

The influence of Hasidism in the poetic oeuvre of Szilárd Borbély

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ABSTRACT

The paper examines the influence of the literature of Hasidism on the oeuvre of contemporary Hungarian poet Szilárd Borbély (1963–1914). It analyzes the workings of regional cultural memory and the memory of the exterminated rural Jewish population, as well as of the former representatives of Hasidism in Hungary in Borbély's works. It also examines the poetics of his collection of poems *Funereal Splendour* and, more specifically, the fusion of Christian and Jewish elements, in which the principle of bricolage prevails, creating a specific, culturally hybrid poetic language. The most important example of this hybridization is the appearance of the messianic motif in the oeuvre, to which this study devotes special attention. Finally, the use of a Hasidic story-type in two of Borbély's works is also discussed.

KEYWORDS

contemporary Hungarian literature, Hasidism, bricolage, cultural hybridity, cultural memory, Jewish culture, Hasidic stories, reception

OVERVIEW: TEXTS AND CONTEXTS

At the turn of the millennium, an exciting trend began to unfold in Hungarian literature. As has been outlined in the introduction, the reception of (neo)Hasidism in literature at the end of the

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20th century and the turn of the millennium, above all the Hungarian publication of [Martin Buber \(1995\)](#) and Jiří Langer's collection of stories *Nine gates* (*Devět bran; Kilenc kapu* in Hungarian)¹ (2000) began to have an impact on literature and, as a result, more works of fiction were produced. Although the impact is marginal, since only a few works actually appeared, it is a phenomenon of unparalleled intensity as regards reception. To mention only the most important, these – which have been treated in a separate chapter – are Géza Röhrig's imaginary Hasidic stories, *The rebbe's parrot of broken feathers* (*A rebbe tollatépett papagája*) (1999), Péter Kárpáti's 'klezmer piece' the *Fourth gate* (*Negyedik kapu*) (2004), and Martin Boross's 'Kabbalistic game', *Thirty-six: The story of a Pseudo-Messiah* (*Harminchatok – Egy álmessias története*) (2012) – all of them unique works born from the encounter between the author and Hasidism, but their uniqueness also lies in their place in the author's oeuvre, since none of the three authors has returned to Hasidic themes – at least not so far.²

In this context of reception history, Szilárd Borbély plays a unique role, both because his oeuvre ended regrettably early and because, unlike the authors mentioned above, his Hasidic inspirations were not just a stage in his oeuvre but were also an integral part of several of his works, and in such a way as to reflect the shift in his poetics. Their emergence marks a change in the direction of the poetic oeuvre, first represented by *Funereal Splendour* (*Halotti pompa*), which reflects on the tragic events in the author's life before Christmas 2000.

Although Jewish motifs are occasionally found in his earlier works, most notably in the volumes *Long Day Away* (*Hosszú nap el*) (1993) and *What Place* (*Ami helyet*) (1999). But Jewish, and specifically Hasidic, motifs take on a more prominent role in *Funereal Splendour*, the central work of his oeuvre. It should also be noted, however, that in the discursive texts of Borbély's oeuvre, and above all in the author's essays, Hasidism is thematized in several places. From this point of view, his article *One Road, Nine Paths* (*Egy út, kilenc ösvény*), written on the occasion of Jiří Langer's collection of Hasidic legends *Nine gates* (*Kilenc kapu*), is significant.³ In this study, however, I will focus exclusively on the fictional poetry of Szilárd Borbély.

First and foremost, I will focus on *Funereal Splendour*, a collection of poems that has been interpreted by the reception as a marked change of direction, reflecting on the biographical background and the radicality of his poetic procedures. From our point of view, the shift that occurred between the first edition of *Funereal Splendour* (2004), which included the *Sequences of Holy Week* (*Nagyheti Szekvenciák*) and the *The Sequences of Amor and Psyche* (*Ámor & Psziché Szekvenciák*), and the second edition (2006), which was expanded with *Hasidic Sequences* (*Haszid Szekvenciák*) and the poem *The Hanged Man* (*Az Akasztott Ember*), is not insignificant. Not only because of the new subject matter and the addition of a third cultural frame of reference, but also because of the resulting complication of the poetic devices and poetic procedures at work in the first edition. The tradition referred to in the work becomes bipartite, and

¹Throughout this paper, titles are given in English translation, with the original titles given in brackets at the first mention.

²I examined the impact of Hasidism on Hungarian literature in a separate monograph: [Száz \(2022\)](#).

³The essay was originally written at the request of Lucie Szymanowska, the author's Czech translator. It was published in her translation, accompanied by Borbély's poems, in the thematic block *Souvislosti* 2005/1. The essay, which is important for the reception of Hasidism, was not published in Hungarian by the author, but thanks to Szymanowska I was able to publish the manuscript: [Száz \(2020\)](#), 329–330.



the gestures of transcription thus shift towards polysemy. The fact that the *Hasidic Sequences* were originally part of the plan for the volume was discussed by the author himself in an interview.⁴

Between the two editions, the drama *While the Baby Jesus of our Hearts Sleeps* (*Míg alszik szívünk Jézuskája*) – whose “Galician” *shtetl* world places the plot of the nativity drama in a Hasidic milieu – was published. Some of the insert poems have also been incorporated into the *Hasidic Sequences*. The Purim spiel *The rooster is calling* (*Szól a kakas már*) (2013), which is perhaps Borbély’s most entertaining work, is set in a completely Hasidic setting, with the main character Eizik Taub from Nagyálló, drawing on the Hasidic stories associated with it. The bygone world of Hasidism is also evoked in the drama *The man from Olaszliszka* (*Az Olaszliszkai*); some of the Jewish motifs in *The Dispossessed* (*Nincstelének*) are Hasidically inspired.

Thus, after the change of direction that began with *Funereal Splendour*, Jewish and Hasidic elements are increasingly introduced into the poet’s oeuvre, the function of which is not to create some kind of mimetic fictional world, but rather imitation is characterized by reflectivity, references by cultural complexity, and adapted elements of tradition by restructuring and contradiction. These procedures often bring into play the plasticity or interchangeability of concepts.

If we examine the impact of Hasidism in the works of Szilárd Borbély, we are immediately confronted with the problem of the delimitation of the concept, first of all its indistinguishability from the concept of Jew(ry). If we look at his use of the word, *Hasidic* seems to be merely a synonym for *Jewish*, the two words interchangeable, and the word fits well into the world of Borbély’s poetics due to the metonymic and synecdochic relationship of the two words. Yet the author does not publish his cycle under the title *Jewish Sequences* but *Hasidic Sequences* (some of the pieces of which he published in journals under titles such as “*A Hasidic Commentary*” or “*Another Hasidic Commentary*” and so on). The Joshua of Lugobych in the *Reading Sequence* (*Olvasás szekvenciája*) and the bleeding Baby Jesus elsewhere are also given the adjective *Hasidic* instead of *Jewish*. All of this suggests that this manifest tradition, within the cultural horizon defined by the use of the term, plays an inescapable role in the interpretation of Borbély’s poetics.

We can conclude that the traits of Judaism and Hasidism in Borbély’s texts are transtextual phenomena that often go back to specific prefaces or incorporate religious concepts and notions into the poetic language. In simple terms, Hasidism affects the author as a reading experience, since he himself has nothing to do with the movement, coming, so to speak, from the outside. The sources are clear from the notes in his volumes and from interview comments: first and foremost, Martin Buber’s and Jiří Langer’s collections of Hasidic stories, with their extensive prefaces, and Gershom Scholem’s works on Judaism. In addition to these sources, available in Hungarian, however, we must also take into account the fact that Borbély may have gained insights into the world of Hasidism through other works as well. For example, he may have read in the original the essays and studies of Martin Buber, whose view of Hasidism, as we will see later, laid the foundations for Borbély’s ideas. At this point it is also necessary to emphasize that it is not so much works of fiction but discursive works that play a role in the incorporation of

⁴⁴“The original plan of *Funereal Splendour* included a Third Book. However, I felt I no longer had the strength for it, so I completed the book a year and a half ago. After reading the proofs many times, I had to realize that I could not avoid writing this third part. Then – I don’t know. We are in God’s hands.” N. N. (2005).



this tradition, and that in the case of Borbély's Hasidism it is therefore a matter of the reception of reception, and of the representation of representation.

That this neo-Hasidic literature was thoroughly studied by the author is demonstrated by some relevant passages in his essays, and by some statements he made in interviews. Some of the features and concepts of Hasidism, as we will see in the next section, had important implications for the spirit of Borbély's thought. It is from these insights that we can approach the paradigms constituted by the mobilization of Hasidic elements in his fiction. The third section looks at the works of the creative period that began with *Funereal Splendour* and lasted until his death.

REGIONALITY AND MEMORY

We have seen that in Borbély's interviews and essays, the disappearance of Hasidic culture as a consequence of the Holocaust becomes the symbol of the tragedy of the European Jewry as a whole. This synecdochic relationship is also reflected in his fiction where he commemorates the Jewish communities of the Northeastern region of Hungary, which was greatly influenced by Hasidism.

In several groups of poems in the *Hasidic Sequences*, there are *tsaddikim* from Hungary who make various pseudo-Kabbalistic commentaries on the events of creation, the Messiah, the Self, or various Biblical-Kabbalistic motifs: for example, Yitzchak Isaac Taub (Eizik Taub in Hungarian), the *tsaddik* from Nagykálló, is an iconic figure of Hungarian Hasidism, who, together with Moshe Teitelbaum from Sátoraljaújhely, is considered to be the Hungarian founder of the movement. The two are regarded as heads of the global Hasidic tradition, and both are mentioned in collections of Hasidic stories (including Buber's and Langer's). In contrast, the third figure, Rabbi Hersele Friedmann, the Olaszliszka *tsaddik* and disciple of Teitelbaum, is recorded in the Hungarian tradition and sources. The order of the names also shows their importance: the rabbi of Nagykálló is dominant, while the rabbi of Olaszliszka appears only a few times in the poems. In this group of poems, however, neither the cultural background and regional embeddedness of the rabbis, nor the figures of the rabbis as revealed by these sources, nor the stories they tell, play any role, with one or two exceptions. They are mostly reduced to names of persons whose wise sayings and commentaries are reminiscent of the Kabbalistic Musar with its strong influence on Hasidic homiletics. Traces of this 'genre' tradition can be found in popularizing neo-Hasidic works, and Borbély seems to imitate that. The inclusion of the three figures can be interpreted as a gesture of memory in the context of the cycle. In the notes to the book, the author himself briefly refers to the three figures he included, also emphasizing their regional context.⁵ The evocation of the three figures as emblems of a culture destroyed in the Holocaust was conceived in the spirit of commemoration, although with a very different motivation than in the case of the *Sequences of Holy Week*.

