THE APPEARANCE OF THE 1989 POLITICAL TRANSFORMATION IN CENTRAL EUROPEAN PROSE

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Writing about the two branches of Latin-American literary theory, Raúl Bueno claims that both directions ‘aim to explore Latin-American reality’, ‘both groups accept the referential nature of these literatures’, ‘are in close relationship with the text, with contextuality’ as well as ‘with the reality both creating it and appearing in it’. [Bueno 1999: 418]

On the analogy of the common socio-cultural characteristics hidden in the depths of Latin-American literatures, we can talk about the common experiences of (Eastern) Central European literatures, whose shared factors may be dictatorship lasting over forty years, 1989 as the turning point and the following post-communist era. Our starting point could be the determining role of experience in the postmodern and/or young literature of the Central European region. We are going to analyse the following Czech, Slovak, Polish, Hungarian and Slovak Hungarian books: Dorota Masłowska Wojna polsko-ruska pod flagą biało-czerwoną (Polish-Russian war under the white and red flag) (2002), Jáchym Topol Anděl (Angel) (1995), Eman Erdeyí, Marek Vadas Univerzita (University) (1996), Oliver Bakoš Katedra paupológie (The Paupology Department) (2001), Attila Györy Kitőrés (Breaking out) (1993), János Térey Termann hagyományai (Termann’s Traditions) (1997) and Attila Hazai Szex a nappaliban (Sex in the Living Room) (2000).

The post-1989 postmodern prose is termed text-literature not only by Hungarian literary criticism. In Slovak literary criticism, the post-1989, younger generations are called genitalists. In the texts of genitalist writers, the influence of post-structuralist literary theory is the most striking. They consciously include so-called intertexts in
their texts, which play on the theoretical texts published in post-communist countries after 1989. The theoretical boom of the 90s is a common experience in Eastern-Central-European literary theory, whose influence is felt in the literary texts themselves. The array of literary theoretical terms, the uncritical use and mixing of the findings of Western theoretical schools formulated in opposition to each other, in order to make the text appear all the more professional… – well, some young Slovak writers consciously include in their texts formulae that perhaps all too easily lead us to the theoretical texts of Bakhtin or Barthes, Eco or Lacan, Wittgenstein or Foucault, Heidegger or Deleuze, Borges or Derrida. However, overwhelming literary texts with theory does not mean what Tim Beasley-Murray claims: that Slovak genitalists are in fact impotent, or that they made a contract with the devil, as their texts are imprisoned by the all too grey theory; or, according to the Dictionary of Slovak writers: ‘Forced sterility, as well as the non-existent originality of official literature and life, opposed by the most part of eighties prose, was replaced in the next decade by voluntarily accepted sterility, the minimum of reality and the lack of authorial originality (the death of the author).’ [Beasley-Murray 2000, 16]

However, language games, intertextuality, metafiction and a different way of speaking about the world do not make it impossible for the experience of an era to appear in the text. In young Slovak literature, the use of post-structuralist theories does not prevent these texts from speaking about the characteristics of post-communist society at the same time.

It is the process as a result of which the literary theories (thinking about literature) of post-communist countries try to catch up with Western theoretical schools. The ‘theoretical boom’ or ‘theoretical carnival’, beheld by many with astonishment, also made its way into fiction; literary texts also reacted to the situation that had arisen, which appears to be a typically Eastern-European condition.

In Slovak literature, an interesting sub-genre is the so-called university novel, one of whose important elements conveying meaning is the presence of theory. The novel by the Vadas-Erdélyi duo, entitled University is a good example of this, as well as Oliver Bakoš’s The Paupology Department. Filozofická fakulta (Faculty of Philosophy) by Tom von Kamin or Univerzita (University) by Tomáš Horváth also toy with the possibility of the university novel. A memorable scene from the novel by Eman Erdélyi and Marek Vadas is exactly the individual-theoretical textualization of the regime change of 1989:

Dear Mrs. Teodora Kugelková was being carried by the lift in her building, exhausted. As her eyes closed, on the tenth floor, a charming thought came to her mind. Why should she remain a Marxist all her life, why couldn’t she try something else? What if she turned into a phenomenologist today? Her face lit up with a professorial smile, and later she lay in her bed with satisfaction that she had screwed Marxism and everyone.

