, the great Hungarian benefactor, who—as was well known to their readership—left everything he owned to his beloved nation ... and this was the point where the writer of the article felt compelled to put down his pen, so powerless was he before the depths of feeling that welled up in him, he was just on the point of finishing the article, and these feelings welled up, he was almost finished, and feelings welled up, which—and in *Blikk*!—were so hard to put into words. (Krasznahorkai 125)

Citing the quote taken from the article in reported speech again suggests an ironic attitude on the part of the narrator, but throughout the novel “it remains a question of where to derive the value system of the underlying irony characterizing the text” (Thimár 90), as it is impossible to decide against whom, or on whose behalf the narrator is parodying the shallow content and sentimental style of the article.

Blikk is an unquestionable and unavoidable point of reference in the world of the novel, the most important mediator between the residents of the isolated town in South-Eastern Hungary and the events of the outside world. This is particularly interesting in light of the fact that—as it is revealed by some scattered references—the town’s residents have access to the Internet; therefore, they would be able to obtain information even from there—as it was already characteristic of media consumption in the 2000s, but more

emphatically in the 2010s. However, a less emphasized anachronistic point in the novel is that the residents of the city are stuck somewhere around the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and even the attitudes towards the press evoke this era. It is revealed at the beginning of the plot that there is both a pro- and an anti-government newspaper in the town, and similarly, a pro-establishment and an opposition TV channel, the editors of which have access to the narrowest circles of the local elite. Given the media conditions of the twenty-first century, this is hard to reconcile with the facts. For a long time now, rural populations have been unable to support even one independent newspaper or television—independent of the local government, a multinational media company, or a pro-government “foundation”—let alone four. The rural press ceased to function as an independent branch of power in the first half of the previous century at the latest, so the media relations depicted in the novel represent a clear shift from reality. As for the anonymous article presented in detail in the chapter *To the Hungarians*, it turns out that “space was being reserved for this material of the evening edition” by the editor-in-chief of the opposition newspaper (Krasznahorkai 460–61). Printed newspapers with two daily editions have not existed in Hungary since the 1990s, but this practice in publishing has not been typical in Hungary since the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, especially not in small rural towns.

Therefore, the depiction of rural Hungary is accompanied by associations of the pre-1945 world; and this is confirmed by other references as well. For example, the “county Lord Lieutenant” (Krasznahorkai 357) would like to meet the Baron upon his arrival, but we also learn that the county has a “chief groom from the cooperative stable” (Krasznahorkai 210), as did manorial estates in the age of feudalism. In his speech to the journalists, the mayor speaks of the city as an “estate,” of which the returning Baron is the omnipotent lord:

[P]lease make a note of this: from this point on he will not be restrained by anyone in any way, shape, or form, because—and it’s possible that this will sound a little unusual to you, as you’re all used to this so-called “democracy”—but be aware that from today onward he [the Baron] is the lord and master here, ... this here (thanks be to high heaven!) is no “democracy” anymore, from now on—and he

described wide movements with his hands, which practically embraced the entire surrounding world, then he leaned forward—this is a dominion to which, after so many decades (he wiped the sweaty crown of his head once again with the palm of his hand) the lord and master has once again returned. (Krasznahorkai 250)

The Baron, who does not seem to be all there, disappoints locals who are unable to repair their lives on their own, thus making the destruction of the town unstoppable. The characters of the novel, whose consciousness is portrayed by the narration, are identical in that they are unable to support themselves, are deeply respectful of authority, and would sacrifice their democratic rights voluntarily for any possible financial gain. Hence, they are ripe for destruction both morally and spiritually.

All in all, the image that we find of “modern rural Hungary” in *Baron Wenckheim’s Homecoming*, is based on Krasznahorkai’s controversial conception, which draws parallels between Hungarian society of our time, and that of the early twentieth century. This theme had a great career in the Hungarian press in the past decades. But as for “sociographic authenticity,” all this is highly questionable: the idea of the rural population represented by the novel does not go beyond the judgement of commonplaces taken from the press. Remaining within the logic of the narrated world, this would not pose a problem, but the large number of references this article dealt with, makes it clear that Krasznahorkai’s satire is built on a panel of thought that simplifies reality to a great extent. What is more, the intended ambiguity of the values in the novel’s world also fails to give the reader a clue as to how seriously this world should be taken at all.

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ANDRÁS KÁNYÁDI

Power Games: Chess and Totalitarianism in Contemporary Hungarian Literature



This article focuses on three novels by three Hungarian authors with the same biographical background, whose books have been translated into English at different publishing houses in New York. Ádám Bodor's career started in Cluj, Romania. He moved to Hungary at the beginning of the 1980s and became famous with *The Sinistra Zone* (Bodor, 2013), a book written after the fall of communism. The author, who rarely publishes, is one of the most significant contemporary Hungarian writers. Attila Bartis is also Transylvanian-born, but he graduated from college in Budapest in the middle of the 1980s, and earned recognition with his novel *Tranquility* (Bartis, 2008). György Dragomán grew up in Romania as well, and although he settled in Hungary a year before the bloody events of December 1989, his book *The White King* became an international bestseller (Dragomán, 2008). The three texts were originally published by Magvető, a major publishing house in Budapest.

The game of chess plays a central role only in Dragomán's text, but in all three novels it is closely related to totalitarianism. The designers of the front covers might have felt this proximity, because they put forward formal specificities connected with the royal game. The jacket of *The White King*, conceived by Melinda Lotfy, shows a white chess king lying on its side, the title is written in black on a red field, all traditional colors of the chess pieces. *Tranquility's* cover represents a painting by Jackson Pollock, *The Moon Woman* (1942), where a woman is standing in front of a mirror, her face split into a bright part and a dark one, in a chess symmetry. *The Sinistra Zone's* cover by Erik Rieselbach shows a highway, with the author's name written in black letters, perpendicular to the horizon, while

on the pink asphalt, in white, comes the title, and on the line separating the two surfaces, in black, the name of the translator; the mirror effect is disturbing, the name of the author casts a long shadow on the highway. But the royal game's inspiration for the designers was even deeper for the novelists who did not only explore its form.

In the multiphasic totalitarian regime which represented the process of socialization for our authors after the Second World War in Romania, the most difficult period was undoubtedly the Stalin era. Bodor experienced it and suffered from it, he was the eyewitness of the tendency to transform social classes into masses (Arendt, 1951). It is perhaps the reason why real names lack in his novel, and the reason for the presence of arbitrary identity tags and the hybrid nomination. The later period of the 1980s, very harsh again, was ruled by "nationalistic communism," which made a clear difference between ethnic groups; therefore, in the novels by Bartis and Dragomán, names are explicit. In any case, violence is the most important mark of dictatorship, physical and psychological violence, decisive both for theme choice and literary success. Totalitarianism can be highlighted through the game of chess, and the authors resort to specific rhetoric figures emphasizing the system's dark side: Bodor's prohibition requires ellipsis, in Bartis's book, police interrogation gives birth to a dreamlike displacement, and destruction by Dragoman is marked by ekphrasis. They also exploit two important formal particularities of the game: colors and duplication.

Ezra Pound's centenary poem is surprisingly appropriate in revealing the close links between chess and dictatorship. This emblematic text of vorticism was published in the ephemeral British avant-garde periodical *Blast*. Let us quote the last verse of the "Dogmatic Statement on the Game and Play of chess" (Pound 19):

"Y" pawns, cleaving, embanking,
Whirl, centripetal, mate, King down in the vortex:
Clash, leaping of bands, straight strips of hard colour,
Blocked lights working in, escapes, renewing of contest.

This programmatic poem, a “model of tensional aesthetic of Vorticism” (Rae 1989), also summarizes the grammar and the vocabulary of a power game, far beyond the strategy game or the *speculum* which chess has been meant to be for centuries.¹ The moves of the figures are drawing the letters of the alphabet, and the games’ “dogmatic” key terms are connected with totalitarianism. For Pound, chess is rooted in consciousness, a possible framework to the Orwellian utopia,² and the poem’s subtitle—“theme for a series of pictures”—acts as an art manifesto inviting authors to develop it.

1 *A refuge for liberty*

The Sinistra zone is a military dictatorship somewhere in the Carpathian Basin, where the narrator arrives to free his adopted son. After a suspicious start, he progressively earns the trust of the power, but his intention fails, and finally he has to leave the district illegally, in a smugglers truck. He returns many years later, realizes the inalterability of the state system, and as a stranger who breaks the law, he is definitively expelled.

In this odd place, hermetically closed from the world and constantly kept under control, there is not much possibility for amusement, and even if there is some, it is strictly limited. For instance, chess is an undesirable board game and is officially not allowed, unlike Nine Men’s Morris. One may wonder about the reason for this prohibition, knowing that strategic goal of the two games, the elimination of the opponent’s pieces, is similar. A possible explanation is the anthropomorphized hierarchy: in the game of chess, the king is the most important figure to be captured. The pieces of Nine Men’s Morris are faceless and equal, their destruction is quite democratic, not to

¹ As a strategy game derived from military divisions, chess was a moralized game during the Middle Ages, due to Jacobus de Cessolis, a Dominican friar, whose book *Liber de moribus hominum et de officiis nobilium super ludo scaccorum* (between 1275 and 1300) had been an international bestseller. The game’s first political use dates back to Thomas Middleton’s famous allegory (1624) of the “Spanish match.” Middleton is also the first to represent it as an instrument of manipulation in his play *Women Beware Women* (1621). See Middleton, 2010.

² In George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-four* (Orwell, 1949) while examining a chess problem under Big Brother’s portrait, Winston, the main character, realizes that “white always mates.”

mention that, as a solved game, it consists of a limited number of moves and combinations. Chess, on the other hand, strongly reflects the hierarchy of its pieces and has always something unpredictable about it; with a surprising move, one can win even from a losing position. This means that in the dictatorship, chess is not only an intellectual refuge, a refreshing exercise after various absurd tasks, but also the citadel of individual liberty, where the arm of power cannot reach. And, of course, it is also an opportunity to take revenge for humiliations, the prisoner can defeat his captor, for instance his colonel, his “case officer.” So chess bears the germ of revolt, the possibility to top hierarchy and political system, it feeds the spirit of anarchy and even the thirst for power—therefore, it is recommended to play it under safe measures. As a consequence of the prohibition, the chess set used in *The Sinistra Zone* is improvised, a checkered cover and home-made figures substitute the pieces of an officially not marketable item. The rude carving of the figures is symbolic: it shows the rudeness and the uncanniness of the novel’s characters, somehow the label of the zone.

The enigmatic aspect of the book roots in the impassibility of the characters, the poetics of concealment; the whole story takes shape slowly, elliptically. The chess allusions and intratextual repetitions allow the reconstruction of some events progressively, and the weird ritual character of the game foreshadows the sacrifice. Before every game, Colonel Jean Tomoioaga carefully changes the lamp’s light whereafter he spreads his checkered shirt, which serves as a chessboard, on the floor. Gabriel Dunka, the dwarf, makes his decision of denouncing the border-crossing during the game. The origins of this peculiar chessboard are highlighted step by step due to the frequent repetitions of the narrative, through changing narrative focuses. At its first occurrence, the chessboard looks like a simple canvas:

Andrei applied the brakes and tied the handcar to the crossing gate to keep it from rolling back down the incline. The colonel, seeing that Andrei was in no hurry, pulled out the chess set from underneath his cot. Beside an open door he spread out a canvas board on the floor and pushed the ungainly little carved figures about: should anyone appear, the whole thing could be swept in a motion. (Bodor 74)

Its second appearance shows a checkered shirt:

In the guard's room lived my old chess-playing pal, Col Jean Tomoioaga ... The hurricane lamp soon found its way to the threshold, when col Jean Tomoioaga switched its red lens to white, and then got out the chessboard. We played with ungainly, little home-made figures on a checkered shirt he laid out on the floor. The whole thing could be swept up in a moment—the mountain infantrymen did not take kindly to games. (Bodor 96)

The narrator's position remains uncertain, but the story told in the first person is more confidential than the earlier version; "anyone" already concerns the mountain infantrymen, the soldiers ruling in the zone, the representatives of power. It also becomes clear that it has to do with the colonel's own shirt, while the chess pieces reveal a failed creation:

Gabriel Dunka was in the habit of dropping by to visit Col Jean Tomoioaga, who for years had manned this post alone and lived in the booth. Whenever the dwarf showed up, the colonel would spread his green-and-white checkered shirt on the floor, take out the chess pieces he'd carved himself along with some pebbles of various unusual colors, and they would play a few games. (Bodor 164)

In fact, those pieces are extremely intriguing, because we know even less about them than about the chessboard. They are little and uncanny, home-made objects, and it is said that Tomoioaga, on such occasions, sets up his own manufactured, special pebbles of *unusual* colour. In this uncanny feeling there lurks something extremely worrying: what kind of carvings are they? What material are they made of? Are the more elaborated carvings major pieces, pebbles replacing the pawns? How did they get to that watch room? Were they really made in the colonel's workshop?

A daring hypothesis can be advanced, following a hint made by the taciturn narrator. Andrei reveals the way he would like to earn his living after

moving out of Sinistra, becoming a bone-carver, quite a lucrative profession: “While wandering about the woods I’ve found a lot of bones, and I’ve been giving carving a try: flowers, deer, mushrooms, colonels standing watch. People go for that sort of thing” (Bodor 155). These bones may belong to dead animals, but regarding the general destruction presented in the novel, they might as well be human remains. The bone’s scale of colors is very rich, going from white to dark, and on the colonel’s improvised chessboard, the pawns, those special pebbles, are perhaps human teeth, a personal collection, explaining the *unheimlich* feeling and the silence of the narrator. Therefore, the sinister artwork carved of bones proclaims not only the organic unity of animal, vegetal and human environment, it also points out the morbid ingenuity developed under totalitarianism. Territories cut from the world have an internal management, with recycling being of major importance, so that it also becomes a ground for artistic experimentation and accomplishment. In any case, ellipsis is ratified by the totalitarian reality: victims do not speak.

