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In the Space of Cumulative Trauma: Lessons from a Hungarian Trauma-Novel in Vojvodina

In the literature under discussion here, a long silence indicates the power of the deepest trauma, the trauma induced by the fact that for a long time Hungarian literature in Yugoslavia could only say something about an issue by not talking about it. At first, the situation is exacerbated by the fact that speaking out about the anti-Hungarian reprisals of 1944 was subject to a *strong power ban*, and speech could not break down the barriers imposed by political discourse. At best, it communicated itself through the constraints of secrecy.

But it must also be said that this literature, from the point of view of the subject matter, presents the image of literature that is difficult to speak about, even later, during the period of dissolution, i.e. after 1989. It too describes the traumatic experience as an impulse that is impossible to place in a narrative and is therefore constituted rather as a kind of *emphatic absence*.

For years, the literary works are replaced by silence, quietude and non-appearance, until the theme appears in Nándor Burány's novel *Összeroppanás* (Implosion), and later in the prose of Nándor Gion, in veiled allusions, allegorical representations, or in László Végel's reflections developed especially in essays. The risky nature of speech, the past as a secret, the history drowned in silence, "the nature of the collective omission of memory, the mass graves turned into spiritual cryptograms," the images of „history buried under the ground” emerge. While the narratives themselves communicate silence, the

“drama of the long silence,” and the “Hungarian silence connected to Bačka” (Végel 2000a: 43).

Nándor Burány’s novel *Összeroppanás*, published in book form in 1968,¹ can be interpreted as a trauma novel, looking back at the repressed events from a quarter of a century’s perspective, is the first to experiment with a possible language of narrative writing. Its documentarian approach also derives from the fact that it is about breaking the persistent and embarrassing public silence. The stifled and isolated voices of the generations involved, which serve to transmit trauma, are also reflected in the novel: “Only in whispers, behind closed doors, did people dare to talk about it” (Burány 25). The reception also states that the novel contains moments that not only had not been spoken about before but were not allowed to be spoken about. “This ‘sensitive’ subject is the memory of the reprisals of ‘44. If I’m not mistaken, Nándor Burány was the first in our literature to write about this in *Összeroppanás*” (Gerold 79).²

By comparison in Serbian literature, David Albahari is the author whose entire oeuvre can be examined from the perspective of the concept of trauma. Albahari’s literary research frequently recalls Cathy Caruth’s related thought and considers trauma as a wound of the soul caused by a deep existential fracture, that occurs in the way the soul experiences time, itself and the whole world. (Ribnikar 615) Besides, Albahari’s highly reflected and subtle prose evokes the literary mediation between “knowledge and non-knowledge” on the “catastrophic events” and the genesis of the “traumatic kernel” of our historical existence (these notions: Aradau, Munster 2012).

At the same time, the peculiarity of Nándor Burány’s aforementioned novel is that, by asking questions about the identifiability of the time horizon of this rupture, he introduces the concept of *trauma* at an epoch when the present-day, frequent repetition of “trauma” had not yet appeared on the horizon:

Have dead, peaceful people been shot in the street? – Soldiers were shot at from the school attic. – The corner shopkeeper dug a cellar in the garden, he shoots from there, don’t go that way. – They threw a grenade into the twin-windowed house behind the station. Only two orphans survived. – Two old men were taken from the neighbor’s house, and the bread was left in the oven. It started here? Is this where the first

1 The novel had already been published in four parts in 1967 in the magazine *Híd*.

2 This study also tells us that when the novel was published in the *Híd*, the party intervened. “It discussed the matter in a closed meeting and [...] condemned it as a work that disturbed public opinion” (Gerold 80–81).

symptoms of the trauma appeared or was it a cold that would only cause rheumatism in old age? The gendarmes and officials came from the motherland. They looked down on you. Their children at school. (Burány 14)

The issues mentioned in this excerpt make it clear that while the novel builds on the embeddedness of trauma in the narration of a life story, the experiencing subject can only represent the possible sources of trauma through an *interrogative* attitude. It seems that the main aim is not to fully explore the traumatic density of events, but rather to find a way out of the heavy grip of memory. It is the opening up of avenues of discourse that provides a very strong impulse for the central character of the novel. But while she is motivated by an indestructible desire to escape from coercion-based events through speech, she is in fact in a state of incessant flight.

