DE GRUYTER OPEN

Acta Universitatis Sapientiae, Philologica, **9**, 1 (2017) 117–129

DOI: 10.1515/ausp-2017-0009

Liminality and Border Crossing in Ádám Bodor's Novels

Zsuzsa TAPODI
Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania (Miercurea Ciuc, Romania)
Department of Humanities
tapodizsuzsa@uni.sapientia.ro

Abstract. The plots of the novels *The Sinistra Zone* (1992), *The Archbishop's Visit* (1999) and *The Birds of Verhovina* (2011) by Ádám Bodor unfold in border zones, in spaces of liminal existence. By investigating the intricate relationship between the Self and the Other, using particular space forming techniques with shifts and displacements, these novels extend the scope of postmodern fragmentariness to identity construction as well. In these literary works enforced journeys or travels with well-defined purposes should not be merely understood in their physical sense: identity also undergoes a change, becomes hybrid. In a space characterized by a labyrinth of ethnic diversity, identities distorted by a dictatorial regime often go beyond the border of the human, the characters being endowed with animal features. Starting from Merleau-Ponty's idea according to which action is not set in space, but rather comes into being through space (Faragó 2001, 7), the consequences of spatial changes must also be taken into account.[1]

Keywords: Ádám Bodor's novels, borders, liminality, identity.

The Universe of Ádám Bodor's Novels – on the Boundary of Referentiality and Fictionality

Ádám Bodor's[2] literary activity has brought a turn in the Hungarian literature from Transylvania; he has created a school from the 1990s on. His works

1 This work was created within the framework of a group research project entitled *Travel and Cognition*, supported by the Sapientia University – Institute of Research Programmes.

2 Ádám Bodor (1936, Cluj-Napoca, Romania) is an outstanding representative of contemporary Hungarian prose. His short stories and novels have been translated into Romanian, English, German, French, Norwegian, Danish, Italian, Polish, Bulgarian, Serbian, Croatian, Slovak and Estonian; six works of his have been adapted to screen. A determining experience of his life was at age of sixteen, when he was imprisoned for two years for distributing anti-communist leaflets. After his release he worked as a factory worker, an archivist and later in a copying-translation service office. He pursued protestant theological studies between 1955 and 1960. In 1965 he published his first short story. In 1982 he moved to Hungary, but his works continued to be inspired by contemporary Romania, mostly by the Eastern European reality.

BDD-A26930 © 2017 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:44:29 UTC)

generate a new readerly attitude, as established interpretations are continuously questioned and displaced in the course of reception. The difficulty of finding his place in literature is justified by the delayed start of his career as well as by his works situated at the boundary of the absurd, magic realism and postmodernism. "Just as there is no definite direction of the inner logic ruling the novel's main and secondary characters, in the same way we cannot talk about a great turn or fulfilment in the author's literary career. Basically, he has continuously been writing the same work (life work)"[3] states Sándor Bazsányi in his review of *The Birds of Verhovina* (2012). Bodor's three novels, *The Sinistra Zone* (1992), *The Archbishop's Visit* (1999) and *The Birds of Verhovina* (2011), can be characterized by the notion of border. Their plots take place in border zones; the identity of the characters becomes blurred in spaces of mixed ethnicity, under distorted social conditions. Due to the repetitive structures, their actions are continuously displaced, slipping out of the systematizing web of interpretation; these writings are border cases also in terms of the poetics of the novel.

In *The Sinistra Zone* (1992), which brought Bodor the first real success, the author indicates space by the title of the book, while he continuously makes it uncertain in the text: the reader may wonder whether the plot takes place in a real, geographically located place or in the nowhere land of the Orwellian dystopia, in the hell of the dictatorships imaginable anywhere. The most important metaphor of the text is the border; it appears already in the introductory sentence: "Two weeks before he died, Colonel Borcan took me with him on reconnaissance to one of the barren heights in the Dobrin forest district" (Bodor 2013, 3). The forest of Dobrin lies on the frontier and Colonel Borcan is approaching the border of life and death. The heroes of the events abounding in irrational turns are in an existential border situation, vegetating on a subhuman, half-animal level of defencelessness.

