

THE POLITICS OF MOOD: ÁDÁM BODOR AND EASTERN EUROPE

ROLAND VÉGSŐ

University of Tennessee, Knoxville, TN
USA

My reading of Ádám Bodor's novel *Sinistra körzet* (Sinistra District, 1992) shows that the political dimension of literary production cannot be reduced to the problem of referentiality (the correct representation of an empirical reality in a realist or an allegorical narrative). In fact, Bodor's fiction suggests that it is precisely the breakdown of the referential paradigm that is the privileged political moment in literature. As I argue, Bodor's text suggests that beyond the political realism of historical referentiality we find a new kind of geopolitics based on a regionalist aesthetics of "mood." In this regard, it becomes clear that the "Sinistra District" is not an allegorical representation of a historical reality (the world of totalitarian regimes) but a rhetorical figure which stages the ideological fantasy that structures that given historical reality.

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Although by the time Ádám Bodor moved to Hungary from Transylvania in 1982 he was a fairly well-published author in Romania (his first volume came out in 1969) who had received appreciative criticism from important figures of the Romanian–Hungarian cultural elite, his Hungarian reception was rather sporadic and meager. Györgyi Pozsvai explains this critical attitude by pointing out that Bodor refused to be a "minority author" at a time when the official state-run cultural machinery expected an explicit engagement with the work on "collective consciousness" from Hungarian artists living in neighboring countries (200). With the Hungarian publication of two of his volumes, by the second half of the 1980s his literary reputation was definitely on the rise. This appreciative critical tendency reached its climax with the publication of the novel *Sinistra District* in 1992, which was immediately hailed as a "true masterpiece."¹

But one of the most salient features of the contemporary reviews of Bodor's novel was a rather antagonistic polarization of the critical responses, a polarization that could be interpreted as a historical symptom of the reorganization of critical discourses after the collapse of the socialist system. The debate was mainly

centered around the novel's relation to the experiences of the socialist past. One of the camps seemed to take it for granted that the novel was primarily about the political and ethical structures of a given socio-political system,² while the other camp tried hard to do away with the geopolitical reading by emphasizing the formal (or in their own term, hermeneutic) complications of the work.³ To put it differently, the basic matrix for one set of the readings was geopolitical territory, while for the other it was (narratological) poetic space.

In the more recent criticism on the novel this polarization is explicitly addressed as a critical heritage, but instead of asking for its conditions and limits newer readings often seem content simply to describe the two poles and declare affiliation with one of the extremes. For example, in her monograph on Bodor, Györgyi Pozsvai discusses the reception of *Sinistra* in the following way:

Although the majority of the readings is based on narratological analysis or devotes a considerable amount of attention to the structural features of the work, this criticism still displays a duplicity based on whether the given readings stay within the limits of an aesthetic universe or, by moving beyond it, engage in external adequations (for example, historical or political) (204).

Pozsvai makes her own stance obvious on a number of occasions, for example, when she insists that *Sinistra* “was not written as a response to an actual political situation or as a work with didactic content” (163). Commenting on the ethical complications of the novel, Béla Kovács, as a part of his summary of the polarized reception, writes

To the same extent that the above-mentioned [geopolitical] readings take it as self-evident that the ethical aspects of the novel are tied to the political history of a region, those who pay more attention to the poetic complications of the work are uncertain about the validity of such claims. As a consequence, the question as to whether the *Sinistra District* is essentially amoral or not can still be seen as a legitimate question for readings of the novel, but it appears to be almost definite that the area around Dobrin City is not such an easily defined geographical region as the above-mentioned readings would have it (131).

In this regard, László Bengi's reading of the novel is important in that it builds its own construction upon the insights of the narratological readings, yet it also points out the limitations of this kind of criticism by reference to a philosophy of subjectivity. This is how Bengi describes the two critical poles: one group of criticism, by paying rather little attention to the actual form of the text,

takes for its point of departure the anthropological determinations (or worse, the political adequations) mediated by *Sinistra District* and interprets the text as a reflection on being or existence (95).

The readings that belong to the other pole, however, start from narratological considerations, “but they either cannot or are not willing to apply their findings to the field of the reflection on being” (96). Consequently, while still acknowledging his ties with the hermeneutical camp, he formulates his own project as an attempt “to move from a narrato-poetical analysis of textual organization, from the interpretation of poetic construction, to the question of subjectivity” (97).

Let us, then, take Bengi’s argument as our starting point in formulating our disagreement with both of these critical camps. Since the critical heritage frames a set of problems in a strictly exclusive manner, the question emerges whether it could be possible to bring back into the discussion the problem of the “geopolitical” in such a way that (to use Bengi’s expression) “the reflection on being” becomes a political problem. Simply put, it is not the mere fact but the manner of the earlier geopolitical readings that we should find objectionable, since they reduce the political dimension of the aesthetic to a realistic content or an empirical referent. My problem with the narratological readings in the present context is that, although this should not be a necessary consequence of their premises, in their discourse “politics” becomes an absolutely untheorized blind spot, and as such it is simply dismissed even before it could become an object of critical reflection. Staging the debate in these terms presents us with a false alternative. On the basis of the texts of these critics, it seems as if we have only two choices: we can either choose to read the political in a rather simplistic way or we have simply to dismiss political readings in general. As I would like to believe, however, our task is not to *dismiss*, but to *think through* the complications of geopolitics in Bodor’s text.

The Mood of a Not Too Distinctly Defined Region

If we choose to speak in geopolitical categories, first we must settle the meaning of the term “Eastern Europe.” In order to set up this discussion, I will start with a reading of *A Börtön szaga* (The Smell of Prison), an extended book-length interview with Bodor edited by Zsófia Balla. On the basis of this interview, it becomes excessively obvious that Bodor is intensively preoccupied with the question of Eastern European identity, yet he shows himself somewhat hesitant to give this identity a primarily political meaning in the restricted sense. First, we must point out that he considers it to be a much broader historical category that goes far beyond the effects of Communist dictatorships. In light of this insistence on the centrality of the geopolitical theme in his fiction, it seems somewhat absurd that the complete evacuation of this theme could ever become a serious program for literary criticism. It is equally obvious, however, that according to Bodor’s definition of the function of art, the geopolitical moment cannot be reduced to a realistic content that simply refers to and mirrors an extra-textual political reality. Hence, the

critical question has to be formulated in the following terms: inasmuch as literature cannot be reduced to an exclusively political meaning, how do we talk about the equally irreducible political component? My point is that the political moment is precisely the failure of this mimetic component and not the realistic recognition of a historical reality. In other words, it is precisely the failure of the mimetic representation of an Eastern European reality that is the irreducible geopolitical moment in Bodor's art rather than its successful recreation in an allegorical narrative.

