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BEATRICE TÖTTÖSSY

Hungarian Postmodernity and Post-Coloniality: Epistemology and Literature

In this article, my objective is to analyze the literary postmodern in Hungary as an "anterior future" (Lyotard, 1987, 24), a Hungarian postmodern that, still in the throws of exhausting realized socialism and that, among numerous remnants of the collective memory of Modernity carries the signs which "will have made" itself seduced to give birth to a "changing" (Perniola, 4) postmodernism¹. In my discussion I will focus on the epistemological bases of contemporary Hungarian literature in its postmodern manifestations of the literary text.

From among the manifestations and paradigms of contemporary Hungarian literature, one factor is immediately noticeable: a restlessness present everywhere, the hurry to observe, a strong will to look at oneself in the mirror, and to interpret the links that this new literary universe has with itself. But, already at the end of the 1970s, when literature began to "use" the mirror - there is point of departure in 1979, with Péter Esterházy's *Termelési-regény (kissregény), - regény [A Novel of Production (a sssshort novel), - a Novel]* — it was disappointed, its will to re-appropriate of the "reflection" found obstacles that apparently were unsurmountable.² The mirror, during those first moments of enthusiasm for truth, resulted in reality to be unusable. Unusable, because, instead of literature, it showed an opaque image, difficult to decipher: the country's literary conditions³ — and, particularly, the condition and function of the people of letters — in the realized socialism of the last thirty years. However, despite disappointments,

¹ This article is an excerpt from my book, *Sentieri postmoderni in Ungheria. Cultura letteraria 1979-1994* (forthcoming in 1995). The book is an attempt to theoretically and methodologically outline and interpret the literary postmodern in Hungary in the context of understanding why and how the literary postmodern, a universal phenomenon of culture, developed in Hungary.

² In realized socialism the dispute between art and cultural politics had as its categorial pivot in the notion of "aesthetic reflection" ("die ästhetische Widerspiegelung") a concept systematically elaborated on by György Lukács (1963). About the political manipulation of the concept in Hungary, see Szerdahelyi.

³ For a discussion of the function of the Humanities (philosophy, literature, and sociology) in the interwar period of Hungarian history see Lackó; Lendvai.

today, after another two decades we understand that Hungarian literary postmodernism was born with that attempt to look at itself. Its manifest parabola, Esterházy starting in 1979 with the "postmodern novel of production novel" — which offered the persiflage of the genre popular in the literary culture of Socialist Realism — was passing through the initial stages to re-introduce *belles-lettres* in its true sense to Hungarian literature. By 1986, again Esterházy with another novel, *Bevezetés a szépirodalomba, - bevezetés a szépirodalomba* [*An Introduction to belles-lettres: An Introduction to belles-lettres*], with the sarcastic spirit of one who has decided to face the total reality of the literary production system — made socially functional previously by specific cultural politics which in turn required that artistical writing manifest itself as a variation of handbook-literature of political Divulgation — suggested, by "reflecting" the title of the work into its subtitle, that is necessary to re-establish literature. The parabola, in its present phase, reached an intense postmodern "microtextuality," in a certain sense independent from the typology of the macrostructures in which it becomes part of them and where they reveal themselves in different poetical macroforms, from the broad genre concept of family sagas in the form of novel to prose poetry (see Töttössy 1994). Such a microtextuality is made by linguistic events that are, so to speak, re-bound as shreds, splinters, and clips of realities in which ordinary daily and extraordinary artistical aspects "make themselves" inseparable. This structure results in a non-linear narrative, a narrative in which the writer (and the reader) finds himself "tangled up," that is to say, awaiting "fantastic, fictional adventures" (P. Esterházy, 1986b, 39), as the critic László Hekerle explains by 1985: "We will love also invented stories when things will really happen" (37)

It is important for us to attempt to decipher the self-image and the situation of the self-analysis in this postmodern literature in its specific Hungarian context because of the rapid changes the country is experiencing after the demise of Soviet economic, political, and military power and influence.

The country is changing from a society founded on mass Socialist Realist inspired paradigms of communication characterised by "compact" communication, planned and orchestrated, a "illustrated" (Magarotto 1980, 100-1) *unique Text* (a unique speech) of political ideology to a society based on a different type of mass communication of *infinite individual texts*.

