

ANDRÁS SÜTŐ: *FROM THE SECRETS OF THE DANUBE*

Tibor KOSZTOLÁNCZY¹

ABSTRACT

András Sütő's short story evoked the memories of a Transylvanian-Hungarian fishing and hunting group which arrived in a village in Dobruja in September 1970, to explore the Danube Delta for three weeks. The writer – who kept a diary about his adventures – was guided in the water-world by an adolescent boy, Alyosha. I try to analyze in this lecture that, through the violent life of this boy and his mother, Sütő explored the problems of stigmatization and social exclusion related to minorities in a wider context. Sütő used first person narrative in his story, and his pen was led by his anxiety for the survival of Hungarian minorities abroad, primarily the one in Transylvania. The narrative and thematic characteristics of the short story strongly resembled the style of Sütő's other writings in the 1980s, through, the omission of didactic remarks was a more effective artistic tools: *From the Secrets of the Danube* dealt with the issue with a subtle approach.

KEYWORDS

András Sütő, Lipovans, Transylvania, Ethnic Minority, Trauma

1.

There is a ballad hidden deep within the story. A man and a woman fall in love, they get married in the city; the man takes the woman home to his village, where their child is born. Although the woman is also a Christian, the locals look at her as a “heathen”, do not accept her because of her different religion. The man's bad character traits become evident, the marriage starts to fall apart; the woman is regularly reviled and beaten due to her “heathen” nature. The woman with her child – during a sudden flood – escapes from the man in a boat, and starts to work in a nearby town, as a housemaid. She writes a letter to her parents, asking whether she could relocate to them with the child. ”And the reply came: Just stay where your disrupted mind has driven you!” [4, p. 271]

The man seeks out the woman, and takes a domesticated wolf into the city; while the woman is at work, the wolf guards the child. Later, the man kidnaps the child back to the village, just to have the woman reunited with him soon. The man kneels in front of the woman, promising that he would never beat her again and that he would also give up drinking. Still, he cannot change; instead he tries to force the woman to convert into his religion, and her refusal results in repeated abuse.

The man gets imprisoned for poaching, the ailing woman dies; she is buried at Epiphany – without the attendance of a priest.

2.

This “ballad” did not take place in the ancient times, but in the 1960s, in Romania. The Lipovan man and “the woman from faraway lands” met at Bucharest; the man's village is located in Dobruja, at the sharp river bend of the Saint George arm of the Danube. The whole story is

¹ Dr Tibor Kosztolánczy habil, PhD, Eötvös Loránd Tudományegyetem, Budapest. ktibor333@gmail.com

revealed by a member of a Transylvanian-Hungarian fishing and hunting group which arrives at this very village in September 1970, to explore the Danube Delta for three weeks. The Hungarian man – who keeps a diary about his adventures – is guided in the water-world by an adolescent boy by the name of Alyosha, whose mother is the “heathen woman”, who was buried at the beginning of the year; the father’s two year-long confinement is due to expire at Christmas.

The “ballad” is revealed to the Hungarian hunter in several parts, by her landlady named Gáfta. Initially, Gáfta seems to be cold, since concerning Alyosha’s mother, she also expresses the same “judgement” as the rest of the villagers do: “Her whole life, she remained a stranger among us. She did not convert to our religion, she was never seen in church, nor did she make a sign of the cross ever. Only a heathen would live like that. Heaven have mercy on her.” [4, p. 260] This point of view is strict, almost to the point of being cruel – but at the same time, it reflects the expectations that accompany the national identity of Lipovans.

