Identity Shift in the Literature of Vojvodina’s Hungarian Community, 1992-2010

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This paper deals with evolving forms of identity as represented in the Hungarian literature from the Vojvodina, and analyzed through local, regional and national aspects of space. From the end of the Second World War and until the dissolution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRJ), there has been a relatively self-sufficient Hungarian community in Vojvodina, with its own collective identity quite distinguishable the from collective identities of communities surrounding it. Hungarians in Vojvodina produced literature following the traditions determined by this autonomous community and its spatial experience. This paper concentrates on the period between 1992 (when SFRJ disintegrated) to 2010 (when dual citizenship for diaspora Hungarians was made possible), with the aim to outline modifications of collectively inhabited space based on narrative representations of certain elements of the topography (i.e. cities, rivers and landscapes) in Vojvodina Hungarian literature.

Following a brief introduction to the history of Vojvodina Hungarian literature, this research focuses on the 1990’s and 2000’s, i.e. on the period after the breakup of Yugoslavia. I am interested in how, during this period, the identity of the Hungarian minority shifted its base of identification. I will try to outline how a Yugoslav based, thus essentially geo-cultural identity shifted to a Hungarian based, thus ethno-cultural one, relying on the representation of inhabited space in literature. Parallel to these shifts, the topographical image, the collectively imagined map of the Hungarian and Yugoslav/post-Yugoslav collective identities also changed. This eventually led to modifications in the self-image and the perception of a homeland for the Hungarians in Vojvodina as well. I will base my analysis on the works by Hungarian authors from Vojvodina. Other texts containing important spatial references from Yugoslavia and Vojvodina are cited in the annex “Further reading”. The theoretical framework and
the used concepts are mainly by Marc Augé, Benedict Anderson, Gaston Bachelard and Michel Foucault, cited in the bibliography.

Introduction

With the dethronement of the Karadorđević-dynasty, and abolition of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (KPJ) headed by Josip Broz Tito, backed up both by the western allies and the Soviet Union, started a state building project already during the Second World War, effectively reorganising the country territorially, ideologically, demographically, economically and administratively. This led to the creation of the Federal People’s Republic of Yugoslavia in 1946, while the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) came later, in 1963. Up until its disintegration in the 1990’s, this state in the Western Balkans was, on the one hand, one of the major powers in the Non-Aligned Movement, as well as the least authoritarian country in the Eastern-bloc. On the other hand, it was a state union displaying more and more apparent economic and demographic divisions, differences in industrialisation and modernisation processes, level of poverty and contribution to GDP — problems which were increasingly hard to master after Tito’s death in 1980, and which eventually led to war and constitutional dissolution.

With six republics, and the now-independent Republic of Kosovo, Vojvodina was an autonomous province of Yugoslavia, located on the territory of the Republic of Serbia. Its population — dependent on the period — varied around 1.5 million, and Hungarians made up a quarter of the population. Vojvodina’s capital, Novi Sad (Hungarian: Újvidék), was the province’s cultural, political, administrative and industrial centre. Moreover, from the early 1950’s onward, the Hungarian community developed a centralized organisational structure based in the city. Firstly, this meant that the community had one centre, and everything else was more or less culturally marginalized, frowned upon as provincial, and — following this pattern — state funding was relatively disproportionate as well. Secondly, the centre was fully institutionalized with infrastructure necessary for cultural production, such as the editorial for a daily newspaper (Magyar Szó) and several journals (e.g. Híd, Új Symposium), a publishing house (Forum), a facility for higher education at the university of Novi Sad (Magyar Nyelv és Irodalom Tanszék), an institute for research of Hungarian culture, literature, and ethnology in Yugoslavia (Hungarológiai Intézet) which was later merged with the Department of Hungarian Language and Literature, and a theatre with a regular Hungarian repertoire (Újvidéki Színház). This centre
was so influential that even the former smaller Hungarian gravitational points within Vojvodina (Subotica-Szabadka, Senta-Zenta, Sombor-Zombor, Zrenjanin-Nagybecskerek etc.) or outside of it (e.g. Zagreb-Zágrab, Osijek-Eszék, Lendava-Lendva) in existence prior to Novi Sad (Újvidék) as a centre of Hungarian language and culture, gradually declined and gave place to the well organised governmental structures of the federal system.