There is only one poem in the cycle that can be considered an adaptation of a story linked to the rabbis in question, and that is the *Sequence of Eizik Taub (Taub Eizik Szekvenciája)*. In it, the

⁵The three protagonists of the *Hasidic Sequences* are three great figures of Hasidism in Hungary: the *tsaddikim* Eizik Taub (1751–1821) of Nagykálló, Moses Teitelbaum (1759–1841) of Sátoraljaújhely and Hersele Friedmann (1808–1874) of Olaszliszka, who were considered miracle workers and are still venerated as saints; there are annual pilgrimages to their graves." Borbély (2006), 199.



author rewrites (or rather modifies) the legendary story of the purchase of the song *The rooster is calling*, taking it out of its original context.⁶

Poem *XXI* also occupies a special place in the cycle, firstly because the *tsaddik* of Nagyálló appears in this case not as an utterer of wise sayings and commentaries, but as a protagonist, and, secondly, because it is the only poem in the group of poems that use Holocaust narratives to commemorate a specific and named Jewish community, namely that of Nagyálló. In the poem, deportation provides the narrative, the legendary old-time *tsaddik* becomes a victim along with his community, his figure appearing among those on the ramp in the death camp:

“...there he strode on the ramp
The Old Man, who had seen the Saint, and
the Hasidic people of Kálló knew that
next to him went He. [...]
Then in front of the officer
doing the sorting, to the left
Eizik Taub the Saint went with his own.”⁷

The miracle working rabbi of Olaszliszka, Hersele Friedman, appears as an icon of memory in Borbély’s drama *The Man from Olaszliszka (Az Olaszliszkai)*. The title evokes the societal discussion of the tragic lynching of 2006,⁸ which caused a great stir, but the use of the capital letter in the original title transforms the adjectival form of the place name into a personal name. Although this procedure goes against the use of designations, it is clear that it refers to the rabbi, Hersele Friedman. Parallel to the events of the lynching is the thread of the plot which is linked to the figure of the Stranger through whom the Jewish past of the region is thematized. All we learn about the figure who refers to his great-great-great-grandparents is that he is a descendant in search of the cemetery and the *tsaddik*’s tomb. The Stranger searching for traces of memory in Olaszliszka and is confronted everywhere with nothing but oblivion turns the village into an exemplar of the disappearance of rural Jewish culture. It is a common phenomenon that after the Holocaust even the traces and memories of the former Jewish population slowly disappear, with the locals recycling their gravestones as well as their buildings. Borbély mentions this in his essay *Auschwitz Tomorrow (Auschwitz holnap)*,⁹ as well as in a chapter of the novel *Kafka’s Son (Kafka fia)*,¹⁰ where he goes into more detail.¹¹

The case of the synagogue in Olaszliszka is iconic in this respect, and it is also alluded to in the drama by the Villager: “We tore the church / apart long ago, we needed the bricks and stones, whatever there was, / everyone took them to the house, the barn, the shed, the

⁶For more on this, see Száz (2016), 361–304.

⁷Borbély (2006), 183–184.

⁸A non-Roma teacher, Lajos Szögi was beaten to death for appearing to have hit with his car a young Roma girl by the girl’s relatives in front of his daughters, who were in the car. The girl turned out to have been unhurt in the accident.

⁹Borbély (2008), 113.

¹⁰Borbély (2021), 25–26.

¹¹Incidentally, in one of the scenes of the novel *The Dispossessed – Nincstelenség* – he relates the story of the survivor Mócsi and the looting of his family’s house; Borbély (2013a), 188–191.



outhouse / to work it into an outhouse. Only one wall is standing. And what for? – / I ask you, so they can bend there?”¹² The slow destruction of the synagogue built by the Olaszliszka tsaddik, Hersele Friedman, became a symbol in Hungarian cultural discourse, the process recorded in Miklós Jancsó’s short film *Presence (Jelenlét)*, filmed in three parts over several years. (Today, a monument reconstructing the façade of the building stands.) János Kőbányai commemorates it in his essay *Hungarian Wailing Wall (Magyar siratófal)*,¹³ returning to it in his 2011 article, precisely because of the events in Olaszliszka (and the then recent events in Gyöngyöspata, where members of radical far-right groups provoked local Roma to fights). In it, pointing to a wider social problem, he writes that in his experience the “eliminated” rural Jewish population was replaced by the Roma, and the example of Olaszliszka shows the role they played in covering traces, i.e. in removing bricks.¹⁴

Borbély must have been inspired by this discourse, since the Stranger is not a pilgrim on the rebbe’s *Jahrtzeit* (there are several references to Hasidic farewells on the day of his death in the text) but is here partly as a cultural tourist and partly for work, although in his monologue he had previously mentioned his family ties in a personal reflection: “It is my job to search with my camera / all the places where the signs of the past are already appearing.”¹⁵ In Borbély’s drama, the figure of the Villager is an envoy of forgetting, since the ideological conflict with the Stranger is developed along the lines of the opposite attitude towards remembering. The disappearing sites of memory are eradicating precisely the traces of the people of memory: “There was a people here that cannot forget [...] They are no longer alive here, so let them disappear at last!”¹⁶ The Stranger argues with the religious commandment to remember, since memory is not only a *mitzvah* but also a duty: “To tell your children / again and again who your ancestors were, what their fate hid...”¹⁷ The phrase is a loose paraphrase of the Old Testament commandment of *zakhor*, i.e. remembering: “On that day tell your son, ‘I do this because of what the Lord did for me when I came out of Egypt.’” (Ex 13:8). The Passover Seder fulfilling the command to remember the Exodus from Egypt is a major reference in the drama, appearing in the story in the introduction: “The *tsaddik* answered thus [sic!]: ‘We remember at Passover that we have been brought out of the house of bondage’”.¹⁸ He also alludes to the story of the *Chad Gadya*, *The Story of the Goat*, recited at the end of the rite, a chain story with an eschatological perspective that is recited by the Little Girl in the last scene of the play. Likewise, a little girl quotes it as a fragment referring to the Passover Seder, in poem XVIII of the *Hasidic Sequences*, as she is led towards the crematoria.¹⁹

Alongside ritual forms of memory, the Stranger represents secular cultural memory. In the conclusion of his influential book on Jewish memory, Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, inspired by

¹²Borbély (2011a), 21.

¹³Kőbányai (1990), 33–45.

¹⁴Kőbányai (2011) (A debate that followed Peter György’s reply created misunderstandings on both sides.)

¹⁵Borbély (2011a), 20.

¹⁶Ib., 18–19.

¹⁷Ib., 19.

¹⁸Ib., 7.

¹⁹The opening line of the poem – “Why is this night so special?” – recited by Otto Moll, comes from the Haggadah of Passover, and is addressed by the father to the youngest member of the family.



Plato, distinguishes between two forms of memory, *mneme* (“memory”) and *anamnesis* (“recollection”). While the former is an uninterrupted, continuous recollection, the latter is the recollection of things that have been forgotten.²⁰ The position represented by the Stranger and the Choir, the post-Holocaust rupture, represents the latter type, since only the gravestones remain as witnesses, “and the living send a message to the past with pebbles”.²¹

This cue is ambiguous, however, as the stone placed on the grave can be read as a ritual gesture of remembrance, but the throwing of the stone can also be a manifest act of (intentional?) forgetting. Almost a year after the Olaszliszka lynching, the press reported that international Hasidic pilgrims had been pelted with stones by Roma children. There are several references to hostile behavior in the drama, which is why the cemetery fence is four meters high.

The function of the play’s introduction in the drama is questionable in the absence of a name that states it. The narrative section, which could be considered an overture, is entitled *Haggadah* (*Haggáda*), which, although it refers to the ritual order and ritual book of the Seder, can be defined more as an imitation of a Hasidic story. Its very theme is unusual since it deals with an inter-religious situation, indicated by the coincidence of Easter and Passover: the Seder is spent at the *tsaddik* of Olaszliszka by “a peasant from Vasvár” who comes from the direction of Szegilong. The latter reference associates the figure with Lajos Szögi, the real-life predecessor of the character called Victim. The peasant from Vasvár answers the rabbi’s initial question only after the feast is over: “I met someone by chance at the fair who sent me here. That’s why I came.” The rabbi replies, “If you meet someone by chance, try to know them well, because nothing is by chance.”²² The sentence imitates the all-illuminating and all-relativizing punchline of Hasidic stories, while at the same time the Haggadah is read in terms of Kafka’s parables. József Krupp also draws attention to this passage:

“These sentences touch on the question of chance and fate, so important in ancient tragedies as well, and, together with the genre definition under the title of the drama, according to which *The Man from Olaszliszka* is a ‘fateless drama’ – a clear reference to Imre Kertész’s novel – make visible the basic pattern, which is also defined by tradition, but which turns tradition into its opposite.”²³

The majority of interpreters²⁴ have pointed to the references and the operation of genre codes, and also allude to the dissonant tension between the fatefulness of tragedy and the irrational coincidence of lynching. Györgyi Földes touches on the deeper connection between the human being living an empty life and the uselessness of traditional genre codes by examining the name and character of the protagonist, the Victim: “even as a modern man, he is necessarily one: no one can be fully aware of his fate, the unpredictability of a world that has slipped into absurdity condemns humans to fate as a mere ‘bio-program’...”²⁵

The drama suggests that the discrepancies of memory, the unspokenness of collective traumas of the past and the forgetting of these tragedies are more closely related to the fatal

²⁰Yerushalmi (1996), 107.

²¹Borbély (2011a), 41.

²²Ib., 7.

²³Krupp (2012), 710.

²⁴Such as Földes (2011); Vári (2011); Weiss and Miklós in: Lapis (2016), 181, 171.

