

Genre hybridity, self-discovery and trauma: Andrea Tompa's *The Hangman's House*

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Born in 1971 in Cluj-Napoca, Romania, Andrea Tompa moved to Hungary after 1989 and obtained her degree at Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest, while publishing theater reviews and other theater-related writings. Employed at the Hungarian Theater Museum and Institute, she was first the editor (beginning in 2008) of the journal *Színház* (Theatre), and then worked as its editor-in-chief (2015–2020). Published in 2010, *A hóhér háza. Történetek az aranykorból* (Eng. trans. *The Hangman's House: Stories from the Golden Age*, 2021) was her first novel. This work was followed by *Fejtől s lábtól. Kettő orvos Erdélyben* (From head to toe: Two doctors in Transylvania, 2013), *Omerta. Hallgatások könyve* (Omerta: The book of silences, 2017), *Haza* (Homeland, 2020), and *Sokszor nem halunk meg* (Often, we don't die, 2023).

The protagonist of Tompa's novel *The Hangman's House* is “the Girl”, with her sister, father, mother, and grandparents also taking important roles, becoming the protagonists of their own chapters. Moments from the times of the dictatorship and the historical past of Cluj-Napoca, and the greater region of Transylvania are also shown. The narrative is non-linear: the chapters offer glimpses of a motif, a character, or a particular event rather than forming a coherent plot, showing the pieces of a mosaic that, after reading, can be reconstituted as the story of the Girl's self-discovery with its background of family history.

The complications of self-discovery are reflected in the complexity of the novel's genre, something that even “professional” readers have found hard to define: one critic described the novel as one that “starts as a girl's story, then turns into a family novel” (Darvasi 2011),¹ another called it a “Bildungsroman” (Borcsa 2011), while a third saw it as a “Bildungsroman and family novel” (Tarján 2010).² Literary historian Éva Bányai has deemed it to be a work whose genre is impossible to categorize (2015, 102). At the same time, critics have noted the work's autobiographical aspect, the narrator and the author's being “copied over each other” (Darvasi 2011).³ This diversity of opinions is not surprising, as Tompa herself intentionally leaves the question unanswered, giving no directions to the reader on which genre code to use in reading the novel (no genre definition, for example, appears in the paratexts of the work).⁴

It is easy to see, on the other hand, that *The Hangman's House* is of a hybrid genre. In the following analysis, I aim to discuss how this hybrid quality gains meaning in the complex process of the autobiographical self's self-discovery.

QUESTIONS OF GENRE IN AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND AUTOFICTION

Despite the third-person narrative and the fact that she is mostly referred to as the Girl, the protagonist's personal and physical attributes (such as her thick, unruly hair), her family members who are addressed by their real names (including parents, grandparents and other relatives), and the protagonist's initials of A.T. leave no doubts regarding the novel's autobiographical nature. Even though Tompa explicitly views her own work as fiction and thus prefers a fictional reading of it, reviews and even the author's own allusions have revealed that, due to the recognizability of these pieces of external biographical data and facts as well as certain characters who were modelled after well-known figures from Cluj-Napoca's cultural life, a portion of the novel's readers have read the work referentially, including its obviously fictional, surreal fillers (Balázs 2011). Both the authorial intention and the ambivalence of the reception (i.e. the existence of both fictional and referential readings) show that newer theories of autobiographical writing, as well as the theoretical approach toward the heterogenic art forms combining autobiography and fiction, must be taken into account when examining this work.

Philippe Lejeune describes life writing as "a retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality" (1989, 4). As Lejeune considers life writing to be indistinguishable from fiction based on formal, narratological, or textual characteristics, he attempts to capture the issue of life writing on the pragmatic level of the text's message. For this reason, he speaks of an autobiographical pact, an agreement proposed to the reader by the author, explained or not, which stands in opposition with the fictional (Z. Varga 2003, 9), or with another word, the fictional pact (Lejeune 1989, 14). According to Lejeune, a life writing narration is characterized by the fact that the work's author, its narrator, and its protagonist are all identical (5). Lejeune further adds that this peculiar triple identity is expressed through the identical names of the author, narrator, and protagonist, as well as particular paratexts.