The new situation has created a particular complexity. At the historical time of the novel, the central dimension of the experience of social being in the region is shaped by the arrival of the “mainlanders”:

The Hungarians came in, the mainlanders sat down in the offices, the various agents and other vigilantes, suspecting virgin territory and hoping for rich pickings, swarmed into the countryside, they were channeled down. (Burány 110)

By opting for a particular way of integration, namely the exercise of superiority, the Hungarian “newcomers” define the relationship between the periphery and the centre. As we have seen, the relegation to a despised status is closely linked to a series of violent acts that is to the manifestation of superiority. The feeling of being looked down upon reinforces the effect of the aggressive relations known by hearsay as a personal experience of the child. An important factor of identity is violated: *the sense of belonging (indigenoussness)*, which, as the language suggests, was shared by all the former residents. The voice of the abhorred is spoken through the language of trauma and autobiography.

“Forty-one? Forty-four? Two years, two turns.” (Burány 9) The hard experiences of two changes of empire are intertwined here. The experience of the arrival of the Hungarian army, the hangings in the barracks yard: “Jews? Communists?” (Burány 14), the deportation of the settlers, then the arrival of Russian soldiers and partisans, the fleeing gendarmerie, and the fleeing Hungarian administration. And the extensive spread of fear: everyone fears “blind” revenge. The Red Army soldiers break into houses at night, point a gun at the

husband, rape the wife, take the horse, the bedclothes, the watch. Then, to top it all off, there are the post-war atrocities.

The novel draws on the various stages of the characters' self-understanding and processes trauma as a social construct based on lived historical experience. This trauma acts as an invisible force that affects many aspects of life. It shapes the way of life, everyday existence and how the world and human relationships are interpreted. In the novel,

The traumatic experience is present not only as a literary theme or as a psychological motivation for the plot, but dramatized by the narrative process, recognizable in narrative strategies that are evidence of the functioning of the wounded consciousness and as an imaginative representation that follows the logic of literature. (Ribnikar 615)

The specific temporal delimitation of the truly dangerous and seriously damaging situations is accomplished by the novel through two sequences based on the transformations of empire. Clearly, we are in a space of *cumulative traumas*,³ although by narrowing the spectrum of the narrative, only two of the three highly traumatic turns appear. Yet the first change of empire, that is, the social memory of Trianon mediated through imagination concerning maps, is closely linked to these events. However, the Serbian military occupation of the area in 1918–1920 and its annexation to the nascent Yugoslav state is not developed. Such connections are not crystallized in the novel because they do not belong to the biographical period of the character. Nor should it be relegated to oblivion, because the grievances of collective identity would become clearer if the assertion of memory were to cover a broader temporal horizon. The first change of imperialism is both the cause and the explanation of subsequent events and behavior. It is here that cartographic semantics enters the story, the redrawing of borders and the profound modification of space that entails the loss of majority status for Hungarians. Just as another Hungarian writer from Vojvodina, János Herceg, in his novel *Módosulások*, depicts the exceptional historical intensity of the region, the traumatic ways in which space is irreversibly lost, some are expelled, others opt to change their living space or emigrate to a more distant place. And some will be tormented for the rest of their lives by a multitude of traumas concerning the choice of space of living.

3 The area in question has also experienced some traumatic events in later years. A remarkable volume on the artistic treatment of the 1999 NATO bombing: Nina Mihaljinac, *Umetnost i politike sećanja: trauma 1999*, Beograd, 2018.

It is in the shadow of the first change of regime that the projected *hopes* of the 1941 turnaround for a return to the former order of power are understood. It is also the time of the multifaceted disappointment of the *Összeroppanás*: “It would have been better if they had not come” (Burány 22), is the message of the 1941 turnaround, to be precise, the Hungarian invasion. The forced exchange of photographs hung on the walls has become a constant theme in the narrative of the turnaround, and the novel makes use of this theme:

Your old father doesn't last long, he doesn't go to the front, he doesn't have a uniform, but after fortyone he hung a large framed picture on the wall, in the old Yugo this was not allowed—you can see him in the photograph, on horseback, with a swollen moustache, sword drawn, in the uniform of the Hungarian Hussars—and now he's hanging it again. His nerves are imploded. (Burány 28)