The main character of the novel, Andrei Bodor, bearing the author's family name, a roadman, a deputy coroner (who is the first-person narrator at the same time), comes to this sinister place in order to help and save his foster son, Béla Bundasian. By subordinating everything to this goal, he slowly adapts to the particular order of the prison-like setting of the novel. Finally, without carrying out his task – because the son does not want to leave the place where his lover is kept prisoner, and finally commits suicide – he escapes from the district in the lorry of the six-hundred-kilo-heavy Mustafa Mukkermann.

The motif of failed mission, the fragmented structure, the grotesque worldview and the multitude of the – mainly unpleasant – smells and tastes return in Bodor's next novel, *The Archbishop's Visit* (1999), in which the town on the other side of the frontier river (which suddenly changes its flowing direction)

3 Translator's note: translations of quotations from Bodor's novels (except *The Sinistra Zone*) and from Hungarian specialist literature are my own throughout the article – E. B.

BDD-A26930 © 2017 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:44:29 UTC)

is gradually covered by garbage. Besides the notion of border, garbage becomes the key metaphor of the second novel. We find out from the first paragraph that Gabriel Ventuza, the chaplain, successfully caught the Senkowitz sisters, who escaped from the isolator, and "led them back to the site on a leather leash, where they were on public display while locked in a henhouse" (Bodor 1999, 5). Later we learn that "[h]e arrived to Bogdanski Dolina years before in order to take away his father's mortal remains, but finally he stayed as well" (Bodor 1999, 11).

According to Éva Bányai, Bodor's greatest innovation is "the conscious subversion of the new Transylvanist prescriptive canon" (2011a, 251). The setting of the novels, the peak, a value symbol in Hungarian literature from Transylvania representing humanism and tolerance, turns in Bodor's novels into the scene of suffering and exclusion. The landscape, made vivid by waters and underground streams, does not enchant its inhabitants with its beauty; living in a reserve-like space, with all its absurdities, makes one forget the comforting power of nature.

The title of the novel *The Birds of Verhovina. Variations on the Last Days* (2011) specifies a location that can be found on the map. However, the settlement situated in the Northern Carpathian region, in Ukraine today, which once represented the border of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, becomes a floating, unrealistic space similar to the spaces constructed in the former novels. It is a place permeated by stench; the unpleasant smell of the thermal spas welcomes Daniel Vangyeluk. The novel starts with his arrival and consists of recurrent leavings and disappearances. The first page already reveals that Vangyeluk's early train coming from the reformatory arrives at a station where the timetable "has just been erased" (Bodor 2012, 5) and soon even the rails will be removed. The apocalyptic scenery is created not only in time but also in space. Jablonska Poljana and Bogdanski Dolina – the former constituting the setting of *The Birds of Verhovina*, the latter that of *The Archbishop's Visit* – are districts similar to the Sinistra Zone. In the town and around it, in Verhovina, the ever-dwindling brigade led by Anatol Korkodus carries out some kind of "water monitoring" work, with the participation of the local workforce and with teenagers coming from Monor Gledin, the reformatory. The plot advances along events such as deportations, escapes, visits of the representatives and spies of power (e.g. Karabiberi, the female police officer, and Kotzofan, the priest sent by her). The short mistress of the head of water management, the deaf-and-dumb Roswitha, and the vice prefect Vaneliza, representing the power, are a grotesque couple of lovers who escape to Norway from Verhovina with water bottles in their arms. The Augusztins, accused of murder, commit suicide before being taken away for their case to be investigated. Januszky or Anatol Korkodus are taken away by force by unknown individuals.