In the autobiographical novel, however, this identical quality is not expressed explicitly, even if the reader is convinced of its existence. Based on Lejeune's interpretation, the autobiographical novel can be defined as a fictional narration in which the reader supposes a certain level of identity between the author and the protagonist, "whereas the author has chosen to deny this identity, or at least not to affirm it. [...] The 'resemblance' assumed by the reader can be anything from a fuzzy 'family likeness' between the protagonist and the author, to the quasi-transparency that makes us say that he is 'the spitting image'" (1989, 13). As other scholars rightfully point out, this definition prompts further questions, such as which elements of a book can be used by the reader as a basis for supposing identity between the protagonist and the author, or whether the central plot has to mirror the author's

real life and how similar the two must be (Missinne 2019, 464). The only possibility of distinguishing between an autobiography and an autobiographical novel seems to lie within examining the referential and the pragmatic status of the text. As Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (2001, 9) write, the two genres are made distinct by their relationship with the referential world.⁵

Given that *The Hangman's House* is a work of fiction, should it be considered an autobiographical novel, or rather, following the popular trend of the past few decades, an autofictional one? It is not easy to differentiate the two, both genres being heterogeneous, containing both autobiographical and fictional elements. Moreover, many of the characteristics attributed to autofiction can be applied to the autobiographical novel as well. If we deem autofiction to be a text in which the fictional and referential pacts are simultaneously present (as Frank Zipfel does; 2009, 305), or one in which “the interrelation between real life and fiction forms an experimental space for self-exploration” (Wagner-Engelhaaf 2010, quoted in Missinne 2019, 468), it is quite difficult to discern it from the autobiographical novel that likewise transcends the boundary between the fictional and the referential (468). It is worth considering the following definition by Serge Doubrovsky, who originally coined the term “autofiction”: “Neither autobiography nor novel, then, strictly speaking, it exists in [...] a space that only the operation of the text makes possible or accessible” (1993, 34). Doubrovsky's own interpretation posits autofiction as a form of autobiographical writing, updated according to concepts of language in modern or postmodern prose (Z. Varga 2020, 19). Pursuing the creative opportunities of language (or as Doubrovsky puts it, the “adventure of language”), the text articulates an inner world which only emerges in the text and exists solely as text. Autofiction should be considered an attempt at renewing the autobiography (18), as reflected in Vincent Colonna's term for Doubrovsky's autofiction: “autobiographical autofiction” (23). However, given the dual nature of autofiction, this genre variation of autobiography and fiction can also be approached from the side of fiction. From this viewpoint, the characteristic element of autofiction is self-fictionalization: the writer as the protagonist stands at the center of the text (just as they would in an autobiography), but here, “the writer is transformed, their being and existence being transported into a fictitious story, ignoring verisimilitude” (Colonna 2004, quoted in Z. Varga 2020, 22). This projected copy is a purely fictional hero, one that no one would consider to serve as the portrait of the author: this is what Vincent Colonna names “fantastical autofiction” (22). Referring to self-fictionalization, Frank Zipfel characterizes autofiction as a fictional narrative that involves the protagonist, who bears the author's name, and exists in a self-evidently fictional world (2009, 302). Such a viewpoint can indeed pave the way toward making a finer distinction between autofiction and the autobiographical novel. In light of the discussion above, interpreting Tompa's novel as autofiction still seems inadequate: above all, because a self-evidently fictional world surrounding the protagonist is hardly present (quite the contrary); thus we cannot speak of self-fictionalization in such a manner as defined above. Instead of essentialist genre definitions, it seems more fruitful to concentrate on the process of reception and the discourse itself, as the differences of genre must become apparent through

the reading process (Missinne 2019, 470). Thus I will also aim to analyze *A hóhér háza* as a work of a hybrid genre, but one whose basic structure follows that of an autobiographical novel.