The traumatic experience, the collapse, is triggered by the fact that with the change of power, an era, an earlier dimension of ethnic identity has again become unacceptable. The novel *Összeroppanás*, by showing the two changes of power, also makes it clear that the trauma in this region cannot be linked to a single historical date. It cannot be localized in a single inherent violent past event, but rather in a series of *dates and events*, and in the process by which it haunts the survivor later on because of its unassimilated nature—and because it could not have been consciously known to the child at the moment it happened. The narrator of *Összeroppanás* creates, with a long time lag, a horizon that was not given to him when the events took place. What he could not naturally do in an earlier timeline. The survivor's guilt, the survivor's syndrome, is part of the unfolding child's self-understanding, and then also becomes part of his adult emotional world. The subject of trauma is plagued by survivor's guilt, the experience of feeling guilty for surviving a situation or experience that caused death or torture to others. The rhythm of the novel is organized by the incessant return to memory, which evokes a kind of empathic disturbance. There are moments when empathy gives way to vicarious victimhood, i.e. empathy with the victims becomes almost an identity of its own. The stories lived in Mihály Kocsis as if they had happened to him. While the illusions seemed to be disappearing, “the notions of man that he had formed in his childish naivety were crumbling, collapsing” (Burány 96). In addition to childhood traumatization, his adult life has another, now a *direct* source of trauma. The contradictory situation of being that, despite his severe experiences, he spends his adult life as a functionary in the service of a system in which he is disappointed by the reverses he sees. But

the fact is that he has become an accomplice and, increasingly impatient and anxious, he asks himself whether he has simply joined the “winners and the system, in the ranks of those who slaughtered thousands of innocent people for profit?” (Burány 111)

In the novel, after twenty-two years, the sentences of narrative testimony and self-recrimination for childish ignorance are torn:

It is as if I were now waking up through the night that I had then slept through with the peaceful sleep of children. How could I have known what was happening in the basement of the former hotel and along the riverbank, along the trenches. The people in the area heard the wailing, the painful moans, the shrieking, the gunshots, but later they didn't dare tell anyone. I carried on carrying my uncle's lunch, but for a long time afterwards I knew nothing of that terrible night. (Burány 55)

It was a decidedly brave literary gesture that in this novel, although it communicates silence, the forbidden topics, those that no one dares to talk about, not even the central character himself, are already quite openly stated in 1967. The quote also suggests that the events have had a traumatic effect on someone who was not a direct sufferer. Here it becomes clear that traumatic events can happen to anyone, individually or collectively, and that everyone in this region carries with them the pain of their ancestors, and that these traumas are transgenerational. For a long time, this was little talked about because it was almost taboo, and narratives were not created to talk about it openly. In this novel, too, *the experience of the unspeakable* dominates and is given a prominent place in self-understanding and understanding in general. Burány captures the essence of the wartime moods of childhood, and then the exploration of one's own identity. The feeling of being lost in the world of post-war Vojvodina and the never-ending process of becoming oneself. Part of this is the shifting of perspectives, as the central figure is shocked to see how his worldview, constructed from the “perspective of the peasant-space in the urban periphery,” is collapsing.

The coordinates of existence are marked by the inaccessibility of the meanings of *indirect trauma*, a secret that locks up the utterable and ultimately calls human dignity into question.

But for twenty years. You didn't dare tell any of your friends about that tragic night with your uncle. And yet to speak freely, to tell the truth without fear, is one of the prerequisites for being worthy of the

name. And you have kept it to yourself, fear has choked you to speak.
(Burány 31)

In the text, the dual presence of the desire to remember-narrate and the taboo is discernible. The experiences of trauma are so difficult to grasp that the novel's singular narrative, but also attempts to approach it in the singular second person and from the perspective of the external narrator.

The thematic moments of the novel include the disturbances of war, the experience of post-war atrocities, the sharp clash of political forces and life under constant threat: "Suffering. Horror. Uncertainty" (Burány 53). It is important to emphasize that these are the elements that organize *the central subject* of the novel's poetics is the way trauma works and its incommunicable nature. The manifestations of trauma are sought not merely in the fact of loss, i.e. in human annihilation, but in its non-discursive mode, i.e. in the subversive—culturally inarticulate—constellations of humanity as such. The traces of transgenerational cumulative trauma can be detected at all levels of the narrative. For it identifies as traumatic all forms of weakness and inferiority associated with the changes of empire (contempt, superiority, plunder, deportation, ethnic cleansing, rape, servitude, grain requisition, etc.), where the individual experiences feelings of exposure to violent elements, abandonment, helplessness, hopelessness and inferiority in the face of the forces that are currently in power. There are also many events that are sometimes recorded only as *indirect experiences*, yet are integrated into one's own life story, but are difficult or impossible to talk about.

