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Hungarian Minority Literature (Hungarian Literature in Transylvania and the Historic Upper Hungary)

National minority and national literature

All European literatures have regional traditions and workshops. The mentality of literature is different in London and Edinburgh, in Berlin and Munich, in Paris and Provence, although in terms of their most important, inherent feature – language –, we always only refer to English, German, or French literatures. Hungarian literature, which, as folkloristic works reveal, has been present in Europe since the Hungarian Conquest (late 9th century) and its written form since the 13th century, has also had its regional traditions. These were different in Transdanubia, always closer to the great currents of European culture as the westernmost province of the country, and in Transylvania, which was constrained to pick up these currents under the influence of eastern domination – the proximity and, for some time, the rule of the Ottoman Empire.

However, Hungarian literature is divided not only by regional differences but also by the fact that, subsequent to the Great War, the peace treaty divided most of the territory of historic Hungary (two thirds of it) among the successor states of Austria-Hungary, annexing one third of the ethnic Hungarian population (3.5 million people) to the neighbouring countries. Accordingly, the formerly homogeneous national literature became a literature of four and then seven countries (Hungary, Czechoslovakia – later Slovakia –, Romania, Yugoslavia – later Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, and the Soviet Union – later Ukraine). Thereby the “Trianon” system of Hungarian literature was established (as defined by the Treaty of Trianon of 1920). It transformed somewhat following the fall of the Central European Communist regimes and the Soviet satellite state system, and the disintegration of the post-WWI Czechoslovak and Yugoslav formations.

The Hungarian literatures that developed in the successor states of Austria-Hungary are not simply successors of the former regional cultures of Transylvania, Upper Hungary, and the Southern Parts. Not even in the case of Transylvanian Hungarian literature, which had very rich regional traditions (the intellectual legacy of the independent Transylvanian principality of the 16th and 17th centuries) to lean on. Cultural regionalism had at most a complementary role in the evolution and historical development of Hungarian literature in Transylvania, Slovakia (Upper Hungary), and Vojvodina (Southern Parts). As revealed by the literary debates in the three regions, it was due exclusively to historical pressure that the regional programme developed. It was due to this pressure that a literary sys-

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tem – literary journals, publishers, and literary societies – had to be developed for the Hungarian communities outside the borders.

The development and running of a system of literary institutions was easiest in Transylvania, given that it had its own cultural and literary traditions dating from the late Middle Ages, and that Transylvanian cities, which had a clear Hungarian majority in the inter-war years (Kolozsvár (Cluj Napoca), Nagyvárad (Oradea), and Marosvásárhely (Targu Mures)), had an extensive Hungarian school system and press and a solid basis of intellectuals. The development of Hungarian culture in Upper Hungary and the Southern Parts required greater efforts even though these too had ancient Hungarian cultural centres: Pozsony (Bratislava), Komárom (Komárno), and Kassa (Kosice) in Upper Hungary and Szabadka (Subotica) the Southern Parts.

In the post-WWII decades exactly these cities lost their Hungarian majority and most of their institutions. Czechoslovakia, Romania, and Yugoslavia all pursued ethnocentric nation strategies of varying intensity and, in conformity with the Communist regimes' administration practices, these strategies never lacked aggressive methods. Resulting from this, the ethnic structure and character of the former Hungarian cities transformed completely.

A polycentric model of Hungarian national literature developed with the presence of minority Hungarian literatures. However, this system is rather different from those polycentric cultures (English, French, German, and Spanish) that are common formations in modern European and universal culture. That is, the general phenomenon of "one language – more nations" lays the basis for universal literary polycentrism of modern world literature and, resulting from this, we can distinguish between the English literatures of Great Britain, Northern America, Canada, Australia and even Africa. Hungarian literature is completely different. The Hungarian literatures of Hungary, Romania, Slovakia, Serbia, etc. all belong to the literature of one nation: the literature of the Hungarian nation. There is one national literature, just as the historical changes since Trianon did not bring about the development of different Hungarian identities either. On the contrary, every Hungarian community detached from the mother country in 1918–1920 considers itself an authentic part of a Hungarian nation that is homogeneous as regards its language, culture, history, and traditions.

