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Gábor Csordás

Literary perspectives: Hungary

Mastering history through narrative?

In the first essay in the Eurozine "Literary perspectives" series, publisher Gábor Csordás introduces five new Hungarian novels. All share a concern with history and narrative, and all but one –– György Spiró's narrrative *tour de force* set in the Roman empire at the time of Christ –– deal with Hungary's recent past: the post–war period as experienced by the Slovak minority; a child's–eye view of social changes during the Communist upheaval; a contemporary Jewish–Hungarian son's struggle with his father and the past that formed him; and a collision of myth and mundanity when the closure of a collective farm causes the past to unravel. Spiró's novel too, it emerges, sheds light on contemporary issues: the historical setting echoes in the anti–Semitism concerning many in Hungary today.

The literary publishing season in Hungary does not stretch from January to December, but instead hinges on Book Week, which falls in the middle of the year, in early June. This remains true even though nowadays the biggest volume of books is sold during the run–up to Christmas, and for quite a few years publishers have tended to time the launch of books aimed at a mass market towards the year end. Thus, the post–Book Week months are when serious literary critics assess the annual harvest and when book reviews in the daily newspapers and radio or TV interviews with authors fall thick and fast.

During the most recent literary publishing season –– that running from June 2004 to June 2005 –– it was new novels by Pál Závada (b.1954), György Spiró (b.1946), and Zsuzsa Rakovszky (b.1950) that were awaited with the keenest anticipation –– not unreasonably so, nor, in the event, undeservedly either. That is still the case even if the promotional fuss that was kicked up around them rather undeservedly overshadowed novels by two other authors, Krisztián Grecsó (b.1976) and Gábor Schein (b.1969), who are at least their equal in terms of quality but could be said to lack the registers that are needed to attract a readership used to an "easy read".

The Slovak minority in Hungary's recent past

Pál Závada's first novel, *Jadviga párnája* (Jadwiga's pillow, 1997), was the first Hungarian–bred work that could be considered a serious literary accomplishment yet also succeeded in winning over a broader readership. Since publication, it must have had over one hundred thousand readers, and a film of the book has been released. The locality of the love story that emerges from the sets of diary entries, partly mirroring, partly commenting on one another, that make up the three narratives is the author's birthplace, the southern Great Plain community of Tótkomlós, which has a population drawn predominantly from Hungary's Slovak ethnic minority. András Osztatni, a well–off peasant, keeps a record from 1915 until 1937 of his unreciprocated

love for his wife, Jadwiga, the day–to–days of his farming life, the dilemmas faced by the Slovak community in an ever–changing political environment, and the customs of a minority culture that had preserved certain archaic aspects. After András's death, Jadwiga inscribes her own entries into the diary that she has found, in part commenting from her own viewpoint on events reported by András, in part chronicling events after his death. The third layer of text, the work of the youngest son, Miso, provides the finishing touch with its documentation of the family's final decline –– intellectual, moral, and physical alike. Frustrated by fraternal jealousy, corrupted by the post–war political changes in Hungary to the point of becoming a police informer, Miso's last entry dates from 1987.

Jadviga párnája is a novel that gains greatly through importing into literature a closed universe that would otherwise have vanished into the mists of obscurity. Because the exoticism of that closed universe shrouds the novel's world in a hermeneutic veil of foreignness, of Otherness, readers are put in the place of an ethnologist: they are obliged to recognize their own experiences in the foreign, so that every little detail gains weight, significance, colour, taste, and character. That can be put down primarily to the novel's language, and in the first place to the vernacular used by András and Miso. András's somewhat roundabout, slow–paced, and at times syntactically unsure but always sensuous style of writing displays elements both of the shrewd peasant, comfortable on his own familiar ground but essentially self–taught, and also of the self–confidence and uncertainty of the speaker of a minority language who is at home in two cultures yet, at the same time, trapped between two linguistic norms. Miso, knowingly uneducated, aggrieved and full of hatred, divorced from all cultures, employs a no less sensuous idiom, only it is recording destruction. The great success that the novel has enjoyed, however, is almost certainly ascribable to the third layer of the text, Jadwiga's entries. The cultivated young lady, having been brought up partly abroad, outside Hungary, uses the idiom of intellectual reflection to explain and interpret events. From the viewpoint of the novel, her inscriptions are actually superfluous, for it loses nothing essential of its vigour and liveliness if one hypothetically screens out those passages; indeed, it could even be said to gain from doing so, as Jadwiga's sentimental explanations, by removing the hermeneutic veil, trivialize the world.