By the end of the 1950’s, for the vast majority of the country’s population, the attribute “Yugoslav” meant less and less what it etymologically denoted (South-Slavic). The discourse “Brotherhood and Unity”\(^3\) vouched for a different definition. With the isolation of its ethnic elements (though promoted in terms of language and culture), the term “Yugoslav” systematically transformed from an exclusive into an inclusive idea of federal strength through heterogeneity. It affirmed a then quite widespread model of nationhood, connected not to ethnicity, but to citizenship. Differences in language, regional characteristics, folklore, or even the latently present religious practices in public were perceived as a positive and not as a negative statement — and this was particularly significant for the numerous minorities (Albanians, Bosnians, Hungarians, Italians, Roma, Romanians, Ruthenians, Slovaks, etc.), many of whom inhabited Vojvodina. In comparison to the term “narodi”, which denoted ethnic groups of south Slavic origin in Yugoslavia, the communities cited above were coded “narodnosti” and not “manjine”, which would have meant minorities. According to the Constitution of Yugoslavia from 1974, the minorities of Yugoslavia effectively seized to be minorities.\(^4\) Stated in the article 245: “All nations and nationalities of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia are equal.” Hungarians in Yugoslavia were thus relatively free to exercise their rights concerning language, to promote and cultivate other aspects of culture through institutions, press or electronic media. By the 1960’s, for the Hungarian community (although assimilation was an ongoing but latent process), this resulted in a substantial improvement of their situation in comparison to other Hungarian minorities in the Carpathian basin. The improvement was evident mainly in the fields of cultural politics, ethnic self-determination and language rights. Furthermore, if we look at the cultural policies, publishing houses, theatre practices or even the distance between freedom of speech and official censorship,\(^5\) the Hungarian minority was in some respects better off even than the Hungarians in Hungary.

Substantial structural reforms put through under Josip Broz Tito’s governance had led to this constellation, and was one of several outcomes
of the widely accepted and politically cultivated discourse of “Brotherhood and Unity” (Bratstvo-Jedinstvo) in Titoist Yugoslavia. It promoted an umbrella-like, supranational Yugoslav geo-cultural identity, connected primarily to the homeland, the secular state, Tito’s cult of personality, socialist egalitarianism and — in order to root out internal nationalisms that continued to carry the historical memory and linger on between different ethnic groups such as Croats, Serbs and Bosnians — the liquidation of ethnic and religious belief systems. Thus, during the 1960’s and 1970’s, the Hungarian community differed only in language from other citizens of the Yugoslav terrain, sharing an ideology, a popular culture and the landscapes comprising this literature, which was in this sense Yugoslav in its manifestations, but Hungarian in its language and literary heritage. This pattern did not change until the mid 1980’s.

**Literary landscapes of the Vojvodina Hungarians**

The Hungarian minority in Yugoslavia thus had its own cultural, governmental and political centre which was fully independent of Budapest and governed by the choices and verdicts made by the federal officials mostly in Novi Sad, and partly in Belgrade. This way the collective identity evolved fairly detached from other Hungarian collective identities, and as early as the late 1940’s, developed its own collective name (jugoszláviai magyarság, vajdasági magyarok). The collective name, although originating from the interwar era, did not exist in the 1920’s, and was not so widespread in the 1930’s either. On the one hand, the Hungarian minority of the interwar years more or less still considered Budapest as its cultural Mecca. On the other hand, since their rights as citizens were few, their language rights practically unacknowledged, cultural and political organisations sporadic, and the imagination of a community only present in a rather rudimental form in the 1930’s, the collective self was not a subsystem of the land of citizenship as it was the case after 1945, but more a part of a greater, though mosaic-like Hungarian collective identity stretching throughout the Carpathian Basin.

