

Can Love Be Learned?

On Tibor Déry's Short Story *Love*

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Abstract

The paper interprets Tibor Déry's 1956 short story *Love* as a story of relearning emotions. It examines the moments in the narrative of the text that reveal the continuous change in the narrator's perception of B. In the course of the story, B. gradually regains control over his senses, and in the last section of the short story, the reader follows the protagonist's attempt to reactivate his feelings for his long-seen wife. We argue that there is a tension between the experience of emotions and their inexpressibility. From this point of view, the short story does not give an optimistic picture of the future prospects of B. and his wife. Our approach can be considered unusual, since over the past decades interpreters have primarily emphasized the public-performative function of *Love*, with less attention paid to the sophisticated workings of the text's narrative.

Keywords: Tibor Déry; *Love*; Hungarian Literature; emotions; protest story

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There are several explanations for why Tibor Déry's short story *Love* (*Szerelem*) is not, or not primarily remembered as a love story in literary history, although, based on the title, the reader might rightfully expect an emotional story. By the end this expectation is essentially fulfilled. We believe there are few love confessions in the history of world literature as moving as the one in the conclusion of Déry's short story: "*Will you stay with me all night? 'Yes,' said the woman, 'every night, as long as we live.'*"¹

Nevertheless, according to the renowned researcher of Déry's literature, Ferenc Botka, the story is traditionally considered a "protest story", a reflection of the turbulent period preceding the events of 1956 in Hungary (Botka 2011, 77). It was first published in the July 28, 1956 issue of *Irodalmi Ujság* (*Literary Magazine*) followed by a collection much later, the 1963 anthology entitled *Szerelem és*

1 The quotes from the short story are taken from this edition: Tibor Déry: *Love*. Translated by Ilona Duczynska. In Tibor Déry: *Love and Other Stories*. Introduction by George Szirtes. New York: New Directions, 2005, 181–193. p. I have already discussed the short story in another context in my 2018 monograph: Reichert 2018, 246–259. More on the volume *Love and Other Stories* see: Reichert 2016.

más elbeszélések (Love and Other Stories) published after the author's release from prison. The short story *Love* is by no means devoid of the portrayal of various emotions and sensual impressions, but they become detectable to the reader only through the mediation of the protagonist's disturbed consciousness. This peculiar narrative technique directs the reader's attention to the reasons why B.'s feelings and senses were dulled to such an extent. In other words, instead of the emotion highlighted by the title and thus put in the *foreground*, the reader becomes curious about the *background*: What happened to the man, why was he imprisoned, why has he been released just these days, and what will happen to him when he returns to his former home? (A similar technique of exchanging the foreground and the background can also be observed in the short novel *Niki* published a year before. Although the story is narrated from the perspective of the titular dog, the reader's attention is directed towards the tragedy of the owners, János Ancsa, who was taken away for reasons incomprehensible to Niki, and his wife living in deprivation.) The interpretation of the short story as a "protest story" was also reinforced by the widespread but factually unsubstantiated legend that Déry modeled B.'s character based on the account of Béla Szász, a journalist and editor sentenced as a secondary defendant in the 1949 Rajk trial and released five years later (Szilágyi 1984, 74).