I will quote here at length the passage that most concisely summarizes Bodor's *ars poetica*:

I am primarily inspired by the existential landscape of the homeland and the whole Eastern European region, by its primitive morals, lethargic mood; I could hardly have written about anything else or in any other way. Consequently, right from the very beginning, my writings seemed to be the products of the publication industry of a democratic society – always staying clear of the terminology of any power structure. There is not one word in them about the social conditions that surrounded me in reality, only about the mood [*életérzés*] of a not too distinctly defined region – which indirectly might of course project the ominous image of a fictive political system. Nevertheless, not so concretely and not to the degree that the actually existing system could have taken offense at it. This was so much the easier for me since I was really not preoccupied with the anatomy of communist despotism, the litany of its incidental crimes, or the critique of its ideology. As I have already mentioned, my main interest was the general moral and existential landscape of the region which, as it already appeared to be at the time, is mostly independent from the ideologies of the political systems that happen to be in power. We are talking about a finely tuned system of communication, the keys to which point towards aesthetics and ethics and not politics. To this very day I am still embarrassed by taking concrete political stances, when a piece of writing has a primarily political and not an ethical and aesthetic message. And while the writer is still trying to talk about the most important things, the general feeling of threat and helplessness, in the course of the ceaseless search for modes of expression the language of writing gets refined: through its obligatorily elliptical structure, writing gained in artistic surplus. At the same time, coaxed into the labyrinths of the aesthetic, the attention of the censor also tended to fail him – it became possible to circumvent him. Although my short stories were undeniably the products of and about a strictly controlled world, in their fictitious, timeless space, resigned atmosphere, sometimes grotesque internal relations, the political system was ashamed to recognize itself. The most important thing was that the censors did not know what to do with them (152–154).

Three significant tensions come to the fore in these lines: first, there is an opposition between politics and ethics/aesthetics; second, we find an assertion of a certain regionalist aesthetic based on the contrast between historical reality and mood; and third, there is a tension between the renunciation of the political content of literature and a simultaneous affirmation of political critique through art (after all, the system is ashamed to recognize itself in these works). The first two of these oppositions can be easily aligned to form a coherent system. On the one side, we find the aesthetic and ethical function of art connected to a regionalist realism of “mood.” At the same time, Bodor rejects political content reduced to a realism of facts. This is why the third opposition seems to disturb the equilibrium of the argument, since it raises the possibility of a political function that goes beyond historical realism.

As we can see, Eastern Europe is defined in the passage cited as the primary object of representation, only the reflected reality is not an empirical reality of the author’s life experiences but rather a much more elusive entity referred to as “the mood of a not too distinctly defined region.” Right away it should be obvious that this expression, in an almost contradictory manner, posits the unity of mood of an indefinite entity. As if the unity of a region, elusive in concrete physical determinations, could be allocated to the actual unity of an immaterial instance like a mood. Bengi has already implicitly indicated the significance of this shift in Heideggerian terms when he wrote of *Sinistra District*:

Therefore, I do not claim that the world of the district is or could be independent in all respects from the experience of dictatorships. I only insist that for the poetic interpretation this experience is not already given and does not fulfill its actual role in an extra-aesthetic dimension. It is rather, as a (world-interpreting) component of the form-giving function, created in the process of reading, as *a universal moment of man’s attunement in being* (98, my emphasis).

One is thus tempted to speak of Bodor’s art in a Heideggerian language, in *universal* existential terms that refer us to “the (uniform) state of thrownness in facticity” (111). As we have seen, however, Bodor himself does not speak in universal but in regional terms. Furthermore, Bodor discusses Eastern Europe as a source of identity that secures a historical continuity more fundamental than the accidental political formations that happen to superimpose themselves on this quasi-ontological region:

As I have already mentioned, my main interest was the general moral and existential landscape of the region, which [...] is mostly independent from the ideologies of the political systems that happen to be in power.

Therefore, the issue is not just the opposition between the experience of dictatorship and the universal human condition, but the problem of a regional identity that incidentally includes both, yet cannot be reduced to either, and primarily has the mode of existence of a “mood.” This is why I agree with Bengi’s point that the “political experience” brought into the aesthetic field cannot preexist the act of reading but must be produced by it. *We have to add, though, that the universal existential condition does not preexist the aesthetic experience either.* To put it differently, art cannot be a simple metaphor for an abstraction called the human condition, since the latter does not exist until the act of reading creates it. Hence the significance of the regional for Bodor: the universal will always only appear as it is produced within the experience of the regional.

In the quoted passage, after dismissing the political, Bodor defines the function of art itself as that which goes beyond the world of transient political formations to the more fundamental level of ethics and aesthetics. We also learn, however, that under the rule of the given political system the political dimension of the text is only manifested through absences, or through the very absence of the political as such: the censorial intervention necessitates a politics/poetics of omissions and ellipses. That is, while Bodor rejects realistic political content, he maintains a potential political function for his fiction. And as the passage makes clear, this poetic and political strategy is based on a double movement: a missing element produces an artistic surplus (“through its obligatorily elliptical structure, writing gained in artistic surplus”).

Bodor discusses the significance of this double movement of ellipsis and artistic surplus in quite precise terms. First of all, let us consider the missing element that generates the artistic surplus. It is important here that we distinguish two different forms of ellipsis: the prohibited and the impossible. In the passage quoted above the missing element is primarily defined as the empirical reality that is not represented for both artistic and political reasons. This incidental censorial omission, however, is based on a more fundamental understanding of the missing element as a traumatic kernel of personal experience. Commenting on his childhood and the lack of his childhood experience in his works, Bodor says the following:

Thus, this abstinence from actual experience is equally a question of principle and instinct: I have no other choice but to obey myself. [...] Therefore, my childhood is also missing from my writings. Or maybe this is how it actually really appears in it. [...] But if I touched its shell, if I tried to extricate the real events from below their skin, I would deprive the memory of its mystery, its living force, its virginity, all in all, of its artistic stimulus. This is why I do not write prison novels either (183).

The logic of this omission is not the same as that of the political intervention of the censor. In the present case, “personal experience” is missing from the texts

precisely because of its very significance: its most authentic artistic “representation” turns out to be its designation as the locus of the lack that produces artistic surplus. On the one hand, then, we find the strategic movement to circumvent the censor; on the other hand, we have the impossible confrontation with the traumatic kernel of “personal experience” which simply cannot be represented – it enters the field of representation as that which is absent.

