The Space Concepts as Intercultural Experience in Contemporary Hungarian Prose

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Abstract. In recent years a number of contemporary Hungarian prose writings have appeared in which the visualization of the interlinguistic and intercultural experience plays a highly significant role. In the prose writings which come into existence in the intercultural border-space, a heterogeneity of the cultural space unfolds. The estrangement from the narratives of self-culture and the recurrence to these give way to another culture. This phenomenon can be analysed in the short story volume by Gábor Vida, *Not free and not royal* [*Nem szabad és nem királyi*].

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In recent years a number of contemporary Hungarian prose works of art (novels, short stories, collections of narratives, etc.) have appeared in which the visualization of interlinguistic and intercultural experience acquires a highly significant role, occasionally a thematized, reflective one. Because of the prose-poetical use and actuation of different linguistic, cultural and religious registers, the matter of alterity/alienage becomes determinative and determinable. The cultural and geopoetical definiteness of these registers denotes the existence of a geopoetical notion of space which is a relatively restricted but removable space structure because of the relativity of the borders. In the prose writings which were born in the intercultural border-space and which use intercultural experiences, the heterogeneity of the cultural space unfolds, hence the estrangement from the

narratives of self-culture and then the recurrence to describe it a new culture (cf. N. Kovács 1999, 10): in the interference of the "aliens" and the "indigenous people" the notion of difference appears, the portrait of the Other manifests, which as a prerequisite of an experience, expands the discursive space as a spacebuilding momentum (see also Faragó 2001, 10).

I am interested in spatiality not as a material (objective) entity but as a generative (creative) one, following Merleau-Ponty's idea: "space is not such a medium in which things get arranged, but a medium through which things get arranged" (qtd in Faragó 2001, 7-8). I mention as examples the prose writings of Ádám Bodor, Zsolt Láng as well as the writings of some post-Bodorian authors belonging to the "Sinistra-space" like György Dragomán, Sándor Zsigmond Papp, Gábor Vida. In these writings – after the perambulation of the performing figures read from the so called name-maps – the ideas of identity generated in the intercultural space and moved by the associated spaces, the relations constituted by the space and the spatialization of the relations become elucidated. The different texts of the above-mentioned writers are related by their spatial embedment, spatial dependence and the spatial conception, which comes into existence in the language. On the border of different languages and cultures, in the prose texts which are constructed interculturally – through the matter of appellation, reticence, alterity/alienage – the spatial embedment and therefore the hardly determinable border-identity become elucidated. Focusing on this aspect the border-situation and the duality of the analyzed literary texts become visible, because the geographical names emerged from the prose texts generate such a name-map which makes their reading referenceable, but at the same time these texts emphasize their literary mediality, their born-in-language status all through.

Our proper space concept is part of the intercultural cognitional tissue, through which we approach the "self"-culture from a different point of view, from a different cultural mediator role. Turning towards the *alien*, the possibility of *translation* leads to the stripping of the till then evident borders, to the experience of alienage and urges us to face it. The (problematic and ambiguous) identity building is helped by the considerable contribution of the processing of the experience of alienage. "Because self-recognition, as self-recognition, in itself, without the involvement of the other is impossible, that is why the experience of alienage is the only way to self-recognition" – István Fehér M. claims in his study entitled *The experience of alienage as the way and the medium of self-recognition* [*Idegenségtapasztalat mint az önmegismerés útja és közege*] (2003, 13).

The above interpretation of translation can be completed with Stuart Hall's meaning rendering of "translation," which "illustrate[s] those identity constructions, which bisect and intercept the natural borders, and which refer to people who *dispersed* forever from their homeland. (…) People who belong *to this kind of cultures of hybridity* have to give up their dreams or hopes to restore the

'lost' cultural purity or ethnic absolutism. *They are* irrevocably *translated*" [ellipsis in the original] (Hall 1997, 77). As Stuart Hall remarks, quoting Salman Rushdie, the English word "translation" etymologically comes from the Latin "transfer," so on the basis of the above-mentioned characteristics the figures have a figurative, converse identity.

