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Utopist with Common Sense. Self-Narration and Career Making in the Works of Ferenc Balázs

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Abstract. My study focuses on the self-narration of the young Transylvanian writer and social activist of the first part of the twentieth century, Ferenc Balázs, based on his personal correspondence and his autobiographical works. The medieval tradition of peregrination becomes a journey around the world which later will offer the ideological background of his work, and an evergoing clash between cultural traditions. Both his literary work and social achievement are characterized by premodern nostalgia for rural life mixed with utopian socialist ideas. The task of shaping a traditionalist, rural community according to modern idea becomes a token of individual achievement in his works. Balázs's self-narration is contrasted in the memoirs of his wife and co-worker, Christine Frederiksen (*The Alabaster Village*), narrated from the special point of view of the stranger. Her interpretation comes to complete a story filled with complex interactions of cultural representations.

Keywords: cultural representation, self-narration.

My essay aims at presenting the career history of Unitarian minister, writer, poet, publicist, cooperative association leader, etc., Ferenc Balázs. He was one of the ideologists of the volume entitled *Tizenegyek Antológiája* [*Anthology of the Eleven*], which gathered the first-generation authors of post-1919 Transylvanian literature. Although impressive in its complexity, his career history was not entirely extraordinary in his own time. Among theology students, taking study trips abroad was relatively common and it kept the tradition of peregrination alive. In Ferenc Balázs's case, however, the study trip became a round the world trip by which he established the ideological background of a lifestyle that combined premodern nostalgia towards the countryside with elements of utopian socialism, where the key to individual progression was the improvement of community life.

It would be hard and perhaps inadequate to examine the complex and diverse life and work of authors like Ferenc Balázs based only on their literary activities.

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It would be equally misguided to focus only on Ferenc Balázs, the Unitarian theologist, then minister, the "folk expert," the rural development advocate, the college curator, the church restorer, the founder of the cooperative movement (and we could further enumerate the domains of his activity). The various areas of activity interfere, therefore they can only jointly outline the authorial career, a career in which the literary works are not only inspired by certain other activities, but they frequently become the fictionalized, metaphorized expressions of these activities. His most well-known work, *A rög alatt* [*Under the Clod*], which is a memoir of a rather undetermined genre full of sociographic descriptions, is actually the depiction of the same coherent and consequent undertaking of improving society also present in his articles, publicistic works (e.g., "Isten völgye" ["The Valley of God"]) and in his novel *Zöld árvíz* [*Green Flood*]. In his correspondence with his wife Christine Frederiksen,[1] he turns the process of getting from theoretical preparation to the realization of his goals into a coherent story. "I know that deep down I am the same as I used to be back then, but my soul no longer manifests itself in a theoretical search for truth, but in the realization of the truth that I have found. This truth is the individual's full and rich life within the community's full and rich life" (Balázs n.y., n. p.).

Based on data regarding dates and locations, below I will try to give an outline of Balázs's career history, a history that, in subsequent interpretations, becomes a coherent narrative of his personal fulfilment through serving his community.

From a temporal perspective, Balázs's life story falls between the years 1901 and 1937. The major historic and economic events of the era (World War I, Transylvania's annexation to Romania as the result of the Treaty of Trianon, the global economic crisis) provide a frame to his particular life events. From a spatial perspective, his life story can be portrayed along the path Kolozsvár – Budapest – Oxford (England) – Berkeley (California) – Tokyo – Osaka – Beijing – Shanghai – Bombay – Calcutta – Bagdad – Kolozsvár – Székelykeresztúr – Mészkő – Torda.

