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István Örkény's Kindred Souls in Central European Literature

It is one of the commonplaces of literary history that on occasion the intentions of a writer do not necessarily seem to harmonize with the interpretations his or her work is given. Once completed, a work of literature is not always quite what the author may have envisioned. It acquires its final meaning in the process of reception, in the conversation it prompts among its readers. Thus the notion of "final meaning" is not final at all, since even a motif in the reception of a work that enjoys widespread acceptance today can conflict with later readings as shifts take place in social consciousness.

The reception in Hungary of literary works that were conceived in the spirit of the grotesque offers a fine example of this. István Örkény was regarded as one of the central figures of the grotesque in Hungary, and indeed in the mid-1960s many – including perhaps Örkény himself – thought that he had invented both the concept and narrative strategy. Naturally the grotesque, as a mixture of dissonant styles and genres, was hardly peculiar to the twentieth century, but one finds innumerable examples of hybrid blends of tragedy and comedy in the literatures of Central Europe, perhaps in particular after 1945. For the sake of clarity, however, it is worth drawing a distinction between works of literature that have elements of the grotesque and works of literature that exemplify more broadly the spirit of the grotesque. In the case of the latter, the grotesque is palpable on every level of the literary work as a manner of depiction, an approach to the phenomena of life, and even a poetics.¹

The emergence of a literary tendency is never simply a matter of choices made by individual authors in search of a distinctive style. Rather it is a matter of shifts that take place as a consequence of changes in the cultural attitudes

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XXX életrajz of contemporary Hungarian authors Péter Esterházy, Mihály Kornis, Lajos Her latest major translations include Péter Esterházy's Celestial Harmonies (2004), Not Art (2010) and István Örkény's More One Minute Stories (2006) XXX

of an era. Life in Central Europe in the two decades following the Revolution of 1956 was marked by a number of circumstances and contradictions that themselves seemed to tend towards the grotesque. For instance, there was tension between consumer practices and people's everyday survival strategies, not to mention the ambiguous assessment of the Stalinist era and the loss of all faith in official ideologies. Urbanization, which brought with it greater social mobility and a greater sense of social security, made it possible or at least easier for a raw kind of individualism to emerge that implied an ironic distance from tradition and even culture. The institutions of political power, however, did their best to hamper the development of any kind of open, autonomous thinking, and reform efforts sufficed to do little more than clarify the limits set by state power. The grotesque began to emerge in the literature that focused on the problems of the individual personality in part because the people of the era were caught in the trap of belated modernization, which narrowed the notion of personal freedom to the formula of "individuality," without, however, social autonomy.

It is thus hardly incidental that in the two decades following the Revolution of 1956 a pleiad of authors of grotesque literature gained prominence in Central Europe, indicating one of the possible paths of artistic innovation. One might well think of Polish authors Sławomir Mrożek and Tadeusz Różewicz, or the Czech Bohumil Hrabal, Milan Kundera and Václav Havel, but one could find examples in each of the national literatures of the region. In their works the grotesque figures as a mix of tragic and comic. This is not simply a juxtaposition of the classic "comic blunder" and the "tragic flaw," since in the grotesque both tragedy and comedy lose their unequivocal connotations and undermine each other's self-evidence. Elements of the grotesque are incorporated into the works in an ambiguous manner such that neither the tragic nor the comic is ever absent. And irony in the grotesque is a more general quality, while the absurd is narrower. Satire tends to offer a clear point of reference from which to assess the events and characters, while the grotesque lacks any kind of self-assured perspective (the assertion of any such perspective can only be the interpretive work of a reader).

The notion of a literary "trend" suggests an assortment of works with common themes and structures.² In the case of the grotesque, the most prominent common structural element is perhaps the alogism. The perturbation of logical understandings is evident on every level in the grotesque, including

1 ■ For an analysis of the notion of the grotesque and the literary trend see Tamás Berkes. *Senki sem fog nevetni: Groteszk irányzat a hatvanas évek közép- és kelet-európai irodalmában* ["No One Will Laugh: The Grotesque As Trend in the 1960s in the Literature of East-Central Europe"]. Budapest: Gondolat Kiadó, 1990, 13-29.

