

## AMBIGUOUS SPACE: ÁDÁM BODOR'S *SINISTRA DISTRICT*

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In the first decade after the collapse of state communism, Transylvania-born Ádám Bodor's novel *Sinistra District* has been praised as one of the most accomplished allegories about Ceaușescu's totalitarian regime. Reread today, the novel reveals its virtue as a historiographical reflection of much larger time-span. Looking at the "natural history" and ethnography of *Sinistra District*, the author draws parallels with Transylvanian regional historiographies, from the Enlightenment to the 20th century, including references to the local lore.

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There is hardly any space in Europe with a more notoriously ambiguous character than Transylvania. Since Bram Stoker's *Count Dracula* established itself as a bestseller in the early 20th century, the region has gained a reputation as the fictional land of unworldly creatures, a no-man's land where the civilized world can speculate on its dark and unleashed significant others. The latter aesthetic quality of Transylvania has become so dominant today that the average Anglo-American reader (although not the German or Eastern European educated public, conscious of the continuity of Saxon lore and Protestantism in the region) is little aware that the province has other, more mundane historical narratives of its own about shifting political regimes, elites who ruled and fell, public spheres and so forth.<sup>1</sup> Beyond the natural curiosities of the Transylvanian Carpathians that impressed the British myth-maker and his learned predecessors, the socio-cultural diversity of the region has been indeed remarkable. Wedged between the cultural centers of Hungary and Romania, it has been an ethno-cultural meeting ground, a frontier zone of several cultures, and its inhabitants have maintained until the present day a sense of historical and geo-cultural frontier.

The cultural demarcation of the micro-region has been a major goal of the historiographies that emerged locally since the late eighteenth century. These were nationally oriented and mutually emulative, yet at the same time bound by a shared local patriotism. A staple of this local belonging has also been a hierarchi-

cal ethno-civilizational self-image of a highly fragmented and conservative society in which the different ethnicities were assigned distinct roles according to their presumed level of advancement. It took several decades of post-war state socialism as well as politics of ethnic un-mixing and re-mixing in Romania to disrupt this mentality, which matured during the Enlightenment, though its roots reach back to the Middle Ages. Ádám Bodor's masterful pseudo-novel *Sinistra körzet. Egy regény fejezetei*, excerpts of which have been translated into English by Paul Olchvary under the title *Sinistra District. Chapters of a Novel*, illustrates this shift eloquently, while it also allows interpretations as a satire of interwar regional Hungarian patriotic narratives. My analysis deals with this shift and this satire.

A product of the crisis of the imperial breakdown after World War I, Transylvanism sought a redefinition of Hungarian collective identity in a situation in which the formerly dominant nation had become a minority. Repeating to some extent the pre-war history of former (Romanian and German) "nationalities," Hungarians in the newly enlarged Romanian state experienced variably harsh attempts at the instigation of the local administration and the central government towards "integration" (or, according to many minority members, "assimilation") into an infrastructure that appeared more than alien to them. Many historical sources testify to the fact that the integration remained incomplete, and not only in the case of Hungarians. Pre-war regionalism matured during the interwar decades among the intellectual elite – here too their history resembles the earlier regional Romanian and Transylvanian Saxon cultural and political ethos. In its "strong" version, the apologetic regionalist ideology of Hungarian "Transylvanism" emphasized as well as "invented" the heritage of distinct though peacefully co-existing Romanian, German, and Hungarian populations. The utopian nature of this ideology, which was too tolerant to become mainstream, was exposed particularly by the triumphant nationalist extremism of the 1930s. After the war the domestic "adaptation" of Stalinism and the ensuing national communism dictated the rest: while the state increasingly pursued ethnic homogenization, the official propaganda maintained the false ideology of ethnic cohabitation. Spleen, resignation, nihilism, the retreat into the private realm, and a troubled relationship with one's history have been among the responses of Eastern European post-avant-garde art and literature to totalitarianism, as the famous film *Stalker* so powerfully demonstrates. Bodor's novel, characterized by an ambiguous and fearful "district," has often been compared with Tarkovski's masterpiece. Like the latter, the novel diagnoses the symptoms of physical and moral decay caused by a brutally totalitarian regime on humankind and its environment.

