The Representation of Otherness in Contemporary Hungarian Urban Fantasy

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After the regime change (1989), urban spaces gained ground in genre literature, and the city became a common imaginary environment mainly in post-apocalyptic/dystopian science fiction novels, such as in *Kiálts Farkast* (*Cry Wolf*, [1990]) by András Gáspár, *Hiperballada* (*Hyperballad* [2005]) by László Zoltán, *Szintetikus álom* (*Synthetic Dream* [2009]) by Tamás Csepregi, *Feljövök érted a város alól* (*I am coming up to get you from under the city* [2015]) by Zoltán Pék, and *Acélszentek* (*Steel Saints* [2016]) by Kristóf Szöllösy. It should be noted here that none of the novels mentioned in my article is available in English; the titles, names, and quotations are my translations.

The field grew at an explosive rate from the early nineties onwards, but urban fantasy did not become widely read—or written. Among the earliest Hungarian examples of the genre are two anthologies, *A Cetkoponyás ház* (*The House of the Whale Skull*, edited by Lajos Hüse, Cherubion Könyvkiadó [2001]) and *Erioni Regék* (*Tales of Erion*, edited by András Gáspár, Valhalla Páholy [1998]). Those short stories are set in imaginary cities created initially for role-playing games (Hegedüs 94). The re-imagination of Budapest (or any other Hungarian city) in urban fantasy remained absent until *Egyszervolt* by Zoltán László (*Onceupon* [2013]) was published. In this traditional intrusive fantasy, inspired by Neil Gaiman's *Neverwhere*, the protagonist becomes aware of a secret Budapest that lies under the surface and starts exploring this secondary world. More recently, *Egyszervolt* was followed by less traditional urban fantasy works, such as *Pinky* by László Sepsi (2016), where the nameless city, which might as well be Budapest or New York, has its hidden secrets and streets populated by elves, werewolves, or vampires. *Csudapest* (*Wonderpest* [2020]) by Fanni Sütő can also be considered as urban fantasy, consisting of short stories, blog entries, and poems with one common feature: they all describe Budapest as simultaneously familiar and magical.

In my essay, I analyze two award-winning contemporary Hungarian urban fantasy novels, *Irha és bőr* (*Fur and Skin*) by Anita Moskát and *Az ellopott troll* (*The Stolen Troll*) by Sándor Szélesi, which were both published in 2019. The stories unfold in an alternative Budapest where non-humans live (or at least try to live) together with the humans, and my examination focuses on the intersection of the urban and fantasy milieus, which lends itself quite well to explore the problem of otherness through certain genre conventions and clichés.

The Genre Tradition

Fur and Skin talks about the new 'creation' when animals begin to turn into humans all around the world. The animals pupate, initiating a transition in which human limbs and organs replace the animal parts. When the transformation does not end in death, it results in hybrid creatures. Moskát's novel revolves around these creatures' fight for social and political acceptance. *The Stolen Troll* concerns a detective, Bercel Tóth, who is the only human at the Department of Magical Creatures at the Budapest Police Headquarters. The troll living at the foot of Margit Bridge goes missing—probably kidnapped—and through Bercel's investigation the novel offers an insight into the daily life of the unusual world in which magical creatures make up about 20 percent of the city's population.

Both novels play extensively with the tradition of urban fantasy, and I highlight the generic features that contribute to exploring otherness. According to Irvine, "the element most common to all urban fantasy is a city where magical or supernatural events occur" (200). Kenneth Zahorski and Robert Boyer give a more restrictive definition of urban fantasy: a fantastical narrative that is "set in the conventional here and now" (56). *Fur and Skin* and *The Stolen Troll* are both placed in a contemporary urban environment, more specifically, in an existing city that has become magical because of its inhabitants. I use the term 'magic' or 'magical' in a broad sense to describe very different worlds, creatures, and phenomena that expand the limits of urban fantasy.

