

# JEWISH THEMES AND ISSUES IN POST-1989 HUNGARIAN LITERATURE

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The essay discusses the renewed interest in Jewish subjects in post-1989 Hungary and, more specifically, popular new Hungarian fiction dealing naturalistically and anecdotally with the Hungarian Jewish experience – fiction written in most cases by “engagé” Hungarian Jewish writers. The essay also touches on the phenomenon of “de-Judaized” Hungarian Jewish literature, in which the Jewish content is masked, concealed, universalized, and with Hungarian writers of Jewish descent who object to the category of “Hungarian Jewish” literature. It is in this context that the essay deals with Imre Kertész and his works, and attempts to show that while his novels deal explicitly with the Hungarian Jewish “fate”, or fatelessness, he is always intent on suggesting the universal relevance of this state of fatelessness.

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After reviewing the changes in Hungarian cultural life in the past decade and a half, one could confidently conclude that one of the more conspicuous changes we have witnessed has been the renewed interest in things Jewish. Caution is in order, however. “Interest in things Jewish” is a deliberately inclusive, ambiguous and loaded formulation, for it includes not only numerous publications of Jewish interest: historical, literary, and sociological works, including penetrating, often controversial reassessments of events, issues, and problems touching on the Hungarian Jewish experience, but also a veritable flood of explicitly and most often crudely anti-Jewish writings ranging from Holocaust denials to conspiracy theories, and the warmed-up clichés of traditional, religious anti-Judaism. This type of “Jewish-related literature” made its appearance in Hungary soon after the regime change, and fifteen years later it still has a prominent place in the far right press and media. Fortunately, my topic is not this hate literature but another kind of literary revival, that of the literature dealing with Hungarian Jewry and with Jewish issues and themes in general. I would venture to say that more books of Jewish interest have been published in each of the past fifteen years than in the previous forty-year period.<sup>1</sup>

If we focus now on literature, the picture isn't quite as rosy, though even here a quantitative tally would be impressive. In his rather somber and chastening post-script to an anthology of post-Holocaust Hungarian Jewish writing, published in Budapest in 1999, János Kőbányai, who as editor, publisher and writer has played a major role in making Hungarian Jewish literature past and present better known, points out that "only one tradition of dead-end Hungarian Jewish assimilation survived the great destruction, and that is the rejection of tradition".<sup>2</sup> And at the end of his essay, he notes, perhaps even more bitterly, that "the names of several authors that by right should be present [in such an anthology] are missing. Interestingly, paradoxically, in similar anthologies published only abroad, we encounter a very different roster of names".<sup>3</sup> Kőbányai is obliquely referring to the fact that while such prominent contemporary Hungarian writers of Jewish origin as Péter Nádas, Mihály Kornis, György Spiró, and Péter Lengyel have contributed to an anthology of Hungarian Jewish writing published recently in English translation by the University of Nebraska Press,<sup>4</sup> they did not wish to be included in the volume compiled by János Kőbányai in Budapest. (We should note that other major Hungarian writers – Imre Kertész and György Konrád – had given permission to have pieces of theirs reprinted in Kőbányai's collection.)

Why this reluctance, this selective reluctance, as we have seen, on the part of some Hungarian writers of Jewish origin to be labeled a Jewish writer, or their works to be considered a part of Jewish literature? It's an old story, of course, as old as the process of assimilation itself, in particular the assimilation of European Jews. For a number of Hungarian writers of Jewish extraction, what the poet Miklós Radnóti wrote in a by now famous letter in the early forties remains the definitive pronouncement on the subject. Radnóti's letter was addressed to Aladár Komlós, a noted critic who did believe that there is such a thing as Hungarian Jewish literature, and it was a response to a request by Komlós that Radnóti contribute poems to an anthology he then edited of works by Hungarian writers considered Jewish by the new law of the land, and who therefore found it increasingly difficult, if not impossible, to place their writings in non-Jewish Hungarian publications. Miklós Radnóti, who considered himself a Hungarian poet to the end, refused to enter a "denominational ghetto". "I never denied my Jewishness", he writes in his letter to Aladár Komlós, "but I do not feel Jewish. I was never taught to be religious, I do not feel a need for it, I don't practice it. Race, blood ties, unseverable roots, ancient pangs quivering in every fiber – I consider such things utter nonsense, and not the defining characteristic of either my intellectuality, my spirituality or my poetry. Even in the social sense I see the 'community of Jews' as a bogus designation. This has been my experience. Perhaps it isn't so, but this is how I feel, and I could never live a lie. My Jewishness has become the problem of my life, but it is circumstances, laws, the world that made it so. The problem was forced on me. Otherwise I am a Hungarian poet; my relatives I have already men-

