

Distorted Structures of Authority and Identity Róbert Csaba Szabó: *Alakváltók* [Shape-Shifters]

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Róbert Csaba Szabó's novel: *Alakváltók* (The Shapeshifters) – like the works of Ádám Bodor, György Dragomán, Zsolt Láng, Sándor Zsigmond Papp, Andrea Tompa – builds the framework of the thematized eras on the fate-turning, history- and society-shaping phenomena of the chronotype of the regime change in Romania, and on the experiences of the characters who lived through them, establishing a network-like, non-linear connection between the different events of different decades, namely the Gheorghiu-Dej and Ceaușescu eras. The present paper seeks to explore the distorted expression of shape- and identity shift, illusory forms, and eroding effects of the transition in Róbert Csaba Szabó's novel mobilizing the crucial concepts of the intermediate existence, transitory nature, linguistic and mental hybridity since, according to the premise of the thesis, transformation as implementation is impossible, both power structures and individuals are trapped in borderline situations, which inhibits the development of neat, completed formations.

Keywords: *Hungarian literature in Transylvania, transition, identity shift, hybridity*

Szabó Róbert Csaba *Alakváltók* című regénye – hasonlóan Bodor Ádám, Dragomán György, Láng Zsolt, Papp Sándor Zsigmond, Tompa Andrea műveihez – a romániai rendszerváltás kronotoposzájának sorsfordító, történelem- és társadalomformáló jelenségeire, az azokat átélő karakterek tapasztalataira építi a tematizált korszakok összefüggésrendszerét, hálózatszerű, nem lineárisan szerveződő kapcsolatot tételezve fel különböző évtizedek, történetesen a Gheorghiu-Dej- és a Ceaușescu-éra különböző eseményei között. Jelen írás a köztes lét, a tranzitszerűség, a nyelvi és mentalitásbeli hibriditás vezérfogalmait mozgósítva az alak- és identitásváltás torz kifejeződéseit, illuzórikus alakzatait, az átmenetiség erodáló hatásait keresi Szabó Róbert Csaba regényében, ugyanis a dolgozat előfeltevése szerint az átalakulás implementációként lehetetlen, mind a hatalmi struktúrák, mind az egyes individuumok határszituációkban rekednek, ami fékezi a letisztult, kész formációk kialakítását.

Kulcsszavak: *erdélyi magyar irodalom, átmenetiség, identitásváltás, hibriditás*

The portrayal of the experiences, traumas, tragedies of fate and the identity patterns of individuals living in the shadows of totalitarian regimes in Central and Eastern Europe has become of particular importance in recent literary works, especially in the so-called “regime change novels” of contemporary Transylvanian Hungarian literature. These works usually present the lives of ordinary figures in typical situations of the dictatorial world, in the labyrinths of restrictions, from an under-view perspective; revealing the bargains, the often morally questionable decisions and compromises of microcosms and civil milieus, making it clear to the reader that many are prepared to cross moral boundaries, renounce their principles and even risk the integrity of their person in order to survive. The outcome is often fatal - a partial or total abandonment of the self, an inevitable distortion of identity. One of the fundamental aims of totalitarian dictatorships is to eliminate the diversity of people’s personal and social identities - sometimes even their human identities - in an attempt to create a purely homogeneous, ethnically, ideologically, culturally, socially and psychologically undifferentiated society, where identity is no longer a method of self-experience, of self-expression, but something, which is imposed on people by outside influences (Erős 1991: 1107–1108). Such homogenization, however, can be considered a utopian vision, since the violent homogenizing effort, the practice of declaring shape-shifting and transformation as an expectation, can only have a superficial outcome, lacking any substantial change. By mobilizing the key concepts of in-between existence, transience, as well as mental and linguistic hybridity, this article seeks to explore the distorted expressions and illusory forms in shape-shifting and identity transformation, and the eroding effects of temporariness in the novel entitled *Alakváltók* (Shape-Shifters) by Róbert Csaba Szabó, since, according to the premise of the thesis, transformation as implementation is impossible, as both the structures of authority and the individuals become trapped in borderline situations, which inhibits the development of clear and complete formations.