Though the focus of the story is the growing up of a teenage girl, this coming of age narrative is strongly interlinked with the stories of the girl's closer and wider social circles, an aspect that can be traced to the readily apparent fact "it is impossible to write one's own life without inscribing in it other persons' lives since 'no person is an island complete of itself'" (Stanley 1992, 10, quoted in Linke 2019, 418). In addition to the autobiographical novel, whose characteristics determine the novel's very structure, the *Bildungsroman*⁶ and the family saga clearly emerge as important components, through the work's focus on the coming-of-age story and the family history of the protagonist. However, these genre characteristics are only present in a fragmentary fashion, with some of their elements playing a part in the process of the autobiographical subject's self-discovery.

The nature of the autobiographical "I" in the novel must be discussed first.⁷ The (anonymous) narrating "I" is the same as the protagonist (the narrated "I": the Girl). Presented in the third person, the narration creates a certain distance between the author (the historical "I"), the narrating "I" (for simplicity's sake, to be referred to as the narrator) and the protagonist (the narrated "I"), while also drawing a complicated relationship system among these three entities. This technique might imply an authorial intent aimed at either broadening her own space of possibilities through the nebulous handling of autobiographical similarity and difference, or a more softly and subtly contoured Self to be drawn from the text.

This distance between the author/narrator and the protagonist only benefits the narration as it contributes to the productive tension between the strong involvement that draws upon both the personal quality of the autobiography and the way in which the Self is distanced from the story told, necessary elements for being able to tell the story in the first place.⁸ The way the story is told is typically non-linear: its fragmentary structure is attributable to the retrospective, reminiscing attitude, with the narrator usually focusing on a motif, a figure, or a relationship in the progression of chapters that have been strung together. It is if every new story opens a new door that enables us to see, by means of memories, a new facet of the lives of the father, mother, grandparents, or the Girl.

Through these mosaic shards, the life of the autobiographical "I" is evoked by means of separate influential experiences, observations, or relationships throughout a period that spans from the age of twelve and a half to eighteen. In two short chapters, however, the narrator and the perspective shifts from the Girl to her father, Janó: in these texts, we find his letters – also discovered by the protagonist after her father's death – to his brother, an economist and writer who enjoyed a hugely successful career. The importance of the two inserted letter-chapters from the perspective of the work as a whole is examined later.

The novel is framed by the chapters describing moments of the 1989 Romanian Revolution (see Siani-Davies 2001).⁹ For the autobiographical "I", born in 1971, the revolution also represents her coming into adulthood: in 1989, she turns eigh-

teen, graduates from secondary school, and successfully completes her university entrance exam. In the last chapter, when the mother tells her daughters that “you do as you please, girls” (Tompa 2021, 340), this statement additionally underwrites this dual turn of the story: as adults, they can exercise their individual freedom. The revolution therefore makes it possible for them to enjoy both political and social freedom, the latter clearly indicated by the application for a passport and the renewed opportunity to travel abroad.

Set within this frame, the chapters alternate between the era of the dictatorship (centered around the life of the Girl), the first half of the 20th century, and the decades preceding 1945 (within which one of the family members is the protagonist). In short, the chapters set before 1945 are wedged between those that take place during the dictatorship, thereby further clarifying the events of the Girl’s life.

This retrospective attitude results in memory becoming a primary element among the processes that define the autobiographical subject and comprise the core structure and frame of the work as a whole (see Smith and Watson 2001, 15–48). The constitution of the subjective and the collective memory (Erl 2011, 15–18), built from experiences, manifests in different elements here, with some connected to the personal and family memory (Halbwachs 2018, 17), and others as a part of the collective memory of the Hungarian minority and a specific community of the late Socialist society. Recalling the past within the framework of collective memory plays a major role in identity construction (Erl 2011, 17). In the novel, memories of experiences and events from different timelines and locations emerge not only from the protagonist’s memory, but also from that of her grandparents (the latter also becoming a part of the autobiographical subject). In the following section, I focus on the experiences as significant elements of the processes which constitute the subject.

THE FORMATIVE FORCES OF THE “I”

The narrator–protagonist’s most grounding experience is that of her and her family’s exposure to violence – a violence that is constant, almost a force of nature. This proves the only continuity of the history of the five-decade-long era told in the novel. Those who live or have lived in Transylvania must survive against this extreme violence one way or the other: this is the common theme of the novel’s past and present events. However, these experiences of violence emerge only indirectly in the novel: the third-person narration effectively serves as a means of maintaining distance, helping to conceal the wounds caused by violence.

