

Attempts at creating a new concept of literature • (The Hungarian literature in Slovakia between the two world wars)

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ABSTRACT

Using the term Hungarian literature in (Czecho-)Slovakia has been a problem for literary historiography specialised on reflecting on this corpus since the emergence of minority Hungarian literatures defined by geopolitics. Since the twenties onwards, the texts of the belletristic corpus have been asking, from time to time, about the relationships among space and identity, and providing answers from approaches heroic to ironic. The relationships of identity and space are reflected vigorously not only in belletristic representations but in the literary criticism that reflects on them and in literary historiography as well. In my study, I am going to follow the process having taken place in the literary-historical narrative between the two World Wars, which aimed to transform the geopolitical factors associated with identity into a constructed space through articulating the experience of intermediacy and reflecting on the “as-if” state of the intercultural existence of Hungarian literature in Slovakia.

KEYWORDS

Hungarian literature in Slovakia, literary historiography, identity, constructed space, self-definition

The term “Hungarian literature in Slovakia” has been present as a problematic concept in literary historiography since the emergence of minority Hungarian literatures defined by

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geopolitics. Following established practice, the phrase “Hungarian literature in Slovakia” could only be used with extreme caution or else reformulated almost each time it was used in the last three decades—although this terminological uncertainty, which refers to doubts about the existence of Hungarian literature in Slovakia (or rather, the possibility to describe it), has essentially been haunting us since 1921, the year of the creation of the magazine “Tűz” and the conference on Hungarian literature in Czechoslovakia (Fónod, 1990, pp. 41–44). Since then, the question arising in debates with certain periodic regularity – is there or is there no Hungarian literature in Slovakia? – has not changed (or has varied at best);¹ and the answers to the question may only have been expanded with new aspects at best, since the question itself determines the answers that can be formulated.

The above formulation of the question automatically allows for two types of response: one affirmative and one negative. The arguments in favour of the existence of Hungarian literature in Slovakia refer mostly to geographical–institutional separation and the experiences expressed in minority literary works, while those negating it argue for a universal Hungarian literary tradition linked to one language, a lack of linguistic autonomy and the inability of Hungarian literature in Slovakia to create a literary canon (Görömbei, 2000, pp. 17–18; Szirák, 2000, pp. 45–46; Tózsér, 1998, p. 50; Ardamica, 2006, pp. 103–113).²

Questioning the existence/non-existence of Hungarian literature in Slovakia does not take into account the fact that the interpretation of literature simultaneously works with a variety of literary concepts (Kulcsár Szabó, 2012, p. 19); therefore, the positions on this issue are, primarily, representations of the literary concepts used simultaneously. The self-evident use of the attributive phrase “Hungarian in Slovakia” lays out a certain geographical and political framework for literature interpretation, and further concepts that shape the interpretation of literature are organized within this framework into systems that define the specific concept of literature—which change from time to time, from interpreter to interpreter. On the subject of the existence of Hungarian literature in Slovakia, Zoltán Németh speaks about the “multitude of equal positions” consistently with the aforesaid in essence (Németh, 2005, p. 9).

My paper focuses on the search for the literary concept (those literary concepts) which, following the Trianon decision (1920), makes the literature written in Hungarian in Slovakia after the territorial division of Hungary, between the two wars, possible to be identified as *literature*—and, beyond that, as the literature of a specific region. In order to identify this literary

¹However, the misguided nature of the question has been highlighted by several people over the last decade. At the end of his study referred to, Zorán Ardamica proposed to reformulate the question: “The question to be answered had better be, *how, in what form, with what purposes, by what means, based on what ideology and aesthetics, in what kind of system of relationships, in what institutional system, in what context, with what emphases, with how much one-sided or diversified nature, with how much stratification, perhaps against what can the formation be described that, for want of a better term, literary history refers to as minority literature.*” (emphasis added by A.Z.) (Ardamica, 2006, p. 112). József Keserű considers the issue of the existence of Hungarian literature in Slovakia to be wrong because it “(...) ignores the fundamental difference between the institution and the desire, in other words, it blurs the boundaries between two levels whose separation is not incidental from the view point of the self-understanding of literature (literary science)” (Keserű, 2010, p. 79).

