

THE PHILOSOPHY OF HEROIC CIVILITY IN G. OTTLIK'S NOVEL *BUDA*

Ferenc HÖRCHER

Institute of Philosophy, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Pázmány Péter Catholic University
1088 Budapest, Mikszáth Kálmán tér 1, Hungary
E-mail: horcher.ferenc@btk.mta.hu

Received 2017 June 12; accepted 2017 October 29

This paper deals with a novel by the 20th century Hungarian author, Géza Ottlik entitled *Buda*. It takes this work as an example of the way cities get fictionalised in contemporary fiction. The novel presents interconnected stories (personal memories, historical episodes and urban legends) all linked to the author's birthplace, Buda, Hungary, narrated by a quasi-autobiographical voice. The fundamental claim of the paper is that *civility* and *heroism* (two, seemingly contradictory values) are both extremely important values in the self-perception of the writer's *alter ego*. Through his rebellious kind of civility Ottlik's self-referential hero, BB is able to counter-balance the historical drama of World War II. In this fictional world, both the author and his hero rebels against overheated and passion ridden politics, preserving the tone and overtone of an urbane and civil Hungary. The paper recalls some of the key episodes in this respect (like when his hero is caught between the two parties of the war), as well as analysing its ironic tone and some of its further key concepts, including friendship, elegance and civil manners. It presents the author and his self-referential fictional hero as mirroring each other, this way establishing (self-fashioning) the legendary figure of Ottlik in post-war Hungary, the paradigm "burgher" of Hungarian civil society.

Keywords: civility, elegance, friendship, heroism, Hungarian civil society, self-referential novel, urbanity, World War II.

Introduction

This paper addresses Géza Ottlik's self-perception as a writer. His generation had to confront a very difficult period in Hungarian history: another lost war (World War II, WWII) together with the Holocaust, Russian occupation, and communism. These were the political settings among which they had to live and create their oeuvres. And yet Ottlik had a pronounced civil

attitude in public affairs: he did not regard literature as a political (or for that matter military) service for the nation. On the contrary: after he left the military school he had attended as a young child, he enjoyed a kind of absolute liberty, not being dependent on anything or anyone.

However, this is not the end of the story. This paper aims to address the inherent heroism of his attitude of civility. To achieve this goal,

Copyright © 2017 The Authors. Published by VGTU Press.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 \(CC BY-NC 4.0\)](#) license, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. The material cannot be used for commercial purposes.

besides considering some of his texts, we also take into account his self-fashioning, the figure he displayed on the stage of mid and late 20th century Hungarian literary and public life.

A writer creates his own figure

Ottlik was a prestigious writer who published legendarily rarely. An early long short story, *Rooftops at Dawn* (RD, in Hungarian: *Hajnali háztetők*, originally published in 1957¹) was followed by the *opus magnum*, *SF*, while the other novel, *Buda*, was only published after his death, in 1993. Between these longer narrative constructions he also published short stories, novels, radio plays, and a collection of criticism and interviews.

Ottlik did work, however, even when he did not write. He created his own figure, in a historical context.

As Ottlik's relationship to the heroic past of his family and country brings up important dilemmas, this essay tries to show that the conceptual opposition of heroism and civility is a fundamental guiding principle of his master-narrative.

Civility and heroism

The fundamental claim of this paper is that civility and heroism are both extremely important

notions in Ottlik's vocabulary. One can formulate it even more radically: they are its asymmetrical counter concepts, to borrow Reinhart Koselleck's term (1988). In other words, both of them depend on the other: their meanings are to be understood in contrast to the other: there is no meaning to the civil, if we forget about the heroic, which is, after all, a military virtue, and *vice versa*: no heroism exists which does not invoke its counterpart, the civil. And together, they are important building blocks of the novels' universe as well as of the self-perception of the author. The paper first offers a tentative short-hand definition for the terms, which is going to be followed by a short analysis of them. Civility in Ottlik's world means to elegantly disregard the world of necessities, and yet to accept what is given with dignity. On the other hand, heroism is an outdated virtue, which is expressed by being ready to give one's life for the patria, for the beloved or for a certain cause, if that is the way to defend one's honour. Otherwise: to pose like a hero is funny.

