

„You must live or die here”?

About Imre Oravecz's Hungarian emigration-novels

In my presentation I would like to depict the connection between the „recession” and the literary representation of the Hungarian emigration before the First World War.

Was the reason for so many people to set out to cross the sea possibly economical or related to the need for agricultural property? Although people are driven directly by psychological reasons, their motivation derives from tangible economical phenomena which influence greatly the workers' lives.” (Bertalan Neményi: *The state of the Hungarian People and the American Emigration*, Athenaeum, Budapest, 1911, p. 21.)

But which are these direct psychological reasons? Imre Oravecz sought to find an answer for this question primarily in his novel, *Ondrok gödre*.

Who or what can be seen as the source of the mass migration from the Monarchy (not exclusively the Hungarians) at the turn of the century as the symptom of recession? So far in a similar manner to Imre Oravecz, nobody has dealt this profoundly with the question from a sociographic angle in the Hungarian Literature. For instance Géza Gárdonyi's novel *‘Aggyisten Birn’* which involves American themes does not discover and break in the reality of the Hungarian Novel. The motif of emigration rather establishes a frame for the piece.

The main character returns from America where he finds himself unable to feel comfortable. America is similarly set-like and rather poses series of trials in the final part of Áron Tamási's Ábel-trilogy.

The concept of the ‘overseas’ does not become auto-referential but it appears as jungle-like complementary version of Ábel's actual home Hargita and its depiction seems to serve the author's intention to animate the motif of returning home. The theme of emigration can be traced apart from the previously mentioned authors in Lajos Zilahy, Ákos Dutka and Géza Csáth.

Oravecz, however, in line with his previous poetic achievements again pioneered two of his novels aspired to depict realistically the themes of integration and homesickness. The *Ondrok gödre* shows the sinister antecedent and demonstrates clearly not only the external economical but at the same time the internal human drives as well. Not exclusively the circumstances seem to have changed but also capitalist-like changes occurs in the attitude of peasantry when their focus from self-provision shifts to material accumulation. The generations do not want to or cannot live together any longer. The emergence of machines generates social gaps and instead of reasonable saving it leads the father-character of the novel *Ondrok gödre* to greed. It is not him but the following generation, and his son, István, who have to pay for his vanity. István escapes from the fragmentation of land and works hard to establish a financial source for his life in America. István and his family represent the first generation of the migration but they did not want to get entirely detached from Hungary, their motivation was only financial. However from the 1,4 million emigrants only 400,000 returned the rest stuck in America eventually. The circumstances

changed the formerly peasant István, who has by now become an industrial worker and his family cannot save enough, and the less known financial crisis of 1907 only increased their sufferings.

Hungarian emigrants faced a very difficult life in America. The so-called old emigrants occupied those lands which seemed similar in climate and geography to their former home. The rest of the land was left to those who arrived later in the country. Because of their struggles for survival – even though it was not the way as they had imagined their integration before – they succeeded to set up a new home while they kept the memories of Szajla. But from a moral point of view they had to pay for their integration. “I’ve been feeling myself Hungarian so far, but now I’m fed up with it and I’m no longer Hungarian” - says the main character’s son in the novel *Kaliforniai fiúrj*. (ORAVECZ Imre, *Kaliforniai fiúrj*, Jelenkor, 2012, 190.) A sentence with the same meaning sounds really different from the American point of view. Philip J. Vandewater declares in his book *The Melting Pot* that the immigrants from different nations melted into one nation. „Because emigration rules became more severe with time, it increased the the heat of the melting pot.”

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