The eternal-being-on-the-road existence of the characters of the Sinistra-prose and their shifts also belong here, alluding to the "inner" movements of the prose correlated to the "outer" movements, bringing in the experience of alterity/alienage which manifests itself in the perpetual foreign-language existence, in space concepts and in name-maps. The doubtfulness of the original place of the journey-narratives, the absence of a starting point may result in a home-existence rooted in the continuous experience of alienage. This alterity/alienage-experience is also the effect of the border-existence, which results in a permanent liminality, inter-spatiability articulated as the metaphor of being on the road.

The reticence as well as the forgotten, incommunicable but at times existent liminal cultural narratives contribute to the problematic definition of identity. That is why the language used by the characters of novels and short stories becomes problematic too. In the text a spatial and linguistic experience of inter-spoken languages comes into being. But it cannot be told what language the speakers of the Sinistra-district (or the speakers of the Dragomán- and Papp-prose) use, because there is no textual allusion to it, so the name-map is also predominated by their "mixed" and liminal entity. The mixture of the (spoken) languages, the thematization of multilingualism presupposes an interlinguistic and intercultural existence, and this urges – "constrains" – the reader to use a multilingual and polyphonic – in this way open and ambiguous – reading strategy assuming the linguistic, more precisely, the cultural-linguistic knowledge of the geocultural space.

The discourses of the creators of the Sinistra-space depend on the mutual relation provided by the system: seemingly they speak the same language, the "power and the dependant" use the same textual code – with few discrepancies: here belong the ironical remarks and the denial to speak. The linguistic variants can be caught out in their inter- and liminal-entity. In the cultural inter-liminality cultures do not show themselves separately, even though on the basis of the name conglomerate and of textual signs there may be hypothesized a common, inter-liminal notion of space with its cultural, historical, anthropological aspects, being the traces of a latent interwovenness of different cultural effects, of a so-called *side by side* existence. The language of the ones who speak in the texts can be circumscribed "only" on the levels of liminal existence and interlingualism, without exact information and "final report." As Maurice Merleau-Ponty says in a somewhat radical drafting, "the idea of *absolute* expressibleness is nonsense, every

language is indirect or indicative, or if you like, mute silence."[1] If we look for the "original language" of the texts, we can pertain to their referential existence, that is why I find it possible to point out the liminal-entity and the perpetual "rendition-existence." The journey-existences between the temporary spaces form an abstract space conception, a border-existence determined by liminality.

Gábor Vida's prose – beyond the demonstrable uniquenesses and the manifested prose-poetical methods which characterize only his prose – can be elucidated by using geopoetic viewpoints too. In Vida's short stories (Vida 2007) it is easy to observe the mixing and blending of different cultures, traditions, cultural traditions: a triple – guerilla fighter anti-dictatorship anti-redemption – story projected on the biblical Peter-narrative (*Before the rooster* … [*Mielőtt a kakas* …]), or the appearance of an anti-Jesus in the text opening the volume, urging for departure (*Get up and walk!* [*Kelj fel és járj!*]), and I could enumerate the other examples too. In the same way the different ethnic groups and their traditions, languages, customs, rites and stereotypes are blended (see also Vida 2005). The spaces manifested in various texts are structured in the same way: the named or unnamed spaces can be hedged in and identified according to the expectations of referential readers,[2] at the same time, due to the carefully placed markers, their relativity, spaciousness and unlimitedness becomes determinant – just like in the writings of Ádám Bodor, György Dragomán, Zsolt Láng, and Sándor Zsigmond Papp.

Space(-time)

The main space of the vast majority of the short stories of Gábor Vida's *Not Free and not Royal* [*Nem szabad és nem királyi*] is the central square of a not free and not royal (little) town, which is just as much defined by the building of the New York Hotel Restaurant (as well as the Thermal Pension Spa and least by the world-famous secondary school) as the existence and movement of the "transhuming" aliens and the indigenous people or the constant/variable actors: the relations defined by the space and the spatiability of the relations.