In the value-hierarchy of Ottlik's great novel's chief protagonists, the friends BB and Medve, civility, an explicitly non-military attitude, was seen as one of the key virtues of a man. One would think that this is a key virtue of the writer as well. After all, we know that he was never a militant campaigner or supporter of wars. But this sounds somewhat strange from a cadet. At the very start of the *SF*, we learn about a distinction they make: between those who shared the years of suffering at the military school with them that is, the schoolmates, and the "civilians", who do not know anything about life in a cadet school. And the distinguishing mark is that as soon as you leave the school you immediately have and will always have the feeling, even if you forget the details of those sufferings, that after years spent in absolute darkness you have got out of the cave to the sun, after the prison years you have finally got back your personal liberty, which is a treasure more precious than almost anything else. That is why he starts the book with the description of

¹ The story was published in a fiction column in 1944, except for the last section, because by that time "the Nazi troops (had) occupied the country" (see Ottlik 2005a: 205). Two editions of the book (Ottlik 1966, 2005a) both refer to School at the *Frontier* (SF, in Hungarian: Iskola a határon, originally published in 1959. We also know that an earlier version of this novel already existed in 1948, when he withdrew it from the publisher. That much slimmer version of the novel was finally published posthumously.), but the first one is an English, the other one a Hungarian edition. This paper needs to use both of these editions, as the present author was able to consult only certain parts of the English language translation, further excerpts had to be translated by him from the Hungarian version.

this feeling: “that sort of splendid intoxication, the rapture that freedom alone gives” (Ottlik 1966: 10).

Both in Ottlik’s fictional world and in his world of his own image-making a farewell to arms is the main priority. This is closely connected with his idea of the gentleman. This idea is not that of the Christian knight anymore, nor that of the *kuruc* horseman, the armed anti-Habsburg rebel of the late 17th and early 18th centuries, nor that of Lajos Kossuth’s mid-19th century freedom fighter. His ideal is that of the literary gentleman (a 19th century invention?), the one whose main battlefield cry is to have an isolated sphere of privacy.

To put it bluntly, his position is halfway between the two ends on the axis of civility and heroism. Ottlik shares with his schoolmates an experiential horizon that is not available to outsiders: he has gone through that baptism of fire, which they imagine to have been worse than the experience of the real battlefields, and therefore he has got impregnated for his whole life by this early initiation into the world of the military. On the other hand, he is a traitor, a deserter, a conscientious objector. He wilfully left the army in order never to return there. This is how he remains in between the two camps, open to the gunfire of both belligerent parties. He is left on no man’s land, on T. S. Eliot’s *Waste Land*.

In between two camps

This symbolic position of being left in between is described in a compelling way in some exemplary episodes of his books. Take, for example, the battlefield scene, when the Russians are besieging the capital. His hero gets through this experience in his beloved hometown, the hilly side of Budapest called Buda. This is how he reacts to that situation:

“In the winter of ’44-’45, during the siege of Buda I had to shovel the snow daily from the flat tin roof over my room. I was kidded a lot

about this because someone noticed from down below that when I realized, up on the roof, that there were bullets zinging a delicate pattern around my head, German ones from the west and Russian ones from the east, I sternly shook my shovel at both warring parties: ‘Hold your fire, you animals! And you to, you savages!’” (Ottlik 2004: 173).

This description sets forth the hero, BB, in this symbolic position of left alone on the roof of his house between the contending, uncivilised, brutal parties: the Nazi German troops and their Hungarian allies on the one side, and the Russian liberators and invaders on the other side. The inhabitants are caught between the two parties, the city has become a battlefield. This is the decision of the leaders of the two armies, the soldiers simply execute the orders, and the civilians simply have to endure it. BB’s funny but also very furious gesture resembles that of an Old Testament prophet who damns both parties of an unnecessary human conflict and because of the innocent victims.

There is a further expression of his preference for an Aristotelian balanced position in this debate of civility and heroism. This is the description of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 (HR 1956) in the streets of Hungary. This was a situation when first students of the capital demonstrated to express their solidarity with their Polish friends, and their non-violent demonstration was provoked by gunshots from unidentified guns, resulting in the end in the outburst of an explicit revolution. The point Ottlik’s narrator makes about the revolution is, however, that the students were not aggressive revolutionaries, but very ordinary people of the street, who found themselves in the middle of a historic revolution. Budapest becomes the emblem city of liberty in 1956, with unarmed student demonstrators later helped by the workers of the factories against a totalitarian regime, and its superpower ally, Soviet communism. Budapest in this respect expresses the power of the powerless, as did Mahatma Gandhi’s India,

and Martin Luther King's Jr. movement in the United States will later do. The only difference is that the youth of Budapest were turning against a totalitarian power – unlike India (turning against the United Kingdom), and King's revolution (turning against Washington). And yet there is no heroic pathos on the faces of the youth of the street, as depicted by this narrative. Let us see Ottlik's narrator's account of the event:

"Just go out on the street, or take a look out the window. Nobody thinks his own worthless, maybe unbearably worthless hide is dearer now than the nation's abstract pride (*becsület* should perhaps be translated as honour? – F. H.). Look at those faces, Márta, and you'll see their calm relief. This is the decisive difference: instead of courageous resolve, or heroic dare-deviltry, you see joyous relief in their eyes. Together or alone, they happily and calmly go against tanks, cannon, and machine guns. Nothing is dearer to them than their regained human dignity. You said it, Márta: this is poetry indeed" (2004: 211).