As we said before, formal aspects of chess are also involved in the novel, such as the important symbolism of colors. The chessboard is green-and-white, but one cannot play until the red light is turned on. Why is this forbidden? Red should normally protect the watching stand if a prohibited game is going on, the colonel may not be disturbed on duty. Or should it mean that he has already ceased his official activity, and in case of control, he has an alibi for that? The ellipsis operates again, but a referential explanation is at hand: there is a political hint to the Hungarian flag (i.e. red-white-green tricolor), banished during communism in the neighbouring socialist countries as a potential nationalistic threat. The referential meaning in *The Sinistra Zone* is significant, even if the author’s space is fictional.³

Duplication, a principle of chess, seems to be also very productive: the characters in the novels are duplicated like the game’s pieces. Every chess player has a double, bearing the same name: the dwarf Gabriel Dunka’s counterpart is the barber Vili Dunka; the customs officer Jean Tomoioaga

³ Dobrin city, the capital of the zone, has also a strong referential meaning, bearing the name of the legendary Romanian football player, Nicolae Dobrin, a star from 1966 to 1980.

has a peer in the person of the undertaker Titus Tomoioaga, both are colonels; and even Andrei Bodor has sometimes an impersonal fellow narrator (is it the author, Adam?), retelling the same events from a slightly different point of view. And what about the albino twins named Hamza Petrika, who kill themselves just before a chess game? These white pawns underline the idea of sacrifice related both to chess and totalitarianism.

2 The nightmare of interrogation

Tranquillity takes place in Budapest, mainly in a closed space. Because of the defection of her daughter, the famous actor Rebeka Weér is banned from the scene, and she remains secluded in her apartment for decades. The connection to the outside world is assured by her son, Andor, who becomes a writer. Judit, the fugitive, dies abroad in an accident and her brother conceals it, writing a letter to the mother in her name every week. The more and more unbearable family relationship ends with the mother's death, abandoned on purpose by Andor, who will write a book from his personal story.

The chess motive is related to the totalitarian universe and emerges towards the end of the novel. First it appears as the space of a brutal physical aggression, as a source of income for ex-convicts, squatting around the Keleti station. These people share a terrible experience suffered in the ill-famed penitentiary of Vác.

People who knew everything there was to know about chess, but nothing of a very effective choice-based pedagogical method used in the Vác penitentiary: one could choose between playing chess or getting fucked in the ass, but having opted for chess there were no backtracking, like I'd rather get fucked in the ass. The loser must drink a liter of water. In short, after the third gale one really thought hard about where to move that pawn, because the next dose of water would be poured down his throat through the funnel made of the rolled-up oilcloth chessboard. And six or seven liters of water can easily kill a man; one's stomach becomes like a balloon tied to a turned-on faucet. (Bartis 221)

Like in Bodor's novel, the chessboard is flexible, since in a space kept under permanent control, leisure is not welcome. Furthermore, it is part of a sacrifice ritual, it resembles the notorious procedure of medieval inquisition. In this cruel demonstration, one can feel the perverted profanation of cerebral activity, the triumph of barbarity over civilization, a wild celebration of violence by pouring science through a funnel into the loser. At the same time, it emphasizes the strict prison hierarchy, based on brutality.

Armed with this unforgettable experience, the former jailbirds prove unbeatable during the chess games at the railway station, whereby the author also alludes to the origins of the game, *Keleti* meaning "oriental." Andor's interest in chess is awakened by watching them, and while he waits in his girlfriend's apartment for the death of his mother, he kills time playing chess against himself:

This was the first time I tried to play by myself, which was inevitable enough, certainly no more absurd than, say, making love alone or drinking your morning coffee alone. As I've said, I managed to play some good games. Once, playing white, I forced a queen exchange, black really had no choice, but in a few moves it became clear that it would have been better to sacrifice the knight, because with the exchanging of queens the white sealed its own fate. It tried to bring up a pawn on the right side, but the black mounted a devilish counter-attack, moving its king slowly, from square to square, right behind the white defense line, then on a8 captured the pawn with the rook and with it kicked the stool out from under its ivory partner. (Bartis 237)

This scene anticipates a ritual sacrifice, but it is also a little misleading. As an intellectual occupation succeeding to the brutality of the prison, here chess seems to make forget violence. Besides, the ironical tone of the narration shows that Andor is aware of the absurdity of these games, his lucidity being not at all threatened. Yet human consciousness cannot be turned out like a machine, such a move can be dangerous for the mind. Since Zweig's famous short story, we know the intellectual fighting against himself, drifting on the edge of schizophrenia:

The basic attraction of chess lies solely in the fact that its strategy is worked out differently in two different minds, that in this battle of wits Black does not know White's schemes and constantly seeks to guess them and frustrate them, while White in turn tries to out-strip and thwart Black's secret intentions. Now if Black and White together made up one and the same person, the result would be a nonsensical state of affairs in which one and the same mind simultaneously knew and did not know something, in which as White it could simply decide to forget what it had wished and intended to do as Black a moment earlier. In fact what is presupposed by this kind of duality of thought is a total division of consciousness, an ability to turn the workings of the brain on or off at will, as though it were a machine; playing chess against oneself is thus as paradoxical as jumping over one's own shadow. (Zweig 29)

Andor's reclusion strongly evokes the captivity of the Zweigian hero, and the nature of the external constraint also indicates an intimate relationship between the two texts. If according to the Austrian author, Dr B is victim of the fascist war machine, the narrator of *Bartis* suffers the tyranny of a mother destroyed by Stalinism. Chess is an evasive manoeuvre, a desperate attempt to protect the intellect, but in lack of an opponent, it risks dissolving the integrity of the mind.

Although Zweig's name remains hidden, his short story shows up as a major intertext in the next scene. Andor spends his time reading *The Magic Mountain* and playing chess, afterwards he has a nightmare which seems to be the crystallization of the interrogation inflicted on Dr B. Thomas Mann's book is misleading, relevant for its suspended time, but not for the dream itself. *Tranquility* transposes the ruthless police strategy of *Chess Story* in a repetitive dialogue. Here is the Zweigian passage in all its splendour:

On the table was a stack of paper, the files whose contents were unknowable, and then the questions started—the real ones and the fake ones, the straightforward ones and the malicious ones, sham questions, trick questions—and while you answered, a stranger's

cruel fingers were shuffling through papers whose contents were unknowable and a stranger's cruel fingers were writing something unknowable in a report. But for me the most terrible thing about these interrogations was that I could never divine or figure out what the Gestapo actually knew about what went on in my office and what they were just trying to get out of me now. (Zweig 24)

Holding the captive in permanent uncertainty until he confesses used to be a successful psychological strategy of the German secret police, based on the obsessive repetition of questions. Bartis depicts a dreamlike scene of interrogation, reiterating the same formulas related to the hero's culpability ten times in a row. Andor is questioned by two detectives who try to charge him with the crime of matricide:

"This is a very nice apartment," said the stocky one when I put out the cigarette butt.

"It is," I said.

"And it's furnished very prettily, too."

"It's mainly scenery," I said and only then realized that we had done this before, and I doubted very much that we were there to discuss the scenery. Mother called her Weér inheritance.

"But five hundred a month covers everything."

"Yes, I've already said that."

"Even for two people."

"Even for two. I've said that too."

"Let's take a break," the lean one put in. (Bartis 239)

The oneiric insert in the Bartis novel can be explained not only with the evident continuation of Zweig's short story, but also with the mechanisms described by the Freudian dreamwork: displacement and condensation (Freud 1899).⁴ On the one hand, it shows the expression of the constant

⁴ Condensation is when a single idea (an image, memory or thought) or dream object stands for several associations and ideas. Displacement is the decentering of dream thoughts; the

tyrannical maternal harassment connected with the desire to kill. On the other hand, despite the fact that the chess scene takes place after the fall of the communist regime, the deeply rooted fear generated by totalitarianism has not disappeared, several generations had been contaminated with it. Andor's nightmare is a spectacular condensation of the traumas caused by the Gestapo (his lecture), the AVH (the calvary of his parents),⁵ and the Securitate (the suffering of his Transylvanian girlfriend).⁶ The psychical terror of the totalitarian power breaks individual resistance, and this violence is at least as enduring and destructive as the physical pain of the prison in Vác.

The Transylvanian background of Bartis emerges through the character of Eszter Fehér, Andor's girlfriend, and leads to the formal loans derived from chess. Colours are of capital importance, reflected by the surnames. The battle for Andor's possession takes place between two "queens," the mother and the mistress, red and white, traditional colours used in chess till the thirteenth century (Pastoureau, 2004). Weér means "blood" in Hungarian, fitting perfectly to the image of a monstrous, sanguinary mother, while Fehér, meaning "white," matches with the purity of the girl. Blood seems to get the upper hand in life, since Eszter loses her virginity when she is raped by a Romanian policeman in exchange for her passport, but on the chessboard she regularly beats her Weér lover.⁷ As to the schizophrenic fight depicted by Andor, the dark side wins over its "ivory partner."

The second essential loan from chess relies, again, on the idea of double. Several characters are duplicated: the mother has her counterpart in a prostitute bearing the same name, whose passion consists of collecting wounded birds.⁸ Andor's sister (and former chess partner) is his twin, so he can perfectly imitate her handwriting in order to fool the mother. The potentate of the Hungarian Communist Party, comrade Fenyő, who

most urgent wish is marginally represented on a manifest level (Freud, 1899).

⁵ The AVH (State Protection Authority) was the Hungarian secret police between 1948 and 1956.

⁶ The Securitate (Security) was the Romanian secret police between 1948 and 1989.

⁷ During Ceaușescu's regime, one was not allowed to keep a passport at home, but every two years it was possible to apply for one, on condition of travel within socialist countries. To leave Romania definitively asked for sacrifice.

⁸ Bartis alludes to a famous ballad of János Arany, "Vörös Rébék" ["Rebeca-the-Red"], where the eponym character is a witch, who turns into a crow.

ruined the career of the actress, has his equivalent in comrade Vultur, the Romanian rapist.⁹ Even narrative situations are identical: Andor's mistress is the same woman who had been his father's. The *doppelgänger* might be necessary for a better understanding of the self, and the book written by Andor as a sublimation of his nightmares seems to confirm it.

3 *The landscape of destruction*

Dragomán's novel, *The White King*, consists of a series of short stories, like Bodor's book. It shows the maturation of a boy nicknamed Djata, whose father has been deported by the Romanian dictatorship to the Danube Canal, and who has to overcome this trauma. The chapter "Africa" containing the chess episode is of special significance as it makes the quest for the father a central symbol. The game, just like in Bartis's novel, features the state machine, its dysfunction attributable to the breaking of rules. The author uses ekphrasis, a verbal description of a visual work of art, a long-dated artefact (Krieger, 1992), which emerges here in the description of a chess automaton.

Djata and his mother visit an influential person, a former ambassador in Africa, in order to free the political prisoner. The flat is a huge labyrinth composed of several merged apartments, and the boy is sent to a remote part of it, because the host wants to be alone with the woman. During his wanderings, Djata enters a room where a seated old black man—a chess automaton—invites him to play a game of chess. The chess set is very particular:

[A]nd that's when I noticed for the first time how really special even the chess pieces were, the black ones were carved of ebony and the white ones of ivory, and each one depicted some monster, the white pieces were skeletons and the black pieces were human-headed demons with animal bodies, and every one held a spear or a sword or a hatchet or a saw-toothed knife in its paw, and the officers wore necklaces and belts of skulls and bones and

⁹ The names of Fenyő (means *fir* in Hungarian) and Vultur (means *vulture* in Romanian) are related to wilderness and reflect their characters.

human ears and human hands, everything was carved to the finest detail, and the face of the white king looked just like the ambassador, and it looked pretty scary. (Dragomán 146)

The white army, operated by the black machine, looks like the carved pieces of Bodor's set, representing skeletons. Djata, who plays black, has an army of hybrid demons at his disposal. The battle is going to be merciless, stabbing weapons and fetishes increase the spectacular scene, destruction emanates from both camps. Among the monstrous pieces, the white king reminds the boy of his host, and with this perceptual switch of the narration, the game takes on a symbolic charge: the ambassador stands for state power that ravished his father and the automaton becomes the embodiment of the state machine, whose activity is strewn with corpses. It is obviously a high-stakes game.

Djata is not a strong player and the exotic automaton¹⁰ quickly takes advantage, but before he could mate, his opponent snatches off its king from the board. The irregular move disturbs the machine; it sweeps the pieces off the table and its terrifying existence goes literally up in smoke.

[A]nd I looked at the automaton, at that old black man's face, at his dusty gray parched skin, and I knew I wasn't about to let him check-mate me if I could help it, so all that once I snatched the white king off the board, and right away the automaton started reaching out after my hand, but with a slow, squeaking motion much slower than mine, and the automaton let out a loud murmur and looked at me and his eyes seemed to glisten with rage, but for a split second only, and then with a wild, creaky swing of his arm he swept the chess pieces off the table, they went tumbling all over the floor, and then he flung back his head and opened his mouth wide and burst out laughing, and smoke started pouring from his mouth and nose. (Dragomán 147–48)

¹⁰ In the eighteenth century, Wolfgang von Kempelen invented the first chess automaton, the famous *Turk*, which was also a notorious fraud since the machine could not play on its own. The shift from Asia to Africa is part of socialist exotism.

