


Ideological and political horizon shifts in Transylvanian Hungarian poetry during the communist period and after the 1989 Regime Change

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ABSTRACT

Although the communist regime, in literature as well as in all areas of social life, aimed at uniformity and creating an “art” serving propaganda purposes in the entire Central and Eastern European region, the Romanian Stalinist “cultural project” differed in many respects from that of other countries, e.g. Hungary’s. In this era, the discourse emphasizing revolutionary transformation and radical policy change decisively builds on the image of the enemy; and the fault-lines between past and present, old and new, and the idea of the need for continuous political struggle also prevail in both poetry and prose as eternal actualities.

For the Transylvanian Hungarian community, the 1989 Regime Change was supposed to mean the end of nationalist dictatorship, of the infinitely intensified ideological/political terror, of the deliberate policy of ethnic homogenization, and the solution of minority issues as well as of internal and external conflicts. Nevertheless, after a few months of cloudless enthusiasm, in 1990, Transylvanian Hungarians had to face the rearrangement of previous power structures; they confronted national and ethnic conflicts, disguised assimilation, and economic vulnerability. This paper aims to present the ideological/political characteristics which determined Transylvanian Hungarian poetry during the Communist Dictatorship and after the 1989 Regime Change.

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KEYWORDS

Transylvanian Hungarian poetry, contemporary literature, communist ideology, post-communist period, East-European society

If we accept the viewpoint according to which “literary theory is indissociably bound up with political beliefs and ideological values”,¹ and “the work of art is the product of a negotiation between a creator or class of creators, equipped with a complex, communally shared repertoire of conventions, and the institutions and practices of society”,² then we will probably not deny that the actual social reality may play a role in producing and maintaining the external references of a literary work at least as important as the author’s or readers’ different interests and expectations. Although contemporary literary criticism mostly faces the legitimate need to strictly separate the aesthetic/poetic identity of the work of art from the gratuitous study of the author’s intent and biographical details, from the perspective of the writer, the public or critical orientation, the nature of the complex system of relations which regulates the writing, the publication, and reception of a literary work can by no means be left out of consideration. Consequently, it does matter if the evaluation of a poem, oeuvre or stylistic tendency – using Zsuzsa Selyem’s appropriate categorization – takes place in the background of an “author-text-censor-reader” or “author-text-manager-reader”³ relationship, just as, hermeneutically, there is a difference between the result of that mode of reception which, in order to circumvent an external political power, is forced to follow the strategy of reading between the lines and one which does not need to make this compromise.

1

Regarding the characteristics of literary discourse and cultural policy of the Post-World War II years, it can be clearly stated that the newly established communist power in Eastern-Europe gained control over all manifestations of community life as early as the second half of the 1940s, and came to regulate all aspects of culture and the arts; it banned, abolished or restructured all forums which enjoyed some kind of independence; it completely revised the literary and artistic canon, and at the same time sought to develop a new ideological/political space that would serve only its own interests. “We can talk about how the party leadership of literary life demands the development of institutionally secured public opinion”, stated József Révai, one of the Hungarian communist critics of the era, who held office in a decision-making position in the executive apparatus of cultural policies imposed on Hungary based on Soviet model. “This institutional security is the Hungarian Writers’ Association, with its strong, ideologically united party organization. [...] It’s time for the party organization of the Writers’ Association to finally begin its work, so that our Party can rely on it in the realization of our literary life’s guidance.”⁴

Although the communist regime, in literature as well as in all areas of social life, aimed at uniformity and creating an “art” serving propaganda purposes in the entire central and eastern

¹T. Eagleton, *Literary theory. An Introduction. Second Edition* 169–170 (The University of Minnesota Press, Minnesota, 2003).

²S. Greenblatt, “Towards a Poetics of Culture,” *Southern Review*, 1(1987): 13.

³Zs. Selyem, *Valami helyet [In Place]* 63–96 (Komp-Press Korunk Baráti Társaság, Kolozsvár, 2003).

⁴J. Révai, *Irodalmi tanulmányok [Literary Studies]* (Szikra Kiadó, Budapest, 1950).



European region, the Romanian Stalinist “cultural project” differed in many respects from that of other countries’, e.g. Hungary’s. However, it was common to the centrally proclaimed literary policy orientation of both countries that they propagated the socialist human ideal and communist ideology, realistic representation and pursuit of community goals which, in fact, worked as a dictatorial, strictly controlled mechanism placing the Party’s interests and personality cult above all, and dealing out rewards and punishments accordingly. “Socialist literature consciously serves the same purposes as the labor movement and the organized labor party; its role is not that of the lonely forerunner anymore, but of one who goes along with the community, the people, and society. In this connection, it is not only literature and the place of the artist in society that changes, but theory and criticism acquire greater importance. In the development of socialist literature, at every step there are theoreticians, critics and writers interpreting the movements, the needs of the Party and society, as well as the demands of social development”,⁵ states Miklós Szabolcsi, one of the best known Hungarian literary historians of the era, in his study appeared in the early 1960s, summing up the “history” and aims of socialist literature. Literary texts of the time contain almost every accessory of the phraseology of materialist “salvation history” and militarist rhetoric. Beside the key concepts, viz. the “Party”, “People”, “Truth”, “Light”, “Word”, “Revolution”, “Freedom”, there are, as obligatory oppositions, words like “Contagion”, “Fascism”, “Exploitation” etc., making it possible, or rather compulsory, to interpret the literary text as a simple political message. In this era, the discourse emphasizing the aspects of revolutionary transformation and radical policy change built strongly on the image of the enemy; the fault-line between past and present, old and new, and also the necessity of continuous political struggle also prevailed in both poetry and prose as eternal actualities. In order to achieve the intended social goals, this kind of communist sacrifice ethics, after all, regards the annihilation of resisters, protesters, and even of the internal opposition not only as a possibility, but as an assumed necessity. “The goal of social redemption conceived by the proletarian revolution exempts us not only from the sin of sacrificing ourselves, but also from the (otherwise sufficiently realized) sin of sacrificing others”, states Dávid Szolláth, making reference to György Lukács, in his work analyzing the elite and mass phenomena of contemporary attitudes, as well as the literary and historical aspects of power and community gestures.⁶ It is consequently no coincidence that the party-state rhetoric during the decades of communist dictatorship in Central and Eastern Europe – though in different ways and with varying intensity depending on the country and the period – is determined everywhere by the image of the enemy and militarist attitude, while individual freedom or forms of expression different from those prescribed are extremely controlled and restricted all along. These phenomena also determine literature in both Romania and Hungary, by no means only as a common manifestation of a consistent aesthetic/poetic view of writers, but mainly as a result of the strict demands and compulsory/exclusive ideological position of the Post-World War II political system.