The new literary act — the proto-postmodern — which announced the transition to a new society, has been instead Péter Esterházy's innovation to transcribe onto one sheet of paper the whole text (more than three hundred pages) of a literary work that already existed, thus creating a *picture-text*⁴. This perception of the literary text "in reflection" was (at the beginning of the 1980s) one (literary)

⁴ The transcribed work is in question is Géza Ottlik's *Iskola a határon* (1959), the "operator" of the transcription Esterházy (see Balassa). Such a "transcription" confirms the intimate link, within the literary system, of poetical action by a Hungarian writer and his poetical predecessor, Jorge Luis Borges (see Jauß 128) through second order observation.

gesture characteristic of the literary condition in "transit" (Perniola, 4) between the two kinds of society, "Communist" and Soviet dominated and postmodern. An allegory *ante litteram* of the postmodern relationship reality, where subjectivity affirms its own "weak" individuality (Vattimo 1989, 99-100). Weak because it only exists inasmuch it gives a literary meaning (it refers to itself) into someone else's literary work (the self in the other).

In 1991, the president of the new Hungarian Republic following realized socialism and Soviet domination, Árpád Göncz, a translator and dramatist, suggested that

We are in the middle of a process of life. This means to me, first of all, that every night I have to make order in myself, I have to put in its right place everything happened to me and in myself during the day ... it is indispensable to be able to mediate myself, to be able to communicate." (315; my italics).

The individual, linguistically and then historically concretized, re-emerges here, that nucleus of modern humanism that had been simulated for forty years in the super-politicized praxis of communication by realized socialism, in its daily "over-production of words and symbols" (Todorov 1993, 101-2). In the literary culture and then in the aesthetic-linguistical postmodern of Hungarian culture, this individual linguistically and then historically concretized is de-simulated on the political level to be re-simulated in terms of pure literariness, since the extreme creative consciousness raises him to an "exact" communicative unity (Bojtár 1986, 340-3; Esterházy 1986a, 504). The Hungarian literature (by the 1990s) still of "transit ... between two points which remain both present and available" (Perniola, 4) between the memory of Modernism and the postmodern creativity that elaborates it, shows itself as the level on which a *déjà vu - déjà lu* system is transplanted (a system belonging to the recent and less recent past) *to keep account of the laws of the ecology of the communicative mind* and, over all, *of its essential nucleus, the aesthetic-linguistic fantasy*. However, by the 1990s there are more literary cultures in Hungary: one of this is a postmodern literary culture, which acts as an elite communicative model. By now, such an elite is sociologically formed by writers, people of letters, university students, etc., and while it does not aspire to leadership in society, just because it maintains the "exiguity" (Esterházy 1991, 146) of literary existence, it already outlines itself and for itself a *new hungarian sociality*: the renouncement of any hierarchical structure of communication. Hungarian culture is, in this way, predicting the probable exhaustion and end of a plurisecular tradition that has always tried to keep the role

4 Beatrice Töttösy

of centrality of literature. And such a new sociality is meant as one of the aspects of the present "new sensibility" (Kulcsár 1993), that concerns Hungary as well.

To agree with Siegfried J. Schmidt, founder of the systemic and empirical approach to literature ("der Radikale Konstruktivismus") and who describes himself as a "eine Form modernisierter Moderne" and "für postmoderne Denker als Gesprächspartner" (Schmidt 1993b, 302) and for this reason is well known in postmodern Hungarian circles, in the Hungarian society of *post*-socialist mass communication ("eine funktional differenzierte Massenmediengesellschaft" Schmidt 1993a, 9) the literature becomes "ein Medienangebot unter anderen" and the consequence is evident: literature will compete with other media: "Ob der Literatur dabei eine Sonderstellung gegenüber anderen Medienangeboten eingeräumt werden kann, ist eine empirisch zu klärende Frage. Eine Sonderstellung einfach zu unterstellen, wäre bildungsbürgerliche Ideologie" (Schmidt 1993a, 9).

