

## Infinite Judgment: On Ádám Bodor’s Fiction

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**Abstract.** The article uses the idea of “infinite judgment” (borrowed from the field of logic) to reflect on the narrative techniques employed in Ádám Bodor later works, with a special focus on the novel *The Birds of Verhovina* (2011) and the collection *Nowhere* (*Sehol*, 2019). In a formal sense, the idea of infinite judgment breaks down the duality of the so-called positive and negative qualities of logical judgments (assertion and negation) by introducing a negative predicate into the structure of a positive proposition. Applying the same logic to Bodor’s prose, we can also grasp it as a poetic principle: the process of fictional world-creation does not follow the logic of either negation or affirmation and, through a subtle logical negation, opens up a series of infinite possibilities. This rhetorical strategy, in turn, becomes the appropriate vehicle for the articulation of a specific type of historical experience that we could designate as “potential history” (in opposition to the “actual” history of Eastern European dictatorships in the second half of the twentieth century). Bodor’s prose forces a confrontation with this potential history through narratives of transience and historical transformation whose ultimate horizon is human extinction.

**Keywords:** Ádám Bodor; Hungarian literature; infinite judgment; potential history; totalitarianism; fictional worlds; the end of the world

“I am mostly a non-writer”<sup>1</sup>

Ádám Bodor

One of the most widely recognized characteristics of Ádám Bodor’s prose in the secondary literature is that his works possess an unusually effective “world-creating” power.<sup>2</sup> We could also say that this cosmopoetic attitude is one of the most fundamental aesthetic features of Bodor’s oeuvre—in effect, it functions like Bodor’s

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1 “Főleg nem-író vagyok.” See, Bodor, *Az értelmezés útvesztői*, 128. All translations from this volume are mine.

2 In Gergely Angyalosi’s words: “Nevertheless, Ádám Bodor is perhaps the most characteristic ‘world-creator’ in the Hungarian prose literature of recent decades” [Márpedig Bodor Ádám az utóbbi évtizedek hazai prózairodalmának talán a legjellegzetesebb ‘világteremtője’]. See, Angyalosi, “Változóban a világ.”

signature. However, it is equally clear that the fictional worlds created by Bodor do not necessarily meet the expectations of his readers: not simply because readers do not always recognize their own concrete life circumstances in these works, but also because the depicted world is not always possible to conceptualize as an independent and complete “world” (as a stable totality of meanings). One of the most productive internal tensions of Bodor’s prose becomes visible here. Cosmopoetics as the formal law of Bodor’s prose (as the aesthetic principle of formalization) is not necessarily compatible with the structure of the world appearing in the work (at the level of content), which is precisely determined by its formlessness or “worldlessness.” One of the frequently recurring motifs of Bodor’s stories is that the world manifested in the text is on the verge of disappearing. The experience of reading, thus, coincides with the liquidation of the fictional world created by the work. This duality—according to which the creation of a fictional world fully coincides with its destruction—forms one of the basic principles of Bodor’s “autonomous” prose.<sup>3</sup>

How can we best describe the form that this seemingly irreconcilable tension between world-creation and world-destruction assumes in Bodor’s writings? As we can see, the difficulty consists of the fact that the reader is invited into a domain where the absolute affirmation and the absolute negation of the fictional world exposed by the story appear to be part of a single process. We can find an already familiar model for this confusing reconfiguration of affirmation and negation in the idea of “infinite judgment.” In order to describe some of the most compelling aspects of Bodor’s prose, I will use this concept on two different levels and in two different senses: on the one hand, as a formal-logical problem, and on the other hand, as a metaphysical principle. In this specific context, the concept of infinite judgment will allow us to reduce the cosmopoetic tension between form and content created by Bodor’s prose to a common denominator. In the formal sense, the idea of infinite judgment breaks down the duality of the so-called positive and negative quality of logical judgments (assertion and negation) by introducing a negative predicate into the structure of a positive proposition. Using the well-known example provided by Immanuel Kant, we can illustrate the basic form of this kind of judgment with the following sentence: “The soul is not mortal.” Applying the same logic to Bodor’s prose, we can also grasp it as a poetic principle: the process of fictional world-creation does not follow the logic of either negation or affirmation. At the same time, taken in the metaphysical sense, the concept of infinite judgment allows us to reinterpret the theological concept of the “last judgment.” In this context, the “day of judgment” no longer functions as the eschatological end of human history. Rather, it names the metaphysical structure of the present, of the actual “now.” We

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3 I use “autonomous” as the English translation of the Hungarian word “öntörvényű,” which is quite frequently used by Bodor in his interviews to describe his own poetics.

encounter here the vision of a world in which every single day is judgment day. In this sense, history itself unfolds as a perpetually happening infinite final judgment. But, in Bodor's works, this history reaches its ultimate limit in the image of human extinction. Facing this perpetual judgment day, we must imagine a world without humans. This limit-experience, however, is accessible to human beings only in an aesthetic register: we can only imagine a world without humans since we cannot be part of that world. Thus, the only way of experiencing this historical possibility consists of pushing the aesthetic judgment itself to its ultimate limits: the aesthetic relation to a world without humans becomes possible only when the aesthetic judgment is suspended and assumes the structure of an infinite judgment.

