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An East-Central European Success Story György Dragomán's *The White King*

Éva BÁNYAI

University of Bucharest
Department of Hungarology
banyaieva@gordias.ro

Abstract. One of the narratives determined by "the common East-European misery" is György Dragomán's novel entitled *A fehér király* [*The White King*], published in 2005. The stream of events—told by a child narrator and defined also by the alterity/alienage-image—reflects not only the general tendencies of communism-stories, but also their overall effects. Dragomán follows the relativizing prose-poetic technique used by Ádám Bodor: he mixes referenceable, decodable elements in the prose-texture for a later diversion away from them. The open, loose end writing technique and the delay of identificative acts indicate Bodor's prosepoetical procedures. Even the speakers' language is questionable for us (as well as the speakers' language in the Bodor-prose): the multiethnic location implies a mixture of language. The name database familiar from the Bodor-prose also has a space-building function: the names outline the space, which, in its turn, delimits the events.

Keywords: Hungarian literature, alterity/alianege-image, borderline-identity, "the common Est-European misery"

The mainstream of the last decades' ways of expression and prose is constituted by the narratives on "the common East-European misery" and on its identity. They also tackle issues related to the alterity/alienage-image. One of the most representative survival-stories generated by fear and defenselessness is György Dragomán's novel entitled *A fehér király* [*The White King*]. During the last decades many novels, narratives, short stories were written which—directly or

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indirectly—try to explain the nature of the dictatorship. Although *The White King* can be related to this intent, it is not an epoch-document, but more of an attempt to explain *documents* left in torso, encrusted in language, waiting to be ravelled.

György Dragomán appoints an eleven-twelve year-old child, nicknamed Dzsátá (Djata) as the narrator of the novel, who—according to the chronotopic coordinates of the novel and identified in conformity with the hints of the context—could have even been the author or any of us who witnessed and watched the dictatorship in the Romania of the eighties (more widely: Eastern and Central Europe) *from below*. I am not an exception either: during my first reading I was "haunted" by the "it is like all of this happened to me"—Ádám Bodor-like feeling (Bodor, *Az érsek* 49).

The traceable effects of the Bodor-texts on the Dragomán-prose are not present only through the "life-sensation", we will see in the following some of the elements of the Bodor-effect, which can be found in *The White King*—the successful[1] novel of the first representative of the post-bodorian triade: György Dragomán, Zsigmond Sándor Papp and Gábor Vida.

(Chronotopos)

The concrete space of *The White King* is marked by a single toponymy: the Danube Channel, where the narrator's father is hauled after being arrested—the moment of the arrest defines the action and time of the novel, everything is correlated to it and conditioned by it. The anthroponyms populating and constructing the space and the Romanian denominations of the articles of personal use—similar to the Ádám Bodor and Sándor Zsigmond Papp prose—lead us to the conclusion that the action takes place in a middle-sized city in Romania inhabited also by Hungarians.[2] Some critics of Dragomán found his biography definitory rather on the road of approaching his novel, than explaining it. Csaba Károlyi—in comparison with the novel *Isten hozott* by Krisztián Grecsó—states that "Both novels cover autobiographic elements even if we take into consideration the age and life-story of the main characters and authors. . . . Dragomán left his hometown (Marosvásárhely, Târgu Mureş) at the age of 15 and had to go far away to Szombathely to finally settle down in Budapest. . . . However, neither of the texts assert auto-biographicality" (Károlyi 95–97). István Csuhai stands on a similar position: "For a better understanding of the book, it is useful to know that the author and his family left Transylvania to settle down in Hungary in 1988 when he was 15 years old" (Csuhai 25).

[1] The *A fehér király* novel was translated into 28 languages by November 2008.

[2] The usage of the expression "brant" (devil, hell) and some other elements could suggest Marosvásárhely (Târgu-Mureş), but I do not consider it relevant.