The first novel by Róbert Csaba Szabó – similarly to the works of Ádám Bodor, György Dragomán, Zsolt Láng, Zsigmond Sándor Papp, Andrea Tompa – builds the correlation system of thematised time periods upon the fate-turning, history- and society-shaping phenomena within the chronotope of the regime change in Romania, and the experiences of the characters undergoing them, postulating a network-like, non-linear connection between different decades, namely the various events of the Gheorghiu-Dej and Ceaușescu eras (Balázs 2013, Bányai 2016: 7–28). Although it is a “regime change novel”, there is only a partial interconnection, since the period of the “turnaround” only provides a narrative framework for the actual story, which unfolds from the

complementary narratives of a doctor shrouded in permanent obscurity and a mysterious travelling liquor merchant, Xavér (the multi-perspectival narrative technique builds upon a chain of interlocking, overlapping narratives). The two men meet on the train journey from Maramures to Bucharest, where Xavér attracts the attention of the initially suspicious first-person narrator with a complex, yet unfinished story. Xavér's intrusive familiarity initially appears to be a provocation, especially since his character, his true identity, remains obscure all the while; in fact, the narrative even raises the possibility that Xavér and the doctor are essentially one person: "Perhaps, in a certain sense, we are the same person, you and I, Xavér laughed softly. At least that's what our seat cards say." (Szabó 2016: 11)¹ The narrative instances in which they have identical seat registry tickets; the way the self-narrator is repeatedly in doubt about Xavér's existence; the numerous references to the identical existence of the two characters, all point to the dissolution of the boundaries between the actors, to the indivisibility of narrative perspectives, and to the layering of subjects upon and into each other (Bányai 2016: 115–116).

Xavér's vehement flow of speech and his particularly enthusiastic storytelling inadvertently overwhelm the narrator, who is unable to shake off the impact of the story even after his arrival to the capital. Then, during his stay in Bucharest, the narrative that began on the train journey becomes more nuanced - in Xavér's apartment, various documents reveal his activities as an agent, as well as the detailed story of the gang that rebelled against the establishment of communists in the 1950s and the Securitate officer Alex Perjovschi pursuing them, which was sketched out in exaggerated detail on the train. The actual plot is thus set in motion through the element of the 'found text'; - following a novelistic model based on the (re)reading, copying and reinterpretation of the text - while the anachronistic time structure, the frequent alternation of timelines, the system of flashbacks and forward references provide insight into different periods of 20th century Romanian history, from the Second World War to the fall of Ceaușescu's dictatorship. The internal, homodiegetic narrative of the first part is replaced by an external, heterodiegetic storytelling - through the medial translation of the documentary bundle found in Xavier's apartment, which serves as an act of reconstruction - resulting in a temporal and spatial dimension shift, focusing on the bleak events of the period of the Gheorghiu-Dej government and their contemporaneous repercussions.

The definitive conceptual organising principle of the volume is the centuries-old literary topos of transformation. The *Alakváltók* (Shape-Shifters)

¹ The page numbers of further references from the novel are marked after the actual quotes.

