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History viewed from above and below

Abstract

The author analyses five novels written by Hungarian writers living in Romania who have chosen historical topics of the distant or near past: Tibor Bálint: Zokogó majom [Crying monkey] (1969), János Székely A nyugati hadtest [The western army] (1979),) László Csiki Titkos fegyverek [Secret weapons] (1990), István Szilágyi: Hollóidő [Ravens' time] (2001), Andrea Tompa: A hóhér háza [The hangman's house] (2010)

There is a city in front of me past the woods, past the summer meadows and it shrinks into some deep indelible lines like a Houfnagel engraving. It is like an old engraving. In such moments I believe to be standing at the side of a smoky faced prince holding the reins of his horse. The cricket is sounding, there is a falcon circling above and the prince is looking contemplatively at the city. László Cs. Szabó

The volume *Fellegek a város felett* [Clouds above the city] I compiled for the National Textbook publisher in 2004 had the sub-title *Literary portrait of a period: Kolozsvár, 20th century*, and it was introduced by the above quotation. The book was part of the series 'European School' of historical, political social studies. The reason I have quoted Cs. Szabó here is that I believe he can quite exactly indicate the special relationship between history and literature – from the point of view of the author.

The present paper is not about Kolozsvár, not only about Kolozsvár (though my birth place has probably the central place). In reply to the present invitation I try to show how history has been presented

in some books I have chosen from the works of Hungarian authors of Transylvania and Romania published in the recent years or decades.

It is necessary to add some explanations. The books to be presented were published in various cities, moreover by publishers in various countries. *Kriterion* is registered in Bucharest but it became known through its sub-editorial office in Kolozsvár; *Magvető* is in Budapest; *Kalligram* is known in Pozsony and Budapest – for its publication of authors who were born and living in Transylvania. Tibor Bálint and János Székely died in Transylvania, István Szilágyi awarded with the Kossuth Prize is still working there as a member of the national board of the Writers' Association of Romania (his book was published by Magvető); László Csiki is travelling along the route of Széklerland – Bucharest - Kolozsvár - Budapest, in my opinion toward immortality, though we shall have to wait a couple of years after his death for it to be accepted; his oeuvre is connected to *Kriterion*, *Utunk*, *Korunk* and now *Magvető*. Andrea Tompa is our youngest first-book author, she is the vice editor-in-chief of a theatrical periodical published in Budapest whose novel has been published by *Kalligram* in Slovakia. The collection of my examples has unwittingly points to the presence of history, beyond the 'accidence' of the publishers, representing the near past or the remote past.

My second explanation relates to the genres. It has to be mentioned that not only several of the present day Hungarian prose writers of Romania have chosen their topics from certain periods or personalities of the universal or Transylvanian, Hungarian history (e.g. Csaba Lászlóffy, the librarian of the Teleki Téka who has been trying his hand in a variety of genres, or Mihály Sebestyén) –but it is also important to explain that in poetry and drama inspired by history there have been especially memorable oeuvres. In the lyric poetry of Aladár Lászlóffy and Domokos Szilágyi past centuries meet the present; the plays produced (or not) in theatres of András Sütő, Géza Páskándi, János Székely, László Csiki and István Kocsis are addressed to the people of our days as they connect their dramatic stories and parables to the past.

Now I am going stop with the explanations. However, I cannot go past literary history without mentioning the debate of 1929 and 1930 known under the title *Profess and accept* that condemned the 'dangerous fashion' of historical topics in the Hungarian literature of

Transylvania. The debate was started by Kuncz Aladár, prose writer of European horizon, editor of Erdélyi Helikon, and directed from the background, the speakers of the debate Sándor Kacsó, Gábor Gaál, Áron Tamási were concerned that literature was leaving the contemporary present and would not face the conflicts of the Transylvanian society, condemned this turn to the past as a cowardly escape.

Eighty years past *Profess and accept* we can declare that the authors mentioned in the introduction: János Székely, Tibor Bálint, László Csiki, István szilágyi and the young Andrea Tompa (the successors of Géza Tabéry, Károly Kós, Mária Berde, Sándor Makkai) do not represent the exodus from present day society in their novels; the least so because they had to experience history as their most personal affair. This is true in the case of Isván Szilágyi's

Hollóidő [Ravens' time] too, albeit in the story- playing in some of the decades of the Turkish conquest – personal matters are far more indirect than in the case of Székely who was a pupil of military school during WWI., Tibor Bálint who experienced the Romania of Gheorghii-Dej and Ceaușescu or Andrea Tompa, who knew Kolozsvár in the 1970s and 80s.