Therefore, the polycentric model of Hungarian literary culture derives from the fact that, beside the literature of the mother country, the ethnic Hungarian minorities also developed their own literatures – not the least to preserve their national identity. (Due to the peace treaties of WWI and WWII, today significant Hungarian national minorities live in several Central European countries: 1.5 million people in Romania, 550,000 in Slovakia, 160,000 in Ukraine, 300,000 in Serbia, 10-15,000 in Croatia, Austria, and Slovenia, altogether about 2.5 million Hungarians – their numbers decreased by 1 million in the past 80 years!) The situation of Hungarian emigrant communities that left for Western states in 1945, 1948, and 1956 is similar: most of them never gave up their Hungarian identity and, possessing a "dual identity", still consider themselves part of the Hungarian nation.

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The minority Hungarian literatures developed in the neighbouring countries after the Trianon decisions had two sources to draw from: regional and universal national literatures. The background of this duality was in part “literary ontological” and, in part, literary historical. On the one hand, Hungarian minority literatures relied on their own regional traditions, since these traditions – the historical and cultural traditions of Kolozsvár, Nagyvárad, Marosvásárhely, Pozsony, Kassa, and Szabadka – offered solid resources. The richer they were the more natural the foundation of minority literatures could be. On the other hand, the whole of Hungarian literary tradition and contemporary literature in Hungary played a fundamental role in the early stages and the development of Hungarian minority literatures. Not only the former homogeneous national literature but also the values, endeavours, and institutions brought about by their separate development enriched the new, minority literatures.

Today, Hungarian minority literature in Transylvania (Romania) and Upper Hungary (Slovakia) have a more than eight-decades-long past to look back to. Generations of writers grew up, literary institutions ceased to exist and were revived. These literatures endured years of hardship and struggles during the forty years of Communist dictatorship when, primarily in Transylvania and to a lesser extent in Upper Hungary, one had to fight against the state strategy aiming at liquidating Hungarian national culture and national identity through aggressive means. A new era and new opportunities opened up for minority Hungarian cultures with the transition in Central European politics beginning in 1989–1990. The democratic transformations provided for the freedom of literature and the renewal of the institutional system, although they were not enough to ensure the conditions of a solid perfection of minority literatures. A new era has begun for Hungarian literatures of both Transylvania and Upper Hungary which are now in a closer relationship with the literary world of Hungary and enrich national literature with valuable new works: works also worthy of the attention of European audience.

Hungarian literature in Transylvania

Hungarian literature went through considerable changes in the past 15–20 years. First, the earlier realistic narrative style has been substituted by narration based on the approach of post-modern literature. This rendered the traditional viewpoint of the narrator, formerly defined primarily by the intent of depicting and interpreting historical and social reality, more personal and relative. Second, the traditional community–nation testimonial and missionary character of Hungarian literature gave way to a more meditative, philosophical mentality. These changes are perceptible in the works of Miklós Mészöly, György Konrád, Imre Kertész, Péter Nádas, and Péter Esterházy, several of which have attracted the attention of the European audience.

No similar fundamental changes have occurred in Transylvanian (and, in general, minority) Hungarian literature, although the post-modern literary transformation

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of the late 20th century did leave its mark on them as well. Transylvanian Hungarian literature hardly broke with its own traditions at all. In fact, after the historical transition starting in 1989, it returned to the traditions developed in the inter-war years by Lajos Áprily, László Tompa, Sándor Reményik, and Jenő Dsida in poetry, Károly Kós, József Nyírő, Sándor Makkai, and Áron Tamási in narrative literature. Accordingly, present-day Transylvanian Hungarian literature can still be placed into a conceptual space defined by cultural regionalism (“Transylvanianness”) and universality (“Europeanness”): it draws from regional traditions and experience, but always seeks to put it in a universal perspective and aims to capture European mentality. On the other hand, it also seeks to answer the questions of the national (minority) community and, to accomplish this, it shatters the communication barrier of national rhetoric and reaches perfection in autonomous creation. It was in this sense that the works of poets Sándor Kányádi and András Ferenc Kovács and writers András Sütő and István Szilágyi came to represent the simultaneous presence of commitment toward the community and sovereign creation.