One of the underlying themes of the novel, the workings of an upside-down world, the atrocities of 1944, the Yugoslavia of Tito—while seeking to build new ideas of community and belonging—is treated as a secret, one of the most closely held and never resolved. So strong are these tendencies that some of the surviving documents have even been destroyed by the home affairs services. The Yugoslav authorities tried to conceal the existence of mass graves at the time of the publication of the novel and even later. The victims were usually buried in cemetery ditches, riverside ditches, and other inaccessible and still unknown places. Many mass graves were subsequently covered up by the authorities by erecting buildings over the sites. In this sense, memory could not legally participate in the construction of post-war identities. The question of how a community can remember if it does not know exactly what has been erased was raised. What could be saved for memory if one of the consequences of the ban was that the massacres committed against Hungarians and the locations of mass graves could only be secretly remembered by potential witnesses or relatives. The novel makes it clear that a silent moral discourse was taking

place within the meaning of the tabooed trauma. For years, strategies of mind manipulation aimed to exclude the Hungarian vision of the dead from memory. When the dead are buried in unknown places, their deaths can remain taboo. The complete prohibition of talking about how and when people died, the exclusion of mourning, the absence of corpses, the unknown location of burial sites or mass graves as depersonalizing places make the *traditional way of remembering through space* impossible. In connection with these events, we should be talking about the *scandal of place*, and of space.

On the other hand, and this is also addressed in the *Összeroppanás*, the existential escape from the *trauma of the Other*, the avoidance, the evasion, is also paralyzing: for a time, the Serbian and anti-Jewish raids that *preceded* the anti-Hungarian reprisals, the so-called “Cold days” in Novi Sad, also shaped the spiral of silence and silencing, with the help of defensive forgetting. The undifferentiated nature of traumatization is vigorously expressed in Végel’s *Exterritórium*: “Perhaps they too carry wounds, wounds they have never spoken of before” (Végel 2000b: 47). This sentence conveys that there is a common underlying feeling, a silencing aspect. Elsewhere, it is also stated that in this sense these experiences manifest national relations: “From Slovenia to Macedonia, they are covering up the mass graves... of which the new generations were unaware” (Végel 2000a: 42). Despite all this, the people living here experience the events in different ways, with traumatic dates for some and not for others. In extreme cases, the day that one community counts as a holiday is overshadowed by the day of mourning for another. These issues lack a common narrative, a narrative that would have the same validity in all ethnic communities. Thus, the narrative relationship to the common horizon of remembrance may not coincide. A *paradoxical drama* of the multiplicity of the same is taking place. Therefore, the inadequacy of the concept of trauma to articulate the relation to the common object of memory is raised. Today, it is still an important question how the political sphere of the community deals with these subjects, in which direction the memory of traumatic events influences the thinking of Hungarian and Serbian society. What formations are created by the coefficients of conscious memory, deliberate erasure and accidental forgetting? In any case, the ramifications of the hidden and *forbidden dimensions* of the personal experience of the minority people are instructive, while the narration of the traumas of the majority is facilitated and made visible by a *mechanism of power*. Thus, there is a juxtaposition between the *silenced* and the *over-told*, over-mediated memory structures that are subordinated to the efforts of power. The forms of memory produced by power are the most over- or under-used forms of memory in the existing political order. Ethnic

relations over certain events are still influenced by the constructed nature of memory.

The narrative of the novel *Összeroppanás* should articulate the trauma of the narrator and the trauma of the Hungarians in Vojvodina at the same time. The boundaries between individual and collective trauma are blurred in memory. This novel of trauma does not focus on the direct depiction of events, it does not go into detail, it only zooms in on a single image and observes the inner events. The re-living of trauma is not seen as a way of re-living the wounds, but as a way of reconstructing them: “Again and again you ask yourself: why hurt this memory? Wound, scar, scab. If we touch it, it will bleed again. It is more difficult to heal” (Burányi 27). The specificity of this concept is that it is most emphatically concerned with the present as a consequence. Remembrance is guided by aspects that can be interpreted *locally*. The past, which is responsible for the present, is revealed in memory flashes: memory is the residue of some elementary experience, which should be integrated into the existing mental system and transformed into a narrative language. Even many years later, Mihály Kocsis experiences recurring insomnia and paralyzing memories that intrude into his waking state, a feeling of anxiety that is difficult to explain, constant tension and almost irrational fear that overwhelms everyday life. The more expressive emotion, the existential fear, is, moreover, widely present in the prose imbued by geocultural identity. As László Végel writes in an essay, “Your history, the history of fears” (Végel 2003: 8).