This is a tricky description: the present winners (who will be the losers in a few days' time) are not characterised by a pathetic heroism. Not at all. On the contrary. What is so astonishing about them is their disengagement, their relief. And although Ottlik's narrator uses the term heroic, he is not glorifying heroic acts, although neither is he debunking what is happening. The opposition here is between "heroic dare-deviltry" (*hősies vakmerőség*) – the virtue of the soldiers – and "joyous relief" (*boldog megkönnyebbülés*) a civil virtue characterising the young demonstrators who turn into revolutionaries. And yet, these joyous youngsters "happily and calmly go against tanks, cannon, and machine guns". Why? What is the motivating force – if it is not martial virtues, glory or eternal honour? Ottlik's narrator has a very simple answer: they do it for "their regained human dignity". Now human dignity is partly a Roman (Ciceronian), partly a Christian humanist term (as explained

by Giovanni Pico della Mirandola), and partly a term of modern-individualist moral philosophy (Immanuel Kant's concept of dignity). For Ottlik, dignity is both a buzzword and a philosophical underpinning of civil liberty. Whenever a regime is trying to turn against it, you will by nature feel that you have to resist that regime. This is what happened in 1956 in Budapest, his narrator suggests.

A Bildungsroman

For Ottlik, getting through the school years meant something like a *Bildung* process. It was of course not at all the course material that proved to be so significant in his later life. Not at all. It was somehow the unintended consequences of his school-experience that earned the importance of these years in his mind-set. While originally it was really shocking to go through all those adventures, in his later life Ottlik could rely on the intellectual and mental strength he had accumulated there during those very years.

Therefore he regarded it as an issue of loyalty not to reject his past. And in a certain way he was loyal even to his military school identity. Here is a detail of *Buda* about that:

"The fact is, *mon Général*, it's been a long time – about four hundred years – since we were new recruits (and plenty brave, until some of us did not come back). The fact is, we had indeed started something. A life? A settling-in? (Could it be we had started, little by little, to turn into all-out soldiers? Or civilians? The key to which, the disentangling, the crawling away from this soldier-identity of ours, could have been familiar perhaps only to weather-beaten, crusty old generals and old foot soldiers?)" (Ottlik 2004: 23).

This excerpt has so many significant references that we cannot catalogue all of them here. But undoubtedly the whole of the monologue

can remind us that the narrator was (and his schoolmates had been) struggling with what he calls here “this soldier-identity of ours” for a long time – maybe for their whole life. There seems to be a case of double-identity revealed here. They seem to have regarded themselves as true soldiers and civilians at the same time. They were true soldiers compared to those who had not gone through their education sentimental, and civilians compared to those of their schoolmates who had remained in the army, and participated in the first rows of the ugliest battles of the new World War. As recruits they had the least experience of real armed conflicts. And yet they were brave enough to fight their own fears against the brutality of their elder schoolmates and the officers. And what about their “civil virtues”? Are they not overrating individual liberty – in a time of total war against totalitarian powers? Should they not grab their weapons and start to shoot?

Medve’s courage to remain in the school is closely linked to our current problem of civility and heroism. These boys accept the value of the martial virtues of the past, a rich package of Christian and antique Roman ideals, connected to the heroic deeds of the Hungarian past, except for those who left the army in order not to be in a position to actually practise what soldiers are expected to do in wars. They choose to be civilians, not because they are cowards, on the contrary. They dare to say “No!” to something that is not acceptable for their moral sense. And in fact, this choice is not simply an amoral dilemma. It is more than that: it is a question of civility. Now let us see what the connection is between being civilian, and the virtue of civility.

Civility and culture

Certainly there is an etymological relationship between the two concepts of civilian and civility in English. Behind both of these terms we find the Latin word *civilis*, which had both of these

meanings already in Roman public discourse. It came from the Latin noun *civis*, meaning “citizen”. As an adjective *civilis* had the following meanings: characteristic of citizens (in present day English *civic*, *civil*); characteristic of public life (in present day English *public*, *political*); figuratively affable (in present day English *polite*, *urbane*), and in a substantive sense: civility (present day English *courtesy*).²

While Ottlik’s story is about the violent conflicts of student groups in an anachronistic military school, he presents the main heroes of his story as much more cultured than all the others, high above the average. In fact, sometimes it is hard to imagine that these are very young teenagers. Most certainly they grew up much more suddenly than their generation’s average. But it is more important that the author wants to present the conflict as a moral and cultural clash. As opposed to the brutally aggressive group around the charismatic leader Merényi, himself stayed in their form for a second year, BB, Medve and their friends, turn out to be not only motivated and bright students, but also ones with artistic capacities: Medve is going to be a poet-writer, while BB is destined to become a painter, and apparently Szeredy has a musical talent. Their revolt against the oppressive regime of the Merényi-clan was that of the cultural elite, who was quite proud of its achievements in the sports, in science and the arts.