tioned..."<sup>5</sup> (Earlier in the letter, Radnóti refers to two pictures hanging in his study, reproductions of portraits of János Arany and Ferenc Kazinczy, two greats of nineteenth-century Hungarian literature. Radnóti relates to Komlós that when "uninitiated" visitors, looking at the pictures, ask, "Are they relatives of yours?" he answers, "Yes, they are."<sup>6</sup>)

A great many Hungarian literary artists of Jewish descent, perhaps the majority, still espouse Radnóti's credo, though we should stress that it is not because of a sense of shame or inferiority, a desire to gloss over certain parts of their heritage, or out of some misplaced, exaggerated nationalist feeling, that they are reluctant to consider themselves anything but Hungarian writers, and view any other designation as inappropriate, parochial, retrograde, even degrading. They insist on being only Hungarian because they have a vivid historical memory. Of course, the real culprits here are pernicious ideologies and the tragedies to which they led. There are quite a few Hungarian artists and intellectuals who, though they are too young to remember the years of persecution, are well aware of the fact that their predecessors, or family members, were herded first into symbolic and then actual ghettos, and who therefore do not wish to enter a "denominational ghetto" voluntarily.

One might say this is not a completely satisfying explanation. After all, Hungary has been a democracy for fifteen years, and though anti-Semitism has reared its ugly head during this time, the kind of stigmatization many Hungarian Jews, not only artists, instinctively fear is a thing of the past. But we also know that the peculiarities of Hungarian Jewish assimilation, quite apart from historical traumas, have left an ambiguous legacy. Let me try to illuminate this with an example. It has been pointed out, most recently by literary historian Eva Reichmann,<sup>7</sup> that two histories of Hungarian literature were published almost at the same time in the late thirties: Gyula Farkas's *Az asszimiláció kora a magyar irodalomban (1867–1914)* (The Age of Assimilation in Hungarian Literature – 1867–1914) and Antal Szerb's broader *Magyar irodalomtörténet* (History of Hungarian Literature). Farkas's highly controversial book examines the work of authors active during the period in question purely from the point of view of their being assimilationists, and his conclusions are pretty devastating. He feels that Hungarian literature after 1867 declined; the Hungarian character recedes and an alien spirit takes over. The literary history of Antal Szerb, a critic and essayist of Jewish descent, who died as a forced laborer in early 1945, is thoroughly modern and European in approach, revealing the influence of the *Geistesgeschichte* school of criticism. For the record, Gyula Farkas's book is a historical curiosity, a period piece, which nobody reads anymore, while Szerb's *Irodalomtörténet* is still used, still delightfully readable, one of the finest works of its kind in Hungarian. Nevertheless, in one sense Szerb's book also represents an extreme position. While Farkas's interest is exclusively in the ethnic and religious origins of the authors he discusses and the effect

of these origins on their works (mostly negative in his estimation), Szerb virtually ignores this aspect and is especially silent on the subject when it comes to assimilated Hungarian Jewish writers, including those writers (József Kiss, for example) in whose works Jewish influences are not at all irrelevant. So, in a sense, we are dealing with distortion and repression on both sides. And this is the highly ambiguous tradition to which contemporary Hungarian writers are heir to.