BDD-A26930 © 2017 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:44:29 UTC)

Dystopias and Heterotopias: Reserve, Penal Camp, Reformatory, Cage

In his seminal essay *Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias* Michel Foucault regards the contemporary age as the era of space in which "the world is putting itself to a test, not so much as a great way of life destined to grow in time but as a net that links points together and creates its own muddle" (1997, 330). This network character defines the mosaic-like structure of Bodor's novels; the reader is supposed to put together the plot subsequently. The French philosopher points out that space is a relative concept, and while the Middle Ages were characterized by the hierarchical totality of the spaces, based on the distinction between sacred and profane, protected and open/undefended, urban and rural spaces, the modern space concept distinguishes organizational spaces, based on the "contrast between public and private space, family and social space, cultural and utilitarian space, the space of pleasure and the space of work" (Foucault 1997, 331). In Foucault's conceptualization of the terms,

> [u]topias are sites with no real place. They are sites that have a general relation of direct or inverted analogy with the real space of Society. They present society itself in a perfected form, or else society turned upside down, but in any case these utopias are fundamentally unreal spaces. There are also, probably in every culture, in every civilization, real places—places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society—which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. Because these places are absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about, I shall call them, by way of contrast to utopias, heterotopias. (1997, 333)

In the modern era heterotopias, among them the heterotopias of crisis and the heterotopias of deviation (psychiatric clinics, prisons, rest homes, cemeteries) constitute a well-established system (Foucault 1997, 333). The scenes of Bodor's novels can be considered as heterotopias because they "presuppose a system of opening and closing that isolates them and makes them penetrable at one and the same time" (Foucault 1997, 335). The heterotopic character is most perceivable in *The Sinistra Zone*. In the region of Dobrin the water of the Sinistra branches off into streams; along the gullies barbed wire, concrete posts, watchtowers and trenches full of traps indicate the border. Only military vehicles can use this

BDD-A26930 © 2017 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:44:29 UTC)

area; the civilians are admitted through the border only if given permission. Arriving in Dobrin City the entrants are given new identities; the commander of the mountain brigade decides upon who may stay and who may leave the zone. Colonel Coca Mavrodin wants to remove Béla Bundasian; Andrej Bodor has to flee. In the second novel the members of the mountain brigade turned into seminarists impede free motion. In *The Birds of Verhovina* the railroad does not lead anywhere; Daniel Vangyeluk arriving in Verhovan asks about the Augusztins, held captive, whether they have committed anything or they are kept in detention just like that from time to time.

Foucault considers isolation as the main technique of discipline (cf. 1995). Within the confined zones situated on the border which constitute the scenes of Bodor's novels there are further isolated areas, such as the mountain rifleman's barracks and the bear reserve in *The Sinistra Zone*, Bogdanski Dolina's barracks turned into a seminary in *The Archbishop's Visit*, in which the renitents are taken to the lime kiln – or in a better case – to the isolation ward of consumptive patients. In *The Birds of Verhovina* the young orphans arrive from Monor Gledin, the youth reformatory, to the region of Jablonka, where, on the mountain, a secret female re-education institute is operated by the priest. As punishment, space is made ever more confined: in *The Sinistra Zone* Aron Wargotzki is walled in alive, and colonel Coca Mavrodin waits for him with a huge rat-trap at the exit of the underground stream, in case he might escape. *The Archbishop's Visit* begins with locking up the fugitive Senkowicz sisters into a cage; Januszky is taken away in a cage by the dogcatchers in *The Birds of Verhovina*.

Bodor presents a particular panopticon in his novels. The concept of the Panopticon used by Foucault (1995) to illustrate supervision shows that a person is under permanent surveillance, whether he is aware of being observed or not. Authority is not necessarily always present but can turn up any time. This feature of the Panopticon suggests that the individual may exercise some kind of self-control, may internalize the rules – this happens to Bodor's vulnerable heroes and narrators.

Despite all the similarities that make Bodor's oeuvre circular and timeless, there seems to be a kind of temporal advancement in his novels. The first novel clearly outlines the controlling atmosphere of the totalitarian communist regime; the second one depicts the grotesque picture of the ambivalent, appropriated regime change. The third novel is technically set in the twenty-first century, but the characters seem to have been mentally stuck in the mid-twentieth century. The reader cannot help associating Khrushchev with Nikita, the name of death; this generates further associations. Although we suspect that the STLN-labelled little crosses preserve the memory of Danczura's lover, the chopped Stelian, the spirit of Stalin seems to keep haunting in the region. The postmodern fragmentation manifests in the motif of dismemberment. At the same time, László Bengi's

BDD-A26930 © 2017 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:44:29 UTC)

statement applies to the last novel as well: "in relationship with the motivic structure, repetition (as a poetic feature), which creates the space and reality of *The Sinistra Zone* and projects the levels of the plot onto each other, can be related to the narrative technique of mythical texts" (2005, 122).