²⁵Földes (2011), 56.



unfatefulness of the lynching. We encounter the fullness and most beautiful example of the stratification of memory in the penultimate scene of *The Rabbi's Guests* (*A rabbi vendégei*). The Choir reflects on the events from the perspective of the dead *tsaddik* as he watches the people perish in the Holocaust, the stones of the synagogue being removed, the desecrated cemetery, the erasure of names, the humiliation of the pilgrims, and finally the beating to death of the Victim. The concluding remark is telling, according to which the *tsaddik* “[s]ees but does not remember, / for he is dead and has time / to wait for the Messiah...”²⁶

The dead cannot remember, only the living can remember the dead. From this point of view, the real problem of the play is not the discontinuity of memory, of *mneme*, nor even of recollection, of *anamnesis*, although the narrativity of the story of the lynching in the forensic scene is problematized precisely by the fact that “there is no link between the many memories” (38). The phrase refers primarily to the contingency of the witnesses’ recollections of the crime, while in its abstractness it also refers to the thematized local Jewish past. In a similar way, the unreliability of witness testimonies and the failure of the investigation are problematized by the Choir in the scene of *The forensic investigation* (*A helyszínelés*):

“Forgetting shapes
the past. That’s how what was false
becomes true, and how those
get accused who never did anything”²⁷

The problem of forgetting replaces tragic fate, and since the absence of memory is a negative concept, the “fateless drama” becomes the result of all the forms of absence: there is no judgment, deeds are absurd, there is no guilty party – everyone has a part in the murder – and there is no one to have a part in remembering – the forgetting is collective.

In his monograph mentioned above, Yerushalmi not only examines the fulfillment of the commandment of memory in Jewish historiography, he also discusses forgetting, which was the greatest horror of the biblical and Talmudic sources: the forgetting of the Torah being considered a cardinal sin – several examples of this are given in the book (1996: 108–113). Yerushalmi emphasizes that although he discusses the tradition of the people of memory, it is a general phenomenon for which parallels can easily be found in the given culture. In a comment by the Stranger explaining the commandment of the *zakhor* to the Villager, we also find an example of how forgetting (similarly to memory) can be not only personal but also familial. Instead of the tragic misdeed inherited in Greek tragedies, forgetting also predestines family fate: “...Forgetting / becomes the hand of fate in the family’s past: / it picks up and shakes a person.”²⁸

Yerushalmi notes that collective forgetting always takes place in the present, only the present can be forgotten. By this he means the absence of transmission: “people ‘forget’ if the generation that now possesses the past does not transmit it to the next, or if the latter rejects what it receives and does not pass it on.”²⁹ The unspokenness of the Holocaust in the present, the pregnant

²⁶Borbély (2011a), 44.

²⁷Ib., 35.

²⁸Ib., 20.

²⁹[“a people ‘forgets’ when the generation that now possesses the past does not convey it on the next, or when the latter rejects what it receives and does not pass it onward[.]”] Yerushalmi (1996), 109.



silence to which Borbély refers in *Auschwitz Tomorrow*³⁰ is the result and consequence of collective forgetting. The forgotten and erased Jewish past, symbolized by the physical erosion of the memories of the material culture left behind, the xenophobia represented by the Villager looks with hostility at any anamnestic, recollective gesture that puts half-forgotten fragments back together. This is why the Villager rejects the pilgrimage of the Hasidim, an example of collective cultural memory, and why he is suspicious of the Stranger, a representative of secular and familial memory. The tomb of the miracle working rabbi is thus a rejected memento, whose “spirit may rise, and then the country can find its way back to the future.”³¹

Not coincidentally, the community’s indifference to the situation of the Roma can also be interpreted as a failure to remember the present, to which the Accused refers in his monologue: “Those who have been deprived of the hope of living with honor, who will see them? Children grow up in the dirt and no one minds”.³² This is the cornerstone of Borbély’s diagnosis of the forgetting of the Hungarian countryside: it is precisely along the lines of the indifference fuelled by forgetting that the lack of memory of the Jews and the current social problems of the Roma, which the tragedy of the lynching “evokes”, can be linked. In other words, the sin of forgetting is indifference itself.

The collective forgetfulness is projected by the Choir onto the landscape, the locality is emphasized by the topos of the land in which this indifference is manifested:

“A thousand years is nothing for this landscape,
peoples have marched here from the East [...]
It has worn layers of pain and
time has slowly piled them on top of each other,
like the yellow sand on the shores of a river.
Memory, like grass,
withers after a summer [...]
Mud has no history,
Sarmatians and Huns walked in it,
and Avars, Tatars, Turks, and Soviets.
We follow in each other’s footsteps timelessly.”³³

The synecdochic Olaszliszka, which also represents the landscape, the region, but also the whole country, and perhaps even the once Hasidic Eastern Europe, is a space in which collective forgetting is the “layers of pain”, the piling up and layering of collective traumas. This landscape and this land are characterized by historical ignorance, metaphorized by mud – which, incidentally, is one of the leitmotifs of *The Dispossessed*. It is thanks to the indifference induced by forgetting that collective tragedies and traumas are repeated over and over again, such as the 2006 lynching or the deportation of the Jews. As Szilárd Borbély himself puts it:

³⁰Borbély (2008), 110.

³¹Borbély (2011a), 26.

³²Ib., 40.

³³Ib., 16.



“Olaszliszka is one of the holiest places for the Hasidic Jews because of the grave of Herman Friedländer, the miracle working rabbi. But where have the Hasidim gone? In the villages of Eastern Hungary, there were smaller and larger communities everywhere. Today, even their traces have disappeared. And what is there to remind us of the Italian or Walloon settlers of Olaszliszka?³⁴ The lack of remembering takes its toll. Violence begets violence. Forgetting breeds repetition.”³⁵

Finally, because of its regional embeddedness and memory, it is necessary to examine the post-Holocaust world of *The Dispossessed*, the representation of the Hungarian countryside of the 1960s, specifically from the perspective of Hasidism. Mózsi, the “last Jew of the village”, returning from forced labor after his family, including his two children teased as Goga and Monkey, had perished, represents the fate of the Hungarian rural Jewish population through a typical story. At the center of the plot is the ostracism suffered by the family at the hands of the village and the father’s origin being treated as an open secret – after all, Mózsi is a love child. It is out of this response to this identity, which he sometimes conceals and then assumes, that this strange Judeo-Christian world is composed, where holidays such as Easter and Passover intertwine and religious teachings are superimposed, such as hatred for Jesus and for the Jews in slavery in Egypt.³⁶ These forms of behavior are represented by the mother: external traces of the rite survive in Passover³⁷ and the welcoming of the Sabbath,³⁸ when she reads from the Haggadah in Hungarian,³⁹ all the while praying fervently to Mary.⁴⁰ The family, in addition to lighting candles on Friday evening, goes to “the Pinkas’ house, to mass in the clean room”.⁴¹ The children’s play of waiting for the Messiah is projected onto the resurrected Jesus, who, like the legendary Messiahs of Hungarian folklore, “walks on earth”.⁴²

There is only one passage in the novel that is directly related to the world of Hasidism. The father narrates a scene in which an elderly rebbe at Mózsi’s house gets involved in a strange discussion about the Spirit of Water and the land, about the waters flowing underground, about mud and clay, about movements below the surface. The visionary poetic description transforms the region into a metaphore and its images give us a hint of the world of *The Man from Olaszliszka*, where mud emerged as a symbol of forgetting. At the end of the his musings, the rebbe says: “The first world was destroyed by fire. The second world by air. The third by water. Ours is swallowed up by the mud of the earth.”⁴³

The idea that there were worlds before the creation of our world which were later destroyed by the Almighty dates from the age of the Midrashim (e.g., *Midrash Bereshith Rabbah* 3:8,

³⁴Olasz is “Italian” in Hungarian.

³⁵Borbély (2011b), 4.

³⁶Borbély (2013a), 54.

³⁷Ib., 49.

³⁸Ib., 44.

³⁹Ib., 50, 53.

⁴⁰Ib., 55.

⁴¹Ib., 57. The “clean room” (*tisztaszoba*) is a room of the traditional Hungarian peasant cottage which is used only for special occasions.

⁴²Ib.

⁴³Ib., 75.



Midrash Tehillim 90:13 directly claims the existence of 974 prior worlds).⁴⁴ The list in Genesis 36 of the kings of Edom who ruled before Israel, in the Kabbalistic interpretation of Bahya ben Asher, refers to the worlds that existed before the creation of our own (*Rabbeinu Bahya*, *Bereshith* 36:39:3).⁴⁵ This interpretation is taken up in the *Zohar* (Vol. VIII. 325 n.18), and later by Yitzchak Luria. The death of the kings, according to the *Zohar*, was due to disharmony between the masculine and feminine qualities, but Luria links his interpretation to the concept of the breaking of the vessels – a concept which is also foundational to the teachings of Hasidism.⁴⁶

In the case of the words of the rabbi quoted from the novel, we can recognize Borbély's characteristic procedure: he incorporates the idea taken from tradition into his poetic world by varying it with new elements (the four elements). The same happens in the sequel: "Soon the father of destruction will come to help his son, who is called Malkhut', the rebbe concludes".⁴⁷ *Malkhut* (or kingdom) is the name given to the last *sefirah* emanating furthest from the divine essence.

In the context of the novel, however, the phrase can be seen as an apocalyptic teaching about the impending Shoah. Similar procedures drawing on traditions permeate Borbély's poetic world and need to be discussed in more depth.

THE PROCEDURES OF THE POETICS OF BRICOLAGE

Even the earliest reviews of the first edition of *Deathly Pomp* pointed out instances of the incorporation of elements of religious tradition and identified some of the relevant generic traits and other references and allusions, cultural codes and mythological corrections. Subsequent analyses sought to define the characteristics of the poetics that draws on Borbély's tradition and the process by which the inherited elements result in the emergence of something radically different, often directly dissonant, in structure. In his much-quoted review, László Márton calls this a "turning inside out" and sums up the far-reaching semantic consequences of this mode of editing: "This is not simply blasphemy, it is more than that: *Funereal Splendour*, as I understand it, represents a re-appropriation of the Gospel. It does the same as medieval hymn poetry, but does it inside out".⁴⁸ Gergely Tamás Fazakas,⁴⁹ starting from the form culture of antiquity and

⁴⁴ Aggadic midrashim; the fifth century *Bereshith Rabbah* interprets Genesis, the eleventh century *Midrash Tehillim* the Book of Psalms. The *Bereshith Rabbah* provided the basis for later Kabbalah with its mystical interpretation of creation. The *Midrash Tehillim* also includes two methods of interpretation characteristic of Kabbalah: *gematria* based on the numerical value of letters, and *notarikon* based on the reading together of the initial or final letters of words.