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Dragomán is also following Bodor's relativizing prose-poetical technique: he mixes referenceable, decodable and translatable elements in his prose-texture, so that he can visibly differentiate from these by relativizing and devalorificating them. The early critics of *The White King* highlight the topographic localizability and abstractability:

> [T]he first-person singular narration of growing up is situated in the Romania of the eighties, although paradoxically we can barely find any reference to a somewhat concrete political-historical corres-pondence with that period. . . . [These narrations of growing up] relate about defencelessness through a Kaffka-universality making it impossible to associate with only one Romanian location. These characteristics and situations, as we can easily admit, could have occured anywhere in the region of Eastern-Europe—perhaps with some chronological delay. (Csuhai 25)

Ferenc Takács also delimits the chronotopos in order to open up to wider dimensions throughout his analysis: "Yes, it is obvious that we are in Ceauşescu's Romania, in its particularly miserable and cruel ending, the eighties" (Takács 118). "The text of the *A fehér király* does not give obvious information regarding where the action takes place, at least I did not find any. A Romanian town inhabited also by Hungarians can be the spot, the characters are both of Hungarian and Romanian ethnicity. Flats, flowerbeds, ordeal and the fear of cutting off electricity during movie-projection in the cinema"—writes Csaba Károlyi, then comparing it with Krisztián Grecsó's novel, he states: "Grecsó brings the world of the lowland village, while Dragomán the world of the Transylvanian city" (Károlyi 96).

The temporalization, the chronology is defined by the repetitive evoking of the moment of the father's deportation. "Back then it had already been six months since we saw our father, he was supposed to be gone only for a week, on a very important business near the seaside, in a research plant—when he said goodbye, he told me how sorry he was that he could not take me along" (8)—as the narrator communicates us in the first chapter, without specifying the exact moment when his father was taken by a van full of grey-coated agents. The duration of the action is one and a half year: it starts on the 17th of April—on the day of the parents' wedding anniversary—with the stealing of some tulips, about half year after the father had been hauled and ends with the funeral of the grandfather, when the father "had already been away at the Danube Channel for more than two years" (280). In almost every chapter we can find reference about how many months had passed since the narrator had seen his father.

Whilst the relatively easily identifiable events which help the definition of time seem authentic (the radiations from the Soviet Union's Chernobyl had probably taken place when the time of the novel suggests it), at the supposed place

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and time (in Romania, a few years before the eighties) there had not been any civil wars or partisan movements—with these deliberate delays, with the *out of place events* the text relativizes the referencial indications and itself. This also empowers the supposition that the survival-stories of these borderline-communities determined by defencelessness and fear can be abstracted from the tight chronotopos: they can happen anytime, anywhere and to anybody.

(Lack of) structure

The White King—following the structure of Ádám Bodor's *Sinistra District*—is a frame-novel composed of texts which could also function as independent short stories, the frame is a constituting part of what it contains: the disappearance, the reappearance and the re-disappearance of the father bonds the action into a frame. The absence and the replacement of the father and the desire to fulfill his absence determine the text and the narrative. "I remember my father's face clearly: it was unshaven, smelled like cigarettes, seemed extremely tired, it had a half-sided smile. I thought a lot about it, but I am not sure he knew he was not coming back any time soon" (10)—remembers the narrator the departure of his father. The visualisation of departure in the text leads us to the conclusion that there is a multi-angled, implicit intertextual connection (Genette) between Dragomán's and Bodor's narration. The "father-hauling" story told by Füles, the child narrator of the *Az Eufrátesz Babilonnál* [*The Euphrates at Babylon*] novel, starts like this: "On that very day, when I last saw my father, because three men sat him in a car and drove him away, I grasped the breast of Andrea Nopritz. . . . On that afternoon I arrived home somewhat later, because I traded my pencil-sharpener for a coloured imprint" (Bodor, *Eufrátesz* 7) in consonance with Djata's words: ". . . and I also remembered that goodbye a lot of times, when I last saw him, my father's colleagues came after him in a grey van, I had just got home from school, when they took off, if our last class, biology, had not been cancelled I would not even have met them" (8).