Moreover, this collective identity was firmly linked to an established, autonomous and flourishing literature (jugoszláviai magyar irodalom — Yugoslav Hungarian literature). It is important to note the difference in this respect to Hungarian minorities in Romania or Czechoslovakia. The Hungarians in Yugoslavia rarely used regional toponyms inherited from earlier history when distinguishing their cultural production. In contrast to the terms “erdélyi magyar irodalom” (Transilvanian
Hungarian Literature) or “felvidéki magyar irodalom” (Upper Hungarian Literature), there has not been a “délvidéki magyar irodalom” (Southern Hungarian literature), for even in its early years — in the late 1920’s — scholars, authors, poets and writers were referring to it as “vajdasági” or “jugoszláviai magyar irodalom”. This identity can best be described in the following terms: the community had its own Hungarian ethnic roots, with its own linguistic identity and cultural heritage; after World War II, they merged into an amalgam with a Yugoslav collective identity hallmarked with contemporary culture and the openness to Western values. An overarching geo-cultural identity, which was to be distinguished from an all-Hungarian national identity, or as Danyi Magdolna, the editor-in-chief of the literary magazine Új Symposion put it in 1975: “Our cultural existence has a triple bond. Besides the autonomous vojvodiannnnes and the traditions of the mother tongue, we put a large emphasis on the influence of the Yugoslav mentality which forms our consciousness.”

What I am arguing is that the cities, rivers, islands, the seashore and other landscapes represented in this literature are showing a Yugoslav based cultural identity, with a perspective on the Western Balkans. The texts presented in this paper are therefore as much a part of Yugoslav literature written in Hungarian, as they are a part of Hungarian literary history. The topographical representational space of this literature includes places like Novi Sad, Belgrade and the Danube, stretching all the way to Zagreb, Rijeka (Fiume), the Velebit mountains and the Adriatic Sea as well as the Neretva River, Mostar and Sarajevo. This literature thus operates along the same Yugoslav identity as other Yugoslav authors of the time who were writing in Serbo-Croatian, Slovene or Macedonian. Toponyms from Hungary such as Budapest, Szeged, Lake Balaton, are all distant places which have no or very little inner significance for the reality experienced in Yugoslavia. Therefore, they are not represented as parts of the space inhabited by the imagined community of Hungarians in Yugoslavia. In the period between the Second World War and the Balkan Wars of the 1990’s, spaces of Hungary differ little from the spaces of other countries beyond the border. There is no substantial difference for instance, between Prague, Vienna or Budapest. These cities are always fitted to a tourist gaze, and a relationship which has little in common with the self-image, the collective identity or the coherent spatial cosmos of the collective subject writing about it. Nevertheless, sites from Hungary are also present in the Hungarian literature of Yugoslavia, but they are very sporadic and rare, and if we look at them closely, there is a certain otherness attached to them. As Ottó Tolnai, one of the most important authors
of Yugoslav-Hungarian literature, puts it in his poem Balaton (Lake Balaton): “despite everything, the vacation of the Hungarian worker is more organised/ because they have workers/ and we have workers as well.”

Disintegration

For Hungarians, the shift began between the so-called “anti-bureaucratic revolution” of Slobodan Milošević in the late 1980’s, and the dissolution of Yugoslavia in the early 1990’s, when this Yugoslav geo-cultural identity became rapidly devalued. The formerly nominal minorities became real ones yet again, and — through segregation — they were deprived of their extensive educational, cultural and linguistic rights. In parallel — since the SFRJ as a state vanished within a few years — it suddenly became anachronistic for the Hungarian minority to declare itself “Yugoslav” or to use “Yugoslav” as a distinctive quality when referring to itself. Therefore, the Vojvodina Hungarians began to look for a collective identity elsewhere.

Yugoslav Hungarians were Hungarians by ethnicity and language, and Yugoslavs by socialisation and geo-cultural bonds, which meant that with the shift in question, they became a minority as much as in Slobodan Milošević’s Serbian-dominated Yugoslavia, as in post-Soviet Hungary. The Vojvodina Hungarians, thus, effectively became a minority without a country. In the first half of the 1990’s, they had lost the legal and political discourse which granted them the rights and privileges previously mentioned, as well as the spatial dimensions of their collective identity: Sarajevo, the home of the 1984 Winter Olympics, became a worldwide media sensation due to sniper attacks on civilians and shelling; Dubrovnik, the pearl of the Adriatic Sea was under siege; the Adriatic coastline, where all Yugoslavs enjoyed spending their family holidays, was cut off, while Ljubljana became the capital of independent Slovenia and thus unreachable for Serbian citizens in the 1990’s. Most importantly, every single one of these places pinpoints a disintegrating collective identity, gradually denoting more and more distant spaces somewhere abroad. Through time, the identificational linkage became looser and looser, and these landscapes evolved from denoting spaces inhabited by citizens of the same country to spaces reachable only as a tourist (with a passport) — and literature followed this process step by step.