Závada's second novel, *Milota* (2002), is set in the same Slovak minority milieu and in part draws on the same formal devices as the first. The work intercuts two diary–like texts chapter by chapter: first, the reminiscences and reflections of a now elderly György Milota, born in 1930, as dictated into a tape recorder, and second, the computer–typed notes of one Erka Roszkos, a woman of the younger generation. The two texts here, however, are not related in any mirror–like fashion. Milota's text far outstrips the conventional bounds of a diary, reminding one more of memoirs from the Baroque era, and incorporating, among other things, the story of bee–keeping and the history of the Slovak populace of the Great Hungarian Plain from the first settlement in 1746 to the present day. Erka's diary, by contrast, is more of an introspective, self–tormenting confession. The literary virtues that glimmered in *Jadwiga's Pillow* come across more clearly in this novel, and I suspect this may also account for its more modest commercial success. Equally, the critical reception was also markedly cooler. That may of course have been a reaction to the previous huge success, but in some measure to its composition, which is too loose and only intermittently holds the baroque prolixity of Milota's memoirs together.

Related links
An excerpt from Pál Závada's *The Photographer's Legacy* in English in *Hungarian Literature Online*.
An excerpt from György Spiró's *Captivity* in German and Hungarian in *Babelmatrix* and in English in the *Hungarian Quarterly*.
An excerpt from Zsuzsa Rakovszky's *The Year of the Falling Star* in English in the *Hungarian Quarterly*.
"The Inheritance Question" by Krisztián Grecsó in English in *Hungarian Literature Online*.

The third novel has given Závada a chance to wipe the slate clean –– a chance that he has taken. Admittedly, the starting point of the story, and its main locus of reference, is still a predominantly Slovak–inhabited community, and numerous minor characters from the two earlier novels resurface in it, as a result of which various narrative strands join up and in retrospect tie the three books together into a trilogy. All the same, *A fényképész utóélete* (The photographer's legacy, 2004) is a radical departure from the two previous works. In it, three stories are intertwined in such a way that each successive chapter belongs to a different story strand.

The first of these opens with the arrival of a team of sociographers, led by László Dohányos, in the now familiar community, where they get talking with the locals –– an encounter that is snapped by Jewish local photographer Miklós Buchbinder. This story strand, which is entitled "Dead Men, Prisoners, Ministers", is in essence about how by 1957 the people who figure in this photograph have been exhausted or obliterated by successive turning–points in Hungarian history –– the persecution of the Jewish populace, the country's participation in the Second World War, its occupation first by the Germans, then by the Russians, the Communist takeover of power in 1948–49, the 1956 revolution and the ensuing reprisals. The second story begins in the spring of 1968 and ends during the days of the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia, in late August of that year, its protagonists being the now adult children and school–age grandchildren of locals who can be seen in Buchbinder's photograph. One of those grandchildren is Ádám Koren, who can be considered the central figure in the book as in the third story it is through his university contemporaries, loves, and friends that the lives of the descendants of the one–time "rural explorers" and the villagers are once more intertwined.

It is by setting this autobiographically inspired character at the centre and incorporating his reflective viewpoint that the book almost comes to grief. The sketchiness of the female characters and the proliferation of anecdotal episodes are signals that forces of tautological self–interpretation enter into play on this level. Fortunately, though, a second central figure is also present all the way through, a nameless first–person plural narrator. This narrator is actually the author's big and truly original brainchild: a constant, menacing presence midway between the chorus of Greek tragedies and the corporate plural of a secret police that is keeping an eye on the protagonists. Through this device, the aberrant common sense of a deadlocked society, the cowardly and narrow–minded consensus that, more than anything else, was responsible for the historical infamies of Hungary's recent past, is itself turned into one of the book's characters.

Mastering history? Narrating the Roman Empire

György Spiró's epic–scale historical novel, *Fogság* (Captivity, 2005), seems to be trying above all to convince readers that seeking sense in history is a vain enterprise. It opens in the twenty–first year of the Roman emperor Tiberius's reign, in 35 AD, and ends in the reign of Titus with the death of the main

protagonist, Uri. Born into the Jewish diaspora in Rome, as a young man Uri is selected to travel as a member of the delegation delivering the Roman Jewish community's annual tribute to Jerusalem; there he is viewed as a secret messenger for Agrippa, who is negotiating with the high priest Caiaphas. As a result, Uri spends a week in the Sanhedrin's prison before being invited to dine with Pontius Pilate and Herod Antipas. From that point on, he becomes initially an unwitting but increasingly, through his cultivation and accumulating experience, an ever–more indispensable tool in the power–games of figures vying for positions at the peripheries of authority in the Roman Empire.