In *Fur and Skin*, the magical or supernatural event is a metamorphosis of animals into humans without rational reason or explanation, so it can be considered magic. The transition process is incomplete in most of the cases, with animal parts remaining, the novel thus introduces creatures that are neither animal anymore nor fully human. Their very existence is supernatural/magical, or unnatural, and humans believe that the sudden appearance of the creatures challenges the natural and divine order. *The Stolen Troll*, in contrast, describes a fictional world in which the magical creatures of Hungarian folklore are integrated into our contemporary world and society. The text introduces both fictional, and widely (dragons, witches, and sorcerers) or lesser known (fairies, dwarfs) characters from Hungarian mythology whose names and attributes derive from the folktales. Moreover, the novel also builds on the narrative structures of the folktales, for example featuring an old king with three daughters or a magic whistle to call for help. These different folkloric elements pervade the quotidien and seem natural to both humans and magical creatures.

In *Rhetorics of Fantasy*, Farah Mendlesohn grouped fantasy texts into four categories: portal-quest, intrusion, immersive and liminal fantasies. According to her taxonomy, both *The Stolen Troll* and *Fur and Skin* belong to the category of immersive fantasy, in which the characters (to varying degrees but) "take for granted the fantastic elements with which they are surrounded; they must exist as integrated with the magical (or fantastic) even if they themselves are not magical" (20). At the same time, the reader doesn't have to discover this primary magical world because it is already familiar, the urban areas are identical to Budapest and Kistarcsa. Therefore, the novels continuously challenge our understanding of normal and not-normal, familiar and unfamiliar,

or one could say, the other and the "not-other." In addition, the sense of intrusion is present in both novels due to the urban fantasy setting, with the dragons flying over the famous bridges on the Danube or deerpeople running down the existing streets of Kistarcsa. In that case, real and fantastic do not collide within the text, but in the readers' minds. This form of intrusion generates threats or problems that are not resolved in the text in a certain way but require the readers' efforts to consider different possibilities, and to avoid (over)simplification.

Otherness: Segregation or Integration

The creatures of *Fur and Skin* are built on the literary tradition of the chimeras, being half-human like us, yet still animals. The denomination used in the novel, "fajzat," reflects on the creatures' liminal position, being a word used here in a new context to express that they are a non-human species, at the same time indicating disdain. Terms and names are central to the narrative as a form of speciesism, and the creatures fight for the name chimera, considering that it "Nincs negatív felhangja, nyoma sincs a gúnynak. Egzotikus, ősi, rejtélyes" ["It has no negative overtones, and there is no sign of mockery. Exotic, ancient, mysterious"] (Moskát 91). Interestingly, humans are called "sapiens" by the chimeras, suggesting the same disdain in reverse.

By their nature, the chimeras of *Fur and Skin* embody the other and humans feel threatened: "A fajzatokhoz első asszociációként az összes felmérés szerint a félelem kötődött" ["According to all surveys, in connection with the creatures, the first association is fear"] (37). Chimeras are fearsome because they disrupt the duality of humans and animals; their birth is unnatural, as a character points out: "Az emberek születnek, van anyjuk, van apjuk. A fajzatok, mi, állatokból keletkezünk" ["People are born, they have a father and a mother, the creatures, we, come into being from an animal"] (65). Secondly, the transition is inexplicable and unpredictable; it can happen to a deer in the forest or to the family's beloved pet. Moreover, the number of chimeras seems to grow, raising philosophical-theological questions about humanness and causing a series of socio-political problems.

Chimeras call into question what people perceive to be human, yet *Fur and Skin* does not want to answer this—though the text inevitably proposes a solution. In the novel, human and animal are not mutually exclusive categories, their relationship is rather an axis that has two ends, the animal and the human. The chimeras are creatures in between; some are closer to humans, like one of the three protagonists, August, who is practically perceived to be human. Pilar, the badger-girl, and Kirill, the deer-man, possess more animal traits, and many of the chimeras are further to human on the above-mentioned axis.