It is along these lines that we can introduce the problem of civility in the context of the military school. The Medve-BB group (we call it like that to express that it has no single authority as its head, even if Medve had all the charisma for that) was quite achievement-centred, while they could also appreciate the luxury of simply enjoying the time spent together, without any real activity – the sort of leisure that was called friendship by Aristotle. If we take the

² This explanation is available on the Internet webpage *WordSense.eu* (see wordsense.eu 2017). One should not forget about the detailed comparative recapitulation of the genealogy of the concepts of civilisation and culture by Norbert Elias (1982).

Aristotelian distinction between active and contemplative life, it is no doubt that BB would be found on the contemplative side, while the people in the army were generally in favour of an active life. Medve is not such an easy case, not even in this respect. For indeed he is civilian, non-military. And yet, he is almost hyperactive, as were his heroes, Petőfi and Ady. Neither of them lived, however, long – and Medve, too, dies relatively young. His unexpected and unexplained death is closely connected to 1956 – when the dreams of the student generation of the revolution died, too. Through his early death Medve turns into a mythical figure – in spite of the fact that he, too, was afraid of death.

But turning back to the problem of the Medve-BB group's rebellion against Merényi's regime and the school's cruelty, the particular way they choose to express their views is refraining from any sort of aggressivity, including swearing and cursing as a soldier does. Their strategy is that of civility. But what exactly do they mean, and what does Ottlik mean, by the term? Let us quote:

“First of all, civilization is an illusion. But an illusion we must maintain. From time to time people act as if civilized (the cowards, the rabble), and you might even benefit from it (keeping in mind its sheer hypocrisy)” (Ottlik 2004: 47).

This is the voice of Medve, the poet and rebel, who wants to oppose aggressivity (rooted in a severe inferiority complex) with a heroic strategy of civility. He tried to uphold this nice illusion well beyond the possible.

It is really noteworthy how Ottlik manipulates our experience of his story with the choice of its words. Civilisation, we heard, is an illusion. It is also hypocrisy, we learn, and self-deception. All these terms used are there only to call attention to the context of their use. These are strong words, rather critical ones. But the point is not at all a criticism of civility. On the contrary. The point is to realise that even if it is

an illusion, a hypocrisy and a self-deception, it is a rather valuable treasure.

“Gábor Medve, the first time in the infirmary back when we were raw recruits, realized that this self-deception, this illusion of civilisation, with all of its disgusting hypocrisy, can be embraced. It works out better that way (What's more, he thought, we were obliged to uphold this civilian illusion, as a hypothetical basis for discussion.)” (Ottlik 2004: 23).

The question is this: what exactly is at stake in this form of self-discipline and courtesy. Why is it so desirable in this military school environment? If we want to appreciate the real value of civility for the military schoolboys, we should reread the comparison between the school in Budapest and the earlier one in Kőszeg. The real, substantial difference of the schools seems to be their respective distances from urban, civil centres: “Just as we were no longer totally sequestered from the world of civilians, our officers, too, were somewhat curtailed by certain amount of decency, as opposed to the uneducated noncoms' lack of restraint” (Ottlik 2004: 142). In other words, the schools' brutality is counterpoised here by urbanity, courtesy, and a number of synonymous concepts with a long-standing intellectual background, pointing back to court culture and the early modern discourse of taste. The reference to “civil, urban centres” points at the European development of urbanisation, which led to the birth of the creatures referred to by both Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel as either *bourgeois* (German *Besitzbürger*) or *citoyen* (this is the equivalent of *citizen*, German *Staatsbürger*). In Ottlik's mother tongue *polgár* (“burgher”) means both one who is autonomous financially (*bourgeois*) and who is participating in public affairs (*citoyen*). The adjective of the term is *polgári*, which is synonymous with *civil*.

Ottlik's heroes, BB and Medve did not try to defeat the Merényi gang as the rival group in the class. But they did everything to get

liberated from under their pressure, and they were successful in achieving that. But their own rule was not marked by the hierarchical relationships based on physical force, so characteristic of the earlier regime, more by the intellectual and sportive achievements which are their trademarks. Theirs is the meritocratic elite, characterised by urbanity (*urbanitas*) and civility (*civilitas*). The superiority they gain by the end of the *opus magnum* over the aggressors is expressive of the advancement of human society, from a military to a civilised state: “a military society is not utterly hopeless: after a few centuries it has a chance of becoming civilized” (Ottlik 2004: 143).