After months of exile in a village in Judea then as a mosaic–layer in Jerusalem, Uri eventually travels on to Alexandria, where he is accepted as one of Agrippa's men by the family of the philosopher Philo Judaeus, eventually becoming enrolled as a pupil of the anti–Semitic Greek poet Isidoros at the Gymnasium. He survives a bloody pogrom in Alexandria and returns to Rome, where, thanks to his Jewish friends in Alexandria, he comes into contact with the circle around the future emperor, Claudius. Rome's Jews suspect that he has secretly converted to Christianity, and when Claudius decrees that Christians are to be exiled from the Roman diaspora, Uri is forced to leave his wealth behind and flee for his life. His beloved son, Theo, then sells himself into slavery in order to relieve the family's poverty. Five years later, Uri and the rest of the family return to Rome, where Christians are now being allowed to evangelize. Uri's younger and dimmer son joins them, and Uri himself becomes curious about their teachings. On hearing the story of Christ's crucifixion, he is shocked to realize that in all probability Christ was the older and plump man with whom he spent time in the Sanhedrin's prison in Jerusalem. Rome burns in the Great Fire, there is a renewed persecution of Christians, then the Jewish War rages. Uri starts to collect historical documents in preparation for writing his memoirs, but the valuable scrolls he has amassed are misappropriated by a business partner and he himself goes blind. In the end, the ultimately deranged Uri dies.

Spiró's novel is spellbindingly rich in detail, full of twists, and parodically witty. At the same time, it deals with a truly dismal period of relations between Jews and non–Jews –– a subject that, on account of the revival of anti–Semitism in recent years, is painfully topical and occupies many in Hungary today. The book's success nevertheless can be attributed primarily to its well–thought–through and seasoned narrative technique, which blends an impersonal narrative voice with the main protagonist's thought processes. This makes it possible for independently verifiable assertions to be firmly fused with the assertions of a monologic consciousness that can draw on only a narrow experience. On the one hand, one can read that, for example, "the Forum was by now a genuine stock market, only they did not yet know this was what they ought to call it", and on the other we are given as an explanation for the spread of Christianity that "Jews, who were a minority group, and those of mixed marriage in Greek towns were shit–scared". This approach holds out to the monologic consciousness the hope of being able to master history with the aid of knowledge; or to put it another way, that a clever person will be able to see through it. And who does not think that means them?

A child's–eye view of the Communist upheaval

Ursula Lehmann, the main character of Zsuzsa Rakovszky's first novel, *A kigyó árnyéka* (The shadow of the snake, 2002), lives her life in the shadow of gallows. The story takes place in the first half of the seventeenth century in

Löcse (modern–day Levoca, Slovakia) and Sopron, two towns in historical Hungary that were populated mainly by ethnic German burghers, at a time when the greater part of the country was under Turkish occupation. A north–western sliver (including the two towns) was, however, under the control of the Catholic Habsburgs, who were warring with the Calvinist forces under János Bocskai, who controlled a north–easterly strip plus Transylvania in the east. The towns are destroyed by sieges, conflagrations, and plagues, with Ursula's mother falling victim to one of the latter outbreaks when she is young. Her father remarries, but the baby that his second wife (also called Ursula) gives birth to is stillborn. Ursula has meanwhile been seduced and impregnated by a hot–headed young aristocrat. Her father works out a devious plan, worthy of a Jacobean drama, to preserve Ursula's reputation and also gratify his own incestuous fantasies. With the child having been born in secret, the family moves to Sopron, where Ursula now passes herself off as her father's wife, with the other Ursula playing the role of their daughter. The second Ursula, however, dies unexpectedly, after which father and daughter are unable to free themselves from their sinful, indeed unlawful relationship, a shared secret that, being shut up together and dependent on one another, they are obliged to uphold.

The novel stands out for the quite exceptional combined impact of its narrative standpoint, the stylization of its language, and the psychological subtlety of the story line. Ursula's lightly archaic idiom is far more than some sort of period imitation; it opens up room for a linguistic game in which the premodern detachment of Baroque memoir literature blends naturally with the unexpectedness of a female point of view and a modern awareness of the dynamics of repressed desire.

A sharp boundary line is also drawn between outer and inner, between family and external world, in Rakovszky's latest novel, *A hullócsillag éve* (The Year of the Falling Star, 2005). The initially patchy, loosely connected episodes, which gradually fill out into a full–blooded story, are convincing simulacra of the way a young child's mind works, from the fragments of memories retained from infancy to the increasingly coherent attempts to interpret the world. The tale is again set in a provincial Hungarian town (Sopron), its narrator and main protagonist being a little girl who lives together with her young widowed mother and Nenne ("Nanny"), an elderly domestic servant, in an apartment that has seen better days, and is now crammed with the family's furniture, one room of which they are obliged to sublet in order to make ends meet. The period is the first half of the 1950s, and this one–parent family belonging to "the former ruling class" has been overtaken not just by the general poverty of the post–war period but also by the consequences of the political suppression, expropriations, and declassing that followed the 1948–49 Communist takeover.