Balázs's name is mostly linked to this notion of the adventurous trip abroad, especially since his first significant work – after his *Mesefolyam* [*Fairy Tale River*] from the year 1922 – *Bejárom a kerek világot* [*Wandering All Over the World*, 1929] commemorates these trips. The point of this rather irregular itinerary is self-discovery and not a discovery of the world. "In my journeys I was guided by one goal: to realize my humanness"[2] – says the introductory chapter of the book entitled *Kikiáltás* [*Proclamation*] (Balázs 1975, 5). For that matter, the contemporary reception sensed that they were not dealing with a

1 Their correspondence went on from the beginning of their acquaintance in 1925 to Ferenc Balázs's death in 1937, and it accurately outlines the author's undertakings in his active years and his reflections on them.

2 The translations from Balázs's texts (except quotations from his letters, which he wrote in English) and from Hungarian specialist literature are my own throughout the article.

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regular travelogue, but with a psychographical story of personal development projected onto the map of the world. In his review, Gábor Gaál emphasizes that Balázs's attention "is captured in each country only by the things somehow related to his quite special view of life embedded in socialism, religion, racial beliefs, panhumanism and panpacifism" (qtd. in Bolyai 1930, 478–479). László Szabédi (then László Székely) exemplifies this using the description of the time spent in Japan:

> Japan, for example, does not appear as Japan, but as a country made of the fusion of two heterogeneous elements: one that Ferenc Balázs likes: the healthy element, meant for development, and one that contradicts his beliefs: the element of decay. We cannot get an image of the various cultures surrounding the Transylvanian wanderer because we can only see Ferenc Balázs's image everywhere. We can see it blurrily under Mount Fuji, while the image is much clearer on the frame of the Buddha sculptures. The Sphinx is not even visible, we can only see a busy Ferenc Balázs hurrying towards home. (1930, 74–75)

The tradition of peregrination would suggest a pattern according to which, after visiting the foreign schools, the young man returns home and tries to put his acquired experience and knowledge into practice within different circumstances. According to this model, globetrotting (his studies at Oxford and Berkeley and the Oriental journey itself where he had the chance to meet influential thinkers like Japanese Toyohiko Kagawa and Indian Rabindranath Tagore and Mahatma Ghandhi) was in fact a theoretical preparation for the work that Balázs tried to accomplish after returning to Transylvania. He had a painfully small amount of time for carrying out this activity, the work that he describes in *Under the Clod* as guiding the village into the transition to common economy.

Today Balázs is primarily known as a writer, which is not entirely unjustified as he began as one of the first ideologists and organizers of the early twenties' (Hungarian) Transylvanian literature headed towards institutionalization; however, after returning home in 1928, he clearly considered the renewal of society much more important. From this point forward his whole literary activity was practically subordinated to his pacifist and utopistic socialist principles according to which development is formed on the basis of cooperative associations, and class conflicts should be resolved through self-development and mutual cooperation. The main character of all of his works is he himself, the educator of the people, the village manager, the community developer. As his friend Imre Mikó – who later became the keeper of his life work and co-author of the monography on Balázs – humorously formulated it: "Ferenc Balázs dedicated his health to community work and his illness to literature" (1975, 32),

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as he mostly wrote when his progressive pulmonary disease kept him in bed. It is perceptible in all of his works that his target audience primarily consisted of young readers who were committed to social changes and who appreciated voluntary activities. He considered the emancipation of villagers through work in cooperative associations to be the only chance for positive social changes, and that is why, for him, peasantry was the foundation of a new society that could live in harmony with nature and with one another.

Although journeys in life story narratives traditionally appear as moments of self-discovery and experience, in Balázs's case it would be wrong to state that all his society developing activities accomplished in the ten years of his active life and all his publicistic and more or less fictional literary works "promoting" these activities solely arose from his theoretical and practical experience acquired abroad. A portion of this (e.g., the emphasis on cooperative associations, pacifism, utopistic socialism) may partially be considered a phenomenon specific to the era, thus it is perceptible in the case of many of Balázs's generation (the so-called second generation). A significant part of the principles that he propagated had actually been crystallized before his journey, consequently the study trip can primarily be interpreted as a process of collecting examples and experience.