⁵M. Szabolcsi, “Bevezetés: A magyar szocialista irodalom történetéből” [“Introduction: On the History of Hungarian Socialist Literature”], in *Forradalmi magyar irodalom. Tanulmányok a magyar szocialista irodalom történetéből* [Revolutionary Hungarian Literature. Studies on the History of Hungarian Socialist Literature], ed. M. Szabolcsi and L. Illés 20–26 (Akadémiai Kiadó, Budapest, 1963).

⁶D. Szolláth, *A kommunista aszketizmus esztétikája. A 20. századi irodalom néhány munkásmozgalom-történeti vonatkozása* [The Aesthetics of Communist Asceticism. Some Aspects of the History of the Labor Movement in the 20th-century Literature] 42 (Balassi Kiadó, Budapest, 2011).



2

In the first volumes of the poets who made their debut in the 1950s or at the beginning of the 1960s, the representation of national identity and of the situation of ethnic Hungarians in Transylvania⁷ is generally closely linked to the ideological/political stereotypes of the official party propaganda. Instead of the conflict between nations or nationalities, the most important element of the prevailing poetic discourse is the message emphasizing reconciliation, interdependence, and cooperation, while “revolutionary poetry” finds its enemy image in the “reactionary” or “bourgeois” representatives of the former social elite. The dominant feature of these poems is contrast, and the verse structure built on militaristic rhetoric is composed rather of simple metonymic than metaphoric components. All the elements of the past are associated with negative connotations, while present and future possibilities are endowed with positive meaning – almost exclusively for didactic, educational purposes. There are only a few exceptions to this, e.g. Aladár Lászlóffy’s⁸ volume entitled *Hangok a tereken* [Voices on the Squares]. Though these poems definitely show a radical change of discourse – primarily related to the avant-garde endeavors – and the need to break with the classical poetic tradition, all of this is dissolved in an attitude which embraces the whole human community and can likewise be regarded as a profoundly Christian worldview.

This poetic attitude is characterized by the use of metaphors specific to folk songs, to folk love poetry, by the effortlessness of pure human consciousness that is able to melt into the eternal cycle of nature and identify with it, and by the transcendent thought that sees life as the greatest miracle:

But they ask You unsuspectingly:

“What do You see where I see nothing?”

Feel it quickly: people are friends!

Say it then: the other stars are far away!

And don’t let Your proud heart make

You feel Yourself more and better;

(Aladár Lászlóffy: *Az Űr* [The Void])

From the mid-’60s until about the first half of the 1970s, Hungarian culture and literature in Romania gained some freedom for a relatively short time, which – from an ideologic/poetic viewpoint – only meant that, as a result of “socialism with a human face”, it was no longer absolutely necessary to follow the patterns of socialist realism, public poetry, glorification of the Party, and the building of a communist society. At the same time, the previously rejected “individualism”, the private sphere, the representation of subjective and existential issues, and

⁷Transylvania is part of presentday Romania, but it also denotes a historical region with significant Hungarian minority.

⁸Aladár Lászlóffy (1937–2009) Transylvanian Hungarian poet, writer, essayist. From 1961 on he worked as an editor for Állami Irodalmi Kiadó (National Literary Publisher), later for the Napsugár, Dacia Könyvkiadó (Dacia Publisher), Előre and Utunk journals (from 1989 Helikon). His work has been honored with several prizes, including the Kossuth-Prize, and The Order of Merit of the Republic of Hungary.



the topics pertaining to historical tradition or Hungarian national identity (in fact, rather the identification with the Transylvanian, Székely⁹ community) also came to the fore in the literary works of the period. For half a decade, Transylvanian Hungarian artists enjoyed a greater degree of freedom than those living in Hungary. “Towards the mid-’60s, Romania officially opened the way to Western literature”, recalls Lajos Kántor, one of the greatest Transylvanian Hungarian literary critics of the 20th century, “so, up until the early ’70s, the inflow of »foreign ideas«, the spread of modernity encountered fewer obstacles than in Hungary.”¹⁰

However, the limits of this relative freedom are well illustrated by the controversy which erupted in connection with the “double bond” of Transylvanian Hungarian literature (which meant that it belonged both to Hungarian and to Romanian literature), in consequence of which the Romanian party leadership ordered the writers and editors of literary journals to publicly distance themselves from the idea raised by the Hungarian Writers’ Association as a “nationalist deviation”.¹¹ It is obvious that in such a context intellectuals were forbidden from using the expression “Transylvanian Hungarian literature” instead of “Hungarian literature in Romania” until the regime change in 1989. Lajos Kántor and co-author Gusztáv Láng were accused of revisionism, because in the title of their literary history summary they indicated the year 1945 which was the year of “liberation” in Hungary, although in Romania “liberation” began on August 23, 1944.

From the second half of the ’70s onwards, however, after Nicolae Ceaușescu’s visit to China and North Korea in 1971, this relative freedom gradually disappears over a few years. In Romanian politics, nationalism comes to the fore; the Securitate, the Romanian secret service, resorts to increasingly drastic methods to intimidate society. In the ’80s, the purpose of the regime already is to assimilate, annihilate ethnic minorities, and as a result of forced resettlement policies coordinated by state authorities, in many Transylvanian cities, Hungarians become an insignificant minority. The government seeks to abolish or merge cultural and educational institutions which had earlier possessed some degree of autonomy; at the same time, it subjects all literary forums to strict, centralized political control. Vilmos Ágoston,¹² a Transylvanian Hungarian writer and critic who emigrated to Hungary in the ’80s, recalls the forced connection between public life, art, and literature as follows: “The Magyar Műhely [Hungarian Workshop in Paris] was not banned for being avant-garde, but for being Hungarian. [. . .] We had to avoid the possibility of direct confrontation to express our opinion on that particular situation in which we were living, because if I had written that here Hungarians were oppressed, that’s a sentence, a general statement, but it surely would not have been published.”¹³

⁹The Székelys (Hungarian pronunciation: [ˈse:kɛj]), sometimes also referred to as Szeklers, are a subgroup of the Hungarian people living mostly in the center of Romania (also called Székely Land), which is not a separate political-administrative region. During the Medieval ages, the Szeklers played a key role in the defense of the Kingdom of Hungary.