### The Critics on *Sinistra District*

When the Transylvanian writer Ádám Bodor left his homeland to settle in Hungary at the end of the 1980s his short stories were well known among the readers of the small circulation Hungarian literary periodicals in Romania. Bodor went on publishing in Hungary, won a literary award given by the journal *Holmi* with the short story *Természetráji gyűjtemény Sinistra körzetben* (Natural History Collection in Sinistra District<sup>2</sup>), and published the volume *Sinistra District. Chapters of a Novel*. As the subtitle indicates, stories that had been previously written were modified and reshaped into a loose narrative structure. Each chapter featured a different event linked by the common setting, the narrator, and the district.

A mysterious ambiguity enveloped the prose and puzzled and fascinated its critics. Already the genre of the book “had to be clarified,” as László Márton commented (Márton 1873). But most obscure was the scene, visibly the central motif of the narrative. Márton interpreted Sinistra as a “post-historical” site, a “Tarkovskian zone,” and placed it among other “demonic landscapes” the features of which shaped the fate of the people living in it. Indeed, the district displays contradictory attributes; it is simultaneously uninhabitable and crowded, spacious and claustrophobic, diverse like a cabinet of curiosities and yet monotonously homogeneous. It was seen by Márton as a wilderness never tamed by civilization, yet at the same time mapped, poisoned, fenced off, and divided by a ruthless government, itself a half-fictional mutant of civilization. He gave three interpretations of the space. One was its concrete geographical meaning. It was a border zone between Romania and the Ukraine with a road from Poland towards the south to the Balkans. The Prislop pass, the Pop Ivan ridge, the Colinda forest and the Punte Sinistra colony are or could be real. The second interpretation was based on the stylized mode that brought the book close to the Transylvanist tradition of landscape representation. The third gave an allegorical reading. Literary critic Margit Ács described the bottomless forest of Sinistra as an archetypal motif with demonic force, replete with the novel images of prison camps (1992).

Another source of ambiguity was the nature and identity of the characters, the inhabitants of the Zone, stripped of historical and moral consciousness. Márton noted how these individuals were barely human, resembling animals, insects, even objects. Margit Ács stressed their amorality and explained it as a local feature of what she refers to with an orientalizing gesture as the “Balkans”, where allegedly shrewdness and lack of scruples were necessary in the struggle for survival. (Even a superficial reading exposes the ideological stance of the critic; in the novel the Balkans represent the domain of freedom, of “sunlit Greece”.) Yet another critic, Béla Bodor, explained the proper names as signs of the mixed ethnic background of the characters (Andrej Bodor, Béla Bundasian, Mustafa

Mukkerman, Jean Tomoioaga, Cornelia Illarion, etc.) and as such the violation of the classic mandate of ethnic purity. Béla Bodor interpreted this as a sign of a vision of the impending doom of the Hungarian minority under Ceaușescu. In general, *Sinistra District* was received as a tragic and nihilistic vision of ethnic Hungarian history, fallen victim to totalitarianism. Finally, the comparison with *Stalker* marked the book as a late product of the Eastern European 1980s and their rhetoric concerning the political “Ice Age.”<sup>3</sup>

There are other aspects of the space in Bodor’s novel that open up horizons of historical interpretation wider than the one focusing on the Hungarian minorities’ experience of the latest decades of Cold War. *Sinistra District* is strongly reminiscent of the “invention of Eastern Europe” as a symbolic wilderness in Western travelogues especially since the Enlightenment, as described by Larry Wolf (1994). The way Ádám Bodor mixes reality with fiction resembles the “synthetic association of lands, which drew upon fact and fiction,” the techniques of exoticization characteristic of the writings of educated travelers on the fringes of civilized Europe (Wolf 356). The manner in which Bodor manipulates geographical descriptions and clichés of natural history, as well as topoi of local lore, is akin to the techniques of foreign travelers who put Transylvania on the map of European civilization as a generic composite space, uniting the opposite features of civic urban culture and unenlightened rural ignorance. *Sinistra District* is an echo chamber of these accounts that carries them to the extreme. The facts are presented by the main character Andrej Bodor, himself a traveler and an outsider (although a former inhabitant of Sinistra), whose arrival to and departure from the district frames the story. The characters, described from the cold distance of the seemingly impartial observer, evoke the barbarians of Count de Ségour. Bodor’s book is first and foremost a study of individual encounters with naked power and timeless despotism, whether feudal or communist.