We do not know the exact coordinates of the place, there is not even an outer viewpoint based on which we could locate or describe it, because the shift of space becomes the stake just like in the *stream of consciousness* of a shepherd: "For him [for the shepherd – É. B.] the road is not speech, not geography, not even

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[1] "If we put out of our head the idea of the *original text*, whose translation our language is, or it could be its encoded version, we can admit that the *absolute expressibleness* is nonsense, every language is indirect or indicative, or if you like, mute silence." [italics in original] (Merleau-Ponty 1997, 145)

[2] Without enumerating every toponym (some of them are very frequent): the Kelemen havasok (Kelemen-mountains, Munţii Călimani), the Radnai havasok (Radnai-mountains, Munţii Rodnei), Nagyszeben (Sibiu), Brassó (Braşov), Marosvásárhely (Târgu-Mureş), Szászrégen (Reghin), Moldva (Moldova), Bucovina, Temesvár (Timişoara), Zsombolya (Jimbolia), etc.

ethnographic argumentation, but life, millions of steps, and the concern to leave, from here to there, and sometimes he wonders what on earth this town is doing right in front of the sheep's road? Is he going anywhere?" (*The beginning of a spring story* [*Egy tavaszi történet eleje*]) (Vida 2007, 192). The narrator, chronicler consistently uses first-person plural form – "our town" – to describe this space-lost space being in a continuous spatial and on-the-way movement. In another short story, beyond the horizontal movement, a space-determining, security-giving building piece sets off vertically upwards, confronting the population with a fathomless riddle and mystery, a (post-)magical, unprocessable trauma (*Ascendent tower* [*Torony emelkedőben*]).

The "catching" smell-attribution as well as the ever-recurring chief waiter and his assistant, or the checkroom attendant, Ánizs are all the identity-determinatives of (one of) the main bulding(s) of the central square: "The inner space of the New York – long ago way too elegant, now ragged – is floating in the lights of yellow lamps, the cigarette smoke is thick but still fragrant and warm, the sourish flavour of the mulled wine crawls out from the kitchen, cinnamon, clove and another unidentified spice, just as if it was winter, and so it is, time or its prosaic counterpart the weather dictates everything and not the calendar" (*The beginning of a spring story*) (Vida 2007, 205-206). This area, constituted by the short stories enclosed in the volume, is not free and not royal, it is closed and dominated, but at the same time really loose, ethereal, sad and sublime. They evoke a rare tradition, the past, a space-image which lives only at times vitalized by "the edge of the collective recollection:" then with the same elegant and resigned movement they disassemble it (*The relic* [*Az ereklye*]) (Vida 2007, 124).

Not even the time definition gives a precise guideline. In the same short story time-frames evoking and presuming the Monarchy, dusty, stoned roads, traffic with horses and carts, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the computer science as a moneyed profession are mentioned. The stories from the period of the two World Wars represent the wings, but the not bygone totalitarian world is also being formed, at times in a jungle and guerilla environment. The only precise time definition[3] seems to be the indicator of timelessness formula: "time progresses only in ourselves" (*Get up and walk!*) (Vida 2007, 9), as well as the dripping eaves, the size and the shape of the icicles, which also show the break in time and spirit.

Although at first reading it seems that the Vida-stories are two-edged: on the one hand, the (little) town spaces and, on the other hand, the natural spaces, but these spaces/places – thanks to their attributes – are always slurred: nature is enmeshed by men, the town is manoeuvred by natural (sometimes supernatural) powers. The vision of the first short story brings an extra-spatial, apocalyptic experience: "At the swinging rope-bridge beyond the waterfall the human existence

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[3] Except the short story entitled *King of the shepherds* [*A pásztorok királya*].

ends" (*Get up and walk!*) (Vida 2007, 13), the sound of the cascading water filters the noise of civilization (for example, the train noise), but at the same time the values and the cultural, religious determination are not influenced by the natural barrage: with the mountain climbing people the indelible mentality infiltrates. Vida's space concept is a bourne along the nature and the culturally encoded "civilization" which can be traced with wan and dashed lines.

