

Border Crossing in the Textual World of Ádám Bodor¹²

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Abstract. In the oeuvre of Ádám Bodor genre and the unity of his texts are always central questions. The reiteration of textual segments as well as of topical elements and the hybridisation of linguistic, ethnical and biological categories altogether lead to a not normative logical system. In his novel *The Sinistra Zone* logical temporal structure and money serve as an outstanding example that connects the inner sphere and order of the zone to the world outside of it. In my essay, I would like to understand the irregularity of the zone's temporal and logical structure through Miklós Mészöly's concept of atonal systems.

Keywords: atmosphere, atonal systems, contemporary Hungarian literature, hybridisation, reiteration

A homogeneous oeuvre

The works of the Transylvanian-born author Ádám Bodor are well-integrated in the Hungarian literature from Romania of the second half of the 20th century. These texts have a close connection with everyday life as well as with the everyday life of the communist era and the Ceaușescu regime, not only through their topics but through their specific atmosphere. In the reception of all of Bodor's works, including his short stories and novels "there appears to be consensus in the sense that the author's writings are characterised by a powerful and unique atmosphere" (Dánél 2016, 1).

In the oeuvre of Bodor genre and the unity of his texts are always central questions. His first novel published in Hungary, *The Sinistra Zone* (*A Sinistra körzet*, 1992), points out this issue: the subtitle is *Chapters of a Novel* (*Egy regény fejezetei*). Throughout his work one can easily find the relation between the idea of connecting single chapters to build a novel and circulating short stories between several books. Bodor publishes many of his short stories in more than one book and through these re-publications, the short stories are put into different

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contexts and tend to re-contextualise the texts around them. This kind of iterative construction can be observed between texts and within them as well. As it will be discussed later in this essay, characters, motifs, even whole sentences or paragraphs often re-appear in different stories.

Regarding the iterative construction and the homogeneous atmosphere, the field opens for crossing from one text to another, therefore the whole oeuvre can be read as one homogeneous corpus. I argue that this homogeneity is caused by the different techniques of reiteration and hybridisation. But besides the homogeneous atmosphere, these mechanisms also construct irregular temporal and logical structures.

Textual iteration

“The zone” in Bodor’s novel *The Sinistra Zone*, which is considered to be his most important book, can represent the system and mechanism of all his texts on the grounds that the zone is closed and things – people, positions, relations – can only be circulated (iterated) within its borders. Thus, the following ideas and interpretations of the examples can be extended to all of Bodor’s texts, although this essay works with examples exclusively from *The Sinistra Zone*. As the zone becomes an enclosed space that has its own regulations (everyone gets a new name, adapts to new ethical norms, gains a whole new personality – just to mention some of the changes that people go through entering the zone) (Bengi 2005, 123–129), the novel becomes the representative model of the entire textual world of the author. Since it is not impossible to pass through the borders of the zone (Mustafa Mukkerman crosses them on every Thursday, sometimes even taking escapees along with him, as Andrei) the borders of the novel are neither clear nor certain. It is questionable whether the imaginary worlds of the chapters that had been published separately before the publication of the novel are included in the imaginary world of the novel. Furthermore, would it be possible to synthesise the world of the novel with the world of some of the short stories that are not included in it? I argue that on the basis of the forthcoming formal and topical characteristics, it is possible.

The cyclic order appears on a textual and on a topical level as well. Beside the switches of stories within and between different volumes, textual cycles are realised in the iteration of segments of the texts (Bengi 2005, 117–120). An eloquent example of this is the frame-like

structure of *The Sinistra Zone*: sentences in the first chapter are repeated with some changes in the last one. There is a report on the circumstances of the zone in the first chapter, when Andrei reappears there:

Many years later, a Greek passport in my pocket, I rolled about the roads of the Sinistra Zone in my sparkling new, four-wheel-drive, metallic green Suzuki jeep [...] before me were two tight parallel bands of depressed soil that sparkled in the reflection of the clouds – ice or, it seemed, maybe glass. All at once it hit me that these were my own old ski tracks. (Bodor 2013, 13)

also in the last chapter:

It was a spring afternoon when I arrived in the Baba Rotunda Pass in my brand new, metallic green, four-wheel-drive Suzuki jeep, a Greek passport in my pocket. [...] Even my old ski tracks still wound their way toward the Kolinda forest. (Bodor 2013, 173)

There is only a slight difference between the two descriptions and that is the information which the reader has gained by the last chapter. Words and phrases like “*a Greek passport*” or “*old ski tracks*” get such connotations by the end of the novel that can place the whole description into a different context. A report on the actions happening when Andrei returns to the zone is also given in the first chapter:

There I was lolling beside her, feeling my pulse, and just beginning to muse about staying near Aranka Westin for at least one more day, when that clarinet-like, caterwauled shrieking from high above us broke the spell: wild geese were announcing their presence in the clouds over Dobrin. As could be heard unmistakably through the silence of the night, they were coming from the south, from the Kolinda forest, and turning overhead suddenly north, toward Pop Ivan

Mountain. I felt their calls to the tips of my little fingers. There's not a sound more disquieting than theirs.