### Constructing Sinistra

Sinistra may be mapped in several ways. As a pseudo-natural historical account, the narrative begins with a precise geographical localization in the northern Romanian mountain region close to the Ukrainian border. The district is a national park and simultaneously forced domicile of its inhabitants on the Southern slope of the Pop Ivan ridge, an actual mountain in the Maramureșul Carpathian cluster. It is on this slope that Andrej moves northward and upwards, from Dobrin village near Sinistra river to the Colinda forest, an army post and morgue, past the Sinistra Colonia mental hospital, until he reaches the Punte Sinistra mountain resort. After the ascension he walks Southward towards Greece. He leaves in the refrigerator van of Musztafa Mukkerman, who smuggles him out of Sinistra.

The next layer is the symbolic description of the place along the north-south axis. North is associated with chill, ice, night, foreignness, and a lethal illness called the Tunguz cold (the name Tunguz denoting a seminomadic people in eastern Siberia, and connotes, among others, Stalinist Soviet Russia, but also a natural catastrophe, called the Tunguz) carried by the bone-feathered birds:

This bird moves to the valleys of Sinistra when the chilling winter winds approach from the north....The bone-feathered was not welcome here; they hassled them with stones, the smarter ones simply spat at them, it was believed that wherever the birds flocked, the tunguz cold followed. (It was) the fever that devoured even colonel Borcan in the end (9).

The northern peaks are always covered in snow, and the northern sky is chilly. The warm southern wind melts the ice in Sinistra once only, giving way again to snow. South, the Balkans is designated by the sunlit resorts of Greece: Saloniki, and the Dardanelles. The Balkans, i.e., a transmuted classical Greece, is the counter-image of Sinistra; here “night and day the lights of freedom glimmer,” it is the imaginary space of wealth and refinement. After Andrej escapes with the truck driver Musztafa he revisits Sinistra driving a brand-new Suzuki land-rover from Greece. His “classical elegance” differs dramatically from the rags and sandals of the locals.

The symbolic north-south distinction evokes particular historical reminiscences. The dark and barren north contrasted with the warm and mild south conjures the classical division of Europe into the southern/Mediterranean sphere of civilization in contrast with the barbarism of northern intruders.<sup>4</sup> It can also be read as a Cold War distinction between the Eastern Bloc and the West. The internment camp Sinistra is separated from the rest of the world by “a web of fences, trenches and obstacles.” It is totally controlled by the army. This “shadowy place” epitomizes Churchill’s “Eastern States of Europe” behind the iron curtain, under “totalitarian control” (cited in Wolf, 1). Conversely, the Balkans, the fictional land of freedom, echoes the actual exemption of Greece from Eastern Europe. To quote Churchill’s famous formulation again, “Athens alone – Greece with its immortal glories – is free” (cited in Wolf, 2).

The quality of Sinistra as an “Eastern European” realm is further compounded by the savage characteristics of local nature and folks, which may be read as the symbolic others of “Western” civilization. Geographically still in Europe, the space becomes the realm of dream, imagination and invention through the attributes of its inhabitants, who in their turn reveal their own often clumsy imaginings about freedom and happiness (where the industrial design of a Suzuki jeep is characterized as “classical” and “elegant”). The effect is an impression of confusion familiar from travel literature on the Eastern European margins. Together with

Count Louis-Philippe Ségur, who in the late 18th century traveled through Central Europe as minister of the French court to Russia, the reader is no longer sure whether she is in Europe or has left it by moving backwards in time (see Wolf, 17–25). In *Sinistra* time leaps backwards in history and carries the reader into the mythical time of tales. When colonel Borcan dies of tunguz cold his body is fixed to the ground for fear that griffins will carry him away.

Read against the Transylvanist literary tradition (the novel is complete without it, and there is no explicit reference to the topic) Bodor's writing may also be interpreted as the dystopia of collectivist ideologies. Seeking markers of belonging beyond politics, interwar Transylvanism rediscovered regionalism and *kultúr-magyarság*, that is, the cultural definition of the nation transgressing political boundaries. Praising the particularities of the regional and local, it emphasized ethno-cultural diversity against nationalizing politics. According to the somewhat mystifying formulation of Károly Kós:

...the cultural production but also the Transylvanian man of this wonderfully unique land has two characteristics, one of them being Hungarian, Romanian or German, but the other one being Transylvanian. This is the squaring of the circle that makes the Transylvanian or: Transylvania incomprehensible to everybody outside (1921, 3).