The revolution of Christmas, 1989, which brought an end to the Communist regime in Romania, brought about whole new circumstances in the life of Transylvanian Hungarian literature which had virtually fallen victim to the dictatorship of the 1980s. Then, state censorship, the literature policing administration silenced every sovereign literary opinion and the literary papers were mostly constrained to serve the official propaganda. Under the rather strict control of censorship only one publisher in Bucharest, Kriterion Könyvkiadó, headed by Géza Domokos, managed to preserve Transylvanian Hungarian culture with some success. This proves indeed the courage and perseverance of the director of the publishing house.

The fall of the Ceausescu regime opened the way to an unobstructed operation and perfection of the literary institutional system. The journal *Korunk* (Our Age), published in Kolozsvár since 1926 with columns on social sciences, literature, and the arts and edited by Lajos Kántor, became a true workshop for intellectuals. It took upon the task of interpreting and serving not only Transylvanian culture but also that of all Hungarians. Replacing the *Utunk* (Our Path) literary journal in Kolozsvár, *Helikon*, edited by István Szilágyi, was launched and, as succeeding journal *Igaz Szó* (True Word) in Marosvásárhely, the journal *Látó* (Seer) was also published (edited by Béla Markó and György Gálfalvi). Zsolt Gálfalvi became editor of weekly *Hét* (The Week) in Bucharest and Zsolt Szabó that of *Művelődés* (Culture) in Kolozsvár. They both transformed these magazines into workshops that ensure the cultural advancement of Transylvanian Hungarians. The journal *Székelyföld* was launched in Csíkszereda (Miercurea-Ciuc), a cultural centre of the Székely region in Eastern Transylvania, while the magazine *Várad* was launched in Nagyvárad. Kriterion in Bucharest that had endured decades of struggles received companions as new publishing houses were established: Polis in Kolozsvár, Mentor in Marosvásárhely, Pallas-Akadémia in Csíkszereda. Beyond these, about a dozen enterprises publish books of authors both from Transylvania and Hungary.

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Primarily the narrative brought novelties in Transylvanian Hungarian literature, as in the new atmosphere of freedom this genre offered the widest range of opportunities for the exploration and interpretation of reality. Poetry, thanks to its metaphoric formulations, could always testify about the terrible experiences of Transylvanian Hungarians more freely. One of the most renowned writers of Hungarian national literature, András Sütő of Marosvásárhely, has been present in universal Hungarian literature for decades. The “lyric sociography” *Anyám könnyű álmot ígér* (Mother is Promising a Light Dream), published in 1970, was his first literary success. This poetic report of documentary authenticity on the historical hardships of a Transylvanian (Mezőség) Hungarian diaspora community laid the foundations of an entire school: as long as censorship in Bucharest tolerated it, books on the afflictions of Transylvanian Hungarians appeared one after another. Among others, works of biographic and sociographic inspiration by Gyula Szabó and György Beke were published. Following the fall of Communism, Sütő recounted his personal and community experiences in several volumes: *Fülesek és fejszések között* (Among Squealers and Axemen), *Szemet szóért* (Eye for Speech), *Erdélyi változatlanságok* (Immutabilities in Transylvania). A great inspiration of these works was the event when, in the spring of 1990, during the peaceful demonstration of Hungarians in Marosvásárhely, Sütő was seriously wounded by the enraged Romanian counter-demonstrators: he lost one eye.

The tragic experiences of the Transylvanian Hungarian community promoted the development of the genre of the historic novel, which had always been popular in Transylvania (see the works of Károly Kós, József Nyíró, and Sándor Makkai during the inter-war years). Subsequently, Gyula Szabó continued this narrative tradition with his historical novel entitled *A sátán labdái* (Satan’s Balls), published in five volumes. The volumes dubbed as “historical reports” describes the painful story of the fall of the Transylvanian principality in the second half of the 17th century. The trilogy of János Pusztaí entitled *Tatárjárás* (The Tatar Invasion) also recalls the historical past of Transylvania. It alludes to the hardships of modern-day Transylvanian Hungarians by depicting the destructive events in Hungary at the time of the 13th-century Tatar invasion.