Déry's own imprisonment between 1957 and 1960 can easily turn the readers' attention from the internal reality of the text to the search for biographical similarities. The years following its first publication fundamentally influenced how the text is generally approached: In light of what happened to the writer, it can be tempting to view the short story, which recounts B.'s journey home to Budapest from prison – somewhat evoking Odysseus's return – as a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy. Recognizing this parallel, Károly Makk's 1971 film *Love* also connected another short story by Déry entitled *Two Women (Két asszony)*, an autobiographical text written in 1962, and the plot of the short story *Love*. The domestic "play" of the pair portrayed in the film and modeled after Déry's elderly mother and his third wife, Mária Kunsági (portrayed brilliantly by Lili Darvas and Mari Törőcsik), retrospectively aligned the earlier work with the autobiographical context of the later story (Makk 1994, 77–83). The plot of *Two Women* sets up the climax of Makk's adaptation which brings the short story *Love* onto the screen, with János, the male protagonist (played by Iván Darvas), appearing only in the final quarter of the hour-and-a-half-long film. Even though the plot of Déry's short story takes place roughly at the same time as its creation in 1956 (most clearly inferred from the surprise of B., freshly released from his *seven-year* imprisonment, at the taxi driver's question about *which* bridge to cross from Pest to Buda, indicating that he is unaware that since the opening of Margaret Bridge in 1948, there had been three more options: the Chain Bridge reconstructed in 1949, the Árpád Bridge – then called the Stalin Bridge – built in 1950, or the Petőfi Bridge restored in 1952), the widely known biographical facts of the author's imprisonment and release three years later were inevitably "superimposed" on the story taking place much earlier.

There is no doubt that the special circumstances mentioned above significantly contributed to the fact that, in opposition to its title, Déry's cultic short story has

never been regarded as a “real” love story. However, the text's distinctive poetic technique, which portrays the “forgetting” and gradual re-experiencing of human emotions (including love) through the filter of B.'s consciousness must be taken into consideration. The main question of the short story is whether B. can regain those feelings that the past seven years of torment have gradually eradicated from him. In the following, we will examine the stages and obstacles of “relearning” perception and emotions in Déry's short story.

The introductory part of the story, which lasts until the protagonist leaves the prison and begins his tram ride, initially depicts B. (who at first does not even have initials and is referred to by the narrator only as *“the prisoner”*) fully identifying with his status as an inmate and the difficulty of reclaiming his free will. At this point, B. does nothing by his own free will; he passively observes or suffers through whatever happens to him: *“they took him to the small office of the prison”*; *“[h]is personal possessions were brought in from the next room”*; *“they escorted him [...] to the main gate”*; *“a sergeant came running out and stopped them”*; *“[the guard] returned his [B.'s] letter of discharge”*. The guards mostly communicate with him using imperative sentences: *“Grab it.” “Put it on.” “Come ‘ere” “Sign here. [...] This one too.”* (Erdödy 1983, 344) He only speaks when he is asked, without considering that he might have any influence over his own fate: *“Don't yer know your destination?” ‘No,’ said B. ‘I don't know where they'll take me.’* In fact, he does not even leave the prison on his own but only after repeated commands from the guards: *“‘There's the tram, get going,’ said the guard to B. when he had searched him and returned his letter of discharge. B. stood there, staring at the ground. ‘Get the hell out,’ said the guard. ‘What are you hanging around for?’ ‘I'm going,’ said B. ‘You mean I can go?’”*.

Although it soon becomes clear that the third-person narration is focalized from B.'s perspective, the narrator initially does not make the protagonist's feelings and thoughts accessible to the reader. This creates the impression that, at this point of the plot, nothing is going on in the mind of the man, who is dragged around like a puppet and is under the complete control of the prison. The narration, built from succinct and short sentences, communicates only the most important information to the reader (just as the guards do to B.), namely what happens and who says what. At this point, one can only infer that B. might have been a political prisoner – and perhaps the defendant in a show trial – since the narrator only hints at the following, rather telling information: *“The last thing he was handed was his letter of discharge. The dotted line marked ‘reason for arrest’ was left blank.”*

The narrator first allows a glimpse into B.'s thoughts when the man finally leaves the prison: *“He listened, but there were no steps behind him. If I make it to the tram, he thought, and no one grabs my shoulder or calls out my name from behind, then, presumably, I'm a free man. Or am I?”* His first act of free will (or rather, his first inaction) also occurs at this point, as he boards the tram: *“A prison guard with a pockmarked face was getting off the second car and, in passing B. in the first car, his small piggy eyes looked him up and down. B. did not salute. The tram started.”* Although the very idea seems somewhat absurd (why would a former prisoner greet his former jailer?), the fact that B. does not greet the guard on

the tram signifies the act of release both physically (as the tram starts moving) and mentally (from his subordination), which he realizes at this point.