2 ■ Endre Bojtár. *A kelet-európai avantgarde irodalom* ["The Avant-Garde Literature of Eastern Europe"]. Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1977, 9-31.

character, style, setting, and the passage of time. For instance, with very few exceptions the character sketches are shockingly flat. This, however, is natural, for as a kind of view of the world the grotesque, a balance between the tragic and the comic, is best expressed in "stills," there can be little or no development. The tragicomic, one could say, is a process, while the grotesque is a snapshot. The tragicomedy makes us laugh and cry at the same time, the grotesque freezes the smiles on our faces. This is why one rarely finds grotesque narratives that could be described as novels, since the novel tends to center around plot and character development. Russian author Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* (1967)³ is an exception or perhaps borderline case, as are the Czech Karel Čapek's *War with the Newts* (1936) and Josef Škvorecký's *The Cowards* (1958), and these novels each contain a motif that gestures outwards, away from the wax-work figures of the grotesque.

It would be a mistake, however, to contend that each and every composition of Örkény's kindred spirits belong to the grotesque. The trend is comprised not of oeuvres, but of individual literary works that can be compared and contrasted (and grouped into "tendencies") on the basis of their generic and structural elements. It is worth noting that like Sławomir Mrożek, Örkény wrote enduring works of literature in three genres of the grotesque, short prose, absurd drama, and longer works that interrogate the coherence of national histories.

In this context Örkény's career is distinctive in part simply because as a manner of perceiving and casting the world, the grotesque is almost entirely foreign to the Hungarian literary canon, in contrast with Polish and Czech literature (with the possible exception of Frigyes Karinthy and the coffeehouse literature of the first half of the twentieth century). In the early 1940s Örkény struck an ironic tone that had grotesque overtones, but this remained stifled for some two decades because of the prevailing circumstances. As a fellow-traveler communist who had done forced labor and been held as a prisoner of war, he tended towards the literary ideal of social realism, adapting to the cultural policy of the Stalinist regime. He then became part of the writers' opposition accused of laying the intellectual foundations of the Revolution of 1956, and after the suppression of the Revolution he was excluded from literary life. In his years of forced withdrawal, his ambitions and vision as a writer matured, and as of the late 1960s some of his works began to win worldwide acclaim. At some 50 years of age he returned to the grotesque and frivolous narratives of his youth, building in part on his experiences of the war and of Stalinism. He was able to do this in part because in the meantime censorship had relaxed somewhat (in the early 1960s he had trouble publishing his works, his first "grotesques" were received with outrage by the official organs of literary life),

3 ■ The dates in parentheses refer to the publications in the original.

but also because his artistic sensitivities were ideally suited to the hidden inner workings of the decade, a time at which absurd and torturous contradictions were consigned to the sphere of the unspeakable. Essentially three factors made it possible for Örkény to succeed, in the end, as a writer: his unique disposition, the relaxation of censorship and the consequential opportunities to publish, and the social and psychological peculiarities of the time.