In order to understand the function of the artistic *surplus* produced by this lack let me recount one of Bodor’s rather amusing anecdotes. Apparently sometime in the early seventies a whole socialist brigade of basket weavers took offense at one of his short stories (entitled “A Place Where They Weave Baskets”) and dispatched its delegates to the editor of the journal that published the story to set the facts right. Here is Bodor’s summary of this little farce of collective misreading:

The writer comrade was right about a number of things, especially what concerns the comrade who did some jail time, but certain details need to be corrected. Anyway, how does he know all this when none of us seems to remember that he had ever visited the workshop in person? As it turned out, the imaginary milieu, the region within the short story, had an almost identical replica in our proximity, only in a more commonplace, more mundane version, without the artistic surplus of deviant elements. The objectionable part was this excess with which the honorable basket weavers did not know what to do; they wanted to take out of the story precisely that which was the reason why it was written in the first place. [...] It seems as if when something is well-made-up, it is a part of reality (185).

Whether the story is real or not, it can be read as a parable of misreading: it represents the “realist fallacy” that cannot come to terms with an artistic excess. By identifying an excess with which they themselves cannot identify, the basket weavers’ reading can be translated into the following interplay of recognition and non-recognition: “Yes, that’s me. But this is not how I should be seen.” In other words, the short story provoked a certain mismatch between imaginary and symbolic identification: to be more precise, it caused an excess of symbolic identification (an identification with the position from which you are observed, the ego-ideal) at the expense of an imaginary identification (an identification with the ideal ego, the exemplary communist worker).

The censor and the basket weaver are the two main characters of the same system of misreadings. The basket weaver identifies with the position of the censor and wants to intervene in the story; the censor, in order to locate the potentially harmful elements of the story, has to identify with the point of view of the ordinary worker-reader (e.g., that of a basket weaver) and ends up tolerating but not censoring the piece because, as Bodor puts it, “the political system was ashamed to recognize itself” in his stories. The significance of this little comedy of

misreadings is the symmetrical structure of *misrecognitions* in Bodor's stories: in his own words, the artistic essence of his texts is precisely the fact that they allow for this double play of identifications and non-recognitions.⁴ What Bodor is suggesting here is that the reason why his fiction actually "works" is not only that it makes this double misunderstanding possible (as an amusing, comic episode), but that this misrecognition is structurally encoded in the very texture of his work: his fiction is a privileged region of misrecognition. In other words, and Bodor is very explicit about this point, the point of art is precisely to disrupt identification rather than fully accommodate it. What we find beyond this imaginary identification is merely a mood.

What appears to be significant from the perspective of the reception of the novel is that the field of ethics is also structured by a similar moment of misrecognition. According to Bodor, both truth and the authentic ethical act necessarily arise from misrecognition. Responding to Zsófia Balla's question concerning the seemingly unavoidable fate of alcoholism and Transylvanian patterns of survival and self-destruction, Bodor recounts two similar stories of misrecognition that go beyond the situational comedy of mistaken identities and describe Eastern European ethical patterns. The protagonist of the first story is the author himself. He tells us about a party that he organized at his own house after he finally received his passport from the Romanian authorities so that he could move to Hungary. During the celebration he got so drunk that, although he was at home, at one point of the night he started asking his wife if they had enough money to take a cab home: "This would be, then, the meaning of perfect diversion [*kikapcsolódás*], when even your usual surroundings are completely alienated" (160). While diversion and alienation are exact opposites (since diversion temporarily restores identity to itself), "perfect diversion" coincides with its seeming opposite, "complete alienation." Although the home is supposedly a refuge from alienation and it should provide a secure haven for the restoration of identity threatened by an alienating reality, in Bodor's anecdote this structure is reversed, or better, pursued to its paradoxical conclusion. Diversion turns out to be an alienation from alienation; and this alienation to the second degree ("complete alienation") is pursued as a form of recreation. To be completely at home is to misrecognize the home. In other words, the truth about the home cannot exclusively come from knowledge of the home – it has to emerge from a misrecognition. We find the only authentic relation to the home in this uncanny homelessness, when home is revealed as a fantasy.

The second anecdote relates the strange case of László Csiki, Bodor's friend, who ended up cheating *with* his own wife:

In a state similar to mine, he started wooing his own wife ferociously. In the frenzy of the revelry, he took a liking to her, and without hesitation started pursuing her. After reaching the conclusion that things

had taken their intended course and he had managed to seduce her, he ventured the indecent proposal that they should disappear from the party together, only they can't go to his place because his wife is at home. The wife had the quick solution: no problem, they can go to her place, because her husband is out somewhere drinking again. They departed together happily. Such is the tragic case of the ideal husband who can only be unfaithful with his own wife. These are doubtlessly deplorable moments, but without similar vices our lives would be infinitely drearier and poorer. We would know less about ourselves, each other, and the place where these things happen (160–161).

While the first anecdote describes complete alienation from the “home” as the source of truth about the home, the second story gives a somewhat tragic and pathetic ethical meaning to the formula “cheating with your own wife.” What is common to both, however, is that these moments of misrecognition are necessary for the emergence of an ethical relation to the home. The only way to know your “home” and the people who inhabit it with you is to place yourself in a state of complete homelessness. The misrecognition of your “own” (home/wife) receives a positive value, since it is misrecognition that produces real knowledge and not recognition which, in the final instance, is reduced to a mere illusion (“csalóka káprázat” [160]).

The ethical content of the husband’s misguided decision is based on the conscious choice of immoral behavior that reveals the inadequacy of “moral doctrine” (the command not to cheat) to be either the guarantee of an ethical act or to provide authentic knowledge. While it might be morally acceptable, there is nothing inherently ethical about the fact that a husband and a wife sleep together. The only way to give this act an ethical content is to inscribe misrecognition in the moment of decision that will allow the subject to step outside the law and reinstitute it once again, *as if for the first time*. The message of the husband’s act is that “I choose you once again beyond the law.” In other words, I am not choosing you because the moral law demands that I only sleep with you; rather, I reinstitute the law because I *choose* (actively and not passively in obeisance to the law) you again – this is a real new choice and the object of the choice happens to be you again. This ethical formula, however, should be distinguished from the classic formula of doing evil from which good may come. In the latter case, in order to serve the ultimate good, I will do evil things, so that in the end the good will be realized (as if the Hegelian ruse of reason were at work here). This position implies that I know what the good is, and my actions are guided by this good, even if I have to do bad things to achieve it. In the end, the final achievement of the good will cancel out the evil of my previous acts. But in Bodor’s anecdote, although the husband knows what the good is, he simply chooses not to be good without the knowledge that this choice might lead to a good that will retroactively exonerate

him. The fact that his action leads to the good that he renounced in the first place and that this realization takes on the character of a (re)institution of the law, shows that “*the good*” cannot pre-exist the ethical act, it must be produced by it.