István Szilágyi of Kolozsvár is one of the most outstanding figures of Transylvanian Hungarian literature and, in fact, Hungarian literature in general. He wrote his novel parabola entitled *Agancsbozót* (A Tangle of Antlers) during the Communist regime but it was only published subsequent to its fall. It sets out the dehumanising power of tyranny through the means of the absurd. The heroes of the novel are at the mercy of some power unknown to them, their personalities gradually dissolve under the pressure of aggression, and they only manage to regain their humanity through a desperate revolt. A more recent novel of István Szilágyi, entitled *Hollóidő* (Raven Time), has been widely praised in professional circles. It recalls the Hungarian world of the late 16th century, the age of Ottoman occupation, when, while at the mercy of the alien conquerors, the inhabitants of a small Hungarian market town search for a way of life worthy of human beings. Two

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kinds of human behaviour clash in this dramatic historical framework: one professes the rightness of survival, the other that of resistance. This is a typical minority dilemma and, in truth, both approaches can be right. Accordingly, the author seeks not to decide between the two but to depict the absurd operation of history, thereby establishing the novel's historical philosophical message.

The depiction of the past seeks to find a way through the inquiries of the recent past and the present. These questions are raised more directly by the narratives on the experiences of contemporary Transylvanian Hungarian society, the novels of Tibor Bálint, Sándor Fodor, István Sigmond, Mária Kozma, and György Lőrincz. Transylvanian Hungarian literature suffered great losses in the last years of the dictatorship with the migration of several outstanding Transylvanian writers to Hungary, such as György Beke, Pál Bodor, Géza Páskándi, Ádám Bodor, László Csiki, Zoltán Köntös-Szabó, and Attila Vári. They continue to consider themselves Transylvanian Hungarian writers, but their works are published and find their audience in the framework of Hungary's literature.

The narrative tradition has always been strong in Transylvania. Its poetry only came to the forefront in the inter-war years when Transylvanian Hungarian lyric poetry became a mediator of the experiences of a national community forced into minority status. The poetry of the post-WWII years continued this mission, especially with the poets who started their careers in the 50s and 60s. Their poems provide an authentic picture on the hardships of the minority community.

Two poets have to be mentioned from the years preceding 1989; both deceased during the transition years: János Székely and Domokos Szilágyi. János Székely reflected on ethical questions of intellectual life in the 20th century, and, in his poetic world, applied a dramatic view on historical existence. Domokos Szilágyi, who committed suicide at the age of 38, was one of the greatest talents of modern Hungarian poetry. His works started out under the influence of avantguard schools and expressed a desire to live life more fully. Yet, he desired this fuller life in vain in the deceptive world of the dictatorial system. His voice turned more gloomy and, finally, tragic. He was a moralist poet, who tried to protect the endangered moral values through irony, but at last could not but realise that poetry itself, the truth, and sincerity were all far too vulnerable.

One of the most popular and intriguing poetic accomplishments is that of Sándor Kányádi. He complemented the folkloristic and realistic voice aiming at simplicity of his early works with elements of avantguard poetry. Always in tune with his natural calling, he could identify with the community around him and profoundly endure the dramatic experiences and the conflicts of the survival struggle of that community. His poems – for example the poetic rhapsody *Fekete-piros* (Black-Red) on the endangered life of Transylvanian Hungarian diaspora or the poetic requiem *Halottak napja Bécsben* (All Souls' Day in Vienna) mourning over the decay of Hungarians tormented by the events of the 20th century – depict the tragic experiences of the national community with a richness of thoughts and mythological force. Sándor Kányádi is a poet of the nation. At the same time, he is

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a European poet in the sense that his poetry has treated the painful tragedies of the 20th century consistently and depicted the intellectual, emotional, and moral horizons of that tragic century with sagacity.