Regarding the genres of the grotesque, Örkény's kindred souls tended to prefer the short prose narrative. These "single-motif" stories were particularly popular in the early 1960s. Most of them deal with the stumblings of common people as they lose their footing while navigating the scenes and backdrops of everyday life. They lose their balance, and as they misstep, the orderliness of everyday life is overturned. In one of Mrožek's early stories, the director of a zoo uses an inflatable rubber elephant to cut costs. The personnel, weary of pumping the elephant full of air, use the gas-tap to finish the job. As a group of school children stares at the enormous animal, hanging on the teacher's every word (who is speaking of the elephant's tremendous weight), the great balloon suddenly begins to rise above the gaping crowd and drift away. As a kind of epilogue of this moral fable, the children will become hooligans, guzzle vodka, and break windows. The distorting lens of the humorous grotesque makes lies and even terrifying occurrences laughable. Karel Michal's heroes in *Everyday Spooks* (1961) find themselves face to face with various creatures of the imagination, including phantoms, imps, and talking cats. The absence of values is revealed on the plane of the fantastic. A dead cat is thrown into the apartment of a journalist, and he speaks, which one would not expect even of a living cat. Furthermore, he cannot conjugate verbs properly and frequently uses the second-person singular instead of the first-person singular. Anyone who speaks to the cat begins to feel schizophrenic. The characters of the satirical short story think for a moment that in his second-person answers the cat is expressing their thoughts, then suddenly come to their senses and distance themselves from the animal's dangerous utterances. In Michal's stories false halos shimmering above the everyday person's head are shattered. When the hero blunders, the narrow-minded, paltry, conservative, even drunkard personality of the average citizen rises to the fore.

In this context it is quite clear that the grotesque prose of the early 1960s took form on the border of the tragicomic. This was the case with Örkény as well, who of course did not begin writing grotesque narratives from one day to the next. When he began to publish again in 1962 his first narratives were remarkably varied. An experimental tone and a technique of omission and insinuation blend in them with the flat descriptive style and the stylized

4 ■ Péter Szirák. *Örkény István: Pályakép* ["István Örkény: A Monograph"]. Budapest: Palatinus, 2008, 156-178.

portrayal of character.⁴ The first new collection of stories, *Jeruzsálem hercegnője* ("The Princess of Jerusalem," 1966) included both traditional and grotesque tales, as well as the first cycle of one-minute stories. The principal strength is the ironic distance that enwraps the meaning, the "message" of the text in the cold style of objectivity. As Tamás Ungváry has noted, Örkény never figures as the narrator: "his characters speak about themselves; that the author would 'recount' a tale about them is impossible."⁵ *Nászutasok a légyapíron* (Honeymooners on Flypaper, 1967) acquaints the reader with the new Örkény in his entirety. There is much less retrospection, the grotesque depiction is unswerving. It is interesting to wonder what it might have been that prompted this shift in his prose, apparently sudden but clearly the result of years of maturation, a shift in which the discovery and development of the grotesque played a central role.

Örkény was no theoretician, and he never devised any kind of coherent theory of the grotesque, but in interviews and other contexts he gave explanations of his approach, which had become a way of seeing the world.⁶ The interviews were done much later, however, than the works to which he referred in the course of the chats, and it can be difficult to determine the extent to which they were colored by the lens of recollection. He was able to become familiar with the works of kindred Central European writers only "on the way," as it were, so it would be misleading to speak of any direct influence. If one wishes to consider possible promptings it would be worthwhile to mention some of the events of literary life at the time. Örkény was one of the many writers who was influenced by the rediscovery underway at the time of the works of Franz Kafka, and the literary journals in Hungary at the time were beginning to write on Wolfgang Kayser's monograph on the subject, *Das Groteske: Seine Gestaltung in Malerei und Dichtung* (The Grotesque in Art and Literature, originally published in German in 1957).⁷

In 1965 Hungarian literary historian Endre Bojtár wrote an article in the widely read journal *Kritika* ("Critique") on the new generation of Czech authors of the grotesque. Bojtár was the first person to introduce audiences in Hungary to the early works of authors such as Hrabal, Havel, Škvorecký.⁸

5 ■ Tamás Ungváry. *Egy modern elbeszélő: Örkény István novellái* ["A Modern Narrator. The Short Stories of István Örkény"]. *Új Írás*, 11, 1966, 119.

6 ■ István Örkény. *Párbeszéd a groteszkről: Beszélgetések Örkény Istvánnal* ["Dialogue on the Grotesque: Conversations with István Örkény"]. Budapest: Magvető, 1981.