²Consider the possibilities between the two extremities by the Hungarian literature in Zoltán Németh in his paper entitled, *Szlovákiai magyar irodalom: létezik-e vagy sem? (Hungarian Literature in Slovakia: Does it Exist or Does it Not?): Néhány fésületlen gondolat egy fogalom lehetőségeiről (Some Messy Ideas about the Possibilities of a Concept)* (Németh, 2005, pp. 19–24).



concept(s), it is necessary to clarify the preconceptions which define the narrative prevailing in literary historiography and in talking about the phenomena of literature. Literary historiography is a genre affected by at least as subjective considerations as literary criticism, and behind the systemic procedures are considerations that are defined in part by the paradigm of the particular age, in part by the author's individual system. Thus, when it comes to Hungarian literature in Slovakia, the following must also be discussed: according to what kind of systemic principles the relationship to a particular belletristic corpus is established; what preconceptions have allowed a certain cluster of texts to be perceived as a homogeneous corpus; or, conversely, what preconceptions allow the same texts to be perceived as so heterogeneous that their treatment as a separate corpus is considered untenable—that is to say (and more importantly for the present paper), the preconceptions and convictions that have created the framework for discussing Hungarian literature in Slovakia. Thus, it is not at all irrelevant what the literature interpretation strategy determining literary historiography is that underlies texts discussing Hungarian literature in Slovakia with the ambition to be literary historiography.

The centralised nature of the Hungarian literature created in the first third of the 19th century was undermined by literary events at the end of the century. The process of natural and gradual decentralization was violently interrupted by the situation resulting from the peace treaties following World War I. The understanding of literature was based on the 19th century model of national literature, presenting language, culture, area and identity as an indivisible entity. The capturing of the national concept based on homogenisation is felt very strongly in this perception and it is also passed on to the practice of the literary historiography of the 20th century.

Upper Hungary at the turn of the century was ethnically mixed and denominationally divided, a place in whose cities the Hungarian, German and Slovak languages and cultures, though with different emphases, were all present. Hungarian writers from the region were seeking success in Budapest, and Hungarian literature in Slovakia is not the result of a kind of natural development, similar writers' orientation, equivalent purposes or an affinity to a literary centre, but rather the result of the border changes of 1920. The pressure for self-definition and the uncertainty are usually partly attributed precisely to the lack of regional literary centres and traditions following the period indicated by the formation of the first Czechoslovak Republic, the drawing of the demarcation lines and the decision of Trianon, which were both deepened by the prohibition to import books up until 1928 (Mezey, 2006, p. 53). In the Upper Hungary of the turn of the century, no strong Hungarian regional literary centres were formed, and there was also a lack of the buzzing intellectual life that characterised the Transylvanian cities of the time. It is partly due to this that, while there was a continued effort for self-organization and self-representation on the one hand, on the other hand the ambivalent attitude toward the possibility of the existence of Hungarian literature in Slovakia can also be felt from the outset.

The area's separation from the general Hungarian literary life and the import ban on books led to a disruption of the centrum-peripheral model effective before, and the highly differentiated literary life in Budapest as a benchmark became inaccessible for some time for ethnic Hungarians in Slovakia—which also meant that the framework of the way of thinking about literature that previously appeared obvious had to be redefined, and the same for the way of thinking about community. When the national and territorial unity familiar from the 19th century ceased to exist, the previous reference system for thinking about literature, linking nation, language, culture and identity and previously providing a self-evident framework for



Hungarian literary history research (Rákai, 2015, p. 235), slackened. The concept of space, which used to be included in the historical structure of the Hungarian literature, changed and although writing in Hungarian remained the main criterion of belonging to the Hungarian literature, 'spatial sub-systems' developed with autonomous canons and institutions (Schein, 2019, p. 10). In his study, Gábor Schein outlined very precisely the context in which the Hungarian literature in Slovakia was (also) established:

'Local and Hungarian literary consciousness have both attributed special functions to the Hungarian literatures emerging in the successor states after Trianon since the earliest days. The abstract idea, which Toldy called the national spirit, found its expression in the sense of belonging to the region, in this particular form of being comfortable and in the preservation of the language together, which has become a kind of expectation and task toward authors living in Romania, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union. So, while in the pre-Trianon era, the multitude of cities used to provide a multi-ethnic environment for identity formation, the signs of which are so obviously reflected in the prose of Jókai, Mikszáth, Krúdy, Kosztolányi and Márai, the Hungarian literary historiography later imposed the requirement of a kind of closed, static identity on authors of literature living on the other side of the borders of Hungary. This requirement also held value concepts and also served the function of moral control over literature and writers' identities' (Schein, 2019, p. 10).

It is worth tarrying with two phrases in the above quotation: the sense of belonging to the region and static identity.