Friendship, elegance, civil manners

How should we imagine the concept of civility Ottlik’s prose advocates? Let us take into account some of its most important building blocks. One of its first and perhaps most important components is a strong concept of *friendship*. This is friendship, as understood in the Aristotelian tradition. The Greek philosopher discussed in detail in Books VIII and IX of his *Nichomachean Ethics* that in fact friendship is one of the highest forms of a flourishing human life (*eudaimonia*). Within friendship he distinguishes friendship based on advantage, friendship based on pleasure, and finally, friendship based on character. He does not hesitate to call this third type the ideal form.

The young children in Ottlik’s boy-school are heavily dependent on each other.³ From some of them, this triggers aggressivity. Like from Merényi, the negative hero of the *SF* and his group. They are there to illustrate the evolutionary biology of social Darwinism: the

struggle for survival helps the strongest. Some of them, however, learn the value of friendship under this heavy pressure, and show that human beings are capable of a lot more than this individualist programme of survival under pressure. The informal group crystallising around Medve, and including BB, offers chances for its participants to exercise unforced generosity, kindness, and attention. In the school it looks like being only a kind of utility function. It is only in the recollected universe of Ottlik’s texts that they as participants, and we the readers, can learn the value of solidarity and friendship in a more substantial sense of the term, which helps them to hang together even decades after they had left the school, if not physically, then emotionally and through their common field of references. This highest common factor, so characteristic of their shared feeling of friendship, is symbolised by the last scene of the *SF*, where on the board of the ship which takes them to Mohács (this place name is itself the symbol of the greatest military loss in Hungarian history, resulting in 150 years of Turkish rule) they smoke BB’s the last cigarette together, like a group of Indians would smoke their peace-pipe.

A second component of civility is elegance (*elegantia*). This is a concept which connects gentlemanlike behaviour with style and grace, a kind of formal quality, which expresses its perfection by its outward look. The way elegance is interpreted by Ottlik suggests a kind of aristocratic element in it: to behave in a way which picks you out of the crowd:

“In tennis it was elegant to give back a point obtained by mistake; in fencing, to chime out ‘Touché!’ when you were scored upon. And none of that upper-crust, overly soignée mode of dressing for us; elegance meant casual clothes worn with lordly nonchalance – such as, say, Medve’s chapeau. Here in Ossiach, dressed in civilian wear from top to toe, Kienasz was able to signal this lordly quality by demonstrating a truthfulness characteristic of section A, uttering the truth without embellishment, even to one’s own disadvantage, with a princely elegance” (Ottlik 2004: 252).

³ The closeness of the boys leads some of them to experiment with homo-erotic feelings, which is, however, handled with a humane sensitivity and tact by the author, in a markedly different fashion than by Robert Musil in his *The Confusions of Young Törless* (2001, in German: *Die Verwirrungen des Zöglings Törleß*, originally published in 1906).

As one can see from this excerpt of *Buda*, it was close to meaning something like fairness or fair play, as it was understood in English public schools or gentlemen's clubs. As for its aesthetic quality, it excluded a kind of snobbish, fop-like, *soignée* mode of dressing, but included what is labelled as "lordly nonchalance", a kind of casual behaviour – as a gentleman, you were not supposed to pay too much attention to your outlook – and yet, you were supposed to express yourself and your whole view of the world by codes like the way you wore your hat (this coding by fashion is analysed in the structuralist theory of fashion by Roland Barthes (1990)). Ottlik makes it obvious that in the concept of elegance the aesthetic quality is closely related to the ethical – what is elegant should be true (i.e. not lying). This is a rather exceptional concept of fashion, which claims that real fashionableness requires a meta-discourse about lies of fashion. The extra-quality of the elegance characteristic of the behaviour and dress-code of the boys from section A is due to this straightforwardness, truthfulness, which gives the style a recognisable charm. As we read in *Buda*, in the second part of the quote above:

"[...] Kienaszt was able to signal this lordly quality by demonstrating a truthfulness characteristic of section A, uttering the truth without embellishment, even to one's own disadvantage, with a princely elegance" (Ottlik 2004: 252).

And finally, there is a third term which belonged there, *civil manners*. This is something which is closely connected to the above mentioned notion of elegance. It means a virtue of style (both in speech and in behaviour) which is not pretentious, highly individualised but also very sociable. One of the most unforgettable places in the *SF* was of course the infirmary, where the rules which prevailed were different from the ones in the outside world of the cadet school. The friendly, humane atmosphere one could experience there was illustrated by the rather "civilised" way of talking that people were

accustomed to using there: "He spoke softly, as did everyone here: just loud enough to be heard, in the normal tone of civilians conversing in a room. It was quiet here; nobody yelled" (Ottlik 2004: 38–39).