In his *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant described the structure of the infinite judgment as follows:

“Now by means of the proposition »The soul is not mortal« I have certainly made an actual affirmation as far as logical form is concerned, for I have placed the soul within the unlimited domain of undying beings. Now since that which is mortal contains one part of the whole domain of possible beings, but that which is undying the other, nothing is said by my proposition but that the soul is one of the infinite multitude of things that remain if I take away everything that is mortal. But the infinite sphere of the possible is thereby limited only to the extent that that which is mortal is separated from it, and the soul is placed in the remaining space of its domain. But even with this exception this space still remains infinite, and more parts could be taken away from it without the concept of the soul growing in the least and being affirmatively determined.”<sup>4</sup>

Kant's goal in this passage is to distinguish transcendental logic from general logic, since the latter would see this proposition merely as a positive or “affirmative” statement (“the soul is...”) without granting us access to the fundamental insight that, on the level of content, no positive definition actually applies in this case: while we know a bit more about what the soul is *not*, we still have no idea what the soul *is*. A purely formal analysis of the sentence that is merely concerned with the question whether a predicate is attributed to a subject does not suffice for transcendental logic, which tries to describe the overall gain in cognition yielded by the proposition. On this level, however, the conclusion is clear: nothing new is affirmatively determined by this proposition.

Hegel draws even more sinister conclusions, since in his interpretation the negative version of the infinite judgment undermines the form of judgment in general. Thus, the infinite judgment takes us to the very limits of logic itself since we are

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4 Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 207–9 (A72–73).

drawn into a domain where we can no longer actually speak of judgments anymore. Hegel's infamous absurd (or in his own terms, "nonsensical") examples succinctly illustrate the essence of the problem:

"Examples of negatively infinite judgments are easy to come by. It is a matter of picking determinations, one of which does not contain not just the determinateness of the other but its universal sphere as well, and of combining them negatively as subject and predicate, as when we say, for example, that spirit is not red, yellow, etc., is not acid, not alkali, etc., or that the rose is not an elephant, the understanding is not a table, and the like. – These judgments are *correct* or *true*, as it is said, and yet, any such truth notwithstanding, nonsensical and fatuous. – Or, more to the point, they are *not judgments at all*."<sup>5</sup>

This specific form of the infinite judgment is, therefore, defined by Hegel as a mere simulacrum of the form judgment: in a formal sense, it can still be correctly described as a "judgment" (because it connects a subject with a possible predicate in a way that, formally speaking, is true); but in terms of its content, it can no longer be classified as a meaningful judgment at all. In this sense, the infinite judgment is nothing more than a mere imitation of a judgment—it functions *as if* it were a judgment.

Putting aside the broader philosophical debates opened up by the problem of infinite judgment, I would like to focus on only one aspect of these discussions: on those logical (or rhetorical) moments in Bodor's fiction when the duality of affirmation and negation cannot be clearly maintained anymore. Needless to say, these complex issues raise several possible questions. But I will concentrate on one particular line of questioning: Is it possible to imagine a discourse that is entirely determined by the logic of infinite judgment? Can "literature" be understood as such a discourse? Despite the fact that Bodor often explicitly distances himself from such abstract interpretations, we can still find similar ideas in his own reflections on literature. For example, in a conversation with Zsolt Karácsony in 2020, he defined literature in the following way:

"Even now, I am (still) haunted by the seductive idea of the identity of nothing and something, of what is and what is not: these two concepts actually refer to the same thing, the ungraspable. According to this reasoning, the two poles of the pair of opposites mutually legitimize each other so that, ultimately, we lean towards the assumption or rather speculation that we are dealing with an essential identity. [...] But from the point of view of literature, it does not matter at all whether, for example, something 'happens' in a short story or not, whether something »is« or »isn't«."<sup>6</sup>

5 Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, 567 (12.70).

6 Bodor, *Az értelmezés útvesztői*, 249.

If the assertion of the existence of something and the denial of its existence can no longer be opposed to each other, literature cannot be described through the simple opposition of affirmation and negation. Even for Bodor, literature operates as a discourse that remains, to say the least, indifferent to this specific logical duality.

## Potential History

Bodor's third (and, up to date, last) novel, *The Birds of Verhovina* (2011), provides us several useful examples. This novel is sometimes treated as the final installment of a loosely defined "trilogy" following upon *The Sinitra Zone* (1992) and *The Archbishop's Visit* (1999) due to the stylistic and thematic similarities between the three texts—even though the three novels do not share any other concrete elements and Bodor himself rejected this collective description. *The Birds of Verhovina* follows the life of the character Adam shortly before and after the arrest and death of his foster father, Brigadier Anatol Korkodus. This personal loss coincides with other signs of the slow but irreversible disintegration of the old social order in Yablonska Polyana, a settlement in the fictional Verhovina. The subtitle of the novel, "Variations on the End of Days" (*Változatok végnapokra*), captures this decadent mood that is certainly not without apocalyptic overtones.<sup>7</sup>

