

OF NON-PLACE: SPATIALITY IN ÁDÁM BODOR'S FICTION¹

The concepts of “imagined worlds” pervading and creating Ádám Bodor’s literary universes, despite their various constructed fictional realities, are brought together by a particular relation, a type of intellectual kinship in the unique way of space is approached. Space, which, instead of being one of the constitutive components of the textual world – in accordance with classic precepts of a literary work – here becomes the main axis, the central point, the primary “value-creating” category². In Ádám Bodor’s prose the unique role played by spatiality is related to yet another of the author’s initiatives: the place, in which his stories take place, does not exist in reality. The neologisms used to name these places, settlements, lodgments, watchtowers and mountain chains discretely suggest the type of space mentioned, so

¹ This research has been financed by The Ministry of Science and Higher Education as part of a program called “National Program of the Development of the Humanities” in 2012–2013.

² The analysis of the concept of “space” and its significance for literary and cultural studies are presented such works as *Space and Place* (Yi-Fu Tuan 1987), *Przestrzeń i literatura (Space and Literature)* (Głowiński 2007), *Przestrzeń w kulturze i literaturze (Space in culture and literature)* (Borkowska 2006), *Przestrzeń i rzecz (Space and Thing)* (Toporov 2003), *Czas i przestrzeń w prozie XIX i XX wieku (Time and space in 19th and 20th century prose)* (Niedzielski 1990).

that these geospatial/geopoetic journeys into the texts are directed and thereby marked by a significance derived from cultural memory about spaces in which these plots unfold.

What exactly is the mountain pass like?

Györgyi Fodor, analyzing the construction of Bodor's magical world and the adaptation of his novel in her essay *Az érsek szava* (*Archbishop's Word*)³, points to the basic condition of how his work is received, which is based on the "reader-tourist" being treated as someone who skillfully decodes the encrypted world of symbols and metaphors entwining the author's textual universe.

If we were to present Ádám Bodor with a random image of the world, he would have to immediately blur its borders and rename the mountain ranges in a way that would make them understandable to everyone and everywhere, and then he would have to sprinkle them with magical language, perfectly intelligible to any reader-tourist, for whom even the smallest real piece of information makes no difference. (Fodor 2009)

Fodor's observations compel us to pose a question around which the poetic world of Bodor's prose revolves: in what way should the artist create space so that it would transcend the hitherto limited role of cinema scenography towards a full-fledged, culturally significant material, one that subordinates the thought of one's own tradition, history and even national/European imagination?

Ádám Bodor chooses in his work the liminal space of the Gyulai Mountains [*Gyulai havasok*]⁴, which is concealed under the imagined

³ This is in reference to the film *Dolina* directed by Zoltán Kamondi from 2007. Ádám Bodor, in an interview he gave for *Székelyszó*, mentions the significant difference between the work of the director in adjusting the text to the language of film and his own concept of the novel, which is, for the most part, an individual, private image. "The work of the director is for the most part more controlled and direct than mine. For instance, he sees dictatorship in terms of its overt violence, whereas I see it in the painful pressure on the ribs". Ne kíméljük az olvasót, ha már... (Beszélgetés Bodor Ádám íróval). (Zsigmond 2006). Bodor's work has been adapted to the silver screen many times. In 1972 there appeared the film *Forró vizet a kopaszra* (*Wrzątkiem w tysego*) directed by Péter Bacsó (script: P. Bacsó, P. Zimre), in 1973 *Plusz-mínusz egy nap* (*Plus minusz jeden dzień*) directed by Zoltán Fábri (script: Z. Fábri, P. Zimre) and *A részleg* (*Wydział*) in 1994, directed by Péter Gothár (script: P. Gothár and A. Bodor).

