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Hungarian Postmodernity and Post-Coloniality: The Epistemology of a Literature

I. INTRODUCTION

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 "really existing socialism" (*Reale Sozialismus*, *tétező szocializmus*) 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" postmodernism (Perniola 4).¹ 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 a point of departure in 1979, with Péter Esterházy's *Termelési-regény* (kiss-

1 This article is an excerpt from my book, *Sentieri postmoderni in Ungheria. Cultura letteraria 1979-1994* (forthcoming in 1995). I would like to note that while the article may be perceived as "closed," both my book and the present article were written in keeping with the expectations of an Italian intellectual audience while still paying attention to represent the specific Hungarian literary and critical situation. Thus, my texts are consciously constructed in response to specific parameters of several levels of *Erwartungshorizont* and this strategy may have caused some difficulty in the translation from the Italian into English not so much on the linguistic and terminological levels but rather in the "translation" of the above mentioned cultural and critical/theoretical parameters embedded in the "tone" and content of my original Italian text.

regény), — *regény* [A Novel of Production (a ssshort novel)], — a *Novel*] — it was disappointed, its will to re-appropriate the "reflection" found obstacles that apparently were unsurmountable.² The mirror, during those first moments of enthusiasm for truth, proved 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 man or woman of letters — in "the really existing socialism" of the last thirty years. However, despite disappointments, today, after another two decades we understand that Hungarian literary postmodernism was born with that attempt to look at itself. Its manifest parable, Esterházy starting in 1979 with the "postmodern novel of the 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 reality and totality of the literary production system — made socially functional previously by specific cultural politics which in turn required that aesthetic writing manifest itself as a variation of politically motivated and charged handbooks of literature — and suggested, by "reflecting" the title of the work into its subtitle, the necessity to re-establish literature. The parable, in its present phase, reached an intense postmodern "microtextuality," in a certain sense independent from the typology of the macrostructures of which it becomes a part and where they reveal themselves in different poetical macroforms, from the broad genre concept of family sagas in the form of the novel to prose poetry (see Tóttóssy 1994). Such a microtextuality is created by linguistic events that are, so to speak, re-bound as shreds, splinters, and clips of realities in which ordinary daily and extraordinary artistic 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 a "fantastic, fictional adventure" (Esterházy 1986b, 39), as the critic László Hekerle explains in 1985: "We will love invented stories, too, when and if things 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, an "illustrated" (Magarotto 100-01) and unique text (a speech situation) 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 — announcing 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) gesture characteristic of the literary condition "in transit" (Perniola 4) between the two kinds of society, Communist/Soviet dominated and postmodern: An allegory *ante litteram* of postmodernity where subjectivity affirms its own "weak" individuality (Vattimo 99-100). "Weak," because it only exists inasmuch as it gives a literary meaning (it refers to itself) in someone else's literary work (the self in the other).

In 1991, the president of the new Hungarian Republic — following the long period of "really existing 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 of "really existing socialism," in its daily "over-production of words and symbols" (Todorov 101-02). In the literary culture and then in the aesthetic-linguistic 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, because the extreme creative consciousness raises her to an "exact" communicative unity (see Bojár 340-43; Esterházy 1986a, 504). By the 1990s, the Hungarian literature of "transit ... between two points which remain both present and available" (Perniola 4), between the memory of Modernism and the post-modern

2 In "really existing socialism" the dispute between art and cultural politics had its categorical 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.

4 The transcribed work in question is Géza Ottlik's *Iskola a haláron* (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.

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 immediate 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 these is a postmodern literary culture, which acts as an elite communicative model. This elite is sociologically constructed by writers, the *literati*, critics, university students, etc., and while it does not aspire to leadership in society, just because it maintains the "exiguity" (see Esterházy 1991, 146) of literary existence, it already outlines itself and for itself a new Hungarian sociality: the renouncing 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 central role of literature. And this new sociality, in the context of the notion of the "new sensibility," is a vital force in Hungary (see Kulcsár).

I agree with Siegfried J. Schmidt — founder of the (Systemic) and Empirical Science of Literature and a proponent of (Radical) Constructivism — who describes himself as "eine Form modernisierter Moderne" and "für postmoderne Denker als Gesprächspartner" (1993b, 302) and for this reason is well known in postmodern Hungarian circles — that in the Hungary of a "funktional differenzierte Massenmediengesellschaft" literature becomes "ein Medienangebot unter anderen" (1993a, 9). The consequence of this 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 dictum, "Nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben ist barbarisch....," to our time: How is literature possible after the Holocaust and after the Fall of the 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 the *literati*, critics, scholars, etc., who position 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 possessed by (un)"really existing socialism," produced by late literary modernity and imposed and ruled by cultural politics.