In fact, the relation of the main title and the subtitle already establishes the logical pattern that will determine in a fundamental manner the composition of this fictional world. The main title refers to a central yet ambiguous negation at the heart of this fictional world that, at the same time, serves as the condition of the manifestation of this fictional world and as the sign of its impending destruction: the negation of the very existence of the birds of Verhovina. As we learn in the opening chapter of the book, there are no birds in Verhovina. At one point in its history, "some people" [valakik] came and deliberately disrupted their living environments. As a result, now even the migrating birds avoid the region. The absence of the birds, therefore, signifies that the "end of days" is near. But the novel weaves a complex metaphorical web around the motif of the "bird" and ends with their possible return. True, there are no birds in Verhovina. But, at the same time, it is also true that there are birds in Verhovina (both in the metaphorical and literal senses). Hence, a negation (of the birds of Verhovina) serves as the condition of establishing the repetitive possibilities

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7 For a discussion of the differences among Bodor's three novels from this perspective, see Smid, *Az ökokritika dilemmái*, 85: "Verhovina—unlike Sinistra and Dolina [the settings of Bodor's earlier novels]—is represented as simultaneously dying and, at the same time, mummified and conserved—caught in an infinite process of dying" [Verhovina—Sinistrával és Dolinával ellentétben—haldoklóként jelenik meg, ezzel párhuzamosan viszont mumifikált, konzerválódott is; végtelenné nyújtott a haldoklása].

of simultaneously creating and destroying this fictional world (in the form of these “variations” on the end of days).<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps the most surprising and most fundamental assumption of the novel in terms of its formal determinations is that this text was not written in Hungarian.<sup>9</sup> Needless to say, the reader of the original text experiences the fictional world depicted in the novel through the Hungarian language. But according to the internal law of the fictional world, this world is not manifested through the Hungarian language. So, the reader has to conclude that we are not reading the “original” novel here but rather the result of a fictitious mechanism of translation. The original text, however, is lost—in the sense that we will never know in what language this world was originally conceived. We encounter here the structure of a peculiar infinite judgment: the novel itself claims (in the language of Hungarian literature) that this fictional world is “not in Hungarian.” However, the statement that the original text is “not in Hungarian” does not reveal anything about the original language. The language of fiction (as the medium for creating a fictional world) is lost in the obscurity of an infinite judgment. In the process of reading the novel, the reader is invited to constantly reflect on the fact that these sentences, monologues, and dialogues are not actually spoken in Hungarian. So, the question emerges: What does it mean to read such a novel in Hungarian? It is nothing more than accepting the novel’s proposition that meaning is secondary to other aspects of language. In the text, the Hungarian language is thematized as a foreign language that some characters might be able to read more or less fluently. As a result, the Hungarian language appears in the text in its purely phonetic form: it emerges as mere sound without meaning. This is a different world, where the Hungarian reader is also just a stranger.

Since the act of “reading in Hungarian” is brought into the fictional world of the novel, its very meaning is transformed according to the aesthetic logic of this world. In this sense, the novel seems to offer us two fundamental reading strategies. Reading in Hungarian turns out to be the opposite of the reading strategy demanded by the mysterious text known in the novel as “Eronim Mox’s cookbook.” In the course of the story, Adam’s foster father, Anatol Korkodus, regularly consults this curious book—but not for the purposes of preparing meals. As we learn, this cookbook is also a “book of tales”:

“For only the lesser part of the cookery book was devoted to providing instructions for preparing meals, and the recipes for dishes using plants from meadow and garden were generally followed by some gnomish tale from

8 For a discussion of the bird motif in the novel, see Smid, *Az ökokritika dilemmái*, 82–8.

9 As Éva Bányai put it: “the text systematically distances itself from Hungarian discourse” [a szöveg következtesen eltolja magától a magyar nyelvű beszédet], see, Bányai, *Fordulat-próza*, 77.

the ever-mysterious history of Verhovina. And for readers who know the score, in these was hidden wise counsel for interpreting the unexpected.”<sup>10</sup>

This prophetic book, therefore, speaks to the characters in the unspecified original language of this fictional world and, as such, it forms a stark contrast with the various (mostly incomprehensible) books written in Hungarian that also appear in the story. We can formulate this contrast in quite precise terms: one of the books possesses an excess of meaning and no sound (as we will never know what this original language was); the other possesses a lack of meaning and only sound (as the characters read out loud from Hungarian books only to get used to the sound of this foreign language). Yet the two protocols of reading do have something in common: they both participate in the construction of the fundamentally “prophetic” temporality of this fictional world. While Eronim Mox’s cookbook explicitly assumes a prophetic hermeneutic function (as it allows its readers to make sense of incomprehensible events in reference to an apparently predictable future), reading Hungarian books is a ritual preparation for the messianic fulfillment of a local prophecy. The character Klara Burszen hires men like Adam to read out loud Hungarian books to her because the local “psychic” known as Aliwanka predicted from a teardrop that a Hungarian officer will arrive one day from across the mountain looking for her. As we later learn, the Hungarian officer does arrive—only too late. Klara Burszen is already dead. Precisely at the same moment when the function of the Hungarian language could be fulfilled in this fictional world (when it could become a means of meaningful communication by fulfilling the prophecy of meaning), we encounter a radical negation of this possibility in death. The world of the novel is irreconcilable with the conception of the Hungarian language as a means of meaningful communication. It essentially assumes the role of ritualistic dead language.<sup>11</sup>