The experience of violence and its impact can be best approached through the concept of trauma, here used in the sense of the following definition:

The metaphor of trauma draws attention to the ways that extremes of violence break bodies and minds, leaving indelible marks even after healing and recovery. But the notion of trauma has been extended to cover a vast array of situations of extremity and equally varied individual and collective responses. Trauma can be seen at once as a sociopolitical event, a psychophysiological process, a physical and emotional experience, and a narrative theme in explanations of individual and social suffering. (Kirmeyer, Lemelson, and Barad 2007, 1)

Along with the exposure to violence, the circumstance of belonging to a minority group can be viewed as the Girl's most common existential experience: her family is a member of the Romanian-Hungarian, more precisely, Transylvanian-Hungarian community. This complex ethnic, cultural, and linguistic experience appears in the context of power and oppression, expressed in the novel through its bilingualism: Romanian sentences appear repeatedly in the text (quotes of dialogues, which are then translated into Hungarian by the narrator), thereby replicating the daily realities of existing as a minority in all public spaces, whether at the office, school, in shops, or on public transport. The experience of oppression amplifies the repressive impact of a dictatorship suffered by all citizens.

This is reinforced by the autobiographical "I's" experiences within the school environment: the education system mirrors the dictatorship's order based on violence, oppression, and formal control. Beyond their teachers' disciplinary measures, Hungarian students must also endure being seen as second-class citizens. Among other things, this status manifests itself in the restricted usage of their native language. Labeled an "adversary and uncontrollable" language, Hungarian gradually disappears at school until general subjects are taught in Romanian from 1959 onwards (Süle 1990, 230–231).

Against oppression, culture becomes a great source of support for the autobiographical "I" in more than one way, while also playing an unquestionable role in forming her personality. In addition to reading, then writing, theater emerges as an increasingly important part of her life, providing the Girl with the communal experience and the joy of belonging after her father introduces her to the amateur theater group in Cluj at the age of 13. Cultural activity not only has a strong group-forming power, but also functions as the ground for opposition: it is through this activity that a different world exists for the autobiographical "I"; culture can provide an escape route from the confinement and hopelessness of the dictatorship and lend her a certain immunity from the infantilizing methods of the regime (Tompa 2021, 74–84).

It is no coincidence that women's fates and the current burdens and constraints of their ways of life are at the forefront of the novel, as these factors also constitute a decisive segment in achieving self-discovery and self-understanding from the narrator's viewpoint. This proves true whether originating from the pressure of expected female social roles, the risks involved in existential decisions, the frustration stemming from the incompatibility between work (and a career) and a private life, or questions related to relationships and having children. In this regard, the historically coded experience of the three generations of women in the family – or rather, what the narrator shows out of these instances – seems to have a primary importance for the autobiographical subject, consequently making the novel's focus on gender issues a dominant aspect of the work (see Massino 2019).

The opportunities afforded to women in the first decades of the 20th century are showcased by the dual portrait of the two grandmothers drawn in the chapter "K. és K." ("K. and K."), also presenting the compromises they were forced to make. The two women present diametrically opposed social backgrounds and careers as

well as fundamentally different psyches. However, the one common thing that is shared in their lives is a certain unevenness. As the narrator points out, both women's lives lacked a marriage formed out of love: they only married "well", to partners possessing sound finances (Tompa 2021, 290–297).

The life and career of Lili, the mother of the autobiographical "I", might be the one to provide her with a certain positive model. Lili is an assertive, independent woman who tries to provide an acceptable living for her family and raise her two daughters in the face of moral and existential constraints and everyday shortages. In spite of her circumstances, she gives up neither her femininity, nor the hope of finding a suitable partner for herself, though within the period of the novel, this remains an unfulfilled dream.

Among the experiences of the narrated "I", the role of the childhood trauma inflicted by the lack of a dependable and stable father proves decisive. The development of the Girl's personality is heavily influenced by her ambivalent relationship with her father: the chapters dedicated to their relationship draw a clinically precise and psychologically shockingly genuine depiction of childhood trauma. The father, struggling with alcohol abuse, is untrustworthy and leaves his children, triggering predictable reactions from his devastated daughter: from shame and rejection through verbal aggression to chronic health issues. Through episodes from this turbulent father–daughter dynamic, the narrator recalls the arduous struggle of her gradual emotional process, from shame and rejection to finally being able to accept her father and reckon with her trauma (though this only comes to pass years after the father's final suicide attempt).