Aladár Lászlóffy of Kolozsvár also sought to interpret the Transylvanian, Hungarian, and European experiences of the past decades: he reflected on the future of human culture, revealed true and lasting values, and recalled orientative messages of the past. The avantguard also influenced his earlier works, but his mature poetry professed the ideals of historic firmness and integrity and the loyalty to the community by classicising the traditions of Transylvanian Hungarian poetry, showing substantial poetic force, and, at times, revealing smart poetic ingenuity. Beside Sándor Kányádi and Aladár Lászlóffy the poetry of the following poets is worthy of attention: Csaba Lászlóffy, László Király, Árpád Farkas, Béla Markó (who has been playing an outstanding role in Romanian political life as the president of the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania and deputy prime minister of the government in Bucharest), Emese Egyed, and István Ferenczes.

András Ferenc Kovács is an exceptional figure of younger Transylvanian Hungarian poetry. His works could establish a unity of Transylvanian poetry of the inter-war years, modern Hungarian poetry connected to the journal *Nyugat* (The West), and the traditions and styles of postmodern poetry. He treats words and forms with ease, but his works also express a fear for the fate of Transylvanian Hungarians. He suggests that poetry should provide cure in the solution of the internal conflicts of human personality and human community. János Dénes Orbán, Vince Fekete and Attila Sántha are other great promises of younger Transylvanian Hungarian poetry.

Theatrical traditions in Transylvanian Hungarian culture are greater than those of dramatic literature: Kolozsvár has always been a centre of Hungarian theatrical culture, and Transylvanian intellectual life has traditionally promoted Hungarian drama. In the inter-war years Transylvanian dramatic literature revived, and the plays of Károly Kós, Count Miklós Bánffy, and especially Áron Tamási also achieved success among the audience in Budapest. In the past forty years there were as many as four Transylvanian writers to leave their mark on Hungarian dramatic literature: András Sütő, Géza Páskándi, István Kocsis, and János Székely. Their dramas are usually historical and philosophical parables, and almost always depict the nature of tyranny and the inhumanity of defencelessness and vulnerability. On the Hungarian stage especially the historical tragedies of András Sütő *Egy lócsiszár virágvasárnapja* (A Horse Coper's Palm Sunday) and *Csillag a máglyán* (A Bright Star at the Stake) had success.

Hungarian literature in Slovakia

The literature of the former Upper Hungary, annexed to the Czechoslovak state subsequent to WWI, advanced with more difficulty than Transylvanian Hungarian literature. Given its geographic proximity to Budapest and that most of its talent-

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ed writers came to settle in the Hungarian capital, the region's Hungarian literary traditions and institutions were much less developed earlier. Yet, historical necessity did bring Hungarian literary institutions to life and started the career of several important writers: among them, the leftist Dezső Győry and a priest of the Premontre Order, László Mécs. Both, although starting out from different political presuppositions, were promoters of militant humanism and clearly turned against the expanding Fascism during WWII. This militant character was also present in the works of Zoltán Fábry, who lived in seclusion in a small mining town near Kassa. He played a prominent role in the protection of minority rights during the times of anti-Hungarian government policy between 1945 and 1948.

It was due exactly to the retorsions applied against the Hungarian minority that Hungarian literature in Slovakia only recovered and found its voice with delay, as late as the 1960s. Then a system of Hungarian cultural and educational institutions developed at last and the younger generations trained in them undertook the cause of Hungarian literature. Institutions were established in Pozsony: the journal *Irodalmi Szemle* (Literary Review) and the publisher Madách Könyvkiadó. After 1989–90 more of them were set up: the literary journal *Kalligram*, the publisher Kalligram, and two other publishers in Dunaszerdahely (Dunajská Streda): Nap and Lilium Aurum. The Society of Hungarian Writers in Slovakia also came to life.