Let me recapitulate the argument up to this point. First of all, Eastern Europe is identified by Bodor as the primary “object” of representation. This Eastern Europe, however, is not a factual reality but a mood. Since this mood cannot be reduced to the objective reality we recognize as Eastern Europe, it will have to be marked by a surplus element in this reality. Therefore, Eastern Europe as mood enters the field of literature as an “artistic surplus” produced by its absence in that field. Due to its excessive nature, it is located beyond identification both for the subject and power. Therefore, the function of art is to interrupt identification in order to make the experience of this artistic surplus possible. The move beyond identification takes the form of a misrecognition. On the level of politics, the subject misrecognizes its position with relation to power; on the level of ethics, the subject misrecognizes the good it chooses to serve by identifying this good with the law as moral doctrine. But if the subject necessarily misrecognizes its position in ideological interpellation, the move beyond identification is only possible by way of a misrecognition to the second degree (rather than a final recognition of reality as it really is). In other words, the secondary misrecognition does not restore the original identity of recognition beyond ideological distortion; rather, it makes possible the creation of a different relation to the unrepresentable kernel of experience.

Reading for the Mood

Thus, the task of reading appointed by Bodor is threefold: first, we have to read for a rhetorical surplus produced by elliptical movements; second, these rhetorical strategies should initiate a politics beyond identification; and third, this politics should be inscribed in the geopolitical determination of mood named by the term “Eastern Europe.” Let us first examine how these three motives come together in the central metaphor of *Sinistra District*: the district itself. The most apparent achievement of the text is the staging of a fantasy of Eastern Europe: namely, that Eastern Europe exists, and it does so with a particular mood, since it is a sinister district. The novel illustrates how spatialization and territorialization of an identity (which is always a failed identity) come about. The staging of the territorial fantasy, however, is not based on a metaphoric substitution according to which the district stands in for something (Eastern Europe) that could be located outside the text as its direct reference. Rather, as the excess produced by a lack, the figure of the district is catachrestic in nature: a territorial metaphor of impossible Eastern European identity.

The novel is composed of fifteen chapters, all of which bear a title with a genitive construction that names an excessive element that organizes the figurative field produced by the elliptical movements of the text (for example, “Andrej’s Dogtag,” “Bebe Tescovina’s Blood,” “Petrika Hamza’s Love,” “Connie Illafeld’s Hair,” and so on). This object or other possession does not appear to have a central role for the plot sequence revealed in the given chapter. Rather, it puts into focus a partial element that itself reduces the plot to a subordinate position with regard to this object. Since it is always something that belongs to a character, we could think of these metonymic objects as figures of impossible identity. For example, the title of the opening chapter, “Colonel Borcan’s Umbrella,” names the object that, as a supplementary prosthesis, ensures the identity of the character, since we learn about Borcan that he is the only one who always carries an umbrella with him. On the other hand, as the first line of the novel already announces (“Two weeks before Colonel Borcan died [...]” [5]), the umbrella will also be the figure for his death. As a matter of fact, it is the first independent appearance of the flying umbrella that announces the Colonel’s death to the community. After his death, however, the umbrella takes on a life of its own and keeps reappearing in the text, through an additional figurative displacement, as virtually undistinguishable from a bat. We can see that the same object ensures the Colonel’s identity and stands in for the story of his demise. In a similar fashion, for example, the title “Béla Bundasian’s Fire” could be understood as a reference to Béla’s all-consuming, excessive love for Connie Illafeld that defines his identity,⁵ as well as the more immediate allusion to his suicide narrated in the chapter in which he sets himself on fire after he murders Connie Illafeld and learns of the literal loss of his identity when his official files are destroyed.

The movement of lack and excess, however, pervades every layer of the novel. As commentators were quick to note, the subtitle of the text, “Chapters of a Novel,” already raises important questions about the genre and the unity of the text. First of all, the subtitle declares the totality of the novel to be absent. It effectively claims that the novel is not here, only its chapters (even if all of the chapters of the novel are here!). Therefore, this absence, as Bengi points out, leads to repetitious attempts in the individual chapters to recreate this missing totality (109). According to this reading, the chapters turn into independent attempts at recreating totality: the lack of novelistic totality leads to its excessive recreation in fifteen different attempts. On the level of plot we encounter the exact same structure. Due to the lack and excess of novelistic totality one does not have to be an overly alert reader to start counting inconsistencies and “mistakes” in the continuous retelling of certain fragments. While parts of the story are clearly re-creatable, it is interrupted by these excesses of plot that therefore refer to absences in the story.⁶

Thus, we have to point out that the unity of diegesis in the novel is based simply on the unity of tone, since the novel does switch narrators who, however, seem to

be speaking in the exact same voice. We get an excess of points of view over unity of voice. It is also significant that the first switch from first-person narration by Andrej to third-person narration by an unidentified narrator occurs in chapter 7, which relates the crucial anticlimactic scene of Andrej's encounter with his adopted son, Béla Bundasian. It is as if Andrej could not have narrated this encounter (or at least not in the first person), which produces an excessive split in the narratorial positions. Furthermore, later on we read chapters that narrate events that Andrej could not possibly have witnessed, either because he was not present or because they occurred after he had left the district. The uniformity of the language of the novel that cuts across characters and narrators has often been commented upon. Language as such seems to be reduced to a limited number of often repeated available formulas. The same happens to the tropological movements of the text, since certain recurrent motives are capable of sliding between the different textual layers and appear in places that seemingly defy the consistency of the novel.

The ethical and political dimensions of the text surface here. Let me evoke here a recurrent motif of the text, the search for unidentified "objects" of characters who simply do not possess these objects. This motif illustrates the kind of ideological fantasy at work that makes possible the double misrecognition that defines the relationship of the censor and the basket-weaver. While power needs to look for these illicit objects in its subjects to maintain the illusion that it has full control over everything, the subjects start to look for similar objects either in power or beyond the law to explain why they are not yet fully themselves. Furthermore, the text also suggests that the very same structure is repeated in the act of reading itself: while we want something from a text that it does not possess, the act of reading should surprise us with something else.

The significance of the search for these unidentified objects is underscored by the fact that the whole first chapter of the novel narrates the failed transaction of such a mysterious entity. Shortly after his arrival in the district Andrej is confronted by Colonel Borcan with a question that we could paraphrase as: "Do you have It?" As it turns out later, Borcan and the stranger only known as "the red rooster" used to communicate by hiding their messages in the belly of a fish. This time, the red rooster was supposed to leave this fish with Andrej. Since Borcan refuses to believe that Andrej does not have the fish, he starts blackmailing Andrej by taking away all his papers. Eventually, Andrej does receive the fish, but only after Borcan's death, a fact that he fails to communicate to the red rooster when he takes the fish. Since Borcan died with Andrej's file in his pockets, Andrej loses his official identity. In other words, while Andrej supposedly has what Borcan wants, Borcan supposedly has that which is necessary for Andrej to complete his mission. Both of these assumptions are wrong.

