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## The Poetics of Heterogeneous Bodies in Contemporary Hungarian Literature

### Introduction

In contemporary Hungarian literature, post-human and post-anthropocenic forms of speech, which focus on biological transformation by operating body poetics, are performing increasingly powerful poetic functions. Therefore, my article focuses on the post-human and post-anthropocenic scene of contemporary Hungarian literature as well as on the strategy of body transformations, along with the eco-critical and bio-poetic phenomena closely related to it. The final part of the article seeks to draw broader literary-poetic conclusions.

### 1. Post-Human and Post-Anthropocenic Contexts

In recent years, post-human and post-anthropocenic issues have had a strong influence on Hungarian literary theoretical discourse. The most spectacular breakthrough of these can certainly be dated to 2019, when a monograph by Márk Horváth, Ádám Lovász, and Márió Z. Nemes, entitled *A poszthumanizmus változatai—Ember, embertelen és ember utáni* (Variations of Post-humanism—Human, Inhuman and Post-Human), was published. It is an ambitious summary of the cultural, philosophical, ideologico-historical and literary discourses of post-humanism. The trio of authors claim that:

in the case of post-humanism, which denies or, at least, questions the traditional concept of man, we cannot speak of a coherent, systematic ideology, but rather of a formless, divisive, heterogeneous way of thinking that constantly threatens itself with destruction and collapse. (2019: 7; translation mine)

In this context, the authors refer to Derrida's famous statement (based on his re-reading of Foucault), which says that the bending back of the end of man is the opening of the very emptiness that opens the discourse of man without man (2019: 61). In other words, the "void" created by the shaking of man's privileged place and his virtual death requires the radical transformation of traditional humanist and anthropocentric viewpoints. In these, the human is the primary, superior member of binary oppositions, in relation to whom nature—the animal, the plant and the inanimate—is always only secondary or subordinated. The post-human and post-anthropocentric discourse, to use Derrida's term, exchanges and eliminates these hierarchical oppositions. Firstly, therefore, it eliminates the hierarchy of human-nature, human-animal, human-plant, human-inanimate pairs, and secondly, it abolishes the strictly separate position of a human: it traces the human back to nature, animal, etc., and sees humans as an integral part of nature.

Besides *Variations of Post-Humanism*, we must also refer to issue 2018/4 of *Helikon*, one of the most important journals of literary theory. Although its main profile is publishing papers by foreign authors in Hungarian translation, this issue of the journal primarily features Hungarian authors. This thematic issue, compiled by Márió Z. Nemes, presents a changing theoretical space, a "cultural map articulated by non-human twists" through "non-human and/or hybrid agents," drawn up by various "discourses related to post-humanism in a network (animal studies, new materialism, speculative realism, anthropocentric discourse, etc.)," "which explore alternative ways of subverting anthropocentrism" (2018: 371).

In the Hungarian literary and literary theory scene, posthuman discourse is present in the most diverse fields, from ecocriticism through theatre theory to feminism. Veronika Darida, interpreting the lectures of Valere Novarina and Romeo Castellucci, refers to Giorgio Agamben (Darida 2018: 497), who states that the abolition of Heidegger's "anthropological machinery" could lead to the elimination of the distance between man and animal (Agamben 2002: 78). Interpreting the issues of twenty-first-century feminism, Kata Kiss follows Donna J. Haraway, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Rosi Braidotti to conclude that "the ones who are excluded from the classical concept of man

are the *unheimliches* of the universal European consciousness” (Kiss 2018: 465; translation mine), and believes that the abolition of female subordination is possible not by extending the classical concept of the male, but by rejecting the general practice of domination and exclusion. Furthermore, there has already been a critique of posthuman discourse by Mark Losoncz, who says that posthumanists are “ultimately themselves the practitioners of dominance who reproduce existing oppressive practices” (Losoncz 2020; translation mine).

Through the metamorphosis and transformation of bodies, post-humanism and post-anthropocenic discourse in contemporary Hungarian literature entail the shaking and changing of the anthropological and evolutionary image of the human. They are accompanied by new biological and power constructions that link plant and animal life-forms to hybrid bodies and possible identities. In some cases, the world of organisms resulting from these metamorphoses is accompanied by the creation of utopian or, more precisely, dystopian systems. The eco-critical character of these worlds inspires and allows for different epistemological insights.