The next day, a completely new woman went to town. On her way to the university, she purchased a hat and make-up. [Erdélyi, Vadas 1996: 15]

Oliver Bakoš’s novel also starts with a scene of transformation. As a result of the events of 1989, the hitherto faithful Marxist, Běžová, also a university professor, decides that she would now believe in God. Even God is surprised by the conversion
of the erstwhile orthodox communist lecturer. Běžová, in turn, is surprised by how seamlessly and kindly she is received by the Catholic circles, and consequently, in the first moments, even she starts to believe that she believes. She decides to create a new theoretical discipline: paupology, the study dealing with the social strata which are becoming poorer and poorer, and she immerses herself in her books with a renewed wave of energy. Every philosopher that she had ever read becomes the forerunner of paupology, and in instances where she could find no reference to the topic whatsoever, she regarded the author’s silence as grave, and listed their texts by virtue of their implicit features under the basic literature of paupology.

The new, determining Central-Eastern-European status of theory as a basic experience is presented by Dorota Masłowska and it also appears in ironic form in Attila Hazai’s short stories. In the Polish writer’s novel [Masłowska 2003: 161], a character called Masłowska enters at one point, whose name and biographical data show similarities with the author and, what is more, she plays the role of the omniscient narrator. This meta-narrational layer of the novel obviously plays on postmodern narration theories. A well-outlined part of Attila Hazai’s Sex in the Living Room is constituted by writings which seem to imitate the tone of a university lecture or thesis. The ‘post-talk’ addressing the reader makes variations on the characteristics of texts playing on Western, French, Barthes-ian, Foucault-ian, etc. subject-theories, similarly to the texts of Slovak genitalists:

Do you feel like reading a kind of text which starts by stating that life has no meaning? What do you expect of me, what does your self expect of myself? I wonder where the border lies between us or whether there is a border between me. [Hazai 2000: 105]

Thus, in the case of certain texts, the experience of the role of (literary) theory may become a major text-constructing agent. Another great experience of post-89 Eastern-Central-European prose is travelling. The topos of being en route seems essential in the European novel, and most often, the stages of the protagonist’s development are linked to the sections of the road travelled. Attila Györy’s novel Breaking out formulates the philosophy of constantly being on the road:

There is some wonderful feeling about it when a goddam great beast brakes behind us, we glance at his number plate as we run, so that we know what language to talk to him, where to attack; the slick feeling when the car jump-starts, and all that. What more do you want? A gorgeous, adorable, rainbow highway – when the engine roars and we set out towards our destination, but never to arrive… [Györy 1993: 17]

By transgressing borders, by constantly being on the road, the punk tramps of Györy’s novel seem to take revenge on the forty-year dictatorship with its iron curtains and on the isolated socialist system. During the dictatorship, the border meant more than a simple country border: it divided not only two countries but two worlds. What is more, getting across country borders was not easy even within the socialist block. Györy’s tramps’ jaws drop when they cross the German-Dutch border without passport control:
We storm across the border. Just like that, nothing anywhere! [...] – Look at that, what passports they’ve got, see, like a student ID! – I gasp, but they also laugh at ours. We are mutually amazed, and don’t even notice that we shit on everything that had been hammered into us for forty years. [Györy 1993: 29]

In this case, the meeting of cultures ends in mutual amazement, but it does not come to a dialogue. In the text, the Eastern, socialist society appears to be alien with its estranged ideology, but so does the Western, unknown society, whose power-enforcement organizations often confront the characters, who are living off casual theft and soup kitchens, who had committed illegal border crossings, who have also been to the cells of the Palais de Justice in Paris. East and West also collide in Topol’s novel Angel. Like in Györy’s novel, drug dealers Jatek and Věra are chased by French police. The common experience of the two novels is that those coming from the East are only able to sustain themselves in Western society for a longer period as a destitute pariah or as a recidivist. János Térey’s volume of short stories paints the same picture, even though the protagonists of Termann’s Traditions are not drug dealers like Jatek or Věra in Topol’s book, nor are they tramp punks like Dőce or Zsani in Györy’s: ‘Brémai’s sticky fingers were feeling around on the shelves of supermarkets. He was only searched once, when his pockets were really empty, just by chance’. [Térey 1997: 53]

It seems like the basic experience and action pattern of Eastern-Europeans finding themselves in the West is stealing. It is not only some subconscious revenge on western welfare societies, but also a vital necessity: it is the only chance to overcome poverty and to survive (as we saw in the case of Györy’s protagonists). This continuous, incessant, angry stealing also seems to be a basic Eastern-European experience in post-1989 prose, recurring as a kind of variation on a theme.