The injustices committed in the name of social justice divide the novel's world into two: on the one hand are "our sort", typical figures of the bygone middle class of professionals and white–collar workers among the threadbare props of a vanished age; on the other, the uncultured, poorly educated "them" who have unjustly gained the upper hand, from an odious nursery–school assistant to the mother's boss in the office where she works. Zsuzsa Rakovszky brings extraordinary sensitivity to her evocation of that period and milieu, the sufferings and helplessness of the innocent victims of this historical turn of events, but also, as one of the book's characters notes in a letter, the fact that "true power, that of irony and scorn", still rests in their hands. Having read it through, the reader can close the book with a contented sigh and reflect on how

lucky it is that this inept and clumsy experiment at redressing "social justice" ultimately failed.

A Jewish–Hungarian son's struggle with his father and the past

In Gábor Schein's short novel *Lázár!* (Lazarus! 2004), "them" means the Magyars (that is to say, non–Jewish Hungarians), the father is already asserting back in the 1970s, and thereby expressing "his conviction that any hope this might be altered could be ruled out from the outset". And the thing that the father was convinced was unalterable was the hatred towards Jews. The single long monologue that makes up the novella relates the story of the father's life and death from the son's point of view. The summoning up of events that are preserved in the fragmentariness of memory alternates with attempts to address and placate the dead father and resolve their conflicts. The narrator at times speaks about himself in the first person singular and addresses the father in the second person singular, or speaks of himself as "Péter" and the father as "M." This doubling of main figures makes the contrast between Péter's boyishness and his fatherless adulthood a linguistic organizing principle of the text.

The family history that unfolds from the tale stretches back to an ancestor who emigrated to Hungary from Galicia at the turn of the nineteenth into the twentieth century, but the first member of the family with whom we become acquainted in any detail is M.'s father, a Social Democrat printer whose two brothers were deported back to Kolomyia in Galicia as "stateless persons", whence they were transported off to a Nazi death camp. On the Communists' assumption of power in Hungary, the Social Democratic Party was disbanded. M.'s father tries initially to maintain traditions within the framework of a male voice choir that he had organized, but then he too conforms to the new order, joins the Communist Party, and is appointed director of the printing works; when they seek to remove him in 1955, it kills him. M. does not go into higher education but instead works first for a state farm, later in a greengrocer's store, ending up as the manager. His diligence and dependability win him admiration, but not love, from those around him. Work slowly becomes a drug with which he blots out his awareness of being excluded.

Péter's monologue becomes a dialogue, an argument, indeed a struggle, by virtue of the fact that the values and worldview emerging from the story of M.'s life collide with the son's values and worldview. The son finds unacceptable the self–consuming distrust and loathing in which an entire generation of Hungarian–Jewish parents were held thrall in the 1970s and 1980s by the eternal experience of exclusion; he wishes to put an end to the cycle of turning inwards and being outcast that is perpetuated from one generation to the next. The "Jewish fate" with which Schein's characters are contending is, in part, a fact of life that the unparalleled twentieth–century experience of the Holocaust renders exceptional, and, in part, a metaphor for the desperation which invites the hatred and uncertainty that haunt us all, regardless of religious denomination or descent. A vile illness puts an end to the father's unhappy life; the son's choice gives love and confidence a chance.

The mythical and mundane meet at the periphery

Krisztián Grecsó's first volume, a collection of short stories entitled *Pletykaanyu* (Mamma Mouthful, 2001), like Závada's first novel, resorted first and foremost to linguistic figures to capture the exotic aspects of a closed local community. Indeed, all the signs are that the Great Hungarian Plain village in

which the stories were set is not far from Závada's Tótkomlós. The linguistic code that Grecsó adopts as the medium in this and other writings is a typical form of communication in societies on the periphery: gossip. It is the product of a world whose reality can never assume solid, definitive form because it can be viewed from innumerable viewpoints, from each of which another reality can be seen. The conceptual schemes and notions that serve to interpret the world always evolve in the centres of a culture and diffuse out to the periphery, which is why they are only loosely and crudely applicable to designating elements and communicating the facts of reality on the periphery. That in turn is why the periphery creates such shifting mythical figures to fill the gaps where the local experience of reality fails to correspond with the conceptual schemes. Gossip is one such mythical figure.

