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**Multilingual Minority:  
Poetical Decomposition of the Embodied Dictatorial Legacy**

**Transborder Hungarian Literature and Multilingual Minority Self-awareness**

East-Central Europe as “the mother of all historical regions” (“Mutter aller Geschichtsregionen”, Troebst 2010) and a historical in-between territory, where dislocating maps have for centuries continuously re-framed static spaces and their inhabitants, merges traces of different national and ethnic memories. On a smaller scale in East-Central Europe one example could be the transborder/minority Hungarian literature as an inherently multilingual phenomenon, which came to denote works produced in the Hungarian language within the territories of Romania, Slovakia, Ukraine and Serbia (the former Czechoslovakia, USSR, and Yugoslavia respectively), where significant Hungarian minority populations exist as a result of the post-WWI redrawing of the region’s borders. This conceptual categorisation could be seen as an example of what Brubaker calls “the movement of borders over people” (Brubaker 2015, 136). The inherent linguistic otherness, i.e. the coexistence of these literatures with other, surrounding languages dislocates both the traditional descriptive categories with which the contemporary Hungarian literary history operates, and the viability of a literary canon based on the borders of the nation state. Consequently,

could re-frame and deconstruct the national as a homogeneous entity, since the conceptualization of the transborder/minority Hungarian literature as multilingual could undermine the “sacrosanct monopoly of methodological nationalism in literary studies” (Tihanov 2017, 475) based on monolingualism.<sup>1</sup>

In this essay, I argue that due to cultural interferences, the hybridity of East-Central Europe as a shared territory between different national and ethnic groups could be seen as a common non-nationalistic context, and I chart two kinds of phenomena for “multilingual locals” (Laachir, Marzagora and Orsini 2018), which deconstruct national literary hierarchies. Examining the ways in which Romanian and Hungarian texts interact with one another regarding the representation of the 1989 regime change, I suggest that literary texts are created as inherently multilingual and that Hungarian novels can be seen as mediums of multilingual cultural memory. By drawing on Hungarian and Romanian novels related to the historical events of 1989, I explore “located perspectives” (ibid, 6) on a common historical past and claim that all these works can be understood as a decomposition and transformation of the Communist ideological conditioning, and as a search for self-expression through language. I consider Hungarian literature as a medium of multilingual cultural

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Ádám Bodor’s novels, the works of a Transylvanian-born author, as mediums of multilingual regional memory. His novels are examples of “commuting grammars,” the texts written with a “multilingual self-awareness” (Thomka 2018, 146, 34–35) that transmit and translate the multilingual experience and polyphonic cultural memory of East-Central Europe. They create localized perspectives by juxtaposing (conflicting) historical mnemonic legacies and differences, and by remediating them, as audible vernacular memory, into a dispersed, accented contemporary reading experience. His Hungarian oeuvre evokes the memory of a multi-ethnic community in the past and preserves a continuous oscillation between the inscribed memory of other languages (for example Armenian, Yiddish, Hebrew, Ruthenian, Transylvanian Saxon, Zipser German, Romanian, Ukrainian, Polish), which is translated by the text into a dispersed, Hungarian linguistic and poetic experience. Bodor’s oeuvre is part of Transylvanian and Hungarian literary canon, and simultaneously of the Romanian Literature as World Literature. See Balázs 2017, 157-174.

memories, which restructure Hungarian cultural perception in a way that leads to the Hungarian language simultaneously oscillating between accents.

Analysing in detail one chapter of the Andrea Tompa's novel, I propose the concept of multilingual minority when a political and societal disadvantage is reshaped as a poetical, artistic opportunity, namely a Hungarian minority experience in Romanian society turns into a transnational multilingual self-awareness in artistic processes.

### **Reshaping the National Categorizations – Interconnected *Bildung* Narratives of 1989 in Romania**

In the context of newly flourishing nationalistic and ethnocentric ideologies and mutual exclusive nationalisms, as seen in post-1989 East-Central Europe, Romanian-born American scholar Marcel Corniş-Pope stresses that “focusing on ‘cultural contacts’ is even more important today than during the Cold War period: literary history must venture into new areas, acting as a corrective both to narrow ethnocentric treatments of culture, but also to the counter-theories of globalism that erase distinctions between individual cultures” (Corniş-Pope 2016, 28).