Landscape symbolism received distinctive importance in the new-fangled sentimental myth of the homeland. Homeland nature thus stood for solidarity (symbolized by the choir of trout in the poem *Pisztrángok kara* by Lajos Áprily), stability and persistence (in poems of Sándor Reményik such as *A kinyújtott és a visszahúzott kéz* (The Extended and the Withdrawn Hand), tolerance and friendship (in the novels of Károly Kós), teacher (in the Bildungsroman trilogy *Ábel* (Abel) by Áron Tamási), or treasure (in *Varjú nemzetség* [Crow Nation] by Károly Kós). These values marked the return to a romantic understanding of nationhood based on public virtues.

How does Bodor's *Sinistra District* relate to this tradition? There is a strong similarity in the stylized and symbolic appearance of the landscape. Like his predecessors, Bodor endows nature with characteristics that foretell the fate of its characters. *Sinistra* suggests their doomed life; they either escape by the skin of their teeth or die a violent death. The weather is an important agent, as the only genuine love story in the novel starts and ends with a dizzying spring day. This love story, the only narrative revealing the noble sentiment of love (and not merely the desire of the flesh), carries a loose biblical connotation; the lovers meet on Palm Sunday, and after an interment and torture in a mental hospital, the woman finds liberation in death on Easter Sunday.



Beyond the structural similarities, Bodor's *district* is not the continuation of Transylvanism's idyllic landscape literature, but rather its violent and dystopian anti-statement. Sinistra is an anti-homeland. Most of the characters are interned or sent there (colonel Coca Mavrodin, from Dobrogea) or are foreigners or spies (Andrej Bodor, who came to find his interned son), and the intimacy of the homeland landscape is entirely missing. The space has degenerated into a military camp and forced domicile, its caves have been filled, and its mine has become the feeding site for the government's bears. So Andrej's statement upon arrival in *Sinistra* that, "here my life will be completed," evokes Transylvanism's romanticism only to refute it through its sheer absurdity. He will have to do the dirty work for his superiors, including killing a man, and finally escape in the refrigerator truck of the half-Turkish, half-German smuggler. The space thus evokes antagonistic interpretations that exclude its unequivocal characterization. In the end, *Sinistra District* remains the ambiguous, half-real, half-imagined space of doom.

### The People of *Sinistra*

The ambiguity of the novel also resides in the inhabitants. László Márton mentioned the Babel-like confusion of names. He finds them both amusing and horrifying. Indeed these names are made up of unusual combinations. Some of them carry permanent attributes in the fashion of epic poems that contribute to their extraordinary, archetypal aura. Here is a list of the most important names: *Béla Bundasian*, Andrej's half-Armenian foster son; *Elvira Spiridon*, Andrej's lover with the "velvet bottom;" *Aranka Westin*, "the old mare," another of Andrej's lovers; *Bebe Tescovina*, the girl with glowing red eyes; Colonel *Puiu Borcan*, whose black umbrella starts flying after his death like an oversized bat; Colonel *Coca Mavrodin*, alias *Izolda Mavrodin-Mahmudia*, from Dobrogea, the substitute for the late colonel Borcan; *Musztafa Mukkerman*, the homeless track driver; *Géza Hutira*; the albino twins *Hamza Petrika*; *Doctor Olinek*, the stinky bear officer; *Connie Illafeld*, alias *Cornelia Illarion*, Béla Bundasian's green-eyed lover; the spy called *red rooster*; the *grey ganders*, Mavrodin's twenty informers dressed in grey suits: *vain stags*. The Babel of names is also one of languages and ethnicities, since Romanian, Ukrainian, Hungarian, Jewish, German (as well as its Zipzer dialect), and Rusin are all used in the district. In addition to the consociation of the numerous nationalities, the mixed ethnicity of the characters (Andrej, Béla Bundasian, Coca, Musztafa, etc.) is also a dominant feature.