The duality is mirrored in the chimeras' position in society and the humans' attitude towards them. In the Hungary of the novel, chimeras, in a certain sense, are perceived as humans, more precisely disabled humans, as their remaining animal body parts are considered a disability that makes many creatures still unable to do ordinary human things, such as holding a mug, buttoning buttons, or tying up shoelaces. Their disabilities need to be remedied, therefore antlers and horns, for example, are muffled up in foam or an artificial finger, a fork and a hook is inserted into the

hoofs. Besides the body modifications, chimeras are also expected to suppress their animalistic instincts and perform civilized human behavior. The "creation" itself is followed by a period in the Socialization Centre, which is responsible for integrating the chimeras into the world of humans, claiming that "Már nem vagytok állatok . . . Meg kell tanulnotok emberként élni" ["You are not animals anymore . . . You have to live as humans"] (Moskát 44). During this education—or I would call it forced anthropomorphization—the chimeras are required to be non-aggressive, learn to speak, wear clothes, and try to eat with cutlery. However, it is declared that "Nem minden állat válik civilizálttá" ["Not all the animals become civilized"] (47); some feel "városkór" ["citysickness"](49) and refuse (or are unable) to imitate the behavior of the humans.

On the other hand, in Hungary—and this is a crucial point—chimeras are regarded as inferior to humans, even treated like animals. Their education does not result in their integration into society; they are segregated, lack human rights, and must have a legal guardian to leave the ghetto, which resembles a zoo where humans visit on safari buses to look around and take photos. Moreover, in the blog entries of Kirill, we read short stories about the brutal violence against chimeras that often results in their deaths.

Pilar represents the concept of voluntary assimilation; to her, the goal is to become human, or at least be indistinguishable from them. To this end, "Minden állati maradvány csak hiba, amely a bebábozódáskor keletkezett. Itt az idő kijavítani őket" ["The animal remnants are mistakes that occurred during the pupation. It's time to erase them"] (Moskát 72). In contrast, Kirill refuses assimilation, saying that "Kevés dolog megalázóbb, mint imitálni a sapienseket." or "Nem kell utánoznunk őket. Nekünk is lehetnek saját fajzatdolgaink." ("Only a few things are more humiliating than imitating the sapienses" or "we don't have to imitated then. We can have our creature-things too"] (64). Other characters in the ghetto hold a more radical opinion on assimilation, namely that chimeras are not to conform to human norms and expectations as they are not disabled human beings. According to this opinion, otherness is a problem of majority and minority: "Matematika. Azért uralkodnak rajtunk, mert ők a többség, hétmilliárd a százmillió ellen" ["It's mathematics. They rule us, because they are the majority, seven billion against seven hundred thousand"] (243). In this situation, the Other is, by definition, a minority and subordinate, thus cannot prescribe his own norms and is subject to the practices of the dominant group. This line of thought leads to the conclusion that the situation will only change "Ha mi lennénk többen . . . mi hoznánk a törvényeket, mi alakítanánk a kultúrát" ["if we were the majority . . . we would write the rules, we would shape the culture"] (244). In other words, they determine what is normal and other, and then "a hétmilliárd sapiensből rácsok mögött mutogatott látványosság lenne" ["the seven billion sapienses would be a spectacle behind bars"] (244).

The third character, August, is approaching the problem of otherness from a human standpoint, having been regarded as human all his life. He intends to secure human rights for chimeras, as they have in other countries, where they have the right to elect their representatives. In his opinion, human rights are the first step towards an equality that takes the differences into account; as he points out in his political statement "Egy vagyok közületek [emberek közül]" ["I

am one of yours [humans]"] (40), but unlike Pilar, he doesn't deny the differences: "ember és fajzat közt a különbséget a külső jelenti" ["The only difference between human and creature is in their appearance"] (40).