Identities – Grotesque Transitions

When arriving at the Sinistra zone, everybody gets a "dog tag," with a new name on it. Béla Bundasian is the only one who can keep his real name, whose integrity is not compromised; however, he is not able to adapt to the world, he protests against it and steps out of it with his death: "'And who am I speaking to now?' 'Come on, Aron Wargotzki, you know full well I could say any old name to you – that's really not important'" (Bodor 2013, 127) – the intradiegetic narrator bearing the pseudonym Andrej Bodor says. As regards the narratability/unnarratability of the stories, the choice of the names of the narrators with limited competence is Bodor's playful, ironic gesture: in *The Sinistra Zone* the narrator bears the author's surname; the narrator of *The Birds of Verhovina* is given the author's first name.

The particular mountainous region created by Bodor is populated by human wrecks; his works revolve around the lack of identity, oblivion and the problematic, aleatory status of names.

> The analysis of the varied names of the characters populating Ádám Bodor's prose and of the place names marking the space of the texts activate different interpretation strategies […]. In *The Sinistra Zone* and *The Archbishop's Visit* the denomination, the appearance of names broaden and at the same time localize the textual space; the Romanian, Ukranian, German, Armenian, Turkish, Hebrew and Polish names frequently occurring besides the Hungarian ones allow a geopoetic interpretation of Bodor's prose as well. This multilingualism gives the impression that distant places are connected; it is the defining characteristic of this prose that all of them are located in one and the same cultural space. (Bányai 2011b, 20)

At the same time, this diversity redirects the attention to the displacement of stabilized identity in all of Bodor's novels: "At the boundary and contact points of different cultures, mentalities and languages identity gets shattered. It becomes uncertain and relative amidst differences and similarities, particularities and deviations. […] This becomes evident in the analysis of identities, which become border identities in the space of in-betweenness" (Bányai 2011b, 38).

In the *The Birds of Verhovina* one can find exotic, telling names that are intelligible for the Hungarian readers living in Transylvania, such as Delfina

BDD-A26930 © 2017 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:44:29 UTC)

(dolphin), Kotzofan ('magpie' in Romanian), Duhovnik ('monk' in Romanian), Korkodus ('wax cherry' in Romanian), Karabiberi ('black pepper' in Turkish). Grotesque irony manifests not only at the level of the characters' dialogues, but the plot is also fully permeated by it. Adam, the intradiegetic narrator is seeing Miss Klara Burszen to read from Hungarian books found in the library. Neither of them understands the text, but she is clinging to the Hungarian words, because once she was oracled that a Hungarian officer would come for her on horseback, from beyond the hills. An outstanding example of irony and deconstruction of national myth is Klara Burszen's expectation of the Hungarian officer coming on a white horse; it was somewhere in this region that Árpád, head of the confederation of Hungarian tribes, came on his white horse to establish a new home for the Hungarians. In the novel the Hungarian army officer arrives from the opposite direction, on foot, carrying only the saddle and looking for Klara Burszen. He is taken to her grave and is killed there without any apparent reason. As an ironic twist, the man incapable of accomplishing his mission is sacrificed, instead of the horse as in the time of the glorious ancestors.

The novel's locations are permeated by the lack of an ethical perspective. In Sinistra Severin Spiridon does not even think of protesting when his wife is allocated to Andrej Bodor. The latter performs the command without a word to wall in Aron Wargotzky alive. We do not know the cause of the deeds and there is no community that would stand up for a peer or would point at the villain. The narrator's impassive voice, as he would not comment on the terrifying or incomprehensible events, is reminiscent of Franz Kafka's technique. It is a sign of alienation that both in *The Sinistra Zone* and in *The Archbishop's Visit* the inorganic communities and faux kinships get an emphasized role: the first novel is narrated by the stepfather, and the stepmother occurs in the second one. Similarly, in *The Birds of Verhovina* there also appears a stepfather figure; a girl mentioned by the narrator as "my niece, Danczura," to whom the speaker has actually no ties whatsoever, nor is he helping the orphan girl in any way.