This moment of catharsis is relayed in the form of a surreal, fairy tale-like story about the Girl's visit to the *Tränenhändler* or "Tear Man". Set at the Cluj-Napoca *ószér* (flea market), the scene might be named a unique sort of therapeutic activity, with the client being able to tell the story that pains them, though only silently, in their own mind, in the "Tear Man's" tent, while the other party, acting like a psychiatrist, helps to loosen the psychic knot with their own "attentive, encouraging, and severe [silence]" (193).

TRAUMAS OF FAMILY HISTORY: A FORMATIVE FORCE THROUGH POSTMEMORY

After 1918, the political instability that wreaked havoc throughout Central Europe turned the region into a ticking time bomb. The redrawing of borders following the Treaty of Trianon, the military events of World War II, the deprivation in the hinterlands, the hardship of national minorities being tossed back and forth between the ever-changing borders, the persecution of Jewish people and the Shoah all led to collective traumas. The family of the autobiographical "I" has been forced to share the extreme vulnerability of the minority groups, having to live and survive while being dangerously exposed to the changes of the political climate. The series of collective traumas stemming from the historical events above is the family history's determining experience before and after 1945. Consequently, this plays a substantial role in the self-understanding of the autobiographical "I" herself, which, through

postmemory (see Hirsch 1999),¹⁰ is ingrained in her conscience as a sort of “indirect knowledge” (Hoffmann 2004, 27).¹¹

Erzsébet Neumann, the protagonist’s future (paternal) grandmother, gets married after obtaining her degree in medicine, then, after a few years, leaves her husband and children to become one of the founding members of the Romanian communist movement. A Jewish woman and Communist, she suffers the consequences of Transylvania’s 1940 annexation by Hungary on two levels. Imprisoned by the Hungarian authorities for her political affiliations, she only escapes deportation to Auschwitz by chance. After 1945, her life follows the well-known Stalinist scheme: as an untrustworthy old communist, she is expelled from the party. She only maintains contact with her eldest son, István (Pista). Emotionally drained, scraping by remaining deaf – both literally and figuratively – to the world, she stays alienated from the rest of her children.

If on the paternal side, the individual choice of Erzsébet, a stern woman who can be viewed as an early feminist, constitutes the original cause for the family’s falling apart and the trauma of her younger son Janó (the father of the narrated “I”), on the maternal side, it is the changing political borders and the chaos caused by World War II that lead to the first, almost irreparable break in family life. Laci Kühn and Klári are separated from each other as newlyweds in 1941 due to the changing of the borders, only being able to reunite years later, when the daughter with whom Klári was pregnant at their separation is already three years old. The little girl, who grows up to be the mother of the Girl, thus carries the experience of lacking a father from an early age with herself, and with it the knowledge of the extreme fragility of the family as a nucleus and a primary medium of safety.

The extended family’s post-1945 history is no less edifying, showing multiple variants of the relationship with the system, from the enemies of the dictatorship, the “class enemies”, to the comrade who builds a career in the party and becomes fully integrated into power. Their family history can be considered an authentic print of the 20th-century traumas of a minority society exactly because we find their members in the most varying social positions.

The defining coordinates relating the family’s post-1945 history are revealed through letters written by the Girl’s father, Janó, with the two letters (“Dear Pista!”, “My Beloved Country”; Tompa 2021, 201–213, 214–219) also drawing parallel portraits of two brothers. For the length of these two letter-chapters, Janó’s statements bring a new narrating voice into the novel. The pretext for these letters is the publication of the second volume of Pista’s novel, *A három Demeter* (The Three Demeters), which, instead of providing a critical and self-critical stance, only aims to prove the author’s loyalty to the Party even in 1980. Through his view of his brother’s novel, Janó emerges as a critic of Stalinism, though also as a critic of himself. Janó is sufficiently outside of the system to be able to evaluate in a level-headed manner not only the political terror of the 1950s, but also the short intermezzo of mock-liberalism that took place regarding Transylvania’s Hungarian minority between 1968 and 1971.