For Eastern-Europeans, Western-European culture includes several objects revered as demigods. During the nineties, these objects became incorporated into the everyday life of post-communist societies. We can often encounter the processes and individual stages of this incorporation in the analysed texts. In Györy’s novel, for the narrators Süne and Zsani, such fetished objects are Doc Marten’s boots. In Attila Hazai’s short stories, a nouveau-riche environment enters the texts which parodies object-fetishism characteristic of Western civilization. In the short story entitled Ric-si bácsi a Kanári-szigeteken (Uncle Ritchie on the Canary Islands), the yellow helicopter generously offered as a gift by Uncle Ritchie becomes the token of loyalty and tolerance. Jáchym Topol’s novel Angel introduces the sacred venue of market economy: the business premises. Of course, only a kind of Eastern-European business premises, converted from a room of a private flat, with the charm of the initial era of free capitalism:

A thousand snow-white, “Alaska” brand candles were stored in the bath for the time being. Paint boxes were lined up in the cupboard. There were the frames of eight “Superbus” brand mountain bikes shining in the living room. Machata’s bed was surrounded by bags of herbs and knedli powder and tins of sardines neatly arranged. The glass cabinet gave shelter to six hundred packs of “Yummy” mini-ketchup. And so on. [Topol 2000: 44-45]
The ironic text of *Angel* wonderfully juxtaposes the two states. During Jatek’s treatment in a psychiatric ward (while he fell out of time), society underwent a major change: after the grey, faceless, dim world of socialism, we can marvel together with Jatek, who has just stepped out of the institution, at the expansion of the private sector and the world of McDonald’s. In *Breaking out*, Süne and Zsani are faced with the multiculturalism of consumer society in the hustle and bustle of the market in Amsterdam: African, Far Eastern, Dutch, French and Belgian sellers offer our heroes the experience of a strange mixture of interchangeability and authenticity.

The idol of this sacred place, increased to unreality and perfection, where objects become capable of showing themselves in full nudity, is the supermarket, which also stands in the centre of Eastern-Central-European man’s desires. An altar where post-communist man can offer a sacrifice to Western civilisation, an offering he had been waiting to make for decades. Sečková, the alcoholic lecturer of *The Paupology Department*, cheating on the tram on her way to the university, is thinking that her lecture will be about supermarkets. However, she is unable to approach her subject; all she can think of is ridiculous commonplaces until she comes to the conclusion that the supermarket is ‘Simply poetry!’ [Bakoš 2001: 48]

In post-1989 prose, drugs are major referential candidates. Drugs became part of the post-89 folklore; for the societies awakening behind the iron curtain, especially for the young generations, they are identified with freedom or, more precisely, with its anarchistic concept. Drugs take the role of the ‘forbidden fruit’ and it is so naturally present in the novels we are analysing as if they were everyday consumer goods. Most characters of Dorota Masłowska’s novel are almost continually ‘sped up’ by all the speed they are taking [Masłowska 2003: 11] and in Attila Györy’s *Breaking out*, drugs play a major role in the plot. The Netherlands becomes the destination of the vagabond protagonists in the first place because that is where society has the most liberal attitude to drugs. Whereas for Györy, drugs run through the text as the allegory of rebellion and involve scenes of clashes with the authorities, in Dorota Masłowska’s and Attila Hazai’s novels, drugs almost become the synonym for food; they are common consumer goods. The characters of Hazai’s short stories roll their joints with routine movements with or instead of breakfast or dinner. In the short story *A rózsaszín por* (*The Pink Powder*), the characters’ dialogue is controlled by the dry logic of the drug. In Jáchym Topol’s novel, Jatek and Věra support themselves as dealers in Paris. During a fight, a new substance is born, a unique mixture of powders:

That night Hassan bowed before Jatek and lapped up the crystal from Věra’s palm like a cave dog. From that moment on, he kept three steps of respectful distance from the pale priestess. The other visitors were in ecstasy, too. This drug, this new product enslaved everyone. The white-haired Lebanese stayed with them for three days and then called Věra Men’s Seven Pleasures Tower’s Goddess. Upon Jatek he bestowed the Blessing of the Intestines’ Pleasures. [Topol 2000: 59-60]

Jatek becomes the leading light of the world ruled by drugs in *Angel*. Following Jatek’s glance, a world opens up before the reader that has already been broken on the crystal lattice of the drug. A small, red blood vessel spraying through a white
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In relation to the examined prose texts, we have arrived at this point at the possibility of a sadistic narration, which we can interpret as a governing feature of referentiality written in the text. The worlds created by the texts are interpreted through roughness: the roles, situations and motifs dictated by roughness follow each other like links of a chain. In János Térey’s texts, the intonation and basic tone are created by gangster poetry. We are faced with images of violence all along. In his imagination, Romanians had conquered his native land; his uncle chases him threatening with a beating; he is forced to live in his rented accommodation in Budapest amidst constant tension and quarrels with his roommates; the basic experience of his mates is the world of pranks, low pubs and parties ‘with a feeling’. The protagonist’s empty world, which implies an existentialist attitude, only reinforces the mutual premises of loneliness and rudeness: human relations are built on the analogy of the budding wild capitalism of a post-communist country.