"The grotesque body becomes ridiculous as long as it does not coincide with its own boundaries" (S. Horváth 2013, 84). The heroes doomed to subhuman existence seem to have changed into animals in *The Sinistra Zone* as well. The love of Béla Bundasian, the polyglot, beautiful and hot-blooded Cornelia Ilarion, alias Connie Illafeld, is confined to an asylum, and by the time she comes out to be transported to a bear reserve, „[f]rom between the strands of silky black hair that covered her face her green eyes glowed. She did not know her own name" (Bodor 2013,99). Verhovina's inhabitants also appear as animals: the dike-reeve Duhovnik's wife, the "bear Delfina" (Bodor 2011, 46) arrives at the colony led by Hanku on a chain. (It turns out that she hanged her husband during the winter.) The informer Balwinder strikes us as a scaly crocodile: "The grey lower body of the dead hindrance is naked, full of parched dots, scales" (Bodor 2011, 182).

BDD-A26930 © 2017 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:44:29 UTC)

Danczura is a yellow-bellied lizard hunting butterflies: "She hangs out clothes to dry but sometimes she lies down surrendering herself to the sunlight. She has her yellow blouse on her, sometimes she picks, snatches and sucks a butterfly from it" (Bodor 2011, 227). The vice prefect lady's daughter is "wizen, precocious, badger-like" (Bodor 2011, 143). The deaf-and-dumb Roswitha's permanent attribute is "Anatol Korkodus's little pet" (Bodor 2011, 73). Nika Karinika looks like a bird, while Januszky, when captured, resembles a dog.

> It would seem that he felt their approach even in his sleep, but also that it was too late, and that there would not be enough time even to open the window. He jumped out through the closed window. [...] he was tucked into the van that consisted of a filthy cage, sticky with dog saliva and tufts, mounted on the platform behind the cab; he was screaming in that non-existent language, which once had already amazed us [...]. (Bodor 2011, 134)

In Bodor's novels the magical elements blend the high and the low. The grotesque image of Hamza Petrika's suicide impaling himself is unforgettable. "The border crossing present in the grotesque is *category transgression*, that of the internal and external borders of the body and the word, the subject and the object" (S. Horváth 2013, 110).

When at last Andrej Bodor first hears about his step-son, he cannot control himself. "Andrei bits of wild mushrooms quivered under knots of coagulated blood in the thick, sparkling smile. 'You've got an upset stomach.' 'No, no – it's just that I leaned over and it tumbled out of me.' 'Good god, looks like your gray matter'" (Bodor 2013,79).

When the uprising broke out in Dorin City, stench filled everything:

> On other spring days, the valley air was filled with the intoxicating scent of daphnes, those evergreen shrubs that bloomed during the night, but what now seeped through the vents into the morgue was the smell of human shit – the shit of the locals, and of the mountain infantrymen, still permeated by the musty bouqet of denatured alchohol.
>
> No sooner had the sun risen and the fog lifted from the yard around the barracks than the explanation itself stank in full view on all sides. Daubed in a viscous brown glaze on the fences and walls – even on the wall of the morgue – was "YOUR MOTHER'S CUNT." (Bodor 2013, 137)

According to Bakhtin (1976), the distortion of language plays an emphasized role in the grotesque linguistic humour present in carnivalesque, ritual swearings; the word exceeds its linguistic boundaries. The content of ritual swearing is to enhance the dismemberment and regeneration of the human body.

BDD-A26930 © 2017 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:44:29 UTC)

In *The Archbishop's Visit*, the fugitive Senkowitz sisters dig themselves partly in a trash heap. In Verhovina, when the inspector appears, everyone gets diarrhea and they write the reverse N letter on the wall with faeces, representing Nikita, i.e. the name of death in Jablana Poljana.