The Russian schism of the 17th Century initiated significant population movement, and one of the ethnic groups among the migrating followers of the old faith were the few tens of thousands of people called the Lipovans, who found their shelter in the swamps of the Danube Delta. According to ethnographic research, religion often withstands foreign influences and preserves the identity of a minority more effectively than language itself. [1, p. 48] The same thing has happened to the Lipovans: after a while, besides Russian, the use of Romanian language became a part of their everyday life; thus their identity was most importantly shaped by the meticulous obedience to their native religious rules and regulations. According to Lipovan standards, that were still valid by the end of the 20th Century, the religious conversion of “a wife brought from faraway lands” would still have been required: “In case of a mixed marriage, the reconversion by complete baptism is mandatory.” [2, p. 342]² However, as the woman refused to do so, her very presence started to symbolize the rejection of the most important element in the identity of the host community.

Obviously, in the course of the strife for preserving one’s identity, the essential components of Christianity: the commandments of love, acceptance and nonviolence are reduced into a subsidiary role. The Lipovan lifestyle – as Sütő describes it – is rather simplistic; lacking the “key symbols and events”, which although naturally diverge by each nation and ethnicity, but they “probably carry rich cultural meaning and connotations, and are there to recall shared memories that originate from similar situations.” [3, p. 20] We do not read about family celebrations or favourite foods. The identity of the Lipovans appearing in the story almost exclusively roots in the outwardly rites of religion. It can also come from an author’s objective, this way the pivotal conflict of the story is “clearly” present: in this narrow minded world, the disobedience of the woman creates a *scandal* that upsets the community and becomes a trigger for drastic responses.

Even Alyosha tries to avoid speaking about his mother’s fate; it actually looks like that the traumas that he went through, make him unable to voice it. When asked about it, he contradicts himself, or simply becomes upset; other times he almost pretends to be an imbecile. That is in contrast with his natural behaviour, which is friendly and cooperative. Alyosha’s fragmented state of mind is confirmed by the fact that he cannot even recall the day his mother died, no matter how hard he “ponders” – his memories are limited to the day of her funeral.

When speaking to others, Alyosha identifies himself as a Lipovan, and verbally does not question the community’s condemnation of his mother. At the same time, he obviously disagrees with the rest, and he is mentally unable to accept that his mother would have been a

² Ferenc Fodor’s paper (cited above) carefully described the ethno-cultural peculiarities of the Lipovans living at the Danube Delta. The study contains a bibliography with most of the entries in Romanian language.

“heathen” [4, p. 259, 262, 263]. Nevertheless, as he cannot find any guidelines that would reveal his mother’s descent, and in the given rural community his mother’s “justice” cannot be renegotiated, he is tortured by constant tension and sadness. Once again, it is confirmed that in order to overcome the traumatic experiences, one has to discuss them.

3.

Meanwhile, as the story unfolds, we learn that Gáfta does not completely accept the villagers’ opinion about the dead woman either. Gáfta is both wiser and more experienced than them. According to her understanding, love is an inapprehensible force. It is almost a “calamity” that cannot be controlled by discretion, or by reason; and which often drives its “victims” into jeopardy. The same thing happened to Alyosha’s parents. Gáfta also has a suspicion about where the woman came from – and partly because of that, the arrival of the Hungarian hunters upsets her daily routine. However, the only way for her to obtain the necessary knowledge about this “faraway” nation, is by also opening herself. She does not reveal her opinion to the villagers, but in the foreign hunter she confides: within three weeks’ time, he will be gone anyway. On the other hand, she does not consider the ethnicity, which the hunters come from as a “relevant factor”: the only thing she knows about Hungarians that “a long time ago they rampaged through the country, side by side with the Turks, until they were driven out by the Romanians in 1918”. When the hunters inform her that Hungarians have been in Transylvania for a thousand years, and there are still about two millions of them, she considers it as a mere “fable”. [4, p. 265–266]