## 2. The Poetics of Heterogeneous Bodies

McCarthy was right. The victims really had *grown together*. The room had become an impenetrably dense jungle sealed up within its walls. The father had turned into a chestnut tree, his face cold bark, his arms sapling branches, the sprawling roots that were once his legs lost in the floor’s thick vegetation. From under the cracks of the rough, hardened skin gazed a pair of expressionless, colourless eyes, and yet they were ever so human. The mother was lying among the roots, her face melted into the bottom of the tree-trunk, her smile still unmistakably echoing the memories of a candle-lit dinner sunk in the past. The brain nestled deep in the grass, gyri throbbing in unison with the budding photosynthesis. Creeping ivy that had sprouted from the children’s bodies was covering the walls, reminding Brian of vacations long gone by, when he and his little sister would dip in their light-blue inflatable pool in the garden. The wind carried the same scent back then. Stone was watching the family’s remains, horrified. The whole of the rampant overgrowth was ominously pulsating, oozing steam with every sigh of the unified tract. Was it a myocardial automatism? Or was it the convulsing of capillaries, which, adapting to the new genetic program, seemed to ever expand? One thing was certain: these people were still alive. They were

only husks, yes, but what inhabited them was very much alive. Stone had no idea how the culprits had done it, and especially none as to why they had done it... And at this moment, the eyes ingrained in the bark cast their heavy, dull gaze on him. They blinked. (Bartók 2013: 36–37; translation by Ákos Kukovecz)

In Imre Bartók's novel, *A patkány éve* (*Year of the Rat*, 2013), the biological terrorists send messages to humankind by distorting the human body. The construction of bodily vegetation depicted in this scene raises ethical, eco-critical, trauma-theoretical and medium-theoretical questions all at once: does the transformation of humans to animals or vegetables provide an absolution regarding man's sins? How is the body of those having suffered the trauma, as a medium, present in the series of events of the trauma? And finally: does the resulting heterogeneous, hybrid body abolish or rather recall what is human?

The distorted body-reconstruction in Imre Bartók's text (Bartók 2013: 44) is a post-human composition transformed into non-human with dopamine receptors and fungal growths; it is a distant dystopia constructed with sci-fi-like devices appealing to the future. The post-apocalyptic tone of the novel turns its characters into the figures of a distant fantasy-world, from where the heterogeneous, traumatised body appears rather as a playful-horroristic linguistic construct than a real-time narrative.

The above brutal, semi-human, semi-plant body composition, which creeps upon the walls, furniture and shelves of a city flat as an ever-growing carpet, threatening to swallow the whole world beyond it, suggests a well-outlined poetic strategy. A strategy of transforming the body emerges that actually expands the complex called a body. The enrichment of human flesh offers the promise of a survival package that forces us to rethink the genetic information of our species. The reproductive organs are replaced by an association of human, animal and plant tissue, and the aesthetics of drugs, tissues and prosthesis results in creatures that contain only traces of the human.

We encounter a similar process in the novel *Hősöm tere* (*My Hero's Square*, 2000) by Lajos Parti Nagy. The protagonists of the work, the pigeons, who seek dictatorial power over Budapest and Hungary, are re-coding their own bodies with the help of some concoction and human skin pinched out with their beaks. The polyphony of the novel is partly ensured by this transformation, which doubles the protagonist-narrator. The power-hungry pigeons create a Lajos Parti Nagy, turned into a pigeon by the operation, who also seeks a dictatorial position, thus threatening the life of the "original" Lajos Parti Nagy. The story itself may seem banal, but in fact *My Hero's Square* simultaneously tells a possi-

ble story of the development of post-communist Hungary, the internal logic of a right-wing takeover of power and dictatorship around 2000, the sarcastic satire of human society, a critique of the intellectual life-style, fictionalized events of a writer's general condition, the circumstances and history of the formation of a distorted subject and, last but not least, the possibility of a post-humanoid future. As we can see, this novel, unlike Bartók's, has very specific and even almost current political and social meanings.

