

# THE PROBLEM OF IDENTITY IN HUNGARIAN POETRY WRITTEN IN NORTH AMERICA

The ARKÁNUM-group

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The topic I am going to speak of in the next few minutes is neither an immanent part of literary theory, nor an aesthetic category, nevertheless, it is an important constituent of literature and literary studies: a content factor, having formal, structural, linguistic and stylistic consequences in the shaping of a work of art; an important contextual feature of literature, and especially of literature written in exile. This is the issue of identity, or, in our case, the Hungarian consciousness represented by Hungarian-born authors in North-America.

As there is a great amount of North-American Hungarian poetry, written by poets of different ages, tastes, programmes and circumstances, I decided to deal with one particular creative community. I chose this community because, within the rather sporadic American-Hungarian literature, its enterprise is absolutely unique. The members of this community belong to the same generation by birth; the generation of the 1956 emigrés; they share a close relationship with their common poetical programme. That they form a group is shown by their appearance together in an edition of the neo-avant-garde review: "ARKÁNUM". I think it is important to list their names here: Sándor András, József Bakucz, László Kemenes Géfin, György Vitéz.

Of course, the problem of identity or consciousness can be studied from many points of view, and appears on different levels of human existence and the creative process. It can have philosophical, psychological or moral aspects; similarly, the lack of identity or the crisis of identity can be of a human, artistic or ethnic nature, being built one upon the other.

In my paper I am interested in the complex meaning of the word, that is to say, not in the moods of the private life of an emigrant writer, but in the identity problem of the artist's self, the Hungarian or American consciousness of the poets mentioned above.

How do these poets perceive and use their Hungarian origin and heritage in literary works? What is their relation to it, and how are they determined by it? How deeply are they rooted in their primary culture and what is the connection to their secondary one? What is the role of their Hungarian consciousness in the answers given to the challenges of the new culture? What is the influence of the secondary cultural environment on their versification?

Too many questions to answer, though they are merely various external forms of the very same conflict, deriving from the author's existence among the difficult physical, material, moral and psychological circumstances of exile.

There is no sense in denying that these circumstances have a great and significant influence on the artist working among them. Lóránt Czigány has identified some constant characteristics of this creative state of mind when analyzing the components of consciousness of the '56 generation poets. These topical components of consciousness are bound to have the most definitive power and character in the formation of this very specific type of poetry. I think the core of Czigány's observations is worth summarizing. He mentions seven of the components responsible for the characteristic properties of the poetic works of the 1956 generation in general. These are as follows:

- Mythical cosmogony: the memories of the cataclysm
- The crisis of identity: rootlessness, alienation, the consciousness of exclusion
- Sense of guilt
- Fragmentary consciousness; the confusion of the scale of values
- Extraterritorial consciousness
- Nostalgia
- Uncertainty of language.<sup>1</sup>

As far as I can judge, we can accept this classification — because these types of components are recognizable in this poetry.

According to Lóránt Czigány and to other emigrant authors,<sup>2</sup> the issue of identity, or the crisis of consciousness is one of the major elements defining the versification of the poets belonging to the '56 generation.

Now, assuming that the general symptoms are also characteristic of the individual, let us focus our attention on the Arkánum group, in order to discover to what extent this problem has determined and formed their poetry.

At first sight it is surprising that the problem of identity, Hungarian consciousness, was not approached in the first volumes published in exile by these poets. Whether it has not surfaced naturally, or whether it has been suppressed — I am afraid it is not me who can answer this question. Of course, the hard reality of being an emigré, the lack of a homeland, of familiar faces and circumstances, the lost values or the shock of meeting a new environment, the uncertain conditions of existence play a dominant role in this poetry. Loneliness, alienation, black moods and horrifying scenes (quite different to the friendly landscapes of home) are the further everyday commonly occurring themes. These reflect the atmosphere stemming from the most difficult phase of the emigration, when the man, the poet is "exiled inside himself" (Kemenes Géfin).

These poems are the artistic elaborations of the process of settling down in an unknown country, a new home; they are examples of the confrontation with a strange, often unfriendly world:

A városkapunál hullabűz  
fogadott, s hogy semmik se vagyunk,  
lebetűztük a neonokról.

Napokig vártunk, összebújva;  
holdfénynél útilaput szedtünk  
s háltunk az elhagyott tereken.  
Ha ugatni kellett, ugattunk,  
ha félni, féltünk. Szunnyadozás,  
tisztá hangok az űrben... béke...  
Vagy mint őzek a vizes erdön.

(Kemenes Géfin: *Zenit*)

The man, who started to discover the new world like Phaëton, has collapsed:

Társtalanul lebegek békém üszkei felett,  
vonzás, taszítás többé nem érvényes reám,  
Csillagtól dermesztő csillagnak ütődöm  
S várom Jupiter sisterség villámait.