In his book entitled *Otthon és haza* [*Home and Homeland*] Nándor Bárdi discusses the characteristic worldview of second generation Transylvanian intellectuals based on three main aspects: the expansion of the concept of nation towards the working class and peasantry, social sensitivity and an increased emphasis on both political and economic self-organization.

> Self-organization and embourgeoisement were central thoughts in their circles, regardless of differences in worldview. The organizers of the Hungarian minority's cooperative movements are among them as well. By the thirties it became clear that national autonomies could be established within the given circumstances. Therefore, developing their own (i.e., Hungarian) social organizations, education system, cooperative movement, education of elites, etc., was brought into prominence in the process of national confinement. They did not conceive national autonomy merely within a legal framework, as given "from above;" combining the notion of the Hungarian alliance with contemporary corporativism, they thought it was possible to establish by means of self-organizing social institutions. (Bárdi 2013, 552)

The ideas of social sensitivity and the urgent need for the economic, cultural and political emancipation of people (in most cases the word refers to the peasantry) were actually present in the literary aesthetic ideology of the Eleven, formulated by Balázs in 1923. The first manifestation of a generation based group in the history of Transylvanian literature, the *Anthology of the Eleven*, gathered

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young authors like Balázs, István Dobai, Zoltán Finta, Géza Jakab, Béla Jancsó, Sándor Kacsó, János Kemény, Albert Maksay, László Mihály, Sándor Szent Iványi and Áron Tamási. The anthology was published in a period when, after the Treaty of Trianon, the institutions of interwar Hungarian literature in Transylvania were not yet established or strengthened, a period called the "heroic age" by Ernő Ligeti in his memoir *Súly alatt a pálma* [*Palm-Tree Grows under Burden*]. A sensitivity to self-organization was shown even by the self-effort and the direct marketing methods of reaching the audience with this generational anthology, an anthology that for many authors represented the frame of their authorial debut.[3] The first article of the anthology is Balázs's piece *Az erdélyi magyar irodalom* [*The Hungarian Literature of Transylvania*], which provides a literary programme. This literary programme clearly promotes Transylvanian, moreover, Szekler literature. Balázs promotes a programme that mythifies the notion of "race," being Szekler and the countryside. The attitude of popular literature and the pragmatical, village oriented, society developing attitude of the Transylvanian youth is emphasized; however, a necessary common sense is present as well: "Transylvanianism in itself, without creative talent is not a value" (Balázs 1923, 16).

From the perspective of literary history, publishing the anthology was not an important momentum; out of its authors, the only one who became an outstanding writer was Áron Tamási, who had already been building his authorial career regardless of the anthology. The author of the related chapter in the monography on Balázs, the contemporary Mikó, does not express appreciation for its literary/aesthetic values either; instead, he discusses its role in bringing the generation together and its function of proclaiming a set of common values in the very period of their emergence.

> Publishing the anthology of the Eleven was by all means the sign of an era. An indisputable merit of the Anthology is that it launched a new generation of Hungarian writers in Romania who – using their audible or less audible voices – promoted a new kind of orientation in the reality of Hungarians from Romania and in the Hungarian literature of Romania. […] They were the ones who took the path which later would be followed by the Hungarian youth of Romania between the two World Wars. (Mikó, Kicsi and Horváth Sz. 1983, 79)

Shortly after publishing the anthology, Balázs travelled to study first to Oxford, then to Berkeley. The opportunity for a foreign study trip is not surprising as many

3 Using Áron Tamási's elaborate lines, the eleven young authors (all men) of the anthology asked the girls they knew to collect subscriptions to the future anthology. The first appeal was published on 22 April 1923, and on 5 July every subscription collector got a second appeal in which they were asked to provide the addresses of their girl acquaintances in order to increase the number of subscription collectors. The operation proved to be successful as the anthology of mostly unknown young authors was sold in 3,200 copies.