The novel sets off with the theft of tulips at dawn, following the father's legacy, the child ("I thought of dad and that he must have been doing it somehow like this every year") decimates the tulip stock of the near little park, so that they celebrate in this way the wedding anniversary with his mother left alone. The events planned to the last detail, are intensified by the appearence of the secret service agents: in this moment it becomes clear to the child-narrator that his father had not departed towards a research plant at the seaside with his "colleagues" six months ago, as he thought, (or as he was told), but that he was hauled to dig at the Danube Channel due to his guerilla organizations against the political system. The scene, with its brutality, advances the basic tone of the phrasing which becomes

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definitory further on. One of the agents "ethically" enlightens the narrator's mother that holding back the truth from the child

> was a mistake, because he will find out sooner or later; it is better to overcome such cases as soon as possible, because lies only give birth to lies, and then the mother burst into laughter, and said, yes, you are truly the friends of truth, and after that the shorter one told her to shut her mouth, and mom really became silent. The grizzled turned towards me and asked if I still thought that they were the colleagues of my father, and I remained silent, but I felt my body going cold like after gym class after an examination running, when you have to lean forward in order to be able to breathe. The grizzled smiled at me and said they were not the colleagues of my father, but they were from the internal-security service and that my father was in arrest for taking part in anti-statal organization so I was not going to see him for a while, because he shovels at the Danube Channel; and if I knew what that meant, that he was in a labor camp, and as weak as he was he was not going to resist too long and was never going to come back. It was possible that he was already dead, and as the agent said this, my mother grabbed the cup from the table and smashed it to the ground, so that the agent stopped talking and for a moment there was silence. (16)

The first chapter contains all the patterns which will develop and evolve further on in the novel: the very determinant missing of the father, the reason for this, the defined roles for replacing him, the family-lies and system-lies, the brutality, the verbal and physical agression, the fear, the defencelessness, the interdependence.

The buildup of the novel makes the structure open in the same way as in its precursor's novel, the *Sinistra District*: the action evolves from the independent short stories put in a relatively chronological order. The short stories start in medias res: the narrator as well as the reader find themselves in a ready situation, but the *situation* remains open at the end of the short story too, we do not find out how the yarn ends. At first the narrator signals something, then he goes on with a long, continuous description of the endless pieces of the story, gradually introducing to us the premises of the events. The lower case subtitles (tulips, the jump, end of the world, pickaxe, music, numbers, valve etc.) of the chapters that can be read also independently, are compact, condensed allusions to their contents.

(I/Self-narration)

All the events regarding the narrator and everything around him are built up in a long monologue. The fragmentation of the monologue and the episodes, the

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translation, conversion of the dialogues are part of the novel's structure. We witness a downward-upward motion of the camera, the focusing and narrowing changes according to the child's perspective. The dialogues appear also in the child's interpretation, a translation imitating the original one. The narrator uses indirect speech—this way especially the parts referring to himself become humorous, ironic. This definitely requires a retrospective point of view—a heterogenous one: the narrator's identity becomes heterogenous by mixing the wisdom of (an) the adult and the posterior explanation of (self) irony into the presumed homogenous perspective. The point of view changes also within a chapter: tulip-stealing seems to happen simultaneously with the action itself, the father's hauling is nested in here, as a retrospection from an earlier event which determines the action and the structure of the novel. At the moment of the narration the story-teller is aware of what happens later, but he pretends not to know: placing himself back at somewhere in late autumn, when his father was taken.

The narrator tells the story for the pleasure of the narration, hoping to understand and making himself heard, jabbering, proving his *own truth* (". . . really"), he starts the sentences with "so" repeatedly, followed by the development of the previous theme ("It all started with . . ."). The development would naturally involve the explanation, the ending, but this does not happen: the tension is not dissolving, and we do not find out what were the agents looking for (who "just happen to pass by, and since they were there, they thought that they would look around a little bit to see if they can find something in the doctor's room" (17)). Furthermore, it also remains a mystery what happened to the children who lost the money of the class on slot machines and planned to pretend to be sick the following day:

> We knew perfectly that if we did not got sick by the next day, then we were dead, at school the others would beat us to death because by that time it would be clear that we accidentally lost the class-money—which should have been spent on flags and placards for the pageantry on the 1st of May—on slot machines, in the basement of the Puppet theater, because Feri made us believe that on those machines every third player automatically would win. (22–23)

The open, loose-end writing technique and the delay of identificative acts indicate Bodor's prose-poetical procedures. There are many other things left unclear: whether the junior football match between the Vörös Kalapács (The Red Hammer) and the Áttörés (Breakthrough) teams did take place, what did they (the author and his mother) sell on the Sunday flea market, in order to raise money for the search of the father, how did the gold-digging end etc. The openness of the action segments results in the unfinishability of the *main story*: according to the sequences of the ending scene (the child running after the police-van with his

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father in it) the story and the world interpretation do not come to an end either, all of this is an endless running in the hope of survival.