addresses the operational mechanisms of power structures, as well as their tactics of preserving position and retaining status, often through sententious statements that capture the recognizable patterns associated with the well-established - and over time self-perpetuating - practices of the post-World War II political systems of Central and Eastern Europe seeking to retain power and therefore declaring 'turncoat behaviour' a necessity. Authority can manifest itself in many forms, yet it always follows the same logic. It is therefore worth considering the "regime change" as a point of densification in its relative, transitory quality - just as the anonymous self-narrator does in December 1989 - since the authoritarian elite is interested in preserving the power structures, the status quo, while trying to alienate the young political elite aspiring to power or, in case of inevitable political realignment, to give the former nomenclature elite a head start regarding the redistribution of privileges. Although parts of the old elite may lose their privileges, sometimes even their lives - as in the case of the Ceaușescu family - the exercise of authority is in fact based on a compromise between the more flexible layers of the old elite and ranks of the recently emerged new elite (Erős 1991: 1107). The emergence of Iliescu, a former ally of Ceaușescu, at the forefront of the movements makes it clear that regarding the two possible modes of elite turnover, namely elite circulation (extensive personal changes) and elite reproduction (personal continuity), in the case of Romania the second one prevailed, which inevitably undermined the credibility of the regime change. Many historians have already argued that the regime change in Romania, being the most violent among the transitions in Central and Eastern Europe, can be interpreted as a *de facto* political and economic transition of power, as described by the "grand coalition" hypothesis of Elemér Hankiss: "by the use of its relational capital, the nomenclatural elite becomes able to save and exchange part of its political authority from the ancien régime into authority and privileges that can be asserted in the new regime, thereby ensuring continuity (Hankiss 1989: 310–352, Kristóf 2015: 65–67). From a historical perspective, this proved to be a valid assumption regarding the second tier of the Romanian Communist Party, the human infrastructure and the organisations, especially concerning the infamous Securitate. "The ubiquitous, all-powerful behind-the-scenes system of state security in Romania hasn't disappeared after the regime change; instead, it used the transition period to save its own structure, and the old patterns to incorporate itself into the transitional society." (Bányai 2016: 22) Therefore, if the personnel of the governing elite remains unchanged after the conversion of power, it is hard to imagine any kind of conceptual renewal (Horkay-Hörcher 2003: 63).

In other words, regime change as a historical-political turnaround, the transition between totalitarian and democratic regimes can be described as an illusion, because the process, promising the possibility of change without ever

fulfilling it - hence often presented as a story of disillusionment - is framed by individual setbacks, existential roller-coasters and failures, therefore leading to tragic outcomes for many. The *Alakváltók* (Shape-Shifters) also places the emphasis on disillusionment in the representation of regime change, as both the narrator and his contemporaries (who are initially enthusiastic but gradually recover from the euphoria) quickly recognise who will step into the position of the “replaced” elite: “As a matter of fact, since Iliescu appeared on TV as the leader of the revolutionaries, many people’s confidence has been shaken. We are being saved by a hard-line communist, young people ask each other on the street.” (6.) The country embarks on the road to democratisation as the leading officials of the former regime - who represent the old regime in their own person - ‘rebrand’ themselves out of public view, regaining leading positions, while political rhetoric does its best to portray the ‘new’ functionaries as relentless supporters of democracy. “Through the recycling of figures from the former regime, the scenes of transition are actually scenes of re-plantation: they are characterised by legacy patterns, namely the new interconnection schemes of the old elements.” (Farágó 2015: 16) Although the *Alakváltók* (Shape-Shifters) does not address the periods beyond the regime change, through the motif of shape shifting it manages to convey the sense that there is no chance of a “great social purge” (Hankiss 1989: 345), there isn’t any substantial change in power hierarchy; whether Gheorghiu-Dej, Ceaușescu or Iliescu is the first man in the country, the so-called turnaround - due to the distortion of the transformation attempts - is merely superficial (Balázs 2013: 51, Bányai 2016: 13). Needless to say, society is also sceptical about the establishment of a “new” political order. This sense of losing purpose exacerbates the experience of being trapped in a state of transition, as if to capture the transience between the obsolete and the emergent.

The inclusion of the rather clichéd butterfly analogy seems obvious, to use the metaphor of infinite circularity to illustrate the similarly cyclical status-rescuing activity of power formations: “For the life of a butterfly seems beautiful, but its duration is desperately short, and if we add that the fluttering lifestyle is the last stage of the cycle, it would be best to kill it immediately before it lays eggs. Before it starts all over again. Pinning it upside down is the only way to ensure that the eggs don’t fall out by accident, should it still be alive.” (7.) However - following the illustrative metaphor - it soon becomes clear that the eggs have come to life prior to the death of the butterfly, which is not a mere personal observation by the anonymous self-narrator, but also of a society believing in the authenticity of the revolution and in the possibility of change: “The second-tier communists were swarming around the vacant seats. And then I understood what Xavér was talking about. That sooner or later the butterfly starts life anew through the eggs it lays, and that the initial state