(Kemenes Géfin: *Phaëton*)

Attraction and repulsion; the old and new, past and present:

Kalifornia: széptestű szenttelen nő,  
izgató és frigid.  
Termékenyíthető,  
de a folyamat magányos,  
feledhetetlenül.  
Szeretem, taszítva vonz,  
egy percre sem hagyja, hogy áltassam magam:  
hegycúcsaival,  
az óceánpart egykedvű szikláival  
és kétezeréves óriásfenyőivel  
szüntelen elmetszett köldökömre mutat  
és alatta az igyekvő zsinórra,  
amellyel nem tudom újrakötni magam.

(Sándor András: *Tétova világ, XII.*)

The feeling of being no one is very near to the crisis of identity:

Senkiségem gyűlik: pocsolya,  
amelybe a világ szüntelen  
fájáról napokkal csöppenek,  
de többnyire téiben élek  
és keserűségem kopárrá tisztult  
fája feketén görcsösül  
a könyörtelenség szikrázó hőmezején

(XVII., XVIII.)

But there is only one way to go on: to accept this unnatural situation: to live and work in another language.

At this very first stage concerning the problems of their Hungarian consciousness, the problems are fundamentally not those of the creative artist, but those of the private person, the emigrant who is deprived of his mental and physical environment. At the same time one sees the first small signs of the danger that the artist will lose his identity. Think for instance of the Géfin-poem's Robot man's search for his identity, or of another poem by the same writer:

A kádban veszi észre, hogy  
idegen fürdik a helyén.

It is also he, who — at about the same time — tries to find the role and place of the poet of Hungarian origin in the New World being neither here nor there:

hát igen: te (drága úrnő) jól hiszed,  
ma költőül magyarni itt e tojja-  
mázzal fürdő káinaánban nem eset  
csak cikk (vagy az se)  
kár a gézért — mondja  
200 ó-kos, ki nincsből vanba s onnan  
többre áhul. jó — a hal halászik, elv-  
halál halálzik, de:  
a költő  
(hogyha  
nem sötétke birka, sem pirult) mivel  
fedezze szükség-hitelét, hogy feles  
itt s hogy haszna (?) ott a csonttörő, parázs-  
kezü, -tól, -hoz hazácskában érvényes-  
sülhet?

csak ír  
lám, mily egyszerű bagázs  
vagyunk&mégse frankó  
hát légy (kegyes  
hölgy) utó-babér helyett most apanázs

This poem, possessing a good many features common in the poetry of the Arkánium-group, also refers to the feeling of these writers of not belonging anywhere, a feeling characteristic of these poets in the '60s and '70s. László Baránszky — also closely connected with ARKÁNUM — wrote a book entitled: *Két világ között* in which Vitéz stands between, criticizing the extravagances of both of his homelands, while Sándor András, being unable to get out, stays (with a splendid allusion to Attila József's *Levegőt!*) in the waters of the Rubicon:

2.  
Elmondhatom mi bánt  
ma otthon?  
Csak azt: mi bántott  
és mi bántana.  
Megfoszt már tér és idő  
az előny örömeitől.

3.  
Mivel megindultam  
választanom kell:  
átkelni, maradni: itt a Rubicon.  
Fel kell lázadnom  
tér, idő ellen  
vagy meg kell szoknom a helyemet.

4.  
Ruhám amiben jöttem  
régén elkopott már;  
testemben nem él sejt  
amely kihozott;  
ideje kivetnem a végső  
ábrándot is, már ideje  
megértenem hogy nincsen átkelés  
a Rubicon vizéből kijutnom nem lehet.  
Fel kell lázadnom  
tér, idő ellen:  
meg kell szoknom a helyemet.

(Száműzetésben)

What a difference between the two endings! It does, nonetheless, illustrate very well the tendencies of attitude to the question.

Kemenes Géfin seems to be the most sensitive towards the problem of identity. I think, although I am not certain, as other inaccessible writings may exist, that he is the only one among the Arkánium-editors who deals with it directly, and outspokenly, in his *Fehérlófia I.*

Nézzél magaddal szembe, vond le a konzekvenciákat,  
beszélj nyíltan, szabatosan és világosan,  
ahogy én tanítottalak, meg az a Lajos (meg Thomas Wolfe  
és a többiek)

lásd be végre, hogy nincs Kubla Khán, nincsen Xanadu,  
azt kell eldöntened, mivégre vagy a világon,  
*hogy uradat istenedet imádd és csak neki szolgálj*  
azt kell eldöntened, mivégre vagy a világon,  
nem régi elavult kategóriák szerint gondolkodsz-e, azaz

- a) nem lettél-e már úgy-ahogy kanadai?
- b) lehet-e még magyarságról beszélni?
- c) miért akarsz még mindig hazamenni?
- d) mit gondolsz, kellesz-e otthon?
- e) nem mondják-e, na ennek se sikerült odakint,  
hát most hazagyütt a mi kenyérünket enni?
- f) mi szükség van idekint magyarul írni?
- g) félsz-e földadni szabadságodat?
- h) minek nyavalyogsz annyit?