The 1989 regime change in Eastern Europe could be perceived as a series of events on the ‘periphery’ (viewed from Western Europe) which had an effect on the ‘centre’. For a short time, these events were in the focus of the global and uneven world.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, the historical event bridges the national (small language) boundaries: novels written in Hungarian and in Romanian come across as “contact

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<sup>2</sup> For a detailed analysis of the ‘combined and uneven world-system’ regarding world-literature, see Warwick Research Collective 2015.

narratives” (Kaakinen 2017, 23) through intersecting personal formations and viewpoints, and they jointly create the common and shared past as the Romanian locality. In this sense, they enable another conceptualization of literature, one that questions the evidence of “the nation as a self-contained unit for literary production” (Domínguez, Neumann 2018, 209).

My broader comparative corpus for this purpose is: Dumitru Țepeneag: *Hotel Europa* (1996; *Hotel Europa*, translated by Patrick Camiller, 2010); Andrea Tompa: *A hóhér háza* (2010, rev. ed. 2015; *The Hangman’s House*, translated by Bernard Adams, 2021); Bogdan Suceavă: *Noaptea când cineva a murit pentru tine* (2010, *The Night when Somebody Died for You*); Zsigmond Sándor Pap: *Semmi kis életek* (2011, *Insignificant Lives*); Zsolt Láng: *Bestiarium Transylvaniae. A föld állatai* (2011, *Bestiarium Transylvaniae: The Animals of Earth*); György Dragomán: *Máglya* (2014; *The Bone Fire*, translated by Otilie Mulzet, 2020); Radu Pavel Gheo: *Disco Titanic* (2016); Gábor Vida: *Egy dadogás története* (2017; *Story of a Stammer*, translated by Jozefina Komporal, 2022); Farkas Király: *Sortűz* (2018, *Barrage*).

Reading side by side these contemporary Romanian and Hungarian novels which deal with the events of 1989, their *common locality* becomes evident; the experience of the totalitarian regime and the fall of the regime as a common ground “forge a sense of locality” (Domínguez, Neumann 2018, 209). They map fragments of the common past shared in different languages. Reading these novels alongside one another, another aspect becomes obvious: not only the Hungarian novels but also those written in Romanian are created as multilingual worlds.

Radu Pavel Gheo’s *Disco Titanic* (2016) is located in the multi-ethnic city of Timișoara (Temesvár in Hungarian, Temeswar in German); Bogdan Suceavă’s *The Night when Somebody Died for You* (2010) focuses on mandatory military service in

the Communist era. For young people the army service was also a site for contact with other ethnicities living within the country and with other Romanians from different parts of the country speaking different dialects. (The novels of Farkas Király and Gábor Vida are also at least partly set during the era of mandatory military service).

Multilingualism as “the coexistence of different belief systems and forms of knowledge” (Doloughan 2009, 40) is developed on many levels in Tepeneag’s novel. Through metaleptic poetics, *Hotel Europa* (1996) combines and interweaves the postmodern auto-poetic self-reflective narrative style with the conditions of realism of an Eastern-European post-1989 vagabond-journey in Western Europe. A very unique aspect of this novel reconfigures multilingualism from a ‘class’ perspective, seeing that all the gangsters and prostitutes of the Eastern European underworld that follow the young adult character as a network are multilingual, they speak several languages with post-Soviet accents.<sup>3</sup>

The historical events of 1989 in Romania and their formative role in the young female and male narrators’ or characters’ personal/individual formation link these novels to the genre of the *Bildungsroman*, giving it a new function. In Mikhail Bakhtin’s definition, it is a genre of “mastering historical time” and of framing “the new sphere of historical existence”, thus it is also a genre which “compromises among distinct worldviews” (Moretti 2000, vii and xii). If we read these novels within the narrative frameworks of the *Bildungsroman*, the role of the (historical) event in the processes of personal formation becomes visible; however, the result is not a narrative form typical of the *Bildungsroman*. The events of 1989 play the role of a liminal event in the characters’ bildung process on a personal, though not on a social level. The plots are

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<sup>3</sup> For a detailed analysis of the novel, see Dánél 2023, 85-113.

