Ádám Bodor

The Sinistre Zone

Sinistra körzet

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The main character of Ádám Bodor's novel *The Sinistra Zone* is Andrei Bodor, who, under an alias, searches in the Zone, which can be read as an experiential imprint of twentieth-century dictatorships, for his adopted son, Béla Bundasian, while at the same time getting to know the peculiar atmosphere of this region's isolated world. Through the sequence of events that befall him, the reader also gains insight into the lives of the inhabitants here, which are marked by a complete lack of morality. Although Andrei eventually finds his son, he cannot persuade him to escape from the district; Béla Bundasian sets himself on fire and thereby offers self-destruction as a possible way of escape from the oppressive, unpredictable totalitarian system.

The Sinistra Zone is often linked – including in Hungarian secondary-school textbooks – with the rule of the communist dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu between 1965 and 1989. However, László Márton reminds us that in the case of Bodor's work too, as with fiction so often, "the aesthetic value of the text is directly connected to the factual authenticity of the description or report" (83; my translation), so the author of *The Sinistra Zone* undoubtedly "has personal experience of Central and Eastern European prisons and labour camps, and has obviously drawn radical, bitter conclusions from these experiences" (83; my translation). Just like the time structure of the novel, the space depicted in the work can also be interpreted as a concrete geographical borderland (the district is presumably located somewhere along the Ukrainian or Romanian border), and certain elements of the novel can be matched with specific historical events. The quotation in the ninth chapter about the "notebook pages written in Polish: a mimeograph" (Bodor 107), for example, recalls the activities of the Polish anti-communist organisation Fighting Solidarity, founded in 1982. On the other hand, if we read it allegorically, space itself becomes one of the main characters of the novel. *The Sinistra Zone,* therefore, "cannot be regarded as realist prose of a mimetic character" (Simon 94; my translation); the story is densely interwoven with fairytale-like, fantastic and visionary elements as well.

The word sinistra means 'ominous, ill-boding'; the title of the work suggests that the district is in some way intended to isolate evil or disaster. At the same time, the novel keeps the reader in constant uncertainty about what exactly the danger is that the boundaries of the district are supposed to contain. Although a disease known in the district as Tungusic Flu is aggressively claiming victims, at one point in the text, the very fact of the epidemic's existence is cancelled out. And although it seems that the lives of the people living here are in some sense specialised in providing for the bears, the reader, through the perspective of the characters, and especially Andrei, never sees actual bears, only bear-keepers.

The subtitle of the work (*Chapters of a Novel*) points to its genre uncertainty: the short, few-page stories together form a coherent universe, and the chapters, which can also be read as separate

short stories, are linked to each other through frequent anticipations and flashbacks, through recurring motifs and the repetition of certain turns of phrases. The part–whole dilemma that comes to the fore in the volume's non-linear structure problematises the question of narratability just as much as the peculiar behaviour of the narrator does: the narrator of the chapters is not uniform; at times the first-person narrator Andrei is telling the story, while in certain chapters there is an external narrator. Although the central epic thread (Andrei searching for his adopted son) forms the background of each story, "the book is not about the adventures of Andrei Bodor or some other character, but about the title character, about the post-historical landscape and about time curling in on itself" (Márton 85; my translation).

In this timeless, geographically non-specific world, people lose their human characterology, their personality and their free will, which mirrors the functioning of dictatorships. The inhabitants of the district are "prisoners of a sub-civilisational underworld, […] eking out an existence in a state of constant surveillance, suppression, deprivation and humiliation" (Simon 95–96; my translation). Their subjugation is represented by their becoming animal-like, as the text of the novel is densely woven through with animal motifs (for example, the female colonel, who is often compared in the text to a moth, has men who are grey ganders; the stranger who appears at the beginning of the novel is the Red Rooster). This network of metaphors affects not only people but also elements of the landscape (for instance, "A narrow, weasel-shaped patch of snow") (Bodor 19); "the sphere of dominion of vegetation, of raw biological life, is wider than anything else and represents a power that subjugates everything" (Simon 95; my translation). A sign of the loss of identity is that Andrei, on arriving in the district, is given a new name and then has to wear a dog tag. The novel also unsettles the reader in terms of the characters: it is often impossible to decide whether "one name covers several persons (for example, Géza Kökény), or whether several names cover one person (for example, the three Colonel Tomoioagas)" (Bengi 127; my translation). The uncertainties around the connection between name, personal identity and selfhood point to the unpossessability of language and the impossibility of fixing meanings – a poetic feature (Bengi 126; my translation) that also mirrors the amorality of the district, just like the motivically detailed procedures of dehumanisation.

The novel also shows its amoral world at the level of language in the fact that the characters' utterances are typically devoid of emotion, and the dialogues are neutral and terse, in a particularly striking way in ethically questionable situations. These utterances, in their absurdity and grotesqueness, also provide the novel's humour. As Zoltán András Bán puts it: "This is the principle of humour. The terrifying world of Dobrin City – and with it that of so-called socialism – becomes ridiculous and is demolished" (63; my translation).

The perception of a world ruled by timelessness is broken down into measurable units by only a single recurring event: every Thursday, Mustafa Mukkerman, who transports frozen mutton towards the Balkans, arrives in the district and sometimes smuggles people out. In the closed district that evokes the world of Central and Eastern European dictatorships, the inhabitants live on canned food, boiled potatoes and berries, which is also one of the signs of their becoming animal-like. This is why the fifth chapter ("*Mustafa Mukkerman's Truck*") is so exciting: in it, the Turkish meat-trucker gives Andrei Haribo gumm,y and Kinder eggs, the special sweets of the Western world, and Andrei eventually leaves the district hidden among the frozen meats in Mukkerman's truck. The first and last chapters, which form the frame of the novel, tell how Andrei returns to Sinistra Zone and how he is finally expelled from there. Although Andrei leaves the district, the memory of his stay there, his memories, experiences and what he has lived through, and the traces of his skis, continue to curve

across the clearing forever.

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