⁴ Góry Gyulai [The Andrassy Mountains, The Gilau Mountains] - a mountain range in Western Romanian Mountains located in Transylvania.

name of “Sinistra Zone” and “Bogdanski Dolina” (*The Archbishop's Visit*). “The only place that can be found on a map is the Pop Ivan mountain range and it is, more or less, in their vicinity that most events in my work take place”, claims Bodor in an interview in *The Smell of Prison* (2001) – “it is generally there where I based the plot of my histories” (Bodor 2004: 170)⁵. His childhood “fairy-tale land” of Transylvania, known for its multicultural wealth of languages (Hungarian, Romanian, Ukrainian, Swabian, Serbian), is presented in these novels as a hermeneutic space, inaccessible to random wayfarers (“detainees”) (Bodor 2001: 109), and all of the natural cycles and universal (humanistic) values are radically disturbed and even irrevocably degraded.

Bodor's characters have no difficulty noticing the changing seasons, because their existence is limited by the presence⁶ of specific species of birds (waxwings, wild geese) or the blooming of plants and is limited only to several days and even a few hours: “A week or two earlier the mountain ash trees still held their clusters of fiery red berries, but by now only denuded branches remained: the waxwings, which feed on the berries, had arrived, driven here by the piercing winds up north” (Bodor 2001: 45). Certain states of nature are not subject to cyclical transformation, Andrej Bodor, the protagonist of *Sinistra Zone* who bears the author's surname, is surprised to notice that the traces he made years ago in the snow with his skis are still visible to the naked eye, even though, in accordance with the processes regulating the circulation of matter, they should have melted long ago:

All at once it hit me that these were my own old ski tracks. Left over from the final winter I'd spent here in the pass, they snaked their way through the incandescent spring grass and, finally, into the darkness of the forest [...]. Even once such a double set of tracks melts, an impression is left behind, a silky, silvery sheen that fades entirely only by early summer. Sometimes it never does (Bodor 2001: 18).

The reverse side of all these disturbances of the natural cycle stimulating the world of nature is indeed the disarray of the states defining the existence of all the participants of this space. The existence of

⁵ Bodor points to one other geographic name – Dobrin Peak. In *Sinistra Zone* this name is used to refer to a series of forest houses located in a reservation, inhabited by the characters of the novel and called jokingly “Dobrin City” (Bodor 2001).

⁶ With the exception of the world depicted in Bodor's last book, *Verhivina madarai* (*Birds of Verhovina*) where the “absence of birds” is significant (Bodor 2014).

characters exceeds or even defies their own, inborn limitations – you can die because of rain and the dead can be resurrected by means of simple restitutional activities. Bodor writes as follows about Coca Mavrodin-Mahmudia, Colonel Borcan's successor:

Having dozed off in the woods, she was caught unprepared by a freezing rain, and, motionless, like a sleeping moth, she froze into a crystalline mass under the ice. Later the wind tipped over this block of ice, which broke to pieces and melted. (Bodor 2001: 51–52)

Changes occurring within the confines of the characters' *habitus* also affect the basic instrument shaping their mutual relations – verbal and nonverbal communication. Coca Mavrodin informs the inhabitants of Dobrina of her decisions, ordering ribbons with orders to be placed on the trees and bushes, but for understandable reasons they rarely reach the addressees. Meanwhile, Andrej Bodor, in search of his missing son, Béli Bundasiana, finds out where his son is thanks to a microscopic sign: “a note etched with a needle onto a coin dropped into my mailbox” (Bodor 2001: 33). The obvious translocations in human behavior, reactions, moral and ritualistic stances are, therefore, predicated on excluding or disturbing the existence of the characters from the series of processes shaping and regulating their existence and they have an inextricable link to the obligation of being present in certain spaces, which in a visible, though inexplicable way, shapes all the manifestations of their lives. According to Kornélia Faragó (*Szituatív térszerkezetek. A dinamikus-poláris formáltság – Situational Constructions of Space: A Dynamic Formation*), analyzing the dynamic and polar formation of spatial relations in *The Sinistra Zone*, the space in which Bodor's characters can exist is extended with elements which create the impression of regularity: “going on the road, the state of ‘being on the road’, arriving at the destination, waiting, observing the terrain, meeting or, for example, death”. All these activities, as well as verbal communication, reveal themselves, according to Farago, through contextual, random evocations of space, which is never presented in its entirety, but as a fragment, supplemented and suggested by the context of a statement or a detail. It is, therefore, an accompanying space, present in an only situational manner (Farago 2001: 129).