is larva-like, necessarily primitive, and devoid of any beauty. Following the events in December, a larval life descended upon the country.” (238.) Undoubtedly, it was expedient to capture the mechanism of transformation, of shape-shifting - which prevails on both thematic and motivic levels - in a super-motif, however, revelations and clarifying explanations concerning the perception of the butterfly as a metaphor narrow the reader’s interpretative possibilities, leaving little interpretational freedom, thus making the butterfly motif inevitably didactic. The “butterfly metaphor subordinates the story”, which is also reinforced by the structural division of the novel (Abdomen; Thorax, Caput) (Bányai 2016: 117).

In a dictatorship, the choices of the individual are limited. Loyalty to the Romanian Communist Party, fake or real humility, means (potential) freedom, which is postulated as an expectation towards society in both political rhetoric and everyday practice, as well as in parabolic - and at the same time extremely ironic - stories such as the triple transformation of Gheorghiu-Dej. The constraints of assimilation to authority, the false conversion often create situations that create dissonance in the individual, threaten to disrupt the inner psychological balance, and undermine the unity of identity, yet for many it is the only way of survival in a highly hierarchical power structure (Bányai 2016: 117–118). For others, confrontation with the brutality of the system is an alternative survival strategy. As freedom in the isolated world of totalitarian regimes is paradoxically experienced through the absence of freedom (Czigányik 2011: 87), the emergence of open rebellion against oppressive power, such as the “activities” of the Sólyom gang movement in the Ozsdola area of the Székely Region, is scarcely surprising. The central plot thread of Róbert Csaba Szabó’s novel focuses on the struggles of Ferenc Sólyom and his men as outlaws fighting against the armed forces of the Party, while their scope for action – their chances of survival – gradually diminishes. The atmosphere creation, the milieu’s liveliness and authenticity rely on reference elements of reality, since the fictional Sólyom Gang is based on real characters, namely Ferenc Pusztai and his renitent companions. For years, the Pusztai boys were able to defy the troops of state security forces, inflicting heavy losses on the units assigned to pursue them in their “partisan struggle”, until by August 1955, the unusually fierce crackdown of the Securitate finally eliminated the „rebels” (Ferenc Pusztai was killed in a firefight on 10 August 1955). The “outlaw” actions of the Pusztai gang were marked by fear among party functionaries and active or silent solidarity among the inhabitants of the area (Bottoni 2008: 123–124).

Thus, the Sólyom gang follows the alternative path, as forced adaptation and the gradual erosion of personality through assimilation are unthinkable for them, but it soon becomes clear that moral discipline is of secondary importance in the obscure context of dictatorship, since anyone can be turned

into an accomplice of power. In “high action-intensity time-spaces” such as dictatorships, survival assumes a plethora of choices and decisions, while the borderline to amorality can be crossed imperceptibly (Faragó 2015: 14). The widespread development of their movement is hampered and, in time, rendered impossible by the ruthless methods of the “Securitate” - functioning as a kind of “violence organisation” - whose “re-education” strategies, beyond physical aggression, are destructive of mental health and use both verbal and psychological abuse in order to reshape consciousness. The unpardonable sins of the organisation are highlighted in the narrative, the effects of its cadres’ wickedness are felt down to the microcosm of individuals. Our characters are regularly confronted with the fact that the servitors of state protection are able to infiltrate their world at any time and in any place, taking on different shapes and faces, since the agents of the Securitate are themselves representatives of shape shifting: the organisation was created after the world war, and from the very beginning it has employed a large number of dubious characters - mostly former members of the Iron Guard - such as the all-surviving character of Titi Mureşan, who is labelled a genuine shape-shifter. The struggle of the Sólyom gang is not presented as some kind of pathetic insurrectionary story; it is devoid of ideological or philanthropic implications, essentially structured along the lines of individual grievances without the possibility of apotheosis. The people who join the gang are of tragic fate, driven by a desire for vengeance, with little interest in building a social base, or in expanding the rebellion - indeed, as the regime uses every possible means to capture them - their resistance is the catalyst for the intensification of oppression: “Whole villages were destroyed. Do you understand that? Who inflicts the suffering is almost irrelevant from the point of view of the one who endures the suffering. For them, there is no difference between me, who beats him to death, and an agent of Securitate, who beats him to death.” (p. 192) Sólyom is neither a clearly positive figure who would lead the gang to victory; he is a man of sudden anger and impulsive instinct (“knife-wielding criminal”) - which is why he is sent to the punishment squadron in Petrozavodsk - who often makes irresponsible decisions, putting not only himself but also the lives of his comrades and his brother at risk.