They have picked out a given historical moment, a period of life from their own past and formed the motives of their personal stories into a novel of development. The aim was not so much a testimony as a confession if it is permissible to mention set aims in connection with artistic works. "The basic experience of the present generation of men was the war (and at the same time that was the decisive fact in our history). The truest model of our past and world was the soldier. Who does not understand that, cannot understand us." wrote János Székely in the recommendation to *A nyugati hadtest* [The western army] in 1979.

The young hero of the first person story is sent from the military school of Vásárhely behind the front to the retiring regular army. Thus the western army cannot be imagined to be a historical documentation of the army, nor the description of a front line, notwithstanding it hits the reader with the force of a document, the moral-psychological document of the circumstances making a man out of a Transylvanian teenager, an authentic, deeply personal description of the war years. Trainers and those trained to obedience, horses and their riders (it is about horse training), fugitives from every walk of

life, people on the move driven away from their localities, prisoners of war in lagers are the characters in the stream of stories building up a novel; there are gems among them, e.g. the one titled *Pálinkás* is a psychological feat, the description of the struggle between the tortured boy and his tortured horse.

László Csiki, too, writes about the strange world experienced by a child, the strange relationship between children and grown-ups at the level of civilians in *Titkos fegyverek* (1990) [Secret weapons], Civilian life could also provide with the kind of trauma similar to that of the military student thrown into war, who was made to ride a horse with weapon in hand without proper training. In Csiki's novel a mother and her small child start out from a Székler village to faraway strange regions and when they return about a decade later they look round in the empty station building (where the radio is blaring, and a rousing speech sounds from somewhere) the village revisited seems to them as 'the leftover bit of food at the rim of the plate waiting for the youngest boy who had left to see the world.' Pieces of memory emerge about the post war Bucharest from a child's eye view. There is the special effect of view the Hungarian child sees peering out from the parquet floored laundry room of the tenement in the Romanian capital; he can hardly communicate with his surroundings; there are the memories of the old home, its gilded remoteness is confronted with the events in the street that he could barely understand. The grown-ups around him, too, are living in a double world. One small momentum of the enchanting narrative of the novel (images of history): the child had brought a book on King Mathias from home, there is the portrait King Mihail on the wall of the schoolroom than it is taken down, and then there is the mother's official application ending with 'Long live the fight for piece!' with the signature in childish handwriting: widow of Ferenc Rákóczi II.

War and peace was connected by Tibor Bálint in his epic novel *Zokogó majom* [Crying monkey] (1969) may be not on Tolstoyan scales but with epic talent, that remains one of the most significant novels of the Hungarian literature in Romania that has been translated into several languages. The sub-title 'The sufferings of a lackadaisical family' indicates that the story bridges over several periods treats it objectively but without keeping a distance. Tibor Bálint has written a novel of development; the main character, Kálmánka, from

the outskirts of Kolozsvár is himself. The sceneries can clearly be recognised; there are lively characters living their lives. But the life and blood of history is also present in a special way, in the form suitable for the 20th c., there are no lengthy descriptions but newspaper cuttings, in the form of small advertisements. The headlines reappear again and again dividing the novel into time pieces too: 'Hitler: Germany is ready to cooperate with everyone but will retaliate every assault with weapons'; 'I have not come with the olive branch of peace – said Gyula Maniu at the station of Kolozsvár'; 'The second world war has begun! England and Germany are at war since eleven o'clock am., France and Germany since five o'clock pm.'; 'Nationwide collection to help the soldiers' families – request of the wife of the governor to the Hungarian society'; 'The Jew who had stolen butter and bacon for his daughter will be tried'; 'The battle of Stalingrad has been ended'. All these are incorporated into the history of the lackadaisical family (in Kolozsvár), the anti-Jewish law, the flight of the highest administrators to Budapest and of course there follows a new set of 'small adverts': 'The draft of the new regulations for collective farms'; 'Fight for the execution of the five year plan in four years!'; 'End the American atrocities in Korea!'; 'Josif Visarionovits Stalin has died'. The new news accompany the changes in the life of Kálmánka; we learn that he is already called Comrade Vincze, is a journalist of the industrial section of a local daily and is lectured on watchfulness by his boss and then is later fired. The former pupil of the College of the Reformed Church enters the archive of memorable heroes as the survivor of an un-heroic age who tried to remain honest.