⁴⁵ Bahya ben Asher (1255–1340), a Hispanic commentator, used both literal and allegorical interpretations in his Torah commentary, *Rabbeinu Bahya*, and applied Kabbalah procedures and readings in addition to the Midrashic.

⁴⁶ "In Luria the death of the kings from lack of harmony between the masculine and feminine elements, described in the *Zohar*, is transformed into the »breaking of the vessels,« ... also a crisis of the powers of judgment, the most unassimilable parts of which are projected downward in this cataclysm to lead an existence of their own as demonic powers. Two hundred and eighty-eight sparks from the fire of »judgment«, the hardest and the heaviest, fall, mingling with the fragments of the broken vessels. For after the crisis nothing remains as it was." Scholem (1969), 112.

⁴⁷ Borbély (2013a), 75.

⁴⁸ Márton (2005), 393.

⁴⁹ Fazakas (2004).



reading from the perspective of Old Hungarian literature, comes to the conclusion that the texts of the volume insert a different idiom compared to its traditional counterpart into the speech situations operated by the art forms evoked. Gerda Széplaky, on the other hand, applies Deleuze's concept of "le pli" with regard to the assemblage of different elements of tradition, as it is "particularly saturated because it creates interlocking meanings. [...] The technique of *le pli* is a way of allowing the different histories to spill over into each other".⁵⁰

It is indeed inescapable to talk about the relationship with tradition and textuality in Szilárd Borbély's oeuvre. Zoltán Kulcsár-Szabó talks about the volume *Berlin & Hamlet* as a representative of "Borbély's intertextual poetics",⁵¹ and we can discover similar procedures in the Legends of the volume *To the Body (A Testhez)*. However, *Funereal Splendour*, which can also be seen as an intermediate stage, is the only work in the oeuvre to employ a poetics that exploits instances of intertextuality. In my previous studies I have sought to map out this intricate relationship by juxtaposing the poems with the original context of traditional elements through the categories of Gérard Genette's theory of transtextuality.⁵² Genette introduces the concepts of palimpsest and bricolage at the end of his monograph, the former offering an interpretive basis for the poems of *Funereal Splendour*, while the latter gains significance in terms of the semantic implications of poetics and the construction of structure:

"Let me simply say that the art of 'making new things out of old' has the merit, at least, of generating more complex and more savory objects than those that are "made on purpose"; a new function is superimposed upon and interwoven with an older structure, and the dissonance between these two concurrent elements imparts its flavor to the resulting whole."⁵³

However, the second edition of *Funereal Splendour* marks an important development in two respects. On the one hand, the work, expanded with the cycle of *Hasidic Sequences* and the poem *The Sequence of the Hanged Man (Az Akasztott Ember Szekvenciája)*, adds a new cultural reference horizon, and, on the other hand, it also adds a new dimension to the poetics of bricolage. Murder was the central theme of the first two cycles, which were (ab)used to talk about murder through the use of the speech positions of the Passion, the twisting of medieval art forms and the *topoi* of Baroque religious poetry (*Sequences of Holy Week*), mythology, orphic symbols, modern pseudo-scientific beliefs and urban legends (*The Sequences of Amor and Psyche*). The new cycle reveals a double cultural horizon behind the poems, an Early Christian and a Hasidic/Jewish world, which read on top of each other. The theme of murder – which projects the personal tragedy reported in the newspaper article quotations of the notes onto the Passion in the *Sequences of Holy Week* – expands into mass murder and genocide.

Within this theme, of course, Holocaust narratives predominate, but alongside these, the Rhineland pogrom of 1096 is also mentioned (the Kabbalist Eleazar Wormsi, mentioned in the poem *The Consecration of the Name [A Név Megszentelése]*, was a victim), or the massacre of

⁵⁰Lapis József (ed.), *Borbély Szilárd*, 2016, 234.

⁵¹Kulcsár-Szabó (2019), 275.

⁵²Száz (2020).

⁵³Genette (1997) 398. In original ed.: „Disons seulement que l'art de « faire du neuf avec du vieux » a l'avantage de produire des objets plus complexes et plus savoureux que les produits « faits exprès »: une fonction nouvelle se superpose et s'enchevêtre à une structure ancienne, et la dissonance entre ces deux éléments coprésents donne sa saveur à l'ensemble.” Genette (1982), 556.



the Cossacks (in poem *VIII*, which perhaps refers to the pogroms of Bohdan Hmelnicki). Elsewhere, murderous persecution is presented without any reference to reality, with poetic metonymy (e.g. “The Angels of Death” in the *Sequence of Reading*). These narrative fragments are mixed with the *topoi* of Jewish/Hasidic and Early Christian horizons, within the logic of bricolage. Already the *Star of the Sea of Tears* (*Tenger Könnyek Csillaga*), opening piece of the cycle *Hasidic Sequences*, which closes the *Sequences of Holy Week* of the first edition, realizes such a poetics of bricolage. In a poem that alludes to the hymn of *Stella Maris*, the scene of the nativity is re-enacted against the backdrop of deportation. The star of Bethlehem is here linked to the yellow star, or, as a reminiscence of Endre Ady’s poem *The Stamped Army* (*Bélyeges sereg*) (“a star on the forehead”), it can be interpreted as a sign, a stamp, a mark of identity.⁵⁴ The shepherds play the role of the murderers, while the baby Jesus becomes a victim of the Holocaust.

In the concluding poem of the cycle, *Zmirot song* (*Zmirot-dal*), the dissonances arising from the bricolage technique form similarly ambivalent meanings by problematizing the relationship with tradition.⁵⁵ According to the *Notes* (*Jegyzetek*), “the *zmirot*-songs are the designation for the hymns that bid farewell to the Sabbath”, and then the author refers to the prayer book *Samuel’s Prayer* (*Sámuel imája*). Although no page number is given, the prayer book does indeed contain a full chapter after the Hevdalah that bids farewell to the Sabbath: the chapter called *Zmirot – Songs after the Sabbath ends* (*Zmirot – a szombat kimenetele utáni dalok*).⁵⁶ Presumably the footnote⁵⁷ of this chapter is the cause of the inaccuracy, since the *zmirot* (*zmiresh*) songs are sung throughout the Sabbath, at all three meals, and the prayer book contains several *zmirot*, including those that greet the Sabbath and the Sabbath day, in addition to the farewell songs. Although not among the *zmirot*, the prayer book also contains the well-known poem, Shlomo Alkabec’s *Lechá dodí*, a Kabbalistic hymn translated by József Patai,⁵⁸ which is paraphrased by Borbély in the last poem. To summarize the complex intertextual relationships, the inaccuracy in the *Notes* is an important clue since the final poem of the cycle and the volume would serve as a true farewell hymn, but in contrast to the designated speech position, it is a paraphrase of the traditional Sabbath greeting. A Holocaust narrative is written into the ritual text, incorporating such emphatic images as the death train, the furnace, the smoke and the ashes, which also link the text to other poems of the cycle that thematize martyrdom. (On the other hand, along the ritual aspect of the song, it is linked to the Sabbath Queen, one of the “protagonists” of the cycle, whom Borbély takes out of the tradition.) The theme thus fits into the position of the coda, but this does not eliminate the ambivalence mentioned above, if only because the paraphrase so emphatically relies on knowledge of the preface that it uses its refrain structure and adopts the refrain itself as intertext. It is in

⁵⁴In *The Dispossessed*, one definition of a Jew is “one who has a star on his forehead” Borbély (2013a), 202.

⁵⁵The following contradiction was pointed out by Balázs Déri at the ELTE conference *Közelítések a kortárs magyar költészethez* [Approaches to contemporary Hungarian poetry] in his talk “Why is this so strange...? Liturgical texts and the poetics of contingency in Szilárd Borbély’s *Funereal Splendour*” („Mért oly különös ez...?” *Liturgikus szövegek és az esetlegesség poétikája Borbély Szilárd Halotti Pompájában*) (May 27, 2021).

⁵⁶Oberlander (1996), 323–326.

⁵⁷Ib., 323.

⁵⁸Ib., 169–170.



the subtle modification of this that the poem bridges the ambivalence of bricolage between end and beginning, between farewell and greeting. For in Patai's translation, the exhortation "Come, greet/welcome, good friend, the Sabbath, the beautiful bride!" (my italics), alternating in the stanzas, is modified by Borbély in the following order: 'welcome', 'greet', 'accompany', 'mourn', 'let'.⁵⁹

However, the operation of the poetics of bricolage does not even require that the poems directly refer to the other cultural sphere already evoked in the context: the furnace in *Christological Epistle (I)* (*Krisztológiai episztola (I)*) links the persecutions of Christians to the Shoah in the context of Holocaust narratives.⁶⁰ The poem *The Song of Three Young Men (A Három Ifjú Éneke)* is an especially complex case from the point of view of how bricolage poetry works. It recalls a story in the Jewish Bible – the Old Testament according to the Christian tradition – of martyrdom in Babylonian captivity, which ended in an escape by divine miracle. This is why the story of the young men thrown into the fiery furnace was so popular in the Early Christian era and is also depicted in the catacombs. In addition, the biblical *Song of the Three Youths*, in which creation is praised after their rescue, is also included in the *laudes* of the chant. This is not a variation of Borbély's – in his version the three young men are not saved by a divine miracle but are martyred in the death camp. The fragments of the Holocaust narratives incorporate New Testament allusions (the "Eye" in 1 Cor 15:35–36 is a metaphor for the resurrected body), and the symbolism of the "Light" can be read in the "light" of both John's and Lurianic theology.⁶¹

The influence of Hasidism is most evident in the group of poems in the cycle in which the aforementioned rabbis play the role of commentator (poems *I, II, IV, The Sequence of the Three Secrets [A Három Titok Szekvenciája]*, *V, VI, VII, IX, XI, XIII, Eizik Taub's Sequence [Taub Eizik Szekvenciája]*, *XIV, XV, XVI, XIX, XX*, and *XXI*). The poems vary the story of the creation of the world and of Adam and Eve, and contain speculative teachings and sayings about the Messiah, the Sabbath, Shechinah, the "Self", and rewrite the story of Cain and Abel. As speculative examples of the interpretation of biblical narratives, they evoke the world of traditional midrashic texts, as well as the interpretive features of the Kabbalistic *musar* favored by Hasidic interpreters.