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of the Eleven – which can be considered a circle of friends, too – went abroad to study at that time (e.g., Áron Tamási, Albert Maksay, Sándor Szent Iványi, etc.). The monographer Mikó (who also spent two years in Paris), adapting to the political conditions of the time the monography was published, discretely leaves us in the dark regarding how Balázs could study abroad and, more importantly, regarding who financed his trip: "he obtains the two year fellowship of the Oxford Faculty of Unitarian Theology. In autumn, together with his colleague Zsigmond Máthé (who got the fellowship of the Manchester Unitarian College) they are ready to go see the world" (Mikó, Kicsi and Horváth Sz. 1983, 80). It is likely that Balázs was able to travel to England with the help of the Unitarian Church and the financial support of the Hungarian government's finance policy called "Eastern Action." The Hungarian state's "political aids were clearly managed by the Hungarian National Party; the division of the subsidy among the different social, primarily educational institutions was done by the representatives of the historic Hungarian churches through the Interdenominational Council" (Bárdi 2013, 367). This seems to be confirmed by the recollections of Miklós Mester, who worked for the Popular Literature Association as a student, and later, between 1936 and 1949, he was the director of the dorm called Foreigners' College or Szekler Dorm, where the financial aids could be received on the third floor. Balázs's name appears among the figures of the Transylvanian literary and cultural life whom Mester remembered seeing at the dorm (2012, 519).

The years spent in Oxford and Berkeley, his connections to and participation in the local student movements and pacifist movements consolidated and modulated his already powerful intentions of shaping society. (He did not travel eastward only on his own initiative; he was delegated by the World Peace Preparatory Congress, travelled to China, Japan, India and finally back to Kolozsvár.)

As we can see in his correspondence with Christine Frederiksen and in the related chapters of *Travelling All Over the World*, he was not shaped by random experiences, he was deliberately looking for relevant information adaptable to the circumstances in Transylvania. As an Oxford student he believed that the point of the Cooperative Society was to form small producer communities and produce goods depending on their own needs. He considered "England's one-sided industrialization" (Balázs 1975, 67) and the fact that he saw no sign of cooperative tendencies in the economy of the United States of America alarming.

In 1927, when travelling eastward he started his journey towards home, he shaped his itinerary based on his interest in cooperative associations and self-supporting economic models. During the journey he visited (in their own homes/schools) three of the most important political/economic/philosophical thinkers of the contemporary Japan and India.

Toyohiko Kagawa (1888–1960) was a Christian reformer, pacifist and labour activist who, among others, worked in the squatter areas around Kobe as a social

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worker and sociologist. Balázs did not merely make him a respectful courtesy visit, but he spent several days at his school and accompanied him to some of his lecture tours; moreover, he also performed at these lectures. Thus, he got direct information on the cooperative associations established by Kagawa in the early twenties as a demonstration of the theorems of his book, *Brotherhood Economics*. According to the correspondence, Balázs was mainly impressed by Kagawa's energetic, colourful lecturing style and the persuation based on visual demonstration, a practice used by him one year later when he held lectures for young villagers around Székelykeresztúr. As Balázs puts it in his letter to his fiancée written on 21 November 1927 in Hanamatsu, Kagawa

> is one of the best speakers I have ever heard, he uses American methods like demonstration. He shows different statistical or other types of boards to his audience. He draws or writes on huge white sheets of paper using a paint-brush dipped in Indian ink. […] When, due to his realistic method, the audience identifies with the situation, his smile disappears, serious words are used, a conclusion or invocation follows. (n.y., n. p.)