Bodor's ethnic potpourri is a sarcastic grimace indeed at Transylvanism's emphasis on national purity. Transylvanism opted for cultural pluralism for Romanians, Hungarians and Germans, but not for mixed marriages. The premise of harmonious coexistence of the aforementioned nations was the maintenance of

the wall between each of the cultures, despite the homogenizing politics of the state. The following passage from Kós' *Kultúrtörténeti vázlat* exemplify this notion:

...during thousand years on the land of Transylvania no people and no culture could or wanted to shape the other in its image. External forces tried it sometimes, at great sacrifice but with little result and no ultimate success. Contrarily, the never totally fading purpose of the three coexisting cultures was to acquire such common features, while they maintained the racial character that made them typically Transylvanian despite their distinct features... These manifest common features build up that special Transylvanian psyche that no national brethren of the Transylvanians could ever understand.... Transylvania's lot was the happiest when her peoples accepted together the separate Transylvanian life and contributed to it with their distinct Transylvanian minds (88).

Transylvanism presumed the existence of pure and distinct local identities. The "Transylvanian psyche" shared by the "three nations" distinguished them from their co-nationals outside the region. Obviously, the focus was on Transylvanian Hungarians. To quote Kós again: "the Transylvanian differs from the dweller of Hungary, but especially different and foreign for us is the Hungarian from Budapest" (1912, 5). *Sinistra District* addresses the theme of local identity and patriotism that disturbs and caricatures the Transylvanist utopia. There is no special focus on the fate of Hungarians or any other ethnicity in the narrative. (In this light, Béla Bodor's contention that Bodor wrote on the tragic fate of the Hungarian minority under communism may be misleading.) On the contrary, the individual stories prove that under a dictatorial regime all the nationalities suffer. Bodor's narrative creates an inverted democracy of multinational underdogs. Ethnicity has no more value than other physical traits, such as hair color, the texture of one's skin. Historical references are built into the text in the form of allusions, especially to the torture, deportations, and imprisonments associated with the change of political regimes in the whole region of Central Europe, Eastern Europe, and South-Eastern Europe, well documented since the end of World War I.

The mixed origin of the characters challenges the Transylvanist ethno-cultural utopia. Ignoring the myth of the coexisting but never inter-marrying three "main" ethnic clusters, Bodor fills the space with half-breeds, as well as exotic minorities from the fringes (see the names listed above): Ukrainians, Turks, Rusins, Zipzers, Serbs, Armenians, marginalized by patriotic historiography. *Sinistra District* generates a regional existence indeed, but a violent and artificial one, without links to the past. Since the characters lack any historical consciousness, the problem of identity related to national past does not exist. The lack of past is linked to the lack of future; *Sinistra's* inhabitants do not plan to change their lives. The only riot, a



minor plot at the end of the narrative, is easily suppressed. The actions of the characters lack inner drive, let alone intellectual reflection. They have no influence on the events. On the level of meta-narrative, they are excluded from history. This a-historic character is another feature of Bodor's archetypical savage realm.

Instead of cultural tradition there is the fictional account of cultural devastation, the eternal characteristic to political dictatorships. An exemplum is the life story of Conny Illafeld, Béla Bundasian's beloved, the last descendant of Boyars from Bucovina. It is not revealed to the reader if martyrdom, which evokes parallels with Christ's Passion, was caused by her privileged ancestry, her exceptional beauty and intellect, her contacts with Jews from Cernowitz and Lemberg, or her selfless love. Yet it is typical to the brutal sarcasm of the narrative that her cultural riches, especially the knowledge of languages, are revealed at the point when she arrives from the mental hospital, insane, covered in fur, mixing German, Romanian, Hungarian, and several other local dialects. This frugal reference to cultural and human loss is even more shocking, as it reveals the bestiality of her mental destruction and the treason of her former lover:

Her face was covered with fur as well, in the shaggy fur her green eyes were glowing. She did not even know her name. I still tried to see it from the funny side. I tried to catch the eye of colonel Titus Tomoioaga for a knowing look. And though I wasn't really in the mood, I smiled off and on, as one does with the nutty (100–101).

In the Transylvanist utopia the cult of homeland used to be the very basis of human existence. The iconography of the nature of the homeland, with its mountains and forests, embodied purity and was contrasted with the image of towns and valleys, the vilified image of civilization. In Bodor's prose this moral order is destroyed both in the landscape symbolism and in the portraiture of the characters. The degeneration of homeland into a zone of imprisonment is correlated with mutations in the personalities of the figures. The characters of the district are moral amputees. Elvira Spiridon leaves her husband to become Andrej's mistress without the least revolt when captain Coca Mavrodin orders her to do so, Géza Hutira talks politely with the foresters while he poisons them, and the dwarf Gabriel Dunka reports the unfortunate Elvira without the least hesitation, knowing that she will not survive it.