The main question to clear up the situation and thoughts.

Géfin's curious masterpiece, *Pogány diaszpóra* convinces us — in Balassi's, Zrínyi's, Tinódi's masks — along with the latest parts of *Fehérlófia*, that he, in spite of his highly sophisticated Anglo-American poetical connections and commitments, is getting nearer and nearer to his cultural roots and traditions. The oeuvre of György Vitéz represents the very same significant values, especially his *Missa agnostica!*

The identity, never really lost, has been regained! Or rather: reaffirmed.

These poets have been able to handle this delicate balance of consciousness. As years have passed — the second phase — they have become more and more integrated into the everyday as well as the intellectual life of their new homeland, accepting its scale of values and acquiring or adopting its cultural heritage. But they have never given up their own identity, a tendency which has been strengthened by the new possibilities which have come about as a result of the shift in their second home's minority-policy and the chance of getting into closer contact with their native country's intellectual circles.

What were the main psychological motives and tools used to avoid the spiritual traps of the crisis of identity?

To answer this rather complex question I shall try to sum up the different ways, methods and techniques which have played an important role in preserving Hungarian consciousness in these artists.

First and foremost one can mention the role of language, the mother tongue which enabled them to keep their Hungarian consciousness vivid.

They have discovered it again and again, reaching unknown territories, testing unknown capacities, they have taken it to pieces, distorted it and put or shaken it together.

As the well-known quotation goes: "the nation survives by its language". So does the emigrant poet! To illustrate this, let me remind you of the famous *Halotti beszéd* by Márai or the *Óda a magyar nyelvhez* by Faludy, two of the many poems of this type. The mother tongue has proved to be the "virtual home" they could retire to, the only refuge where they could accomplish and realize their artistic personality.

I think Lőránt Czigány was right when speaking of the lingual uncertainty of this generation, but I should like to draw particular attention to the second part of his statement: this weakness could turn into a virtue, in the light of the last ten years' developments — the third phase — it would be more accurate to say that it is the Hungarian language that has provided the basic and renewed principle for their Hungarian consciousness to rely on. This vehicle has become the dominant constituent of their poetry, and one can not overemphasize the part played by the witty verbal quibbles, puns, magic games with words and linguistic inventions in their versification. The creative, free and often sacriligious relationship with their mother tongue kept the mind and soul fresh and alive and in addition resulted in the ironical process of language-reform and language re-creation. This action was aided by a way of writing they had in common: automatic poem-making, a kind of "stream of consciousness" by which mean they were able not only to discover or re-discover almost untouched or forgotten layers of vernacular, but at the same time to penetrate into the deepest strata of the mind, such as the memories of their childhood, the inspiration behind every poetic work. Furthermore, this procedure strengthened their self-knowledge and identity.

But the Hungarian consciousness of these poets was not rooted in and fed by their creative and protective relationship to the mother tongue alone. Historical consciousness is equally important. Hungarian historical and poetical tradition have also helped to form their poetical way of thinking. They thought of themselves and shaped their artistic programmes as the successors of the poetical and political freedom fighters of the Hungarian past. Their poetry is interwoven with open and hidden allusions to historical events and personalities, including such recent figures as Imre Nagy and Pál Maléter. They accepted Balassi's, Zrínyi's, Petőfi's heritage in keeping alive the hopes for Hungarian independence. Their poetry and prose absorbed the best Hungarian literary traditions from Tinódi through the folk songs to Attila József, Sándor Weöres and Bartók. There are lots of connecting links, hidden allusions and quotations, borrowed texts and references which prove that these modern authors are imbued with a sense of Hungarian literary tradition. To preserve their identity, they turned to the world of

mythology, to folk tales — remember Géfin's *Fehérlófia*-series —, or profaned the structural possibilities of the liturgy of a catholic mass. (*Vitéz: Missa agnostica* — full of Hungarian cultural references.) Of course they make use of everything, even witty archaizing, distorted quotations, false textual environment for the ironical alientation, for mental distinction, to put the important issues into a modern poetical context: a new dimension.

Their identity has a double character: carrying the features of the intermediate. Like their forerunners — Tótfalusi, Apáczai —, they act for better cultural communication as well.