So when the mountain infantry came to get me around dawn – stating that since I'd secretly left my designated lodgings, they must revoke my residence permit and ban me forever from the Sinistra Zone – I'd long been wide awake, waiting for morning, waiting to finally be done with the place. (Bodor 2013, 14-15)

it is also repeated with some changes at the end of the novel:

Languidly, tapping my artery, I lay there nestled close to her warmth when, all at once, wild geese honked from the clouds above us. [...] I swear there's not a sound more disquieting than theirs. As could be heard unmistakably through the silence of the night, they were coming from the south, from the Kolinda forest; and on arriving above Dobrin they'd turned suddenly north, toward Pop Ivan Mountain. Their calls stirred the pit of my stomach.

So when the mountain infantry soon came to get me – saying I'd abused the people's hospitality by leaving my designated lodgings, and so they would have to revoke my permit and ban me forever from the Sinistra Zone – I hadn't even gotten to sleep yet. Like a sentry I'd been long been alert, waiting for morning, waiting to finally be able to leave this place. (Bodor 2013, 176)

The changes issued within these texts show that besides gaining all the extra connotations throughout the novel, one can also get used to the mechanisms working in the zone. While in the first chapter, the scene looks like a romantic meeting and the narrator also uses terms like “clarinet-like shrieking” to describe the sound of the birds, by the end of the novel one already knows enough about usual relationships in the zone to know that they are less romantic and more animalistic. While in the beginning feelings like the sound of the wild geese stay at the surface of the body, so the outer perception does not become an inner experience (“*to the tips of my little fingers*”), at the end they penetrate the body of Andrei (“*stirred the pit of my stomach*”). Similarly, in the first chapter Andrei only wants “*to finally be done with the place*”.

However, in the last chapter there is more emphasis on the fact that his life is somehow conformed to the zone; he is “*waiting to finally be able to leave this place*” – to get the permission to leave Sinistra. So instead of escaping, this time he waits until the zone forces him to leave.

A cyclic plot

Circulation appears topically as well as on a structural level. None of the phrases that seem to indicate a specific date or period of time are certain at all. Although every chapter starts with a sentence which contains a time-reference, these references are only connected to events happening in the very same chapter: “*When it was announced that Colonel Puiu Borcan has been found [...]*” (Bodor 2013, 35) or “*One fine spring day, back when I worked as an assistant corpse watchman [...]*” (Bodor 2013, 101). These timestamps do not signify the point of the current acts within the whole plot either. In fact, it is impossible to find such a place since the novel does not have an entirely linear plot. Instead of having the events in a temporal or logical order, chapters are organised by the characters. Every chapter has its own protagonist and the events relating to that character are told in that character’s chapter, whether they have been told before or not. Regarding the plot, there are some events that are opposed to one another when reading them as parts of a temporal structure, such as the case of Elvira Spiridon’s hair. In Chapter 11, titled *Severon Spiridon’s Surprise*, due to a regulation, Andrei cuts off Elvira’s hair. Chapter 13, *Gabriel Dunka’s Name Day*, is definitely telling the reader about the last couple of hours or days that Andrei spends in the zone, since that is the one in which he escapes. After the escape, Elvira is standing on the road “*completely nude but for her thick head of hair, matted against her neck like an old, threadbare scarf*” (Bodor 2013, 157). At this point, there are two possibilities: either several years has passed between the events of the two chapters, or something illogical is happening here. The first case points out that in the novel one cannot find any concrete description of the time passed apart from the first and the last chapters. Within this frame, time has stopped: every event of the plot from Chapter 2 to Chapter 14 happens in a timeless space. The second case refers back to the segregated status of the zone, meaning that the logical structure of that area cannot be compared to the logical structure of the readers’ everyday lives.

Besides this unusual temporal and logical structure of *The Sinistra Zone*, the cyclic mechanisms of the topical level can also be identified in Bodor's other stories, through some characters that appear in more than one short story or novel. However, it is important to mention that these characters do not know about their lives and activities in other texts. Despite having the same figures in different stories, these texts do not refer to each other, they do not construct whole personalities or life stories.