In Oliver Bakoš’s novel The Paupology Department we can observe the fight of theories, professors, associate professors not short of rough punches even below the belt:

1. Create discipline = paupology!
2. Department head position = take it!
3. Who in head position? = Blatenská

However, after a brief rethink, she modifies the plan:

PA U P O L O G Y
1. Department head position = take it!

Eman Erdélyi and Marek Vadas’s University, the endless drinking sessions end in loss of consciousness, vomited-upon books and carpets in their soft version; in sprains in their medium-strength version and a heart attack in the hardest version. In Attila Györy’s Breaking out, roughness is not only the guarantee for survival (stealing, homelessness and prison) but, in a paradoxical way, also of friendship and fellow-feeling. The members of the gang, Sűne, Zsani and Döce, keep slapping hell out of each other: whether they screw something up or carry out a mission successfully.

Of the texts discussed here, perhaps Attila Hazai’s short story A dorogi vadászat (Hunting in Dorog) and Topol’s Angel exploit the poetry of brutality most thoroughly. In Hazai’s story, the protagonists are taken to the maze of subhuman passions by hitting the jackpot. The siblings’ argument ends in murder, they exterminate each other and when their parents arrive home, the view makes them commit suicide. At
the end of Topol’s novel, the threads of the narration – the chase after the unique drug coveted by underworld figures; Machata, who subordinates everything to getting rich; the protagonists Jatek and Ljuba’s disordered love life; the miscarriage of their child; Machata’s wife joining the sect of The Faithful to the Living Coming; the activities of the half lunatic, half criminal sect members – converge into scenes of horror and terror, and the book ends with half a dozen ‘sinful’ people tortured to death. The carnival of post-communist societies creates a new quality from the dance of intertwining dead, burnt bodies.

It is the specific aim of some works of post-1989 Eastern-Central-European prose to enable readers to interpret the social and cultural processes of the region on the basis of the literary text as their starting point. Perhaps this also explains the fact that almost all of the prose works discussed here take place at an actual place and time. One of the most beautiful (and at the same time, most referential) scenes in Attila Györy’s novel is when they make a pilgrimage to Jim Morrison’s grave and, to authenticate the story, the author uses the final meaning of referentiality, which is simple tautology: ‘We go back to a deserted crypt and, using a handful of empty wall, we sign our names. Anybody can ascertain it; there is our signature with the date.’ [Györy 1993: 27] Oliver Bakoš’s *The Paupology Department* takes place in Bratislava, just like Eman Erdélyi and Marek Vadas’s novel *University*, and what is more, both at the faculty of arts of Comenius University. Erdélyi and Bakoš use a similar trick as Györy: a hand-drawn map is annexed to the novel, which shows the most common scenes by arrows, even with their names before and after the change of political regimes.

However, deciphering the hidden references of the texts requires a reader who himself is a partaker of the world set up by the text. Such small signs, by which the year in issue, 1989, is written into the texts are, for example in Erdélyi and Vadas’s novel, the mention of Tornaľa or the Czech-Slovak opposition in the Devin scene, which are probably hard to interpret for the uninitiated reader. Similarly, the unfolding of the concept ‘ujo Sőrös’ (which ‘hides’ the name of György Soros) could be the subject matter of a separate study for a reader not living in the context of Slovakia; or the journal *Sárkányfü* (*Dragongrass*), brought into a text by Attila Hazai; the phrases Great Plain or National Cultural Fund for a reader who only encounters them as a one-off.

The exploration of post-1989 Eastern-Central-European prose offers its reader the gift of the experience that, during reading, not only texts read texts but so do cultural contexts and the body does, as well. In reading, we are forced to face the bases and experiences of our identity as, although there are an infinite number of prospective readers in every text, it is our own reading that we must create.

**Bibliography**


**Summary**

The appearance of the 1989 political transformation in Central European prose


The theoretical boom of the 90s and the new, determining Central-Eastern-European status of theory is a common experience in Eastern-Central-European literary theory and literature. Another great experience of post-1989 Eastern-Central-European prose is travelling and the meeting of cultures. The topos of being en route seems essential in the European novel, and most often, the stages of the protagonist’s development are linked to the sections of the road travelled. In post-1989 Eastern-Central-European prose, drugs are major referential candidates. Drugs became part of the post-89 folklore; for the societies awakening behind the iron curtain, especially for the young generations, they are identified with freedom or, more precisely, with its anarchistic concept. The study analyses the common socio-cultural characteristics in the post-89 Eastern-Central-European prose.

Key words: *Central Europe, literature, post-1989 prose, identity, referentiality*