The characters take after the corrupted natural world mentally and physically, acquiring its characteristics. They become similar to animals, insects, even plants, sometimes even machines. No feelings are expressed when one of the twins discovers his brother's suicide: "Well, doc, I see you brought his boots. Then I won't even ask where the feet of my brother from them are." (90) Andrej evinces a similar lack of emotion in the scene in which he gets a new job: "On the damp, grey

stone table there laid the late roadman Zoltán Marmorstein, his pants stuffed with his guts. He did not stir, (and) I already felt his drying foot cloth to be mine.” (61)

Resembling the layered construction of the space, the shaping of characters involves several perspectives. One is the topos of misery. The characters of Sinistra live in the most austere circumstances, and their customs are primitive: “Gathering in the forest in hard times was safe bread, one could fill his own satchel beside the treasury bag. The blueberry, the blackberry and the chanterelle can make one happy, really.” (28) “The methyated spirits, filtered through the white of the bread, spongy mushroom, or mashed blackberry, are the favorite drink of the forest region.” (83) The inhabitants of Sinistra are anthropological mirrors of the “thoroughly rude and barbarous people” of 17th century French mercenary Captain Jacques Margeret or the Russians of Adam Olearius, German envoy, with their “vile and loathsome words” (the characters of Sinistra casually mix polite expressions with common references to sexual organs), “noisy farts” (when he leaves, the surviving Hamza Petrika breaks wind “as if his spirit were departing”), “lusts of the flesh and fornication” (think of the pleasures Andrej enjoys with Aranka Westin and Elvira Spiridon), and even “the vile depravity we call sodomy” (the twins and doctor Olinek, Musztafa Mukkerman) (cited in Wolf, 10–11). The “checking out” of Severin Spiridon’s wife for Andrej’s pleasure resembles Casanova’s purchase of the twelve-year old sexual object. Obviously, the reduction of the figures to mere animals or objects results from their comparison to the latent norm of Western civilization, outside the symbolic space of Sinistra. This perspective reduces the individual differences between the characters and creates the motive of *demi-sauvage*.

The presentation of power structure in *Sinistra District* invokes Orwellian motifs: omnipresence, total control, Big Brother-surveillance, complicity of the church, spying, plots. The motifs evoke late totalitarianism: bears under governmental protection, electricity cables destroyed by the officials, a ban on accumulation of goods, the unpredictability of life. Almost everyone, including the main character, lives in an intimate relationship with power and is ready to do a favor, even kill, in exchange for a job, a passport, or simply to be left alone. The characters, previously described as barbarous, bear the stamp of the regime as well. They enter the row of literary figures testifying the effects of communist history.

When Chernyshevski created the ideal of the Russian Revolutionary in the second half of the 19th century he was planning the perfect executioner of social reforms. To this end one had to leave tradition behind and “simplify” oneself in spirit and flesh, to inscribe oneself entirely into a material order of existence. The revolution was taking place intellectually, it was a process of reeducation. The end-result was the New Man, disciplined, deliberately banal, ascetic, and rational. He was placed in a materialist cosmology, without transcendence but purely mechanistic and scientifically pragmatic. Morality became instrumental, it was

translated into social usefulness, and freedom meant understanding the necessity of devoting oneself to the system. According to this logic, being an outsider, being cynical, refusing to learn, forgetting what one has learnt, all of this meant sinning. The reader's attention is drawn to the proto-ideological character of this portrait, its precedence to ideology or political program (Besancon 124).

Yet since his birth, the Chernyshevskian hero has not fared very well among critics of scientific materialism. During the last hundred-and-fifty years the criticism of the revolutionary type has dealt with the moral degeneration encoded in him, as the eloquent essay of Czesław Miłosz reveals it (1981). Instead of demonizing him like his great Russian predecessors, Dostoyevsky or Bulgakov, Miłosz treats the idealistic image of the hero with ironic distance, that finds resonance in the portraiture in *Zone Sinistra*. The characters of Bodor's novel are the image of the Chernyshevskian figure come to life. Their portraits are completed with the attributes of the imprisoned personality: fear of being on the wrong side in the political wrangling, spying and denouncing as the basis of social ascendance, the art of concealing feelings and opinion behind a mask of commonplaces.