The most important scene figuring such an unidentified object can be found in chapter 5, “Mustafa Mukkerman’s Truck.” This chapter is crucial because by the end Andrej understands that he was exposed to a “secret” of power: that the object either does not exist or power does not always find it. Therefore, from now on, Andrej is considered to be an “insider” and an intimate aid to Coca Mavrodin. The scene takes place at the crossing on the Ukrainian border where Coca Mavrodin, Andrej (as a substitute for the official photographer), and two of Mavrodin’s thugs with Dobermans await the weekly arrival of Mustafa Mukkerman’s truck. Apparently, the authorities received information from “the Polish colleagues” that Mukkerman is going to have something on him, but they never said exactly what. Significantly, the story takes place during a snowstorm that suspends the spatial and temporal conditions of the narration. Space becomes a formless “grayness” and time stops flowing: “When Mustafa Mukkerman arrived, everything turned quiet, the wind stopped blowing, and the snowflakes stopped moving in midair. Only the thick grayness remained” (48). It is the contrast with these conditions that highlights the excessive nature of the truck:

The silver walls of the truck were decorated with the kind of nonsense only a homeless truck driver like him could think of who aimlessly wanders through all kind of borders: blue palm trees and green monkeys under the purple sky, and on one of the sides a lonely, sagging female breast (48–49).

When nothing is found in the bodily recesses of the benevolent, but confusingly insolent giant (who in response to the search, calmly states that he doesn’t mind at all when his balls are being scratched), Mukkerman tells Coca Mavrodin that he doesn’t have “the thing” with him because he had a dream about this search. The story, however, moves beyond the absence of the object when, as an unexpected gesture, Mukkerman gives a present to Andrej and offers to rescue him from the district anytime he has the money to pay for it. The lack of the object and the surplus of the present are figured by the detail that one of the gifts is a so-called “Kinder Egg”: a Western surprise candy that hides a secret little toy inside the chocolate shell. While the mysterious object remains a secret in its absence, the present itself turns out to be a secret.

The most significant object, however, is Béla Bundasian himself. We have to remember that our protagonist, Andrej Bodor, is on an ethical quest: he wants to rescue his adopted son. Andrej penetrates the district because he believes that at the heart of this closed area he is going to find the supreme good, the only thing worth living for that was taken away from him. In order to achieve this goal, he is willing to do anything. He dissimulates full complicity with the system, eventually to the degree of actually committing murder for them. This supreme good is never explicitly defined, but we can suppose it to be a certain sense of belonging, a

vague sense of familial ties, or the singularity of the father-son relationship. During the crucial scene, when after five years Andrej finally finds Béla, the son turns out to be completely uncooperative and simply asks his father why he is there at all. Andrej responds, “You are the only one I’ve got” (73). Béla raises an empty bottle to his mouth until the last drop of alcohol is drained. Then, letting his saliva grow long, he spits in front of himself and says: “Horrible” (74). We already know this much: at the heart of darkness one finds horror. This horror is the breakdown of the fantasy that gave form to one’s life. Later on the same day, while Andrej is still trying to convince his son to escape from the district with him, the irate Béla protests: “What are you thinking? You are one of them now. Otherwise you couldn’t be here.” (77) The paradox is clear: had you been ethical, you would not be here to claim the prize. In other words, the ethical quest failed to produce its own good. This final confrontation stages the failure of the fantasy that is necessary for complicity with system.

But Béla himself acts in a way that aims at maintaining the system: he reports his father to the authorities and later demands his own punishment for the murder of Connie Illafeld from a system that refuses to acknowledge his existence. The next morning, after the meeting with his son, when Andrej is getting ready to return to his usual quarters from the reservation where his son lives, the following conversation takes place between him and Nikifor Tescovina concerning Béla:

– Just so that you know, he went to the village last night. Although he is not allowed to and usually he doesn’t.

Andrej was in the process of unhooking the chain of the speeder from the bumper. He slowly stood up and felt his stomach with his hands. He opened his mouth and vomited in front of himself on the seat. In the sparkling thick saliva, the small pieces of mushroom were shaking under the threads of coagulated blood.

– You upset your stomach.

– Nonsense. As I bent over, it accidentally slipped out of me.

– It is just like your brain (78–79).

The elliptical conversation between Andrej and Nikifor Tescovina makes it clear that Béla actually turned his father in to the authorities and reported his real purposes in trying to infiltrate the district. On this level too, the elliptical construction of the text produces an absence (we are not told directly what happened the night before) and Andrej’s response is equally elliptical. He speaks his mind by producing brain-like vomit. The absence of a verbal response creates an excess of bodily excretion that takes upon itself the role of a displaced, figurative expression. In this respect, it is important to point out that the novel pays close attention to bodily excrements. Descriptions of defecation, urination, vomiting, spitting, bleeding, and bodily odors saturate the text. In fact, the excessive figures by definition assume the role of excrements in the novel. They take the form of a dis-

avowed part of the identity that is externalized as excrement, which nevertheless is given the role of an alienated (figurative) expression. In this sense, the district itself is such an excrement of Eastern European identity.

The point of this reading is to show that it is not enough to say that the world of Sinistra is without “moral values,” as quite a few commentators claimed. Andrej’s problem is not that he inhabits a world without morals and therefore gets caught in the evil mechanisms of power. As his encounter with Béla makes it clear, the problem with Andrej is that he presupposes the existence of a transcendental good, a good beyond the legitimacy of the positive order that he inhabits, and he believes that any action can be justified in the name of this goal. In other words, he fails to produce the good through an ethical act. (He is like the drunken husband who believes he is sleeping with his wife but ends up cheating on her.) In Andrej’s case, it is precisely “a moral value” that prevents an ethical act.

There is a double fantasy at work here. On the one hand, the district functions as the *mise en scène* of the fantasy of Eastern Europe as a fully controlled, self-enclosed area. A sinister district in which power reduces every human being to mere animality, destroys family values, and presents itself in an inscrutable bureaucratic form. On the other hand, another fantasy is also at work, which claims that beyond this system, there is a world of (moral) values, a world of human freedom, just power, and full expression without alienation. The fantasy of subjective deliverance is part of the same ideological mystification as it makes the fantasy of the omnipotence of power bearable. The promise of this “beyond” makes the whole situation livable and is therefore essential to achieve the complicity of the subjects of power. We could call the experience of the failure of this double fantasy, the closed territory and its beyond, the real of “Eastern Europe.”

I certainly agree with Bengi’s analysis of the mechanisms of the discourse of power represented in the novel as a totalizing and mythologizing tendency that fails due to the central role of non-identical repetition:

From the point of view of the myth, the Sinistra District is a closed and self-sufficient model of the world, which at the same time is identical to its interpretation as fully organizable and controllable (105).