¹⁰L. Kántor, *A nagyelefánt nyomában [In Search of the Big Elephant]* 9 (Pallas-Akadémia Kiadó, Csíkszereda, 2005).

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Vilmos Ágoston (1947–) Hungarian writer, criticist, born in Transylvania, author of several monographs, emigrated to Hungary in the ’80s, after he was arrested by the Romanian state security police.

¹³V. Ágoston, “Ez a nemzedék nem akarta becsapni magát” [“This generation did not want to deceive itself”], in *Marsallbot a hátizsákban – a Forrás harmadik nemzedéke [Marshal’s Baton in the Backpack – The Third “Forrás” Generation]*, ed. G. Martos, 12–17 (Erdélyi Híradó Kiadó, Kolozsvár, 1994).



Although, from a certain point of view, the recollections of Lajos Kántor or Vilmos Ágoston can only be regarded as fiction, part of the communist “grand narrative”, it is unquestionably a matter of fact – even though it does not strictly fall within the scope of literary studies – that in the ‘80s Romania faced the most horrible totalitarian dictatorship in Central and Eastern Europe. In these years, the excessively pervasive personality cult, the ideological terror, and the – disguised or undisguised – assimilative aspirations made the life of the Hungarian minority in Transylvania extremely difficult. Zsófia Balla,¹⁴ a Transylvanian Hungarian poet who debuted at the end of the ‘60s, aptly points out one of the distinctive aspects of the ‘80s in the Ceaușescu era: “This society has already got used to the Party always telling them how to be moral and how to write”.¹⁵ This historical and social/political context most obviously influenced the Transylvanian Hungarian literary canon and the orientation of the critical reception of literary works, since all public figures were fully aware that resistance to power would easily lead to expulsion, silencing or even physical destruction.

Consequently, knowing the situation in Romania in the ‘80s, any approach according to which literature functioned as unconditional political engagement or as the only possible (counter-) discourse can be reevaluated. Also, on such a predetermined path the aesthetic/poetic function of literary works, creative freedom, and inventiveness were inevitably pushed into the background. Literary works created before the 1989 regime change usually “suggest a moral system which displays the ideal of dutiful steadfastness rather than that of fruitful initiative”, states Éva Cs. Gyimesi, one of the best known Transylvanian Hungarian critics of the 20th century.¹⁶ In Transylvanian Hungarian literature, we might add, this ambition was especially abandoned by those “artistic” endeavors which strove to serve the goals of the existing power (in some cases the same authors also represented the former tendency, the tradition of dutiful steadfastness).

However, defying power through literature became not only an artistic imperative in the ‘70s and ‘80s, but also an expectation on the part of the readers. The social role of the writer, the noble fight for the “right cause” was of vital importance to the reading public, which highly contributed to the appreciation and revaluation of literature and all creative work in general. In this way, the social prestige of a particular literary text often was more important than its aesthetic quality. On the other hand, literary criticism in Hungary – if it wished to deal with the issue of “transborder” Hungarian literature at all – could only confirm this necessity, which had become a tradition, and, regarding the cult and canon formation mechanisms of the ‘70s and ‘80s, significantly contributed to the strengthening of the value system that legitimized the fetishizing of the creative role and the revelation-like, exalted discourse as an aesthetic/poetic expectation. The aspirations most often represented exactly by the institutionalized reception itself in judging literary works are dictated not only by aesthetic but also by ideological considerations, which can certainly affect the acceptance or rejection of a particular author, text or literary tendency. “In the 20th century, the

¹⁴Zsófia Balla (1949–) Transylvanian poet and essayist. From 1972, she worked as music editor in the Hungarian department of the Cluj radio station until the station was closed in 1985. Thereafter she worked as a journalist for the Romanian newspaper *Előre*, published in Hungarian language. Since 1993, she has been living in Budapest, Hungary.

¹⁵Zs. Balla, “Egy kicsit mindenkől kimaradt ez a társaság” [“This company was a little bit left out of everything”], in *Marsallbot a hátizsákban – a Forrás harmadik nemzedéke* [*Marshal's Baton in the Backpack – The Third “Forrás” Generation*], ed. G. Martos, Op. cit. 22.

¹⁶É. Cs. Gyimesi, *Kritikai mozaik* [*A Critical Mosaic*] 10 (Polis Könyvkiadó, Kolozsvár, 1999).



value judgments of universal Hungarian literature”, as Hungarian critic Mihály Ilia correctly observes from the perspective of the early 1990s, “were mostly judgments made by public taste dictatorship on issues concerning foreign Hungarian literature. When in the 1930s they started to sell in Budapest the books published by the Transylvanian Guild of Fine Arts, it turned out that the readers embraced pictures of the creek, the pinewood, and the traditional costume, the representation of untainted Székely life; and business affected literature, it contributed – among others – to the deterioration of the Guild of Fine Arts. Today, there are still huge shortcomings in the publishing industry. (Of course, there are exceptions.) Until recently, the reception of non-traditional trends, of Hungarian thinking and essayistic literature in Romania, were omitted; the literature of successive generations is hardly present. The complexity of the culture of ethnic Hungarians in Romania is barely felt at home, as if domestic public consciousness did not want to believe this phenomenon; not only the publisher, but the reader also selects; it is the worst thing they can do since they worsen the historical fact by exclusion.”¹⁷

