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The History of Hungarian Minority in Slovakia and its Literary Representation.

A szlovákiai magyarság története 1918-ig nyúlik vissza, s regények sora járja körbe traumatikus pontjait, mint a kisebbségbe kerülés, a második világháború alatti el- és visszacsatolások, a háború utáni jogfosztottság évei. Az előadás célja, hogy bemutassa a történelemábrázolásnak azokat a típusait, amelyek a szlovákiai magyar irodalomban meghonosodtak: a realista, mimézis-elvű történetmondás eljárásaira épülő sorsmagyarázatot, a mágikus realista megközelítést és az ironikus önreflexióra épülő értelmezést.

The History of Hungarian Minority in Slovakia and its Literary Representation

The history of Hungarians in Slovakia dates back to 1918, and a series of novels depicts its traumatizing events, such as becoming a minority, the territorial changes during World War II and the years of post-war lawlessness. The purpose of this lecture is to present the most common types of historical fiction in Hungarian literature in Slovakia: the fictional explanation based on realistic, mimic-based story-telling procedures, the magical realistic approach, and the interpretation based on ironic self-reflection.

FULL TEXT

Ladies and gentleman!

In my paper I would like to present you how the history of Hungarians in Slovakia is represented in the novels of the period between two World wars. For this reason is necessary to introduce you the context of the beginning of formation of Hungarian minority in Slovakia. The history of Hungarian minority in Slovakia began in 1918, this is the year of the foundation of Czechoslovakia. In 1920, after the Treaty of Trianon the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy was divided. As the signatures of the Treaty had no regard to language borders, 1,1 million Hungarians were included into Czechoslovakia.

In the life of the minority, literature has played a prominent role between the two world wars, as it seemed to be a key for maintaining national identity.

In the twenties the lyr was prevalent, and in the thirties the prose literature - especially the novel - has been remarkable. During this period, the literature program was the expression of the minority existence and situation.

The subject of novels published in this epoch is primarily the trauma of becoming minority, the loss of citizenship, lands, property, and the experience the feeling of being a foreigner in their own country, which we can mainly find in the works of István Darkó, Mihály Tamás, Piroska Szenes, Viktor Egri and Zoltán Vécsey.

Besides their numerous differences, these novels have some common motifs all of which are connected to the narratability of Slovakianness. The novels of Darkó, Tamás and Vécsey try to make the trauma of the state takeover narratable and, parallel with the essay literature of the period, to create the minority narrative to replace the national one.

The basis for a new sense of identity is an obscure sense of otherness,¹ which does not only distinguish the Upland Hungarians from the motherland population but also the young, post-war generation from the older ones. The Slovakian self-definition is therefore closely related to the necessity to reinterpret the homeland.

The authors of trend-setting novels in the twenties and thirties all started their career in Czechoslovakia. The emergence of the group marked with names such as István Darkó, Mihály Tamás and Piroska Szenes thus also means a generation change. The difference between the way of thinking and mentality of the generations before and after the war becomes really emphatic in Slovakian literature due to the change of borders coinciding with the change of generations and the effect of the change of borders penetrating every aspect of life.

The change of borders and the consequences of it appear in three different ways in contemporary Slovakian novels:

1. through an increased awareness of the above-mentioned generation gap
2. in the deterioration of the former social order which, to some extent, resulted in the homogenization of Slovakian Hungarians who had been highly differentiated before
3. in the narrowing down of the national territory hitherto experienced as homeland to the place of birth.

1. The obscure sense of otherness, which was mentioned above, was most apparent in relation to the generation gap. “*This one also came from the hygienic, soul-cleansing and mind-ironing institution of the new youth, erected by the stubbornly clever and calm youth after the war with the mendacious slogans of more faith and more heart, on the foundation of a general contempt of their elders* (153).”² – this is how Mihály Béni Balogh, the protagonist of Darkó’s novel *Szakadék* (Gap) describes his young acquaintance, one of the “new-faced Hungarians”. However, the source of conflict with the older generation can be found not only in the principles and ideals but also in the altered circumstances. In his other novel, *Égő csipkebokor*³ (Burning Bush) Darkó gives a detailed account of the sources of conflict between the youth and an introverted, older, middle-class generation, who are stubbornly ignoring reality, insisting upon a pre-war set of values even at the cost of lies. Darkó thinks

1 This sense of otherness is lyrically expressed in Dezső Győry’s volumes *A láthatatlan gárda* (The Invisible Guard) and *Új arcú magyarok* (New-faced Hungarians) as well as in Mécs’s first volumes.