In an allegorical reading, the White King is the head of the totalitarian state, a topos explored by Dragoman's elderly compatriot, the famous German writer (Müller, 2003). As the most important piece on the chess board, the king is the only one who cannot be taken. Therefore, the boy's gest to break the established codes of the game is more than a simple cheat. On the one hand, it is an instinctive move, conditioned by his black army of demons, but on the other, it is an act of sympathetic magic (Frazer 1890),¹¹ conferring power over the opponent. The automaton disrupts and even the king-faced ambassador will lose his authority: the laughing turns out to be the mother's mocking at the diplomat's attempt to rape her. The collapse of the global state system is evident, yet such a domino effect may occur only if there has already been a serious flaw in the setup. That is why the automaton looks like an old man and the ambassador has grey hair. However, the White King alludes not only to the dictator, it also refers to the boy's father fallen into disgrace, who must be recovered from strangers: the African automaton "usurps" the white pieces, so Djata has to do justice by himself. In the end of the book, the boy reiterates his reclaim, when the ivory-faced father comes back to attend the grandfather's funeral.

Dragomán's text has also an important literary chess model. The royal game assumes a strict logic, precise and relentless: Stefan Zweig's world champion, fully insensitive and automaton-like, embodies the totalitarian state machine, frightening yet defeatable. However, the *White King* seems to echo Ambrose Bierce's short story, featuring a sensitive robot. In *Moxon's master* (1899), the chess automaton cannot bear defeat, it rebels against its creator and in a blind rage strangles him like a terminator. The rattle announces the imminent collapse:

In the pauses between, I now became conscious of a low humming or buzzing which, like the thunder, grew momentarily louder and more distinct. It seemed to come from the body of the automaton, and was unmistakably a whirring of wheels. It gave me the

¹¹ According to Frazer, sympathetic magic has two principles: one is called "law of similarity," where the magician infers that he can produce any effect he desires merely by imitating it.

impression of a disordered mechanism which had escaped the repressive and regulating action of some controlling part—an effect such as might be expected if a pawl should be jostled from the teeth of a ratchet wheel. (Bierce 8)

More than a failed creation, there is also a disordered system at work, inviting to a fruitful parallel with the motives that Dragomán uses in the novel. Unlike Moxon's creature, the squeaking African automaton is incapable of walking, it pours its anger on the chess pieces, and its imperfection seems to be acknowledged with self-irony and helpless laughter. To survive a dictatorship, unfair means are necessary, because from the very beginning, there is an unfair, unequal game going on. With this crucial recognition acquired on the chessboard, Djata gets rid of his moral doubts, gaining internal serenity. Bierce's terrible, gorilla-shaped automaton becomes a kind of burnt-out, grotesque Minotaur in the labyrinth of a socialist flat, and the issue promises a final victory over totalitarianism. Ekphrasis is an outstanding rhetorical figure to seize the monstrous, the true purpose of poetry.¹²

We have already mentioned the colour symbolism of the novel, influenced by the game of chess, but the subversive way it is used in the text has to be underlined. The automaton owned by the ambassador has the white pieces, yet it belongs to the power, the "dark side." In the game of chess, white has always the advantage of launching the assault, and this circumstance reminds us of the initiatives practiced during totalitarianism. It is also notorious, that the Romanian regime had tight links with many African dictatorships, Bokassa and Mugabe being good friends of Ceausescu by that time. Djata would like to play on the "bright side," with the white pieces, but has no choice left, so he puts forward his shadow¹³ and upsets the game by a forbidden manoeuvre. By doing so, he makes an attempt to restore order.

¹² According to Diderot, "La poésie veut quelque chose d'énorme, de barbare et de sauvage." See the paper of N. Olszevicki on Diderot (Olszevicki 2016).

¹³ A Jungian interpretation is tempting, the automaton acts as an archetype of the monster.

The *doppelgänger*, another obvious chess influence in the novel, has several faces. The doubles are never perfect, there is always some imperfection, a system error preventing full (con)fusion. For instance, the Frunza brothers Romulus and Remus are not twins, but they bear Roman twin king names. Djata shortly takes a convict—who comes from the Danube Canal and protects him—for his father; his illusion is fed by rumours that in penal colonies, diseases disfigure human faces. In a dictatorship ruled by fear, the *doppelgänger* is also a necessity to ensure a getaway for kings if circumstances happen to go wrong. And we do not know the real first name of the boy, except that it is identical to his father's. A biographical detail may also be of help, like in Bodor's case: the narrator's nickname is the same as the author's childhood nickname; its meaning and form¹⁴ underline a double Transylvanian language identity, Hungarian and Romanian.

*

Let us summarize. Pound's chess poem proposed a vorticist program, but totalitarianism has close affinities with it, illustrated by each novel. Through the prism of the three contemporary texts, the glossary of the second verse provides special issues concerning totalitarian power (TP):

blocked lights = measures of control. TP likes obscurity, lights are turned out.

centripetal = labyrinthic structure. TP has a centre, victims are on periphery.

clash = violent opposition. TP oppresses, sacrifices are inevitable.

cleaving = split of personality. TP produces *doppelgängers*, twins are a favourite.

embanking = defensive measure. TP imposes reclusion, silence is preventive.

escape = desire to quit. TP can be foiled, the system has flaws.

¹⁴ Dragomán confessed that his childhood nickname came from the *The Black Arrow* (2006) (*Săgeata Neagră* in Romanian), a popular movie made after Robert Stevenson's novel, by the apheresis of "săgeata" (to pronounce: *sadjata*, in Hungarian transcription *szödzsátá*). See his Award Ceremony Speech in the Romanian Cultural Institute in Budapest, 2008. <http://gyorgydragoman.com/?p=261>

hard colors = red, black and white. TP is bloody, dark and blank.

leaping of bands = optical illusion. TP changes its appearance, keeps its essence.

renewal of contest = endless process. TP charges continuously, victory is never definitive.

vortex = obsession. TP makes life dizzy, hallucinatory and nightmarish.

Adapted to the medieval courteous society, chess was fixed as a moral game during the Middle Ages, conceived to show an example of fair governance for the king. William Caxton's *Speculum* reveals its inventor's intention: "the grettest and most thinge that I desire is that you haue in thy self a glorious and vertuous lyf" (Caxton, 2009). Totalitarian systems in the twentieth century have radically changed this representation. Bodor's narrator, who plays to survive, does not shrink from murder if the authorities require it, and the chess-playing dwarf also denounces the fugitive. The prisoners of Bartis use the chessboard as a torture instrument, and as a result of his schizophrenic experience, Andor imagines the game situation as the nightmare of methodical interrogation. Dragomán's Djata manages to destroy the terrible war machine with an ordinary cheat. Chess is no longer about finding the right path in life but about teaching survival strategies, regardless of morality. And for our three contemporary authors, it is a power game in a specific universe where the absurd is natural, where violence is legitimate and even ordinary. This is undoubtedly the very particular experience of Romanian totalitarianism—much rougher than Hungarian state socialism—and it also accounts for the lasting success of the three texts.

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TIBOR GINTLI

“Satura quidem tota nostra est” (?): György Spiró’s *Captivity*



György Spiró’s novel *Captivity* (2005) was a huge success at the time of its publication, being well received by the public and critics alike. Greeted with keen interest and almost unanimous appreciation, reviews and analyses contained only the occasional critical comment. The novel’s positive reception was, without a doubt, related partly to the genre components employed by the novel and partly to the topical references contained in the text. *Captivity* boldly employs several of the narrative procedures associated with the historical novel, while at the same time addresses social issues that are of particular interest to contemporary readership (Radnóti 1426). The diegetic world that it creates is colourful and diverse, suggesting that an intention to entertain is far from alien to the novel, while at the same time creating a more abstract, intellectual semantic plane. Spiró is associated not with the genre of historiographical metafiction that is popular in the Hungarian postmodern epic, but to more traditional variants of the historical novel. *Captivity* is characterised by an intricate, eventful, linear plot, and the narrative often provides a colourful and detailed description of historical sites (Bazsányi 844). However, the use of such traditional concepts can be considered something of a bold gesture in light of the expectations prevalent at the time the novel was written: the view that a coherent, elaborate plot was an anachronistic, outdated narrative device to be studiously avoided by a contemporary author of any significance had become almost dogmatic in Hungarian criticism in the 1990s and 2000s. Spiró’s novel proved that an intricate plot was not necessarily an outdated requisite, doubtlessly also inspiring the younger generation of writers who had increasingly been distancing themselves from so-called ‘text literature’ since the 2010s.

Critics who focused on the role of the genre component of the historical novel drew attention almost exclusively to its period tendencies, thus they

examined such approaches essentially from the perspective of the romantic historical adventure novel that ultimately derives from the genre created by Sir Walter Scott. Although they rightly pointed out that the novel's view of history differs markedly from that of Mór Jókai, the classic writer of period-focused Hungarian historical novels, and from that presented in the genre tradition associated with his oeuvre, they essentially neglected to mention the other significant Hungarian historical novel genre tradition. Jókai's perspective, based on the creation of a heroic national mythology, is indeed contrary to the historical concept evidenced in Spiró's novel, which, approaching the opposite extreme, tends to perceive history as a series of petty and grubby machinations of power (M. Szilágyi 102). The Hungarian genre versions of historical narratives that distance themselves from the creation of a national mythology date from essentially the same period as Jókai's epic novels, although they never achieved the same popularity as the works of the "great storyteller." Furthermore, these works can also be understood as a parallel to Spiró's novel, since they too suggest an analogy with the socio-historical situation at the time of the creation of the work. Interpretations of *Captivity* correctly drew attention to the applicability of the novel's semantic plane to the present day (Almási 3), which prompted some critics to see the novel as a parable (Radnóti 1429). In light of this, it is somewhat surprising that in a reception in which the applicability of past events to the present was recognised, practically no mention was made of the literary tradition associated with the names of József Eötvös and Zsigmond Kemény.

József Eötvös's novel *Magyarország 1514-ben* [*Hungary in 1514*, 1847] recounts the story of the peasant uprising led by György Dózsa from an expressly critical point of view, free from any tendency towards idealisation. Eötvös's work, which betrays a similarly comprehensive knowledge of sources as *Captivity*, criticizes the actions of both the peasant army and the nobility, attributing the national disaster to a lack of willingness to compromise. Despite being grounded in painstaking historical research, *Hungary in 1514* also provided a topical assessment of the political situation in 1847, the date of its publication. A year before the civil revolution of 1848 and the abolition of the feudal system, Eötvös was attempting to convince his contemporaries to align themselves with a programme aimed at the association of interests. Having achieved the emancipation of the serfs by overcoming the opposition between serfs and landowners, he

called on political decision makers to lay the foundations of a “bourgeois Hungary” that was in the mutual interest of all Hungarian citizens. He also warned that, in the absence of the necessary willingness to compromise, Hungary would face the same catastrophe as it had done at the time of Dózsa’s Peasant War.

The inclusion of a reference to Zsigmond Kemény, another classic writer of the type of historical novel that draws parallels with present-day events, seems even more obvious among the genre traditions evoked by Spiró. In the text of *Captivity*, the speeches attributed to various characters typically contain passages in which the nature of religion is discussed. From the ideological perspective that can be attributed to the novel, the practice of religion on the part of priests exclusively serves their greed and their power-related interests, while for the lay masses, religion is nothing more than ecstatic fanaticism. The original Hungarian text employs the words “fanaticism” (*rajongás*) or “fanatic” (*rajongó*) on several occasions to describe the believers’ state of mind. Such terms also appear in the speech of Uri, when the protagonist is confronted with the sight of the crowd flooding into Jerusalem for the feast of the Passover, and most often in connection with the religious doctrines of the Nazarenes in the text of the novel. One of Zsigmond Kemény’s most important novels, which recounts the tragic story of a seventeenth-century Transylvanian Christian denomination (the Sabbatarians) was published under the title *A rajongók* [*The Fanatics*, 1858]. From the perspective of the novel’s implied author, the Sabbatarians are unable to accept the impossibility, in the given historical circumstances, of achieving their coveted goal of having their sect declared a legitimate, established religion. By insisting on the otherwise venerable principle of the freedom of religious practice, having lost touch with reality, they ignore the fact that Prince George I Rákóczi has banned their operation by decree. In the name of moral justice, they violate the prince’s orders, ultimately provoking a series of disasters. Zsigmond Kemény’s novel provides a complex interpretation of the psychology of fanaticism: while never calling into doubt the fact that moral truth lies with the Sabbatarians, it regards as reprehensible blindness the fact that the leaders of the movement refuse to accept reality but instead behave as fanatics, pursuing illusions in the face of the given circumstances. Although Spiró’s approach to religious fanaticism is far less complex, this scarcely calls into question his intertextual connections with Kemény’s novel.