7 ■ Wolfgang Kayser. *Das Groteske: Seine Gestaltung in Malerei und Dichtung*. Oldenburg/Hamburg: Gerhard Stalling Verlag, 1957. See György Walkó. *Könyv a "groteszk"-ről* ["Book on the "Grotesque""]. *Világirodalmi Figyelő*, 3, 1958, 271-274 and Péter Pór. *A groteszk és története* ["The Grotesque and Its History"]. *Filológiai Közlöny*, 1-2, 1965, 253-264.

8 ■ Endre Bojtár. *A groteszk a mai cseh irodalomban* ["The Grotesque in Czech Literature of Today"]. *Kritika*, 10, 1965, 27-34.

All signs suggest that Örkény developed his literary style spontaneously, even instinctively, as if happening upon the grotesque in the privacy of his own workshop without having any knowledge whatsoever of what he had discovered. This is illustrated perhaps the most clearly by the fact that *Ballada a költészet hatalmáról* ("Ballad about the Magic of Poetry"), one of his finest short stories which inclines strongly towards the fantastic and the grotesque, was published in 1956 in *Ludas Matyi* (a literary journal named after "Mattie the Goose-Boy," a poem by Mihály Fazekas based on a folk tale), but it took years before the grotesque began to dominate in his short prose works. In order for the grotesque to permeate his work as it came to do, he needed the budding discourse on the grotesque and the general influence of the other literatures of the region.

The grotesque short story, however, is not yet a one-minute story. The one-minute story was Örkény's most significant literary innovation, and it is unique in the literatures of Central Europe. (Only Andrzej Bursa and the Czech Miloš Macourek have come close.) The one-minute stories are distinct from the grotesque short stories not simply because they are short. Örkény dismantles and reduces to a minimum the genre of epic story-telling and essentially shelves the narration of plot. "Some 12 years ago I turned off the path of epic prose," he commented in 1970, "as a kind of uprising against the hegemony of explanation. It was not first and foremost as a writer that I rose up against the recounting of everything, the detailed description of setting, the portrayal of character from head to toe, but rather as a reader."⁹ The events of the one-minute stories do not comprise or recount a single, unified story. The fragmented prose is a crucible of opinion, tentative thought, and tentative philosophy. Unlike the traditional conclusion of a tale, the closing line, sometimes almost a punch line, more often than not is absurd. It elevates the idea to the level of the abstract, but symbolically and with an intense grimace.¹⁰

Of Örkény's works for the stage, *Tóték* (The Toth Family, 1967)¹¹ and *Pisti a vérzivatarban* (Pisti in the Bloodshed, 1972) can unquestionably be considered part of his turn towards the grotesque in the 1960s. Both share many affinities with works of prominent authors of other national literary traditions of the region. *Tóték* is a good example of how the presence of elements of the absurd alone hardly exhausts the concept of the absurd drama. The structure of this grotesque work is traditional. There is only one dramatic contradiction in the

9 ■ István Örkény. *Párbeszéd a groteszkről: Beszélgetések Örkény Istvánnal* ["Dialogue on the Grotesque: Conversations with István Örkény"], 101.

10 ■ See Tamás Berkes: "Örkény groteszk pályafordulata" ["The Turn towards the Grotesque in the Career of Örkény"]. *A magyar irodalom története*. Vol. III. Ed. Mihály Szegedy-Maszák and András Veres. Budapest: Gondolat, 2007, 564-572.

11 ■ *Tóték* was published first as a story in *Nászutasok a légyapíron* in 1967, he dramatized it in the same year.

linear and unified plot. In the case of *Pisti in the Bloodshed*, one finds all of the formal accoutrements of the absurd drama: the mosaic-like plot, which is constructed out of shivers and shards, is a collective autobiography. History appears in forms of behavior.