A wide variety of contexts have been built around Parti Nagy's novel by its analysts. From the point of view of our topic, this novel can be especially relevant if interpreted as a metamorphosis story. According to Péter Balassa, the transformation and mutant existence of the protagonist may refer to the "antique story of the donkey skin" as well as to Nick Bottom in Shakespeare (the latter possibility warns of the genre of travesty) (Balassa 2001: 82), but it also makes possible the contextualization of Kafka's short story "Metamorphosis" (Bodor 2001: 524). Because of the "more or less animal-like human characters," Béla Bodor mentions the novels of David Garnett, Vercors and Updike (Bodor 2001: 525), and István Margócsy, referring to the animal characters, mentions Karel Čapek's *War with the News* (Margócsy 2003: 306), but the reception also included in the context of *My Hero's Square* the infectious colonies of rats in Albert Camus's *The Plague* (Sükösd 2000: 112) or the monkeys behaving like humans in Boullé's *Monkey Planet* (k szonja 2000: 176), not to mention the traditional genres of the animal fable and animal novel. In connection with this, István Margócsy writes about the tradition of socio-political satire from *Reynard the Fox* to *Animal Farm* (Margócsy 2003: 303).

The above examples are also educational because they make it clear that the stories of human and animal transformation go back to a significant world literature tradition, and the sensitive exploration of ontological and epistemological differences is particularly important in this regard. Parti Nagy's protagonist is turned into the other, the mutant specimen, the pigeon-man by biotechnology, genetic engineering and cloning, which in turn is placed in the service of dictatorship. Therefore, this novel can also be related to Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. In connection with this, it is worth referring to a remark made by Francis Fukuyama who, in addition to Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, considers Huxley's novel to be the other important counter-utopia of the twentieth century. He says: "Of the nightmares evoked by these two books, *Brave New World's* always struck me as more subtle and more challenging," as "many of the technologies that Huxley envisioned, like in vitro fertilization, surrogate motherhood, psychotropic drugs, and genetic engineering for the manufacture of children, are already here or just over the horizon. But this

revolution has only just begun; the daily avalanche of announcements of new breakthroughs in biomedical technology... portend much more serious changes to come” (Fukuyama 2002: 5).

Anita Moskát’s fantasy novel, *Irha és bőr* (*Hide and Skin*, 2019) can be placed in similar contexts, as regards both the genre of dystopia and the metamorphosis story. However, whereas in Parti Nagy’s novel, the pigeons of augmented bodies, having gone through artificial body-transformation, threaten humans with dictatorship and try to control them, Moskát’s novel raises quite opposite issues. From the aspect of our topic, one of the central questions of the work is what happens, what kind of world is built if a new species appears, the so-called “breeds” or chimeras, which are in between humans and (various) animals. What rights do these beings have, especially when their physical and intellectual characteristics do not differentiate them from humans, and sometimes they even surpass humans in some respects. As Péter H. Nagy puts it, the real question is:

what kind of problems are generated in the present society by the addition of a third category to the human–animal duality and by the artificial mobilisation of borders (ghettoisation, racism, intolerance, etc.), while this situation not necessarily refers back to some sacred topic but to the assumption that all animals are potential humans. (Nagy 2019: 133; translation mine)

The question posed by the literary scholar can be answered by the Derridian argumentation, mentioned above. Anita Moskát’s breeds abolish the binary oppositions of the anthropocenic world, *fill up* and loosen the places fortified with taboos and separated by clear demarcation lines between man and nature or man and animal, which had been created by the ideology of power. The reason that Moskát’s novel has subversive power is because, according to József Keserű:

it would be misleading to interpret her characters as anthropomorphised animals. Through the fate of the breeds, the novel poses the disturbing question of what we can actually consider to be human, while seeking to approach this issue from several directions: legal, political, philosophical, theological and biological. (Keserű 2019: 76; translation mine)

Keserű refers to Balázs Keresztes, who claims that “the difference between human and animal beings cannot be imagined without cultural-technical me-

diation” (Keresztes 2018: 304). This demarcation and differentiation is created by paddocks, cages and folds as cultural techniques—the breeds live in ghettos surrounded by barbed wire, and people go to these ghettos to feed and stroke them as if in a zoo.