3

Analyzing the development of Transylvanism¹⁸ between the two world wars and the subsequent poetic changes, Éva Cs. Gyimesi,¹⁹ a young Transylvanian critic of the era, in her excellent essay entitled *Gyöngy és homok* [Pearl and Sand], draws attention to that mode of speech impregnated with metaphors which had a decisive role in the development of the specific value orientation of Transylvanian Hungarian literature.²⁰ This accurately detailed study on the evolution of the motif of the pearl²¹, in both the lyric and prose works of the period, as well as on the aesthetic horizons associated with it, undertakes to present that kind of attitude which probably can best be identified with an intellectual behavior which makes a virtue out of necessity and with the elevated worldview which creates value out of pain. At the same time, regarding the literary works of the 1970s, the essay *Gyöngy és homok* detects the presence of a (counter) speech, which is opposed to the classic ideology of Transylvanism, and which is far from being able to aestheticize minority traumas and to confidently dissolve the sense of helplessness by the illusion of moral superiority. Tragic irony perceived as an answer to specific life situations of the individual and the community

¹⁷M. Ilia, “Kell-e egységesülni?” [“Is Unification Necessary?”], *Alföld* 2(1991), 42.

¹⁸After World War I when, as a result of border changes territories of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire became part of Romania, the Transylvanian Hungarian community’s leading ideology, the Transylvanism, mainly consisted of three different ideological orientations: 1. emphasizing the thought of surviving on the native land as a moral imperative, 2. highlighting the specificity of the “Transylvanian spirit”, and 3. creating the historical background of national consciousness. G. Szávai, *Torzmagyar [Distorted Hungarian]* 166–179 (Pont Kiadó, Budapest, 2004).

¹⁹Éva Cs. Gyimesi (1945–2011) literature historian, linguist, Hungarian writer, author of several volumes of essays; winner of the Pulitzer-prize. She was one of the signers of the 1986 petition addressed to the party leadership, which criticized the chauvinistic practices of the central authorities. In 1988, she wrote a letter to the Rumanian Ministry of Education, protesting against the discriminatory practices prevailing in the compulsory assignment of nationality graduates. Romanian state security police repeatedly interrogated and threatened her for expressing her views too freely.

²⁰É. Cs. Gyimesi, *Honvágy a hazában. Esszék, interjúk, publicisztikai írások [Homesickness in the Homeland. Essays, Interviews, Journalistic Writings]* 19–110 (Pesti Szalon Kiadó, Budapest, 1993).

²¹The classic metaphor of Transylvanism: in Transylvanian Hungarian poetry, it represents the ennobling power of suffering, the active experience of minority existence, the idea of value born from pain.



– in Zsófia Balla's, Ferenc Kenéz's, and Kálmán Györffi's poems, as well as its analysis in connection with Domokos Szilágyi's poetry – suggests the development of a much more pessimistic (self) defense mechanism and survival strategy in Transylvanian Hungarian literature than the one functioning in the previous poetic discourse – represented, among others, by Lajos Áprily, László Tompa, Áron Tamási, and Károly Kós. "Tragic irony", as Éva Cs. Gyimesi points out the essence of this aesthetic attitude, "contains the negative moment of choice: by deeming the situation unacceptable and expressing the conflict bluntly, it rejects and denies them. Since it does not aestheticize necessity, tragic irony makes us realize disharmony and the lack of the possibility of a positive choice: helplessness."²² Thus, the ironic approach in fact creates a situation in which "denial, though it is not real action, is a value in itself since, by exploring disharmonious value relations, it encourages the search for real ways of conflict resolution".²³ In her analysis of Domokos Szilágyi's²⁴ lyrical oeuvre, Éva Cs. Gyimesi mostly connects the increasingly emphatic tragic/ironic attitude which, instead of the previous, ideologically/politically positioned, discourse, is mainly expressed in the questioning of historical and social development, and even of the social function of poetry, to the poems of the volume published in 1969, entitled *Búcsú a trópusoktól* [A Farewell to the Tropes].²⁵ From this point of view, the experience of the devaluation of values can be considered as a reflection revealing the universal crisis of both world politics and humanity, and at the same time as a prophetic attitude which (apparently) makes it possible for the speaker to remain an outsider. Here, the creator, "due to the superiority of the ironic attitude, which leaves antinomies unresolved and relativizes the opposing poles by turning them against each other, tries to transcend the tragic contradictions between the depths and heights of human existence, as well as between the positive and negative lessons of history".²⁶

It is undeniable that in Domokos Szilágyi's volumes, the tragic-ironic view that accompanies the feeling of vulnerability to dictatorial power, the worthlessness of the emotions, thoughts, and even of the whole existence of the individual, the defensive reflexes of the human being sunk to the level of a beast, the experience of humiliation and self-humiliation is present with a decisive force. These poems, in proclaiming the paradoxical duality of facing death and desiring to live, in representing the world in a grotesque manner, show mankind as the suffering subject of a huge concentration camp created by itself:

Respected Prosecutors,
I witnessed
that the person in question was born,

²²É. Cs. Gyimesi, *Honvágy a hazában. Esszék, interjúk, publicisztikai írások* [Homesickness in the Homeland. Essays, Interviews, Journalistic Writings] Op. cit. 90.

²³Ibid.

²⁴Domokos Szilágyi (1938–1976) Transylvanian Hungarian poet, born in Nagysomkút. He got his degree in Hungarian Language and Literature from the Bolyai University, Kolozsvár, and worked for *Igaz Szó* and the newspaper *Előre*. In 1970, he retired for health reasons, and in 1976 he committed suicide. After 1990, it was proved that he collaborated with the Romanian secret service, the Securitate.

²⁵É. Cs. Gyimesi, *Álom és értelem, Szilágyi Domokos lírai létértelmezése* [Dream and Reason, Domokos Szilágyi's Lyrical Interpretation of Being] 55–70 (Kriterion Könyvkiadó, Bukarest, 1990).

²⁶Ibid. 56.



grew up conscientiously,
mingled, separated, as it is written,
[...]
he worked so as to be noticed when he was missing,
and he lied only when hope
sank below the horizon –
Respected Prosecutors, he wasn't guilty!
his own body went over to outside word,
and the word, the word, the word
finished him off nastily and then
left his victim in the lurch.