Through the spaces represented in Yugoslav-Hungarian literature, one can see the blueprints of this collective identity. In addition, compared to its situation in the previous, Yugoslav periods, the shift from a geo-
cultural perspective to an ethno-cultural perspective is also noticeable. The biggest change, however, became the imagination of a collective self not as a sub-system of an ethnically heterogeneous entity in the Western Balkans, but of an ethnically homogeneous entity in the Carpathian Basin. For authors of the younger generations socialised through post-Yugoslav pop-culture and collective discourses, also in line with cultural and educational policies of the late 1990’s and beyond, the perception of their own inhabited space is to a much greater degree connected to Hungary or Budapest than to the Adriatic coastline or the Balkans, thus differing vastly from generations of the SFRJ period between 1945-1992.

The landscapes that fell out of the previous collective identity transformed from previously heterogeneous spaces into more homogenous ones. The terrain is no longer cracked with experience or intimacy, as Gaston Bachelard would explain it, it is not bended with memories, and there are no narratives linked to it. The post-Yugoslav space of the Western Balkans is homogenous in the sense that it is flat, hollow and empty — a blank spot of a collectively indifferent terrain on the map. Without these augmented memories and elements which could carry the possibility to distinguish one segment of this space from another, a community cannot develop a meaning for it, and it cannot embed it in its collective self based on — amongst other things — its spatial experience. For familiar places contain memories; spaces which are known to us were at some point scenes of events — if not to us, then to someone with whom we share a collective identity. “In its countless alveoli space contains compressed time. That is what space is for.”\(^9\) The landscapes which were gradually fenced off for post-Yugoslav generations of Hungarians in Vojvodina, do not have these compressed memories, which were handed down by narratives or accumulated through the experience of annual summer vacations, various cultural manifestations, inland travels or means of education. These landscapes are flat, in a timeless and empty plane from where the collective self has retreated, and which cannot be narrated collectively any longer. Parts of the old geo-cultural identity mean nowadays (especially for younger generations socialised during the 1990’s and after) as little as Rome, the Black Sea, Munich or Vienna. As parts of a former identity, the toponyms on the chart shaped a cosmos of familiar spaces, while in contemporary literature these toponyms are as chaotic and foreign as they would be in a tourist guide. Mircea Eliade begins his book *The Sacred and the Profane* with the sentence “For religious man, space is not homogenous; he experiences interruptions, breaks in it; some parts of space are qualitatively different from others.”\(^{10}\) Much like the religious man, the
man of the age of nationalism also interprets space by building a hierarchy within it, and by doing so he shapes an individual, eventually a collective cosmos, too, with borders, centres, and routes of transit. However, when these interpretations are questioned or replaced, space becomes a chaotic mass, similarly unshaped as it was before, not differing from other unknown spaces. This is the interpretational shift in question, which occurred during the 1990’s, transforming the collective imagination of inhabited space for Hungarians in Vojvodina to this day.