“If animals had a choice, they would all want to change. Who wouldn’t exchange their primitive life for the wonders of the Sapiens?” (320)—one of the most important sentences of the novel is uttered by Pilar, the badger-breed. Anita Moskát’s novel, to quote co-authors Judit Halberstam and Ira Livingstone, “does not reduce difference-from-others to difference-from-self, but rather emerges in the pattern of resonance and interference between the two” (Halberstam, Livingstone 1995: 10).

Eco-critical power issues become part of the transformation process of society as a whole. The novels of Lajos Parti Nagy, Imre Bartók and Anita Moskát present the heterogeneous and traumatized body as the object of poetics. The beings in the above novels allude to the experience of the inadequacy of language through their bodies as trauma. The body functions as a metaphor for subordination, and its transformation is an extension of that metaphor.

### 3. The Postmodern Poetics of the Language Given to the Subordinate

In the last two decades, works that use the registers of the language given to the subordinate have had a strong influence in Hungarian literature, creating a language of trauma in which the marginal identity, vulnerable to power, can speak or be addressed. If we want to contextualize these texts, we can observe that they consciously concentrate on issues of a political nature: the questions of power and social hierarchy. Exclusion from power takes place in the space of language deprivation; thus, in the space of fiction, the only possibility of an identity excluded from discourse is to be represented as a language and, in so doing, to draw attention to the injustices of the social hierarchy: vulnerability, oppression and subordination. If the term were not already reserved in Hungarian literature, we would dare call the works that can be classified here minority literature, as we can indeed call them in Deleuze/Guattari’s sense (Deleuze/Guattari 2009).

In many cases, these texts are biographical or autobiographical in nature and the credibility of the language lies in the cathartic power of experience, reality, trauma, and testimony. The narratives of suffering and the problems of inequality brought to the surface in literature make us rethink the structure, hierarchical relations and social roles of the whole of Western society. All this logically refers not only to phenomena that can be interpreted in the narrow circle of literature.

The concept of the subaltern, first used by Antonio Gramsci (Gramsci 1970: 1979) in a cultural-ideological sense, became significant in the discourse of literary criticism when it turned out to be one of the key concepts of post-colonialist literary scholarship. The concept, known earlier in the English language only as a military term, was used by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her study “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1988), thus placing it in a wider theoretical discourse. When examining it, we are advised to consider a mixture of ideological and theoretical discourses, which we can become aware of by taking into account certain significant theoreticians and also the more important theoretical bases. The concept of “subaltern” can include former convicts and individuals belonging to a sexual minority in the Foucaultian sense, the minority way of writing referred to by Deleuze/Guattari, and the post-colonial subject described by Edward Said.

What counts as a marginalized identity always depends on the specific social context, but in Western culture in general, it is usually anything that differs from the dominant identity formula of the “white, middle-class, Christian, heterosexual man.” Thus, forms of identity such as Black, Roma, manual labourer, rural, Jewish, gay, lesbian, transvestite, woman, child and, related to this, life experiences portrayed by narrators belonging to ethnic, national, religious and gender minorities. Consequently, the scope of the concept appears through the complex hierarchical relations of minorities belonging to groups defined by class, religion, race, gender, social status, ethnicity, age, illness or oppression, as well as through the various interpretations of the Alien and the Other.

In the past two decades, one of the most important linguistic issues in Hungarian literature has been how to give language to the above-mentioned groups, in other words: how to give language to the subordinate. Post-human, post-anthropocenic and eco-critical forms of expression can be placed in this context. What the colonized, dark-skinned native is for post-colonialism, the oppressed female identity is for postmodern feminism; the transgender, the gay and the lesbian in queer-theory; the migrant or hybrid-identity person in transnational literary science and the silently suffering animal and natural environment in eco-critical discourse.