However, inherent in the mythopoetics of Borbély's bricolage is the self-contained nature of his poems that create new structures from old elements, and a semantic order that differs from the traditional. Poems *III* and *VI* begin with a similar statement about what preceded creation. According to poem *III*, it was the "Sabbath" and in poem *VI* it was "the Scripture" that existed before the creation of the world. This latter statement corresponds to what the rabbinic Midrashim teach about pre-existent things, which include the Torah (Pesachim 54a, Bereshith Rabbah 1.4) – but not the Sabbath. The preexistence of the Sabbath is not known in the tradition as a matter of theorem, i.e. this is a poetic invention, placing in its traditional place another element that does not belong there.⁶²

The basic tenets of the doctrine of Hasidism were applied to the doctrines of the Lurianic Kabbalah, and are therefore frequently encountered in Hasidic doctrinal narratives. One of the

⁵⁹Borbély (2006), 189–190. (In orig.: "fogadjuk", "köszöntsük", "kísérjük", "sirassuk", "eresszük")

⁶⁰cf. Száz (2020), 67–68.

⁶¹cf. *Ib.*, 86–87.

⁶²For more on this, see Száz (2020), 308–309.



most important events in the complex and speculative creation myth with its gnostic tinge was the contraction of the divine essence prior to creation, the so-called *tzimtzum* phenomea, several of which occurred and preceded the crises of creation. The opposite of emanation, this self-limitation of God is the inverse of the act of revelation.⁶³ Borbély varies this element in such a way that, on the one hand, he leads it back into the figurative, anthropomorphic world of myth, and on the other hand, he hyperbolizes it to the extreme, until finally the break with tradition ends in heresy: in poem *II* the creator is so tired that he cannot move, and in poem *III* he “returns to his own final breath / and also destroyed himself”.⁶⁴ In poem *IV*, the Angel of Existence and Nonexistence manipulates the creator who finally “falls into the Angel of Nonexistence” exhausted,⁶⁵ and almost obliterates creation itself. Also central to Laurian cosmogony is the creation of the celestial or first Adam, Adam Kadmon, the macroanthropos, who was a perfect spiritual being. Again, the symbolic myth takes on an anthropomorphic form in Borbély’s work.

Poem *XIII* contains the Book of the World, which can be identified with the Celestial Torah, traditionally used as the “blueprint” for creation. God turns the pages, then falls asleep, and the twilight breeze, supported by Samael, turns the pages of the book, creating the “First Adam, who became as mighty / As the Universe”.⁶⁶ The inheritance of the element, Adam reaching from earth to sky, is already known in the Talmud (Bereshith Rabbah 1.1), and the Kabbalah later extends it in a spiritual sense, metaphorically. We find the same idea in poem *XIV*. Here, in a reversal of the Lurianic myth, it is not the Creator who contracts, creating the empty space for his creation, but the other way around, it is a reaction, “God was forced / to contract” (159). In poem *XIV*, God “had to flee”.⁶⁷ In the conclusion of poem *XIII*, the Adam of Heaven creates “the Golem who is the Second Adam”. The statement contradicts the sources in several ways, where it is, first of all, God that does the creating, and where the golem represents the body, the inanimate substance into which the creator breathes His soul. In poem *XIV*, the Adam of Heaven, the Golem and the Second Adam enter into a relationship so intricate that it is impossible to untangle it in the face of tradition.

The central crisis point in Lurianic cosmogony is the symbolic myth explaining the origin of evil, the shattering of vessels unable to withstand divine light (*sefirat ha-kelim*), in which light returns from the eye of Adam Kadmon, who is identical with the universe, or falls through the vessel and is lost among the shells, or *qliphoth*, which symbolize matter.⁶⁸ The fall of Adam in the poem marks this crisis, which the author’s invention (in contrast to tradition, where no such element is found) blames on original sin, whose function in poem *XIV* is the murderous intention motivated by pride against God.

The Lurianic teachings and principles used in these poems may have been drawn from works of religious and Judaic studies (Buber’s account of this intellectual background is minimal), and the themes and motifs used may have been drawn from Gerschom Scholem’s *The Symbolism of*

⁶³See Scholem (1995a), 260–261.

⁶⁴Borbély (2006), 129.

⁶⁵Ib., 132.

⁶⁶Ib., 159.

⁶⁷Ib., 162.

⁶⁸Scholem (1995a), 256–257.



the Kabbalah, published in 2003, shortly before Borbély began work on the poems of the cycle. Of course, it must also be taken into account that the author may have read the German original or other translations, or may not have drawn from Scholem but from other sources.

Poem XVI is also a fine example of bricolage poetics at work. The poem uses the theme of forgetting and remembering as a peculiarly legendary lore, in which forgetting is presented as metaphorically analogous with sleep, this “everyday death” when the Angel of Death wipes people’s Self away. Then, Shekhinah writes the letter aleph on their foreheads every morning – if she does not forget people’s names. The poem is a unique combination of elements from two Jewish legends. The wiping away of aleph refers to the golem legend, in which the wiping of the first aleph of the word *emet* “truth” written on the forehead disarms the destructive golem, who is transformed back into mere matter (*met* “the dead”). Another possible source of the poem is the Talmudic legend of Laila, the angel of the night (bNid 30b), who blows on the mouth of the unborn fetus (marked by the indentation above the upper lip, the so-called philtrum) and forgets the Torah, losing the fullness of her knowledge. Moreover, two Hasidic stories in Buber’s collection are based on the Talmudic legend, one related to Baruk of Mezbiz⁶⁹ and the other to Rabbi Yechiel Mikhal of Złoczów⁷⁰ – both of which seek to answer the same question: why should one know everything first and then forget everything. In the comparing the poem with its sources we see the specific functioning of the bricolage technique: Borbély adopts some elements from each, replacing some with elements from the other foreword (for example, the wiping of the aleph instead of the blowing of Laila’s mouth), or replacing them with similar ones: “Angel of Death” replaces the angel Laila, Shekhinah replaces the rabbi handling the golem, and pre-natal forgetting is replaced by pre-waking forgetting. Incidentally, there is also an intratextual link between the added or replaced elements and the *The Sequences of Amor and Psyche*, in which the classical metaphoric relationship between sleep/dream and death is reformulated in several texts, and the idea of the Self and the underworld is repeatedly invoked.

Inversions and substitutions following metonymic logic cause a constant shift of meaning. The pre-texts of the poems are themselves interpretations of the pre-texts, that is, they are multiple palimpsests, but the shifts in relation to these often produce readings and permutations of meaning which no longer fit into the tradition, but go against its dogmas or doctrines, and which are sometimes considered outright heretical. Moreover, this constant shift is reinforced by the form of commentary, with the three Hasidic rabbis commenting on each other and re-varying the elements raised.

Several recurring elements in the *Hasidic Sequences* derive from concepts that are central to Hasidism, but inherited from an earlier period. The Sabbath is clearly the foundation of Judaism as a whole, yet in his particular mythology, Borbély draws on the Lurianic-Hasidic mysticism associated with Hasidism, and in the recurring figure of the Sabbath Queen, who also identifies with Shekhinah, this is clearly recognizable. The role of the aleph, the beta, and thus of letters, is integrated into the poems as a kind of (pseudo)kabbalistic metaphorical system, treated with poetic license. Scholem notes that the *galuth/golus*, the image of expulsion or exile, linked to the destruction of the second temple, was intensified in the Lurianic kabbalah, which emerged in the Safed diaspora after the expulsion from Spain, and took on an absolute theological meaning:

⁶⁹Buber (2006), 167–168.

⁷⁰Ib., 231.



beyond this point it no longer signified only the dispersion of the people of Israel, but also the irredeemability of an imperfect earthly existence. It was in this idea that the doctrine of the sparks scattered in the material world was conceived, along with the mysticism of the exiled Shekhinah.⁷¹ In Borbély's work, these elements form a parallel with fragmentary Holocaust narratives and pogrom images, so that the images of persecution and flight are given a theological foundation and gain absolute validity.

The mention of the primordial light in the poems can be directly derived from Laurian imagery (*The Three Secrets Sequence*, *The Reading Sequence*). In poem V, for example, the symbolism of light derives from the Gnostic apocryphal *Pearl Hymn*, which serves as a prefiguration, and which brings a new, hidden tradition into the scope of interpretation (which is not entirely independent of Lurianism, since Scholem considered it to be of Gnostic origin). In *Christological Epistle (I)*, the Son of God is "the light itself", which in turn brings Christian imagery, the theology of light of the Gospel of John, into the scope of interpretation. In this way, not only does Borbély place the Judeo-Christian tradition in a dialogical position, in this free-spirited poetics of bricolage, this dialogue is liberated and freed from dogmatism.

The latter examples, as well as some of the earlier ones (such as *The Song of the Three Young Men*) show that it is necessary to pay particular attention to the characteristics of the functioning of bricolage poetics in cases where the sources evoke two cultural traditions and the poems mix Jewish/Hasidic and Christian elements.