It should be remembered that, despite functioning as “scenography” in Bodor's fiction, space is not devoid of the author's distinct reflection, which would allow us to talk about the fictional phenome-

non of nature. According to Enikő Boros (*A Sinistra körzet motívumhálója – A web of motifs in Sinistra Zone*), it can be described as an archetypal, on account of a particular type of “melting”, mutually intertwined “perspective from which Bodor asks us to observe the nature of the existence of primordial, communal influence: the magic of nature is connected with attentively becoming one with her” (Boros 101). Creating mysterious lands, which does not have its own counterpart in the reality outside the text is, according to Boros, a display of a primal desire to return to communal harmony, to a spatial refuge, where the natural order and everyone inhabiting it can constitute a particular kind of agreement, unity. It is worth reiterating the claim put forth by Margit Ács:

Existing in nature is a kind of archaic communal form of co-existing with nature, which presents itself in the existential impressions stemming from the unconsciousness, where the archetypal, demonic image of an ‘endless forest’ has not yet reached (Ács 1880).

This archetype can be treated as a metaphor of the universe, a symbol of primal strength that subordinates the universe. According to Boros, the decomposition of unburied bodies, which can be treated as a disturbance of the moral order, is at the same time a representation of the lost, though in a certain way desired, connection with the elements which eventually consume all matter.

Sinistra Zone is ruled by antique, cosmological principles: the four elements of earth, air, water and fire, as well as natural substances under constant change: rain, ice, fog, mud, snow, sunlight and clouds. The essence of man (*humanus*) is identical with its sphere of being. Along with the passage of life, it undergoes a natural transformation. Man is not a person, but a kind of “individuum” co-existing with nature, and the natural elements exist on in its corpse. (Boros 101)

The body of Coca Mavrodin melts along with the snow, thus becoming a part of Dobrinski Forest, and Colonel Borcan, who had been eaten by an animal, returns to the elemental order of nature, building the universe by returning to it.

Universalizing the space of the world of the “gulag”

Thinking about space becomes in Bodor's work a new category – “thinking spatially”, which is the most important symbolic language universalizing the textual message. The hidden motivation of the

writer, revealing itself in stripping proper names of their real meanings, serves above all to speak about the fundamental problems of existence and, even if we notice geographical markers, to aid in the identification of places described in the author's books with their real counterparts, the first reaction of "the reader-tourist" should be a journey into the depths of the essence of man and his social conditioning and a comparison, or a critical analysis, of the metaphorical blueprints form the book with their real prototypes.

What also warrants the journey is the hidden structure of the fictional world, which, under its aesthetic layer of "magical language", conceals carefully considered matrixes of a world steered by the mechanics of power. In *Sinistra Zone*, the military is in charge (first Colonel Borcan, then Coca Mavrodin), in *The Archbishop's Visit* it is clerics. None of the residents of Dobrina or Bodganski Dolina are in full command of their lives. The characters seem to have a "transitory" or "temporary" identity; each of them is only a "newcomer", "wayfarer", who was allowed for some time to live in this "non-place". Having no sense of attachment to the space in which Bodor develops the fictional lives of his characters is tied to the inevitable inner distinction of the fictional world between what is "inner/outer" and ours/other⁷.

This distinction is not, however, free of the weight of historical consciousness held by even the most isolated "reader-tourist". The situation of temporary presence in a closed world, which never becomes a homeland, is in the twentieth century a living metaphor of living in Central-Eastern Europe. In Bodor's novels, being in a space, the right to live in Dobrina is manifested by one visual sign: every resident has a metal plate around their necks with an, often incorrect, engraved name and surname. None of the characters who had forfeited their right to live in Bodanski Dolina or in Sinistra ever return.