Intertextuality

The Birds of Verhovina displays a multiple intertextual relationship with the author's previous works. However, despite the subtitle referring to the Apocalypse, the social picture outlined here seems to be a shade lighter. This might be so for the same reason that László Boka notes as well: "Here the power (even understood in political-military terms) known from Bodor's previous works hides in the background, in remote, faraway, intangible distances, still, it exercises a profound impact, with its frightening presence and determining strength, which is impossible to ignore" (2014, 112). The ending of the novel may be perceived as having positive overtones as the ousted birds return. But their appearance can also be understood as the recapture of the area by nature following the destruction of human beings. Not only the colonels managing the Sinistra zone or the archbishops expected to Bogdanski Dolina are foreigners. The actions of the authorities coming from the outside with incomprehensible motivations are frightening also in this novel. "The person whom he expected would usually arrive at night. When he suddenly steps forward from the opaque darkness, from the greatest depths of silence, almost out of nowhere, and knocks on the door. Or does not even knock, but simply enters. He is suddenly there. In order to take him away" (Bodor 2011, 143).

Similarly to the previous works, *The Birds of Verhovina* also resorts to unreliable narration, it employs an intradiegetic narrator (this time bearing the author's first name), beginning *in medias res*. "Two weeks before my foster father, brigadier Anatol Korkodus, was arrested, he had given me a brand new Stihl powered chainsaw as a gift" (Bodor 2011, 5). The motif of the secret, the mysterious atmosphere as well as the hidden, violent presence of the power operating as a Foucauldian web, all characteristic of the former novels, play a determining role in this work as well. Not only the chapter titles, first names in brackets, but also the fragmented character imply the structure of *The Sinistra Zone:* the chapters are constructed by individually readable short stories containing recurrent motifs. The obnoxious, ethically objectionable, unreliable first-person narrator often appears in postmodern novels, such as the paedophile hero in Nabokov's *Lolita*. The first-person narrator allows deeper insight into the psychological motives of the action; the inner viewpoint urges the reader to be more tolerant, to be capable of responding to the continuous attraction and repulsion triggered by

BDD-A26930 © 2017 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:44:29 UTC)

the narrative angle. The narrator of each novel by Bodor uses a dispassionate tone to tell about his murder, but he does not shed light on his motives.

Not only individual characters (Danczura, Nikita, the infant prodigy or Nika Karinika, performing a miraculous healing) are reminiscent of the figures of magic realist novels; the metalepsis also alludes to Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. The cookbook of Eronim Mox, studied by the narrator, contains prophecies and it seems that parts taken from it constitute the chapters of the novel. The cookbook is a kind of scenario: it does not contain explanations but includes recipes which will come to life when someone prepares the respective meals. It can be considered predictive because what is read from it will soon come true. Bodor's stories fold back onto themselves. "If the world of the novel is the world of writing penetrating into the presence, into the inaccessible full presence, into the world of the now, then is the writing which holds the key to this world not the very key as writing revealing itself?" – asks Tamás Bényei, prominent Hungarian analyst of magic realism (1997, 208).

Places of Memory

The geographical space displayed in Bodor's novels is located on the border, but it is also a cultural space in which the accumulated cultural influences (as it can be seen in the mixture of names) shape and nuance each other. The historical and geocultural text traces relate to the border experiences.

According to Foucault, to use the past in order to understand the present (and critically evaluate it), first of all we need to be aware of the fact that the past affecting the present is not given directly for those living in the present, it is not directly accessible but deeply buried. History is discontinuous. In Foucault's view power is ubiquitous. It can turn up anywhere, it cannot be evaded within the confines of society. Power exerts its effect in the social sphere, within the ties of communication. It cannot be acquired or lost just like that; several situations should be changed at once in that case. It cannot be said that power is concentrated in a particular segment of the social network and resistance in another. "Where there is power, there is resistance" (Foucault 1978, 95). The hybridity of the characters' names confuses the reader in establishing the ethnic belonging of the characters. However, in *The Sinistra Zone* the change of names points at the ambition of totalitarian power to deprive the vulnerable individuals even of one of the most solid pillars of identity.