Repetition serves the purposes of power to the degree that it creates the space of control and reduces identity to ultimate substitutability, yet iteration fails to maintain this power because it also constantly displaces the repeated identity. Nevertheless, I disagree with the conclusion that such a reading can at most lead to an “existential” but not a geopolitical reading.

First of all, I would translate Bengi’s terms into psychoanalytic terms by substituting fantasy for myth. In other words, when the novel represents power as an agent of full control that creates a closed world of its own, it effectively stages the

ideological fantasy that maintains the reality of dictatorship or a geopolitical identity (rather than this reality itself). In this sense, what the novel represents is similar to the mutual misrecognitions of the censor and the basket weavers. On the one hand, the inhabitants of the district (as subjects of power), even when they perceive the internal inconsistencies of the system, actively participate in maintaining the fantasy of its omnipotence. On the other hand, the representatives of the system are “ashamed” to recognize themselves in the lack of the illicit object whose elimination is supposed to maintain their power.

Second, the “universal condition” located by Bengi, what I would call the failure of identity, has no other mode of existence than the failure of the particular. It would be a mistake to imagine this failure as an abstract condition that exists independently from the particular identities that it displaces. Rather than a fully transcendent condition, we can only speak of a quasi-transcendental one that has no other existence than the inconsistency of the field it institutes. The particular, however, is not simply “one,” but the local collection of a multiplicity in a situation without inherent consistency. This is what we could call, after Bodor, a “region” which is the intermediary category between an abstract universal condition and the particular political identity instituted by a system. Geopolitics, in the present context, is nothing but the institution of the identity of such a region. Therefore, the existential condition of failed identity has no other mode of existence than the way it appears through a region in which the natural and the political are almost inextricably intertwined. The geopolitical marks precisely the point where the natural and the political both reach a certain limit.

Theoretical Post-Script: Eastern Europe as Mood

Bodor’s fiction allows us to think “Eastern Europe” as the excessive figure of the constitutive lack of Eastern European identity. In this sense, Eastern Europe names the repetitious history of the failure of an identity. This repetition has the effect of a “territorialization” in that it simultaneously spatializes and temporalizes this impossible identity. The novel shows how a community, intimately tied to the geography of the region, creates a home for itself among these subhuman conditions. The natural world, as Attila Simon points out, assumes the ambiguous role of a sublime power, which “as the frame of the scenery, simultaneously appears for the inhabitants of Sinistra as a figure of security and protection and as a mysterious, alien force” (73). The brutalizing world of political power is carved out of this timeless “metaphysical” background that comes to signify, for Simon, the universal condition of decay as the highest form of power. But if the universal condition itself cannot preexist the act of reading (since it must be produced by it in the first place), the geopolitical moment for Bodor is precisely

the interaction of the natural world and the world of power: the district is instituted in nature through repetition, but the impossible closure of the district is marked by the irruption of the natural into the political. "Nature" as such is not simply a metaphor of a universal condition. Rather it has to be taken literally as a particular region, and the universal condition will come about as a partial metaphoric articulation within this region.

Thus, the geopolitical moment can be located at the meeting point of the mood of the region and the *ideological fantasy* of the political district. As we have seen, for Bodor regional identity is based on a certain unity of mood. The mood of the region, however, is not to be found on the level of identification. Inasmuch as mood is beyond identification, it is also irreducible to ideology. In other words, Bodor is trying to define mood as the objective component of a region that belongs to it in such a way that it is impossible to equate it with ideological fantasy or a fully subjective determination. Just as the subject is located beyond ideological interpellation because it is more than the mere effect of subjectivation, the region is beyond the ideological fantasy because there is something in its objectivity that cannot be reduced to ideology. A region has an objective identity manifested in its mood. But as a mood, this objective content is irreducible to the field of objectivity. Therefore, the question is: How does the subject participate in this mood?

But let us first raise the question, what is a mood after all? Who or what can have a mood in the first place? A subject or an object? When we speak of the mood of a region or the mood of a novel, it appears that we automatically attribute mood to the field of objectivity. In order for an objective entity to have a mood, the totality of the object (even if it is understood to be unachieved or fragmentary) must be presupposed. When a region has a mood, this mood is not one component among many that make up its totality, but an attribute of the totality itself. Similarly, in the case of an aesthetic object, if it has a mood, it does so as a totality. Its mood is not something that could be isolated as an independent entity in itself. That is, mood belongs to the field of objectivity in such a way that it remains irreducible to this field. In the case of an objective reality, mood cannot be one object among the many that make up this reality, while in the case of a novel, for example, it cannot be one particular textual component. Even if totality is only present through its absence, its existence can be ascertained through a mood.

Second, this posited objective totality has to assume an expressive function that will convey its mood. Inasmuch as totality expresses something essential about its own being, it possesses a mood. Mood therefore always expresses totality. It claims that an object exists as a whole, and it does so in a particular manner. The mood of an objective reality is never simply what this reality appears to be, since mood is not identical with any of the objects that appear in this reality. Nor is mood identical to what this reality wants to be perceived as, a mere appearance be-

hind which we could identify its true being. In this sense at least, mood must be a genuine expression of being or it is not a mood at all. But if this totality is posited, if it only comes about as an articulation, totality is this expression and nothing else. Mood is the only way in which this totality exists. The absent totality of the field of objectivity will be signified by a subset of its elements, a vaguely defined cluster of signs, which beside their particular positions in the structure will also signify the totality of the structure. They assume an additional expressive function: besides expressing their particular identities, they also convey the mood of the totality that they belong to. That is, while mood is irreducible to the field of objectivity, its only mode of existence is the split identity of these particular objects. Therefore mood has no other being than what these objects allow to come about.

But what happens when a subject finds itself in a particular mood? Is there a subjective mood at all? When we happen to be in a good or a bad mood, are we in something or is something in us? Whatever this mood might be, we perceive it as intimately ours. When a mood takes over, it might do so without any apparent reason, but it takes over completely. One component of the soul emerges from somewhere and affects the whole of our psychic disposition. Mood saturates the totality of our being. It claims us with full authority. So we say that we are in a mood to indicate the lack of control we have over mood. As if moods were given independently of our personal existence, as if they were objective, even impersonal, categories after all. Moods are not passing whims of erratic souls, vague impressions of melancholic minds given to capricious musings. They are not subjective categories, if by subjective we simply mean personal opinions, that everyone has the right to feel any given way about any given subject matter. They exist in the subject in such a way that the subject experiences them as alien, as coming from somewhere and doing something to the subject. They affect the subject, but from a location that appears to be beyond the subject. Moods are irreducible to subjective agency, yet they affect every element of subjectivity.