CULTURAL HYBRIDIZATION AND THE AMBIVALENCE OF THE MESSIANIC MOTIF

The "secret dialogue" between Hasidism and early Christianity, to which Borbély alluded in his interviews, is here recreated by him in the context of the Holocaust experience and the narratives of persecution, through the poetic devices of bricolage. *Hasidic Sequences* creates a situation of interreligious dialogue along the lines of the similarities exemplified above. The parallel in poem XI is an indication of this: "...Christians await the return of Christ / And we await the return of the Messiah".⁷² There is no need to look for such manifest parallels between the two cultural horizons evoked by bricolage poetics – their contextual presence often imbues neutral concepts (e.g. light, fire, or furnace) with a double connotation, making the different elements interconnectable and maintaining this constant, latent ambiguity throughout the cycle. On the other hand, however, the bricolage-like mixing of elements often creates a culturally syncretic structure, an amalgam in which the individual segments from a given religious culture are already indistinguishable. This phenomenon opens up a new dimension for Borbély's poetry. It is not enough to speak only of bricolage or of the multicultural dimensions of the texts, since the two cultural traditions interpenetrate each other dynamically, and the ambivalence of meanings goes beyond dialogicity. For example, the Holocaust poem *Consecration of the Name*, a palimpsest on medieval pogroms, ends with a particular reference to the dogma of the Trinity.⁷³ *The Eizik Taub Sequence*

⁷¹Scholem (1995a) 249–250.

⁷²Borbély (2006), 151.

⁷³Ib., 137.



reflects on the theme of the coming of the Messiah, who is signified by the bird in the song, while the poem defines him as “the Absence of Christ”.⁷⁴ In the poem *Jesus Ahasuerus* (*Jézus Ahasvérus*), the various segments of tradition are mixed and superimposed in an almost inextricable way: beginning with the figure of Jesus and Christ, the Gospel narrative is inverted, and this is compounded by the figure of the Messiah (the image of light caught in matter is also present here), and finally the figure of Ahasuerus unites them as a kind of axis of reflection.⁷⁵

The cultural hybridity in the *Hasidic Sequences*, however, refers primarily to the texts that the author used from *While the Baby Jesus of Our Hearts Sleeps*. It is therefore necessary to deal with these separately and in depth, but first let us look at the drama itself. The twin corpus of the “Bethlehem mystery” employs a similar poetics of bricolage, incorporating various guest texts, and the basic structure of the drama is also bricolage: it mixes traditional Bethlehem dramaturgy with the staging of the death dances. Cultural hybridity also appears when Jewish and Christian elements are combined. This is already indicated by the play’s motto, which quotes from the introductory dedication of the Gospel according to Luke (which addresses Theophile as much as *Christological Epistle [I]* does), as well as from Buber’s collection. The Hasidic story connected with Yehudah Cvi, from which the extract is taken, announces the birth in Hungary of Joseph’s son, the Messiah. The Early Christian testimony of Christ “already gone” and the Hasidic prophecy foretelling the coming of the Messiah establish the duality of the reading. In the drama, the dramaturgy of Bethlehem is set in the Hasidic setting of the world of the shtetl, and this double coding is emphasized by the duplication of the name variants: Bethlehem/Betlehowo, Jesus/Yehoshua, and Mary/Miriam. The chronotopoi are also double: we are simultaneously in the Judea of the imperial period and in the Hasidic world of Galicia, dating from sometime after the Shoah. This duality also places the feasts and ritual time in parallel: it links Advent with the coming of the Sabbath, Christmas (the birth) with the Sabbath, and the outgoing of the Sabbath with the epiphany. The rising of the star becomes a cultural hybrid: it is both the star of Bethlehem and the star of Shabbat. This dual coding is already introduced by Michael in the Prologue:

A week or a thousand years ago,
or two thousand? Taken together,
everything, it’s all the same in the end.
Somewhere in Jerusalem,
or rather right across the street...
It’s called Bethlehem.
Or maybe in Galicia? -
Once upon a great night
a small Jew was born.
The town is called Betlehowo,
where his father was from.
It was a week ago,
That the baby cried so.⁷⁶

⁷⁴Ib., 160.

⁷⁵Ib., 181.

⁷⁶Borbély (2005), 12–13.



Homi K. Bhabha developed the concept of cultural hybridity in the (post)colonial context, and although the texts under discussion have nothing to do with the colonial world, the concept of hybridity can be applied – Bhabha himself points out that diasporic existence (in which these texts are culturally embedded) also generates such phenomena.⁷⁷

According to Bhabha, one of the most important features of cultural hybridity, following Barthes' definitions, is the transformation of the symbol into a sign, precisely because of the duplication and ambiguity of the meaning(s) guaranteed by the traditional cultural context and references, with important consequences: "Hybridity [...] is not a third term that resolves the tension between the two cultures [...], in a dialectical play of 'recognition'. The displacement from symbol to sign creates a crisis of any concept of authority based on a system of recognition"⁷⁸ The elements of *Hasidic Sequences* exemplified above, which would behave as symbols in the given cultural context, are transformed into signs whose meaning becomes culturally ambivalent in the culturally ambivalent context of the poems (e.g. light, fire, furnace, and the Messiah).

The seemingly arbitrary interchange of religious concepts, the "conflation" that results from the typical metonymic substitution of Borbély's bricolage violates the normative traditions of both Judaism and Christianity. Hybridity bypasses authority, unleashes meaning bound by dogmatism, and, as Bhabha emphasizes elsewhere, provokes tradition, creating heretical and blasphemous structures.⁷⁹ Cultural hybridity is thus, as Bhabha puts it, "less than one and double".⁸⁰ It is precisely because of this contradiction that he introduces the notion of a third space of revelation, an in-between space generated by cultural hybridity, which makes the process of meaning, the relation of sign and referent, ambivalent.⁸¹ This in-betweenness is exemplified as perfectly in the world of *While the Baby Jesus of Our Hearts Sleeps* as in the texts it shares with the *Hasidic Sequences*.

For these, in conjunction with some of the other texts of the cycle, represent the most culturally ambivalent poetics for the Jewish and Christian context. The poems in question are *The Messiah Sequence VIII (A Messiás szekvenciája, VIII)*, *The Nativity Sequence (A Születés szekvenciája)*, the poem *The Hanged Man (Az Akasztott Ember)*, but the cycle also includes the *Reading Sequence* and poem V, since the same mysterious figure appears in each. (Also, because of thematic-motivational similarities, the *Star of the Sea of Tears* and poems XII and XXII can be included here.) Although he is referred to in the poems by different variants of his name, such as Yehoshua, Yeshua ben Yosef, Yeshua ben Yosif, the Hebrew/Yiddish equivalent is always Joseph's son, Jesus. In the master narrative that may be discerned from the verses, the figure can be interpreted both as a rewriting of the story of Jesus – although here it is emphatically the Baby Jesus, not the evangelical teacher and savior referred to as the Master – and as the coming, or more precisely the birth, of the Jewish Messiah, conceived in the wake of the Hasidic story. The figure "Yeshua ben Yosef of Lugobych", formed from a fictitious place-name, imitates the name of the Hasidic *tsaddikim* – in poem V he himself, as a fictitious companion, takes on a role similar to that of the three rabbis in the poem in which they speak. Emphasizing the Messiah in

⁷⁷Bhabha (2004), 247.

⁷⁸Ib., 162.

⁷⁹Ib., 322–333.

⁸⁰Ib., 166.

⁸¹Ib., 54–56.



the position of the victim, this persecution in *While the Baby Jesus of Our Hearts Sleeps* is an association with Herod from the Gospel narrative, but the massacre of the children is replaced by the pogroms and the persecution of Shoah from the world of Eastern Jewry.⁸² Poem VIII and the *Reading Sequence* use (pseudo)kabbalistic motifs (the letters, the Sabbath, the primordial light) to tell the story of the mystical birth and martyrdom of the Saviour.

The Messianic motif in Borbély's work is of central importance because, after these two discussed works, it becomes a recurring element of his oeuvre: *The rooster is calling* also dramatizes the birth of the Messiah, as does his poem *To the Thought (A Gondolathoz)* in the volume *To The Body*, and in *The Dispossessed* it is thematized in the local, hybrid Judeo-Christian religiosity of the mother and in the figure of the Messiah. On the other hand, because the Messiah becomes the main representative of Borbély's culturally hybrid private mythology, it combines the segments of tradition blended and mixed with poetic freedom by the author's bricolage poetics.

The creation of this myth is not motivated by a search for a historically authentic Jewish Jesus, as is the case with religious historians, nor is it driven by the intention of reconstruction. Nor can we rightly claim that he reads the Savior of the Gospels in the light of Judaism, or that he imagines the fulfillment of the prophecies of the Messiah. On the one hand, because of the self-contradictory, subversive use of bricolage, leading to a break with tradition, and on the other, because of the heretical and blasphemous nature of cultural hybridization, the figure of the Messiah in Borbély's work, although growing out of tradition, also breaks away from it, and develops ambivalent meanings in the third space of revelation. Bhabha recognizes this liminality and in-betweenness as a source of heresy, and exemplifies it through Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*, whose relation to Islamic tradition and the Qur'an as a preface is based on a poetic license as arbitrary as that of Borbély's Messiah figure. The meeting of the two traditions within the blasphemy problematizes translatability: "Blasphemy is not merely a misrepresentation of the sacred by the secular; it is a moment when the subject-matter or the content of the cultural tradition is being overwhelmed, or alienated, in the act of translation", writes Bhabha.⁸³

In a previous study, I have attempted to interpret the figure of the Messiah in Borbély and to explore the ambivalences and contradictions of its meanings by comparing it with the Jewish tradition's conceptions of the Messiah⁸⁴ – so here I will focus exclusively on the influence of Hasidism. It is clear from these investigations, as well as from the author's allusions scattered throughout his interviews detailed above, that it is precisely the influence of Hasidism that led to this particular Judeo-Christian hybridity and the creation of this poetic Messiah myth. The prophecy of Yehudah Cvi, quoted as a motto, could serve as a starting point for imagining the coming of the Messiah: "Today the son of Joseph, the Messiah, is born in Hungary, and he will be one of the secret *tsaddikim*." (Buber 2006: 590). The story continues eighteen years later, when the rabbi arrives in Budapest and a mysterious angel-faced youth speaks to him behind closed doors and then disappears without a trace into the street. More important than the sequel are two key concepts in the quoted sentence. As a cultural translation, the name Yeshua ben

⁸²"They hear Cossack horses / and flee again, / and bodies fall behind them. / So they arrive in Egypt." *The Hanged Man*. Borbély (2006), 72.

⁸³Bhabha (2004), 323.

⁸⁴Száz (2020), 219–260.