The Fanatics also reflects on historical events at the time of its writing, albeit indirectly. As evidenced by his pamphlets *Forradalom után* [*After the Revolution*, 1850] and *Még egy szó a forradalom után* [*One More Word after the Revolution*, 1851], Zsigmond Kemény was convinced that the armed struggle against the Habsburgs and its direct aftermath, the failure of the revolution, were caused primarily by the uncompromising mentality of the Hungarian political elite (and especially of Lajos Kossuth). The laws adopted in April 1848 not only proclaimed the emancipation of the serfs and the abolition of privileges based on birth, but also affected political relations with the Austrian Empire. The decrees ruled that the Kingdom of Hungary could pursue its own policies in the fields of Defence, Foreign Affairs, and Finance. These provisions—which Austria found itself constrained to adopt only after the Vienna Revolution and the wave of revolutions elsewhere in Europe—would essentially have led to the dissolution, or at least to the pronounced weakening, of Austria’s position as a major power. In the summer of 1848, the emperor therefore issued an ordinance requesting the abolition of the independent ministries of defence, foreign affairs, and finance, which was rejected by the Hungarian government. If the Habsburg Empire did not wish to accept the loss of its status as a major power, it had no other choice but to achieve its goals by means of a victorious war. *The Fanatics* portrays a type of conduct that is incapable of taking historical reality into account; conduct that strives for unattainable, idealistic goals while heaping disaster on the community that it is called to serve. In this context, the novel also interprets the historical events that had recently taken place at the time of its writing when it ascribes the disaster to a mentality that hankers after castles in the air while turning a blind eye to actual power relations.

Kemény’s other outstanding novel *Zord idő* [*Stormy Times*, 1862] contained even more unambiguous references to the contemporary historical situation. It is set at the time of the Turkish occupation of Buda in 1541, when the country was split into three parts. Thus, it has at its heart a national catastrophe that was due in large part to erroneous decisions made by two contemporary politicians, György Fráter and István Werbőczy. Rather than allowing the German troops sent by Ferdinand Habsburg into the castle to reinforce the guard, György Fráter naïvely and unsuspectingly hands the country’s capital over to the Turkish conquerors. Guided by the concept of a Hungarian Kingdom independent of the Habsburgs, he unwittingly

causes the destruction of the country. István Werbőczy, who had been appointed by the sultan as the magistrate of the conquered Buda, is unable to understand that the powers granted to him by decree are impossible to enforce in the context of the prevailing power relations. Ignoring the actual power relations, he irritates the Turkish authorities by petitions supported with complicated legal arguments, thus provoking further retaliations and setting in motion a series of tragic events. The foregrounding of a politician who rigidly insists on principled legal argumentation might well be read as a reference to Kossuth, who had a degree in law.

The genre of the historical novel that projected contemporary socio-historical issues onto the past remained a living tradition in the first half of the twentieth century. In the first two decades of the century, Hungarian modernity abandoned the genre of the historical novel in favour of social novels set in the contemporary present, although in the 1920s a new wave of historical novels were written by authors such as Gyula Krúdy, Zsigmond Móricz and Géza Laczkó, who can unquestionably be included among the significant Hungarian representatives of modern prose. The resurgence of the historical novel at around this time is surely due to the fact that the historical situation generated by the Treaty of Trianon in 1920 was popularly regarded as analogous to the Mohács disaster in 1526. In the wake of the Trianon Peace Treaty, Hungary lost two-thirds of its former territory. In the battle that took place 400 years earlier, the king had been killed and his army annihilated, triggering the process of the division of the country into three parts.

As mentioned above, *Captivity* employs many of the devices of the historical novel with convincing results. The best-known and traditionally the most important locations from the first century appear in the pages of the book: Rome, Jerusalem, and Alexandria. Even the average reader will have some knowledge of them, although typically they will have acquired no tangible, true-to-life image of these places during their school years. Interest on the part of the reader can be considered as given due to this particular situation, and their interest is satisfied by the narrative with the requisite invention. Spiró’s novel offers a detailed, colourful, and varied presentation not only of the historical locations, but also of particular customs and characteristic behaviour. The vast quantity of information might even have overburdened the text if the author had not chosen a suitable

protagonist and an appropriate epic framework. Uri, the protagonist of the novel, is a member of the Jewish community of Trastevere, who reaches adulthood at the time the story begins. As an inexperienced youth, he gradually learns the rules that govern the adult world, and the narration of this learning process provides the writer with an opportunity to communicate his own knowledge to the reader. The narrative schema of the development novel allows the reader to be introduced into the historical context via the protagonist's recent experiences and the experiential process of his learning about the world, thus the reader is familiarised with relations in the diegetic world in parallel with Uri. Much of the plot, or around three-quarters of the novel, is enclosed in the framework of journeys to remote locations previously unknown to Uri. Since the narrative chiefly promotes the protagonist's viewpoint, the story schema of the journey naturally makes possible the organic integration of knowledge into the narrative through a wondering gaze at new locations, social conditions, and behaviour.

The early reception of the novel rightly pointed out that *Captivity* tends to employ narrative approaches typical of the adventure story (Á. Szilágyi 30). Plot elements such as a storm at sea, the imprisonment of the protagonist followed by his lucky escape, encounters with robbers, armed confrontation and murder are devices traditionally used in adventure stories and picaresque novels. The story is also extremely unpredictable in that the protagonist sometimes finds himself at the bottom of the social hierarchy and at other times rubbing shoulders with the highest echelons. Spiró's novel varies these elements ingeniously, particularly when presenting the intricacies of power games. Not only does he entertain the reader with the surprising twists and turns of the political machinations, but the presentation of the convoluted logic behind them is also extremely imaginative. Spiró had already used this device extremely successfully in his novel *Az Ikszek* [*The X-s*, 1981].

Besides employing the conventional elements of the historical novel, *Captivity* significantly modernises this traditional genre. This can partly be seen in the fact that, compared to the protagonists of adventure stories and romantic historical novels, Uri is a kind of anti-hero. Named Gaius Theodosius by the Romans, Uri is a man of distinctly unfavourable appearance, and might even be called ugly. He has protruding teeth, wispy hair, and a stout physique, and

he moves with difficulty because his legs are permanently swollen. His sight is extremely poor, giving him a permanent squint, and he often experiences pain in his rectum, which leaves him barely able to retain his stool. Initially naïve and clumsy, he fails to see hidden connections between things, although this changes over time in keeping with the narrative schema of the development novel. On the other hand, he is also blessed with exceptional abilities, which elevates his character from the role of anti-hero and in some respects turns him into an idealised figure (Tarján 81). He speaks a surprising number of languages, he is able to memorise things word for word after a single reading, and he can quote whole books by heart, in the same way that Julien Sorel was able to cite the entire New Testament. Over time, he sees through the mechanisms of power more clearly than anyone else, so much so that he predicts the occurrence of certain events—the Jewish War, for example—when no one else is expecting them. His outstanding intellectual faculties are accompanied by remarkable dexterity: he is a talented painter and has achieved a level of artistry in mosaic making; he has even distinguished himself as an inventor, sketching designs for a pneumatic hoist. And while it is up to the reader whether to interpret this attribute as idealisation or irony, Uri’s penis far exceeds the average size.

Aware of these rather disparate traits, some critics have concluded that the novel is consciously breaking away from the demands of psychological authenticity and emphasising Uri’s constructed, fictitious character as some kind of postmodern gesture (Bárány 603). However, this ingenuous reading is not borne out by any irrefutable argument, since the novel’s narrative does not make use of any metanarrative or metafiction commentary that would emphasise the fictitiousness of the characterisation. In many respects, Uri’s character is distinctly complex, and his self-interpretation is profound and multifaceted. The motivations behind his actions in no way contradict the principle of psychological authenticity. At most, the elemental hatred he feels towards his mother and his wife, just as the lack of interest he shows in all his children, with the exception of his favourite son, Theo, seems implausibly one-dimensional and is not fully convincing from a psychological point of view. However, the strikingly simplistic, one-dimensional emotional relationship with these characters does not necessarily indicate the reflected rejection of psychologically authentic characterisation. In the value system of Spiró’s protagonist, which the implied author apparently shares, intellect and reason are given an

accentuated, even exaggerated importance, which can be linked with the fact that the protagonist is a kind of embodiment of the intellectual role. The striking one-dimensionality of the protagonist's value system is not subjected to irony by the narrative voice, suggesting that Uri's peculiar emotional attitude to certain members of his family is treated by the narrator as a natural reaction.

For my own part, I am far from convinced that the novel consistently distances itself from the narrative tradition of psychologically authentic characterisation. The motivations behind the protagonist's actions do not systematically contradict the principle of realism: such elements rather remain sporadic and incidental. At the same time, in the narrative traditions of the historical adventure novel, heroes are often invested with special abilities. In a more critical reading than that referred to above, the inconsistencies in the shaping of Uri's personality might be attributed to the inertia and automatic continuation of the genre tradition, and even to the course of the plot, during which Uri—who comes from one of the lowest social strata of the free but sometimes dines with Pilate and Herod, and at other times belongs to the immediate circle of Philo of Alexandria yet also meets Emperor Caligula—is intimately connected with Vespasian's mistress who, strictly speaking, controls the entire empire. Thus, the humbly born protagonist comes to meet the most powerful and prominent figures of the day, and even ends up closely connected with several of them. Such a plot might be considered commonplace in the case of a picaresque or adventure novel. It is quite another issue that, in a novel that links the tradition of the historical adventure novel to more intellectual and, with some exaggeration, historical-philosophical aspirations, tensions may arise between the two components. The novel's style of presentation, in which the impossible (or at least the highly improbable) is taken as self-evidently possible, coupled with a more reflective narrative mode, may strike one as dissonant unless the novel's narrative handles the elements that belong to the less demanding genre with playful self-irony.

It is not only poetic solutions in the strict sense that contribute to the modernisation of the historical novel. *Captivity* frequently proposes an innovative, and sometimes almost a provocatively innovative viewpoint when depicting historical persons, events or phenomena. In these cases, by displacing established, traditional approaches and generating an unusual

or even shocking perspective, it clears away the historical patina that has accumulated on the given object and enforces a kind of emphatically contemporary, present-day approach (Bárány 601). For example, the novel adopts a perspective that almost ostentatiously diverges from the traditional in its depiction of Pilate, who, in contrast to Christian tradition, is presented not as the embodiment of cowardly compromise or culpable disinterest but as a level-headed, intelligent politician, who always opts for the lesser evil in any given situation. This provocative reinterpretation is even more striking in the case of the figure of Jesus, who differs strikingly from the typical iconographic representations, and not only with respect to his external appearance. In Spiró’s novel, Jesus is an insignificant minor character, who is deprived of his role as the founder of a religion. Rather than a prophet who consciously sacrifices himself, we see an angry figure who is imprisoned for overturning the tables of the money changers in his fury at finding their exchange rates expensive. He is convicted not for his religious teachings but for causing a public nuisance and is therefore essentially a common criminal. Similarly provocative is the approach according to which Moses was wrong to lead his people out of Egypt. In both the Jewish and Christian traditions, the Exodus from Egypt is interpreted as a narrative of liberation from slavery. The protagonist of *Captivity*, on the other hand, values Alexandria’s cultural diversity and prosperous economy more highly than the rigid religiosity experienced in Judaea.

As suggested several times above, rather than contenting itself with entertainment based on historical description and an adventurous plot, Spiró’s novel has higher intellectual aspirations (N. Nagy 5). It explores issues such as the relationship between the intelligentsia and power, the complex identity of the Jews in the Diaspora, the nature of history, the history of religion, and the historical role of Christianity. However, the interpretation of these issues takes place in very different ways. Some topics, such as the question of Jewish identity or the problems of intellectual life, are approached in the narrative in a very complex way, while others (such as the role of Christianity, the nature of religions, or the drivers of history) are presented in a distinctly satirical manner. From the novel’s ideological perspective, Christianity is the religion of the weak and of losers whose fanaticism does not brook even elementary rationality. In this critique of Christianity, it is not hard to discern the influence of Nietzsche’s prejudiced position, of which Spiró’s novel is a vulgarised version. The narrative

paints a devastating picture not only of Christianity but of all institutionalised religions in general, which are considered superior to Christianity only inasmuch as they do not conceal the true, ruthlessly hopeless nature of human existence by mendacious doctrines about fellowship. According to this approach, religion is a collection of formalisms and rigid rules, and it exclusively serves the interests of power, sanctifying and guaranteeing the economic and political power of those in authority. This interpretation of religion is obviously simplistic and one-sided, as is the interpretation of history in the novel. From the perspective of the implied author, there are always petty motivations in the background of great historical events, and the fates of peoples and countries are shaped at will by the power hungry and their courtiers (M. Szilágyi 100–102). World historical events are in fact monumental crimes, and famous historical figures are madmen or buffoons controlled by villains or their minions. This view of history is scarcely new: the basic elements of its narrative are already to be found in Procopius's *Historia Arcana*. Also known as the *Anecdota*, this work gave its name to the *anecdote noir*, the history of which reaches all the way to modernity, the best-known representative in the modern age being Jaroslav Hašek's darkly humorous novel *Švejk*. Another forerunner of the sarcastic perspective is the Menippean *satire*, a classic example of which, Seneca's *Apocolocyntosis*, traces the death of Emperor Claudius and his transformation not into a god but into a pumpkin.

The characteristics of satire are exaggeration, raucous humour, and ridicule. Its extreme approach necessarily involves simplification, and its provocative attitude is not compatible with in-depth, complex analysis. At the same time, satire makes no attempt at unbiased, balanced assessment: the criticism it metes out is avowedly trenchant and one-sided. Inherent in the conventions of the genre is the fact that readers regard it as a kind of curved mirror, a distorted image, which draws attention to certain negative phenomena by means of exaggeration or which, through its disrespect, public-spiritedly challenges the authority that has become obsessed with an unshakable belief in its own superiority. Thus, the prejudice, one-sidedness, and militancy of satire are far from shortcomings but rather peculiarities of the genre (Frye 223). The satirical perspective is not, of course, strictly limited to the genre of satire: a satirical tone can appear in any genre. Nor can it be claimed that the epic novel is necessarily less suitable as a vehicle for satire because of its length. In the case of *Švejk*, for example, the reader will not

see it as a deficiency that the satirical approach permeates the entirety of the vast novel. Although the length of the novel might undoubtedly lead readers to expect that the problems raised in the text will be followed by a comprehensive and complex interpretation, meeting this expectation can scarcely be regarded as an essential requirement.