When he was in India, he visited Rabindranath Tagore and Mahatma Ghandi, the two most important political/cultural figures of the "modern" India then struggling for independence. He immediately reported on both encounters to his fiancée, and later he wrote detailed portrayals of both using his diary entries. (These appear on the pages of *Travelling All Over the World* and in a separate article published in *Erdélyi Helikon*.) It is worth emphasizing that out of all his experiences in India, he found the natural teaching method of Tagore's Shantiniketan ashram and his village development site, Shriniketan, to be the most exciting experiences:

> However, I was much more interested in Tagore's village development site Shriniketan than in the school. When I found out that the poet, thinker, master of the art of living Tagore didn't forget about the thing most poets, thinkers and masters of the art of living don't even find out, my joy was infinite. […] He does not make reproaches to the government about letting the village perish, he does not recite allocutions to society about saving the village because the village is India, and if it perishes, India perishes. He is not satisfied by establishing schools where attendees can learn about protecting the people. He himself joins the workers. He has to show the opportunities of a more human life to the 10–12 villages in the neighbourhood of his site. He immediately sets up a hospital and employs paid doctors. He provides free medication. He organizes the youth of the villages, he makes them burn down the reeds where the nests of the disease-spreading mosquitos are, he makes

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> them clean the water pools. He launches spinning and weaving courses. And, in order to educate the villagers regarding economics, he complements the site with a poultry farm, a dairy-farm, an olericulture garden, a fruit garden and a workshop for processing leather. He employs professionals to manage these, to give the necessary instructions to the villagers and to train people for carrying out an even wider range of work. (Balázs, 2002, 243)

After going back to Transylvania, Balázs wanted to get a parsonage and begin his community service mission as soon as possible, but instead he got a supervisor job in the dorm of the college from Székelykeresztúr. At first on his own, then by recruiting helpers among the young villagers, between November 1929 and March 1930 he visited one hundred villages and held one hundred and sixty lectures using projected images (Mikó, Kicsi and Horváth Sz. 1983, 118). His lectures consisted of presenting and explaining seven series of pictures. The locations seen by Balázs during his trips were among these (e.g. Fabulous India, New York, etc.), but he also held general educational lectures on apiculture, agriculture, glass-making, etc. After becoming enthusiastic over the success of his lectures, together with some of his friends, he organized a one-week training course, first for the young villagers around Keresztúr, then for those who lived along the river Homoród. Beside Balázs, the lectures were held by young Unitarian ministers, highschool teachers and a doctor; the audience was of approximately two hundred people.

Based on the reports about his lectures and the Youth Days organized by him in the summer of 1930 in Kobátfalva, Siménfalva and Kissolymos (these reports can be found on the pages of *Under the Clod*, as well as in the magazines *Kévekötés* or *Erdélyi Fiatalok*), we get a picture similar to that of Kagawa's lectures or Tagore's ashram from Shantiniketan. Now the person drawing on huge sheets of paper was Balázs himself:

> More than two hundred young people from 20 villages came to the assembly. In one of the classrooms of the highschool, I wrote the main thought of the assembly with ornate letters on a sheet of wrapping paper: What is required for the realization of God's Kingdom? Below it I numbered the building blocks in order: 1. Sound body. 2. Sound mind. 3. Well-being. 4. Beauty. 5. Knowledge. 6. Love 7. Religiosity. (Balázs 1975, 243)

It is worth noting how these needs were ranked like in a type of Maslow-pyramid, beginning from physical and mental health and economic well-being to religiosity. It is also important to point out that during these trainings, as part of educating people to live healthy lives, he also provided sex education to girls and to boys separately, which was a pioneer effort in his time. The importance of

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hygiene, health and other types of education, respectively the consequences of their lack are demonstrated in Balázs's letters from Mészkő written to his wife in America and in his wife's memoir, *Alabaster Village*. The latter gives a shocking image of the physical and psychical misery considered natural by the villagers, a misery primarily salient in the lives of infants and women, as well as in the extremely high infant mortality rates.