Despite the general amnesia and lack of interest, traces of memory turn up in the novels. The "*lieux de mémoires* are mainly remnants, the ultimate forms of memory storage in a history which recalls them because it does not know them anymore" (Nora 1984). At the end of *The Sinistra Zone*, Andrej Bodor's ski tracks

BDD-A26930 © 2017 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:44:29 UTC)

remain for years in the snow; in *The Birds of Verhovina* such objectified places of memory are the frozen water mill, the synagogue, the public laundry and the iconostasis. The Hungarian books of the library, books which nobody understands anymore, play a similar role. And even Anatol Korkodus becomes a statue at the bottom of the lake because of the deposited minerals. His stepson sends after him, as a kind of sacrifice, the foreign photojournalist preparing the colony's modernization. Man thus becomes part of the landscape in the literal sense.

Genre Shifts

Gergely Angyalosi formulates what the first critics of *The Sinistra Zone* have already pointed out, namely that "Bodor does not provide us the opportunity to find the only valid point of view from which this world can be viewed, the perspective from which his novels totally surrender themselves to the spectator" (2005, 51). The constant displacement of the reader's preconceptions can be regarded as an ingenuous literary manifestation of the Foucauldian detour.

Chapters of a Novel as the subtitle of *The Sinistra Zone* suggests a radical shift from the traditional boundaries of the novel genre; the chapters that can be read as independent short stories do not form a linear order but create a mosaic-like structure suggesting postmodern fragmentation. The treatment of time also reflects fragmentariness. The same structural principle turns up again in Bodor's third novel, *The Birds of Verhovina*.

The titles can be linked to border phenomena of narration, because they separate the world of the text from the real world of the reader. *The Sinistra Zone* as a title refers to one of the most important narratological elements, namely space, which determines the characters' possibilities of motion within the narrative. The ominous atmosphere pervades the whole novel.

Bányai points out that "[t]he title of *The Archbishop's Visit* does not contain specific names; however, the promise of newer and newer archbishops' names turns up in the text. Consequently, the title itself becomes devoid, anonymous, because no promised archbishop arrives, only the constant movement, deferral is perceived" (2012, 95). The title of *The Birds of Verhovina* underlines the very absence, as the strangers arriving at the neighborhood destroyed the nests, chasing the birds away. As Judit Pieldner states,

> Verhovina is like a phantom place. In its silence the audible absence amplifies, such as the lack of the bird chirping: the birds have left, because some unknown people, strangers, who knows why, stroke down the nests with pales and water syringes, thus the place has ceased to be homey for them. Not only the birds are missing from Verhovina […], but all those who

BDD-A26930 © 2017 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:44:29 UTC)

> have passed away ("the Lutherans became extinct in Jablonska Poljana" [138]), those who have left, the newcomers from the reformatory; Anatol Korkodus' Roswitha; the Czervenskys, whose abandoned house was used by the water management brigade; Olga Kapusztin, the escaped former social worker from Jablonska Poljana; captain Dominik "Fowler" Mordwin longing for Klara Burszen vanished together with the birds; even Tatjana, Adam's cat has gone. (2013, 145)

Due to the title, the reader's expectations are shifted again. The omissions and concealments that the novels abound in stimulate a constant displacement of the reader's position and continuously keep the interpreter on the border of understanding and lack of comprehension. Bodor's novels stimulate all-time readers to cross their own borders of interpretation.

Translated by Enikő Biró

Works Cited

Angyalosi, Gergely. 2005. "A kiismerhetetlen remekmű." ["The Enigmatic Masterpiece."] In *Tapasztalatcsere. Esszék és tanulmányok Bodor Ádámról* [*Exchange of Experience. Essays and Studies on Ádám Bodor*], eds. Tamás Scheibner and Gábor Vaderna, 49–56. Budapest: L'Harmattan.

Bakhtin, Mikhail Mikhailovich. 1976. *A szó művészete és a nevetéskultúra*. [*The Art of the Word and the Culture of Folk Humor*.] Budapest: Gondolat.

Bányai, Éva. 2011a. "A *Másik* megjelenése, képe, néhány kortárs magyar irodalmi műben." ["The Appearance and Image of the *Other* in Some Contemporary Hungarian Writings."] In *Tükörben. Imagológiai tanulmányok* [*In the Mirror. Studies on Imagology*], eds. Zsuzsa Tapodi and Levente Pap, 253–265. Cluj-Napoca: Scientia.