Medve accepts civility as a norm, even if he is aware of its hypocritical nature. He finds it acceptable because it is quite useful in certain situations – like when you have to dissociate yourself from what is wrong. That usefulness explains "the (useful) acceptability of the illusion of hypocritical civility" (Ottlik 2004: 41).⁴

Heroism and irony

Ottlik's ironic treatment of heroism turns it upside down. Heroism is downgraded to the level of civility, while civility itself turns into heroism. Civility turned into heroism is not a battlefield affair in his tales, but rather an ordinary virtue, non-romantic, trivial and casual. This does not make it the less valuable, or in any way easier to achieve. One can only achieve it almost unconsciously, by the unknown mechanisms of chance – or grace (on the meaning of grace in Ottlik's "philosophy of history", see Hörcher Horkay 2010). In Ottlik's universe those who pose like soldiers will certainly turn out to be "cowards", while those who are claimed to be losers will turn out to be the real heroes of history. In a way a certain weakness is required to arrive at the superhuman level of heroism. Like when Ottlik's hero, BB reflects on the dilemma whether he will have enough courage and staunchness to stay beside his terminally ill wife. Here is how he sees the issue: "I had already reckoned that I lacked the heroism for this nor did I have the nerve to abandon Márta" (Ottlik 2004: 258). The form is obviously logically antinomic in its structure. BB denies both his heroism and his nerve to leave his sick wife. As it seems, the second negation deletes the first one: if he does not have the courage to leave, he

⁴ In Hungarian: "a képmutató civilizáltság illúziójának (hasznos) elfogadhatóságát".

will in fact have the heroism necessary to stay with her.

One of the most interesting points in this reversal of heroism and civility is the fact that even to be a loser can turn out to be heroic. Certainly, Hungarian history has provided ample examples of how great heroes can lose on the battlefields or in secret conspiracies against them. In this respect Hungarian historical self-perception was not so far away from ancient (Roman or Greek) warrior ethics: neither of these traditions claims that to die for your beloved (*patria*, family or lover) means to lose your status as a hero. On the contrary: our history as interpreted by Ottlik seems to suggest that in a way to lose in a battle helps you to become a real hero. In a self-critical moment Medve, the second main protagonist of the novel *Buda*, suggested that their common friend, Lexi, was seen by him as indeed a hero, in the classical sense of the word, and in comparison to Lexi he regarded himself as unworthy of that title.

But for Medve, Lexi still retained the aura of a remote, unattainable Viking world. Proud, courageous, elegant warrior seafarers, thought Medve, what business did he himself have among them – a cowardly, apologetic, jittery loser? (in Hungarian: “...gyáva, magyarázkodó, begyulladt tróger, aki csupa vereség mindenütt” (Ottlik 2004: 165)).

The ironic point in connection with this quote is that in the book Medve’s life history turns out to be very close to those of his ideal Vikings: he can be regarded as a martyr of the revolution. His fate is closely linked to the ill-fate of his nation, his death to the downfall of the heroic HR 1956, overwhelmed by the military preponderance of Russian tanks and the hypocritical silence of the Western powers.

The poet as a civil hero

The civil hero does not attack. But he does not escape, either. His main virtue is to be afraid of

being a coward. And this is because the most valued treasure of the civil hero is his own self-esteem, his *dignitas*.

It is no wonder that the poets Medve and Ottlik liked were Petőfi and Ady, two radical voices in the revolutionary tradition of Hungarian poetry. For Medve in *Buda*, especially Petőfi was the icon. Petőfi, the paradigmatic Romantic young poet, always in love, and always against political tyranny. Petőfi, whose famous four line verse “Liberty, Love!” (in Hungarian: *Szabadság, szerelem!*, originally published in 1847) presents love for your country and love for your lover as the two most valued treasures of one’s life (in that order). And Petőfi, who was going to die on the battlefield, in the last battle against the invading Russian army. In all these respects he was a model for Medve. And yet, he was in constant intellectual contest even with him. In fact he quarrelled with him like with a friend:

“This made Medve quarrel even with his beloved poet Sándor Petőfi. ‘Scoundrel, thieving nowhere man’ (*Sehonnai bitang ember*) – you say – Who prize your worthless hide more than your homeland’s pride (*haza becsülete*: the honour of the homeland). Then again, I, too, am a scoundrel nowhere man. Who isn’t?” (Ottlik 2004: 88).