The notion of trauma is defined here as the confrontation with some level of a stressful situation, the extent of which is so incomprehensible to the subject that it degrades his or her ability to verbalize the events. Meanwhile, the paradoxical nature of trauma is reflected in its almost compulsive need to be expressed, but its impossibility of verbal communication. The phenomenon of trauma both demands that it be consciously expressed and denies us our usual ways of accessing the event. The theme of the novel is a powerful need for utterance while suggesting that trauma cannot be expressed in referential language, nor through familiar narrative forms. This speaks of the need to understand the inarticulable experience of trauma as events that are difficult to translate into the language of literature. The recognition of the urgency of speaking out is also reflected in other texts in which the mother “described in detail the site of the mass graves in Srbobran, burial place of those who were innocently murdered in the street [...] you must speak out, like your mother. At least at the last moment, you must speak out” (2000b: 141).

Returning to *Összeroppanás*, it speaks of the need to understand the elusive experience of trauma as events that are difficult to translate into the language

of literature. From its very first pages, it uses the names of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus to signal its preoccupation with the search for meaning in existence. In the next sentence, he elevates the speaking of truth to the status of the purpose of life, the meaning of existence. “Man carries a truth within himself, it should be grasped, spoken; you almost said that if you could do it, it would be enough in itself as a purpose in life” (Burány 8).

The *co-owner* of the trauma struggles for a long time with the impact of the events, the personal consequences, and the memory of the trauma. In several places, the novel expresses the preoccupation with the *unspeakable* around the *spoken*, the relationship between the unspeakable experience and the desire to speak, the interconnectedness of the two, the role of events in the formation of the self-image. The novel also reckons with the permanence of the elemental power and the threatening memory of events. It situates these moments in the context of an *inexhaustible, impermanent* world of feelings: “I may never be able to get away from it” (Burány 54). The need to break through taboo planes, the narrative filling of the void of reality, the telling of the truth, appears in several places in the novel as a way of escape: “If you told the whole truth, you might be saved forever” (Burány 9). No doubt, one should attempt to speak about those things that Mihály Kocsis might be able to express in language at all, for which he might gather the courage:

How dare he speak? How many times has this question preoccupied him, tormented him! And for how long? Perhaps it has got somewhere. Still afraid, it is true, but more afraid of not knowing, of not being able to say it. (Burány 101–102)

The double vision so characteristic of trauma stories becomes here an important structural figure. In the unstable world of trauma-induced thinking, the need and impossibility of speech at once torment the central figure of the novel. The elements associated with the individual condition of collective trauma are “interconnected” (Burány 92). “The interlocking confused feelings of helplessness, shame, remorse, humiliation have been deposited in the sand, causing constant disturbances in the functioning of the kidneys” (Burány 97).

The final collapse, the bankruptcy, is that in the end, the truth in the novel remains untold. As if to prove that every phenomenon of trauma finally resists representation: “I could not, I dared not speak the truth...” (Burány 135). We know that the novel *Összeroppanás*, however, broke the silence and this story said what Mihály Kocsis was not allowed to say.

Traumatic experiences always tie the subject strongly to space, and consequently, they cannot find a way out within this space. Therefore, an important moment at the end of the novel is the recognition of the need to break out of the geo-cultural space. For the speaker, to place herself outside of traumatic space would mean that she could move away from the relation in which she experiences her being to herself: "I must, it seems, travel away after all. Away. Very far away" (Burány 135). However, it should not go unmentioned that at the beginning of the novel we read that the "awkward wandering" is interiorized to such an extent that distance does not eliminate, or at most weakens, certain spatial structures of existence:

You flee from city to city, but you should know that you cannot escape, it is everywhere, it accompanies you to Rome, Pest, Belgrade and Split, that is, it is rather inside you, wherever you travel, you take it with you. (Burány 8)

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| Abstract

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In the Space of Cumulative Trauma: Lessons from a Hungarian Trauma-Novel in Vojvodina

In the case of deep trauma, literature is often unable to speak. In the Hungarian literature of Vojvodina, the general silence concerning the changes of empire and the reprisals describes the traumatic experience as an impulse that is impossible to put into a narrative. Nándor Burány's book-length trauma novel, *Összeroppanás* (Implosion), published in 1968, looked back on the events from a quarter of a century later and for the first time thematised the task of processing transgenerational trauma. The novel's distinctive feature is that it introduces the concept of trauma itself by asking questions about the identification of the time of the traumatic rupture. The real subject of his poetics is the way trauma works and its ineffable nature. The double vision so characteristic of trauma stories becomes here an important structural figure. In the moody world of trauma-induced thinking, the necessity and impossibility of speech at once torments the central figure of the novel. The novel is set in a space of cumulative trauma and processes trauma as a social construction based on lived experience. It also makes the point that trauma in this space cannot be located in a single inherent violent past event, but rather in a series of dates and events.

Keywords: geoculture, cumulative trauma field, empyrean shift, transgenerational trauma, trauma novel

| Bio

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