As its simplistic character renders the satirical approach quite predictable, the best way to satisfy the reader’s hunger for novelty is that the narrative ingeniously conjures up new situations in which fresh life is injected into the familiar satirical schema. In this respect, an episodic plot structure might be better suited to maintaining the reader’s interest than a homogeneous plot based on close correlations. Despite its coherent plot structure, *Captivity* is rather inventive in terms of repeatedly putting the satirical perspective into effect in new situations. This is made possible primarily by the variety of locations and local conditions.

The portrayal of the protagonist is another essential element in the aesthetic validity of the satirical perspective, particularly if the viewpoint of the narrator and the implied author does not deviate spectacularly from that of the protagonist. In the case of both Švejk and *Captivity*, the viewpoint of the protagonist prevails, and its validity is not questioned either by the narrator or by the implied author, who is understood as the common denominator of what is said. Švejk’s vital force is the world of pubs and common people: as a result of his situation, he sees the world from below, and narrow as his intellectual horizon may be, he is sufficiently cunning to annoy to death the representatives of power with his behaviour. The protagonist of Spiró’s novel, on the other hand, possesses remarkable intelligence: he has a broad intellectual horizon, speaks several languages, and, in the course of his journey, acquires significant life experience by visiting the most important sites of the ancient world. His self-reflection is complex, and he assesses his own identity and social situation in their very complexity. His interest extends far beyond the confines of his own mundane life: he is inclined to philosophise and is capable of interpreting the historical events he experiences in the context of world history. In terms of his faculties and knowledge, Uri is in fact a member of the intellectual elite, despite the fact that he refuses to accept the respective social position even when given the opportunity to do so, due to his aversion to power. His intellectual abilities are not questioned by the narrator, who at

most speaks ironically of his youthful naïvety. However, in keeping with the narrative schema of the development novel, Uri gradually loses his innocent good faith in the wake of what he experiences, and he increasingly comes to understand the hidden context of things. The majority of the novel, which runs to 900 pages in the English edition, is otherwise dominated by Uri's focus, while the perspectives of the other characters are presented sporadically and succinctly. This rather traditional narrative solution likens the protagonist to the role of the *raisonneur*. The distance between Uri's outlook and that of the narrator becomes apparent almost exclusively at those points at which the narrator refers to the naïve good faith of the character. Since Uri is typically aware of his own mistakes, this distance decreases as the plot of the novel progresses, until eventually, again following a rather traditional approach, the viewpoints of character and narrator become practically identical by the end of the novel (Á. Szilágyi 31).

The main representative of the satirical approach in Spiró's epic novel is an intellectual with outstanding abilities, whose personality is represented in the text in a complex way. Bearing in mind that the natural vehicle of satire is exaggeration, tendentiousness, and militancy, this is not the most felicitous solution. The complexity of the character and the exceptional intellectual abilities that are attributed to him are not fully in harmony with the simplistic perspective inherent in satire. This tension might well be relieved if the character's voice somehow reflected on his own propensity for exaggeration, or if it were looked at from the narrator's perspective. However, few traces of this are to be found in the novel, as the satirical approach appears to take itself too seriously at every level of the text. One might say that the novel is not entirely aware of its own satirical character, since it interprets itself not so much as a curved mirror but rather as a reliable, exploratory, "true to life" mirror image of the essence. In the typical fashion of realist narratives, the implied author of Spiró's novel is convinced of the correctness of his own way of seeing things. This complete self-confidence appears somewhat anachronistic, as it presents the implied author as being in possession of the truth (Á. Szilágyi 39). This is also reflected in the structure of focalisation: throughout the lengthy novel, the narrator makes the viewpoint of one single character, the protagonist, not only dominant but almost exclusive. Furthermore, in many respects the protagonist's viewpoint appears to be the duplication of the

narrator’s viewpoint, insofar as there is a temporal rather than a substantial distance between the two perspectives. In the first sections of the novel, Uri’s point of view is, as it were, a juvenile variant of the narrator’s outlook, while the disillusioned and aged Uri ultimately achieves the same degree of wisdom that characterises the narrator.

At this point, it is worth briefly recalling the asymmetry that is manifested in the novel’s approach to thematic problems. As I have already mentioned, some topics (such as the nature of power, the essence of religions, and the historical role of Christianity) are depicted with the exaggeration and tendentiousness that belong to satire, while other topics (the problem of identity, the myth of origin) are discussed in a complex way with profound perspicacity. This variation in approach between satirical polarisation and in-depth analysis is by no means felicitous, since it removes satire from its original context and lends it the appearance of complex analysis. Since the narrative never reflects on this shift in dimension, the reader is compelled to think that the obviously tendentious and simplistic approach has the same authenticity as the complex interpretation that surrounds the subject. In this respect, the text is therefore capable of misleading the reader and making the satire appear as a matter of fact. Although I consider the crossing of genre boundaries to be a productive poetic solution in most cases, a satirical approach and the self-interpretative narrative that belongs to the realist novel scarcely constitute a happy combination in this respect.

As noted, the protagonist of *Captivity* is, in my opinion, the embodiment of the intellectual type. One might justifiably ask what kind of intellectual self-interpretation can in fact be attributed to the novel. Relying on certain elements of the schema of the development novel, *Captivity* guides the protagonist through a kind of process of maturation. One aspect of this transformation is that, as the story progresses in time, Uri, who has always held reason in great esteem, increasingly condemns human folly and those forms of behaviour that he considers incompatible with reason. His relationship with the members of his family is also determined by the level of their intelligence and the extent to which they are able to be his intellectual peers. The stupidity of his mother and his wife leaves him distinctly disgusted with them, and the only one of his children to whom he feels close is Theo, who is extraordinarily intelligent. There is no indication in the text that either the novel’s narrator or the implied author expresses

any irony regarding this mentality, which classifies people according to a very one-sided point of view. Although Uri initially appears to be extremely modest, his experiences increasingly seem to prompt him to divide people into two groups: the stupid and the intelligent. The narration shares this approach, showing a preference for the use of free indirect speech, two variants of which are given particular prominence in the novel. In keeping with the prevailing nature of the protagonist's focus, Uri's internal monologue is largely conveyed in this way by the narrator. Another typical device is to make the voice of the public heard by means of coloured narration. The voice of public opinion in the novel is manifested through the voicing of shared beliefs and false opinions. In contrast to the small number of intelligent people, the novel features a multitude of fools, suggesting a kind of elitist superiority in terms of intellectual self-definition.

Since the enormous success of *Captivity* can doubtless be explained by the topical references in the text, it is worth looking at the socio-political context of the period in which the novel was written. In post-1990 Hungary, a number of ideologies and political aspirations emerged that exhibited an anachronistic and even undemocratic character in the name of the country's Christian roots. For example, the old-fashioned and unpalatable popular-urban opposition was revived: an attempt to classify writers according to an artificially created binary system, and, on this basis, to evaluate whether the urban or the rural way of life and the values attributed to them were closer to the given author's viewpoint. This fruitless and spurious categorisation is all the more reprehensible since it was, to all intents and purposes, a code name for Judeo-Christian discrimination and thus bordered on anti-Semitic prejudice. The approach quite rightly elicited aversion and disapproval on the part of anyone with democratic convictions. I can scarcely be wrong in relating the novel's explicitly negative interpretation of Christianity to this socio-political situation, and my assertion is apparently supported by the fact that the book offers a complex and profound interpretation of the complicated question of Jewish identity in the Diaspora. Anti-Semitism, which evokes the Christian mentality, rightly gives rise to satirical presentation. In a novel with a uniformly satirical perspective—in which genre-dependent self-reflection acknowledges the magnifying, distorting curved mirror of satire—such a one-sided framing of Christianity (and other religions) would scarcely be objectionable. What I consider problematic in *Captivity* is the fact that the narrative of Spiró's

novel oscillates between the naturally exaggerated satirical approach and in-depth analysis. Within this structure, the satirically one-sided presentation of Christianity and other religions does not appear to be a felicitous approach, since satirical polarisation combined with a thorough-going analysis of other objects tends to give the impression of a judgement that can be taken seriously in every respect. If the narrative holds up the curved mirror of bias in relation to religions and Christianity, yet at the same time provides a complex and balanced interpretation of identity, this must be an indication of prejudice. The reader of the novel might then justifiably ask: What is the purpose of this tendentious distinction? Does the novel’s implied author believe that the caricature of Christianity and of organised religions in general is in fact a substantive analysis? In my opinion, the novel’s criticism of religion and its interpretation of Christianity can be considered valid only in the context of satire, while if removed from this context and presented as a substantive evaluation, it can scarcely be taken seriously because of its simplistic one-sidedness.

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TÍMEA MURZSA

The Narrative Structure of Szilárd Borbély's *The Dispossessed*: Reception, Narration, and Identity



This article examines the narrative structure of Szilárd Borbély's novel *The Dispossessed*. I will mainly concentrate on the questions of narration and identity in the book, but beforehand I would like to give an overview of the novel's reception. I believe that the recurring problems in the reception are in connection with the special narrative structure of *The Dispossessed*. I will be discussing the idea that many criticisms of the novel arise from the non-standard features in its narrative structure, claiming that the authenticity of the narrator should be questioned. By viewing the novel as employing some of the features of (im)migrant fiction and considering Borbély's narrative choices as stylistically conscious decisions designed to convey the experiences of language and culture loss, I will argue that many of the predominant criticisms of *The Dispossessed* in fact relate to its unique strengths, rather than its weaknesses.

1 Reception

The Dispossessed (2013) was a great critical success, with numerous interpretations and articles published in connection with the book (for a summary of its reception until 2016, see Szénási, "A *Nincstelenek* jelentés-rétegei" 26–34), and many claiming Borbély's first novel—published in 2013—to be one of the most important publications of the year (Bod 874; Deczki 4). Since then, the book has been translated into several languages (English, German, and Italian, among others), and has been well received in the foreign press as well. For example, George Szirtes wrote the following in *The New York Times*: "What is clear is *The Dispossessed* is a great *sui generis* book

that, for all its cultural differences, touches us deeply. We recognize it as tragic, truthful, and visionary wherever we are” (Sziertes). Regarding the interpretations of Borbély’s novel, we can see certain trends linked to the concepts of autobiography, sociography, trauma literature, and the authenticity of narration. In the following points, I will provide a brief summary of these trends.

1.1 *Autobiography*

The Dispossessed is often interpreted as an autobiography, due to several factors including the content of Borbély’s earlier works (for example *Halotti Pompa* [2004, *Splendours of Death*] or *Egy gyilkosság mellékszálai* [2008, *Subplots of a Murder*]) and public knowledge of his own tragic life story (the murder of his mother, the death of his father, and the author’s own eventual suicide). The paratexts of *The Dispossessed* further contribute to this impression, including a photograph of the author as a child and the GPS coordinates of his childhood village (Túrlicse) on the cover of the first edition.

An example of this interpretation can also be found in the following: “Borbély’s self-chosen death retroactively deepens and expands the meaning of the book, as in posterior he makes *The Dispossessed* definitive” (Takács 106; my translation). This approach is supported by Borbély’s essay in *Élet és Irodalom* with the title “Egy elveszett nyelv” [2013, “A Lost Language”], which can be understood as an interpretation of *The Dispossessed*. In this essay, he spoke about his childhood in his village, identified himself as a cultural migrant, and touched upon the subject of the loss of his original language—the language of his childhood. Later, I will examine this essay in further detail, because, in my opinion, it is a key text for understanding the narrative structure of the book.

1.2 *Trauma literature*

Often closely linked to an autobiographical reading of the text, *The Dispossessed* has been interpreted as an attempt to find a language in which one can speak about trauma. Trauma here could refer to the author’s real-life traumatic experiences, the traumas suffered by the novel’s child protagonist, his family, or their village collectively.

It [*The Dispossessed*] tells the story of an outcast family within a village community steeped in aggression, from the perspective of

a child narrator subjected to constant abuse. ... The narrative of a traumatised childhood is told in the tension between remembering and forgetting, saying and not saying, but this is also complemented by the historical traumas affecting the community: the forced change of language and religion of the Romanians and Ruthenians who migrated to Erdőhát, and—especially—the Holocaust. (Szénási, “A *Nincstelenek* jelentésrétegei” 28–29; my translation)

The following features of the text support the reading of *The Dispossessed* as a piece of trauma literature: intensification of bodily sensations in the novel (Szénási, “A *Nincstelenek* jelentésrétegei” 29), silence (reflecting on the muting nature of trauma), and use of repetition and present tense (which can indicate the feeling of being “stuck” in the traumatic experience). In addition to this, Zoltán Németh also stresses the thematisation of violence and questions of superiority and inferiority raised within the book: “*The Dispossessed*’s hopeless world overlays the territories of subordination, positions, and languages, and in this way it varies the final meanings of trauma, the registers of the unspeakable” (Németh 166; my translation). Reading Borbély’s novel as an exploration of trauma(s) is a dominant theme in Hungarian responses to the novel.