The *image* of the self-narration, Djata, is not shown by the text, his face glitters before the confrontations. First he sees the reflection of his own face in the golden ring of Vasököl (Iron Fist), the geography teacher:

> . . . and, in the meantime, Vasököl took his hand out, and there were no brass knuckles on it, but he was holding something, we could not see what, then he held out his fist in front of me, he wore a very wide golden ring I could see the reflection of my face and then he asked if I could guess what he was holding, but by then I was so scared that even if I could do so, I would have been too afraid to speak out . . . (94)

He does not want to lose on purpose due to his respect for sports and the impossibility to cheat, so the geography teacher reminds him of his earlier prank, about the valve hidden in his fist. Djata, together with his pal Feri (who tells on him) stole a valve from the front wheel of the teacher's motocycle. After the confrontation emerges the fact that the *valve is leaking*, the self-image of Djata suffers a distorsion and giving in to blackmail, albeit by constraint, he sets off on the Haza Védelme (The Defence of the Homeland) competition, where he wants to win despite the threatenings, he scores maximum points, but the result is institutionally altered.

Another confrontation takes place at the forced channel digging, when the narrator pulls out the military photo of his father, which he always carried with him in his coat's inner pocket. He used to compare it placing it besides his reflection in the mirror confronting, identifying himself.

> . . . then I pulled out my father's photo and I looked at that too, it was dirty from all of the touching, but I could still see his face. Formerly everybody told me how much I resembled my father, once I kept looking at myself in a pocket-mirror by putting my father's picture near it, and I could really see that my chin and my mouth are exactly like his. (53)

The juxtaposition of his own reflection and his father's photograph the identificational act of self-reflection broadens, but shifts at the same time.

At the end of the novel, his face flashes only in imagination on the varnishing of his grandfather's coffin, that is, it would flash if he went closer to it: this distance-keeping kept him away from his father also, before and after the deportation, and this is what holds him back from getting to know himself: "I was looking at the varnishing of the coffin, I knew if I approached the black painted

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wood properly, I could see in its reflection my own face and that made me feel terribly anxious" (289).

The tragicomic aspect of the scene of the grandfather's funeral turns into absurdity by the appearance of the father in chains, but not even the closest persons may approach him. Djata can only see his father's pale face behind the bars of the police-van's door. And he can only remain with the hope that the formerly acquisited white king figure—which he stole from the ambassador, and kept near his father's military photo—is a caution for the final victory. Namely, just in the middle of this eighteen-chaptered novel, in the tenth one, the stake and fate of the *game* are settled: though life is battle and warfare, he refuses to get a checkmate. He steals the ivory-carved white king before he would lose, he puts the whole world in his pocket with all of his enemies in it "and I reached into my pocket, I firmly squeezed the white king, the cold ivory slicked perfectly well into my hand, and I knew, that noboby is going to beat me in the warlike game, because even the most beautifully painted tin soldier is bagatelle in comparison with this leader" (175).

(Names, border-identities)

The identification act is delayed: we only know the nickname of the main character, the self-narrator (which only turns up in the fifth chapter) and, besides that, we know his "original" first name is identical with his father's and grandfather's, according to the ancient tradition. "The origin" of the name "Djata" is untangled by an interview with Dragomán: the author was called so by his classmates, friends. The etymology of the nickname is related to his friends of Romanian ethnicity: "my Romanian friends named me Săgeata (arrow—ed. note) because I had a bowing arrow. My Transylvanian-Hungarian friends found this too long, so they shortened it to Djata, which was eventually used by the Romanians also" (M. László). The undefiniable identities which run into each other and are inseparable indicate the existence of the border-identities present in the Bodor-prose also.

The names of the most important persons, that is the family members, remain unknown for the readers. Only the secondary characters are denominated, we get to know mostly their nicknames or first names—the way we would hear them or the way the child hears them. The delivery and the phrasing of the text seems to act on our auditive senses and imagination: throughout the quick slideshow of the events the language used becomes questionable (just like in the Bodor- and Papp-prose): the multiethnic scene presumes mixed language.