Nevertheless, the novel raises no false hopes that the chimeras will be accepted as normal in the foreseeable future. Regardless of her efforts, Pilar is rejected and laughed at for imitating a human. After she is re-created by a team of hairdressers, make-up artists, and stylists, her transition seems to be accepted, but when she stands in front of people under different circumstances, the audience sees a creature on the stage, mocking and humiliating Pilar in public. Should the chimeras become the majority, it would only reverse the roles and would not provide a real solution; as we learn from the examples of other countries, despite the human rights and the liquidation of ghettos, chimeras remain marginalized in society. They cannot change humans' attitude, and apparently, as a conclusion, the novel suggests that there is no place for the other with biological differences in society, as protagonists end up in prison or choose self-imposed exile.

In *The Stolen Troll*, we find different "others" and a more positive attitude towards otherness. Magicians and magical creatures are a common trope of fantasy that embodies the other among humans and the attitude towards their otherness varies from dread or disdain to admiration. Szélesi's novel describes an alternative Hungary populated by humans and a wide variety of magical creatures from Hungarian folklore, no less than fifteen different magical species live together. In this exceptionally diverse world, the other is considered a normal member of society; the coexistence is even if not unproblematic but based on acceptance. Ordinary humans represent the majority of the population, followed by humans born with magical abilities, like shamans ("sámán," who is connected to the spiritual world and able to use magic of nature), magicians ("mágus," who possess magical objects and is able to use different forms of magic), witches ("szépasszony," whose magic also derives from nature but they are only able to cast smaller spells) and sorcerers (the figure of the "táltos" is unique to Hungarian mythology; their power derives from a direct connection to God). In addition to humans and different magicians, magical creatures like trolls, siegbarstes, giants, werewolves, fairies account for about ten percent of the society.

We can distinguish between visible and invisible otherness. Contrary to *Fur and Skin*, where the chimeras are visibly different from humans in most cases, the magicians and witches do not differ from humans in their appearance, yet they are associated with the magical other. This duality is mirrored in the attitude towards them, as on the one hand they are not perceived as fundamentally different. Answering the question "Hogyan viszonyulsz a varázslényekhez?" ["How do you feel about magical creatures?"], Bercel replies that "Nincs veletek gondom" ["I don't have a problem with you"] (Szélesi 20). Contrary to Fur and Skin, in Szélesi's novel, integration is present in every aspect of life, including education (mixed nurseries and schools) and jobs (the protagonist works together with a werewolf, a shaman, a magician, and other creatures), in the private sphere, "inter-species" relationships and families are accepted, though uncommon. Certain magical creatures live apart from humans, but that is usually a consequence of the different body sizes;

giants prefer to live on the top of the beanstalk, and tiny fairies (called "pilinkó" in Hungarian folklore) tend to hide in the forests.

The novel does not give a detailed description of the society's structure but the investigation of Bercel Tóth leads to higher and higher places, revealing the hierarchy of the fictional world. In the novel, Hungary is a kingdom, the king is a human, and the parliament is the highest legislative authority, made up of the Upper House and the Lower House. The members of parliament, and most importantly, the aristocracy, are equally composed of humans and magical creatures, yet, the highest positions, like the Home Secretary, the Minister of Human and Magical Resources, the Minister of Security, are held by highly qualified magicians. Apparently, magical abilities are not a basis of discrimination or an obstacle to overcome, but rather an advantage in public or political life.

Various forms of otherness are acknowledged, accepted, and even appreciated in the novel, in both political and social terms. However, delving deeper into the text, we see the humans (and magical creatures) struggling with otherness in everyday life because invisible alterity is more fearsome than visible otherness. Examples can be found for distrust or fear of magic, or we could say distrust and fear of the magical other and their superhuman abilities. The protagonist, Bercel Tóth, wears an amulet to be protected from curses and spells and automatically assumes that his partner of magical abilities, Krisztina Hanga, is reading his mind or uses magic to bewitch him (Szélesi 79, 113). Bercel is not the only one who does not entirely trust magical creatures, the aversion of a "magicolist" is expressed in an outburst: "Egy boszorkányt hozott a házamba . . . Úristen!" ["You brought a witch to my house? Oh my God!"] (22). Krisztina Hanga articulates the problem from the opposite point of view, saying:

Integrált oktatás, hogyne. Minden varázstudó gyerek rémálma. A többiek félnek tőlünk, nem fogadnak be minket, kinéznek maguk közül. Az a varázstudó, aki nem védi meg magát, azt zaklatják. Ha megvédi, akkor beárulják, hogy agresszív és antiszociális."