either placed in the midst of the events happening on the streets (see Bogdan Suceavă's and Farkas Király's novels), or more often the events are contextualized in a broader period before and after 1989 (see the other novels). This second aspect reveals the overlapping character of the novels; the event can be seen as the border between periods and also as a connecting point between before and after. This interwoven aspect of the historical event in process also reflects the 'face' of the event. Namely, the event becomes visible from the perspectives of different personal life stories. These novels re-create the 'nature' of the event as a multiplication and intersection of several personal and power viewpoints. These novels are created as a site for a cross-section of viewpoints, where the narrator(s) are navigating like a handheld camera capturing non-linear, fragmented occurrences, memories, personal shards, and reflections. The historical event narrated as a personal, even subjective event, links the language of literature with the event that occurred, without objectifying language (which was a characteristic of social-realist literary modes). The generational correlation (with the exception of Tepeneag, every writer was born in Romania around the seventies) could be interpreted as an exploration of language for an appropriate, authentic literary language connected to history and society.

The *Bildungsroman*'s master narrative is re-invented as a liminal genre between art and the historical event. On the personal level of the characters, these novels create 1989 as a landmark event in their personal developmental process. Indoctrinations, memories of socialism are implemented in non-linear, self-reflexive narratives as shards, realisms in narratives of private memory. In Andrea Tompa's, György Dragomán's and Zsolt Láng's novels, the main viewpoint is embodied by a young girl. An interesting aspect becomes visible when we compare the young female characters' actions with the young male soldiers' viewpoints in Bogdan Suceavă's and



Farkas Király's novels: namely, the girls appear as free agents in the streets in the midst of the events, moreover, they can even be portrayed the rebellious hero (as in Dragoman's novel). They try to influence and shape the evolution of the event personally. The historical event, being incorporated through the female agents, also balances the conception of history as a male event. Compared to the girls' perspective, the male soldiers' viewpoints are more insecure, fragmented and ultimately disappointed. In both Király's and Suceavă's novels the chaotic event accidentally 'traps' innocent victims, close to the narrators' friends. This similarity in Hungarian and Romanian novels also reveals the common collective male traumas which the soldiers suffered in the middle of the events. (In Radu Pavel Gheo's novel, the young male character is also wounded).

What all these novels have in common is how they describe pre-1989 childhoods and pre-1989 conditions distinctly but definitely as a common institutionalisation of personal lives. The narratives can be seen as a countermeasure, an image breaker of visual and other practices of deep communist indoctrination even at the bodily level. These novels can be understood 'as a decomposition and transformation of the Communist (state-socialist) ideological conditionings and inscribed fantasies, and as a search for self-expression through language'.

### **Indoctrination, Embodied Dictatorship, and Poetical Decomposition**

In this sense the most powerful example is Andrea Tompa's first novel *The Hangman's House* (first Hungarian edition 2010, revised edition 2015), which is at the same time a poetic example of the inner heterogeneity of the Hungarian literary language.

In its 38 chapters, every chapter is one single, gigantic, and fluid sentence, saturated by Romanian, English, Hebrew, German words, and sentences. The genre of the *Bildungsroman* is de- and recomposed as a texture of passage where different linguistic and cultural layers, political and ideological structures are intermingled and transposed, and in which one young girl attempts to pass into the new future. In the novel, the events of 1989 play an essential role; the novel is framed by two chapters, which are related to the events of 1989 in Cluj and Timișoara. For the young female protagonist, time with a future aspect – essential for the *Bildung* process – begins with the historical events of 1989. The internal chapters are characterised by “liquid, boundless time” (Andrea Tompa) without the sense of mobility and future. The chapter-long sentences can themselves be considered as provocative rebellious poetic performances against the dictatorial regime with its closed, bounded space and time, which, at the same time, can be understood as a form of structural violence on Hungarian grammar. The novel’s world is a multilingual space in which the characters’ identities are negotiated through inter-lingual and intermedial encounters.

The chapter “The Mouth” recalls and re-enacts the propaganda tradition when the Romanian dictator’s face was put together as a gigantic puzzle picture formed by children. In the following passage, there are two (or more) cases of ekphrasis of the pictures or the moving “gigantic face” of the “One-ear”. This is the way the invisible dictator is called in ‘his’ multiple, remediated images in the novel.<sup>4</sup> For a more intense experiencing of the flow and the poetics of the chapter-long sentences and the dynamic of the girl’s self-understanding process I cite a longer quote here:

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<sup>4</sup> Official photographs of Nicolae Ceaușescu showed him only in profile.