Since the totalitarian system of power becomes “imprinted” in the elementary medium of the private sphere, it is able to corrupt anyone, planting distrust and suspicion in interpersonal relations, inevitably triggering Pavlovian reflexes in people’s behaviour, speech and even thinking (Czigányik 2011: 101–103). Even among close associates, there is no justification for unquestioning good faith, because it soon becomes clear that the doubt is by no means unfounded, as is shown in the case of Ilona’s betrayal. The communist system, which is based on fear, gradually entangles everyone, and the individual

becomes a part of it, wittingly or unwittingly: Xavér served the Party as an informer; the anonymous narrator is recruited by the Securitate in the final hours of the dictatorship to report on the hospital's senior medical officers; Ilona betrays her colleagues under torture; Ferenc Sólyom is rendered similar to the Securitate by his brutal methods (Károlyi 2016) - of course, one might legitimately question whether autonomy can be preserved at all in the narrow conditions of survival. In both the Gheorghiu-Dej and Ceaușescu eras, we can speak of a "disciplining power" that is omnipresent in everyone's life, even those who are themselves active participants of the regime (Foucault 1990) - much like the Securitate officer Alex Perjovschi (born as György Rajnai), who pursues the gang, and is also exposed to the watchful gaze of the authorities.

As a "renegade neophyte" (Pécsi 2016: 90), Rajnai/Perjovschi becomes one of the central characters of the book. The Hungarian child in Cluj experiences situations early on that are detrimental to the formation of his identity - in the final hours of the war, when the front is close to Cluj, his mother flees to Budapest, leaving behind her son suffering from meningitis, which leaves an ineradicable trauma on the teenage child: "He remembered, and he could not rid himself of the memory, that when the car honked twice in front of the house, his mother ran up to him and, wearing her travelling cloak, without even sitting down, just kneeling hastily, planted a kiss on the left corner of his mouth." (43.) The maternal image of Gyurika, who has undergone a mental shock, is thus permanently distorted, and he regards the act of leaving as a rejection, a desertion, attributing the facial paralysis caused by meningitis and the subsequent stroke to the effect of the mother's farewell kiss. The sick child remains in Cluj-Napoca with the grandmother who tends to him, but after her death he is sent to an orphanage. The transitory environment of the institution is a symbolic threshold between the phases of Gyurika's life, on the verge of two periods, marking both an end and a beginning as he passes from one to the other. As an interpolation: an atmospheric parallel to the orphanage is the foster home in Péter Nádas' novel entitled *The End of a Family Story*, where the protagonist, Péter Simon, is placed after the loss of his family. The violent system of the orphanage, depicting external power structures on a micro level, demands amnesia and oblivion, the young people are obliged to turn their backs on their past, as the headmistress says: "To be a useful member of the community, your new life must cover up the old, as if you had just been born; to be a new person! [...] Those who will be your companions here are of a similar fate. They must cast off the burden of parental sins." (Nádas 2018: 143) The suppression of the past, the rejection and shattering of family traditions can lead to the collapse of the incipient individuation, to the disintegration of the self (Balassa 1997: 102, 109), which is only a supposition in the case of Simon Peter's unresolved story, but a reality in the case of Rajnai/Perjovschi.