Gáfta speaks cautiously, withholding several important things about the life of the “heathen woman”; and although she reveals the name of the husband – Gávrilov – by accident, the woman still remains anonymous in her narrative. At the same time, Gáfta shows remarkable sympathy when speaking about the dead woman. Alyosha is also of special importance for her – she tries to “guide” him in the maze of the world. It all is not by accident, as Gáfta is not of Lipovan descent either; by birth she belongs to the Macedo-Romanian (Aromenian) ethnic minority. In addition, her first husband was Turkish, and she ended up with the Lipovans through her second marriage. Gáfta apparently also experienced the grinding conflict of emotions and faith, however – by making her own compromise with fate – *she did*, what the “heathen woman” refused to do. Ornamenting her house with a plethora of religious symbols, crosses, icons, and embroidered pictures is a result of overcompensating and seeking approval. Of course, these objects reflect the dogmas followed by the Lipovans; according to *outward appearance*, Gáfta presented as a deeply religious person. *Her life* is also a ballad.

4.

The book entitled *The Bird, Whose Leg Has Been Shot* – in which the short story *From the Secrets of the Danube* was published – contains the most intimately-voiced writings of András Sütő’s works at that time. [4] According to the introduction that was attached to the diary notes from 1970 in 1986, the writer published his one-time notes without any alterations. However, the image is a little bit tinted by the fact that Sütő worked on his text from April 1984 until December 1986 – with significant temporal pauses, as his diary reads. [5, p. 12, 166]. On the other hand, the narrative and thematic characteristics of the story strongly resemble the style of the latter writings in the book that are dated to the 1980’s.

The author’s perspective of the story also rhymes with the theme of the entire book, as while contemplating about the laws of nature, the writer also examines his life’s most intimate

plights. In a major part of the volume, Sütő uses first person narrative, and his pen is led by his anxiety for the survival of Hungarian minorities abroad, primarily the one in Transylvania. *From the Secrets of the Danube* deals with this issue with a more subtle approach. The omission of didactic remarks is a more effective artistic tool; an example for this can be seen in one of the parabolic episodes of the short story, in which the ornithologist who is engaged in bird banding, “exposes” Alyosha, stating that on the tissue-paper affixed on the birds, instead of the regular text, he sends his own messages to the north: “I’m here at the Delta. Where are you?” [4, p. 275]

The content of the diary notes in *From the Secrets of the Danube* is elaborate, with a strong literary character. Besides the laboured, meticulous style, certain composition elements also suggest that the text underwent posterior editing; for example the theme of dying swan – with the inclusion of the poem *Fairy’s Dream* by Sándor Petőfi – appears both on the 26th of September and on the 3rd of October, although the war of birds that finally concludes the stay at the Delta is not even conceived by that time [4, p. 267, 279, 294].

The disclosure of the Transylvanian-Hungarian origin of the “heathen woman” is also conveyed through literary reminiscences (although the reader could somehow already suspect that). Through the pranks of Alyosha, the author recalls the character of Áron Tamási’s protagonist, Ábel. Besides, Alyosha listens to the folk song – starting with the line “*I have lost my little bay horse...*” – with awe.³ At night, when the fellow fishermen tell their anecdotes, Alyosha is eager to recognize Hungarian phrases.

At certain times, Sütő’s prosaic text transforms into poetry, due to the writer’s masterful word-craft. Alyosha is touched by the encounter with the Hungarian language and the melody of the song. The reader is increasingly charmed by an emerging illusion, hoping for a fairy-tale ending. On the 2nd of October, the hunters sing a folk song from Csík, that starts with the line *On the first of October, October...*⁴ They also try to teach it to Alyosha, however, at the end he fails to pronounce the vowels – according to the writer’s comments, due to the lack of *Hungarian* “motherly voice and relentless chanting over the cradle” [4, p. 277].

Joyous and sad scenes alternate; one can succeed tomorrow in something that he failed in today. Fishing, hunting, making supper, drinking wine, singing. The hunters are mysterious, maybe even with some magical powers; at last Alyosha’s destiny could take a positive turn too. The world is idyllic, or at least has the potential to turn into a better one.