*“What part of him are you? asked Csabi Ürögdi, blue with cold outside the children’s clinic at the 25 trolleybus stop, because they would go the same way to the Györgyfalvi district, but no trolley had come in half an hour ... I don’t know, the Girl answered uncertainly, watching for the buses on Monostori út, but there was nothing coming, then glancing doubtfully at little Csabi, Aren’t we letters?, ... What colour were you wearing? asked Csabi, because in the stadium they’d not been together ... (the senior pupils also were said to bring in pálinka and tea with rum in it) – led them up into the stand on the south side, where they had to turn on the shout of ‘La dreapta!’ (Right turn!); ... the pig-eyed history teacher Ghiță stood down below on the edge of the pitch on the top level of a podium fished out of the store, marked with a 1 and intended for winners, and howled into an aluminium megaphone, trying as he did so to turn over folded diagrams in the icy wind that blew from the side, and the teachers in charge of the classes and groups at the ends repeated the words of command: this was the sign that they had to turn all together in four stages, and those in charge clapped their hands eight times: left foot outwards turn, right foot beside it (so far a half-turn), left foot outwards turn, again right foot beside it, and by now they were facing the other way), only all this had to be done on a fixed, plastic seat on which there was hardly room for their boots, it was next to impossible to turn, so somebody was always falling off or late because the seats were wet and slippery, those that were badly secured wobbled, somebody must have taken the screws out – One side’s blue, the other side’s red, she replied, and thought that it might be as well to start walking home, there must be a power cut because nothing was coming up the hill, although several people were waiting, but perhaps they were queueing for the shop behind the bus stop? – Red? There’s no red, said Csabi firmly, and added I’ve got black and white: white is the letter on one side, black is his hair on the other, and he began to blow on his red hands, Aren’t we letters on both sides? That’s what Year Ten told me, asked the Girl, because no one had officially told them what they were portraying, all that they knew was that they were preparing for a celebration, and it was a great honour and distinction for the whole school that they had been chosen, and so the Girl hadn’t thought about what the colours meant, she’d just been waiting every day to go home – Shall we go? she suggested, because she and Csabi often walked home. – Yes, let’s, there’s nothing coming. At one time we’re white letters on blue, then the other side’s the picture. Which side are you on most? he asked – You mean, facing the stadium? The blue. Where are you going? she asked, because in the meantime she’d decided to go to Grandmother’s instead, where there was always some lunch left over, and now she might get a hot milky coffee as well, but Mother wouldn’t be home until evening, she’d said she was working out of town – I don’t know, don’t mind, I’m not going home – replied Csabi, I’m with the white more, I’m the hat on the letter ä, you know, right at the very top, because the side of the stand’s been extended to make room for the whole thing, the words and the picture, they say the other stadium was higher than the Kolozsvár one, they’ve welded bars onto the top railings – they just hung about for two days while that was done, couldn’t even go into the dressing rooms – then the bars have been supported from*