Historically, in the Hungary at the end of the 1970s in an intense dynamics of mutual influences — along signs of latent and strongly compromised late literary modernity — a postmodern literary culture emerged. A phenomenon that, compared to other aspects of culture in the Hungarian social system, was seen to have great innovative capacity. It was, for example, a literary culture in which

it was not the text that represented the uncontaminated ground from which to produce a (self)definition, that is to say, the definition of the (textual) location of Hungarian postmodernity. Rather, the demands and the properties of the text *per se* were a "guide" which induced writers and readers to follow the path of postmodernity. The text helped then the "transit" towards the postmodern where their audience experiences literary culture and experiences the text as an "attempt" (Lukács 1981, 125, 131) at literary culture.⁵

II. CULTURE AND CIVILIZATION IN THE HUNGARIAN POSTMODERN AND POSTCOLONIAL: PHILOSOPHICAL-LITERARY CREATIVITY

Not being able to understand sufficiently the notions of "to be," nowadays 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 those active 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 metaphysical thinking, to his analysis regarding the cultural function of daily language (see 1976b). Heidegger's questions and arguments intimately affect Hungarian intellectuals now emerging from the experience of "really existing socialism."

In the 1960s — when the Hungarian unabridged translation of *Brief über Humanismus* was published in Hungary — Heidegger was read in terms of a peculiar existentialism that was indissoluble from the condition of the individual in "really existing socialism" and based on a prevalently ethical-political concept of freedom. However, since the 1980s the same Heideggerian thesis was approached in different terms of reading, in a context neither political nor ideological. In Hungary, Heideggerian thinking is offered by philosophers and translators and consequently used by the readership as an extraordinary support of culture. Now, writers are able to stimulate each single reader to open himself or herself to the prospect 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

5 Today, the efforts of young Lukács to understand the function of literature in its widest definition as "process" operating between sociology, the aesthetic, and ethics and without any allowance for metaphysics, is up to date again. He approached the problem of literary "process" as an experience (i.e., "function") and literary phenomena as non-metaphysical entities of social life (1977, 385-421).

text" (201). In the Hungary of the 1980s, Heidegger thus becomes the ambassador of the "message of postmodernism," because his works inspire an understanding and view literature beyond its "functional" aspect within social life to a perception of its multitude of functional and pluri-ideas-laden constructs, thus representing "concrete culture," finally devoid 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 levels of daily life [and culture]" (Heller and Fehér 1992, 156).

Among Hungarian models of cultural and philosophical arguments regarding postmodernity and postcoloniality, there is one postulated by Zoltán Endreffy, an intellectual category, that I designate as "reflective anti-Cartesian mentality." According to this postulate, science and technology, neutral phenomena in themselves similar to language, did not finalize that total power over nature predicted by Descartes. Real products of scientific and technical activity have created, instead, the "capability to accumulate" (weapons, nuclear power, but also food which is apparently over-abundant), and, on the contrary, produced the *incapacity* to master this universal technical apparatus also compromised by interior competition. Hence, we now have a crisis and the risks of global catastrophes, instead of the possibilities accorded by global governments based on solidarity. Among literary texts, the poet Endre Kükorelly, for example, reflects on the crisis of Humanism in one of his postmodern (self-reflective and self-ironic) *Lieder* imbued with metaphysical tension (1993, 12-13). In this context, if the idea of progress — from the eighteenth-century to the mid-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, this reminds us Endreffy (212).⁶

III. FOUNDATIONS OF THE HUNGARIAN POSTMODERN, EPISTEMOLOGICAL AND CULTURAL

Endreffy states that the Hungarian "literature of doubt" can be read as texts of modernity where culture is based on power, or, as Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker argues, *machtformig* (Endreffy 213). According to Endreffy's philosophical-literary argumentation,⁷ in contemporary culture where the search for "ultimate" reality has been replaced by its realization through effective instruments towards arbitrary purposes, the "spiritual quest to guarantee the unity of life does not exist any more and ... the spheres of life have become independent" (218).

6 I would like to add that, indeed, a line of a literature of doubt could be followed from Rousseau, Blake, Tolstoy, Gandhi, and Huxley, through Orwell.

7 Endreffy's arguments, in form and content, are theoretical in a narrative setting, with metaphysical and mythological intonation and language.