There have been writers who responded to the challenge of this ambiguous legacy by masking, universalizing, submerging their Jewish themes; Jewishness in these works becomes a subtext that must be decoded, deconstructed, in a way. Critics have noted this tendency and have written about it. For example, in a much quoted essay aptly titled “De-Judaization in Hungarian Jewish Literature”, the philosopher Ágnes Heller discusses the phenomenon with regard to three Hungarian writers: Ferenc Molnár, Tibor Déry and Péter Lengyel and comes to the conclusion that this concealment, or obfuscation, though it may stem from a degree of self-denial or even self-hate, can make a work resonant, suggestive, and of course, can also impoverish it.<sup>8</sup> In a literary text, oblique allusions and ambiguous hints – whether they refer to politics, religion or whatever else – can always add excitement, turn the reader into a detective, a fellow conspirator, though the feeling that something is missing is also always there. Let me illustrate with a couple of simple, even trivial examples. The *topos* of the wanderer’s return to his original home is common enough in literature. In modern Hungarian literature, because of the many dislocations caused by historical upheavals, the return of the exile or emigrant to his or her native country, city is an especially common theme. Ferenc Karinthy has a short story, written in the early sixties and called “Túl az Óperencián” (“Beyond the Seven Seas”), in which an elegant, middle-class Budapest lady returns to her native city, which she left in the late nineteen-forties, and visits her former maid and her family. She is received with great cordiality by the hard-working and prospering working-class family. Their hospitality is unexceptionable, the conversation polite, though it soon falters, and after all the pleasantries have been exchanged, there is not much more to say. The social gap that had always been there seems wider now. The lady leaves the house of her former maid, tired and disappointed. “Túl az Óperencián” is a typical story of the period, yet there is a tentativeness and awkwardness not only about the story itself but also about the manner of presentation, as though the author couldn’t decide what to reveal and what to withhold. We learn that before they left, she and her husband had been makers and purveyors of fine china, they have a German-sounding name, and are now comfortably settled in New York. They might be Jewish; then again they might not be. The number of things left unsaid makes Karinthy’s story vague and indefinite – a torso.

Transylvanian-born Zsófia Balla’s much more recent story, “A nagyapám háza” (My grandfather’s house), included in János Kőbányai’s previously men-

tioned anthology, is also about a return – a family from Israel paying a visit to their Transylvanian hometown after an absence of forty-nine years. In this story, nothing is glossed over: the author details the visitors' contradictory feelings about their hometown, the mixture of nostalgia and bitterness, and the locals' lingering resentment of the one-time victims whom they now see as rich Westerners throwing their weight around. Zsófia Balla's story is also modest in scope, a sketch really, but at least it's forthright and honest. We could cite a counterexample from the same collection of Hungarian Jewish stories: György Dalos's marvelous vignettes about growing up Jewish in Communist Hungary, "Anecdotes from Childhood", were first published in 1978, during the Kádár era. Wry, subtle, written with a gentle touch, these anecdotes nevertheless focus on the absurdities of life in Hungary in the early communist years, as seen by an orphaned Jewish boy who is raised by his tenacious grandmother. A sequel to these little gems, entitled "Anecdotes from Adulthood" lack the sharpness and poignancy of the earlier collection. Written in a period of far greater freedom, they are long-winded, explicit, obvious.

All this is not to say that the years of change, the fall of communism, did not have a liberating effect on Hungarians of every stripe. In her reminiscences, Ágnes Heller recalls the moment in her youth when she embraced communism and snapped out of her previous existence, forgetting about her Zionist past, her Jewish past, and also about her Hungarian self – for years she was in the thrall of an ideology. Her reawakening, her return to her roots, she says, happened early, during the 1956 Revolution; she realized then that she was both Hungarian and a Jew.<sup>9</sup> But it is a fact that as a thinker and writer Ágnes Heller began to rediscover Jewish literature and history only after 1989. Since then all of her books are brought out by Múlt és Jövő, the most important publisher of books on Jewish subjects in Hungary today. Her example may be exceptional and conspicuous, but it does say something important about spiritual reorientation in post-1989 Hungary. For many the historic changes meant a moment of truth; they could say and do things they hadn't dared for years. For example, the well-known psychologist and writer, Tamás Vekerdy published a slim volume entitled *Zsidó könyv* (Jewish Book) several years ago, in which more than once he writes down the simple sentence, "I am a Jew."<sup>10</sup> One senses the relief, the exhilaration accompanying such a public declaration. Another dramatic and cathartic utterance can be heard in a Hungarian film made in 1989, at the very cusp of the changing era. The film is *Tutajosok* (*Memories of a River* in English), made by Judit Elek and based on the famous Tiszaeszlár blood libel case. In the film's final scene, after all the defendants have been acquitted of the charge of ritual murder, the prosecution's star witness, Móric Scharf, the adolescent son of one of the accused, who (partly because he had been "prepped" by the examining magistrate, and partly because he rebelled against his authoritarian father) testified against him in open court, reject-