*underneath, little planks put over them, and we stand on those, there's only a rope behind us, and the shortest and lightest in the whole school have been chosen, there are some fourth formers as well, they haven't put anybody smaller up there because a stupid third former fell off, and the whole thing wobbles like this when we get up and turn – Csabi demonstrated with his red hands – everybody shakes, and they've put the smallest up there in case the whole thing collapses under the big ones, you see, we're very high up, makes you shit yourself, you can see the cross in Főtér, the whole of Fellegvár, the Kerekdomb and the station, the Szamos bridge as well, Donát út, the Kányafő, the Monostor, the cemetery, the covered-up lions on the Roman theatre, I'd never seen the town from so high up, and you can't hear what Ghiță's shouting down there either – because it was he, the history teacher, who was directing the proceedings from down there – we've got Kriszti on the end of the row, he's really shit scared, feels sick all the time, so I'm the very highest of the letters, on the first ă in 'Trăiască' (Long live), and when we turn I'm his hair, see! when I've got my back turned and I look down I shit myself! and when we turn round there's the picture, then your back's black or white, you're hair, face, eye, but there's no other colour, I've not heard of any red, d'you want one? And he took out a pack of Albanian Apollonias and offered it, and now they were passing the Ethnographic Museum in Unió utca, and Csabi's mother knew that he smoked and only laughed – Are you daft? Here in the street? Here and now? because before the holiday there were more police about, but you had to look out for adults as well, they might note your identity number, ... How many reds do you think there were? How many piles when you gave them in? Csabi asked suddenly, as if he'd just remembered that at the end of the practice the overalls were stacked in piles of ten, and he stubbed out the cigarette on the wall of a house because his hand was frozen by then, and put the long butt back in the box. Look, I'm going to have to go to my mother's office, see you, said the Girl, and turned abruptly on her heel, but she didn't make for her mother's office but, although it was out of the way, for her grandparents', because it has suddenly dawned on her that she could only be his mouth: the fleshy lips, drawn into a smile on the front pages of textbooks, the blood-red cherry lips on the classroom wall above the double poster, the smiling lips on the holiday front page of the newspapers – his teeth never showed in the smile – the mouth that ranted long speeches on the television, she was the mouth in the gigantic picture made up of another school's worth of children, which in birthday greeting would turn into a sudden, smiling portrait on the south side of the stadium, the mouth which would churn out catch-phrases and cheer itself when the tiny original of the picture descended from the helicopter at the birthday celebrations in the middle of the gravel-strewn, red-carpeted stadium, and a chosen boy and girl would run forward and happily greet him – the best class in the school – and school governors had come in Pioneer uniform on the first days and practised in the dressing room – with flowers, salt and a huge, gleaming plaited sweetbread that no mouth would touch, step onto the edge of the rolled-out carpet, like the little ones, the Falcons of the Fatherland, in just blouses and skirts, and a bigger pupil would declaim enthusiastically into the microphone*

the poem entitled *Ce-ți doresc eu ție, dulce Românie* – What do I wish you, sweet Romania – the rest would sing and, standing on the plastic seats of the stadium, would suddenly turn round on the word of command, and then the picture would appear ... *Now I'm his disgusting mouth*, had suddenly came into her head, and she felt sick as she thought of herself and the overalls that she'd not long taken off, she felt as if cold, drooling lips were kissing her defenceless body, as if this huge frothing mouth were vomiting white, foaming letters over her, and she was becoming a bit of living, loathsome, pink flesh, torn off and displayed to public view, because *I am him, or vice versa, he is me*: I am his flesh, inseparably conjoined, he's taking root in me so that I shan't be able to wash him off, and his likeness has been burned into me like a brand, I am him, or more precisely we are all him, because we're all stood in nice, tidy order and we turn on the word of command and we're him: but he himself doesn't exist anywhere, nobody ever sees him, never: Tătă's seen him and my uncle Pista as well, they've sat with him at meetings, but now he's just pictures, pictures, pictures, not a person, just pictures, something that we've jointly made up and unknowingly formed from our bodies ... *I'm his mouth, I've got to stand still, like a statue, the lips will move with me, open and swallow me, or open to speak and speak through me, his words will start to pour forth because there are no others, only his screeching voice, because it is I, I, I in my blood-red overalls that keep him alive* ... (Tompa 2021, 22-29, italics in original).

The description intertwines the tangible, traumatic and sensual inner perspective of the child with the panoptic, downward-looking view (through which ironically the dictator looks as “the tiny original of the picture”, composed for him). This process of puzzle-making objectifies the children's bodies that it uses to create its picture. In the chapter-length sentences, Hungarian and Romanian words and sentences are also intertwined: they depict a multilingual city and co-existence from the inner viewpoint of the Hungarian girl.