Moods exist for us as affective judgments concerning a totality that either fully includes or affects our own lives as well. The cause of the mood appears to be external to the subject, as if it were inscribed in the structure of the situation, which includes the subject, an objective totality, and the mood as well. Mood comes about as an objective category when the subject perceives itself to be a part of a certain objective field and passes a judgment on the way it is inscribed in the situation. Therefore, mood is the affective judgment on an objective totality as the subject appears in it. And the primary surface of appearance of a subject is always a region, a restricted domain of objectivity that provides a familiar terrain for the construction of identity.

This is why we could say, following Bodor, that the subject is always represented and always inhabits a region (a more or less structured situation in which nature and history form a difficult unity). The subject is part of this region, but not

as an object. As a subject, it is represented for this region. Something in the region, besides representing its particular identity, also assumes the task of representing the subject for that region. As an inhabitant of a region, the subject comes about as the statement: I am the one for whom the totality of this region is expressed through this given element. Mood is the coincidence of the representation of the subject with the representation of the totality of the region. When it is in a particular mood, the subject passes judgment on its situatedness in the world, its position within its region, in such a way that it posits the totality of the region (as represented by one of its elements) and invests this element with its own representation as well. The judgment of mood says: such is the totality of this region; it is best represented by these particular elements; and I relate to this totality in a particular way; I am represented for this totality through partaking in its mood. Inasmuch as it expresses an objective totality that the subject becomes a part of, mood is the subject's mode of participation in the construction of the totality of the objective region it inhabits. Mood names the way we become parts of our regions.

We also know that works of art are capable of evoking moods. The aesthetic experience produces moods. Mood as judgment can therefore be an aesthetic judgment as well. The world disclosed in the work (not a realistic representation of an empirical reality, but the world made possible through an aesthetic experience) provokes a judgment: the totality of the work comes about in this judgment, just like the totality of the world. In this respect, it might be useful to consider a short fragment by Adorno in which he moves beyond Hegel's objectivist theory of art via Benjamin's concept of "aura." Inasmuch as the latter is an objective determination of the artwork that nevertheless designates a moment of transcendence, art cannot be reduced to a fully immanent aesthetic objectivity:

Here what is called aura is known to artistic experience as the atmosphere of the artwork, that whereby the nexus of the artwork's elements points beyond this nexus and allows each individual element to point beyond itself (274).

But, according to Adorno, the other extreme, sentimental subjectivism, is equally mistaken since it confuses the effects of art with the properly aesthetic dimension of the constitution of aesthetic objectivity. Adorno's dialectical aesthetics rejects the two extremes of objectivist and subjectivist aesthetics by locating the "aesthetic subject" within the aesthetic object as its collective component that should not be reduced to the psychology of production or reception. The objective meaning of an aesthetic object is that which remains irreducible in it to a subjective determination. Therefore, Adorno rejects the category of mood in the following terms:

The concept of mood, so opposed by Hegel's objective aesthetics, is therefore insufficient, because it is precisely mood that reverses what

Hegel calls the truth in the artwork into its own opposite by translating it into what is merely subjective – a spectator’s mode of reaction – and represents it in the work itself according to the model of this subjectivity (275).

While Adorno criticizes Hegel for his blindness to the element of mood, he commends him for avoiding the “twilight between the aesthetic and empirical subject.” The internal conflict of the fragment is precisely that this “twilight between the aesthetic and empirical subject” simultaneously functions as the condition of aesthetic experience and that which must be done away with if the specificity of aesthetic experience is to be accounted for.

In spite of Adorno’s rejection of the category, mood could still be defined on the basis of this fragment as that which makes art irreducible to either pure objectivity or pure subjectivity. As a matter of fact, the only way to salvage the category of mood is to relegate it to the field of objectivity (as the aural character of objectivity) rather than to the subjective field as “a spectator’s mode of reaction.” In the case of the aesthetic object, we learn from Adorno that it cannot be reduced to subjective projections since it possesses an objective truth beyond all subjective determinations; yet its objectivity cannot be reduced to the sum of its objective elements either, because it possesses the aural quality we could call an “objective mood.” In the case of empirical experience, we learn that nature is the primary locale of the production of this aural effect and that therefore “the artwork is more deeply related to nature in this element than in any other factual similarity to nature” (274). Natural and aesthetic mood mirror each other since the recognition of the former requires “recognizing in nature what it is that essentially makes an artwork an artwork” – which is its irreducibility to subjective determinations.

Benjamin introduces the concept of aura through the definition of a necessary distance: the subject can participate in the aura of a natural scene by establishing a certain distance from it. The precondition of art is this distancing: the moment nature is not “merely” nature anymore, the possibility of aesthetic comportment is present in experience. This is why, while it is true that art requires a certain identification, the subjective component is not to be confused with the identification with an empirical personality:

Just as the exemplary instance of the philistine is the reader who judges his relation to artworks on the basis of whether he can identify with the protagonists, so false identification with the immediately empirical person is the index of complete obtuseness towards art (275).

There is a necessary move beyond identification here both on the level of artistic experience and the more immediate experience of subjectivity. What makes this double move possible and necessary is precisely mood. Inasmuch as the sub-

ject cannot be reduced to the immediate experience of empirical personality (that is, it is capable of having a mood), there is an openness towards art, which cannot be an identification with a realistically represented empirical reality, but rather proceeds through the experience of that which makes it impossible to equate the aesthetic object with its mere objectivity (that is, the mood of the object). Mood is the way the subject, irreducible to the field of pure subjectivity, appears within the field of objectivity as that elusive element that makes objectivity impossible.

Accordingly, mood appears in *Sinistra District* as that which is irreducible to the field of historical objectivity and names the affective cathexis of the constitutive failure of this objective reality. This failure, however, is not a fully transcendent negativity, since it assumes a positive form through a figurative substitution. One objective element of the region takes on the role of signifying the unity of this region which is absent. This element, therefore, receives an excessive signification that no longer refers to an objective element of the situation itself but to its constitutive lack. The split in the identity of this particular object is what evokes the mood of the region. The ideological fantasy, the figure of the district as a catachresis of impossible Eastern European identity that provides its consistency, is revealed to be a lot less dependent on the barbed wires and strictly controlled borders than by a repetition of the figure itself. The repetition of the figure phenomenalizes its referent, but in such a way that it can never fully coincide with the entity designated by the physical borders. Therefore, the catachrestic figure of the district in the novel functions as the trope that has no other function than to signify the closure of the topological field of the text. What on the level of representation appears as the unity of style (figured by the excessive trope of the district as a unity), appears on the level of the represented as the unity of mood. Andrej's relation to the district is not expressed by the physical enclosure of the district, but by the unity of mood.