This playful self-negation of the novel’s own language is already quite disorienting. But the systematic undermining of the duality of affirmation and negation in the text further increases the reader’s general sense of semantic ambiguity. The human interactions depicted in the world of the novel are characterized by the same uncertainty: it is not possible to know for certain the meaning of any act of communication. A short example from the last chapter of the novel, Adam’s conversation with the photographer character Gusty, illustrates this situation quite clearly:

“We’re putting up a couple of buildings here. You know, because of the hot water.

Has that been discussed with anyone?

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10 Bodor, *The Birds of Verhovina*, 117.

11 See, Lőrincz, “Elbeszélés és fordítás,” 291.



Once again, he just stares at me in amazement, unable to grasp my question. Apparently, the matter has been discussed. Or not, as the case may be.”<sup>12</sup>

Either yes or no. Either an affirmation or a negation. But, as we can see, it is impossible to choose with certainty. This “either yes or no” alternative without a real choice can also be tied to another dominant rhetorical figure in the text that determines the drift of the narrative at a fundamental level: the proliferation of “no, but...” statements. This logical structure strictly speaking introduces a double negation that never becomes a positive assertion of an identity in the world of the novel. It is neither a simple affirmation, nor a proper negation. For example, the text introduces the character Danczura as Adam’s niece. However, this assumption is immediately denied twice: “Danczura is not my niece, though everyone here, even Danczura herself, believes that she is.”<sup>13</sup> Just like his relationship with his foster father, Anatol Korkodus, this other “familial” tie is also defined by a social and legal fiction. Although the two characters are not related, according to the social rules of this limited community, they are nevertheless kins.

However, we must go farther. The novel is not satisfied with the description of this general phenomenon (that familial ties are partially defined by social fictions) and further complicates the story. As we also learn, Danczura was chosen by Adam himself from the same correctional institution that Adam was also taken in from by his foster father. Here we encounter another negation in the logic of the story, since Danczura is not *that* girl:

“But when, after several years, the request was approved and Anatol Korkodus was informed that the girl had been let go, and I went out to pick her up from the stopping train: as soon as she was illuminated by the crystalline lights of Verhovina, I said to myself, Adam, you’ve been bloody well had.”<sup>14</sup>

The girl we meet under the name Danczura is not the girl that she was supposed to be. According to the logic of this second negation, she is not simply “not Adam’s niece,” but not the non-niece of Adam chosen by Adam. So here, in a certain sense, we are dealing with a double negation, which, however, does not result in a positive statement: the two negations do not restore an original identity but proliferate possibilities moving in unpredictable directions. The identity of “not that non-niece” resembles an infinite judgment in the sense that the only thing we learn for certain about Danczura’s identity is that she can be anyone except for Adam’s actual niece. As a result, both statements (“Danczura is Adam’s niece” and “Danczura is

12 Bodor, *The Birds of Verhovina*, 266.

13 Bodor, *The Birds of Verhovina*, 209.

14 Bodor, *The Birds of Verhovina*, 209.



not Adam's niece") are simultaneously true and false. To use Hegel's terms, they are constantly on the verge of becoming "nonsensical and fatuous."

The novel's rhetorical moves, therefore, lead us into these logical mazes, where a series of negations (Danczura is not Adam's non-niece) assumes the force of a kind of "weak" affirmation (everyone thinks Danczura is Adam's niece). The social relations depicted in the novel often have a similar fictitious modality. Accepting the logic of this fictional world requires that the reader needs to perceive in each negated element a possible affirmation and treat each affirmative statement as a complicated but illogical consequence of a series of negations. Although the novel makes a number of formally speaking affirmative claims, in this world a proposition merely opens up an infinite series of possibilities without the weight of a concrete affirmation. There are no logical solutions here, only resignation as habit: this situation cannot be rationally legitimized, it can only be accepted by those who already got used to the fact that this is how this world works:

"Anatol Korkodus once explained how at the weekly fair in Velky Lukanar they recognised Verhovina's inhabitants, particularly those from Jablonska Polyana, by their fowls smell. [...] But we have grown used to it, we would not exchange our fate for any other."<sup>15</sup>

The law of double negation is replaced by the force of habit. This experience is simultaneously the law of the world of the novel and the fundamental principle of reading the text: the reader needs to get used to the fact that a different kind of logic applies here. Reading is the process of getting used to this logic.