Dilemmas

The first signs of this shift appeared as early as 1992. István Németh, one of the most prolific short story writers of the period, uses the term “Délvidék”, for the first time, on the pages of the daily newspaper Magyar Szó. The sheer act strikes him as a problem: “I write Délvidék for the first time, since the word Vojvodina is starting to lose its meaning.” The term “Délvidék” means “lands of the south”; it is a traditional Hungarian geographic term denoting what Southern Hungary had been prior to the Treaty of Trianon, i.e. roughly the territory of Vojvodina. It was in use prior to the First World War, and again during the Hungarian takeover of Vojvodina in the Second World War. During the communist period, the term was banned from public discourse. In the same year that Németh picked up the term “Délvidék”, Ottó Tolnai writes: “If I would have to say why this abstraction of the Adriatic concerns me a lot (allegedly one could travel to Croatia with a Catholic baptism certificate), then aside from the abandoned marble quarries of Vrnik, I would most probably mention the geranium trees from Žuljana.” This text was published in the first issue of the journal EX Symposion based in Veszprém, Hungary, although the manuscripts were most probably intended for the journal Új Symposion based in Novi Sad (Újvidék), which ceased publication after its authors had fled abroad. The concept of the two journals is practically identical, both relying traditionally on Hungarian authors from Vojvodina and Hungary, and some Serbo-Croatian authors from other parts of Yugoslavia, with a strong focus on post- and neo-avant-garde practices, and a comprehensive approach from social sciences.

And thus the shifting began. If we look at it as a hobsbawmian question of invented traditions, we can observe a very indicative model of identity shifting from one tradition to another, and the utilisation of toponyms as part of one tradition towards a different one. Communities choose their traditions, and if the usage of toponyms requires a linguistic
practice, then this practice means that at an identificational crossroad, the practice shows which collective identity prevails. The (re)labelling of landscapes and their representation in literature contributes to, and is a fine indicator of these practices. Tradition in this case functions as part of a discourse, and it formalises the way of representing objective reality. Representation of space in this discourse is just one of the symptoms, and literary examples can show that, when it comes to space, traditions are the instances within which rules are invented. It is therefore crucial, whether a spatial identificational element is represented as alien or not, whether it is perceived as one abroad or not, or inhabited by one’s own community or the “Others”. The two quotes above show how this barely tangible but penetrating flow had begun. Németh ponders whether another discourse should or should not be accepted, and, if so, which would be the proper way of (re)introducing it. While the Tolnai text deals with the reconstruction of spaces, emigration, borders. He writes about war with countries that were recently homelands, but which are becoming foreign and potentially alien to future readers, who will be unable to identify with them.

Interludes

The shift from one collective identity to the other was (and never is) by no means a smooth, uneventful and easy process; nonetheless, it resulted in a lot of sidetracks — fortunately, a lot of them were highly creative. On the one hand, due to the fragmentation of public space, the collective self-image had connected to smaller, locally defined spaces, while on the other hand, spaces of transit became a frequent scenery of literary narratives. Along with spaces disappearing and emerging, one of the most peculiar symptoms of the forthcoming age was the reappearance of sacral spaces — in literature as much as in other art forms as well.

Local discourse of the mid 1990’s

By the mid 1990’s, authors started to describe places which were quite marginal in quantity and sporadic in their appearance prior to the shift, or didn’t even exist — neither in landscapes of the collective self, nor in literary discourse. These spaces were rarely known beyond the local community. Poems, prose and even drama started to use these spaces, which were up until that point fairly unknown to the wider public, and familiar only to the local observer. The plot unfolded at previously unknown sites, in a mi-
lieu scarcely represented before, and in spaces belonging to a necessarily smaller scale. In contrast to previous patterns where novels, poems and short stories could take place on streets and boulevards of such Yugoslav cities as Sarajevo, Belgrade, Zagreb, Priština, sometimes in a specific village on the seaside or even on islands in the Adriatic, the mid-1990’s were rather hallmarked by a number of micro-spaces. Literary texts abandoned the above mentioned larger landscapes, and pulled out their subjects from its contexts. Instead of the vast settings of poems or prose, one could encounter spaces at the micro-level: bridges, streams, wells, field paths, streets, squares, marketplaces — without any intention or hint from the author to reveal the town’s name, a town almost without exception located somewhere in the Vojvodina countryside, away from urban areas. The authors often used smaller geographical elements, village alleys instead of city squares or even streams instead of rivers. Novi Sad and Subotica rarely provided a scenery at this point. The great waterways of the Danube, or the once relevant Sava, Drina, and Drava, vanished from the collective imagination, hence the significance shifted to a much smaller radius. The subject becomes more focused on its proximal environment, dealing with issues concerning only the immediate visibilities, thus mythologizing and closing them into a much smaller textual world than it was usual during the 1950’s, 1960’s, 1970’s and 1980’s.