1.3 Sociography

The GPS coordinates on the first edition of *The Dispossessed* point to Túrlicse, the writer’s childhood village. Combined with the fact that the world of the novel depicts the poverty and social hierarchy of such a village—and the position of a child within it—some interpreters have identified the book as sociography. It has to be emphasised that this reading is most common in foreign analyses of Borbély’s book. This is particularly evidenced, for example, by the previously quoted article by George Szirtes in *The New York Times* and by the foreword to the English edition by Otilie Mulzet, the translator:

No Hungarian author—whether novelist or social scientist—had ever really written about the persistence, even through Communist social levelling and late-twentieth-century social advances, of Hungary’s deep and intractable poverty the way that Borbély did,

with his laser-sharp observations and uncompromising ethical stance. (Borbély, *The Dispossessed*)

This phenomenon reflects, to some extent, what foreign readers may look for or respond to in Hungarian literature as a whole—and in doing so, fails to consider the complex narrative structure of the book and how it emphasizes its own fictionality. In my view, this approach can result from translations that do not fully encompass the nuances of the original narrative (in particular, the change in tense is missing in the final chapter of the English edition in a very important sentence, compared to the Hungarian original), or its theological subtext (as in the English edition the choice to omit the original subtitle, which would translate as “Has Mesijás [Messiah] left yet?”).

It is also worth noting here that some Hungarian responses to *The Dispossessed* draw attention to how the book in fact undermines certain features of the genre of sociography, for example Péter Szirák’s assertion that “[t]he authenticity of the village narrative is undermined partly by the specific operation of epic selection and partly by the ‘discordance’ of the narrative voice” (Szirák 35; my translation). István Margócsy states as well that the narration lacks the “indignation” which has characterized the tradition of Hungarian sociographic narratives (Margócsy, “*Nincstelenek*” 8).

1.4 Narration and fictionality

The narrative style of the novel has also led to confusion amongst critics. More specifically, the following question recurs in many critical articles: Is the child narrator’s voice authentic? The novel contains interpretive commentaries and abstract ideas that are considered by many readers to be beyond the reasonable horizons of a child—raising the question, how does an adult’s point of view enter the text? It is hard to depict the distance between the narrating *I* and the experiencing *I*, and the retrospective narration’s codes are seemingly overridden by the use of the present tense. This phenomenon has led some scholars to see the voice of the child narrator as inauthentic and to consider the changes of perspective in the text as unjustified:

In the first half of the text, one gets the feeling that we are reading a text written by a boy of about ten, and the short sentences, the simple

structures, the form of knowledge about the world, and the narrator's lack of the ordering-structuring principles of hindsight all reinforce this. ... The problem with all of this is that, in part, he is already making statements that a young adult cannot, or at least is not used to making, and at the end of the novel, the mature adult speaks as well, in beautifully crafted sentences. (Bedecs 111; my translation)

Éva Bányai agrees with László Bedecs:

The shifts are not clear and thoughtful, there is no clear explanation as to why and for what reason the transitions occur; at least the text does not give any instructions or clues as to how to understand them. The child's voice is infiltrated with elements that constitute the knowledge of an adult, the post-corrections of an adult perspective, by which I mean not only the sometimes moralising, interpretative reflections and thought processes but also, for example, the "we say so" parts. (Bányai 106; my translation)

Critics who do not interpret this dichotomy as a mistake, instead stress the symbolic nature of it: the abstract interpretation—formulated from an adult perspective—provides a parallel between the individual's existential situation and the socio-psychological state of the village community (Szénási, "A *Nincstelenek* jelentésrétegei" 32). Other scholars claim that this duplicity illustrates the fictional nature of the text—an opinion which also forms the basis of my research: "This child narrator speaks ... neither a village language nor a child's language, but a fiction of both, overwritten and over-stylized: and it is precisely in this fictionalisation that it achieves its effect" (Margócsy, "*Nincstelenek*" 9; my translation); and Borbély's child narrator is "a figure projected back from the adult consciousness" (Visy 112; my translation).

To describe the unusual narrative style of Borbély's novel, Sarolta Deczki uses the term "schizophrenic narration" (Deczki 5; my translation). In my opinion, this is a misleading path, as we do not see a "split of one mind." Instead, the adult narrator, who has already left the village and its

language behind by the time he is creating his story, can be considered to be trying to rebuild his child voice. I agree with Ákos Szilágyi on this point, which he describes—in his note written to István Margócsy’s previously mentioned analysis—as “he [the narrator] is ... imagining himself, existentially positioning himself in his former self, and then he is artistically constructing the world as it is constituted in the child self, but from a non-child perspective” (Szilágyi, “*Nincstelenek*” 15; my translation).

I believe that the novel is an attempt to reconstruct a language and a perspective that is long since lost. This manifests itself in an in-between position—a narrative feature that is quite common in so-called “immigrant fiction”—in which the immigrant writers are at the intersection of the loss of their “old,” “original” language (and culture) and the possession of a “new” language (and culture). In the world of fiction, they are able to make a connection between the original and the new culture by creating a “virtual” identity (see the work of Terézia Mora and Saša Stanišić [Thomka 26]). In my opinion, features of immigrant fiction can be applied with some restrictions to *The Dispossessed* as well. Despite the fact that the author of the book was not an immigrant, the radical shift of cultural fields and languages in his life may well compare to that experience (especially if we consider that he described himself as a “cultural migrant” in the previously mentioned essay).

2 (Im)migrant fiction

To give a context for my discussion here of immigrant fiction, I will use Beáta Thomka’s work titled *Regénytapasztalat* [*The Experience of the Novel*]. (In her book, Thomka briefly discusses Borbély’s novel, but not from the same perspective as mine; she focuses on the poetic inventions of the language of the “dispossessed” and whether the experiences of living on the periphery can be shared.) In the case of *fictional diaspora*, the concepts of “getting in” (*bekerülés*) and “getting out” (*kívül kerülés*) are at work: translating to a separation within the geographical terrain of the author’s origin and the place where he or she works as a writer (Thomka 15). This idea is very similar to the one explored by Borbély in his essay mentioned above. There, he defines

himself as a cultural migrant who has left his own environment, and thus his own language. Instead, he has learned another language, but he can no longer use the language of his childhood authentically (metaphysically speaking, he is punished for the sin of abandonment by losing the language):

In the years after my father's death, I spent a lot of time thinking about the journey we had taken together and the journey we had taken apart. How did I become a traitor? And why did they become victims? Why don't I have any memories? What do I really remember? Or whose memories do I remember? My own or my parents'? When I asked these questions, I knew I was a migrant for a long time. A cultural migrant who has to erase the tell-tale traces of his past. First-generation migrants do their best to forget the past, the medium, the language, the place they are leaving, which they need to forget in order to become successful migrants. They must also ruthlessly sever the threads of homesickness and nostalgia, otherwise, the experiment will fail. The first-generation migrant refers to the second generation: it must be done to make things better for them. In the second generation, it all backfires, the secret comes out. Because there is no blessing on the secret, says the Talmud. For cultural migration to be successful in our country, in our gentrified homeland, it is not enough to leave the village, you have to betray the peasant world because it is not presentable. ... I am looking for the whys in my book *The Dispossessed*. ... Whoever betrayed the common destiny of the humiliated, the peasants, and sided with the lords, committed an unpardonable sin. When I began to describe the world of my parents and the village, I realized that in doing so I was betraying them. As a punishment, I had forgotten their language, which was also my own. I could no longer speak to my mother. I couldn't find a voice with my father, who was in a state of loneliness. To abandon the people of a village is to betray them. Whoever talks about them betrays them. And if you leave them, you lose your language. And then you learn to speak again. But a language is lost in the process. That is the path I have walked. (Borbély, "Egy elveszett nyelv" 13; my translation)

Immigrant fiction also possesses the following features relevant to such a discussion of Borbély's work:

For the narrators the learned language of writing leads to a new cultural identity, even if this means a temporary or permanent feeling of not-belonging. ... Distance from linguistic heritage can reinforce attachment to the personal past and cultural tradition, as we see in the frequent occurrence of childhood themes, memories, historical traumas, and versions of evoking the past. ... The works of the fictional diaspora operate as parts of two systems, they are navigating between two worlds, bringing and taking, exchanging values, and changing perspectives. (Thomka 16, 17, 18; my translation)

This type of translation, the navigation between two worlds, is present in *The Dispossessed*. It takes place within the text itself, with the standard version of certain words used first, followed by the narrator's vernacular version, in his original dialect. See, for example: "I watch the courtyard through the window while my mother talks to the doctor. We say doktor" (Borbély, *The Dispossessed*). Critics have spoken about mediation through translation (Deczki 5), but the question remains as to whether the reader can be initiated into a language that is no longer the narrator's own. Is it possible to convey an identity that is not accessible anymore, which is rebuilt within a fictionalised world, with a fictionalised language? It must be emphasised that the language we read in *The Dispossessed* is a recreation from a posterior perspective. This story was possible to tell only because the narrator left the village (Margócsy, "A szegénység a magyar irodalomban" 382), and learned the standard language (László 117). That is how the ending scene makes sense when the child's voice is not present anymore, and this explains why the language in this chapter is different from the rest of the book: it is smooth, using a standard, even literary, vocabulary and style. A lot of critics have interpreted this closing chapter as unnecessary and faulty (see Margócsy, "*Nincstelenek*" 13 or Nyerges), but in my opinion, it is necessary to show the distance between the child and adult selves, and to clearly illustrate the narrator's loss of language. Although I agree with Ákos Szilágyi that "the change of voice and mind or plane takes place on the stage of a single consciousness, without which

the formal rounding of the work would not be possible, since the narrative could not be closed and rounded artistically from within—by the child narrator who necessarily does not see or represent himself” (Margócsy, “*Nincstelenek*” 15; my translation), the text suggests with the last chapter, that the distance between the narrating *I* and his child self, his family and village, is irresolvable. The attempt to find the “lost” language again has failed.

Which features indicate the effect of this failure in the novel? The majority of the book is written in the present tense, suggesting that the events and feelings being shared are happening at the moment of narration. The only chapter in which we find the past tense is the last one. There is also a recurring refrain throughout the novel (“we say”—in the present tense) which is notably used in the past tense in the last chapter instead: “that’s how we said it”—unfortunately this change is not indicated in the English version. This choice changes the narrative situation retroactively. From this point of view, the present-tense parts are in fact re-created memories. That way, retrospective narration is just seemingly overridden. At this moment, we can distinguish the narrating *I* and the experiencing *I* by the tense used. The narrator is not a child, as many critics state, but an adult who gives the illusion of the child’s speech, but also indicates throughout the novel at several points that he is in fact not a child anymore (see the comments and insights which are beyond a child’s horizon).

3 *Who are the dispossessed?*

The Dispossessed tells not only the story of a cultural migrant, who has left his childhood environment and the language in which he could have been able to speak about his experiences, but his entire family’s story as well, which is also characterised by constant loss, surrender, and exclusion of identity. In a way, the family members are all cultural migrants, as for generations they have been changing their location, and their language. If we follow the family’s history, we can see that both sides are marked by constant historical traumas. Their ancestors had to leave their home, and their choice of new land is symbolic as well: “We have built upon the silt, the drifting sands,” says the father (Borbély, *The Dispossessed*). They live in a place next to the borders of Hungary, Ukraine, and Romania,

where historical traumas are particularly present, and a peripheral identity is inherent. Although times change, the village stays the same, with a constant recurrence of themes including silence, unspoken trauma, sin, and a feeling of inferiority (the present tense further emphasising this feeling of unchanging timelessness as well). In the following, I will examine the languages and identities of the family members and generations. My thesis is that the narrative of the family's history cannot be recreated due to the recurring trope of exclusion in it. In the setting of the novel, the village, the identity of the individuals is strongly derived from their family's history, as shown in the following dialogue between the protagonist and some old men in the village:

"Who is your grandfather?"
 "Lame Miska," I say so he will understand. That's what my grandfather is called in the village.
 "Lame Miska?"
 "That's the one," ...
 "Aye, Mózsi's bastard," he whispers to the other so I won't hear.
 "Jóska Mózes's?"
 "That'un's."
 "I didn't know."
 "Not them'un's."
 "But you said Mózsi's."
 "Not this'un here. The old'un."
 "The one they done took away?"
 "That'un."
 "So Mari Pop's."
 "That'un."
 "Mari still alive?"
 "Nope. She a dead'un. Four or five years now."
 "May God rest her soul, she was a dog of a woman. She could really scratch." (Borbély, *The Dispossessed*; quotation marks in the original)

As the narrator's family was excluded for generations, they are considered *the others* by the village's community. A name is one of the most important indicators of one's identity. As László Szilasi pointed out, almost no

first names are mentioned in the book (21). In *The Dispossessed*, we know the names of the grandparents' generation (this may indicate that their identity is still 'accessible'). On the paternal side there is Mária Pop and Miska Kengyel. Miska Kengyel says he is a Hungarian nobleman from the Bobonkay family, but his ancestors were probably Romanian, like his wife's. The family is, and was, Greek Catholic, even though they were forced to change religion. Being Greek Catholic is the only stable part of their identity. However, there is a 'black spot' in the family history: the father is supposedly the son of Moses (Mózsi), a Jew from the village who died in the Holocaust. But this is a taboo subject, although the whole village is aware of it. This is why the child protagonist—whose name we do not know—is sometimes called Goga by the people in the village. Because of his supposed Jewish origin, he is identified with the Jewish boy who was taken from the village during the Holocaust. Besides their Romanian origin and the Jewish line in the family, they are also outcasts because the village considers them kulaks. Máli, the father's sister, identifies herself and her family as peasants.