In order to clarify why I call Balázs a utopist with common sense, we should compare his unconventional village monography to his wife's book entitled *Alabaster Village. Our Years in Transylvania* (Morgan 1997). If *Under the Clod* is a self-discovery novel with sociographic descriptions, *Alabaster Village* is a memoir written with anthropological accuracy. While the former is not concerned with the reality of the actual world, but with what it is supposed to become, the latter focuses on individual human fates. *Alabaster Village* is a story based on the letters Christine sent home to America during her years spent in Romania (the period approximately overlaps with the years of her marriage with Balázs). While she includes in her work plenty of paraphrases and quotes from the letters, she sometimes adds short comments to them (e.g., she reports on the subsequent fates of certain characters, she complements the parts where her opinion changed regarding the problem in question, etc.).

The idea of writing a book practically first arose at the time of writing the letters. One of the addressees, Lucy Morgan, who visited Christine and Ferenc Balázs in Mészkő (accompanied by her husband Arthur Morgan, director of Antioch College) and thus knew the location and the obstacles of their activity, already recommended the publication of Christine's letters in 1933. However, the idea could not be put into practice due to their concern about possible political retaliations. Nevertheless, we cannot exclude the possibility that Christine already had the publication of a book in mind as she was writing her extremely detailed letters rich in precise descriptions based on a wide range of information. (Some general reports on their life and work in Mészkő were published in different Quaker and Unitarian magazines, mostly with the intention of obtaining financial support or reporting on how they had used previous aids.)

Even though Mészkő becomes the main location of both *Alabaster Village* and *Under the Clod*, the outsider does not only face the otherness of village society and life; the circle in which Christine Frederiksen and – in a different way and to a different degree – Balázs participate as outsiders is much broader. They are people with strong identities, concrete visions and conceptual backgrounds, who see things according to their worldviews, while their introspections are never autotelic, they are always motivated by the intention of changing things for the better. Balázs and Christine Frederiksen were idealist society reformers who were horrified by the "barbarity" of the culture unknown to them and who did everything in their power to create "more human" conditions. In many cases,

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these were indeed vital assignments in which they took over the role of the non-existent social network (e.g., sanitary arrangements, infant care, cultural and art education, economic changes favouring the transition to cooperative associations, etc.). They both considered folk art and some elements of popular culture extremely important (e.g., Balázs put great effort into convincing the villagers to preserve their church in its traditional form); however, they were not at all susceptible to the portion of popular culture related to popular beliefs and superstitions, thus, in the name of "modernity" they despised and fought against its manifestations.

Balázs was a utopist with common sense, in fact, he was not interested in the actual Mészkő, but in "the valley of God," i.e., the village it could become after the necessary changes. In order to achieve this, he desperately tried to induce changes, mostly at a rate neither he nor people around him could keep up with. Christine Frederiksen's attitude was more pragmatical, she planned to achieve long term changes at a slower rate; at the same time she was much more open to a two-way communication, to investigate the community's own self-proclaimed needs.

Aside from personal/authorial attitudes, the reason for this must be that Christine appeared as a stranger in the village, without any clerical status that could have entitled her to take a leading position, thus her relationship and communication with the villagers was multi-dimensional, and it facilitated a process of mutual learning. The formula is more complicated than in the case of the young minister who was engaged in serving and educating the community. The women working in the household gave directions to the inexperienced wife of the minister regarding the customs of the village and the local conditions; they taught her the trickeries of gardening and managing a household, which must have seemed rather primitive compared to the American practices she had been familiar with. In exchange for the information regarding these practices (usually improved or worn out by consecutive generations) she provided up-to-date knowledge about anything they were interested in, from infant care to dairy-farming, based on modern sources like Encyclopaedia Britannica. She usually faced difficulties due to the lack of proper conditions needed in order to perform these activities according to modern, scientific knowledge, thus, most of their innovations could not be used by the villagers. The crafts and cultural activities, lectures and reports based on personal interactions and sharing experiences (which are much closer to ancient forms of communication and obtaining information) proved to be much more successful.

In *Alabaster Village* we find a complicated interplay of fitting in and being an outsider, of passive observation and active participation, of identity and alterity. We get an authentic picture of what Balázs called a "beautiful apostolic life" in *Under the Clod* (1936, 286).

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