Other types of reiteration: mixed, broken or overextended categories

Looking through the examples of the cyclic structures in Bodor's short stories and novels, it is apparent that there are many examples of other types of reiteration as well. Firstly, the combination and hybridisation of different registers of a language and even different languages in *The Sinistra Zone* can be simply the result of the position of the zone: Sinistra lays on the borderline of Ukraine and Romania. According to this specific place, there are not only strange names and a grammatically misused language, but an ethnic amalgam can also be detected. Secondly, different lifestyles meet and things even switch, swing or mix between different biological categories. Such union of categories usually happens in moments of intensity,¹³ for instance in moments of fusion between human and nature. In *The Sinistra Zone* as well as in Bodor's other texts, these shifts appear during the description of death and sexual acts (or during the build up to them). The meeting of Elvira Spiridon and Dunka is a spectacular example of this: Elvira's body flourishes in the rain when Dunka first recognises her. "*Her wet thighs, her loins strewn with spruce needles and with blue, white, and yellow flower petals had seemingly blossomed in the spring storm.*" (Bodor 2013, 157) Another instance of mixed up biological categories is the animalisation of humans. This can be seen through use of language ("*the Red Rooster*" (Bodor 2013, 5) and "*the grey ganders*" (Bodor 2013, 36–37) are not the only examples) and also in the plot – such as the transformation of Connie Illafeld from a beautiful woman into a bear (Bodor 2013, 101–111).

¹³ Although Gumbrecht uses the term "moments of intensity" or "moments of epiphany" as aesthetic experiences that take place in the interaction of the artwork and the audience (e.g. the reader and the text), I would like to bring attention to the quality of a moment of epiphany. Epiphany has the status of the event, firstly because we never know when it would happen and we cannot predict what form it would take and how intense it will be (Gumbrecht 2004, 113). In such moments of intensity "production of presence" can happen: the moment has the status of the event, as it is short and unique, and it also emphasizes the presence and the spatial dimension of the people or objects participating in that moment (Gumbrecht 2004, 17).

The appearing human bodies do not fit the phenomenological experience of the body: they are not inseparable, they do not work as a continuous and homogeneous surface. In Bodor's texts, there are several examples of fractal or discontinuous bodies as well as bodies which overreach their own borders, even by incorporating other bodies. Overextended bodies show up many times in Bodor's short stories relating to the concept of twins. The Hamza Petrika twins at first seem to be two different persons regarding their physical bodies, but they are somehow equal: they have the same job, the same desires, even their names are the same – inhabitants of the zone do not look at them as if they were two different people. “>>Yes indeed,<< grumbled Doc, >>these damn twins. That's how they are. Tear them apart from each other for a couple of hours and they get into all kinds of trouble.” (Bodor 2013, 94) Although at this point Doc clearly refers to them as separate men, the word *tear* indicates a more physical relation between them. This presumption is verified on the next pages: as soon as one of the Hamza Petrikas learns of his brother's suicide, he leaves “as if his soul was fast departing his body” (Bodor 2013, 98). This unifying mechanism works in reverse too, when a character's body part appears as separated from its owner.¹⁴ Concerning these body parts there is usually a metonymical connection between the character and the missing body part, and on the grounds of this metonymical connection, the body part can replace the whole body, it can include and construct the identity of its (former) owner character. Replacement is also a common practice among characters, considering the constant job-switches in *The Sinistra Zone*: workers of the wild berry depot, the photographer and the coroner's assistant are all seeking for job replacements all the time.

Similar border-crossing mechanisms can be seen in the iteration of texts and in the relationship between characters and their bodies. The act of continual reorganising of the texts points out the deficiencies caused by the ever-shifting focuses of the stories, and it also implies that there is no final or complete order.¹⁵

¹⁴ Many examples can be found for this mechanism in Bodor's short stories such as *Tárkonyfű-illat* (The scent of tarragon) (Bodor 1978, 38–40) and *A szántóvető szerencséje* (The ploughman's luck) (Bodor 1985, 148–151).

¹⁵ See on this Mészöly (1996, 48): “A képekkel teleaggatta a deszkafilagória falát, s órákig cserélgette őket, mintha valamilyen sorrendre, értelemre akart volna rájönni. Ez a munka néha hajnalig is eltartott, s többnyire úgy fejeződött be, hogy alig maradt kép, amit ne követett volna a falon egy görcsös hézag, kiáltó semmi, aminek a helyét képtelen volt az elkészült fotókkal kitölteni.”