There is a sequel of the story in another novel by László Csiki: *A céda nyúl*. [The wanton rabbit] (1990). The time is the last years of the Ceausescu dictatorship, about the end of the 1980s and the definition of honesty is more complicated; of course it is not about the dictator and his top servants but the terrorized small people ensconcing in their private lives who find themselves stumbled into suspicious situations. The child hero of *Titkos fegyverek* has grown up and is living in the vicinity of the 'equestrian monument of the great king', has a flat, owns 'such a telephone' (i.e. that is one better to hide when unannounced visitors come). There comes a visitor unannounced whose historical – literary-historical ancestors could be compared to the 19th c. exile-racketeers after the Hungarian war of independence.

In the centre of the novel there are no major characters but agony, fear and hopeless expectations.

And now a great leap into the present. 2010 is the date of the publication of a first novel by Andrea Tompa who was born in Kolozsvár in 1971. Similar to the *Zokogó majom* it is a chronicle of a family in Kolozsvár and a development novel, too and is an exciting reading in the best of senses for those who do not want to separate literature and history. She starts experiencing the history of her native city as a young girl; there are several generations living together in this family, people of various nationality, experts of ups and downs with lives full of vicissitudes. Andrea Tompa herself (the characters bear their real names in the novel), though very young, suffers from the changes; the remnant of the Hungarian course she went to was dispersed at her school and she being faithful to the philological class lives her everyday bi-lingual life. In reality *A hóhér háza* [The hangman's house] is more than the story of two decades, more than a novel of Kolozsvár albeit it can be read as a document of the local history of the 1970s-80s up to the December days of 1989. It is a pity that Andrea Tompa's novel will not probably gain such a wide interest as the writings of Herta Müller (also emigrated from Transylvania) who is following an entirely different style. It is not proper to compare the work of a fresh new author to that of a (fresh new) Nobel prize winner. But it would be worth our while to meditate over what the writer György Dragomán, a fellow Transylvanian, expressed in his introduction to the 2010 Hungarian edition of Müller's *Der Fuchs war damals schon der Jäger*: 'Herta Müller's precise prose draws the reader into the game, makes him part of the system'. Andrea Tompa, too, draws the reader into the game with her flowing prose, makes us part of the system nevertheless she did not include its head, the dictator (and his worthy companion) in the plot of the novel as Herta Müller has - though indirectly - successfully done.

It would be worth trying to ponder upon why the literary description of the near past is more successful when it is treated from the so-called worm's perspective than if e.g. the Caucuscus had been at the centre of the narration. Daniel Bănulescu published a book: *Cel mai bun roman al tuturor timpurilor* [The best novel ever] in 2008. The Romanian author, honoured with many international prizes, has written a good, adventurous novel about the dictator (who is still

being esteemed by some in Romania and who caused terrible harm to the country), about its 'golden age' and his downfall –the book started being written in Vienna in 2002 and quite certainly is not the best ever novel. Just as Tibor Bálint failed to create an outstanding figure of Hamudius in *Bábel toronyháza* [The highrise of Babel] (1996) in comparison to any of the characters of the *Zokogó majom*, or László Csiki to get over the system and his eponymous head that had forced him to leave his birth place. Undeniably there are excellent chapters in *Ajakír* [Lipstick] (2008) worthy of Csiki's talent and there are some memorable episodes in *Bábel toronyháza* (however, those are not about Hamudius).

Of my examples I have left *Hollóidő* (2001), the classic historical novel of István Szilágyi to the end. It plays in the far away past and could be the example of an invented past in our most recent literature. It is a created literary world built upon history – as it is familiar from Zsigmond Móricz's epic and László Németh's psychological-social prose. And where Szilágyi is truly worthy of the great predecessors is his linguistic imagination, his language creating talent (although he could not compete with them in readability). The researcher of history, of course, could not make any use of it. Maybe Professor György Poszler has written the best analysis on Szilágyi's book comparing it with his earlier excellent novel *Kő hull apadó kútba* [Stone drops into drying well] set into the world of Szilágység. As a conclusion to our train of thought and our examples Poszler's statement could be repeated: 'The first (kő hull...) is the analysis of a historical-social segment – specific in space and time. The second is the analysis of history itself – abstract in space and time. To be precise, it is to show that the historical-social segment can be analysed. History itself cannot be interpreted. In the first the given historical situation is brutal; in the second (*Hollóidő*) the whole history is.'

Minority policy and minority rights