The texts of the literary corpus linked to the region and originating between the two world wars sought to represent the specific Slovakian-ness by linking the language, a sense of belonging to the territory and identity, while also questioning their relationships from time to time. Some of these texts (primarily the novels of István Darkó, Mihály Tamás, Zoltán Vécsey and the poetry of Dezső Győry) attempted, on the one hand, to present the realignment, as a consequence of historical changes, of the relationships among language, identity, nationality and the space filled by the nation thus far supposed to be self-evident and, on the other, to put them in a new context, thus providing the conditions of self-recognition for a newly formed community.

This effort can also be felt in an attempt to create a new type of novel that can express new experiences and in which, precisely through this new experience, the Hungarian population in Slovakia could be represented (with more or less success) as a single community. 'Hungarian novels of destiny in Czechoslovakia' could even be regarded, due to the constant attempt to create them, as a separate branch of fiction.³ First, Viktor Egri tried to present a description of the changing conditions in his work with a symbolic title (*A rácsablakos ház* (*The House with Lattice Windows*, 1924)). This was followed by the novels of István Darkó (*Szakadék* (*Ravine*), 1928; *Égő csipkebokor* (*Burning Bush*, 1935; *Deszkaváros* (*City of Planks*), 1938), Zoltán Vécsey (*A síró város* (*The Crying City*), 1931), Mihály Tamás (*Két part közt fut a víz* (*The Water Runs Between Two Banks*, 1936) and Viktor Szombathy (*Elesni nem szabad* (*It is Forbidden to Fall*), 1938). These works treated the existential and moral problems, and the traumas caused by the

³Several of them do consider it a separate branch of fiction, especially FÁBRY above, but also Endre KOVÁCS and László ZAPF as well. Some form of the phrase appears even in the title of several studies by László Miklós MEZEY: *Az idő és a történelem a szlovákiai magyar sorsregényben* (*Time and History in the Hungarian Novels of Destiny in Slovakia* (Mezey, 2006, p. 153) and *A szlovákiai magyar sorsregény kezdetei* (*The Beginnings of the Hungarian Novel of Destiny in Slovakia* (Mezey, 2010, p. 78-90).



serious social changes resulting from the exchange of state, haunting the everyday life of people turned into minority. The presentation of Hungarians in Slovakia as a homogeneous community (among the contemporary authors, primarily István Darkó) was also a matter of homogenisation—the community's primary definition being its spatial identity, and the differences arising from social, religious, social and gender differences becoming completely irrelevant beside the importance of sharing the destiny of the community.

In the meantime, in the contemporary literary journalism, a partly renewed model of thinking about literature also emerged, which modified the 19th century tradition by reducing the national framework for literature to the regional level on one hand and by broadening it (at least theoretically) to Central European on the other—placing the Hungarian literature in Slovakia into an imaginary cultural space that partly stayed below, partly went beyond the Hungarian national literature, while maintaining its tradition of connecting culture and identity. The restrictive nature of the concept of regionalism can primarily be detected in the editorial practices of the anthologies appearing one after the other (see in more detail in [Csehy \(2011\)](#) and [Csehy \(2012\)](#)) and in parts of the literary journalism during the period between the two wars—while it is journalism that expresses thinking within the Middle-European framework, at least as a desire, as a programme, this programme is, partly, also handed down to the later practices of Hungarian literary historiography in Slovakia (in particular in the case of Zoltán Fónod). However, the community-, social, identity-forming function of literature in the reformed models of thinking about literature continues to play a major role and, in reality, has even become an absolute value, which also appears in the era as a recurring argument against literary division. Gyula Farkas, the first to write about the development of Hungarian intellectual life in Slovakia with a view to summarising it, formulates this idea regarding the contrast between the literary concepts of writers in Košice and Bratislava as follows: '(...) Bratislava represented the insistence on national traditions, on the Christian world view, which Košice was willing to denounce as dilettantism and fustiness. Košice represented progress and literary modernity, which, in Bratislava's view, was lack of nationalism. In essence, the same contrast that divides the universal Hungarian literature into two parties. A similar fight, with similar slogans. But a lot more dangerous, because literature in Upper Hungary is a true force for the maintenance of national identity (emphasis by Zs. B.) and this power distribution nipped all welcome initiatives in the bud for years' ([Farkas, 1927](#), p. 18). Farkas explains the contemporary lyric poetry being tuned to social issues by saying that 'The nation is no longer the same as the state, but only all the people speaking Hungarian, but that without exception: it includes master and peasant, rich and poor' ([Farkas, 1927](#), p. 31). In the practice of understanding lyric poetry drawn up by Farkas, a homogenising procedure appears which allows for the interpretation of value and minority fate as supplementary categories and which (though with different emphases) is also reflected in so different minds as Gábor Kemény ([Kemény, 1940](#), p. 73), Zoltán Fábry ([Fábry, 1939](#), pp. 147–148), Endre Kovács ([Kovács, 1932](#), p. 14) or in the 'minority genius' of Dezső Győry.