As B. sets off from the stop in front of the prison (which is possibly modeled after the Kozma Street Prison, since the tram shortly afterward stops at the nearby brewery, revealing that the protagonist is riding tram line 28 towards Blaha Lujza Square), he is suddenly overwhelmed by the stimuli of the outside world: *“just then, the world broke into sound”*. This feeling of shock is reinforced by “mixing” the representation of aural and visual experiences. The sudden change in B.’s condition is introduced by a movie metaphor, assuming the simultaneous presence of sight and sound: *“Much as in the cinema, when something had gone wrong with the projector and the film had been running silent for a time and, suddenly, right in the middle of a sentence or a word, the sound blasts out of the gaping mouth of the actor. Then the theater, a deaf-mute space, in which the very public seemed deprived of its third dimension, in an instant impulse is rocked to the rafters with vibrant song, music and dialogue.”* Following the return of the movie’s sound, synesthetic sensory details (*“All about him the colors started exploding.”*; *“A tiny garden, bottle-green, with two sparking glass globes and an open kitchen window undulated past.”*) and evident poetic exaggerations illustrate the initially overwhelming activation of external stimuli for the protagonist. This is well exemplified by the following sentences: *“The tram coming from the opposite direction was yellower than any yellow B. had even seen, and it raced by at such speed past a low, shimmering grey house, that B. thought it would never get under control again. Across the street, two horses, red as poppies, galloped in front of an empty cart. The enchantment of its rattle made the fairy clouds dance in a mackerel sky.”*; *“Millions of people milled about the pavements [...]”*

The ecstatic mode of speech in this part of the short story, at times reminiscent of Déry’s early texts from the 1910s, showing avantgarde influences, is gradually replaced by more rational descriptions that increasingly separate the various sensory domains. As B. approaches his home, he “relearns” how to use his senses, and following the initial chaos, he visibly makes an effort to consciously restrain and delay the flow of the incoming information. It is as if the conscious observation of the outside world and the rational organization of bodily sensations commence as soon as he gets into the taxi. Déry’s description here employs a much more consolidated imagery than the simultaneous depiction of his sensory overload during the tram ride. It is noticeable that the narrator, following B.’s cognitive processes, can now sequence the impressions coming from different directions and observe them separately, rather than all at once: *“The cab started. B. sat erect, not leaning back. The sunlit street’s smell of dust and petrol, the clanging bells of the streetcars rushed through the open cab windows. The sun blazed down freely on both pavements and the shadows of the pedestrians, streaking by their feet, seemed to double the volume of traffic. The awnings of a sweet shop had orange stripes that shed russet light on a young woman who sat smoking. Further on at the corner, a small chestnut tree was budding, gathering underneath it a minute patch of lacy, exhilarating shade.”*

Regulating the senses obviously carries significant weight for B. He considers it essential to regain “control” over himself before returning home. In other words, he begins working on the image he wants (or dares) to present to his wife during the journey home. To put it differently: reason begins to prevail over emotions. The man delays his return home for a while, possibly taking the taxi driver’s advice: *“B. got out of the taxi at the funicular railway station, and walked the rest of the way. He wanted to get used to moving about easily, before he met his wife.”*; *“His wife wasn’t expecting him, anyway, he thought, so he had time to sit on the grass for half an hour.”* His elevated attention to the noises, images, and smells of the outside world reaches its peak in the ensuing long descriptions of nature. Observing the trees, flowers, sky, and clouds triggers extreme reactions in B. (loss of sense of time, dizziness, vomiting): *“He gazed at the two, through the attainable to the unattainable, till he blacked out. He had forgotten to wind his wristwatch and didn’t know how much time had passed since he had left the taxi, so he turned and started for home. After a few steps, he went behind a bush and vomited; he felt relieved.”* In the third and final part of the short story, B.’s focus increasingly shifts from the “outside” to the “inside”, towards his own feelings and those related to his wife, and notably towards the experience of their shared tragedy.