ing his family, his community, his faith, in a contrite but unnatural gesture kneels before his father and in very proper Hungarian begs for forgiveness. But then, in a sudden, heart-rending outburst, the boy sobs, in Yiddish, “Tate, harget mich!” (Father, kill me!), after which József Scharf lifts the boy from the kneeling position and embraces him. Now this is a fictional scene. Nothing in the available historical record shows that something like this actually took place.<sup>11</sup> But I cannot help feeling that this anguished outcry springs from a deep need – present in the director and perhaps in many other Hungarians of Jewish background – to atone, indeed to be punished, for allowing themselves to be duped, led astray, brainwashed into denying an important part of their being, just as the young boy was brainwashed by his handlers in what was planned by the prosecution as a kind of show trial. (The film suggests in a number of ways that the Tiszaeszlár trial prefigured the political show trials of the late 1940s and early 50s – except that in 1883 justice and reason ultimately prevailed, and the compelling arguments of a liberal Hungarian aristocrat, Károly Eötvös, succeeded in staving off the forces of unreason.)

Since the 1989 watershed Hungarian Jewish literature *has* enjoyed a kind of renaissance. For the first time in a long time works of fiction appeared about Jewish characters and Jewish life situations that didn’t have to resort to indirection or coded, euphemistic language. Writers emerged in the new era who were either too young to publish before (Gábor T. Szántó), or turned to belles-lettres rather late (István Gábor Benedek), or were under publication ban before 1989 (György Dalos). Certain hitherto sensitive, painful, even taboo subjects could be treated more freely: Jewish religious life during the communist years; Jews in the communist secret police in the late forties and early fifties; collaboration between community leaders and the security apparatus. Published in the mid-to-late nineties, these works aimed at a larger readership, and some of the new writings, especially István Gábor Benedek’s books, achieved considerable popularity.<sup>12</sup> But they *are* popular fictions, often sentimental, melodramatic, offering the reader colorful, “ethnic” characters, earthy language, and plots with unexpected twists and turns. Generally, they lack the depth, seriousness and stylistic innovations of earlier examples of Hungarian literature on Jewish themes. But readers in the nineties, it seems, were no longer interested in oblique, parabolic representations, in playing detective or reading between the lines – they were interested in anecdotal realism, which is certainly not a new tradition in Hungarian literature. It is worth noting that in the post-1989 period, the best-selling foreign Jewish writer in Hungary has been Chaim Potok, who during the communist era was not published in Budapest, probably because he was considered “too Jewish”, but also because he wasn’t deemed literary enough. During the same period many works by such renowned American Jewish authors as Saul Bellow and Bernard Malamud were

published in Hungary – works which, in the fifties and sixties at least, were seen both in this country and abroad as the best that American literature had to offer.

The family novel has been seen as a particularly suitable genre for conveying the Hungarian Jewish experience, if only because it is a story of rather rapid assimilation through several generations. We need only think of works by Tamás Kóbor, Lajos Hatvany, András Komor, Károly Pap, Illés Kaczér to realize that the ups and downs of Hungarian Jewish history have been told, to a large extent, through family novels. In recent decades, a new generation of writers produced post-Holocaust examples of family or generation novels, but these, as Rita Horváth, a student of the genre points out, are attenuated, fragmented versions with mythic beginnings, abrupt breaks, and uncertain endings.<sup>13</sup> This trend continued in the nineties, and even in the more popular kind of Hungarian Jewish fiction referred to earlier we get brief synopses of the genre. For example, in one of István Gábor Benedek's stories, we read the following (the narrator here is an orthodox Jew and he is interrogated by an officer of the secret police, a Jew):

Then he came out with it. The familiar story. The grandfather who was still an observant Jew. The son who already changed his name and pursued happiness in more worldly ways. Thus Deutsch became Derczei, the casino replaced the synagogue, Jewish fellowship gave way to hobnobbing with the gentry. But then came the war, the deportations, and sobering forced labor. And here stands a member of the third generation, a disgusting specimen, a smiling interviewer among the interrogators, whose questions are usually punctuated with slaps in the face.<sup>14</sup>

This brief outline of a Hungarian Jewish family's history in the twentieth century will be familiar to those who saw one of the most famous Hungarian films of recent years: István Szabó's *Sunshine*, an elaborate, representative cinematic version of a family novel. The film tells an important and thus far neglected story, which in many ways is unique in the annals of Jewish history. Though making some concessions to Hollywood-style film-making, *Sunshine* incorporates themes, characters, episodes from a number of Hungarian-Jewish sources. Szabó's film met with unexpected success in Hungary, and (there is much anecdotal evidence for this) it had a positively cathartic effect on many Hungarian Jews.