These authors of Hungarian origin have had the opportunity of meeting persons, works, schools prohibited or unattainable to their colleagues at home. Their poems — influenced by modern European and American poetical tradition have been enriched by the new experiences and influences. So, not only by translating them, but by absorbing their technical, structural, rhetorical innovations into their own works of art, these poets have played an enormous part in the transmission of new, 20th century poetics towards Hungary. Of course, at the same time they fell victim to temptation: they themselves came under the influence of up-to-date western poetry and literary theory. Elemér Horváth, again a close friend of the Arkánium-circle, made an appropriate remark in his poem *Honfoglalás*:

Ez már nem is magyar mint Illyés népe  
Laci Pound és kissé Eliot  
Jóska Breton én inkább Yeats vagyok  
Gottfried Benn és Montale keveréke  
Olddódban is egzotikus kéve  
tibeti mantrák inka népdalok  
el-ellepik az alapanyagot  
Csokonai tüze Berzsenyi érce  
messzebről és halványabban ragyog  
De vallatni magunkat hogy mivégre  
mártottuk tollunkat nyugati égbe  
nem kell többé ilyfajta aratók  
működtek már Adalbert idejébe,  
S a puszták népe megrágtá a szót

According to this observation the intellectual conquest has taken place, but the people of the new conquest are aware of their roots. Having taken their latest products into consideration we can agree that this fact has not weakened their consciousness but has made their personality and works of art richer, more colourful, modern and complex.

Last but not least I would like to emphasize one more quality of their Hungarian consciousness. The avantgarde writers of the review Arkánium — along with the edi-



tors and authors of Magyar Műhely — hence been underestimated. They have not had the reputation they deserve in the leading intellectual circles of Hungarian emigrants. These writers usually stood aside from the political gatherings and enterprises of Hungarians living abroad. That is why they were thought to have no political sense or aims. Their poetry has been condemned as apolitical, *l'art pour l'art*. Their linguistic tricks with typographical and visual obstacles, annoying for the reader accustomed to linear reading, the sacrilegious attitudes, the obscene expressions, their epaterizm have challenged the mainly religious emigrant taste and good manners.

But one very important thing cannot and must not be denied: during the last two decades, by means of their own volumes on the one hand, and with their review Arkánium on the other, they have completely fulfilled a well defined task and programme (given in the first issue of the review): "Ezen a nyelven nem lehet bizonyos dolgokat kinyomtatni, sőt leírni sem. Ezt a nyelvet a politikai, prűdériai, nacionalista, vallási cenzúrák és öncenzúrák hályoga, a tekintélytisztelet, a finitizmus, a kisebbségi érzet, az önbecsapás szutykos rétege borítja. A rettenetes: mi lesz, ha ezen a nyelven az író azt írja le, ami eszébe jut? Káosz? Anarchia? Nemzethalál? Vagy tán a kényelmes homály felszakad, fény tör be, s akkor újra érezni kell, gondolkodni, határozni, felelősséget vállalni? Esmélni? Élni?"

Regarding the production of the modern, avantgarde or post-avantgarde literature in Hungary today, I would say that their best achievements relating to the questions above have already been integrated into it, and the group of Arkánium while preserving its own Hungarian consciousness, has helped the younger poetic generations in Hungary to do the same.

### Notes

1. Lóránt Czigány, *Gyökértelen mint a zászló nyele...*, A természetes világkép felbomlása az ötvenhatos nemzedék költészetében. Offprint from numbers 3–4 of *Új Látóhatár* (München, 1981).
2. Tibor Dénes, *A múltból a holnapba — A honból az otthonba*, Az emigráció lírájának mozaikjai in *Magyar Mérés II.* (SMIKK, Zürich, 1980). pp. 84–134.; Károly Nagy, *Magyar szigetvilágban ma és holnap* (Püski, New York, 1984).

### Volumes referred in the text

Sándor András, *Rohanó oázis* (London, 1970); *Mondolatok* (London, 1981)  
 József Bakucz, *Napfogyatkozás* (Paris, 1968); *Kövesedő ég* (Paris, 1973)  
 László Baránszky, *Két világ között* (Paris, 1979)  
 László Kemenes Géfin, *Jégvirág* (Paris, 1966); *Zenit* (München, 1969); *Pogány diaszpóra* (Toronto, 1974); *Fehérlófia I.* (Toronto, 1978); *Fehérlófia II.* (Washington–New York–Montreal, 1981)  
 György Vitéz, *Amerikai történet* (Paris, 1975); *Missa agnostica* (Paris, 1979); *Jel beszéd* (Paris, 1982); *Nyugati magyar költők antológiája*, 1980 (EPMSz, Bern, 1980)