“He hung the pictures all over the walls of the deck pavilion and he was constantly reorganising them for hours, as if he wanted to get to know some kind of order or sense. Sometimes he kept going on with this activity until

Time and money

As previously mentioned, the borders of the zone construct a different and closed world: every person gets a new name and new personality when entering this magical (in terms of the postcolonialist interpretations of Bodor),¹⁶ mythical (concerning the temporal and story-telling structure of *The Sinistra Zone*, and the manner that it builds up a whole universe), and fantasy (the plot contains a dwarf, a giant etc.) world. However, there are people crossing these strict borders, and the crossing always happens in connection with leaving the temporally undefined or timeless space: Mustafa Mukkerman's arrivals every Thursday strengthen the periodicity of the temporal structure of the zone. Andrei's first arrival to the zone does not define a real starting point but a place where he, along with the reader, enters the world of *The Sinistra Zone* – the novel begins. The only part where one can get concrete information about time is when Andrei returns to the zone: “[...] Aranka Westin – whom I'd parted from exactly seven years earlier without so much as a farewell.” (Bodor 2013, 175) Apparently, time only passes in the usual way (or it is only described in the usual way) when Andrei stays out of the zone.

Like time, the appearance of money is firmly related to leaving the zone. This is shown in the last chapter, in which Andrei returns to the zone because he has to pay back the money he borrowed from Dunka (Bodor 2013, 173). When he borrowed it, he wanted to give the twenty dollar bills to Mukkerman so he would transfer Andrei to the south (Bodor 2013, 77 and 152–153; Nikifor Tescovina steals some money from Andrei in order to escape (Bodor 2013, 152), Dunka gets paid for his soon-to-be death and for giving his body to the museum as an artifact (Bodor 2013, 162), and Béla Bundasian pays “*with the twenty dollar bill his stepfather had once given him*” (Bodor 2013, 171) for the oil and the gasoline that he uses for his suicide. Whenever the text speaks about money, dollar bills are mentioned, except for this last example, that of Béla Bundasian: “*He got so much change in return – in coins in the local currency that all his pockets were overflowing.*” (Bodor 2013, 171) With the exchange to the local currency

dawn, and usually when it was finished there were hardly any pictures that were not followed by a cramped gap, crying emptiness, which he could not fill up with the photos that had been prepared.” (Translation by me, G. L.)

¹⁶ The idea of magic realism as a common tool of Hungarian artworks in the 21st century appears in some theoretical works in connection with the so-called “trauma culture”. As Judit Pieldner shows in her study, Romanian and Hungarian movie-making nowadays tends to use magic realism to represent “the real” and the traumas of the communist past. Following her argumentation, Bodor's texts can also be seen as examples of the Hungarian magic realism (Pieldner 2016, 87–114).

the zone seems to approve of his suicide. It is important to affirm, however, that unlike money, denatured alcohol is constantly present in the world of the novel, and it is definitely valuable. This can be clearly detected in the scene where Andrei recounts all his belongings: “*Besides what fits in my pockets, back then I owned a tin plate, two sheet-metal mugs, a horse blanket, a couple of socks, a few odd shreds of fabric, some cord, and a bottle of denatured alcohol.*” (Bodor 2013, 65) It is even more interesting to consider that since they handle and hand out denatured alcohol as if it was water, it is highly probable that for the majority of the novel most of the characters are continuously drunk. If one compares this discovery to the idea of atonal systems, it can be seen that in the atonal system of Bodor’s world not one absolute of a referential reality is applied. There is no referential centre, because the referential frames are always moving and revaluing themselves. The system is based on temporally functioning absolutes which are only applicable for one moment at a time.¹⁷ The most self-evident instance of this is Coca Mavrodin and the long list of her unexpected and always changing regulations: the colonel herself can be seen as one of the temporally functioning absolutes of the zone. Above this, the mythical cyclic and iterative structure, the web of tale-like motifs, the homogeneous atmosphere, and the non-logical and non-linear plot all proves that the zone, as well as the text and the entire textual world, can be read as atonal systems.

Every single short story, novel, and the whole oeuvre, the represented worlds and the zone in *The Sinistra Zone* – can all be read as atonal systems. But at that precise moment when a character leaves one of these systems above, which can be described as spaces of the non-reconstructable chronology and logic, or when an act of the plot seems to be “regular”, that character or act would divert from the system as if they were foreign bodies. Considering that in Bodor’s system the so-called “normative” elements stand out, although the system seems to be hybrid overall, I believe that some of the basic questions that Bodor’s texts are raising are whether it is possible or worthwhile to talk about normative logic, normative chronology, or generally speaking, norms.

References

¹⁷ For further information on temporally functioning absolutes, see the atonal systems of Mészöly Miklós. (Mészöly 2006, 187–194)

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