And the funny thing is that in the first moment Medve seems to be right in this quarrel with Petőfi – after all people are most probably less romantic these days, and it is wholly naive to expect them to sacrifice their young lives on the altar of the *patria*. What is more, if we regard him as a martyr of 1956, his exulted life and early death seems to suggest that perhaps the example of Petőfi should not have been taken so literally. On the other hand, it was exactly in connection with the HR 1956 that Medve recognised that Petőfi had been right:

“The city radiated happiness. All of a sudden everyone had a place to go home to (including

perhaps even Lexi). Already on Wednesday Medve raced down to the street and stepped in front of a procession marching off to face the tanks, and yelled at them: 'Are you all insane? Did you forget you are supposed to be nothing but a cowardly rabble?'. He was beside himself, beaming; after all, Petőfi had been right and he was proved wrong" (Ottlik 2004: 180).

Medve, the civil hero, dies for (or with) the revolution, like a Romantic poet. Is this a heroic death? Could it be any more heroic? Well, it has not happened on the battlefield. And yet, it has happened to defend the *patria*.

The writer and the civilian

Ottlik and his heroes together teach us a lesson of giving up heroic illusions and learning to live a civil life with dignity. This was a hard lesson to learn for the Christian middle class, which had inherited the elitism of the nobility, without the adequate financial and political resources to remain active on a national level. Ottlik's story, however, addresses the declining national mainstream in the aftermath of two of the most horrible experiences of the last century in Europe: the Nazi terror with the Holocaust and the Russian communist takeover of the country with its oppressive apparatus occupying the state. Ottlik's narrative is never blurred when these two events are brought up: his narrative is always critical against both forms of totalitarianism experienced by him in Hungary. Ottlik has never forgotten about the social responsibility of the intellectuals, but his criticism is not a kind of didactic anti-propaganda. What he does is to keep his civil voice, and the reader can realise that this is perhaps the most effective propaganda against the aggressive voice of totalitarian regimes.

This is an insight we can arrive at after reading the reaction to his journalistic adventures during the years of WWII. Ottlik, the journalist was well aware that he was not a hero. Therefore

it surprised him to see that his journal articles had been warmly welcome in the editorial offices of the daily papers. In his collection entitled *Prose* he published a piece about a talk he had with one of the editors of these dailies during WWII. If we look for Ottlik's own ideal of the relationship of civility and heroism, we find it in the following longish quote from this piece:

"Do you really need this, Gyula? I cannot see anything particularly up to date in it'. He raised his burring voice: 'Whatever You write about whatever, my chief, is here a 'magic weapon' against the Nazis!'. We were in the very midst of the war. 'This one you have expressed in a very nice way. But I never take part in politics, you see'. I fell back into using the formal personal pronoun. And this kind of monkey tricks had a very fine small child atmosphere. 'Or to put it right, I always comment politics, but this is only the civilian in me, the burgher of Budapest, not the writer. I realised that I have no expertise in it. (Not even as much as had Ferenc Deák, Churchill or Marcus Aurelius.) Against Nazism I have no political objections, but – and I, too, raised my voice – first: Aesthetic ones, because it is disgusting. And second: which is inseparable from this: moral-ethical objections. Third: purely police-like ones: the hideous crimes are conflicting the legal order of our civilisation since at least two thousand years'. 'Four thousand' – said Dessewffy" (Ottlik 2005b: 65).

This quote is particularly revealing, because here he seems to separate the writer and the civilian. Yet as a second move he defines his own position, expresses his own self perception of his identity in a very direct way, in connection with politics: "...I always comment on politics, but this is only the civilian in me, the burgher of Budapest, not the writer" (Ottlik 2005b: 65). And yet when he tries to provide the arguments for his political judgment, his first one is already aesthetic, confessing that the writer-scribbler in him is not at all that far from the politically

active being (*zoon politikon, homo politicus*). On the contrary – the first thing for him is to show to what extent the two sides of his identity overlap each other, in other words how he contradicts his former, self-assured negation. And if we recall that this is an episode in a book on *Prose* by a writer, we cannot fail to see that the claim of the writer's being far away from politics is partly ironic. Although the writer is aware that he is not a hero, his writer's voice has a civil dimension, which turns out to be heroic in times of social-political crises.

Conclusions

Ottlik, a published writer in the interwar period, did not become a hero in the second World War. His years in the cadet school near the Austrian border did not turn him into the unhesitant, bloodthirsty cog in the military machine of a revisionist country that was expected from the officers of the army. On the contrary: he kept a fair distance not only from military affairs but also from corrupted party politics. And yet, this neutral stance in a period of exalting political passions (like in WW2) was in itself a rebellion against the style and content of mainstream public debates. When he recognised this effect of his prose he seems to turn it into his own private strategy: to talk about “pity” human affairs instead of the grandiose and sublime themes of world politics and of modern ideologies. The strategy became his trademark: by now he is the civil writer, *per definitionem*, in Hungarian cultural history. He is the author who rebelled against overheated and passion ridden politics, and who preserved in his novels and interviews the tone and overtone of an urbane and civil Hungary. This strategy turned out to be quite useful not only against the Nazi, but also against the communist propaganda machine – an achievement which transforms his civil figure into a heroic one, just as he transforms his own persona into a heroic civil person.