Further, my postulate is to adapt Adorno's question to our time: *how is literature possible after the Holocaust and after the Fall of Berlin Wall?*

My hypothetical response is that literature is possible inasmuch as it can offer itself as self-analysis, that is to say, it does so in self-referential terms. In other words, a self-analysis which guarantees to literature the action of a people of letters who place and observe themselves on the border of the literary and non-literary in the context of an aesthetic-linguistic and poetical consciousness. In present-day Hungary such a consciousness — evidently with its tangent, the concept of culture promoted by the humanist liberalism of the nineteenth century — is deeply possessed by the late literary modernity produced, imposed and ruled by the cultural politics of an (un)realized socialism.

Historically, in the Hungary at the end of the 1970s in an intense dynamic made of mutual influences, along signs of latent and strongly compromised late literary modernity, [tehát] a postmodern literary culture emerged. A phenomenon that — compared to other aspects of culture in the Hungarian social system — showed to have a great innovative capacity.

It was, for example, a literary culture in which was not the text — or better, the textual qualities — that in itself and for itself offered itself as the uncontaminated ground from which to produce a (self)definition, that is to say, the definition of the (textual) location of Hungarian postmodernity. At the same time, it should be noted that the demands and the properties of *text per se* were a "guide" which induced writers-readers to follow the path of postmodernity. The text

intuited them to be in “transit” in the postmodern path in order to have - hungarian writers and readers - experience/event of literary culture, experiences/events of text as "attempt" (Lukács 1981, 125, 131) at literary culture: today, the efforts of young Lukács who in his works bridged the Western with Hungarian parameters, to understand the function of literature as "process" which operates between sociology, aesthetic and ethics out of an kind of methaphisics, is up to date again: Lukács approached the problem of literary "process" as an experience (i.e., “function”) and its phenomena as not-metaphysical entities of social life (Lukács 1977, 385-421).

CULTURE AND CIVILIZATION IN THE HUNGARIAN POSTMODERN AND
POSTCOLONIAL [PHILOSOPHICAL-LITERARY CREATIVITY]

Not being able to understand sufficiently the notions of "to be," nowadays this does not imply uncertainty. Martin Heidegger, in his *Sein und Zeit* pointed to the position of the individual in daily life and in history. In my opinion, it is an ambition of almost all in Hungarian philosophical culture, to meditate on the shades and the meaning(s) of Heidegger's postulate. It is an ambition in a very intense and also very effective way, since the horizon of discussion is enlarged to the next evolution of Heideggerian thinking, to his reflections on Humanism and the limits of methaphysical thinking, to his analysis regarding the cultural function of daily language (1976b). Heidegger's questions and arguments affect intimately Hungarian intellectuals now emerging from the experience of realized socialism. If in the 1960s — when the Hungarian unabridged translation of *Brief über Humanismus* was published in Hungarian (Heidegger 1976a, Köpeczi 1965) — Heidegger was being read in terms of a peculiar existentialism that was indissoluble from the condition of the individual in realized socialism and based on a prevalently ethical-political concept of freedom, one of the most representative expressions of this existentialism appeared in the novel *Saulus* of Miklós Mészöly.

However, since the 1980s the same Heideggerian thesis, including the consequences of dictatorship through which public opinion refuses things supposed as incomprehensible, was approached in different terms of reading, so in a context of neither political nor ideological.

In Hungary, Heideggerian thinking is offered by philosophers-translators and consequently used by public readership as an extraordinary support of culture. Now, the writers are able to stimulate each single reader to open themselves to the prospective of daily freedoms, of the "limitless pluralism" of cultural, artistic, and literary movements as well as the political ones or those of different nature, with

no exclusions. For example, the philosopher Mihály Vajda — an ex-Marxist and a former student of Lukács — maintains that it is not necessary to read or write in the language of philosophy to understand Heidegger but rather, "to understand Heidegger means to try to enter in empathy with his text" (201). In the Hungary of the 1980s, Heidegger thus becomes the ambassador of the "message of postmodernism," because his works inspire to understand and view literature beyond its "functional" aspect within social life and to perceive it in its multitude of functional *and* pluri-ideas-laden constructs, thus representing "concrete culture," finally void of its totalitarian and colonized state. This situation is manifested in the previously un-experienced but now real situation where in Hungary "foreign cultures are present at all level of daily life [and culture]" (Heller and Fehér 1992, 156).

Among Hungarian models of cultural and philosophical arguments regarding postmodernity there is one postulated by Zoltán Endreffy, an intellectual category, *reasoned anti-Cartesianism*. According to this postulate, science and technology, neutral phenomena in themselves similarly to language, did not finalize that total power on nature predicted by Cartesius.