Bodor's characters reflect a mix of various historical interpretations of 20th century Eastern European human types. Their simplicity recalls the machine-like hero of Chernyshevski. But their complicity with the regime, their slyness and corruptness indicates that these portraits were drawn in disenchantment with and mockery of the Soviet-type hero. When Andrej arrives for the first time in Sinistra he is received by the messenger of colonel Borcan:

"This is it," said Nikifor Tescovina. "This is the place where you can shelter. Nobody will ask you anything."

"How did you know that I would come?"

"Ever since you set foot in Sinistra District colonel Borcan knows about your every step. This land attracts people like you. If someone starts upwards along the Sinistra he doesn't stop until reaching Dobrin."

"You have reassured me. Then the colonel knows too that I am a plain wanderer."

"Of course he does. And tell me, plain wanderer, what do you wish to do? You seem to be a versatile person."

"I love the forest a lot, the trees, the bushes. Let's say, I know something about mushrooms, fruits, I have already worked in markets. I can go, if you want, to timberyards, to woodpeelers. Or, if needed, I can set traps."

"That doesn't sound bad. I will talk to the colonel. But until he visits you personally, please, do not leave this place. I mean, do not even step out of the house."

"And to relieve myself, if you don't mind, where can I do?"

"It is best if you stick out your behind out of the window."

In Sinistra everyone is useful and can be used. But usefulness is not the idealistic, unequivocal good of the interpretation of the revolutionaries. It has already acquired the ambiguity captured by Miłosz, it can refer to the interests of the system, concealed, circumscribed, seldom spoken, yet clear to everyone. The self-disciplining of the body has been transformed into the wooden mask worn by the heroes of Miłosz. The ridiculously stiff camouflage of Sinistra's characters is sometimes penetrated by a weak manifestation of personality (the velvety warm look of Musztafa Mukkerman, the love-suicide of one of the Hamza Petrikas, the moving love story of Bebe Tescovina and Géza Hutira, the ironical remarks of Aron Wargotzki before being built into a wall alive).

The stylized presentation of characters, the use of topoi and clichés in their construction, suggest the author's interest in types rather than individuals, in a certain historical and geographical setting. But what a bitter irony is revealed in the treatment of these characters! It is not the community of the tragic patriots as in the case of inter-war heroic literature one finds in *Sinistra District*, but rather the random collective of prisoners chained to the locale.

Bodor does not strive to create a flattering image. His iconoclasm vis-à-vis national and political utopias, the avoidance of creating positive heroes, the suspension of the characters in a subpolitical, subhuman, sub-temporal context, and their grotesquely overdrawn portraits evoke patterns of ethnic and social stigma (Antohi, 216, 242, 244). Bodor creates the symbolic geography of misfortune that echoes the orientalist division of Europe into regions of salvation and regions of the doomed. Nevertheless, *Sinistra District* does not apply the pathos of the great laments in the fashion of national prophets like Chaadaev or Cioran. There is no specific ethnic group to address, let alone victimize or scapegoat.<sup>5</sup> Bodor creates the ethno-cultural hodgepodge of underdogs. Beyond the veil of national uniqueness, he discovers the awful face of self-devouring political power. Colonel Borcan falls victim to the Tunguz cold, Coca Mavrodin freezes solid in the forest. Her death, like everything else in the narrative, is grotesque; what remains of her is a "wet, insect-smelling pile of cloth, crammed with army stars" (43).

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The political claim of the power structure was generally so strong that often the very name of the region was censored in public speech (e.g. in the post-war decades until 1989).

<sup>2</sup> The translation of titles and quotations from the works of Ádám Bodor are mine.

<sup>3</sup> I borrowed this motif from a lecture by Sorin Antohi, who relates the Eastern European topoi of the 1980s referring to chill and coldness to a general crisis in dealing with history and historiography.

<sup>4</sup> The ancient north-south cultural dichotomy between the civilized Hellenes and the barbaric invaders from the north mentioned by Wolf (4) is elaborated by Koselleck.

<sup>5</sup> Antohi, 216.

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