Yosef corresponds not only to the evangelical Joseph's son Jesus, but also to the rabbinical concept of the Messiah. The messianic conceptions present from the time of Jesus onwards have become differentiated, and the Talmud already speaks of two messiah figures (bSukk. 52b). The one from the house of David will be the figure who brings salvation, but his coming will be preceded by the messiah from the house of Joseph (or the tribe of Ephraim), who will be the victim of apocalyptic struggles. This martyrdom may have inspired Borbély – leaning on a Hasidic source. Buber⁸⁵ and Langer⁸⁶ also include in their collections the story of Shlomo of Karlin, who was considered a messiah and was referred to as the son of Joseph because of his martyrdom. It was in the synagogue that he died, killed by a Cossack (cf. poem VIII), who, according to Buber's variant, was called Armilus – another reference to the end-time antichristian war.⁸⁷ The main characteristic of the Messianic figure(s) in Borbély's work is that they are sacrificed – in a Christian reading this could be seen as a paraphrase of the Passion. However, a Jewish aspect is also attached to this culturally hybrid sign. Messiah ben Joseph suffers and dies a martyr's death without bringing redemption, just like Borbély's figures.

The other important characteristic used by Borbély, which also comes from a Hasidic source, is the hiddenness of the Messiah – another element of the phrase quoted from Yehudah Cvi is the popular teaching about hidden *tsaddikim*. Gershom Scholem saw in the development of *tsaddikism* the manifestation of the internalization of messianism. The real messianic expectation, which gave rise to the Sabbatian and Frankist sectarian messianic movements of the age of the emergence of Hasidism, was able to be satisfied by neutralizing it.⁸⁸ As the movement developed, two types of *tsaddik* were distinguished: the concept of the "true" *tsaddik* who operated in public, and the hidden/concealed *tsaddik* (*tsaddik nistar*), who operated in secret. This distinctively Hasidic concept is a relatively late development, although it gained great popularity. The hidden *tsaddik* lives as a simple laborer, blended into society, often on its periphery and in many cases performing the most menial tasks. No one knows that they are righteous, often not even they themselves, with no sign of their being chosen, although they often have wonderful abilities such as unrivaled knowledge of the Torah and direct contact with the spiritual world, often with the prophet Elijah himself. Encounters with the hidden *tsaddik* (the case of Yehudah Cvi is one of these) are a particular type of Hasidic story.⁸⁹

In terms of the concept of the hidden *tsaddik*, an interesting reading is offered by the specific figure that appears in *The Dispossessed*, the Mesiyaš. This mentally handicapped, penniless Gypsy does the most menial jobs in the village (he empties the toilet), enduring all humiliations in his innocence. There is nothing to suggest that he is possessed of any kind of intellectual excellence (quite the contrary) – indeed, he is not even a holy fool. Yet, in the crippled world of *The Dispossessed*, he is the only figure who does no harm and who, in his work, represents purity, and in his behavior, innocent honesty.

⁸⁵Buber (2006), 410–411.

⁸⁶Langer (2000), 133–134.

⁸⁷By the way, he was not the only *tsaddik* identified with the Yosef messiah – Buber also has the same opinion about Rabbi Shlomo Leib of Leczno. See Buber (2006), 74.

⁸⁸Scholem (1995b), 176–203.

⁸⁹Nigal (2012), 264–279.



According to a well-known Kabbalistic belief of Talmudic roots, the fate of the world rests on the merits of thirty-six hidden, righteous men who appear in every generation, and according to some versions one of them is the messiah, the righteous one of their generation (*Tsaddik Hador*). Variants of the legend of the *lamedvavniks*, which is very popular in Hasidism, are often encountered and have been adapted to literary texts. Scholem elaborated the concept in a study that is also available in Hungarian, which may have been where Borbély encountered it.⁹⁰ He refers to the legend directly in the poem *The Hanged Man*: “Every day a Messiah dies / of the righteous thirty-six”.⁹¹ The idea of daily martyrdom, in the daily layering of murder, is an extension of the Christian sacrifice, made more expressive by the anaphoric repetition of “every day”. It is due to the logic of bricolage that Borbély combined the traditional version of the Messiah as one of the thirty-six with the idea of the martyrdom of the Christian Saviour. Combining the idea of a messiah who appears in each generation with the distinctively Christian element of martyrdom creates a culturally ambivalent motif. All of this is set in a hybrid context in which the Hasidic milieu of Eastern Europe is evoked through a specific, one might say apocryphal, Christian Passion narrative, and this is interspersed with elements of the myth of Amor and Psyche – the poem thus blends the central motifs of the three books in one volume.⁹²

The image of the returning suffering messiah, though rarely found in such explicit form in Hasidic sources, is not unique. Borbély may have encountered it in several places, inspired for example by André Schwarz-Barth’s novel *The Last of the Just*, which is based on a specific adaptation of the legend. Each of the 36 successive generations has a righteous man in it – their martyrdom and their stories of suffering make up the novel. More likely, however, is the influence of Martin Buber, who refers in several places to the concept that the messiah appears in every generation and that his task is suffering. Concerning the martyred Rebbe Slomo of Karlin, Buber writes in the introduction to *Tales of the Hasidim*: “According to the tradition that saw in Shlomo of Karlin the first suffering messiah to appear ‘generation after generation’, the rabbi was hit by a Cossack bullet while he was praying”.⁹³ He also formulates a similar concept at the end of *The Faith of the Prophets*: “The image of the suffering Messiah who appears to all generations, and who wanders from martyrdom and death to martyrdom and death”.⁹⁴ And in another essay, *Spinoza, Sabbatai Zwi und der Baalschem*, he highlights, quoting a saying, that the suffering Messiah ben Joseph, whose messianic mystery is based on hiddenness, appears from generation to generation, suffering mortal pain for God again and again.⁹⁵

Borbély takes this idea to the extreme. The image of ever-repeating martyrdom leads the reader to the most important attribute of the messianic figure(s) in Borbély’s work, the image of the cyclical appearance and death as a sacrificial victim. In what is perhaps the most thought-provoking Holocaust poem of the cycle, poem XXII, this incessantly layered victim is, like *The Hanged Man*, an extension of the martyrdom of Christ: “The despised / death of the tortured

⁹⁰Scholem (1995b), 251–256.

⁹¹Borbély (2006), 72.

⁹²Similarly, the *Star of the Sea of Tears*, which was the last poem in the *Sequences of Holy Week* of the first edition, and then moved to the top of the *Hasidic Sequences* in the second edition.

⁹³Buber (2006), 49.

⁹⁴Buber (1991), 283.

⁹⁵„Messiah son of Josef appears from generation to generation.«” Buber (1948), 113.



Body has been repeated / ever since, and as a victim / is layered upon itself...”⁹⁶ Or as he wrote in the opening passage of his essay on his own tragedy, *Fragment of Murder (Töredék a gyilkosságról)*: “...in every body Christ is killed... He who kills, through the body he destroys, kills Christ”.⁹⁷

The Judeo-Christian hybrid messianic figure of Borbély’s, Yeshua ben Joseph, whom the *Reading Sequence* calls “Hasidic / bleeding Baby Jesus”,⁹⁸ is the innocent martyr constantly reborn to become a victim again and again. His clearest formulation is found in poem VIII:

“The Saviour was born again.
In a Bethlehem winter
/ In nearby Galicia
In the house of a shtetl
Joseph the junk dealer had a son
In Miriam’s sleep.”⁹⁹

“Re-birth” is also emphasized as an important keyword in poem V,¹⁰⁰ the conclusion of which can be read as a symbolic rebirth of Yeshua ben Yosef himself. In connection with this word, the Kabbalistic image of the transmigration of the soul, the *gilgul*, may arise as an inspiration provided by tradition. It is curious, however, that Borbély never uses the word *rebirth* (*újjászületés*), but always the word *re-birth* (*újraszületés*). Even in his essay *Auschwitz Tomorrow*, discussed above, he uses this word when he speaks of the messianic appearing generation after generation.¹⁰¹ It is as if, contrary to the idea of the *gilgul*, it was not a question of the appearance of a soul again and again on earth, but of a constant new beginning without any progress.

EXCURSUS: THE USE OF A HASIDIC STORY TYPE IN *KAFKA’S SON* AND *THE ROOSTER CALLS*

In addition to the works analysed so far, it is necessary to pay special attention to Szilárd Borbély’s posthumously published novel, *Kafka’s Son (Kafka fia)* (2021). Since the publication of the previous German translation (2017), the unfinished novel, in which the problematization of Jewish identity plays a central role within the framework of Kafka’s biography and oeuvre, has been an important starting point for several analyses. The author uses a range of Jewish motifs, which is also of interest for the reception of Kafka and the topical theme of Jewish culture. However, he does not use any explicitly Hasidic inspirations (at most, one can see such a thing

⁹⁶Borbély (2006), 188.

⁹⁷Ib., 7.

⁹⁸Ib., 167.

⁹⁹Ib., 144.

¹⁰⁰“... the Jesua ben Jósef of Lugobych, / who was also called the Reborn.” Ib., 135.

¹⁰¹“According to legend, the Messiah was also re-born among the Hasidim. For even today, generation after generation, he is incarnate among us.” Borbély (2008), 111.



into the poeticization of the storytelling in the chapter *Kafka at the Rabbi's* [*Kafka a rabbinál*.]) These and other features of the novel have been discussed elsewhere.¹⁰² The only exception to this statement is the chapter *Kafka and the Letters* (*Kafka és a betűk*), which I did not analyze in this paper. However, for the purposes of our topic, it deserves a more thorough examination, as it provides an important contribution to the reception of Hasidism in Borbély's works.

From the point of view of the novel's narrative, this chapter functions as a kind of insert story, like *The Mystery of the Sphinx* (*A szfinx rejtélye*), which uses the myth of Oedipus, and *The Silence of Nebuchadnezzar* (*Nabukodonozor hallgatása*), based, in turn, on the biblical story. The title, however, is confusing through the contrast it provides: neither Kafka, nor letters of any kind appear in the text of the chapter. From this and the pending narrative we might conclude that this section was unfinished.