Real products of scientific and technical activity have created, instead, the "capability to accumulate" (weapons, nuclear power, but also food apparently over-abundant), and, on the contrary, produced the *incapability* to master this universal technical apparatus compromised by interior competition.

Hence, we now have a crisis and the risks of global catastrophies, instead of the possibilities accorded by global governments based on solidarity. Among literary texts, the poet Endre Kukorelly, for example, reflects on the crisis of Humanism in one of his postmodern self-reflective and self-ironic *Lieder* with metaphysical tension (1993, 12-13). In this context, if the idea of progress — from the eighteenth-century to the early nineteenth century — had been able to appear winning and to reinforce the Cartesian vision of reality, it had always been supported, by and through the events of the heresy of doubt (Endreffy 212), of the genre of a literature of doubt manifested in the works of Rousseau, Blake, Tolstoj, Gandhi, Orwell, Huxley, etc.

EPISTEMOLOGICAL AND CULTURAL STUDIES BASES OF THE HUNGARIAN POSTMODERN

Endreffy states that the Hungarian *literature of doubt* can be read as modernity where culture is based on power, or, as Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker (1986 and 1988) argues [hozzáírandó:] és Endreffytől átvett kategória szerint, *machtförmig*

(Endreffy 213). In Endreffy's philosophical-literary argumentation — a theoretical argument in a narrative setting, with metaphorical and mythological intonation and language — in the contemporary culture, one in which the search for "ultimate" reality has been replaced by its realization by effective instruments towards arbitrary purposes and where, therefore, "the spiritual quest to guarantee the unity of life does not exist any more and where the spheres of life have become independent," one must call upon the recovery of a "right orientation in reality" (218). That is to say, an orientation based on the effective use of the whole range of behavioural moments that the individual possesses: along *judging* and *doing* — the bases of conceptual thinking in the Weberian rationality according to purpose — two other components, *perceiving* and *feeling* and which are neglected by the modern wo/man, must be re-activated. Perception "allows to see the relationship between our action and the *whole* of which we are part" (Endreffy 216) and it is not simply an activity of the primary senses.

Therefore, *theoria* and *contemplatio* and observation of intellectual and spiritual objects, all based in the faculty of perceiving, must also be recovered for the purposes of intense and systemic use.

In addition, it is also necessary to restore and to re-activate the dimensions of *feeling*, of which we become mostly conscious in and by the experience of art (i.e. and e.g., literature). Endreffy's idea is clearly an idea of the "whole individual." Nevertheless, he does not intend to invoke the idea by *Aufklärung* of the individual's "fundamental trust" in the sense of, for instance, Goethe, despite the fact that the legend of Faustus and his ambivalent pact with the devil assumes great importance in the postmodern imaginary.⁵ (25). In his argumentation, Endreffy does not postulate the utopian individual, typical of the avant-garde or communism/realized socialism. What he postulates is the usage by the contemporary individual of individual own *existing* faculties to give a "whole" reading of individual own *existing* reality.

An example of this full vision is possible for Endreffy when in daily *doing* (e.g., the driving of a car) beside *scientific judging* — the efficient production and use of gasoline, for example — the person at the wheel would be able to have also awareness of the whole situation individually and concretely experienced and so would be able to *perceive, feel, and not remove* the corollaries of this action: for example, the pain of mothers for mentally retarded children owing to the effect of

⁵ "Is it not the case to say that thunders, lightnings, sulphur, and poison gases present in Faustus legend, are represented for contemporary man by the radioactive cloud of Chernobyl, by the ... greenhouse effect, by the poison gases of Bhopal and **Seveso**, and by the fatal cosmic rays which pass through ozone shield?" (Endreffy 208).

lead in gasoline (217). We would have, then, a "radical changing of conscience," a reversal of the status quo whose necessity used to be imposed by the colonialism and political praxis of realized socialism (see Heller, Fehér, and Márkus). Instead, this reversal must derive from a fundamental individual consciousness. But this reversal of conscience implies the end of the concept of the individual, the concept that saw the identity and the reality of the individual built and measured solely by action guided by (Max Weber's) rationality according to the purpose. What Karl Polányi said about premodern societies is, therefore, re-formulated in postmodern terms and re-elaborated in the presence of a new, *antimetaphysical*, concept of the individual: "Normally, the economic system was *absorbed into the social system* and whatever principle of behaviour predominated in economy, the presence of the market model was recognized as compatible with it" (1974, 88; my italics). The result would be, in short, a new sociality of the individual, a sociality which would not live on ideological and utopian pressures, but that would take root in the complex and complete reality of the individual, without any transcendence whatsoever.