The opening of the novel already sets the mood precisely in these terms. As Andrej returns to the district many years after the events narrated, the whole narrative is inscribed in a politics of memory. In the first and last chapters of the novel, the constellation of three particular motifs serves the purposes of the encryption of mood: the horrifying and unbearable squawking of wild geese, the "orange cloud of sadness" (14), and the ski tracks left behind by Andrej himself. The bird metaphors of the novel are central to the construction of the whole text. In this instance, the wild geese direct our attention to a repetition, the migratory territorialization by an expressive function (squawking) that belongs to the domain of nature. The territorializing effect assumes a surplus expressive function that is variously described by Andrej in the following terms:

The frosty deaf and dumb nights of silence were filled with the squeaking and squealing of the migrating birds. Their shrill dying sounds – sometimes like those of the watchman's clarinet – climbed

down the chimney and kept stirring in the ashes of the fireplace until the break of dawn. Their nerve-wracking whining always brought me back to my solitude (12).

At the conclusion of the novel, the birds appear again: “I swear there is no more unsettling word than theirs. [...] Their sounds resonated even in the depths of my bowels” (158.) The orange clouds of sadness assume a similar function, in that (as a background to the flight of the wild geese) a particular element of nature takes on an additional expressive function. This time, however, rather than the horror associated with the district, the clouds remind Andrej of a metaphysical condition, the passing of time.

The ski tracks, on the other hand, represent Andrej himself for the region. Since it is implied by the text that these marks will never disappear, Andrej realizes that through them, he has become an objective part of the region. The important thing about these tracks, however, is that they serve as evidence of Andrej’s crime. Andrej was participating in the liquidation of a group of bear-keepers supposedly infected by the mysterious illness periodically decimating the population of the district. Aron Wargotzki was the last member of this group hiding in the underground tunnels of the reservation. Andrej, at the order of Coca Mavrodin, started to fill up the tunnels with concrete. The ski tracks mark his itinerary as he was carrying the heavy sacks of cement on his back. Nevertheless, these are the marks that represent the subject. Hence the somewhat ambiguous closure of the novel, where the sight of the tracks evokes a feeling of “pleasant warmth” (157) and happiness in Andrej because he is not going to disappear without a trace from this region.

So, what is at stake in this figure of Eastern Europe is similar in structure to the Orientalist fantasy invented by the West,⁷ only this time we have to scrutinize the ideological fantasy created by the East itself that sustains its very reality. Eastern Europe as a mood, however, is not a “merely fictional” Eastern Europe, but a “real” Eastern Europe that has no other existence than the interruption of both the geographical and the political fantasy of regional identity. In Bodor’s case, as the properly geopolitical agency (which means that it is neither geographical nor political in the restricted sense), mood is an attempt to establish an affective community beyond ethnic, cultural, and other differences. Participating in the mood of a region means recovering an “objective” point of reference beyond ideological or mere subjective determinations which nevertheless remains irreducible to the field of objectivity. Its elusive nature, its very precariousness, and its openness to numerous types of manipulation, however, do not detract anything from its reality. And neither does the fact that region, mood, subject, and totality simply do not preexist the actual articulation of their configurations. As the regional, “ontologized” condition of political experience inscribed into the sanctity of unrepresentable personal experience, which makes political identity “impossible”

(not non-existent, but rather always threatened), the mood of a region shows that the “universal” condition in its abstract emptiness does not exist without regional contamination. A community is never without history, which is its repetitious attempt to inhabit different kinds of regions. The ontological limit is given a particular “local flavor,” a recognizable mood, since it exists only as the internal limit of particular systems of symbolization but never completely independent of them. The repetitious emergence of this limit creates the history of a region.

Notes

- ¹ See, for example, Angyalosi, Bán, and Kardos.
- ² See Ács, Bán, Béla Bodor, Angyalosi, and Márton.
- ³ See, Simon, Szirák, Kovács, Bengi.
- ⁴ For different formulations of the role of recognition see: Reményi (“the duplicity of the *never-experienced* and that which *exists in memory*” [93]); and Pozsvai (56).
- ⁵ Andrej describes this love after reading Béla’s diary in the following way: “He wrote that it was impossible to have enough of her. Whenever he looked at her, he had the feeling that even between her toes there are tiny little hungry pussies hiding. The best thing would have been to drink the whole woman up like a glass of water. A love like this, of course, was already secretly nearing its end.” (97) We can also see here that excess is more than just an external trait; it is a cause that defines the outcome and destiny of the narrative.
- ⁶ Furthermore, the very concept of character seems to have been invaded by this excessive logic. For example, Mustafa Mukkerman, the only true outsider in the district, who in contrast with the other characters emanates an excess of humanity, is described as a 600-kilogram giant, whose undulating bodily excesses and flaccid folds of flesh mesmerize the border guards as he appears totally naked in the middle of a snowstorm during a strip search. Connie Illafeld, Béla Bundasian’s true love, after abusive psychiatric treatment in Colonia Sinistra, is reduced to an unrecognizable hairy monster who speaks an incomprehensible mixture of languages – and the suggestion is entertained that she might even have grown a penis. As the narrator comments, she moves from being a fairy to an animal: that is, she moves from an excess to an absolute lack of humanity, but the properly human status is constantly denied to her (101). Béla Bundasian, in turn, becomes a surplus element when his very existence becomes excessive after his official file is destroyed and, receiving no recognition from the system, he ends up committing suicide. Furthermore, at a certain point Colonel Coca Mavrodin dies frozen in a block of ice, but when spring comes and the ice melts, only her clothes remain behind, revealing her to be some sort of substanceless entity. The novel also presents more direct interventions into the concept of character through the technique of reduplication. The two Hamza Petrikas, for example, are described in the following way: “They were albino twins and so similar to each other that their thick bear-keeper overalls creased in the exact same spots. As the path of the mist released from their nostrils indicated, they even breathed to the same rhythm. And on top of all that, according to the little tin plates hanging around their necks, they were both called Hamza Petrika.” (80) A similar reduplication happens with the heroic bear-keeper, Géza Kőkény, who becomes almost indistinguishable from his statue.
- ⁷ See, for example, Larry Wolff’s book on Eastern Europe, where he argues that “It was Western Europe that invented Eastern Europe as its complementary other half in the eighteenth century, the age of Enlightenment. It was also the Enlightenment, with its intellectual centers in West-

ern Europe, that cultivated and appropriated to itself the new notion of ‘civilization,’ an eighteenth-century neologism, and civilization discovered its complement, within the same continent, in shadowed lands of backwardness, even barbarism. Such was the invention of Eastern Europe” (4). Furthermore, he explains “the construction of Eastern Europe as a paradox of simultaneous inclusion and exclusion, Europe but not Europe. Eastern Europe defined Western Europe by contrast, as the Orient defined the Occident, but was also made to mediate between Europe and the Orient. One might describe the invention of Eastern Europe as an intellectual project of demi-Orientalization” (7).

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