On the thematic level, however, these rhetorical formations, despite their semantic ambiguities, aim at a clearly definable problem: they try to encode a possible historical experience on a linguistic level. It is therefore not surprising that the novel tries to capture this possible experience with a formula resembling an infinite judgment: "So, something had undoubtedly ended. But perhaps not quite everything."<sup>16</sup> While the first sentence formulates an existential negation (something is definitely over), the second one reinterprets this negation as an infinite set of possibilities. All we know is that not everything is about to come to an end, so something is "perhaps" still there. However, the identity of this "something" cannot be determined in the form of a particular content through a concrete predicate. This is, once again, a negation that merely opens up the possibility of an infinity of new propositions.

This is where the significance of the motif introduced by the novel's subtitle, the reference to "the end of days" [végnapok], becomes clear. In an interview, Bodor tried to consistently separate the concept of "the end of the world" [világvége] from

15 Bodor, *The Birds of Verhovina*, 259-260.

16 Bodor, *The Birds of Verhovina*, 123.

that of “the end of days” [végnapok]. While the “end of the world” evokes the idea of a “global cataclysm,” the concept of the “end of days” refers to a “social collapse, [...] the breakdown of the usual order of coexistence.”<sup>17</sup> While one designates a meta-physical situation, the other evokes a presumably quite common historical experience, which can be described on a formal level through the structure of an infinite judgment: the negation of a historical situation opens up a new temporal horizon without immediately providing a specific historical content for this novel situation.

This is why it is important for us to take seriously Bodor’s repeated protestation that readers should seek in his works more than just allegories of a specific historical situation: in this sense, Bodor’s texts offer us something other than “a panorama of the Ceaușescu era.”<sup>18</sup> But if what is at stakes in these stories and novels is *not* the “panorama of the Ceaușescu era,” then what are we supposed to look for in them? Bodor’s texts deny their reducibility to a concrete empirical historical situation and, thereby, give rise to an infinite series of possibilities. In this sense, these texts are not allegories of a particular historical conjuncture, but “variations” on “possible” historical experiences. When Róbert Bak asked Bodor whether “the ‘Bodorian’ world, which is present in all [his] works, will change or even disappear from reality in the foreseeable future,” Bodor clearly rejected such a possibility: “No, it will certainly not disappear in the foreseeable future. This world is within us, so its threat is constant” (p. 239). In other words, Bodor’s work is not about an easily identifiable historical past, but about a possible historical experience that is constantly present. Using Ariella Azoulay’s expression, its content is not empirical or “actual” history but “potential history.”<sup>19</sup>

Here the logic of infinite judgment becomes the key to a specific type of historical experience. The outlines of a conception of history emerge here according to which, for a history deprived of eschatological and teleological explanations, every single day is the “final day”—at least potentially. In this sense, Bodor’s novel reinterprets the theological concept of “last judgment” along the structure of an infinite judgment. As Giorgio Agamben writes in his interpretation of Kafka: “For man it is always already the day of the Last Judgment: the Last Judgment is his normal historical condition, and only his fear of facing it creates the illusion that it is still to come.”<sup>20</sup> Similarly, if we reject the concept of the “end of the world” (which is still based on the absolute duality of assertion and denial), the temporal structure of the “end of days” rewrites the structure of the “last judgment” as an immanent historical logic: “So, something had undoubtedly ended. But perhaps not quite everything.”<sup>21</sup>

17 Bodor, *Az értelmezés útvesztői*, 222.

18 Bodor, *Az értelmezés útvesztői*, 205.

19 Azoulay, *Potential History*.

20 Agamben, *The Man Without Content*, 113.

21 Bodor, *The Birds of Verhovina*, 123.

## Nowhere

If literature is not defined in terms of either affirmation or negation, where does it take place? The final short story of Bodor's latest collection *Nowhere* (*Sehol*, 2019) offers us an answer. As the concluding piece of the collection, the story "Rebi" delivers a final judgment of sorts on the entire volume—and on much of Bodor's oeuvre as well. It becomes immediately apparent here that the structure of infinite judgment in Bodor's works possesses both a temporal and a spatial dimension in a way that collapses the very difference between fictional world-formation and world-destruction. While this temporal structure can be grasped through the idea of "potential history," the spatial dimension can be described through Bodor's conception of "nowhere" (the negation of place that, nevertheless, remains a pure potential space). These two aspects are impossible to separate from each other as it is the temporalization of space that turns it into the non-place (or the negated place) of "nowhere," which in turn becomes the "topological" location of this "potential history." To put it in more concrete terms: Bodor's insistence that his works offer us more than "a panorama of the Ceaușescu era" also suggests that the locations of his stories cannot be reduced to concrete "Eastern European" settings. Therefore, this "nowhere" does not function as the absolute negation of space (that would simply do away with any possible reference to spatiality) but rather as a means of creating an experience of space that could take place potentially anywhere.<sup>22</sup>