(*Domokos Szilágyi: Följelentés [Reporting]*,

*translated by Len Roberts*²⁷

Extending this question slightly towards a later lyrical orientation, it can be definitely stated that in the 1970s, besides Domokos Szilágyi, other Transylvanian poets begin to make use of the tragic/ironic tone in their works, e.g. Sándor Kányádi,²⁸ László Király²⁹ or Árpád Farkas.³⁰

I would have snowed, myself –
but look, how it's started to fall!
Snow falling above the homeland
in wild, enormous flakes.
It reaches to the knees, the waist, the throat
and whispering, it chokes,

²⁷ All the poems translated by the translators mentioned above are cited from A Makkai, and E. Watson Liebert ed. *In Quest of the "Miracle Stag": The Poetry of Hungary*. (The International Association of Hungarian Language and Culture, Budapest, Atlantis-Centaur and Framo Publishing, Chicago, 2003).

²⁸ Sándor Kányádi (1929–2018) one of the most famous Transylvanian Hungarian poets, translator, was born in Nagyalambfalva. He was editor and frequent contributor to several literary and children's magazines. He was politically active, published numerous works about to the ongoing oppression of Transylvania's Hungarian minority. He received several awards and prizes, including the Kossuth-Prize, the Herder-Prize, The Order of Merit of the Republic of Hungary, and the Prima Primissima Prize.

²⁹ László Király (1943–) Transylvanian Hungarian poet, writer and translator, born in Sóvárad, held a degree in Hungarian Language and Literature (Babeş-Bolyai University, Kolozsvár), worked initially as a teacher before he became a reporter (Előre), and later editor of Utunk (Helikon from 1989 onwards).

³⁰ Árpád Farkas (1944–) Transylvanian Hungarian poet, translator, started publishing in periodicals, worked for Igaz Szó (Látó from 1990), and Háromszék. In 1985, he translated works of a Romanian poet, Ana Blandiana, who was blacklisted by the Communist regime. In his poetry, he often speaks out for the survival of the ethnic Hungarian minority in Romania.



a lecherous foam that overflows

all the church tower's bells.

[...]

Without motion

in these Large Swaddling clothes

existence learns to be silent.

The blades of scythes and knives

are swathed to the canopy of heaven,

the village's slow panting

is turning white, is gasping,

stone does not clatter against stone,

who speaks, speaks with a mouth full of snow –

and the mind peacefully sits around

in the stomach of the great snows.

(Árpád Farkas: *Alagutak a hóban* [Tunnels in the Snow],

translated by Adam Makkai)

The unprincipled compromise, the dilemma of being faithful to the ideological goals of the communist regime, of making concessions for the sake of social advancement, and of accepting retreat and silence, all these illustrate that as a citizen of a dictatorial state, one can only make bad decisions.

Besides (self) reflection concerning the whole of humanity and history, this value position mostly fulfills itself in the representation of minority existence or the relationship between the individual and communist power. In this case, irony can be interpreted not merely as a gesture of abandonment, the giving up of a deceptive vision of the future, but partly also as the overwriting of a previous aesthetic/poetic attitude, even if the unity of the lyrical self and the monologue-like, linear speech is still mostly preserved. The following volumes may be mentioned here: László Király's *Sétalovaglás* [Horse Ride] (1976); *Az elfelejtett hadsereg* [The Forgotten Army] (1978), Árpád Farkas's *Jegenyekör* [Poplar Circle] (1971), and *Alagutak a hóban* [Tunnels in the Snow] (1979) or Sándor Kányádi's *Szürkület* [Nightfall] (1978):

I saw when the poet

was pushed like a thief

I saw when the poet

was humiliated like a thief

I saw when the poet



was condemned like a thief

I saw that, and I who has never stolen

I began to fear like a thief

(Sándor Kányádi: *Ostinato* [Ostinato])

As a common structural feature, in these poems the rhythmically recurring details, the factual – apparently irrelevant – enumerations show the true face of the communist state power, the inhumanity of the retaliatory machinery represented by the secret service forces, informers, and provocateurs, as well as the experience of threat and total vulnerability.

However, analyzing the attitude of prominent young poets of the period towards Transylvanian spirit, we can undoubtedly find a certain degree polarization: while in Aladár Lászlóffy's or Domokos Szilágyi's poems, written in the 1950s and 1960s, regional issues are almost entirely absent, and in Sándor Kányádi's poetry metaphorical language related to the Transylvanian spirit becomes predominant only in the third and fourth volumes, in Árpád Farkas's or László Király's first volumes, for example, we can witness the expression of adherence to the narrower homeland, that is the Székely Land, at the very beginning, as well as the undertaking of a strong linguistic identification and of the lyrical tradition between the two world wars. The anthropomorphized nature, the onomatopoeic words, and the threatening character of the colors and surroundings project the picture of an unbearable, inhuman, alien, and absurd world before us.

4

“Tragic irony – according to its nature – may not show us a way out of our crises, but it can make us fully realize their depths. It may not dissolve disharmony, but it can control it. Its bitter pills help the divided mind and soul reconcile from time to time so that helplessness should not become our nature, we should not get used to it. Internalized helplessness would be a sin; through irony, it remains what it is: an endured necessity.”³¹ The sentences above can be regarded not only as an observation concerning the interpretation of literary works, but also as a self-reflexive statement, an intellectual confession about a contemporary state of being. In the relationship between the individual and power, the generation making its debut in the 1970s and 1980s had to face the same challenges as their older colleagues who had already been recognized as part of the literary tradition. At the same time, in accordance with the increasingly open anti-Hungarian efforts of the regime, local political leaders tried to phase out even all the limited public forums, alternative possibilities which, at the price of no small compromises, minority intellectuals had succeeded in creating in the previous decades.