Therefore, one must call upon the recovery of a "right orientation in reality" (218). In other words, an orientation based on the effective use of the whole range of behavioral moments that the individual possesses: along *judging* and *doing* — the bases of conceptual thinking in Weberian rationality according to purpose — two other components, namely *perceiving* and *feeling* (these are neglected in modernity), must be re-activated. Perception "allows [one] 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*, as well as the *observation* of intellectual and spiritual objects — all based in the faculty of perceiving — must also be recovered for the purposes of intense and system-atic use. In addition, it is also necessary to restore and to re-activate the dimensions of *feeling*, of which we become most conscious in and by the experience of art (e.g., literature). Endreffy's idea is clearly an idea of the "whole individual."

Nevertheless, Endreffy does not intend to invoke the idea of *Aufklärung*, the idea of the fundamentally trusting and undoubting individual (Goethe), despite the fact that the legend of Faustus and his ambivalent pact with the devil remains in the postmodern imaginary (208). In his argumentation, Endreffy does not postulate the utopian individual, typical of the avant-garde or the one of "the really existing socialism." What he postulates is that contemporary individuals should employ their own existing faculties in order to be able to construct their own existing reality and the full understanding of this reality. An example of this vision is possible, according to Endreffy, when in daily *doing* (e.g., the driving of a car) and along *scientific judgement* (the efficient production and use of gasoline, for example), the person at the wheel would also be able to have awareness of the "whole" or "full" situation by experiencing it individually and concretely. Consequently, this individual would be able to perceive, feel, but not remove the corollaries, of her action: for example, the pain of mothers for mentally retarded children owing to the effect of lead in gasoline (Endreffy 217). We would have, then, a "radical changing of conscience," a reversal of the *status quo*, previously imposed by the colonialism and political praxis of "really existing socialism" (see Heller *et al.* 1983). 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 rationality according to purpose (Weber). What Karl Polányi said about pre-modern societies is, therefore, re-formulated in postmodern terms and re-elaborated in the presence of a new, anti-metaphysical, 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" (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 impressions, but which would take root in the complex and complete reality of the individual, without any transcendence.

Human aspiration to power here changes into a postmodern tragedy of conscience. However, the notion is not particular to the epistemology of the Hungarian 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 notion of a 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 on the one hand, and the energy (and raw materials) crisis on the other. According to Endreffy, the "progress" of civilization caused the emergence of three main factors of the crisis: the increasing depletion of natural resources, the widening gap between the rich and poor, and the epoch of "limited wars" with continuous nuclear threat (209). It is against this global background of crisis that Endreffy built his argument for a need of the "whole individual" and linked it with cultural phenomena in the Hungary of the 1980s. Here, Endreffy discusses the specific difficulties of a collective transition from the socialist model of reasoning — the "really existing socialism" — to a new model we can best designate as a specific "East Central European postmodern model of reasoning."

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

In contemporary Hungarian literature — that is, on the level of daily culture — the postmodern text (*szöveg*) manifests a release from an indigenous Hungarian terror of abstract thinking. This means a release from the reasoning that the self is defined solely in and by "Socialist Realism" (Lukács 1963) while at the same time the release also re-orientates the self — within its political dimensions — towards a "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

it is possible for all speakers to come to an agreement on which rules or metadescriptions are universally valid for language games, when it is clear that language games are heteromorphous [...] and this ...] implies a renunciation of terror, which assumes that they are isomorphic and tries to make them so. (1989, 65-66).

Further, he suggests that

the formation of consensus defining a game and the "moves" playable within it *must* be local, in other words, agreed on by its players and subject to eventual cancellation.... This

orientation corresponds to the course that the evolution of social interaction is currently taking.... (66)

In the Hungarian postmodern on the cultural and literary level, the above situation is perhaps best explicated further by using Gianni Vattimo's notion, where 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' pretention of a cultural "legitimation" becomes superfluous and is eliminated. Thus the opportunity emerges to modify the social and theoretical discourse about art. In other words, the theoretical argumentation about art is not with reference to traditional concepts of autonomy against engagement/commitment. Rather, the Hungarian postmodern literary act — the primary creative activity and a science of literature (theory and criticism) — is emancipated from metaphysical aspirations. This literary act approximates 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, 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 textual immanence of communicational and (when possible) literary-aesthetic communicational value. Further, its main characteristics include attempts (successful or not) to release itself from Socialist Realist and "really existing socialist" parameters — the release from the overriding parameter of the "colonial" historical situation — and to plead for the notion of the "whole individual."

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