However, a few remarks from the diarist remind us that we are in a police state. Among others, for Transylvanian-Hungarians, the Danube Delta is far from being an idyllic location – in the decades of dictatorship, thousands were deported there to different labour camps. Local authorities are also alert, they even know that Alyosha stole two asps from the underwater net of the fishing association. Alyosha and the hunters are arrested, interrogated, Alyosha is even slapped in the face: “All of us were protesting, causing a great stir so that we were finally released.” [4, p. 285] Really, mysterious hunters they were.

Alyosha’s arrest initiates a series of ominous developments, and the happenstance events fall into an order of unambiguous composition. On the 7th of October, Alyosha prepares the war of birds for the next day, which – as it later turns out – is an unethical action: it goes against the rules of nature, as its mere purpose is self-serving killing. The hunter has no idea what is to come, however, nature itself sends a kind of warning through the enormous storm that breaks out on Lake Uzlina, to show that they are on a wrong path. The next day Alyosha tries to catch a swan, yet a “distant shot” makes the birds flee.

³ The author replaced the commonly used “green forest of Gyimes” phrase with “cypress forest” [4, p. 270].

⁴ The folk song was collected by Béla Bartók at Csíkkarcfalva, in 1907.

On the third day, a swan is finally captured. The hunter thinks that Alyosha is about to band it, however, he daubs the bird in red paint instead, painting a cross on its crop. The marked swan returns to its flock, they deem it as an intruder, attacking it and inflicting mortal wounds to it.

As a symbol, the wounded bird has already been connected with Alyosha's mother. When the mother was beaten by the gamekeeper in front of the tin Christ statue of the village, her hands were also shaken to force her into making a sign of a cross as the followers of the old faith do. The woman's hand became injured, and as Gáfta formulated it: "The woman ran away lopsidedly, like a moorhen with a broken wing." [4, p. 281]

5.

Alyosha's behaviour is deranged since the death of her mother – Gáfta several times tries to explain how the boy has changed, but she continuously fails to do so. Alyosha also cannot put the trauma into words, he is only able to recall the events through the language of the wild-water world. Though, he has to get drunk in order to enter this world of primitive aggression, which he is attracted to and repelled by in the same time, and which he is unable to understand.

At the end of the story, Gáfta also reaches a deadlock. Upon saying goodbye to the hunter, she clarifies that Alyosha's mother indeed came from Csík, as Reformed Believer; that is why she refused to make a sign of the cross. But she makes the hunter swear that as long as she (Gáfta) is alive, he will not reveal the secret to Alyosha. However, her instincts tell her that Alyosha should meet his grandparents. But not just yet.

Gáfta trusts fate to take care of these issues.

REFERENCES

- [1] BARTHA Elek. *A vallás és a nemzeti kisebbségek néprajzi kutatása = Nemzetiség – identitás : A IV. Nemzetközi Néprajzi Nemzetiségkutató Konferencia előadásai*. Szerk. EPERJESSY Ernő, KRUPA András, UJVÁRY Zoltán. Békéscsaba – Debrecen : Ethnica, 1991. 47–49. p. ISBN 963-471-721-7
- [2] FODOR Ferenc. *A lipován közösségek etnokulturális sajátosságai = Folyamatok és léthelyzetek – kisebbségek Romániában*. Szerk. JAKAB Albert Zsolt, PETI Lehel. Kolozsvár : Kriterion, 2009, 331–348. ISBN 978-606-92223-6-2
- [3] LÖFGREN, Orvar. *A nemzeti kultúra problémái svéd és magyar példákon szemlélve = Janus*, 1989 tél (VI/1), 13–28.
- [4] SÜTŐ András. *A Duna titkaiból = SÜTŐ András. A lőtt lábú madár nyomában*. Budapest : Szépirodalmi, 1988, 258–296. ISBN 963-15-3725-0
- [5] SÜTŐ, András. *Napló*. Budapest : Helikon, 1998. 629. p. ISBN 963-208-512-4