The extension of the discourse formulae of post-colonialism, feminism, eco-criticism, queer-theory and transculturalism has also meant that in Hungarian literature at present we are indeed living in revolutionary times, when the relationships of subordination are brought to the surface, identity is radically re-evaluated, and when literature confronts the reader with the relations of subordination, the representation of subordinate identities, the issues of the formation of the voice and language given to the marginal. This cultural



shift permeates the whole of artistic life, highlights and articulates tabooed and marginalized topics and is characterized by a new focus. The direction of perspective changes, literature becomes an area of sensitisation and a place of recounting traumatic experiences; the presentation of identity emphasizes elements of subordination, alienness and otherness by means of the rhetorical devices of the autobiography. The topics of MeToo literature, domestic violence, sexual abuse and paedophilia can be placed in this context (Edina Szvoren, Réka Mán-Várhegyi, Rita Halász), along with displaying the perspective of the victim and the child (Szilárd Borbély, Anna Mécs), as well as a new kind of historical novel that focuses on taboo historical events other than the narrative of official national history (Pál Závada, Gábor Zoltán, Andrea Tompa) and, last but not least, the so-called poverty literature, which uses the potential of sociographic narrative to give language to the subordinate identity (László Szilasi, Tibor Noé Kiss). Due to the possibility of displaying the subordinate identity, there is a strong emphasis on genres such as the autobiographical and diary novel (Péter Nádas) and the travelogue (Éva Bánki, Balázs Szálinger, Noémi Kiss, Zoltán Csehy). The so-called transcultural literature (Árpád Kun) and coming-out prose, dealing with non-hetero-normative sexuality (Tibor Noé Kiss, Ádám Nádasdy), represent unique new genres.

The questions of power, interpreted from the perspective of post-human and post-anthropocenic discourse (novels by Lajos Parti Nagy, Imre Bartók, Anita Moskát and volumes of poetry by Márió Z. Nemes, Mátyás Sirokai, Tamás Korpa) are also placed in this context. They create a linguistic space in which the human's privileged place disappears or at least becomes problematic. They extend marginality poetics, give a language to alienness and represent the emancipation of the subordinate.

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## | Abstract

ZOLTÁN NÉMETH

### The Poetics of Heterogeneous Bodies in Contemporary Hungarian Literature

In contemporary Hungarian literature, an increasingly important role is played by post-humanist-anthropocene forms of literary expression, the starting point of which is biological operations performed on the body. The bodily transformations that change the anthropological and evolutionary picture of man are accompanied by new biological constructs and power relations, as a result of which animal life forms acquire hybrid identities. Three Hungarian novels are discussed in the work: *My Hero's Square* (2000) by Lajos Parti Nagy, *A patkány*

*éve* [Year of the Rat] (2013) by Imre Bartók, *Irha és bőr* [Hide and Skin] (2019) by Anita Moskát. Their analysis is set in the context of posthumanism, ecocriticism and postmodernism.

**Keywords:** heterogeneous bodies, subordinate identities, post-humanism, post-anthropocenic discourse, Hungarian literature, postmodernism

## | Abstrakt

ZOLTÁN NÉMETH

### Poetyka ciał heterogenicznych we współczesnej literaturze węgierskiej

We współczesnej literaturze węgierskiej coraz większą rolę odgrywają posthumanistyczno-antropocenijskie formy wypowiedzi literackiej, dla których punkt wyjścia stanowią biologiczne operacje wykonywane na ciele. Cieleśnym transformacjom, które pociągają za sobą zmianę antropologicznego i ewolucyjnego obrazu człowieka, towarzyszą nowe biologiczne konstrukty i relacje władzy, w wyniku których zwierzęce formy życia zyskują hybrydowe tożsamości. W pracy omawiane są trzy węgierskie powieści: *Plac mojego bohatera* (2000) Lajosa Parti Nagya, *A patkány éve* (Rok szczura) (2013) Imre Bartóka, *Irha és bőr* (Ircha i skóra) (2019) Anity Moskát. Ich analiza jest osadzona w kontekście posthumanizmu, ekokrytyki i postmodernizmu.

**Słowa kluczowe:** ciała heterogeniczne, tożsamości podporządkowane, posthumanizm, dyskurs postantropoceniczny, literatura węgierska, postmodernizm

## | Bio

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the Postmodern Hungarian Literature] (Kalligram, Bratislava 2012), *Álnév és maszk* [Pseudonym and Mask] (Líceum, Eger 2013), *Postmodern Literature in Central Europe. The Threefold Strategy* (Constantine the Philosopher University, Nitra 2015).

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