Thus, while in the context of the '60s and '70s, the artistic representation of the (existential) problems of the Transylvanian Hungarian community was still possible through a heroic/mythical or tragic/ironic discourse, later, in the '80s, references to community identity and

³¹É. Cs. Gyimesi, *Honvágy a hazában. Esszék, interjúk, publicisztikai írások* [Homesickness in the Homeland. Essays, Interviews, Journalistic Writings] Op. cit. 90.



traditions, or any form of religious expression, immediately put both author and text on a blacklist. “At first”, recalls Vilmos Ágoston, “they watched very carefully so the word “Hungarian” would not occur twice on a page; then they watched very carefully so it would not occur at all.”³² Nevertheless, the authors referred to by the critical reception as the Third “Forrás” Generation³³ wished to create their own value system within a stylistic/poetic orientation which, in some respects, got much closer to trends in European literature than to traditional Transylvanian discourse. The most characteristic feature of this mode of speech is, probably, language-game and ironic self-reflection: “Much could be said about this different kind of intellectual orientation. On the one hand, it’s more disillusioned, on the other, it’s more playful and lighter”, says Zsófia Balla, talking about her contemporaries.³⁴

This literary attitude, instead of presenting the exposure of the individual to power as a universal human problem, focuses increasingly on allusions to real events and persons or on the ironic/allegoric mode of representation as a means of protest. Consequently, the artistic representation of various repressive mechanisms, abuses of power, as well as the more and more concrete references may limit the contextual background determining the act of reception in such a way that the text is decoded by the reader, sufficiently familiar with and attentive to essential problems, as a clear position of the lyrical or narrative self, whereas within a broader interpretative horizon, it evidently deprives its interpreter of such rhetorical potentiality for the production of meaning.

Previous to the 1989 regime change, in the poetry of the generation of poets who made their debut in the 1970s and 1980s, e.g. in Géza Szöcs’s³⁵ volumes (*Párbaj, avagy a huszonharmadik hóhullás* [Duel, or the Twenty-third Snowfall], 1979; *A sirálybőr cipő* [The Seagull Leather Shoe], 1989) or in András Ferenc Kovács’s³⁶ poems (*Tengerész Henrik intelmei* [The Admonitions of Henry the Sailor], 1983; *Tűzföld hava* [Fireland Snow], 1988), basically such a specifically new kind of poetic attitude appears, but this voice is not strange to László Király’s (*Amikor pipacsok voltatok* [When You Were Poppies], 1982; *A téli tábor* [The Winter Camp], 1984; *A költő égő asztala* [The Poet’s Burning Table], 1986; *A föld körüli pálya* [The Orbit Around the Earth], 1988) or Sándor Kányádi’s (*Sörény és koponya* [Mane and Skull], 1989) lyrical works written in the 1980s. In these poems, self-irony, rhetorical game, the mutilated or deformed words, and the

³²V. Ágoston, “Ez a nemzedék nem akarta becsapni magát” [“This generation did not want to deceive itself”], in *Marsallbot a hátizsákban – a Forrás harmadik nemzedéke* [Marshal’s Baton in the Backpack – The Third “Forrás” Generation], ed. G. Martos, Op. cit. p. 17.

³³“Forrás Generation”, a term for writers whose works were published in the series called “Forrás”, reserved for first-book authors, from 1961 onwards.

³⁴Cf. Zs. Balla, „Egy kicsit mindenből kimaradt ez a társaság” [“This company was a little bit left out of everything”], *Ibid.* 18–21.

³⁵Géza Szöcs (1953–2020) Transylvanian Hungarian poet and politician, son of István Szöcs, writer and translator. After 1986, he went into political exile in Switzerland, in Geneva, where he worked as a journalist. In 1990, Szöcs returned to his natal land, and was active in the Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romania (RMDSZ), for which he sat from 1990 to 1992 in the Romanian Senate. Since 1993, he has been living in Hungary. He served as Secretary of State for Culture of the Ministry of National Resources in Hungary from 2010 to 2012. In 2011, he was elected president of the Hungarian Pen Club.

³⁶András Ferenc Kovács (1959–) one of the most famous Hungarian poets. He was born and still lives in Transylvania, translator and academic. He works as the poetry editor for the *Igaz szó* journal (Látó from 1990). He received several awards and prizes, including the Roumanian Writers Union Prize, Kossuth-Prize, Artisjus Prize.



nonsense serve the same purpose as the increasingly incomprehensible allegorization, viz. the exposure of the machinery of power whose activity insidiously undermines culture, language, and identity. At the same time, in a certain socio-political context, it highlights the morally disputable character of the petty compromises of literary life functioning in the shadow of the communist dictatorship:

come on this whole thing was just a provocation
 this illustrious géza szőcs is nothing but a stool pigeon
 just like lajos kossuth was too
 he was the agent of the imperial house
 charged by vienna to make a pretty big upheaval

 you ask why

 so there would be shooting hanging killing
 and so it would be clearly visible
 who the emperor's enemy is

(*Géza Szőcs: Kompromittálás 2. [Compromising, 2]*,

translated by Len Roberts)

As it is typical of much of the Transylvanian poetry of the era, in the poems of the '80s, as well, particular emphasis is given to texts referring to the brutality of Communist power, the "obligatory" characters and accessories of the dictatorship – to a world of enforcers, interrogations, informers, and house searches, a society of intimidation and skulking complicity. Instead of pathos, in these poems, the personal and tragic voice is counterpointed by playfulness and irony. The impossible situations, word-associations, the representation of absurdity, style and humor almost imperceptibly dissolve the weight of terror, the experience of vulnerability.

From a stylistic/poetic point of view, this artistic orientation can be considered important not only because in the ideological/political context of the late '70s and early '80s, increasingly efficient censorship prevented a growing number of writers from publishing their works or actively participating in public cultural forums, but also because this change of perspective in Transylvanian Hungarian literature indicates the appearance of a form of discourse – probably closest to postmodernism – which requires less and less social engagement and moves away from the conventional forms of that prophetic (creative) attitude which wishes to address all members of a particular community.