The fact that we are dealing with an imitation of a Hasidic story is already indicated by the "pious" merchant in the first sentence, since the adjective, which recurs later in the text, can be interpreted as a translation of the word *Hasid*. The anecdotal narrative has the characteristics of a Hasidic story: it is linked to a holiday, *yom kippur*, and the intention and failure to return home at the beginning of the holiday (travel is forbidden during holidays) is a typical motif. In addition, the setting, the fair, poverty, the journey to the city, and the allusion to Jewish jokes about the Messiah,¹⁰³ are also derived from Hasidic stories.

Broadly speaking, the story is that our pious merchant, on his way home from the fair and after having made an exceptionally profitable deal, has got drunk in his joy and, hung over, he was late starting out on his journey the next day. To make matters worse, his cart broke and was overturned by way of punishment. Time passes while the cart is being repaired, the holiday arrives, and he is forced to "stay away from the community gathered in the temple for Yom Kippur".¹⁰⁴ He spends the holiday in a stable. Finally, the text evokes the idea of an entry in the book of life: the merchant acknowledges his absence by saying that at least his wife will not see him hung over, "provided that he is entered in the book of life". Then the pious merchant reflects on the image: "a fearful thing came into his mind, for the book in which the Almighty, blessed be his name, his hard-working servants inscribe the names of mortals, strictly according to their merits, was to him the fearful secret itself. The secret of secrets".¹⁰⁵

At the time of the Rosh Ha-Shanah, according to Talmudic opinion (R. Hash. 6b), there are three books open in Heaven, the first containing the undoubtedly guilty, the second the undoubtedly righteous, and the third the people in between, neither guilty nor righteous. In the first two books, the Lord inscribes the names of those destined for the good life and those destined for death, but in the case of the third, He postpones judgment until the day of Yom Kippur. During the ten days between the two feasts, the Days of Repentance, people still have the opportunity for prayer, repentance, and penance. It depends of this whether those entered in the third book will be sentenced to life or death.¹⁰⁶ It is in the context of the spirituality of Days

¹⁰²Szász (2021).

¹⁰³ "... the Messiah will come when all the bad deals have been made by the rich at the expense of the poor." Borbély (2021), 57.

¹⁰⁴Ib., 58.

¹⁰⁵Ib.

¹⁰⁶Stern (2002), 62.



of Repentance and of the Yom Kippur (in which *vidduy*, the confession of sins, plays a central role) that the pious merchant's unruly behaviour can be understood. However, his allusion to writing in the books does not solve the problem of the letters in the title, namely, that they are missing from the story. It is probable that Borbély intended to adapt a well-known Hasidic story here but did not finish the text.

In connection with Yom Kippur, we find several typical Hasidic stories that deal with praying in the Hasidic spirit (implementing the principles of *devekut* and *kavanah*), such as the story entitled *The Little Whistle* by Martin Buber,¹⁰⁷ in which a child with little intellect, "who was dull-minded and could not even comprehend the shape of letters", begins to play the flute instead of praying during the Yom Kippur ceremony, thus praising the Almighty in his own way. József Patai adapted the story as *The Flute Prayer*,¹⁰⁸ but we also find traces of it in Peretz's and Berdyczewski's works. Another early story, which can be found in the first printed collection of Hasidic stories, is story #219 of *Shivhei ha-Besht*,¹⁰⁹ which was also adapted by Buber under the title *The Prayer in the Field*.¹¹⁰ In it, the devotee of Baal Shem Tov does not arrive for the feast due to an unspecified obstacle (he lies down and falls asleep in *Shivhei ha-Besht*), and is forced to recite the prayer in the field. Later, Baal Shem Tov is delighted: "Your prayer lifted up all the prayers lying in the field"¹¹¹ – that is, with his prayer he fulfilled the *tikkun*, the so-called dead (unenthusiastically uttered) prayers. The third story, which is known in various versions, begins in a similar way: a pious man was about to go to the town of Koschnitz (Koziencice) for the Yom Kippur ceremony, but fell asleep. When he woke up, it was too late to set off, but he could not say the prayers at home because his wife, thinking that her husband had set off on foot, had taken the prayer book with her. The simple man did not know the prayers, so he sincerely asked the Lord, "Creator of the world, compose all the festive prayers of the prayer book from the aleph-bet" and then recited the letters of the alphabet. After the feast, when the man went to Koschnitz, the *maggid* reported the success of the prayer, which broke the firmament of the heavens.¹¹² Another version of the story is linked to Baal Shem Tov and an ignorant shepherd – or rather to the innkeeper who forgets to lock up his shop and turns back from his way to town, but eventually the inn is raided by customers, as time flies.¹¹³ In each case, at the base of the story are the spirit of the Days of Repentance, Yom Kippur, and the principle of Hasidism whereby great knowledge is worthless in itself when compared to the sincere piety of simple and ignorant people, the *tamim*.

Borbély's unfinished story not only allows us to identify this type of narrative; judging by the title we may infer that the author wanted to adapt the story described later, similar to the stories of Oedipus or Nebuchadnezzar. This hypothesis is confirmed by the fact that the story fits perfectly into Borbély's poetic world, the Hebrew letters also performing a motivic function in the pseudo-Kabbalistic poems of the *Hasidic Sequences*. What is decisive, however, is the fact

¹⁰⁷Buber (2006), 134.

¹⁰⁸Patai (1937), 89–102.

¹⁰⁹Ben-Amos and Minz (2004), 221.

¹¹⁰Buber (2006) 128–129.

¹¹¹Ib., 129

¹¹²Nigal (2012), 261, 324.

¹¹³Stern (2002), 101.



that Borbély dramatizes the same story in a scene of his drama *The Rooster is Calling*. A minor character in the play, Rabinowitz, is a comic figure and a notorious drinker, who, as the Bocher declares, does not even know his letters, whereupon Gabriel the *maggid*, the Hasidic angel in disguise, comes to his defense, excusing Rabinowitz by saying, “Piety is more important than learning”.¹¹⁴ Later, to prove Rabinowitz’s piety, he refers to a past event, “when once / he could not return for Yom Kippur, / the angels up high wept with him”. Then Rabinowitz himself recalls the incident: after having tasted the wine he had bought in Tokaj, they were late setting out the next day, the Tisza was flooding, a storm arrived, and he was forced to spend the holiday huddled in a pigsty – his weeping reached to the heavens, and the angels wept with him. Then the angels dressed as *maggidim* go on as follows, while Rabinowitz recites his aleph-bet:

“MICHAEL MAGGID And we have seen the light come on
 down there in that barn, not far from Kálló, the light
 of true repentance and unfeigned sorrow,
 that reaches up from the Earth to the throne of the Lord of Hosts.
 LUCIFER MAGGID But we do not know this for certain, we only suppose.
 MICHAEL MAGGID Rabinowitz could not return to Yom Kippur.
 And because he didn’t know the prayers,
 in his desperation and unbroken repentance
 he prayed by listing the letters,
 which he remembered from the Cheder... [...]
 GABRIEL MAGGID And he left it to the Lord and to his angels,
 Michael and Gabriel to make of it
 the prayers
 which are now to be recited by all Hasidim...”¹¹⁵

Borbély thus adapted the same Hasidic story in both works – except that he did not finish the version in *Kafka’s Son*. However, in addition to the version in *The Rooster is Calling*, *Kafka and the Letters* also establishes two other important relationships in the context of the oeuvre: on the one hand, it refers back to the early work *Long Day Away* through the spirit of Yom Kippur – as discussed in the early part of this paper. However, the similarity with the *Haggadah of Olaszliszka* is more important for the reception of Hasidism. The motif of the holiday (in this case the Passover) and the journey both occur here, as do the profane elements. As a unique case of the reception of Hasidism (among other types of influences), the two texts can be considered imitations of Hasidic stories in Borbély’s oeuvre.

CONCLUSION

Several works of Hungarian literature around the turn of the millennium were inspired by literary (neo)Hasidism. It was only in the case of Szilárd Borbély, however, that this inspiration became decisive for the development of an entire oeuvre. The two editions of *Funereal*

¹¹⁴Borbély (2013b), 54.

¹¹⁵Ib.



Splendour, and the publication of *While the Baby Jesus of Our Heart Sleeps* in between those two dates, marked a radical change of direction in the oeuvre, which the reception explained by the biographical facts, namely, the trauma of robbery and murder of his parents in 2000. The manifest relationship with Jewish references and Hasidism appears at the same time, although it was already present in traces and distant associations in Borbély's poetry collections. In all cases, these elements are the product of literary Hasidic stories, treatises exploring the world of Hasidism and the Kabbalah, and of reception processes that act as reading experiences of ritual texts. However, the texts that are significant for the author's self-representation also reveal the personal aspects of the relationship with Judaism, and this was later articulated even more emphatically in the autobiographical *The Dispossessed* and the surrounding discourse thematizing the ambivalences of identity even more emphatically.

Hasidism, a subset of Judaism that can be separated from it only problematically, appears in Borbély's essays and other discursive texts in a cultural-historical context, often as a counter-narrative to the master narrative of the Enlightenment. In these texts we already witness the emergence of ideas such as the movement's parallelism with Christianity or the elements of its messianism that emerge from the Buberian idea – all of which take on particular significance in the fictional works. In the discursive texts, as in some of the fictional ones, Hasidism becomes a means of problematizing the author's wider context, the disfigured Jewishness of the North-eastern Hungarian region, and the forgetting of memory. At the same time, the evocation of representatives of the Hasidic tradition in Hungary is a gesture of literary commemoration.

In Borbély's works, Hasidism is always a tradition mediated by secondary texts, and its examination is thus obvious for theorists of textuality. Drawing on cultural traditions, Borbély's texts, which mobilize guest texts, allusions and references, are excellent examples of the bricolage poetics defined by Gérard Genette. At the same time, these Hasidic/Jewish references operate even more complex genetic procedures when they are combined with Christian motifs. Homi K. Bhabha's theory of cultural ambivalence and hybridization emphasizes the transformation of symbols into signs as a semantic consequence of cultural fusion. The relationship to tradition becomes problematic, and new structures become subversive through hybridization, even producing heretical meanings. The motif and figure of the Messiah in Borbély's poetic language in which the Christ of Christianity and the ideas of Hasidism are combined is the most emblematic example of this Judeo-Christian hybridity.

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