As a pivotal moment in his life, the leader of the local party elite, Duca Laurentiu, lifts him out of the orphanage to raise him as his son, effectively sealing his future destiny. After leaving the foster home, he is introduced to another artificial micro-climate, where the primary objective is to radically transform the personality of Gyurika, who is now called Alex. In his new environment, it is evident that upon the elimination of his Hungarian national identity elements, the development of an identity integrated into the Romanian linguistic-cultural-political milieu becomes a requirement. In order to avoid the incorporation of early experiences into individuation, it is essential to remove the “memory keys”, since these “memory keys” are able to trigger the operation of remembrance by their mere perception, i.e. the memory of the previous period can be marginalised by means of a conscious technique (Keszei 2012: 14). The character of Perjovschi’s identity from childhood onwards is determined by “self-elimination and reconstruction”; his denial is deeply rooted in the “shameful” moments of childhood, and less so in the impact of the ‘party-political turnarond’ (Tinkó 2016: 98). His entire adolescence is framed by adaptive behaviour, the shedding of the “encumbering” name, nationality, language, and assimilation, and this impermanence clearly reveals Perjovschi’s transitory status (Faragó 2015: 14). The name change is a cornerstone in the (re)formation of identity, the acquisition of a Romanian first and last name practically erases the previous self, while at the same time determining the construction of a “new” self. Remarkably, Perjovschi does not perceive the name change, a key moment in the deprivation of identity, as an act of loss, but as a necessary element in the process of initially unreflected, later reflected, self-rejection. This denial is reinforced in the young man by the experience of discrimination on the one hand, and by the atrocities he is forced to suffer because of his Hungarian origins (ridicule, mockery, physical abuse), and even the narrative itself suggests, that for a long time his socialisation is also hindered by the language barrier, initially responding in all speech situations with the verbal act of saying thank you, until his progress in Romanian enables him to understand. Accordingly, the “*expressis verbis*” rejection of being Hungarian can also be interpreted as a means of defence, since the identification with the ethnic category is under prohibition, and the break seems to be a pragmatic choice for the sake of integration - along with all its negative consequences. Thus, what dictatorships want to achieve at a macroscale is achieved at a microscale (Hankiss 1989: 59–63): because, as it has been mentioned, the utopian objective of totalitarian regimes is to eliminate differences in society, to “homogenise” society. However, the one-sided exaggeration of an identity formula can lead to a rupture in the identity of the individual, creating public and private identities. While public identity is clearly “system-compatible”, private identity is often considered illegitimate, which the authorities seek to

eliminate by exerting great pressure on the private sphere. One possible way of displacing and erasing private identity elements is to transform them into negative identity fragments. "This means that a previously existing identity formula becomes fragmented, whereas certain components remain and represent the "bad" side of the personality, which still has to be overcome [...]. Constant self-criticism and "brainwashing" also aim at transforming former identity elements into negative identity fragments and forcing the personality to constantly confront these fragments." (Erős 1991: 1108) Although the violent identification and homogenization efforts of the totalitarian system are generally confronted by obstacles, especially in the family sphere, identity deformations and identity erosions are only valid for a narrow stratum of society, i.e. patterns cannot be generalized (Szummer 1992: 219), the above formula of negative identity fragments is instructive regarding Perjovschi's concept of genealogy. Perjovschi's "multiculturalism" is therefore rather problematic, encumbered by a deliberate eradication of national consciousness, thus inevitably heading towards acculturation. Although Hungarian and Romanian cultural aspects are mixed within the same personal consciousness, "multiculturalism" - or, more precisely, "biculturalism" - reinforces the decentralisation of cultural identity, the destructive sensation of not belonging anywhere (Szigeti 2002: 408–409). If the two cultures are perceived as incompatible or contradictory, the unification of bicultural identity will not be possible, and both dissociation and assimilation will be incomplete (Grabovac 2013: 204).