Within the system, the two sons’ lives run in diametrically opposed orbits, though both follow in their mother’s footsteps by becoming communists. Janó abandons his

university studies and works for the party as a volunteer, while Pista, an economist, experiences a meteoric career path within the party, eventually holding posts that guarantee him a comfortable existence until the 1980s.

As the letters of the author-protagonist's father Janó reveal, Pista (or István Tompa),¹² is the archetypical comrade who always painstakingly adheres to the party (or rather the current "party line") and unscrupulously sacrifices relatives or any familial past that does not fit into the expected party scheme. He serves the power, in order to remain in power himself. For him, as for his mother before, there is no life outside of the party. Above all, Janó reproaches his brother for being unwilling to realize that sacrificing the family for "the cause" (i.e. the party) was pointless.

There is, however, a counterbalance to Pista's actions in the help he has extended towards Janó and his family: he aids Janó's wife in finding a job. Janó himself owes Pista thanks, as his brother helps him obtain a new job in a furniture factory after Janó gets fired from the printing house for the erroneous typesetting on a Romanian poem. Janó's life and fate, unlike his brother's, are marked by the absence of his mother whose appearance he cannot even recall. It seems that there is no escape from fate repeating itself: the son abandoned by his mother abandons his own family as an adult, passing down the trauma to the lives of a new generation.

The role of the fictional letters is unquestionable within the novel: the fact that the younger brother stands up for those family members who have been reduced to a marginal existence and renounced or deemed non-existent by the system shows that despite (or even with) his alcohol abuse issues, Janó still has a clear mind and, perhaps paradoxically, an uncorrupted sense of morality. Even if he cannot gain absolution, he still has a right to the empathy and understanding of the autobiographical "I" for his derailed life.

However, the family history aspect of the novel has another message that also points to the field of referentiality: Andrea Tompa's novel can be seen as a response to István Tompa's own work, *A három Demeter*, rightfully criticized by Janó for its falsification of the family history, as Pista omits both his Jewish relations and their paternal relatives, labelled as "class enemies". Pista himself is the center of the novel as the communist cadre who always "serves" according to the expectations of the party. Polemicizing with István Tompa's autobiographical work that portrays a socialist-realist life story and family saga within the expected Stalinist framework, Andrea Tompa writes her own complicated family saga with the intent of reclaiming the family's history.

CONCLUSION

The analysis presented in this article gains its meaning through the maturing of the autobiographical "I" and the constitution of her Self, which is framed by the work itself. The heterogeneous genre of Tompa's novel is, as presented by this analysis, intricately connected to the complicated nature of the process of self-discovery; above all, however, the construction of both the autobiographical "I" and the world depicted in the novel links the work primarily to the genre of the autobiographical novel. Through retrospection, research, and acquisition, recognizing and

pinpointing the neuralgic points and uncovering the traumas of this family's past becomes a part of the protagonist's personality. The product of this search for selfhood is explored by means of fragmentary chapters that are laid side-by-side in Tompa's first novel. The narrative's fragmentary quality mimics the protagonist's mode of discovery and acquisition: the author/narrator writes this process back into the work just as the Girl gathers the shards of her family's past and present until eventually discovering the layers of interconnections that she pieces into a whole. With this uncovering of the past, from the individual perspective the story reaches a resting point, a lull that can be interpreted as a sign of the strengthening of the Self following the confrontation with the traumas that are her own as well as those of her family members. The narrative's fragmentary quality could additionally signify that the narrator is aware that the construction of a homogenous, coherent, autonomous and transparent Self can only be illusory.