On the one hand, the Romanian language functions as a medium of power, as an instrumentalised language of propaganda, of command, and of dehumanization, as seen, for example, in the command “La dreapta! (Right turn!)”. The Romanian national poem of Mihai Eminescu “*Ce-ți doresc eu ție, dulce Românie* (What do I wish you, sweet Romania)” also appears as an instrumentalised element in a propaganda

show. In addition, Csabi, the Hungarian boy is objectified in the big propaganda picture as a specific Romanian diacritic, “the hat on the letter ă” he is “the very highest [tallest] of the letters, on the first ă in ‘Trăiască’ (Long live)”. Meanwhile, the Romanian equivalent of the word ‘father’ appears in the text – referring to the girl’s own father – but written with Hungarian diacritics: “Tátá”. This Romanian-Hungarian denomination cannot be reduced, transcribed, or translated either to the Hungarian ‘apa’ or to Romanian ‘tată’, the latter word being expropriated in the Communist era by propaganda language which called the dictator the father of all Romanian children.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> For this connotation see a fragment from Herta Müller’s book *Der Mensch ist ein großer Fasan auf der Welt* which stages propagandistic indoctrination in Romania. By repeating such basic sentences, the instrumentalized language appears as a medium of the ideological conditioning of children. And the diabolical efficiency consists in blending the images of the family and the country. The extension of the private images (house, family, parents) to the non-private (country, leaders) results in the suspension of the private as private. See: “Amalie hängt die Landkarte Rumäniens an die Wand. ‘Alle Kinder wohnen in Wohnblocks oder in Häusern’, sagt Amalie. ‘Jedes Haus hat Zimmer. Alle Häuser bilden zusammen ein grosse Haus ist unser Land. Unser Vaterland.’ Amalie zeigt auf die Landkarte. ‘Das ist unser Vaterland’, sagt sie. Sucht mit der Fingerspitze die schwarzen Punkte auf der Karte. ‘Das sind die Städte sind die Zimmer dieses grossen Hauses, unseres Landes. In unserem Häusern wohnen unser Vater und unsere Mutter. Sie sind unsere Eltern. Jedes Kind hat seine Elter. So wie unser Vater im Haus, in dem wir wohnen, der Vater is, ist Genosse Nicolae Ceaușescu der Vater unseres Landes. Und so wie unsere Mutter im Haus, in dem wohnen, unsere Mutter is, ist Genossin Elena Ceaușescu die Mutter unseres Landes. Genosse Nicolae Ceaușescu is der Vater aller Kinder. Und Genossin Elena Ceaușescu ist die Mutter aller Kinder. Alle Kinder lieben den Genossen und die Genossin, weil sie ihre Eltern sind.” (1986, 61-62). English translation: “Amalie hangs the map of Romania on the wall. ‘All children live in the blocks of flats or in houses,’ says Amalie. ‘Every house has rooms. All the houses together make one big house. This big house is our country. Our fatherland.’ Amalie points at the map. ‘This is our Fatherland,’ she says. With her fingertip she searches for the black dots on the map. ‘These are the towns of our Fatherland,’ says Amalie. ‘The towns are the rooms of this big house, our country. Our fathers and mothers live in our houses. They are our parents. Every child has its parents. Just as the father in the house in which we live is our father, so Comrade Nicolae Ceaușescu is the father of our country. And just the mother in the house in which we live is our mother, so Comrade Elena Ceaușescu is the mother of our country. Comrade Nicolae Ceaușescu is the father of all the children. And Comrade Elena Ceaușescu is the mother of all the children. All the children love Comrade Nicolae and Comrade Elena, because they are their parents” (2015, 59-60).

In this cultural and intertextual context, through the interaction of the Hungarian and Romanian stresses and diacritics the word 'Tátá' in Tompa's novel looks like a re-familiarisation of the Romanian word 'tată' in the personal relationship between the Hungarian daughter and her father. The way the word sounds lays claims simultaneously to two languages: Spelt like this, it also signals the interaction of the Hungarian and Romanian diacritics and accents: the long Hungarian 'á' in the Romanian word conjures up the long-accented Romanian 'a'. The inner disruption and split sound of the word 'Tátá' also performs and mediates the disruption (or dissensus) between the written and the pronounced word. (The simultaneity of the disruption and interaction of the two written-verbally uttered languages create a space for an intimate reading for those who are connected to these languages, to Romanian-Hungarian interacted accents.)

The inter-lingual character of the novel as a "destabilization of fixed, monolithic viewpoints" (Sabo 2014, 106) is connected to other disruptions. Such a disruption can be found between the institutionalized, regulated body and the sensitive body. By keeping orders turning left and right, the trained body "acts and pushes" the protagonist for long period in self-accusation when she faces her father's death, who is probably not dead yet, but she turns out without calling the ambulance. After this tragic turn, she heads off, running in a ritualistic fashion in order to find or get back her own body. The body instructed to turn left and right, becomes a site for expressing personal guilt, while the turning itself emerges as a language/body of self-discovery. Meanwhile, the trope of running laps aids the transformation and reclamation/re-appropriation of the previously over-regulated body.