Here, at the barely inhaling
living Aranka
leafs
started to fall swiftly
through them like knots
nests lump out
and within them already
the autumn is nesting

With us, at the barely inhaling
living Aranka
the silence of the
fallow had grown and
their failure touches almost
the mask-like sky...
sluggish birds
wrinkle, peck
the decay
a whole heaven of birds
and on the fading trees
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cold nests
whether next year
will there be hatching here
the same ones who put
who placed them here this year?!\(^{15}\)

The reader often requires the gaze and knowledge of the local, native observer in order to decipher the whereabouts of the specific locality. One could say that the authors retreated from the more and more uncertain and indeterminate spaces to the only space that they were certain would not fall into pieces — the space of the local community. On the one hand, this cosmos remains a small one, but on the other, it is rich with anecdotes, village fools, local heroes and buildings, toponyms, wells and roads which could only be fully interpreted through the eye of the local bystander. As Bachelard writes: “Inhabited space transcends geometrical space.”\(^{16}\) Reading these poems and stories of the mid 1990’s, one can experience a small world enlarged by literary fantasy, enhanced in scope to much greater urban and social construction, represented as a gargantuan maze, sometimes with a centre, but certainly never with a way out — a Hungarian Macondo\(^ {17}\) in a disintegrating Yugoslavia.

In a 1994 conference analysis from Hamburg, Zygmunt Bauman argues that postmodern communities dream of a local discourse which will grant them certainties and truths that nation-states cannot grant them any longer. They dream more of a unity of thought, feeling, will and action on a local scale. Bauman calls them “neotribal communities”, and refers to them as ones that cannot live differently, but only through the faith in the norms stated above.\(^{18}\) If we look at the products of the Hungarian literature in Vojvodina, it is quite easy to notice that a similar process took place and peaked in literature by the mid 1990’s. The only certain way of building a collective identity — or at least trying to build one during the dissolution of the country, which resulted in the devaluation of every identificational pattern of a larger scale — was through the certainty provided by the local identificational web. This, actually, was the most radically minimalistic approach a public discourse could provide; after that, there is nothing but the individual.

To define it briefly, the local discourse is a way of thinking, writing and identifying oneself according to the norms, structures and hierarchies of the local community. The subject retreats from the imagined communities of national or even regional strata, and finds its way back to the primary face-to-face community of the local milieu. In contrast to Benedict Anderson’s imagined communities,\(^ {19}\) a local community is not
necessarily imagined. Hence, a lot of knowledge is implicitly present and there is no need for a “footnote” or a reflection, since there are very few of those who would seek additional explanation. These narratives are closed by not mentioning the city name, and they are focusing on the inner structures, with the obvious assumption that the reader shares the writer's local knowledge. This community is small, compact and often provincial. Texts are recurrently written in dialect. The step-by-step withdrawal is demonstrated very precisely in a poem by Károly Jung, entitled Limányi anziksz (Postcards from Liman), written originally as a street graffiti in Novi Sad, showing instability even in its linguistic manifestation (written in Serbian and Hungarian, but struck out in both). The author names every level of space, but only the city (Novi Sad-Újvidék) remains unveiled:

This is Yugoslavia!
This is Serbia!
This is Vojvodina!
This is Liman!
This is a building!
This is crap!

Another aspect of the local discourse is that the narration depends very much on the topography, which is mostly codified in names tangible only to the ones who share the knowledge with the locally defined collective identity. This, naturally, does not mean that a reader with an entirely different cultural background will be completely unable to understand what is written, but his experience will be undeniably different. The author aims at a locally socialized reader, one who is familiar with the current situation and understands his problems and needs — for these are the problems and needs of “the” community. This narrative practice gives the poem certain mysticism, and even though, on the surface, it is readable by everyone, the author’s only true accomplice is someone who can decode the topographical matrix and break through this locally encrypted fence. Éva Harkai Vass, in a poem from 1993, wrote:

I see you standing on the Butter Hill,
and on the freshly painted Calvary
only an alto prayer was heard
and the stacios as lung wings
successively open their gates
The Butter Hill (Vajhegy) and the Calvary on its top is located in Bačka Topola (Topolya), a town 74 km north of Novi Sad. It is impossible to locate these places on a map, for they are not normative, codified names — only the local subject can pin it on his/her spatial chart. Another example from an essay, published in the same year demonstrates how the hydrography shows signs of this local discourse as well: “Undergarments, I saw a lot, but not just in the summer, when on the Little-Danube the bathing women take off their clothes.”