It is through the fortunate choice and the originality of its linguistic code that this volume of partly interlinking long short stories received two of the prizes that are awarded in Hungary to debut literary works. In this case, the book also met with considerable commercial success, largely thanks to a strange incidental circumstance, which was the first sign that one has to reckon with the influence of the mass media and their hunger for news (that is to say, stories of catastrophe and scandal) even in the market for intellectual values. What happened was that a number of inhabitants of the author's native village claimed to recognize themselves in the events portrayed in the stories. Several had enough influence to give public expression to their displeasure; indeed, two even went so far as to threaten they would sue for libel. At this point, the village was veritably besieged by reporters, and for a while the author became almost a permanent fixture on television talk shows. The lawsuits were not forthcoming in the end, because the author promised to make a few alterations to the text for the book's next print run, which indeed duly followed in short order.

The world of *Isten hozott* (Long time no see, 2005) is interwoven by mythical figures other than gossip, such as legendary explanations for place names and horror or ghost stories. Mythological and mundane reality become inextricably entangled in local customs and the bizarre miracles of so−called "incidents". The inhabitants of the village of Sáraság are tormented by an unquenchable thirst and therefore carry around with them everywhere they go an enamelled drinking pot of water or watered−down beer. Every morning on awakening they mutter a babble of incoherent words, some in foreign languages, the meaning of which is only decipherable by "VIPs" who are able to get in touch with the spirit world. The womenfolk have a strange recurrent dream in which a carriage pulled by dapple−grey horses careers down the main street of the village towards the River Tisza with a murdered girl in its forage rack and the driving−box occupied sometimes by the dead Ede Klein, sometimes by Satan himself. As one might expect, the thirst, the glossolalia, and the recurrent dream are manifestations of the return of a repressed past. A young woman was indeed found dead one morning the day before she was due to be married, and the detective in charge of the case threw suspicion on Ede Klein, a dyer of Jewish descent who had only recently returned from a Nazi concentration camp. The detective claimed that Klein had killed her to use her blood in consecrating a synagogue that was to be rebuilt before he threw the corpse into the Tisza, and Klein was forced to flee the village. He was supposed to have returned secretly from Jerusalem in the 1960s to meet up with his boyhood love, Panni, who now runs the local tobacconist's.

Light is gradually thrown on these affairs and much else as the slowly unwinding tale inches along from "incident" to "incident", the starting point

being a telephone call made from the village to the narrator by a former friend, advising him to hurry home because a mysterious Klein diary has been found. It is 1989, the local co−operative farm had just been wound up, and in the co−op's safe they had come across a closely guarded document, which had been drawn up in a trance by the young Panni, who then worked as a typist. No one knows what the document contains since the co−op's chairman had sent it by mistake, instead of a report, to the district HQ, precipitating a huge kerfuffle and investigation, as a result of which the document was again locked away in a safe. While the narrator travels back to his native village, he recollects many stories from his boyhood about how they had scratched their heads over the meaning of the miraculous "incidents" and recurrent nightmares; over the significance of "Uncle Pista Avarka's obscure references to an Ede Klein Club that he had founded; over how it turned out that Panni, the woman who ran the local tobacconist's, was in truth a scion of one of the oldest aristocratic families in the land who had been obliged to change her name and move to the village because in Budapest during the war she had harboured Jews from deportation; and over how the girls raised in the Sáraság orphanage had put on a competition to see who could insert the largest glass tumbler in her vagina; and how Ede Klein had fathered a child by Panni when he had paid a return visit to the village in 1966.

The narrator eventually arrives in Sáraság, and of course it turns out that the famous Klein diary consists of nothing but blank sheets of paper: there are secrets that, when all is said and done, remain unfathomable. The novel closes with a double revelation. Readers discover that the narrator has been misleading them all along, making them believe that he too was born in Sáraság, whereas he had actually been one of the children brought up in the local orphanage. Shortly after that, however, the narrator himself learns that he is tied to the village nevertheless as it is he who is the love−child of Panni and Ede Klein's relationship.

Hopefully, even this brief outline gives something of the flavour of the exceptional originality that *Long Time No See* offers. By adopting an ethnographer's stance, Grecsó is able to fruitfully combine a sane outlook on reality with a creative imagination. He is able to avoid the banality of sociological description, as well as the essentialism of myth, by setting such figures of speech in motion, suspending and displacing both the experience of reality and that of myth. That motion creates unverifiably proliferating meanings that are capable of piercing both the realist and anti−realist integuments of repressive *écriture*. Whether it will reap such resounding success as some of the other works mentioned above remains to be seen.

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