Another important example for transformation and re-functionalization of an inscribed attitude and body condition could be detected in re-appropriation of the

propagandistic performances: the big street marches and chants in praise of the dictator organised by communist propaganda turn into revolutionary chanting in December 1989. People now are chanting together with the power of the rhythmic memory of learned/inscribed slogans: “Down with communism! Jos communismul!”

In the novel’s world we can detect the girl’s *Bildung* as a struggle between elements of society as fake pictures, propaganda images and commands written even in bodily exercise. What the novel explores and suggests, not so much as a message, but as a method in my interpretation, is that the process of *Bildung* is actually a deformation process, a self-alienation from the interiorized communist dictatorial conditions inscribed in the body. On the other hand, *The Hangman’s House* gives intimate examples for such multilingual characters who – because of the nature of the shared discordant language – speak all languages with an accent, including their own mother tongue. Where the accent as a medium preserves the other language, the interaction of languages as audible present.

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**Entrapment and Resistance. Language and Power in  
Andrea Tompa's *The Hangman's House***

**Response to Mónika Dánél:**

**“Multilingual Minority: Poetical Decomposition of the  
Embodied Dictatorial Legacy”**

The theme of ‘entrapment’ lies at the heart of Andrea Tompa’s *The Hangman’s House* (2010, rev. 2015, translated into English in 2021), but it also encapsulates a defining characteristic of the ‘political novel’ as a genre – that consistently interrogates the ideological, social, and linguistic forces that constrain both individuals and communities. In Tompa’s text, the entrapment extends far beyond the political, emerging not only through oppressive political regimes but also through the constraints imposed by one’s native tongue, and the broader cultural-linguistic frameworks that define and confine individual and collective existence. The exploration of the individual’s relationship to language – whether native or state-mandated – serves as a central motif, where marginalized local languages and cultures intersect with dominant official languages, reflecting the individual’s relationship with the collective and, ultimately, broader center-periphery dynamics.

For many Eastern and Central European writers, particularly those who lived under communist regimes, language becomes both a battleground and a site of negotiation: a space in which power is exercised, resisted, and reconfigured. This phenomenon is highlighted by Mónica Dánél, who discusses contemporary authors from East-Central Europe as those who ‘commute grammar’ navigating not only between languages but also across cultures, positioning themselves within multifaceted sociopolitical landscapes. Through the interweaving of language and political struggle, these writers engage in a complex and ongoing cultural negotiation, a theme that remains central to Tompa’s novel. The issue of linguistic entrapment is especially pressing when considering how literary histories and canons are often constructed as integral components of national identity. In post-Soviet states, this canonization tends to center around linguistic homogeneity, with official languages gaining primacy while minority languages are relegated to the periphery or the private sphere. This tension between official language and cultural expression deepens the entrapment of individuals, illustrating how language can both shape and confine the political, cultural, and personal realms in profound and enduring ways. This situation is compounded by the persistent legacy of totalitarian regimes that sought not only to control the political and public sphere but also to mediate cultural expression through language. In *The Hangman’s House*, one can trace the lingering presence of these power structures and how they haunt the characters, especially their relationships with language. This dynamic between individual and collective identity is brought into sharp focus, echoing the dynamics of “center over an enormous periphery” (Moretti 1998, 195), where the ‘center,’ is not just a geographical location but serves as a symbol of control. The periphery is the space outside this power center, where those who are not aligned with the dominant ideology live, both literally and metaphorically. This