["Integrated education, of course. It is every magician's worst nightmare. The others are afraid of us, do not accept us, even ostracize us. The ones who don't defend themselves are bullied. And if you defend yourself, you are told to be aggressive and antisocial."] (78)

Moreover, despite their human and political rights, some non-human magical creatures are still objectified in certain situations. The title, the "stolen troll" addresses the problem of objectification, and it derives from the law: "A lopás szót használom a rablás helyett, és nem rasszizmusból, hanem, mert a büntetőjogban a kőből álló varázslényekre még mindig így tekintenek" ["I use the word stolen instead of kidnapped, and it's not racism, because according to criminal law, magical creatures made of stone are regarded as objects"] (7). In other situations, magical creatures despise humans for the lack of magical abilities, such as a goblin (called "pörtmandli" in Hungarian folklore, a magical creature unable to lie and susceptible to magic) declares to the protagonist that "Maga *csak egy ember*" ["You are *just a human*"] (6). The novel's antagonist, a magician, points out that humans are the same and worthless: "Az egyik emberizink

olyan mint a másik . . . Tizenkettő egy tucat. . . . A szaporodáson kívül másra nem képesek!" ["One human is like the other . . . They are a dime a dozen. . . . They can only reproduce"] (192). His view, however, is not generally accepted and he is called an "abilist," a word created by analogy with racist from ability. The term suggests a form of ableism according to which the lack of magical abilities is a disability from the magical creatures' point of view. We can draw a connection between the two novels, as they both connect otherness to the concept of disability that limits the others' opportunities in society.

Like *Fur and Skin*, names and denominations reflect on the attitude towards otherness, though it is only a question of political correctness in *The Stolen Troll*'s world. Following Bercel's question to Krisztina: "Maga boszorkány?" ["Are you a witch?"] (11), the detective is reminded to be politically correct, at least concerning the terminology. But as the quotation in the previous paragraph reveals, not only the magical creatures are called insulting nicknames, but humans are mocked as "emberizink," an archaic word, meaning little, both in body and abilities. The world and society described in The Stolen Troll reveals that the integration of the magical other into the society is not without conflicts and certain forms of distinction are still at play.

"The world is designed for humans"

The setting is central to the definition of urban fantasy, and fantasy scholars are taking different approaches to the characteristics of the city, predominantly based on its location in a primary or secondary world (Elkman 457). Irvine proposes the distinction (or rather an axis) of urban fantasy or fantasy urban, referring to texts in which "urban" is a descriptor applied to fantasy and those in which fantasy modifies the urban milieu (200). On the one hand, both *Fur and Skin* and *The Stolen Troll* belong to the category of urban fantasy, in which the city is recognizably taken from our contemporary world. However, as Irvine points out, this kind of narrative involves contact with some magical realm, and the story revolves around the magical coming into collision with the urban milieu (201). In the novels discussed, the fantastic does not come in contact with reality, but is intrinsically part of it from the first pages, being a component of the urban milieu. Talking about the urban environment, Kirill points out that "a világot sapiensekre tervezték" ["The world is designed for sapiens"] (Moskát 46). It is worth examining this remark in the light of accepting or rejecting otherness and to what extent the urban spaces are transformed because of their magical inhabitants.

Despite the different attitudes towards otherness, both novels depict cities that mostly remain unchanged compared to our known reality, and the texts refer to real objects of the urban landscape. In *Fur and Skin*, the NFSZ (International Organization for Creatures) headquarters at Kálvin Square is in the modern glass tower with a view of Szabadság-bridge and Danube (Moskát 80), the visitors travel to the ghetto in Kistarcsa by the local railway (13). At the same time, the cohabitation of the other and the human in a common space is not a given. Concrete walls and barbed wire separate the spaces of the humans and that of the chimeras, and within the walls,

we find a city in the city, more precisely another urban environment that mirrors the chimeras' otherness in two ways.