The idea of collective Slovakian-ness, as a procedure to understand literature exhibiting single works as a uniform literary corpus, is essentially based on the perception that the Transylvanian model is applicable to the situation in Slovakia. It appears in the work of Farkas ([Farkas, 1927](#), p. 30); Endre Kovács, who calls for the discovery of Slovakian-ness based on the Transylvanian model ([Kovács, 1932](#), p. 14); and Lajos Tamás, who thought that the spirit of Transylvania 'has more responsibility for its nation', its literature is 'more deeply Hungarian' and 'more earthbound', 'more closed' ([Tamás, 1934](#), p. 162); but also with Zoltán Fábry. The



idealised model of Transylvanian-ness also appears in the work of László Zapf, who ‘creates a world separated from the whole of Hungarian literature, with its own internal laws’ (Cseh, 2011, p. 155).

However, the discovery of the region’s mobile identity, which does not fit in with the concept of national identity at all, is seen as a disturbing notion for those who consider identity as a static phenomenon within the ideal of collective Slovakian-ness. In his study on the intellectual life of Hungarians in Upper Hungary, Farkas takes the national affiliation of the lyric poets he discusses in relation to literary life one by one, pointing out that ‘in the homogeneous Hungarian literature, the race or national origin of writers is not a significant feature, not more than a tint; however, it is a key problem in the literature of Upper Hungary, as we are trying to prove below’ (Farkas, 1927, p. 28). The issue of Transylvanian-ness, and the static identity associated with it, can serve as a useful basis of comparison for this problem. In the opinion of Farkas, separation from the Hungarian state has not become a problem for Transylvanians, ‘because the concept of a single Hungarian state, which has always been one with the concept of the nation, has been replaced by the traditional sense of Transylvanian-ness for them’ (Farkas, 1927, p. 30). Equalising the idea of the nation and the state, which Farkas replaces with the equalisation of the nation and Transylvanian-ness as a matter of course, is crucial in the quote. However, this model of idealised identity, suggesting continuity and a static nature together, is not applicable to Slovakian–Hungarian literature, where, once again in the words of Farkas, ‘poets exist between two nationalities and seek to balance out their own inner duality’ (Farkas, 1927, p. 31). The concept of the ‘deeper Hungarian’ Transylvanian literature put forward by Lajos Tamás (Tamás, 1934, p. 162) also implies a more superficial Hungarian (national) nature of the Slovakia-based literature: as something absent, something negative, as one can deduce from the tone of the article. Jenő Pintér, in the chapter ‘Hungarian literature in Upper Hungary’ of his literary history, roughly summarises the work of Gyula Farkas, describing it as something absent, something negative that ‘beside pacifism, nationalism is still rather marginalised’ in the emerging Hungarian literature in Slovakia (Pintér, 1928, p. 191). Aladár Schöpflin, in the matter of the Hungarian literature in Slovakia and Yugoslavia, also ascertains the “weaker expansiveness of Hungarians”, together with less regional tradition and their dispersion, thereby explaining their weaker ability to reach the standard of universal Hungarian literature (Schöpflin, 1990, p. 417). The literary concept approaching literature from the direction of the tradition of nationality-based literary understanding cannot handle the mobile identity replacing static identity and is unable to recognize it as a key concept behind the self-representation attempts of the Hungarian literature in Slovakia between the two wars.

What appears negative on the one side means an addition on the other. Jenő Krammer (Krammer, 1937, p. 27), Pál Szvatkó (Szvatkó, 1994, p. 10) and Zoltán Fábry (Fábry, 1939, p. 147–148) find that special differentness precisely in the untraditional form of identity that lurks behind the Hungarian identity and literature in Slovakia. “We cannot be genuine, true-born, ur-natural Hungarians because if we were to show ourselves that kind, we would play a dishonest role. Our language has no taste, flavour, our images have not been shaped by the primeval Hungarian imagination, our Hungarian-ness is a profession, the role of a bridge and a constant state of being stretched between two worlds” (Krammer, 1937, p. 69).

The “the role of a bridge” was later, practically, reduced to the role of mediation among cultures, and the formation of the development of a mobile identity promoting literary understanding became marginalised. For a long time, papers with a literary-historical aspiration



that appeared after WWII did not ask about the literature comprehension design that lay behind the Slovakian literature of the twenties and thirties. The generation of the twenty-first century is returning to the age-old question of the literature of the region principally in terms of the contemporary literature: whether or not Hungarian literature exists in Slovakia.

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