5

For the Transylvanian Hungarian community, the 1989 regime change was supposed to mean the end of nationalist dictatorship, of the infinitely intensified ideological/political terror, of the deliberate policy of ethnic homogenization, and the solution of minority issues as well as of internal and external conflicts. Nevertheless, after a few months of cloudless enthusiasm, in 1990, Transylvanian Hungarians had to face the rearrangement of previous power structures;



they confronted national and ethnic conflicts, disguised assimilation, and economic vulnerability. The National Salvation Front³⁷ led by Ion Iliescu, which as a party easily won the first elections due to its dominant position, adopted an anti-intellectual³⁸ and anti-minority policy from the very beginning.³⁹ After a very short pause, Romanian secret services resumed their activities, largely based on the repressive machinery of dictatorship, i.e. the former Securitate staff, supporting political organizations formed from second-line members of the communist nomenclature. Thus, until the mid-'90s, Romania functioned as a semi-authoritarian state, where former beneficiaries of the communist regime consolidated their political and economic positions. "December 1989", points out Stefano Bottoni,⁴⁰ "successfully ousted the old regime and its elite: Ceausescu's direct subordinates. The new power elite stepped out from the second line of the old ruling class. If the Romanian Communist Party had not been dissolved, we could only have talked about a radical elite change within the party."⁴¹

The continual denial of the historical presence of Hungarians in Transylvania, the expropriation of cultural and community spaces and the tendentious reinterpretation of recent events defined the electoral messages of both left- and right-wing political parties for a quarter of a century after the 1989 regime change. Right from the first months after the regime change, radical nationalists gained ground who saw the presence of ethnic minorities, especially the self-organizing efforts of the Transylvanian Hungarian community, as a major threat, and sought to undermine them by all means possible.⁴² At the same time, as part of subtle political manipulations, there developed an old/new national ideal and "hero-worship" which tried to enhance the prestige of the military, state security organs, and law enforcement authorities, particularly by alluding to external and internal "threats" and by maintaining "historical" enemy images. In fact, this ideology relied on militaristic rhetoric just as that of the Ceausescu era, more or less openly establishing continuity with the minority policy and repressive strategies of the past forty

³⁷The National Salvation Front (Frontul Salvării Naționale) is the name of a political organization that was governing Romania in the first weeks after the regime change in 1989. It subsequently became a political party, and won the first elections under the leadership of President Ion Iliescu. In 1992, some members of this party, including President Iliescu, broke away from it, forming the Democratic National Salvation Front. In 1993, the remaining NSF was renamed as the Democratic Party.

³⁸"The government called miners to Bucharest from time to time, prompting them to act violently against groups that questioned the legitimacy of the system represented by president Ion Iliescu" – remarks Gabriel Andreescu in his analysis on the period. G. Andreescu, "România és a Római Egyezmény: egyéni jogok, diszkrimináció és különleges intézkedések," ["Romania and The Rome Convention: Individual Rights, Discrimination, and Special Measures,"] *Fundamentum* 4(2000): 20.

³⁹"The notorious Black March in Târgu Mureș and subsequent retaliations during which only ethnic Hungarians were convicted brought about intimidation and the revival of old power habits. Cf. Cs. Z. Novák and M. László, *A szabadság terhe. Marosvásárhely, 1990. március 16–21. [The Burden of Freedom. Targu Mures, March 16–21, 1990]* 133–228 (Pro-Print Könyvkiadó, Csíkszereda, 2012).

⁴⁰Stefano Bottoni, (1977–) historian, researcher, focused on the political and social history of Eastern Europe under the Soviet Bloc. His cited books are analyzing the nationality policy in Communist Romania, especially troubled history of the Hungarian Autonomous Region in Transylvania (1952–1960) and the anti-Hungarian reprisals carried out in Romania after the 1956 Hungarian revolution.

⁴¹Cf. S. Bottoni, *A várva várt Nyugat. Kelet-Európa története 1944-től napjainkig [Long Awaited West. Eastern Europe since 1944]*, 265–266 (MTA Bölcsészettudományi Kutatóközpont Történettudományi Intézet, Budapest, 2014).

⁴²Cf. G. Illyés and Z. Kántor, "Románia 1989 után," ["Romania after 1989,"] *Külvügyi Szemle* 4(2012): 79–98.



years. So, deliberate intimidation and discrimination were present, to a greater or lesser degree, in Romanian political and cultural forums, printed and electronic media just as in some court decisions or during various official inspections. Double-talk played an active role in this kind of policy, which promised the European Union and the Atlantic Alliance “exemplary” solutions to minority issues, while the selective – or tendentially biased – application of laws and incitement against minorities for the sake of electoral success were part of the daily practice.⁴³

However, compared to previous years, after 1989, a radical change of direction occurred in the political and cultural life of the Transylvanian Hungarian community, especially with regard to the openness of the newly created community spaces, the opportunities provided by literary journals and newspapers, and the various forms of self-organization. Following the abolition of censorship, free speech and freedom of expression, were insured, under the circumstances. Relative freedom of movement also existed, at least to Hungary and the former communist countries, but smooth travel to the European Union did not become possible until after Romania’s accession in 2007. Amid the new opportunities, on almost at all levels of society, the question emerged whether to remain on the native land or to emigrate, all the more so, since in the first half of the ‘90s, a new kind of dialogue began to develop between Hungary and the Transylvanian Hungarian community, which was a slightly cautious but productive and equal partnership until the early 2000s. “It’s an incredible freedom that I’m not locked in a country and that there’s no more censorship; that I can be here in Hungary. I publish quite a lot, and now they don’t write »Cluj-Napoca« next to my name (so they don’t treat me like an exotic zoo creature), but I simply have to exist within poetry or literature”,⁴⁴ says Zsófia Balla in a 1992 interview, implying somewhat ironically that from the perspective of the Hungarian intellectual living outside Hungary, classification based on individual values and free from any discrimination would be the best attitude on the part of the mother country.

6

It is probably obvious that, as a result of changes in the situation awareness of Transylvanian Hungarian literature after 1989, the traditional discourse on social engagement, the writer’s responsibility and Transylvanian spirit have not been able to prevail exclusively for the past two decades or so. However, if these issues have emerged at all, the writer’s exemplary attitude and heroic pathos have mostly been replaced by a viewpoint which, besides the reinterpretation of the classical relationship between the author and literary work, has urged the critical/hermeneutical dialogue with the Transylvanist tradition of the first half of the 20th century and with the typical trends during the Communist dictatorship.