"Rebi" is told by an unnamed first-person narrator who, in the middle of the night, finds himself awakened by the sirens and loudspeakers of unidentifiable state officials arriving at his homestead in response to some kind of a massive catastrophe. While the story itself does not explicitly name this disaster unfolding in the background, several telling signs point toward a nuclear explosion. The loudspeakers instruct the narrator to stay in his house, go down to the basement, block the doors with barrels of water, and lay down on the ground with hands behind his head. Our narrator is quietly defiant because his wife, Rebi, is missing. She had left earlier that evening and did not return home. When the narrator first heard the sirens, he thought that the police might have finally brought her home. In a brief flashback scene, we learn that the narrator and his wife had just reconciled after a period of conflict. Shortly after they had fallen asleep, they were awakened by what readers will no doubt interpret as an atomic explosion: "And indeed, towards the East, a light appeared in the sky, and an enormous orange-like cloud rose above the horizon, and the sky became just like the prophet described it."<sup>23</sup> In the ensuing alarm,

22 In Beáta Thomka's words, Bodor's stories "take place *nowhere* and could happen *anywhere*" [*sehol sem játszódna és bárhol megeshetne*]. See, Thomka, "Bodor Ádám imaginárius térképe," 126.

23 Bodor, *Sehol*, 147. All translations from *Sehol* are mine.

the narrator's goats (the source of their livelihood) ran away, and Rebi took off after them never to return: "But Rebi is nowhere" ["Rebi meg sehol"].<sup>24</sup>

At this point in the story, the neighboring family shows up at the narrator's house asking for shelter because they do not have a basement. The narrator takes them in, and the rest of the story simply narrates some of the time they spend together in the basement waiting for events to unfold. They notice through the small basement window that a black rain like "ink" starts falling: "Outside, the world is dark blueish."<sup>25</sup> A small altercation develops between the narrator and the father of the Nussbaum family as the narrator wants to leave the basement—allegedly to urinate. Nussbaum, however, insists on strictly following lockdown protocols and does not want him to go anywhere. Outside, the dark rain is replaced by falling snow. The story ends as the narrator stares through the basement window hoping to spot his wife:

"I pick a corner in the basement, but I will wait to relieve myself. In the meantime, I will keep looking out through the dirty, hazy basement window into the snow-white world. I might spot Rebi approaching with the goats, or just all by herself, without the goats, or at least her footprints in the fresh snow. So that I can yell out to her that she can't find me upstairs, because I am in the basement with the Nussbaums."<sup>26</sup>

In many regards, this story puts on display some of the most common narrative moves of Bodor's prose. Just like in *The Birds of Verhovina*, we are presented with an "end of days" scenario. The catastrophic event (that had been already foretold by a prophecy and functions as the ultimate cause of the narrative) has already taken place. The story unfolds in the wake of this disastrous occurrence and, therefore, merely narrates the slow dissolution of the fictional world that these characters inhabit (this is what Samuel Beckett called an "endgame"). In this sense, the atomic explosion is simultaneously the cause of the narrative manifestation of this world and the cause of its unavoidable destruction. The story itself occupies the space of this minimal distance between the fictional creation and destruction of its world. In the middle of this slow disintegration, however, the narrative is repeatedly punctuated by expressions of the narrator's mundane quasi-messianic longing for Rebi's return. As the narrative world is reduced to the confined space of the basement, outside everything disappears in an all-consuming whiteness. This whiteness (resembling the whiteness of the paper that the story was printed on), however, remains ambiguous: it is simultaneously the end of the world and the possibility of arrival—and of imprinting traces (Rebi's footprints). When Rebi and the narrator were awakened by the explosion, they experienced the event in this duality: "What

24 Bodor, *Sehol*, 146.

25 Bodor, *Sehol*, 149.

26 Bodor, *Sehol*, 151.

is this supposed to be? We could feel that something is. Or something wants to be.”<sup>27</sup> The existential striving of this unspecified something that wants to come into being refers us back to the historical experience at the heart of *The Birds of Verhovina*: “So, something had undoubtedly ended. But perhaps not quite everything.”<sup>28</sup>

Rebi’s position is identified with this “nowhere,” a term that clearly takes on a dual meaning. In one sense, these stories take place “in the middle of nowhere”: in insignificant marginal locations whose very existence appears to be irrelevant from the perspective of the mainstream of history. In another sense, however, these stories present us with the active production of a different kind of “nowhere” as a mere potential space. The whiteness that swallows the world at the end of the story is a good representation of this spatial logic. What we are left with when all is said and done is the whiteness or emptiness of the space of potential history where something unknown is striving to come into being. The end of the world, therefore, produces this empty space and a little appendix: the white space of a world under erasure (the outside) and a dark hole (the basement). This is the last narratable moment of this world: the spatial division between the basement and the empty whiteness functions as the very condition of narration itself. The only reason why we have the story “Rebi” is that its world is about to be eliminated. At the same time, the narrative can be maintained only as long as this final division between the basement and the world is preserved. In this sense, the true accomplishment of this story is that it makes visible this “nowhere” in a narrative setting.