The familiar name database from the Bodor- and Papp-prose has a space-building function this time also: the names outline the space which delimits the events, they assure the localizability of the action.

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The narrator uses an integrating technique in translating the dialogues similar to the one he uses for the names of the characters. Both Hungarian and Romanian names are characteristic for the scene presuming a multicultural region. The latter get into the text in a phonetic transcription, suffering a distortion based on hearsay: *Gyurka, Szabi, Jánku Zsjánu, a híres hájduk, Gica bá, a Frunzák: Romulusz és Rémusz, Nagyprodán, Traján, Csákány, Áronka, Feri, Horáciú, Janika, filtrú nélküli Kárpáci, Filimon Szürbú* – some of these are denominations of articles for personal use and character-names from the Romanian history book. As some critics formerly observed:[3] there are such words, ideas, idioms in the text, which can be known mostly only to readers who are familiar with the Romanian language or have lived in the country (or at least in one of the East-European dictatorships). This reading indication imposes a special conditioning: one of the three dogs of *Vászilé bá*'s son is called *Kloska* and that implies the other two to be called *Horia* and *Krisán* corresponding to the three rebel peasants notorious from the history of the Romanian nation. This (post-colonialist) game played with the reader can also be related to the post-bodorian trend, the prank pulled on the reader, the lesson taught, the dislocation could result in different readings conditioned by space, just like in the prose of Sándor Zsigmond Papp and Gábor Vida, followers of the Bodor stream.

("Natural" agression, as an expression of the system image)

The text continuously questions itself, it keeps wondering whether all of this is true, whether it really happened the way *it is told*. The belief of imagination and its transformation in *reality* dominates: the narrator knows that he only imagines some of the events, but these ideas are so strong that he considers them real. The narrator "almost" hears as the phone rings on the other side of the line, Djata "sees

[3] "The first sentence of *The White King* already gives away the fact that its language is going to be based on the Romanian-Hungarian common speech, not on the one from Hungary: the action sets off with the ringing of the alarm clock. The *pohárszék, jálézár* and *blokk* words found on the first page underline this" (Károlyi 96), respectively: "My favourite example is the repetitive use of the 'take away/give back the electricity' expression in the chapter entitled *Mozi* [*Cinema*] because it mixes the planes of the language used and the characteristic approach of everyday life in a sensible manner. I had the opportunity to hear this expression in Transylvania from many people, many times, in many situations at the beginning of the nineties, if the provision of some public utility—electricity, water, telephone —stopped or was suspended. The figure of speech here, in this novel, does not only suggest what the luckier readers from Hungary would assign to it in the first instance, meaning that the power, 'they,' some influential people are responsible for a possible, random technical issue. The 'take away/give back the electricity' juxtaposition sums up the drastic experience of a countryful of people used to 15 watt lightbulbs and powersaving campaigns. It simply means: they took it away, they gave it back. That is it. It is better than if it had been vice versa. It radiates temper not resignation" (Csuhai 25).

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clearly" the bloodshots on Iza's thigh—probably his first love—and that he whispers to her, although the storytelling questions this. The narrator knows that the scarfaced Csákány cannot be his father but still addresses him in that way:

> [H]e smiled at me and I just wanted to see his eyes and his mouth, and then I already knew that he was not my father, he could not be my father, but I still took a step towards him, and I still spoke out and said: father!, although I knew I was not seeing my dad and the workers were lying, but I still said it and, by doing so, for a moment I felt I might be wrong, that he still was my father. (58)