2 The page number following the citations hereinafter refers to the edition: Darkó István, *Szakadék*, Košice-Kassa, Kazinczy Kiadóvállalat, 1928.

3 The page number following the citations hereinafter refers to the edition: (Darkó István, *Égő csipkebokor*, Franklin- Társulat, without date

that national illusions are in the background of the clashes in the same way as social class lies. In his novel *Két part közt fut a víz*⁴ (The water runs between two banks), Mihály Tamás also identifies these two problems as the source of conflict between generations, which has now become permanent. Vécsey's and Tamás's novels provide a complete overview of the personality types of the era. They both depict members of the minority living in illusions and waiting for a miracle, 'existential politicians' fleeing to Budapest and preaching the need for perseverance from there as well as protagonists who oppose both groups and stay in their place of birth at any cost.

Obviously, Slovakian Hungarian society was affected in its very existence by the cultural concepts changing in relation to the change of borders. The novels of the thirties give an account of the changing order of everyday life and also of the effect of these changes on the knowledge of Slovakian Hungarians about themselves. According to Péter Niedermüller, "*Every society functions through and with the help of cultural concepts, as these are the symbolic tools appearing in linguistic and visual form which determine the cultural framework and cognitive horizon of a society. However, cultural concepts also represent the knowledge on the basis of which everyday life is organized in a given society and what the individuals living in that society must, can and may do.*" (Niedermüller 2006: 34). In the novels of Tamás, Darkó and Szenes, in the background of some characters' frequent inability to make a decision, there is the invalidation of hitherto valid cultural concepts, just like it is also behind the dissolution of the social order and the thinning of the limits between classes, which had hitherto been insurmountable. Indirectly, the changing of the state borders resulted in the fact that the knowledge that had controlled the behaviour of the individual and the group before was now invalidated. The accumulation of new knowledge takes a long time and presupposes the definition of a new self-identity by the individual and the group alike.

The dissolution of the social order controlling individual lives and the effect of the gradual development of a new order on the Upland Hungarians is most spectacularly depicted in István Darkó's novel *Deszkaváros* (Plank City) and Mihály Tamás's novel *Két part közt fut a víz* (The Water Runs between Two Banks). Traces of it can be found in Piroska Szenes's work *Csillag a homlokán* (Star on her Forehead), although there, it is primarily manifested through the strengthening of the Slovak identity and the increased social role of Slovaks in the new country. Darkó also described the development of the new life in the Uplands from two aspects, taking the view of Slovaks into consideration, too, in which the reordering of the

4 The page number following the citations hereinafter refers to the edition: TAMÁS Mihály, *Két part közt fut a víz*, Franklin-Társulat, without year, without date

social hierarchy was the most remarkable besides the national-ethnic role-reversal. Barinkó, a minor character in *Plank City*, a Slovak railwayman expresses this change the most precisely: “Come off it” – he says to Tamás – “now different circumstances are coming. It was enough of what we’ve had. The change can only make the situation fairer. It is about the land, nothing else. The land, which the city is built on, and speaking of the land, one can only approve of the principle of rotation. Along with the land, I also mean the people living on it. The earth must be turned over, and the people, too. From the bottom up and from the top down, that’s what I mean by turning over. (171)”⁵

In this change, the representatives of social groups that had been alien to each other before are placed side by side – in the literal sense of the word, too – whose only common trait before the change had been their Hungarianness in the heterogeneous linguistic and cultural Upland space, but after the change of borders, belonging to the same nation becomes so emphatic that it completely masks the previous differentiation of the community. In Darkó’s *Plank City*, the offspring of a family of famous architects, who had stayed at home, the petty clerk who had lost his existence, the demobbed Colonel and the simple tailor are placed side by side. The dramatic depth of the change affecting the life of Upland Hungarians and necessarily penetrating their self-understanding is probably the most convincingly demonstrated by this novel. At the beginning of the work, the basis for the sense of community is not the linguistic or ethnic but the social identity, one’s status occupied in the life of the city, but by the end of the novel, the most elemental definition of the group consciousness becomes the belonging to the same nation and being loyal to one’s place of birth. In the multilingual (Hungarian-Slovak-German) town with a symbolic name, Véghely (‘Final Place’), the awareness of national belonging is raised by external forces, and the town’s Slovak population creates a discourse in which the Hungarian citizens of very different social status all fall into the category of “they”, regardless of their differences, and thus are defined as alien. The loyalty to the place, not leaving the city, however, is an individual decision in each case. In Darkó’s novel, this individual decision to stay in one’s birthplace weighs more in developing the new identity of the community than one’s national identity. Eventually, the characters in the novel define themselves neither as Hungarians, nor as Upland people but as citizens of Véghely, that is, the inhabitants of Plank City. Thus, Darkó’s novel shows a new identity, which is locally determined. In his final speech, Tamás, the protagonist expresses it clearly: “He feels the meaning of his being there without doubt,