Perhaps it is by merging the two cognitive perspectives: "metaphorical" (fictional) and "real" (realistic) and by preserving the natural territorial/spatial tension inscribed in the existence of people occupying borderlands that has allowed the writer to create a type of space which we today treat as ideal and iconic in discussions of the

⁷ Kornélia Faragó employs a differentiation based on issues of the visible, the Sinistra world and its terrain belonging to it, but appear in the accounts of visitors; hence, the division between "presence/being" [*jelenlét*] and "absence" [*távollét*], between which complicated, mutually intertwined life relations are played out (Faragó 2001: 134).

image of Central-Eastern Europe. A careful reading of Bodor's "magical language" will make it clear to the reader that Bodor is not using it in order to reinforce the power of his "imaginative concoctions" and "authorial hallucinations" – in the style of French magic realism – but as a sign of an alternative search for a new language, one which would be able to lift not only the memory of an ideal childhood but most of all a mature consciousness 'gulag-like' world (Bodor 2004: 16).

As far as the borderland is concerned, it is clear. It is no coincidence that it is so often the backdrop of my stories. It is usually the case that borderlands are usually more interesting than the center of a country. It is a magical, mysterious space, a place of risky encounters, where the scenery and the whole surroundings are marked by a state of tension. Europe's eastern border was a space cordoned off by drawbars and barbed wire, a place prickling with guard towers and cut by moats, where even a gliding bird was considered government property. (Bodor 2004: 12)

All the disturbances of norms, from the moral, cultural to the natural, serve only to express the ineffable absurdities of existence in places cordoned off by barbed wire, in the space of totalitarian regimes, and also those with artificially established territorial borders, which have often divided in half streets, houses, not to mention border towns. Despite the validity of the above judgments, Bodor is far from treating his own work radically material created in order to successfully expose the truth of political lawlessness and spatial ghettos. The writer concentrates instead on the arbitrary category of border and liminality – not only spatial, geographical, but, most of all, existential, intellectual, and moral. For Bodor, the basic condition and motivation to write is the need to freely create reality in which inevitable associations with an outer textual reality should accompany the reading, but should in no way dominate it.

The Poetics of the Provinces and a Shard of the Trianonic Glass

The strange web of binary oppositions building Bodor's fictional world is not without a nationalistic element, i.e. Hungarian. Critics of the writer's work have drawn attention to those elements of his stories, which can be read through the lens of Hungarian history and tradition. According to Péter Szirák, the author of *A regionálitás és*

a posztmodern kánon a XX. századi magyar irodalomban (Regionality and postmodern canon in twentieth century Hungarian literature), “Transylvanianism” “is a category that is derived especially from the situation of ethnic minorities, who, in their attempt to understand their spiritual-moral totality, turn it into a kind of survival strategy”⁸.

Szirák defines the concept of “Transylvanianism” as an ideological construct describing various representations of Hungarian minorities, who, as an ethnic totality, have retained their literary/cultural independence thank to their ability to co-exist peacefully in a multicultural world with other nationalities inhabiting Transylvania (Szirák 40).

Bodor, who places in these stories representatives of nearly all the nationalities when building the multicultural melting pot of Transylvania, faithfully represents the mood rich with history of “one of the most unique provinces in Europe”, which he claims could be a metaphor for the whole of Central Europe. The multicultural mosaic created and brought to life by Bodor is a modern attempt at consolidating the traditions of Transylvania, though devoid of a mythologizing element, which the writer avoids. Not without reason does the magical language of the novel accompany the descriptions of dirt, rotteness, stench, corpses, defecation, foul smells “mountains of death” (Bodor 2002: 7), which become the negative, naturalist background of all of Bodor’s stories. Symbolizing the post-Trianonic territorial breakup:

That something horrible had happened was evidenced by the horrible stench of hundreds of destroyed outside toilets, which was lifted around the area. In a few hours of the black like sot night, when all the people – as they say – were sleeping, Bogdanska Dolina crossed to the other side of the river. To another country. (Bodor 2002: 15)

Bodor is consistent in representing an honest account of Transylvanian reality, burring it deep in the bitter hopelessness of an exist-

⁸ In his comprehensive study devoted to the topic of “regionality/regionalism”, Szirák draws our attention to the basic components of space and regional identity and points to the significance of “peasant movements” [*népi mozgalom*] for the history of political, cultural and literary ideology. He emphasizes the significance of peasant discourse [*népi diskurzus*] and (post)romantic, modernist identity [(*poszt*)romantikus nemzeti identitása]. The formation of what is called “Transylvanian thought” [*erdélyi gondolat*], which became the “central point of the discourse creating ideology” of this region, led through years of literary and identity transformations to the birth of the category that is today called “Transylvanianism” (Szirák 40).

ence devoid of any perspective, in confined spaces, which exacerbate the feeling of isolation, with no hope of progress. Györgyi Pozsvai, the author of a monograph devoted to Bodor's work, analyzes the meaning of space in *Sinistra*, reading all the etymological hints included in the names of this fictional "non-place". For Pozsvai the Latin root word should be treated as a symbolic harmonization of mental ideas: "the image of ominous evil", "dark omen", "a prophecy of an unhappy end" as well as "the awareness of ephemerality" (Pozsvai 149). The ambiguous division of space represented as right and left parts (as connoted by the titles of the novels) reflects, according to Pozsvai, the problems permanently inscribed in the territorial opposition between the East and the West, that is on what is indeterminate, isolated, closed (Pozsvai 149)⁹. The division brings to mind the real territorial borders and European spaces.

According to Kornélia Faragó, the author of *Térrányok, távolságok. Térdinamizmus a regényben (The Direction of Space, Distance: Space and its Dynamics in Novel)*:

Territorialization, deterritorialization, reterritorialization – taking place on the basis of agreements, shifts and restorations – can be traced thanks to an examination of traces of these changes and also thanks to the historical and cultural dimension of space and the images of space consolidated in language (Faragó 2001:8).

The image presented by Bodor not only retains its internal contradictions inscribed into the cultural heterogeneity of Transylvania (the real equivalent of *Sinistra*), but also – on the path towards developing the spatial concept of nonexistent places – it also makes it possible to treat this remarkable province, which symbolizes the difficult political existence of Central Europe, as a matrix expressing the fundamental dilemmas of human existence. Bodor retains also the most important element of culture ascribed to this land – her concealed mystery. Not all of the characters struggle with the powers of primal nature, not all of them are "interned wanderers". Among these

⁹ Pozsvai refers to two other critical texts devoted to this issue: *A kiismerhetetlen remekmű* (Angyalosi 18) and *A hely, ahol lak(t)unk* (Alexy 82). The extraordinary nature of this space is emphasized by the absence of a cemetery, which symbolizes the desire to maintain continuity between ancestors and descendents. In *Sinistra* it is difficult to point to the existence of family ties; there are no generational dependencies, society functions temporarily, and any social guidelines are regulated by military orders.

characters appear ordinary observers, who came here, drawn by curiosity. It is they who ask: "What exactly is the mountain pass like?". The absence of any resolution makes it possible to treat *The Sinistra Zone* as a provocative text that elicits a discussion on the role and meaning of closed, Gulag-like, spaces. Bodor asks: can we leave the space that is marked and dominated by military forces? Is there anyone, who is a local in such a space, or should we instead speak of a ceaseless ethnic, linguistic transit of values and tradition? Bodor preserves the secret of this non-place; he does not suggest any unequivocal solutions, but proves that whoever once visits Sinistra is forever condemned to it.

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