Translated from the Hungarian by Orsolya Gyárfás

NOTES

- ¹ "Egy lány történeteként indul, majd családrégénybe torkollik." Unless otherwise stated, all translations in this paper are by Orsolya Gyárfás.
- ² "Fejlődés- és családrégény."
- ³ "[Az] elbeszélői és a szerzői szerep egymásra kopírozódik."
- ⁴ The same is true of Tompa's following novels: *Fejtől s lábtól* (From head to toe), subtitled *Két orvos Erdélyben* (Two doctors in Transylvania), and *Omerta*, subtitled *Hallgatások könyve* (Book of silences); both were published without a genre definition.
- ⁵ "Novelists are bound only by the reader's expectation of internal consistency in the world of verisimilitude created within the novel. They are not bound by rules of evidence that link the world of the narrative with a historical world outside the narrative. In contrast, life narrators inevitably refer to the world beyond the text, the world that is the ground of the narrator's lived experience, even if that ground is comprised in part of cultural myths, dreams, fantasies, and subjective memories" (Smith and Watson 2001, 9).
- ⁶ "Traditionally the *Bildungsroman* has been regarded as the novel of development and social formation of a young man, as in Dickens's *Great Expectations* [...] the *Bildungsroman* culminates in the acceptance of one's constrained social role in the bourgeois social order, usually requiring the renunciation of some ideal or passion and the embrace of heteronormative social arrangements" (Smith and Watson 2001, 189).
- ⁷ Based on the work of Smith and Watson (2001), I use the concept of the autobiographical "I" as the complex of the historical, the narrating, and the narrated Selves, out of which the first (the biographical author) is evidently not accessible in the text.
- ⁸ As Sarolta Deczki writes: "To distance ourselves, but only so far to be able to see things from afar, and thus comprehend them better and from more perspectives. And to draw near, so that we don't stay entirely untouched, to be able to uncover a world in the drifting sequence of clauses which would otherwise be impossible to describe" (2010, 18).
- ⁹ Imre József Balázs analyzes Tompa's novel as a characteristic example of a new type of narrative, emerging in the Hungarian transborder literature of the last decades, one which problematizes regime changes and does not offer master narratives of a whole age (opposing the official interpretations of Central European regime changes). Instead, this new narrative "offered a view from below, as a microhistorical representation of events" (Balázs 2020, 130).

- ¹⁰ Marianne Hirsch defines postmemory as follows: “I use the term *postmemory* to describe the relationship of children of survivors of cultural or collective trauma to the experiences of their parents, experiences that they ‘remember’ only as the stories and images with which they grew up, but that are so powerful, so monumental, as to constitute memories in their own right” (1999, 8).
- ¹¹ “The paradoxes of indirect knowledge haunt many of us who came after. The formative events of the twentieth century have crucially informed our biographies and psyches, threatening sometimes to overshadow and overwhelm our own lives. But we did not see them, suffer through them, experience their impact directly. Our relationship to them has been defined by our very ‘post-ness’, and by the powerful but mediated forms of knowledge that have followed from it” (Hoffman 2004, 25).
- ¹² István Tompa (1924–1996) was an economist, politician, and writer, who published novels and short stories from the 1950s onwards. His works mentioned here are: *Három Demeter I., II.* (Three Demeters I., II., 1973/1980). In 1995, he published a new autobiographical work *Hogyan történhetett?* (How could it have happened?). Considering that István Tompa’s book holds no aesthetic relevance, a more in-depth comparison of the two works, beyond the referential aspects already mentioned, is not pertinent to this article.

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Genre hybridity, self-discovery and trauma: Andrea Tompa's *The Hangman's House*

Trauma. Postmemory. Coming-of-age story. Autobiographical novel. Family history. Transylvania.

Andrea Tompa's novel *A hóhér háza* (2010; Eng. trans. *The Hangman's House*, 2021) gives insight into a teenage girl's coming of age during the last decades of the Ceaușescu regime. Recounting the story of three generations of a Transylvanian intelligentsia family, from the 1940s until the fall of the dictatorship in 1989, the novel depicts all the crucial moments of 20th-century Transylvanian history. At its crux stands a journey of self-discovery, which gains meaning in the context of the family history. This duality is reflected in the hybridity of the novel's genre. Tompa's work is of a hybrid genre that, in addition to the dominant presence of the autobiographical novel, encompasses elements of the Bildungsroman and the family novel. Self-discovery and family history are joined together in the protagonist's character, as the traumatic experiences of the family past become crucial parts of the protagonist's self-knowledge and personality through postmemory.

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