The elevation of grotesque and absurd drama to the level of social, historical, and political parable distinguishes it from the grotesque and absurd drama of the West. For Mrožek, Havel and Örkény the absurd is not a matter of the metaphysical questions of human existence, but rather the product of social mechanisms. The Central European version of the grotesque and the absurd bears affinities with the Western trend, but it is different in significant ways. They share the theme of alienation, but their principal similarity lies in formal and artistic structure. The absurd is, first and foremost, a kind of logic. It is not based on causal relationships, but it has its own internal consistency. Its logic is unbelievable in the extreme, but not unintelligible. The inversions of logic are made possible through the deformation of language. An absurd work of literature or art builds on the confusion and disturbance of communication in general, and some such works deal almost exclusively with this. They demystify and expose prejudices, mythologies, and ideologies that cloak and distort reality. But this similarity is more formal than anything else. Beckett parodies redemption, Mrožek parodies the ideology of power and national ideals. The Western version is abstractly symbolic, while the Central European version maintains its ties to the concrete. It bears the clearest resemblance to the comedies of Friedrich Dürrenmatt.

One finds a similar difference in the thematicization of language. While Eugène Ionescu demolishes petrified clichés of language because they obscure any possibility of experiencing manifold life, the falseness of language in Havel refers to clearly discernible social relations and interactions. The real hero of *Garden Party* (1963) is the empty (or emptied) language or phrase that crushes the individual. However, through the proliferation of commonplaces the play derides the intertwinings of the machinery of communism and the worst of petty bourgeois tradition. The dogmatic apparatus and the philistine share a common "platform": they both cling to schemas and empty linguistic formulas. The protagonist assimilates the language of the official apparatus so perfectly that he begins to rise to the height of power. He terminates the Ministry of Termination. These examples give a sense of how, while the absurd in the West was more a philosophical stance, in Central Europe it was more political. In the West the absurd inclines towards disarming distress, while in Central Europe there is the subdued sound of liberating laughter. The reader, understanding the situation, rejects the world that is portrayed.

Not counting the two works of the interwar period, the first grotesque drama of Central Europe was Mrožek's *The Police* (1958). The play is set in a fictive dictatorship, where the police are so efficient that every last one of the

political prisoners gives a profession of allegiance. The police chief then tells one of his men to play the part of the enemy, a role with which he comes to identify so thoroughly that in the end he becomes a revolutionary. Mrozek simplifies everything to a logical level and creates a complex conceptual structure, stretching his passion for analysis to the limits of the absurd. He is not concerned with metaphysical perspectives, but rather hierarchies among us. Many have compared his drama to *The Great Wig* (1965), a play by Slovak author Peter Karvaš in which the bald are identified as the enemies of the system, but with the exception of the protagonist everyone loses their hair and those who wear wigs rule. The protagonist, the only person who actually has hair, is sentenced to death as an agent of baldness, but following the revolution of the baldies he is executed anyway because he does not change sides and become loyal to the new regime.

Mrożek crowned his early dramas with the first performance *Tango* (1964), perhaps the most important composition of the Polish drama of the time. The play is a grotesque recasting of the philosophy of history that bitterly parodies the classical line of the Polish literary tradition. If one were to attempt to reimagine this work, which both bemoans the rupture of the national tradition and at the same time rejects it, as part of the Hungarian canon, one would have to envision a play that, building on allusions to József Katona's *Bánk Bán* (The Viceroy, 1819) and Imre Madách's *Az ember tragédiája* (The Tragedy of Man, 1862), pronounces the most hallowed ideals of the Romantic heritage useless without, however, sparing Modernism or the Avant-garde. It is perhaps not an exaggeration to claim that there is some affinity between *Tango* and *Pisti a vérzivatarban*. Örkény's last question refers to the notion of a collective Hungarian "personality," a "Pisti." Is this collective Hungarian character simply Pisti, or the transformation of Pisti into the heroic István? Örkény's play raises the literary question of morality, and according to many critics also conjures the referential world of Madách's *Az ember tragédiája*. But he gives an answer similar to that of Mrozek: "but how are we supposed to give new life to something that never existed?" 🐼