The mountain is a wild, unapproachable, inaccessible region, the people living there or even the tourists may "touch" it with great humbleness and obeying the rules of nature, but it is still more honest and open than the human society: "Such are these mountains that whatever happens even in the most hidden canyons people get to know it immediately" (*Get up and walk!*) (Vida 2007, 14), in contrast with those short stories which mainly illustrate (sometimes a bit didactically) a totalitarian social system with a spatial- societal- world- and human-image (*Jack Daniel's, There was a woman in it* [*Nő volt a dologban*]*, King of the shepherds* [*A pásztorok királya*]*, Before the rooster…*). The adventurer may get initiated into the mountain region, even if many times he has to take part in infernal games and is at the mercy of (super)natural powers and of the landscape becoming anthropomorphous:[4] "There is something scary in the heavy snowing, when the space dissolves in a single whiteness, and without certain contours the man feels that this mountain is up to anything" (*Initiation* [*Beavatás*]) (Vida 2007, 34); "The man battles with the elements and gets nowhere" (*Initiation*) (Vida 2007, 35); but the elevation of the tower cannot be stopped by anybody/anything, and the prognostication-like space-criticism – "The composition is wrong somewhere" (*Ascendent tower*) (Vida 2007, 53) – pays off: on the one hand, the alteration of space-structure (unexplainable and magical) strips the tranquility of the town; on the other hand, the designer of the change – because of the subtleness and indelibleness of cultural tradition – projects (not in this way, for sure) a totally similar tower as the main representative of the "new" space/square. Previously "he thought, that changing only just a buliding or a facade would decisively affect the image, that the great predecessors did not make a mistake with the central square, they just shifted the perfection and the accomplishment, leaving a mystery for the successors. The one who finds that point of which irrelevant but influential modification would repair everything, that would find the meaning of the square together with the meaning of the city" (*Ascendent tower*) (Vida 2007, 49). Artúr Horgas got the opportunity for a change in vain, because he cannot "repair" the square/space, that does not obey either, just like the mountain. Furthermore, the change is impeded due to the fact that the city center is doted with tasteless,

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[4] "The snowy peaks emerging from the marching clouds look at me startlingly, but cannot see me. This is the country of the dead, and it is not sure that I am the one who lives." (*Initiation* [*Beavatás*]) (Vida 2007, 39)

ostentatious "way too much secession, fake monumentality, kitschy ornaments," which is a "curiosity for the tourists and the homesick emigrants." "Maybe the spirit of this place is like this – he once thought – that in every gorgeous creation and also in our vision and thinking there is mixed some wrong and bad. We feel that something is wrong, but we cannot find its place" (*Ascendent tower*) (Vida 2007, 50).

The only short story describable with precise chronotopic coordinates is *King of the shepherds*: on one of the glades of the Kelemen-mountains there is the place called "La Elicopter," when the weather is clear one can see the Nagyhagymás-peak, the Radnai-mountains, but the towers of Szászrégen [Reghin] and Marosvásárhely Târgu Mureş] are also visible (*King of the shepherds*) (Vida 2007, 209). The "La Elicopter" "is a very recent name of the place, that is why it does not figure on any accessible maps. It is not even indicated on the forestry-maps, although those include every gullet, hole, bigger rock or fallen out tree. It is rumoured that the triangular stone which is also visible on the snapshots made from considerable heights, and contrasts with the green of the flora and the dark grey colour of the trachit composed mountains, is unmarked even on the military-maps. But who has ever seen such airborne snapshots?" (*King of the shepherds*) (Vida 2007, 210). The well-known but reticenced name presumes the existence of the place/space, but the upcoming interogative sentence questions its officiality (but not its authenticity). We can minutely follow the action, the dictatorial precipitation and destruction of medieval tradition, but the spatial "traces" can be found even today, to find the place we have to defeat the cultural codes: the consistent human reticence (namely, today's shepherds) rather than assuring the frames of hiding in the nature, "but it is better to avoid that place, there is nothing interesting at all and it is not getting in the way either" (*King of the shepherds*) (Vida 2007, 234). Vida's space concept composes, shapes, forms a region-image in a way that it enlarges the contours of border-stories and de-regionalizes the space-map.

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