Besides the father's absence and the desire to fill this, agression and brutality form the other text-organizing component. The characters, almost without exception, are (verbally and/or physically) agressive: the secret service agents, the workers, Gica bá the football coach, the teachers (Iron Fist), the grandfather, the people standing in the queue – the whole sick society. Everybody who possesses some kind of power (Nagyprodán, when he is appointed brigade leader) becomes agressive and everybody who is bigger, stronger (even Djata pokes the clothes-hanger boy who is weaker, shorter, more miserable than himself, and he would throw the cigarette onto the teacher's face if he could). It might seem funny that a teenager goes to school with a wrench in his pocket (intended to fight with, but could be useful also for screwing), if this agression was not so extremely serious, followed in most cases by fighting, a real war: the neighboring flock of kids who appropriate the ball and challenge them to win it back the way we know from stories about indians. The "game" presented in an eight-page long single sentence degenerates into a brutal, bloody war. The edge-games, the teenager school-stories, the apparently irresponsible deeds, drolleries unobservedly transform into a cruel fight, the kids do not refrain even from self agression: they want to get sick if they are trying to get away from responsability, and starting with the basic methods known by every pupil (eating chalk, thermometer manipulation), they also experiment with inducing pneumonia, and the action ends with premedited fracture of the ankle (they considered working in the mines of Petrozsény as a previous option as a shelter). As "legitimated players of the Vörös Kalapács youth team" they have to fight with determination, until death, otherwise Gica bá, the heavy-handed rough football coach, will tear them to peaces.

Quoting the novel of Imre Kertész, *Sorstalanság* [*Fateless*], being exposed to masterfulness, to power, everyone's dependency of these is *natural*: it is part of the social *order*, of the system set in (programmed to) survival. *Voluntary* social labor is natural, the sabotage of the public work is a sin (after the channel diggers put the children to work for free they even wrote their names on a list so that they come back after Sunday's lunch), it is natural that the secret service agent empties the

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cupboard, the maths-teacher beats and tortures the pupils. It is also natural that we do not speak about certain things because someone, anyone—also referring to the text-construction procedure of the Bodor-prose—can denounce us. Even the teenager knows, possesses the strategies of life-conduct of the survival society, he lies, he does not say anything (for fear of being reported by the others, and depriving himself of an act of heroism, he cannot speak about what happened in the cinema when, after "taking away the light" and scraming from the schoolmates, they entered a secret projection room where they watched sex-film sequences). All of these reflect the premature juvenile sense of responsability, fear:

> Usually Mom discusses everything with me, telling me many times what happens and why it happens that way, explaining the way things are, and on those occasions she usually answered my questions, if not I knew it was because she thought that it is better not to talk about that, because what I do not know I cannot even accidentally share with the others. I totally agreed with her because I knew there are things which are dangerous even to talk about like . . . why are the secretary general of the party and the commandant of the armed forces treasonous animals or who did they haul away from our acquaintances. (176)

Mixing and uniting conscious regulations and subconscious feelings, the child has no problem lying (the commandant of the armed forces brings superstitious luck), but his instinctive ethic-sense conflicts with cheating (he is allright with participating in The Defence of the Homeland contest instead of his colleague, but despite the threatenings of Iron Fist he shoots the perfect score, even though the result was institutionally altered in the favor of School no. 3). Lies, cheating, defencelessness, fear become natural, usual, elemental. Everybody lies to a certain degree, they are all addicted to the system, the micro-stories of life-lies and the macro-stories of system-lies equally determine the text-space. Everything is interwoven with some kind of Balcanic-playfulness, almost with cheerfulness: the stake of survival is conceived as a life-goal, the evasion of the system possibly using its own rules, which sometimes can joyfully get you killed. Since there are not well defined regulations, everyone has to guess for themselves, how to sidestep, avoid the rules mostly by cheating and lying. In this process everyone gets dirty, sort of becomes part of the system which—as we have seen also at Bodor—cannot be divided unambiguously into victims and dastards.

This is why Djata's victory in chess becomes a torso as he grabs the white king figure in his pocket. A torso, just like the sculptures in the garden of his alcoholic grandfather. The grandfather, former party-secretary, lives in a mansion expropriated from a sculptor. A parallel can be traced between the statues left in torso (which remained in the garden) and the world visualized in the text. The

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language-sculptures left in torso are deconstructed and melted in the text. This procedure is achieved in a playful manner, this is not a game without a stake, like the statue-imitation game played with his friend Szabi either: playing the Forradalom Fáklyavivője (Revolution Torch Carrier) game on the pedastal of the stolen statue; who can resist longer throwing stones or "standing column-saint" during math-class as a punishment: standing on the top of the garbage-can turned upside down, on one leg, with the arms above the head waiting for salvation, that is, the end of class. All of these in the hope of survival, because this world visualized in the text can only be lived *through*.

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