During the prolonged period of the adolescent identity crisis, the individual copes with the uncertainties of future roles, has the opportunity to break away from the self-concept, roles and social relationships rooted in the past, while developing a new self-image, roles and relationships (Erikson 1991: 437–498). However, it is worth emphasising that if engagement with new roles takes place too early, without prior experimentation, or is subject to coercive influences, identity disorders may occur later in life (László 1999: 95–97). Since individual identity dynamics are linked to the fundamental need of social identity to satisfy one's self-esteem and self-respect through belonging to a group, the perspective and belief system of the group to which one's perception of reality is connected becomes of paramount importance (Erikson 1991: 485–486). Perjovschi is trained as an intelligence agent, he is given insight into the "network of oligarchy, clientelism and nepotism" that pervades the country (Hankiss 1989: 322), but we must also remember that adaptation is not an autonomous choice, but a result of coercion, of external influences. No matter how much he tries to adapt to the system, embracing the Party's worldview, the methods of the Securitate, showing loyalty, commitment and diligence, his complete integration remains unsuccessful - he is still an "outsider", as illustrated by the constant remarks regarding his Hungarian origins,

the denial of his professional competence, his rapid removal after a series of fiascos, and finally his social isolation. When his successive failures start to embarrass the party leadership, he is quickly made into a scapegoat, thus the infamous cadre of the Securitate ends up as a petty prison administrator.

Since he is now useless to the Party, he goes through another identity crisis, and the part of his personality that made him deny and erase his “difficult to control” memories, his nationality and his youthful identity, gradually erodes. This continuous identity (re)formation, this discontinuity of the self, threatens with the disintegration of self-identity, with its future collapse, which is reflected in Perjovschi's unstable basic character, his frequent indecisiveness, his inconsiderate actions and his late alcoholism. In the last phase of his life, he ‘escapes’ into an alcoholic stupor, yet he cannot live in peace - he is haunted by the image of a teenage boy; the figure of an unknown child appears in vision after vision, dream after dream: “Perhaps he does not exist, he is just having visions again, like in Craiova. But no. That boy is himself, no one else. Or if not him, someone from him. He looked away and saw the boy, sitting on the marble steps leading upstairs, munching on pumpkin seeds. He was staring blank-eyed at the people walking up the steps.” (p. 247) In the man's psyche, then, his own past childhood is projected into the vision, his own traumatized self is represented by the boy. His daydreams, his fantasies, his paranoia of eventually being eliminated by those he has served for years, make it clear that he is also being swallowed up by the hell he has actively helped to create. Therefore, paradoxically, Perjovschi can also be considered a victim of the oppressive regime, although not in the sense of “passive suffering”, as in the case of victims of ethnic purges and pogroms, for his brutal acts would obviously qualify him as a “perpetrator”; however, the evolution of the concept of “victim” has made the term applicable to those who were previously labelled ‘undeserving’ - the group boundaries of “sufferers” and “perpetrators” have shifted, rendering the ambivalent figures such as Perjovschi more nuanced (Gyáni 2010: 328–329).

The *Alakváltók* (Shape-Shifters) presents an image of the ideologically based policy of violence, the conformist servitors of the Romanian communist dictatorship, which was “markedly unique in Eastern Europe” (Boka 2013: 276), the oppressive experiences, the trajectories of coercion, the totalitarian regime's ubiquitous attention to everything and everyone, while leaving no doubt about its intention: to reveal the mechanism(s) that are being operated in order to achieve the inherent objective of power - with its constant shape-shifting - to maintain absolute domination. It mediates the realities of a tragic historical period, identity (de)constructions, linguistic-cultural transitions, temporary formations, transitory situations, while highlighting the psychological effects of collective social traumas on individuals or on entire groups.

Beyond specific temporal and spatial localisability, it reveals such areferential, general patterns that apply not only to the dictatorships of Gheorghiu-Dej or Ceaușescu, but also to the currently reigning ideologies and to politics in general (Bányai 2016: 81). If there is a change in the power structures, it is always a superficial, disingenuous, false representation, while for the individual - as the destiny of Alex Perjovschi illustrates - the violent constitution of the self, the elimination of negative identity fragments can never be unproblematic or without consequences, as it can only lead to a distortion of character - a barren illusion of life.

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