Now, if we try a little more carefully to delineate the differences that distinguish the aesthetic/poetic tendencies of contemporary Transylvanian Hungarian literature from previous

⁴³Since the regime change, election propaganda threatening to detach Transylvania from Romania has been part of almost every campaign in Romania. For example, in the 1996 presidential elections this was also illustrated by a map. [Cf. G. Molnár, “Az erdélyi kérdés” [“The Transylvanian Issue”], in *Kisebbségi alternatívák. Kisebbségi kérdések megjelenítése a Magyar Kisebbségben (1995–2000)* [Minority Alternatives. Minority Issues Displayed in the Hungarian Minority (1995–2000)] ed. I. Györgyjakab, 3–27 (T3 Kiadó, Sepsiszentgyörgy, 2002).

⁴⁴E. Erdélyi and I. Nobel, *De azért itthon is maradn. ... [Staying at home all the same. . .]*, 155 (Tárogató Kiadó, Budapest, 1994).



(value) orientations, we can clearly state that, besides certain new tendencies, ideologies which date back to before the regime change have always had followers, and not only among the older generations. In a somewhat polarized manner, we might even say that the seemingly more traditional trends are interested in the continuation of the Transylvanist discourse, including the aesthetic/poetic patterns emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, while other tendencies are concerned with the naturalization and further consideration of the discourse seeking to break with this tradition. The first, apparently more conventional attitude is generally associated with a need for tragic/nostalgic (self) reflection, while a different kind of orientation, besides humor and language-game, emphasizes the intention of redefining culture, society, and national image, as well as the idea of representing the 21st century mediated reality. As a matter of fact, in contemporary Transylvanian Hungarian literary works, these issues are, at the same time, linked to an external approach, focusing on Hungarian and Transylvanian characteristics from the outside, which, along current social, political, ideological tendencies, asks about the future of mother tongue, culture, and art in a somewhat pessimistic, often ironic manner. The playful/ironic portrayal of narrow-minded provincialism is as much a part of this (world) representation, which contemplates things in a “distorting mirror”, as the superficial adherence to local traditions and social patterns, or the (self) reflexive examination of the identity crisis of the 21st century disguised as intellectual independence. Thus, individual issues and the different types of attitude towards the world and fellow humans gradually become part of the typically 21st century media space created by mass media and social networks which, on the one hand, functions as a medium facilitating the effective flow of information, and on the other hand as an instrument of power structures shaping the individual according to their own interests, or expressly as a metaphor of political manipulation. From a stylistic point of view, the literary texts produced after the 1989 regime change are, in many cases, characterized by a deliberately vulgar language or the use of teen slang. They point out the radical differences between the values of the past and the present, as well as the crisis of the language and the way in which art is losing ground and the emphatic social critique flowing from the emerging youth culture. Probably, these are the characteristics that most clearly connect Transylvanian Hungarian poetry at the end of the 20th century and at the beginning of the 21st century to trends in Hungary.

In contemporary Transylvanian Hungarian poetry, instead of registers seeking to aestheticise minority existence – or aiming to interpreting it in a tragic/heroic context typical of the decades of the communist dictatorship –, the direct, playful representation of issues concerning individual and national identity becomes predominant. (Self) ironical depiction of the relations between Transylvania and Hungary, and the anomalies of these relations, through the lens of migrant worker experience or of globalization come into the fore. In some aspects, all these initiatives were continuously present already in the 1980's, e.g. in Sándor Kányádi's, Aladár Lászlóffy's, László Király's, and András Ferenc Kovács's poems, and after the 1989 regime change they found a wide resonance in the poetry of younger Transylvanian Hungarian poets, such as Péter Demény⁴⁵ (*Bolyongás* [Wandering], 1997; *Beszélgetés a tükörrel* [Conversation with the Mirror], 2004; *A fél flakon* [The Half Bottle], 2007; *Lélekkabát* [Soul Coat], 2015), or

⁴⁵Péter Demény (1972–) Transylvanian Hungarian poet, writer, translator and academic, born in Kolozsvár. Degree in Hungarian Language and Literature at Babeş-Bolyai University, editor of *Kriterion Könyvkiadó* (Kriterion Publisher), and *Polis Könyvkiadó* (Polis Publisher), works at *Kronika*, *Erdélyi Riport*, and *Látó* journal.



László Lovétei Lázár⁴⁶ (*A névadás öröme* [The Joy of Naming], 1997; *Két szék között* [Between Two Chairs], 2005; *Zöld* [Green], 2011); *Miféle harag* [What Kind of Anger], 2019). This kind of postmodern reality is determined by a marketing approach and market factors, in the same way as predictions about the disappearance of traditional value systems, or the 21st century experience of the loss of prestige of literature and the devaluation of the status of poets and intellectuals:

Who's "they": I could never
figure it out, though I write all kind of things
just "this word": Hungarian
I haven't written it down so far "...
So there it is.
True, it's a quote
but for lack of anything better, that'll do ...
[...]
Don't expect of me some sort of ode:
it is not dawn, nor am I drunk

(László Lázár Lovétei: *Hol volt, hol nem* [Once Upon a Time])

In these poems we can witness a particular critical-hermeneutical approach, which is interested in both rejecting and reusing the traditional poetic way of speaking. On the one hand, the confessional character of the poems really helps the formation of a (fictitious) authorial identity; on the other hand, precisely as a result of the dialogue with previous texts, it leads to the creation of a horizon of meaning that questions the authenticity of the 21st century individual, reality, language, and poetry. The pathos of resistance, the pain of skepticism and renunciation are always overwritten by humor stemming from the directness of the speaker, the ease of everyday language.

Consequently, the narratives and motifs about the Transylvanian spirit appear in a well-defined, historically and textually organized (value) horizon, pointing out the radical differences between a false portrayal of Transylvania and post-communist reality, the well-known stereotypes and real values. Christian attitude and postmodern playfulness are as much part of the lyrical discourse as creative serenity and humility, which – viewed from the perspective of the individual – open up new directions for the self-understanding gestures and attempts of poetry, as well as of individual and collective identity.

⁴⁶Lázár László Lovétei (1972–) Transylvanian Hungarian poet, translator, born in Lovéte, a little village in Hargita county. Degree in Hungarian Language and Literature at Babeş-Bolyai University, editor and editor in chief of Székelyföld journal (2010–2020).