One should also note, that in his fictional works Ottlik builds up a life-world that turns out to be – unlike our own one – just and fair at the end of the day. His hero is an *alter ego* of the author, and progress is like the autobiographical self of Joyce in his early autobiographical work (Joyce 1916). However, what is mostly missing in Ottlik's recollections is pomposity and self-praise. Neither is he pretentious and snobbish. Instead, he presents a civil figure with irony and self-irony, with his friends and lovers, and with a painfully meticulous *veduta* of a forgotten Buda surrounding them, which makes those lyrical brushstrokes of the subjective experiences of the past so loveable, and which turns the novel into your hometown.

Funding

This paper was supported by the Hungarian-Lithuanian joint project “Conception of Creative City within Central Europe: Historical Images and Empirical Indices” carried out within the framework of a bilateral agreement of the Hungarian and Lithuanian Academies of Sciences.

References

- Barthes, R. 1990. *The Fashion System*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press.
- Elias, N. 1982. *The Civilising Process*. Vol. 1: The History of Manners. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Hörcher Horkay, F. 2010. Isteni kegyelem és nemzeti történelem: egy rejtélyes összefüggés Ottliknál, in (Horkay) Hörcher, F. *Ottlik kadét története – közelítések, vázlatok*. Budapest: Kortárs Kiadó, 85–112.
- Joyce, J. 1916. *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. London: The Egoist Ltd.
- Koselleck, R. 1988. *Vergangene Zukunft: Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten*. Series: Suhrkamp taschenbuch wissenschaft. Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag.

Musil, R. 2001. *The Confusions of Young Törless*. New York: Penguin Books.

Ottlik, G. 1966. *School at the Frontier*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World.

Ottlik, G. 2004. *Buda – A novel*. Budapest: Corvina Kiadó.

Ottlik, G. 2005a. *Iskola a határon*. Budapest: Magvető Könyvkiadó.

Ottlik, G. 2005b. *Próza*. Budapest: Magvető Könyvkiadó.

wordsense.eu. 2017. *civilis (Latin)* [online], [cited 2 March 2017]. Available from Internet: <http://www.wordsense.eu/civilis/>

HEROIŠKO PILIETIŠKUMO FILOSOFIJA G. OTTLIKO ROMANE *BUDA*

Ferenc HÖRCHER

Šiame straipsnyje nagrinėjamas XX a. vengrų rašytojo Gėzos Ottliko romanas *Buda*. Šiuo kūriniumi remiamasi parodant, kaip šiuolaikiniame pramane beletrizuojami miestai. Romane pristatomos tarpusavyje susietos istorijos (asmeniniai prisiminimai, istoriniai epizodai ir miesto legendos), jas visas jungia autoriaus gimimo vieta – Buda (Vengrija), pasakojamos kvaziautobiografinio balso. Pagrindinė šio straipsnio mintis – *pilietiškas* ir *heroizmas* (dvi, atrodytų, nesuderinamos vertybės) yra ypač svarbios vertybės rašytojo *alter ego* savivokoje. Dėl savojo maištingo heroizmo autoreferentiškas Ottliko veikėjas BB geba atsverti istorinę Antrojo pasaulinio karo dramą. Šiame pramanytame pasaulyje tiek autorius, tiek veikėjas sukykla prieš perkaitintą ir aistrų valdomą politiką, siekdami apsaugoti miestieškosios ir pilietinės Vengrijos toną ir virštonį.

Šiuo atžvilgiu straipsnyje atkuriami kai kurie pamatiniai romano epizodai (pavyzdžiui, kai veikėjas atsiduria tarp dviejų karo partijų), taip pat gvildenamas jo ironiškas tonas ir tam tikri tolesni pagrindiniai konceptai, įskaitant draugystę, eleganciją ir pilietines manieras. Čia pristatomi autorius ir jo autoreferentiškas pramanytas veikėjas kaip atspindintys vienas kitą. Taip pokario Vengrijoje steigiamą (automodeliuojant) legendinę Ottliko figūrą, Vengrijos pilietinės visuomenės „biurgerio“ paradigma.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: pilietiškas, elegancija, heroizmas, Vengrijos pilietinė visuomenė, autoreferentiškas romanas, urbaniškas, Antrasis pasaulinis karas.