Firstly, it highlights the creatures' physical differences from humans, expressed through their incompatibility with the urban environment. The city of the humans is a constant threat: "akárhányszor kimerészkedtek otthonról, az életükre tört" ["Whenever they dared to venture out, it tried to kill them"] (Moskát 13), being cold, silent, dirty, and full of glass and steel compared to nature where the chimeras' partly belong. Contrary to the humans' world, the ghetto is inhuman in two senses. The creatures live in an area that the humans abandoned; they occupy houses and multi-storey buildings that were family homes. The ghetto is characterized by decay without humans; the walls are ruined, the furniture is broken, the windows are covered with cardboard, and there are no public utilities. Among the houses, huge tents are set up. However, those also only provide inhumane refugee camp-type living conditions of shared camp beds, common facilities, and strict rules. The ghetto is the inferior, ruined version of the human urban spaces, mirroring the chimeras' inferior position in society.

The Stolen Troll likewise describes a city almost identical to the real Budapest, and magic is not apparent in the construction of urban spaces. The narrator spends much time detailing the routes and places of Bercel's investigation, mentioning dozens of reference points, including Margit Island, the bridges over the Danube, the building of the police headquarters at Teve Road, and Jégbüfé, a famous patisserie at the Square of the Franciscans. The only mentioned difference between the real Budapest and the fictional one lies in the name of Andrássy Avenue that bears the name Avenue of Equal Constitution and in the presence of a Broom Store that sells traditional Hungarian brooms to witches. Re-naming the avenue, the novel also reflects on the continuous change of the street names according to the political changes, throughout Hungarian history Andrássy Avenue also wore the name Avenue of People's Republic (Népköztársaság útja). We could say that the difference between the real Budapest and the imaginary one is as invisible or subtle as the difference between magicians and humans, and the nonhumans are not represented at all in the cityscape. In short: magical creatures are integrated into the world, but the urban environment remains of and for humans.

The parallels drawn between the two novels and the city landscapes reveal that Kirill's comment is not only correct, but the same applies to The Stolen Troll despite the different attitude towards otherness. Irrespective of the level of integration, the use of urban spaces suggests a human-centered approach, in which the other can live in the humans' world yet can't remake it in their image.

Conclusion

In his study, Ekman argues that urban fantasy is the genre of the unseen that offers the possibility to "discuss and discover" what we usually do not or do not want to see (466). I would add that the combination of the primary-world setting, the contemporary environment, and the immersive fantasy in *Fur and Skin* and *The Stolen Troll* can be called (sub-)genre of otherness. As

we have seen, the novels display otherness in different ways, yet have one crucial common motif: the other is no longer something hidden in the dark, outside our world and our society but walks amongst us in the familiar streets. Therefore, this form of urban fantasy, on one hand, mirrors what we think about ourselves and our society, and at the same time, invites us to think about the situation of the other. The discussed novels explore the reactions of society to otherness, and, in this regard, they can be considered as steps of a process from rejection to almost complete acceptance of otherness. The characters focus on the differences between humans, chimeras and magicians, and the novels depict internal social tensions, raising the question whether complete acceptance is possible. Only one chimera, a nameless, ancillary character, addresses the problem from a different point of view: "Ugyanazt szeretnénk, mint minden élőlény a Földön: legyen biztonság, legyen meleg, legyen mit enni. És mellettünk legyenek azok, akik szeretnek" ["We all just want the same things as all the living things on Earth: to be safe, to keep warm, and have enough to eat. And we want the ones we love to be there for us"] (Moskát 153). The comment applies equally to humans, chimeras, and magicians, and suggests focusing on similarities rather than differences. In other words, not only others can be the unseen, but the differences that make them *the other*.

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