More recent films focusing specifically on the Holocaust in Hungary are worrisome because they are formulaic, inauthentic, sensationalist. I am thinking of films like *Gloomy Sunday* (Szomorú vasárnap), a German film actually, shot in Budapest, based on a Hungarian story and using a number of Hungarian actors, and Andor Szilágyi's *Rose's Songs* (A Rózsa énekei). The latter is a particularly glaring example of cinematic kitsch. It may work as wish fulfillment, but it strains credibility to the utmost. The film is derivative in many ways; let me cite just one

example. Supposedly based on a true story, *Rose's Songs* is about a group of Hungarian Jews taking refuge in a Buda villa in late 1944, their spirit being kept up by a famous Jewish opera singer whose house this is. A young boy, the son of the film's main character, does his turn as a Peeping Tom, climbing up a tree and catching glimpses of a pretty young girl taking a shower, and on one occasion of a wig-wearing orthodox Jewish lady, one of those hiding in the house; he happens to look when the lady's wig slips, exposing her bald head. The boy is so taken aback, he falls off the tree. The scene is highly reminiscent of a recurring memory in Imre Kertész's novel *Kaddish for a Child Not Born*, whose first-person narrator recalls that on a visit to observant relatives in the country, he once opened the bedroom door and saw not a sheitel-wearing aunt but "a bald woman in a red gown in front of a mirror".<sup>15</sup> He is dismayed, and the image stayed with him. But whereas in Kertész's novel the image becomes a potent symbol Jewish vulnerability and shame, in Andor Szilágyi's film it is simply a grotesque moment, one of many in the film, whose sole aim is to shock, without carrying any real meaning.

Imre Kertész, with or without the Nobel Prize, has achieved something very important in modern Hungarian literature, and specifically in the literature about the Holocaust, in that he has combined the reach for universality, the distilled, mythic truth of a parable, with the concreteness of realist fiction. György Köves, the hero of *Fateless*, is not simply a victim, one of the persecuted who gains insight into his own fatelessness, but a very real Jewish boy from Budapest, who tells his story. Kertész has always insisted that in *Sorstalanság* he did not intend to write a Holocaust novel, or indeed a novel in the conventional sense. "The greatest danger for me lay in the temptation of giving way to anecdotal digressions, intriguing, colorful but inessential details, singularly interesting little stories", he said in a 1999 interview. "The action had to follow a clearly devised structure, it had to be reduced to essentials. The story of Auschwitz has become part of the repository of European knowing and European memory. I had to fashion my story as a collective myth."<sup>16</sup> Indeed, each scene, each episode and character in the novel is at once concrete and emblematic; each detail used is crucial and representative.

*Fateless* is a universally valid meditation on evil in the twentieth century, an existentialist novel in which an absurd universe appears in the guise of a totalitarian system that strips one of his or her real self and imposes a role, a fate. Yet there is nothing abstract about the novel – for Kertész, lived reality is too important. He is a survivor who bears witness, but he is also a writer. Implicit in *Fateless* (as well as in Kertész's other works) is the belief that there is – there must be – art after Auschwitz. All of Kertész's literary works, not just *Fateless*, are the painful and risky undertakings of a writer who turns the material of his own life into serious fiction. The result is stirring and also disquieting, because for his characters transforming lived reality into words on paper is too often an obsessive rather than redemptive act.