The paradigmatic topological structure of Bodor’s fiction is often taken to be the “zone”: a carefully policed closed world with its own often seemingly irrational laws that produce fundamentally “totalitarian” structures governing human lives on the edge of mere survival. The three novels (and a number of Bodor’s stories) undoubtedly justify this interpretation. But in Bodor’s later works, we see another paradigm emerge: that of the “nowhere.” In a sense, the zone was already a location of this nowhere, since Bodor’s fictional zones were located in marginal social and historical spaces. More importantly, however, the zone has always been threatened by the temporal structures that are opened up by potential history. Repetition is the necessary means of territorialization of this zone: in order for the zone to possess some ontological consistency, its borders and institutions have to be repeatedly performed. As we know, however, iteration is simultaneously an enabling condition and a threat. This temporal dimension introduces the inherent experience of the “end of days”: transience is the mode of existence of all historical constellations.<sup>29</sup>

27 Bodor, *Sehol*, 147. This is a tendentious literal translation of the narrator’s words: “Ez most vajon mi akar lenni. Mert megérettük, hogy valami van. Vagy akar lenni.”

28 Bodor, *The Birds of Verhovina*, 123.

29 For discussions of the role of repetition in Bodor’s prose, see Bengi, “A szövegszegmentumok iterációja mint az epikai világmegalkotása,” 114–31.

But in stories like “Rebi” the zone is no longer the dominant spatial structure—unless we interpret the “basement” as the ultimate reduction of the zone to its minimal structures (an emergency situation establishes prison-like relations between the “subject” and the “neighbor” while a significant “other” remains emphatically absent). While the “state of exception” produced by the catastrophe does resemble some of the totalitarian structures that dominate Bodor’s fiction, here the existential threat produced by the catastrophe is not life under dictatorship but a direct confrontation with radical human finitude (in the form of the possibility of human extinction). This is why we can distinguish here two separate levels of the potential history that is recorded in Bodor’s works. On the one hand, Bodor’s historical insight appears to be similar to Hannah Arendt’s conclusions in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*:

“Apart from such considerations—which as predictions are of little avail and less consolation—there remains the fact that the crisis of our time and its central experience have brought forth an entirely new form of government which *as a potentiality and an ever-present danger is only too likely to stay with us from now on*, just as other forms of government which came about at different historical moments and rested on different fundamental experiences have stayed with mankind regardless of temporary defeats—monarchies, and republics, tyrannies, dictatorships and despotism.”<sup>30</sup>

Arendt’s theory of totalitarianism clearly resonates with Bodor’s view of the ever-present danger of the experience that he recorded in his fiction. As Arendt argues, totalitarianism was a radical innovation in the political history of the West and the history of humanity—something unprecedented came into being with the first totalitarian structures of the twentieth century. In a sense, the birth of totalitarianism broke history into two halves: there is now the time “before” and the time “after” the political invention of totalitarianism. Whether we like it or not, we now forever live in the “time after” totalitarianism—which means that even if totalitarian systems are defeated or even if they collapse under their own weight, totalitarianism remains an “ever-present danger” as an indelible part of human political possibilities. The “zone” in Bodor appears to be a poetic articulation of this meaning of potential history. In other words, his stories are not concerned with the correct empirical description of the Ceaușescu era but rather with the “ever-present danger” of totalitarianism since totalitarian tendencies can now emerge at any point in human history.

However, the similarities between Arendt and Bodor end here. In the same passage that I quoted above, Arendt tempers the permanent threat of totalitarianism with the promise of a new birth:

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30 Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 478. Emphasis added.

“But there remains also the truth that every end in history necessarily contains a new beginning; this beginning is the promise, the only »message« which the end can ever produce. Beginning, before it becomes a historical event, is the supreme capacity of man; politically, it is identical with man’s freedom. *Initium ut esset homo creatus est*—»that a beginning be made man was created« said Augustine. This beginning is guaranteed by each new birth; it is indeed every man.”<sup>31</sup>

Arendt’s celebration of the miracle of birth as a radical new beginning is alien to Bodor’s thinking. For Bodor, every end in history remains an ambiguous experience—even if it contains a new beginning. In this sense, his position is closer to Jacques Derrida’s insight that the death of the other each time marks the singular end of the world (“chaque fois unique, la fin du monde”).<sup>32</sup> It is not the birth of the human being that marks this miraculous singularity but the end of the world. Rebi’s absence represents precisely this death in the story, which coincides with the singular end of the world.<sup>33</sup>

This is why the ultimate horizon of this potential history in Bodor’s works is human extinction. In other words, potential history in Bodor cannot be easily reduced to the political experience of totalitarianism and the historical experience of transience. While the experience of historical change might be possible to localize in concrete situations, the “end of days” motif ultimately refers us to a world without human beings. This ultimate limit experience is clearly marked in both *The Birds of Verhovina* and *Nowhere*. Once again, Eronim Mox’s mysterious cookbook provides us some guidance:

31 Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 478–79.

32 “For each time, and each time singularly, each time irreplaceably, each time infinitely, death is nothing less than an end of the world. Not only one end among others, the end of someone or of something in the world, the end of a life or of a living being. Death puts an end neither to someone in the world nor to one world among others. Death marks each time, each time in defiance of arithmetic, the absolute end of the one and only world, of that which opens as a one and only world, the end of the unique world, the end of the totality of what is or can be presented as the origin of the world for any unique living being, be it human or not.” See, Derrida, “Rams,” 140.