On the mother's side, the Alecska and Harbula families have Ruthenian and Hutsul ancestry. Mama Juszti spoke old Slavonic until her mother's death. The Grandfather is a fascist, a Horthyst, whose identity marker is that he has a Hitler moustache. His favourite poem is "I am Hungarian, I was born a Hungarian" and his favourite song is "Miklós Horthy's soldier am I, his most beautiful soldier am I ..."

The stories related to previous generations (the grandparents) of the family are presented in the text in a coherent narrative—unlike the child's stories in the book—indicating that these stories are still accessible and can be passed on. The histories of the two families are similar in many ways, but the family identities cancel each other out: as demonstrated by the contrasting Jewish and fascist histories. The only common point for them is Greek Catholicism, which is not just a religious but also a political identity (see Borbély, "Egy elveszett nyelv" 13). For the parents' generation, however, the consistency with how their identity and memories are presented is not the same, as their identities are based much more on negation and denial. The identity of the mother is derived from subordination: "You know that we are despised. We are hated in this village. We are hated in every village" (Borbély, *The Dispossessed*). She claims several times that she is not a peasant, and neither are her children: "We were never like these

peasants. If one peasant barfs up his food, another immediately gobbles it up so it won't go to waste" (Borbély, *The Dispossessed*). For the father, his Jewish background is the main problem. So much that he does not even utter the word "Jewish": "AT HOME, WE DON'T SAY THE WORD JEW. MY FATHER NEVER pronounces it. Nor does my mother. They are afraid of this word. The word *Jew* can never be uttered" (Borbély, *The Dispossessed*). Even though the father does not identify himself as Jewish, he keeps contact with his supposed half-brother, the young Moses, who is the only one who survived from the Jewish family.

The mother does, however, try to embrace their Jewish traditions, although in a deformed way, for she does not know the meaning behind the rituals. This act is rather of symbolic importance to her, performed without a deep understanding of the religion: "It must be stressed: the mother does not link herself to the history of Judaism, she does not link herself to the Holocaust—her identification is mythical, her personal roots are in her opposition, her experience of alienation as resistance" (Szűcs 229; my translation). She thinks her family does not belong to the village, and her desire to leave it is a recurring topic within the family and the novel. The father finally agrees to go after his step-father's death, when his brothers and sister openly declare that he is Jewish and therefore cannot inherit anything. It is at this point that he announces one of the most powerful phrases in the text: "never again will I pronounce the name of that village. I have no siblings. I deny them ... I have forgotten my life. May our memories no longer be our memories" (Borbély, *The Dispossessed*; modified translation). This is also the point when, finally, the Jewish identity is taken up by the whole family: an identity that is associated with exclusion, oppression, slavery, wandering, but at the same time in the mother's eyes: being chosen.

The question of memory, closely interwoven with that of identity and narration, is also repeatedly thematised textually: the child invents memories ("I SAW IT ONCE," OTTÓ TELLS ME. AND FOR A LONG TIME I thought I'd seen it, too.") (Borbély, *The Dispossessed*), and the mother too: "MY MOTHER IS SITTING AT THE TABLE, HUSKING A SACK OF beans. In the meantime, she's talking. My mother is making up memories for me. She wants me to remember the same things as she does" (Borbély, *The Dispossessed*). As Petra Bozsoki has pointed out, the associative order of the novel mimics the process of remembering (Bozsoki 55). In my view,

modification is integral to the nature of remembrance, which is why the “inconsistencies” in the narration should not be considered mistakes (for example, Tibor Bárány notices that the characters’ ages do not always add up. See Bárány, “ÉS-kvartett” 21). As previously noted, the grandparents’ stories seem to use a more coherent language than the child’s story, yet not even the grandfather’s tale is delivered in direct speech but as a story retold by the narrator: “Popescu was mute with shock, like the duck that swallowed a bumblebee” (Borbély, *The Dispossessed*). Notably, the image of the duck swallowing a bumblebee is something that had been seen by the child before, independent of the grandfather, in another memory fragment. This emphasises again the fictional nature of the text and reflects on the narrator’s position: *The Dispossessed* is a fictionalised story told from the point of view of a single narrator, even though there is the impression of focalisation.

The arbitrariness is also reflected in how other family members’ memories are constructed and presented: each individual’s story always involves the highlighting of certain elements and the omission of others. This is characteristic not only of the family but also of the village community. What is interesting here is that hidden and unspoken sins are still present in the village vocabulary, for example, in the Jew-related proverbs: when someone goes to defecate they say “I’m going to pay the Jew” (Borbély, *The Dispossessed*). Another important sign of this phenomenon is that when people do not want to talk about something, they answer with the saying: “Because Adam shit in the water, and Eve drank it up” (Borbély, *The Dispossessed*), and thus put an end to the conversation.

4 “*Has Mesijás left yet?*”

The theoretical subtext of the novel is strongly linked to questions of identity and inclusion in *The Dispossessed*. Stigmatised identity is not only present in the family’s history, but also in another character’s life who deals with exclusion from the village community as well: Mesijás, the gypsy. He has an important role in the text, as evidenced by the subtitle of the book: “*Has Mesijás left yet?*” Mesijás lives from small jobs, like cleaning the toilets of the village. Many have pointed out that being named as Messiah, he symbolically takes away the sin of the people by

cleaning the toilets (Szénási, “A peremlét” 198). He has a mental disability, and conforms to the archetype of the mentally weak, Jesus-like figure which has its roots in Friedrich Nietzsche’s *The Antichrist* (which was partially inspired by Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *The Idiot*), and features in Hungarian literature as well. Both Károly Pap and László Németh have their version of it, in *Megszabadítottál a haláltól* [*You Delivered Me from Death*, 1932] and *Emberi színjáték* [*The Human Comedy*, 1929]. With their weakness, these Jesus-figures emphasise the human side of the Messiah, rather than presenting him only as the son of God. In *The Dispossessed*, the deformation of the character’s name (Mesijás instead of Messiás) can also reflect this approach. Such characters share a childlike quality and a compassion for everyone—a parallel between Mesijás and the kids is raised on several occasions in *The Dispossessed*. In the majority of critical responses to the novel, the gypsy figure has been interpreted ironically, with Zoltán Szénási, in particular, thinking of him as a “demonic parody” (Northrop Frye’s expression) of the Messiah of the Gospels (Szénási, “A peremlét” 189). However, it seems to me that the character of Mesijás is not necessarily parodistic but instead has its roots in a different approach to the figure of Jesus. Considering Jesus as human rather than divine is an important difference between Judaism and Christianity. Borbély’s works are strongly linked to the Jewish culture, especially to Hasidism (see Száz).

Mesijás is practically the only positive character in this text: he does not like violence, and he turns with compassion and love towards everyone. The fact that people fail to have compassion for Mesijás then, might indicate a lack of redemption (see the scene when he is spat on and made fun of). If we continue with the biblical interpretation, in order to be freed from the sins and silence (i.e. of the family and the village), there should be confession—embracing weakness, repentance and forgiveness, but this does not happen (see Borbély “Az emlékezés is fikció”). The appearance of the Messiah touches upon the question of language as well: “it would not be until the coming of the Messiah that all the secrets of the kabbala would be definitively revealed. Only then, at the end of time, would all linguistic differences cease, and languages be reabsorbed back into the original sacred tongue” (Eco 33). This utopian view can be related to the problem of cultural migrants too. If all languages were unified into one sacred language, the differences between cultures and people could be overcome. But in the world of *The Dispossessed*, the Messiah has already left, or he never

came. The word “messiah” appears in the text several times (in addition to the use of the name Mesijás), but never has a stable meaning. As Balázs Görföl points out, “[b]y leaving the phrase ‘to wait for the messiah’ empty or by always referring to something else, the characters testify that none of them actually hopes for the redemption of this world, but the hope of an all-embracing redemption is preserved in the language” (Görföl 80; my translation). There is another character who is addressed as “Messiah”: the protagonist’s baby brother who dies in the book. This can also symbolise the lack of redemption in the novel’s world.

5 Conclusion

In this study, I have argued that the “mistakes” repeatedly highlighted in critical responses to *The Dispossessed*—such as the duplicity of the narrator’s voice and inconsistencies in the ending scene—in fact arise from a consciously chosen narrative position. The decision to reconstruct the narrator’s child-voice is, therefore, an attempt (by him) to regain the identity he had in his youth, which has since been abandoned, and is no longer accessible to him. The fact that the reception has found the narrating voice inauthentic can, if considered in this light, evidence the struggle of recreating this long-lost language, as well as highlight the failure of the attempt. The fiction provides a space for this trial to take place: just like in immigrant fiction, the narrator’s reimagined memories could construct a family history in the fictional space, which would be difficult to create anywhere else due to the fragmented nature of these experiences. Furthermore, by owning the language of literature, a position is created from which the childhood language can be reconstructed, the story could be told. Even though, in Borbély’s perception, the “new language” cancels out the “original language.” If you leave the village, you forget to speak its language as a punishment. That way, *The Dispossessed* is a trial to reconstruct an identity and a family history that is in fact not approachable anymore—not even in fiction.

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KATALIN SZLUKOVÉNYI

“The Magic Book”:
Editorial Notes on Folktale Collections
by Dr Csenge Virág Zalka



In Csenge Zalka's first book in English, there is a tale called "The Magic Book" (*Superhuman Powers* 184–86). It is a Hungarian story about a "garabonciás," a medieval wandering student with certain supernatural skills and instruments, in this particular case a magic book that can fly its user over large distances or even up in the air in a second. The tale tells about the student's encounter with a peasant, who kindly offers him a ride on his oxcart but, out of curiosity, cannot refrain himself from fiddling with the magic book while his passenger is asleep. The book first flies them to a nearby city then up to the sky, but the peasant cannot find the appropriate spell to get them back to the ground. Due to all the turmoil, the magician wakes up at this point and orders the book to "Descend!". After they have safely landed, the student warns his travelling companion: "You are lucky you did not close the book up in the air ... We would have fallen to our deaths" (185). I find this tale an enchanting parable reminding all of us involved in literature of the enormous power of books, which are able to take their readers to distant lands or even up to heaven, substantially expanding their horizon, but which definitely need to be handled with respect and expertise. In the following brief reflection on my editorial experiences with some of Zalka's books, I attempt to outline what I see as her skilful and valuable contribution to expanding the horizon of Hungarian juvenile literature in general and of folktales in particular.

As an editor of books for young readers since 2017, I have the impression that the status of children's literature is rapidly rising in the past few decades. Juvenile literature is a relatively young section within literature, so it is not surprising that it has been going through several phases of

formation and transformation. “Most cultural historians agree that children’s literature, as we recognise it today, began in the mid-eighteenth century” (Grenby 41), and it can be claimed that the great achievement of the first couple of centuries was to distinguish it as a corpus different from literature written for adult readers. While its numerous specific genres—from nursery rhymes through didactic fables to bedtime stories—were established, refined, modified, and combined in multiple ways, the specific standards of producing books appropriate for young readers also developed gradually. Such principles or guidelines of juvenile literature include—but are not restricted to—using language suited to the implied reader’s age and linguistic competence, being highly aware of the overt or covert moral and social messages suggested by the text, or the high demand for delightful components like pleasant, poetic sound patterns and attractive illustrations. The sharp distinction between books for young readers versus for adults was immensely useful as it allowed the book industry to adapt to the special needs of young readers and to produce a constantly increasing amount of excellent quality reading for children, also helping them to grow into adults fond of reading precisely because they learnt to love reading at an early age, perusing books designed specifically for them. Yet the disadvantages of this separation of juvenile literature from adult literature were also noticed after a while. For long, children’s books were widely considered secondary to adult books, receiving much less critical acclaim. While the latter were discussed in innumerable scholarly journals and book-length treatises, the former tended to be neglected in historical summaries as well as in contemporary reviews. As the marketing of *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Children’s Literature* at Amazon.com succinctly phrases it: “For much of its history, children’s literature has been overlooked or looked down on by scholars. But in recent years children’s literature has assumed greater importance...” A large number of prestigious monographs and scholarly collections published in the field since the turn of the millennium—like the overviews by Cambridge and Oxford University Press in my bibliography below—seems to confirm that juvenile literature finally gets the long-due professional attention.

A similar trend can be observed not only internationally but in Hungary too. The popularity of juvenile literature matches or sometimes even exceeds that of adult literature among readers, as Márton Mészáros, a scholar of children’s literature pointed it out to me during an interview, propounding

that “I feel that ... one can no longer be a trendy poet without having a trendy collection of poetry for children” (Mészáros 17:29–17:50; my translation). His evaluation of the present situation is clearly confirmed by numerous examples like Bálint Harcos, Judit Ágnes Kiss, Dénes Krusovszky, and Krisztina Tóth, who were highly successful authors producing for adults before starting to write for children. Mészáros’s suggestion also harmonizes with my personal experience that adult literature tends to be published in smaller numbers of copies for the first edition (500–2000) than children’s books (2–3000), with second and third editions also being more frequent for the latter.

Apart from subjective opinions, it is even more important that more and more literary and academic institutions explore juvenile literature. HUBBY (Hungarian Board on Books for Young People) has been rewarding the best achievements in the field by the annual prize for the Children’s Book of the Year since 2000. In 2014, a Postgraduate Programme in Literature for Children and Young Adults was launched at the Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary. The “Literature” column of one of the youngest but already acknowledged online cultural sites, *f21*—established in 2016 by university students—has two sections: “Contemporary” and “Children,” indicating how it is already natural for the new generation of literary professionals that juvenile literature is just as much a matter of interest as texts for adults. In 2020, IGYIC (Ifjúsági és Gyerekirodalmi Centrum / Centre of Juvenile and Children’s Literature) was established as part of the Petőfi Literary Museum. In 2021, the most comprehensive undergraduate contest in Hungary, OTDK (Országos Tudományos Diákköri Konferencia / National Scientific Students’ Associations Conference) held its first section on literature for children and young adults. In 2021, Ildikó Boldizsár, the renowned fairy tale therapist and folktale scholar, launched the magazine called *Mese* [*Tale*, my translation]. As even this short chronological outline of the past few years reveals, juvenile literature is being more and more intensively appreciated and discussed both in academia and by various official forums of contemporary literary life.