center-periphery tension is very much palpable in Tompa's portrayal of characters navigating multilingual lives, seeking expression and identity. The concept of 'commuting grammar' becomes particularly relevant here, as Tompa's characters exist at a linguistic and cultural crossroads. In the chapter "Christmas 1989", for instance, a seemingly simple exchange of words – "*Eu răspund* (I'll deal with it), *Yes ma'am*, replied the boy, saluted smartly and ran back with the instruction ... and Mummy repeated in Romanian and Hungarian" (Tompa 2021, 335; emphasis in original) – reveals the dissonance between the authoritative language and languages of familial intimacy, and is crucial to understanding the entrapment at play in *The Hangman's House*. This moment encapsulates the characters' yearning for a multilingual society that embraces diverse identities. Yet Tompa's portrayal of this fleeting aspiration reveals how, in the aftermath of the Soviet Union's collapse, this possibility has remained, and continues to remain, largely unrealized. Both Hungary and Romania uphold monolingualism despite their multilingual populations, thus marginalizing minority language speakers and reflecting a continuity of centralizing power structures. The political entrapment inherent in the state's control of language extends beyond a mere political issue, penetrating deeply into the personal and cultural realms, where it shapes the identities of individuals caught between their yearning for linguistic freedom and the stark realities of political power. This dynamic is aesthetically rendered in the text through the concept of 'innocence' and 'identity'. In totalitarian regimes, innocence is redefined and reshaped by political forces, where the erasure of private and public divides transforms identity: it becomes enmeshed in the state's ideological apparatus. In the chapter "The Mouth", the question "*What part of him are you?*" (Tompa 2021, 22; emphasis in original) posed to a young girl among a group of children dressed to form a living version of a portrait of the Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu, vividly

illustrates how the state subsumes individual identity into its collective image, “his gigantic face” (Tompa 2021, 28). The children’s faces and bodies, once markers of singular selves, are transformed into mere components of a larger, dehumanizing apparatus. This transformation is underscored by the unsettling detail that “no one had officially told them what they were portraying ... it was a great honour and distinction for the whole school that they had been chosen” (Tompa 2021, 24), highlighting the erasure of personal autonomy even in the act of representation. This phenomenon is further amplified in “Christmas 1989”, where the intrusion of surveillance becomes a palpable force, with the removal of a bug from a telephone. The act of bugging private spaces is not merely a tool of control, but a manifestation of the state’s ability to infiltrate the most intimate aspects of life, and the surveillance device itself symbolizes the breakdown of the boundary between public and private, as it encroaches upon the sanctuary of the home, violating the very spaces that should remain beyond the reach of the state’s pervasive eye. The psychological repercussions of such surveillance are equally profound, manifesting in the characters’ palpable fear of going “to bed because next day she might not wake up” (Tompa 2021, 339). This phrase encapsulates the ever-present anxiety and existential uncertainty that define existence under a totalitarian regime. In these moments, the characters are ensnared not only by the political system but also by a pervasive psychological entrapment, unable to escape the haunting fear of loss – loss of identity, autonomy, and, ultimately, life itself.

*The Hangman’s House* exemplifies how the political novel functions not simply as a vehicle for depicting oppression, but as a dynamic site of deconstruction and transformation. As a genre, it probes the fluidity of power, identity, and meaning, exposing these concepts as unfixed and continually reshaped by the shifting forces of history, language, and politics. This relational nature of power underscores the genre’s

capacity for profound social and political critique. In this light, Tompa's novel transcends mere representation of the breakdown between public and private spheres, instead engaging directly with the fluidity and volatility of these boundaries. Perhaps, as David Damrosch (2003, 281) suggested regarding World literature, the political novel might be seen "*not a set canon of texts but a mode of reading*" (emphasis in original). This approach invites readers to confront the unsettling experience of being 'detached' with the world (see 2003, 281), navigating the discomfort of texts informed by divergent historical, social, and linguistic realities. Through this lens, Tompa's work as a translingual text challenges readers to engage with the layered complexities of language and identity, revealing how the boundaries between public and private, personal and political, are perpetually shifting and never fully stable.

Ultimately, Tompa's novel offers a profound meditation on the individual's entrapment within the interwoven structures of political and linguistic power. By illuminating the intersections of personal and political confinement, the text reveals how identity and agency are shaped – and often constrained – by state ideologies and institutional forces. In this respect, the political novel serves not only as a vehicle for portraying oppression but also as a medium for deconstructing and reimagining the boundaries between public and private, individual and collective. Its greatest potency lies in its transformative potential, opening up the potential for social change through a profound engagement with the constructed nature of political realities. In contesting these boundaries, it affirms the enduring power of language and literature to resist, reshape, and ultimately redefine the contours of authority and identity across both local and global hierarchies.

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