B. looks in the mirror twice during the story: first when he gets out of the taxi (*“Sideways across the street he saw a narrow mirror in the window of a clothes shop. He stood in front of it for a while, then he continued on his way.”*), and then in their apartment while waiting for his wife (*“The table was piled with many things — books, clothing, toys. There was also a small hand mirror. He looked into it; it showed what the one in the shop window had shown.”*). In neither instance does the narrator inform the reader of what B. sees in the mirror, but these telling instances already foreshadow the sense of loss that pervades the ending of the short story, despite the joy of reunion. The realization that nothing can be continued from where they left off because B. himself is not the same person anymore is mirrored by his words: *“‘I’ve changed,’ said B. ‘I’ve grown old.’”* More important than the possible physical deterioration hinted at through these omissions are the emotional and psychological aspects of the “change” to which B. alludes with his statement. When he sees his wife and young son again, he realizes that nothing can return him the past seven years. At this instance, the reader also begins to doubt whether B. will ever be able to show tenderness towards his loved ones again.

It is striking that B., even though the narrator allows us to see his deepest feelings for his wife on several occasions, communicates with his wife and son in a surprisingly measured, almost interrogative manner. He never addresses the boy directly; when he has the opportunity to meet him, he does not let him enter the room. What is more, the narrator does not actually distinguish the child from the small group of four or five who surround him upon their first meeting. (In fact, even when asked twice, the wife refuses to tell B. which child is theirs.) The fact that the boy, like his father, lacks a “visual code” in the story raises concerns about whether this mutual unfamiliarity (invisibility) can be overcome following the events unfolding in the short story. B.’s promise does not seem reassuring either (*“I’ll get to know*

him and love him.”), and the question about the possibility of having another child raises another problem: “*Can we still have a child?*” she asked. ‘*Perhaps,*’ said the man, ‘*if you love me.*’” The “technical” nature of the question is not answered by B.; instead, he shifts the responsibility to his wife for determining how their family and marital life might unfold in the future. This call for confession dominates the entire conclusion of the story. B. asks his wife three times, “*Do you love me?*” and inquires four times whether his wife would be able to get used to him. The wife repeatedly tries reassuring his husband of her feelings. The phrase “*my only one*” is uttered a total of seven times in the short story, while she says “*I’ve never loved anyone else*” three times. She also emphasizes her feelings by sentences such as “*I’ll love you always, as long as I live*”, “*There wasn’t a day I didn’t think of you,*” etc. The numerous repetitions make it seem as though she is overly eager to prove the steadfastness of her love to B. Understandably, considering what has happened earlier, B. is unable to express his emotions in a similar manner, even though the narrator repeatedly alludes to B.’s tender feelings for his wife: “*His wife was a wonderful blend of air and flesh, unseen and unheard of before, unique. She surpassed everything he had treasured about her for seven years in prison.*”; “*When she whispered, each word could almost be taken in one’s mouth as it hung in the air.*”; “*She surpassed everything he had treasured about her for seven years in prison.*” This raises a somewhat psychological question: is it enough to feel attachment to the other person “on the inside” without expressing it verbally? On the other hand, as the wife’s repetitions suggest, it is also questionable whether such a highly complex set of emotions, which we commonly call love, can be conveyed through words at all.

Considering B.’s past traumas, it is not at all surprising that the few hours the short story encompasses were insufficient for him to find a way to express his emotions (not to mention the gender stereotypes of the period, which significantly differed from today’s and might also explain B.’s reticence.) However, *Love* becomes a profound read – and not a simple love story with a happy ending – precisely because it does not show the “positive outlook”, the real coming together of two people. We cannot be certain whether the wife’s one-sided confessions and B.’s deeply felt but almost immediately suppressed, unspoken emotions will eventually give way to a mutually used “language of love”.

Literature

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