Zalka is contributing to this golden age of juvenile literature both as a writer and as a scholar. Moreover, she successfully combines her two sets of skills in her books, which I consider to be one of her greatest merits. Her first book in English: *Tales of Superhuman Powers: 55 Traditional Stories from*

Around the World (2013) is a good example for her complex approach. In the “Introduction,” she draws a convincing parallel between the heroes of myths or folktales like the ancient Greek warrior Achilles (57–58) or the Hungarian folktale wizard Kampó Táltos (212) and the iconic figures of pop culture like Superman or Indiana Jones, claiming that all of these characters are distinguished by some supernatural ability and that connecting these different layers of culture can be used to evoke the interest of contemporary children in the ancient strata of our heritage (1). Consequently, the collection offers fifty-five classical stories organized into thematic groups according to the special abilities of their protagonists, providing essential information on each tale regarding their sources and possible uses in an educational context. These explanatory notes suggest that the book is designed to be a handbook for professional storytellers or for people like teachers, who regularly find themselves in situations where telling stories is a meaningful and entertaining way to pass time with the children they take care of. A similar approach characterizes *Hősök és pimaszok: Mit és hogyan mesélünk kamaszoknak* (2019) [*Heroes and Cheeky Guys: How to Tell Stories to Teenagers*, my translation], a collection in a Hungarian by Zalka. In this volume, she selects another practical focal point, this time an adolescent audience, and provides the reader with the text of 21 folktales suitable for that age group, accompanying the stories not only with a general introduction full of useful insights and tips regarding the challenges involved in addressing this particular audience but also with an analytical commentary about the sources and the secondary literature of each tale, complete with a short list of further stories with similar subjects, which can be explored if any of the tales happens to be particularly welcomed by the listeners and they ask for more of its kind.

Yet the real novelty of Zalka’s method of gracefully crossing artificial boundaries that separate “simple” readers from scholars or contemporary fiction from folktales often perceived as ancient seems to be most spectacular in her two popular series for children. One is a trilogy published by Móra Publishing House, and the other is an ongoing series designed to promote the charity work of Világszép Alapítvány. In both cases, the concept as well as the structure of each book renews the ways of thinking about folktale collections for children.

The Móra trilogy started with *Ribizli a világ végén: Régi magyar népmesék mai gyerekeknek* (2019) [*Ribizli at the End of the World: Old Hungarian Folktales for Modern Children*, my translation], which received the HUBBY’s Children’s Book Writer of the Year Award in 2019 in the category of books for children under 12 years old. Next year, it was followed by *A kalóz királylány: Nemzetközi népmesék mai gyerekeknek* (2020) [*The Pirate Princess: International Folktales for Modern Children*, my translation] and completed in 2021 with the final volume: *A Varjúherceg: Ismert népmesék ismeretlen változatai* [*The Crow Prince: Unknown Versions of Well-Known Folktales*, my translation]. As the subtitles indicate, the trilogy was intended to be a reinterpretation of tradition by means of selecting stories capable of addressing the concerns of a contemporary audience.

The initial concept was based on Zalka’s blog of *Feminista Magyar Népmesék* [*Hungarian Feminist Folktales*] launched in 2015. The blog’s first entry on 6 November defined what the author meant by “feminist folktale”:

I understand the adjective feminist as referring to every story that encourages gender equality, respect for women, sex-positive attitude, and acceptance of the diversity of gender roles (in a direct or symbolic form). In these tales, special attention will be devoted to independent, interesting, and self-confident female characters as well as girls with careers independent from the roles of being a wife and a mother. (See <http://tarkabarka.blogspot.com/2015/11/feminista-magyar-nepmesek-uj-blogsorozat.html>; my translation)

Accordingly, the first volume offered a selection of authentic but less-known Hungarian folk stories about complex female and male characters defying outdated gender stereotypes. Encouraged by the success of *Ribizli*, the series continued with sampling from international folktales and was finished by the third book relying both on Hungarian and international sources. In *A Varjúherceg*, exotic versions of widely known tales like “The Salt”—with the Turkish padishah’s youngest son playing the role of King Lear’s Cordelia (113–18)—or “Jack and the Beanstalk”—with not Jack but a young girl from the small island of Nauru in Oceania climbing up to the sky (119–22)—demonstrated how our global cultural heritage

had actually been interconnected for several centuries and how universal numerous issues and human responses to them tend to be. Just like in case of *Superhuman Powers* and *Hősök és pimaszok*, Zalka chose a contemporary issue for a focal point, this time the question of gender roles. Demonstrating that old Hungarian folktales represented a far more diverse picture regarding female and male characters than it is usually supposed and that gender roles had long been proved to be interchangeable in several cultures—including Hungarian heritage—meant taking a stand in an intense social debate about gender stereotypes. Selecting stories like “Vitéz Rózsa” (*Ribizli* 98–105), in which the female protagonist gets dressed as a male soldier and falls in mutual love with the female fairy Tündér Ilona, was an especially courageous gesture as *Ribizli a világ végén* came out just a year after the Government Decree 188/2018 (October 12) cancelled university gender programmes and a year before MP Dóra Dúró became infamous for shredding *Meseország mindenkié* [*A Fairy Tale for Everyone*], a collection telling stories about a variety of socially marginalized characters from LGBTQ people through characters living with various disabilities to adoptive families (Vass).

But what is even more remarkable is how naturally Zalka integrates her scholarly attitude into these classically designed, richly illustrated, and reader-friendly books. Each of the three volumes gives a detailed list of sources and an afterword explaining the concept. Besides, each tale in *Varjúherceg* is followed by a short commentary under the title “Which tale is this?,” revealing which classical narrative might be recalled by the story just read and how the two are related. Before, this kind of bibliographical information was usually not included and definitely not commented upon in detail in popular editions of folktales for children but rather reserved for the scholarly publications. For me, treating her young readers as mature, curious, and intelligent individuals, who might wish not only to get lost in the magical world of fairy tales but also to learn and think more about them, is Zalka’s most impressive authorial gesture.

The same method of sharing abundant information is repeated or even extended in the *Világszép* series. The series consists of two volumes at the moment, with annual additions in plan. The first book is: *Széltestvér és Napkelte: Hagyományos mesék rendhagyó családokról* (2020) [*Wind Brother and Dawn: Traditional Tales about Unconventional Families*, my translation],

and the second is: *Törpeszarvas és a déli álmom: Mesék kópékról, lázadókról, furfangosokról* (2021) [*Kanchil and the Midday Dream: Tales About Tricksters*, my translation]. The choice of both topics is deeply connected to the mission of Világszép Foundation, which is to take care of children living in the childcare system by offering them stability and helping them to “discover the beauty within themselves” (Világszép). Therefore, the first selection focuses on unconventional families, as the children addressed by Világszép Foundation themselves come from unconventional families by definition. Single parents, adoption, mosaic families, and protagonists with unusual disadvantages or difficulties are all represented in these narratives. The second book’s topic is tricksters: characters who are often vulnerable, therefore need to overcome challenging situations not so much by physical strength or power but by cunning. These tales are often funny, as questioning well-established systems and provoking an unexpected turn are the essential features of their protagonists, which makes them popular among kids living in the childcare system, which is a vulnerable position to start with. The series contributes to the mission of Világszép not just by calling the readers’ attention to these socially important subjects by the principles of selection and in each foreword and afterword but also financially, as its entire revenue is spent on the foundation’s projects. Moreover, each tale is finished by a section called “Behind the scenes,” and *Törpeszarvas* also has a short introduction to each unit describing the various types of tricksters. In these short commentaries Zalka explains exotic references—for example what the kanchil, or lesser mouse-deer, which gives the second volume’s title, looks like (11), or how Nart sagas from the Caucasus resemble legends about King Arthur and the Round (*Széltestvér* 134)—placing the individual tales both into their own original context and into a wider multicultural perspective. These short texts with plenty of fun facts can motivate the reader for active participation—for instance to ask further questions from their parents, who read the story for them, or to search additional information on the Internet if the children can already read and write on their own—without breaking the magical atmosphere of the tale with coercive didactics like tasks appended to stories.

The reception of Zalka’s work is mostly favourable. Beyond the HUBBY reward mentioned above, it has been acknowledged by readers and critics alike. Both *Ribizli a világ végén* and *Mesemondók márpedig vannak: A nemzetközi mesemondás világa* (2016) [*But Storytellers Do Exist: The World of International*

Storytelling, my translation] have already had three editions, and many critics rank her books in their seasonal top lists. To name just two examples from 2021: *Széltestvér és Napkelte* was recommended by the Hungarian online edition of *Forbes* business magazine (G. Tóth), whereas *A Varjúherceg* was among the top choices of the contemporary writer Mátyás Sirokai when the literary magazine *litera.hu* asked him to name his personal favourites at the Festive Book Week 2021 in Budapest.

Negative criticism seems to be articulated only rarely and mildly, and those opinions mostly concern the language of Zalka's tales based on Hungarian sources. Gabriella Ágnes Nagy, for example, claims that "Hungarian folktales have their own idiosyncratic language, which means ... that their essential features can be recognised not so much in their plot but rather in their structure and language" (79; my translation). Keeping that in mind, she writes about "slips" due to specific phrases that are "foreign to the language of the folklore" (78; my translation). This type of recurring criticism is interesting because it reveals not some accidental mistake that could be corrected with more careful attention but a substantial difference in the critic's versus the author's approach to folk heritage. Nagy—along with many other professionals active in maintaining folk tradition—apparently wishes to preserve (or emulate) folktales in the way they were recorded in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, which often involves by now archaic terms, the peculiarities of certain dialects, and often distorted narratives, reflecting the momentary mental condition of the storyteller and the circumstances of the recording. Zalka, however, thinks of the Hungarian folktale heritage as a living corpus of narratives that have survived so many centuries primarily in oral tradition precisely due to the active and creative contribution of storytellers, each of whom uses the vernacular of his or her own region and time. Consequently, she does not even try to imitate the specific—often archaic—dialect of her sources, especially, as she often produces her own version of a tale based on several known texts. She describes her method—used both with Hungarian and international tales—in practically all of her books. The excerpt below is from the "Afterword" of *Széltestvér és Napkelte*:

For retelling a story, I researched as many versions of it as possible.
I compared them, identifying their shared elements, and I chose

the version that was closest to the purpose of my book. Although I coloured some of the details and softened some of the particularly brutal scenes, I was very careful not to change the “skeleton,” the plot, and the message of the tale... (158; my translation)

Zalka’s approach, which prefers to see folktales as constantly transforming narratives that are parts of a living multicultural tradition instead of relics to be displayed untouched in museums, might partly derive from her education out of Hungary, as she received an MA in Storytelling in the USA, at the East Tennessee State University, TN in 2012. Folk tradition in Hungary was discovered in the nineteenth century in the aesthetic and ideological framework of Romanticism as an essential part of a national identity and unity just being created, and most of its sources were recorded in villages before urbanisation, that is until the mid-twentieth century, or in isolated places with belated economic development. In consequence, Hungarian folktales tend to evoke the image of mildly archaic language spoken by people who lived about a century ago, and the tales—just like folk costumes—are often treated as remnants of a noble past. Zalka, however, reads and retells present tales in a primarily oral, multicultural context, the roots of which can reach back to millennia-old customs, symbols, or characters, but the language is always the natural vernacular of the current storyteller, who selects the story and adapts its style to his or her own taste and the expectation of his or her audience. In this way, boundaries between myths, folktales, or legends tend to disappear, along with some of the local taste too. On the other hand, whole new worlds open up when tracing a motif or theme through various countries and centuries.

Zalka’s magic books enrich the world of folktale collections. She is doing her fair share in communicating folktales in both directions, translating international narratives into Hungarian as well as local tales into English. For example, *Dancing on Blades: Rare and Exquisite Folktales from the Carpathian Mountains* is an excellent selection of regional folktales originally told by the Transcarpathian storyteller Anna Pályuk, who spoke Hungarian but was clearly influenced by stories of diverse ethnic groups, including Roma, Ukrainian, and Slovakian culture. In my opinion, however, Zalka’s greatest achievement is to revitalize Hungarian folktale heritage by directing her readers’ attention to forgotten stories and reminding them that cultural

heritage is alive only if contemporary society keeps it alive: by studying it with respect and expertise but also using it creatively so that what is considered to be the best by the present can be passed on to future generations.

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This volume seeks to provide international readers with a useful guide to recent and contemporary Hungarian fiction. Although it discusses individual writers and their output, as a whole, the book outlines the intrinsic network of interrelations traceable in Hungarian prose and offers a survey of the last seventy years through a careful selection of authors and works presented in chronological order, highlighting the main junctions crucial for the understanding of texts.

We hope to address a wider educated public open to encounters with the masterpieces of internationally acknowledged writers—like Imre Kertész, Péter Esterházy, László Krasznahorkai, Péter Nádas, Géza Ottlik, and Szilárd Borbély. A diversity of readings are conveyed through the lenses of contemporary literary historians and translators reflecting on the most prominent artistic oeuvres of the past decades available in English.



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