5 The page number following the citations hereinafter refers to the edition: DARKÓ István, *Deszkaváros*, Bratislava – Pozsony, Tátra Kiadás, without date

starting from its cause, making his way uncertainly though its ways, all the way to the crystal clear result of the present moment. He turns towards the fireplace and begins to speak in abundance. A festive speaker, explaining the meaning of this new kind of life. Even more so, he is the judge of the community rebuilt after the fire, who enlists the history of the changes. – I name our plank city Végújhely – he shouts – I declare its independence and our intention to provide shelter and protection to everyone who lost these outside... And he is telling and explaining the history of the plank city, polishing it with his words and gratefully celebrating it.”(260.)

With this, we have actually arrived at the third consequence of the border change, which is manifested in Slovakian novels: the narrowing of the national territory, which had previously been experienced as homeland. Geographical places *a priori* carry some social and cultural meaning (Niedermüller, 2006, 35). In contemporary Slovakian novels, certain geographical places are also turned into metaphors, thus attaining a very strong, independent field of meaning. In Darkó's novel *Burning Bush*, the Tatra Mountains become a geographical name carrying such a complex meaning, and its opposite, the Great Plain, too, and in *Plank City*, as we've just seen, the city itself becomes a metaphor. In Tamás's prose, the two banks of the river Tisza represent the double determination of ethnic minority existence. It is also referred to in the title of the novel: *The Water Runs between Two Banks*. The relationship to Hungary, which had functioned as the homeland before, also changed. Hungary suddenly becomes the land of hopes as well as “a country of eight million, struck to death” (these are the words of Mihály Tamás's protagonist, Iván Bodák), which is no longer capable of the defence and governing function that had been fulfilled by the former nation state, which contained the Uplands, too. The definitive abandonment of the Uplands is only expressed so clearly, with an almost journalistic flavour by Vécsey and Tamás, and only once by the latter. In Darkó's novels, it is expressed much less openly, whereas Piroska Szenes approaches the topic from a different viewpoint altogether. Her novel *Star on her Forehead* tells the life story of a Slovak maidservant, so in this book, the takeover of the country, which affected the Upland Hungarians, only appears incidentally, from the lower perspective of Slovaks living on farmsteads, as an event that hardly affects the characters of the novel. We can say it about Darkó's, Tamás's and Szenes's prose alike that their characters are moving in a narrower space and there are only references to the country and nation as a whole. It is replaced by the place of birth, the city and its inhabitants.

The experience of belonging to Hungary is destroyed not only by the political changes but also by the discontinuation of transportation and the mail service, which were

consequences of the former. The experience of spatial relations is also changed: Budapest, which was known to be near, suddenly becomes almost unreachably far, only accessible by a dangerous journey lasting several days. In his novel, Tamás repeatedly describes such a journey. Prague, on the other hand, whose existence had been to the Upland people little more than a piece of geographical information until the end of the war, was suddenly found much closer. The merchants of Tamás's novel orientate themselves into this direction instead of Hungary, which is nearly inaccessible. However, because of its cultural alienness, the new state formation is unsuitable for Upland Hungarians to identify with as their homeland. This sense of alienness, according to contemporary novels, was mostly felt against the Czechs and the new state established by them. In the novels of the era, Upland Hungarians' need for self-definition combined with a territorial demand is directed towards their place of birth, for want of a better choice.

The expropriation of the territory happened through literature in the Slovakian consciousness of the twenties and thirties. In the multilingual and multicultural Uplands, the literary traditions were missing on the basis of which Slovakian Hungarians could have recognized the area, which had been torn off Hungary and started a life of its own for the ethnic minority living in Czechoslovakia, as specifically their own. It seems like neither Jókai's romantic, nor Mikszáth's exotic, nor even Krúdy's nostalgic portraits of the Uplands could fulfil this function. István Darkó's, Mihály Tamás's and to some extent, Piroska Szenes's novels, published in the twenties and thirties, completed the job of literary expropriation and acquisition of the Uplands, creating a discourse in which this territory could be mentioned as one's place of birth, overtaking the role of the homeland.