Bányai, Éva. 2011b. *Térképzetek, névtérképek, határidentitások.* [*Space Concepts, Name Maps, Border Identities*.] Cluj-Napoca: Korunk, Komp-Press.

Bányai, Éva. 2012. *Terek és határok. Térképzetek Bodor Ádám prózájában.* [*Spaces and Borders. Mappings in Ádám Bodor's novels*.] Cluj-Napoca: Casa Cărții de Ştiință.

Bazsányi, Sándor. 2012. "Madártalanul." ["Birdless."] *Holmi* no. 2. *http://www.holmi.org/2012/02/bazsanyi-sandor-madartalanul-bodor-adam-verhovina-madarai* (Last accessed 2 April 2016)

Bengi, László. 2005. "A szövegszegmentumok iterációja mint az epikai világ megalkotása." ["Text Segments Iteration as the Creation of the Epic World."] In *Tapasztalatcsere. Esszék és tanulmányok Bodor Ádámról* [*Exchange of*

BDD-A26930 © 2017 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:44:29 UTC)

Experience. Essays and Studies on Ádám Bodor], eds. Tamás Scheibner and Gábor Vaderna, 114–131. Budapest: L'Harmattan.

Bényei, Tamás. 1997. *Apokrif iratok. Mágikus realista regényekről.* [*Apocriphal Documents. On Magic Realist Novels.*] Debrecen: Debreceni Egyetemi Kiadó.

Bodor, Ádám. 1992. *Sinistra körzet.* [*The Sinistra Zone.*] Budapest: Magvető.

Bodor, Ádám. 1999. *Az érsek látogatása.* [*The Archbishop's Visit.*] Budapest: Magvető.

Bodor, Ádám. 2011. *Verhovina madarai.* [*The Birds of Verhovina.*] Budapest: Magvető.

Bodor, Ádám. 2013. *The Sinistra Zone*. Trans. Paul Olchváry. New York: New Directions Books. Kindle Book.

Boka, László. 2014. "Határ és háttér. Elválasztottság és szökés mint prózapoétikai létkonstruáló tapasztalat Bodor Ádám, Agota Kristof és Papp Sándor Zsigmond prózájában." ["Border and Background. Separation and Escape as Prose Poetic, Existence Constructing Experience in the Prose of Ádám Bodor, Agota Kristof and Sándor Zsigmond Papp."] In *Tér(v)iszonyok és térkép(zet)ek* [*Space Relations and Space Concepts*], eds. Csilla Bíró and Beatrix Visy, 109–120. Budapest: Gondolat.

Faragó, Kornélia. 2001. *Térirányok, távolságok. Térdinamizmus a regényben*. [*Space Directions, Distances. Space Dynamics in the Novel.*] Novi Sad: Forum.

Foucault, Michel. 1978. *The History of Sexuality*. Vol. 1: An Introduction. Trans. Robert Hurley. New York: Pantheon Books.

Foucault, Michel. 1995. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: Vintage Books.

Foucault, Michel. 1997. "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias." In *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*, ed. Neil Leach, 330–336. New York: Routledge.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 1993. "A látható és a láthatatlan. A 'Munkajegyzetekből.'" ["The Visible and the Invisible. From the 'Working Notes.'"] *Atheneum* 4: 27–42.

Nora, Pierre. 1984. *Emlékezet és történelem között.* [*Between Memory and History.*] *http://www.aetas.hu/1999_3/99-3-10.htm* (Last accessed 11 April 2016).

Pieldner, Judit. 2013. "A víz szaga, a vég szaga." ["The Smell of Water, the Smell of the End."] In *Az értelmezés ideje* [*The Time of Interpretation*], 143–148. Cluj-Napoca: Egyetemi Műhely Kiadó, Bolyai Társaság.

S. Horváth, Géza. 2013. *Testiség és nyelvi tapasztalat Mihail Bahtyin irodalomelméletében. A megtestesüléstől a groteszk testig.* [*Corporeality and Linguistic Experience in Mikhail Bakhtin's Literary Theory. From Incarnation to the Grotesque Body.*] Budapest: Gondolat.

BDD-A26930 © 2017 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:44:29 UTC)