Human aspiration to power here changes into a *postmodern tragedy of conscience*. This notion, however, is not particular to the Hungarian epistemology of the postmodern. Rather, it appears to be a universal phenomenon, traditionally divided along economic, military, and political lines and it represents, generally speaking, the foremost problematics of the contemporary individual. So much so that the strong divergence between culture and civilization in Endreffy's construct is located in the 1950s and in the 1970s. For him, the two loci, marking incisive beginnings, are the appearance of nuclear power and the second one the locus of explosion of the raw materials crisis. According to Endreffy, the "progress" of civilization caused the emergence of three main factors of the crisis: the increasing depletion of nature, the increase of tension between rich and poor, and the continuous state of war ("the epoch of limited wars", Endreffy 209), with continuous nuclear threat. It is on this universal background of crisis — whose recognition resulted in the need of the "whole individual" — that Endreffy's proposal is intimately linked to with regards to cultural phenomena in the Hungary of the 1980s.

Endreffy speaks about the hard collective transition from the socialist model of reasoning (based on an extremely political and ideological use of the full social-communicative act) to my notion of *Central East European postmodern model of reasoning*.

POSTCOLONIAL LITERARY CULTURE AND ITS INFLUENCE ON "DAILY FREEDOMS": THE CASE OF HUNGARY

In contemporary Hungarian literature, the postmodern "text" (*szöveg*) is, on the level of daily culture, manifests a *release from the terrorism of abstract thinking*, of the exasperating reasoning that the self is defined in and by "Socialist Realism" (Lukács, 1963) and that [hozzáírandó: - politikai környezetét tekintve -] has been re-defined as "hyperrationalism" (Lukács 1989, 240; Magarotto, 95). The differentiation between the terror of the abstract as employed in Socialist Realism and its reversal can be explicated with Lyotard who argues that "the recognition of the heteromorphy of linguistic games is a first step ... [and] it implies ... the renunciation of terror, that supposes and tries to achieve their isomorphy" (120). Further, he suggests that the formation of consensus "must be local, that is obtained by interlocutors moment by moment, and subject to possible reversion," which corresponds to the evolution of social interactions" (120). In the Hungarian postmodern on the cultural and literary level, this is perhaps best explicated by using Gianni Vattimo, who postulates that postmodern literature is a construct of minority voices where each minority has its own voice with its own grammar. Thus, the literary text, the *szöveg*, is "literature as a group plan" and it becomes part of social communication, understood as a polyphony of numerous voices of "minorities," one of which is the group of writers.

Consequently, the artists' pretensions of a cultural "legitimation" becomes superfluous and is eliminated: therefore, emerges the opportunity to modify social and theoretical argumentation on the art. In other words, the theoretical argumentation on the art is not interested in *traditional concepts of autonomy against commitment*. Rather, in Hungarian postmodern *literary acting* — as a primary creative activity and as a science of literature — is emancipated from any *metaphysical aspiration*. This literary act approximate itself to Kant's "pragmatic anthropology," to resemble, in a certain sense, the social sciences which attempt to formulate "un-alienated forms of self-knowledge of society" (Vattimo 24, 33).

In its first stage, contemporary Hungarian postmodern literature tries to produce a new writing, a textuality whose *form* is *content* not only by virtue of artistic engineering — applied and lived — but above all because the *szöveg* is and wants to be an *allegory* (of the possibilities) of value immanence, specifically of the immanence (in the text, in the *szöveg*) of communicational and (when is possible) literary-aesthetic communicational value.

Its main characteristics include attempts (successful or not) to release itself from Socialist Realist/realized socialist parameters — the release of the overriding

10 Beatrice Töttösy

parameter of the "colonial" historical situation — and to plead for the notion of the "whole individual."

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(Translated from the Italian by Aristide Melchionna, University of Alberta)

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12 Beatrice Töttössy

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