All writers who deal with the Hungarian Jewish experience face such risks, even those whose works are not autobiographically inspired. But only the most courageous and gifted can, like, Kertész, shy away from easy answers, facile dénouements, and suggest that sudden insights and epiphanies may light the way but for an instant, after which one feels lost again.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Here is a representative sample of Hungarian Judaica published in recent years: Aladár Komlós, *Magyar-zsidó szellemtörténet a reformkortól a holocaustig* (Hungarian Jewish History of Ideas from the Age of Reforms to the Holocaust), 2 vols, Budapest: Múlt és Jövő, 1997; Kinga Frojimovics et al., eds: *A zsidó Budapest – Emlékek, szertartások, történelem* (Jewish Budapest – Monuments, Rites, History), 2 vols. Budapest: MTA Judaisztikai Kutatócsoport, 1995; Petra Török, ed.: *A határ és a határolt – Töprengések a magyar-zsidó irodalom létformáiról* (Boundaries and Limits; Meditations on Hungarian Jewish Literature), Yahalom, 1997; Gábor Hamp, Özséb Horányi, and László Rábai, eds: *Magyar megfontolások a Soáról* (Hungarian Reflections on the Shoah), Budapest: Balassi Kiadó, 1999; János Pelle: *Az utolsó vérvádak* (The Last Blood Libels), 1996; Viktor Karády: *Zsidóság, modernizáció, polgárosodás* (Jews, Modernity and the Rise to Middle Class), Budapest: Cserépfalvi, 1997; Alan Unterman: *Zsidó hagyományok lexikona* (translation of *Dictionary of Jewish Lore and Legend*), Budapest: Helikon, 1999.
- <sup>2</sup> János Kőbányai, ed.: *Budapesti aggadák – A holocaust utáni irodalom* (Budapest Aggadot; Post-Holocaust Literature), Múlt és Jövő, 1999, 334.
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 338.
- <sup>4</sup> See Susan R. Suleiman and Éva Forgács, eds: *Contemporary Jewish Writing in Hungary – An Anthology*. Lincoln–London: University of Nebraska Press, 2003.
- <sup>5</sup> Miklós Radnóti: *Napló* (Diary), Budapest: Magvető Könyvkiadó, 1989, 210.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 209.
- <sup>7</sup> See her essay, “Vád alá helyezett szerzők?” (Authors Under Indictment?) in *A határ és a határolt, op. cit.*, 230–245.
- <sup>8</sup> Ágnes Heller: “Zsidótlanítás a magyar zsidó irodalomban,” in *Pikareszk Auschwitz árnyékában* (Picaresque in the Shadow of Auschwitz), Budapest: Múlt és Jövő, 2003, 7–25.
- <sup>9</sup> See Ágnes Heller: “A zsidóság vonzásában” (Drawn to Judaism), in *Zsidó szellem ma* (The Jewish Spirit Today), Budapest: Múlt és Jövő, 1999, 23–62.
- <sup>10</sup> Tamás Vekerdy: *Zsidó könyv* (Jewish Book), Budapest: Ursa Minor, 2002, 10, 11.
- <sup>11</sup> See Judit Elek, and Mihály Sükösd: *Tutajosok – A tiszzaeszlári per dokumentumai* (The Rafters; Documents of the Tiszaeszlár Trial); Judit Elek, *Tutajosok – Filmforgatókönyv* (The Screenplay), in one volume, Budapest: Magvető, 1990.
- <sup>12</sup> See for example Gábor T. Szántó: *Mószér* (Snitch), Budapest: Magvető, 1997; *Keleti pályaudvar, végállomás* (Eastern Station: End of the Line), Magvető; István Gábor Benedek: *A komlói tóra* (The Torah Scroll of Tótkomlós), Budapest: Dan Könyvkiadó, 1994; *Az elégett fénykép* (The Burnt Photograph), Magyar Könyvklub, 1997; György Dalos: *A körülmetélés* (The Circumcision), Budapest: Magvető, 1990; *Az istenkereső* [The God-Seeker], Magvető, 1999.
- <sup>13</sup> Rita Horváth: “A Changing Genre: Jewish Hungarian Family Novels After the Shoah” (Manuscript).

- <sup>14</sup> István Gábor Benedek: *Az elégett fénykép*, *op. cit.*, 231–232.
- <sup>15</sup> Imre Kertész: *Kaddish for a Child Not Born*, transl. by Christopher C. Wilson and Katharina M. Wilson (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1997), 19.
- <sup>16</sup> “A vizsgálódó mondat” (The Inquiring Sentence), *Élet és Irodalom*, November 12, 1999, 3.