33 This point also highlights a crucial tension at the heart of potential history in Bodor’s fiction: the irreducible difference between the radical singularity of concrete historical experiences and the iterative generality of possible historical experiences. Several elements of *The Birds of Verhovina* reflect on this duality of singularity and repetition. For example, the fictional species of insects, the so-called “lakantusz-bogár” that can be found exclusively in Verhovina, represents the radical singularity of this unique place and its history—it is something that cannot be repeated. Similarly, the parts of this fictional world that are literally “frozen in ice” introduce a temporal logic that goes against temporalization, transience, and repetition. While repetition is unquestionably the one of the major organizing principles of this fictional world, the text also articulates the internal limits of iterability.



“For some reason, Eronim Mox, after providing instructions on how to prepare îles flottantes, in particular those little clouds of foam that float on its surface, touches in his story upon the times when humans will no longer inhabit the earth. That these clouds will continue to scud across the sky just as if there were someone admiring them down below. About why they should do so then, there’s not one word.”<sup>34</sup>

The narrative paradox of catastrophe fiction meets here the aesthetic paradox of a world without human beings. The narrative paradox of the end of the world consists of the basic fact that the event must be narrated “in advance” before it actually takes place. In other words, the end of the world by necessity must be announced as a preordained future, since it cannot be narrated as a past event. Hence the fundamentally prophetic orientation of Bodor’s text. The narrative temporality of the absolute catastrophe is inconsistent with the past tense. At best, a slowly unfolding catastrophe might be narrated in terms of the lived experience of prolonged disintegration (as we know from T. S. Eliot, sometimes the world ends with a “whimper” rather than a “bang”). This is why Anatol Korkodus’s “report” could be seen as a desperate catalogue of the final days. It is an attempt to archive whatever could be salvaged from a world destined to disappear.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, in “Rebi,” the story must stop short right before the complete elimination of the fictional world, and we are offered a glimpse of what we assume to be the final moments of the characters’ lives.

But Bodor’s passage above clearly demonstrates that the ultimate horizon of potential history is accessible to us only in the aesthetic register. The indifference of nature to human existence is presented here as an aesthetic problem. The book suggests that the “beauty” of nature will continue to exist even after human beings no longer exist. As the reader of this prophecy, Adam does not understand how such a thing could be possible. How could nature be “beautiful” if there is nobody to appreciate this beauty? The aesthetic paradox of a beautiful world without human beings, therefore, turns into a metaphysical question. Adam seems to repeat here Nietzsche’s conclusion—for him, the existence of the world can be justified only aesthetically.<sup>36</sup> The complicated question this problem raises is whether the very idea of the world (in addition to being a cosmological and metaphysical problem) is by definition an aesthetic category. Regardless of how we would want to approach this problem, Bodor’s novel clearly marks this paradox as a limit of the human imagination: Adam’s incomprehension suggests that it is impossible for him (and, maybe,

34 Bodor, *The Birds of Verhovina*, 271.

35 See, Smid, *Az ökokritika dilemmái*, 68.

36 As Nietzsche put it famously in *The Birth of Tragedy*: “we have our highest dignity in our significance as works of art – for it is only as an *aesthetic phenomenon* that existence and the world are eternally justified” (143).

even for us) to imagine a truly non-human or post-human world that is not already contaminated by aesthetic (and, therefore, human) categories.

Here the aesthetic judgment itself becomes the site of this metaphysical paradox. To judge the world aesthetically means that we inscribe the human being in this world: we assume that the world was (at least partially) made for human contemplation. But to be able to judge the world without human beings, we must suspend the aesthetic orientation. This is the most radical form of infinite judgment that the idea of potential history leads to in Bodor's fiction: the radical negation of the human being merely opens up infinite new possibilities of existence that are beyond the human imagination. Adam's confrontation with the possibility of a world without humans raises the question: Can literature take us to this limit? If literature is neither affirmation, nor negation, if it is indeed a discourse of infinite judgments, does it necessarily involve the suspension of the aesthetic relation?

The final scene of "Rebi," therefore, appears to be a staging of the aesthetic situation. The narrator, located in an isolated position of observation (the basement), stares through a frame (the dirty basement window), at an aesthetic object (the world covered with radioactive ash). His attitude is characterized by a utopian or messianic longing for happiness (the return of the other). To expect this kind of consolation from the aesthetic experience might be futile, but Bodor's works suggest that the promise of art consists of this hope for the return of the missing other. What does the narrator see? And what does the reader see in the narrator's presumably futile longing? At the end of the story (and, at the same time, at the end of literature in general), we as readers are invited to stare into this empty whiteness—*but no longer in aesthetic terms*. The ultimate challenge of the story is to rely on aesthetic means to provoke this non-aesthetic response. As we confront here an extreme possibility of potential history (in the form of human extinction), this limit-experience becomes accessible to us only through the paradoxical suspension of the aesthetic judgment. This, then, is the end of aesthetic judgment, which reaches the limits of its historical destiny in the form of an infinite judgment: this world is not human—this world is not beautiful.

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