The successes of Slovakian Hungarian narrative literature are connected to Gyula Duba and László Dobos. Gyula Duba began his career with comic works and continued it with sociographic ones, in which he authentically depicted the transformation of Hungarian peasant society in Southern Slovakia. He summarised his personal experiences in his novels *Ívnek a csukák* (The Pikes Are Spawning) and *Örvénylő idő* (Whirling Times). László Dobos played a significant role in public life as minority politician (minister of the Slovak government in 1968) and cultural organiser (first director of publisher Madách Könyvkiadó). As a writer, he had a great impact (comparable to that of Zoltán Fábry) on the self-knowledge of Hungarians in Slovakia. In his novel entitled *Földönfutók* (Outlaws), he recalled the post-WWII retorsions against minorities – the forced resettlement and deportation of the Hungarians of Upper Hungary. His novel, *Egy szál ingben* (In Just a Shirt), was a reflection on the historical ordeals of the Hungarian minority community. In this work, original in its poetic character, he merged the potentials of sociographic “reality literature” and the novel parabola of mythical meaning.

The prose of Lajos Grendel, essentially an original version of postmodern Hungarian narrative literature, has brought novelties to recent Hungarian literature. His novels *Éleslövészlet* (Live Firing), *Galeri* (The Gang), and *Áttételek* (Metastases) depict the inner traumas of minority Hungarian society in detail, and also ponder over the experiences and world view of his generation that gained consciousness in the 1970s. Later he revealed an inclination toward absurd literature. Besides, he is an excellent short-story writer, a master of all kinds of forms: from the classical short story forms to the stories constructed on paraphrase.

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Similar to Transylvania, poetry reacted more directly to the events of community existence in Upper Hungary as well. This poetry started out with the interpretation of rural society surrounding the Slovakian Hungarian writer in his youth just to arrive at the examination of the philosophical and moral conflicts of people in a modern world. Árpád Tózsér also recalled the experiences of his childhood spent in the Central Slovakian Gömör (Gemer) region and only then turned to an original interpretation of the Slovakian Hungarian intellectuals' identity. Questions and meditation became dominant in his poems, as revealed by volumes *Történetek Mittel úrról, a gombáról és a magánvalóról* (Stories on Mr Mittel, the Mushroom, and the Noumenon) and *Mittelszolipszizmus* (Mittelsolipsism). The poet examines the characteristics and mental structure of Central European existence (including Hungarian experiences) with objectivity.

László Cselényi, from the same generation, also became a follower of poetic modernity through the poetic depiction of personal experiences. His style merges the structure constructions of the neo-avantguard and the mythical approach, and, in compositions and a language that stylistically satisfy the requirements of both, he reflects on the historical experiences of Hungarians in Slovakia and his personal realisations. His longer poetic composition entitled *Jelen és történelem* (Present and History), provides a comprehensive overview on the conflicts of minority existence. Sándor Gál, who lives in Kassa (city in Eastern Slovakia), assesses his personal experiences related to minority life and the community experiences of the Hungarians of Southern Slovakia as poet, narrator, sociographer, and essayist. His compilation of interviews, *Mélyutak* (Hollow Roads), provides an analysis on these community experiences. Other poets who should be mentioned are László Tóth and Imre Varga, who moved to Hungary, and László Barak, who lives in Dunaszerdahely. László Barak of Pozsony has produced important works as sociographer and essayist.

Hungarian writers in both Slovakia and Transylvania have been working closely with the literary life of Hungary since the early 1980s. They became members of the Hungarian Writers' Association after 1989, their works have been present in Hungarian journals, the Hungarian publishing industry and the book market, and they have been awarded various cultural prizes by the Republic of Hungary. Transylvanian András Sütő, Aladár Lászlóffy, Domokos Szilágyi, and Slovakian Árpád Tózsér were decorated with the highest literary honour, the Kossuth Prize, while Transylvanian Samu Benkő and Lajos Kántor were decorated with the highest scientific honour: the Széchenyi Prize. Beside the spiritual unity of the literatures of Hungary and the Hungarian minorities outside the borders, the institutional unity of Hungarian literature has also more or less recovered. This also contributed to the widely demanded "unification of the nation", the realisation of which can be best promoted by European integration.