The Little-Danube (Kis-Duna) being a backwater of the Danube near Novi Sad, which is also not a codified name, and is used only by Hungarians in Novi Sad, Serbs calling it “Dunavac”. The authors in these years rarely define which specific village or town they are referring to, their only aim most certainly being tucking away the subject geographically to the safest, most secluded spot of the “couleur locale”.

Non-places

In the mid 1990’s, another by then rather unusual experience of space emerged. It manifested itself through waiting rooms, refugee camps, border checkpoints, railway compartments, train- and bus stations. The opuses got overloaded with places which Marc Augé calls non-places, and refers to them as follows: “If a place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity will be a non-place.”

This movement, along with a migrational unpleasantness with its borders, transfers, delays and waiting, can be felt in a poem written in 1996 by György Szakmány:

I got down at Kiskunhalas
at quarter past one
I’ll be at Kelebia by three
I’m from Vojvodina
I study in Buda.

Due to the Yugoslav war, a large number of Hungarian and other students, intellectuals, artists and other mainly educated and young people, fled abroad in search of a peaceful life, with no notions of war, conflict and ethnic divisions. For decades, the centre of gravity for Vojvodina Hungarian intellectuals has been Novi Sad (Újvidék). However, when the war broke out and the university campus mutated into a hunting ground for
young men who were to be recruited into the army, more and more people decided to leave. Authors such as dr. Máriás and Bada Dada who left Novi Sad wrote poems about these experiences of migration, László Végel wrote novels and essays about the ever migrating “Gastarbeiter”, while Csaba Szögi, who was a soldier, wrote a novel which takes place in a military base, and continues the tradition of the non-place. The novel is called Drót (Wire), and even its title functions as a synecdoche, denoting the fence enclosing the narrator, and pointing out the hollowness of the identificational space inside the barracks. Árpád Nagy Abonyi, Aaron Bloom and Ottó Tolnai wrote a series of texts about the same empty spaces which have to be passed to get to the destination point. It is symptomatic that — due to the generic situation of war — the last issue of the literary magazine Új Symposion was published by an editorial made up entirely of women (Ildikó Lovas, Csilla Utasi, Tímea Bordás and Zsuzsanna Papp), the editor in chief being Papp P. Tibor, who left the country soon after as well. In one of his short stories, György Szerbhorváth writes about a police station in Budapest: “Entering the police station on I. street I was only occupied with one thought, how long must I stand about this time around to get my residence permit.”

Poems, plays, novels from migrants and commuters got filled with these liminal, transitional spaces of travel, temporary residence, and other provisional landscapes of need set in an intermediate place without time, relations or any possibility of building an image of the self connected to them. The majority of Vojvodina Hungarians experienced different parts of the world, which carried the probability of a new home, but had been divided with these necessary spaces of transit. The fact that these spaces appear in a wide variety of genres shows the relevance of these representations of space amongst other landscapes of the collective self.

ERNŐ You think I went mad don’t you? Man, I didn’t even see that country!
TIBOR Where were you?
ERNŐ They’d escorted me, with my wife and child to a refugee camp near Malmö, and had let me go to the city only twice during the one and a half years stay. I didn’t get a permanent residence permit nor a work permit, and now – as the war apparently ended – they transported us home via an airplane nicely, culturally and with a Swedish politeness.
The shift thus produced a unique sidetrack of Hungarian migrant literature. Places which were tourist attractions at most, became necessities for an escape, be it temporary or permanent. Short stories and essays about immigrant offices, train stations, passport controls abound. Empty spaces became places of contact, but even through these augéian empty spaces the subject could not build a temporary collective identity — it is trapped between its old geo-cultural self and a desire to form a new community. This wave in Vojvodina Hungarian literature reached its peak in the last third of the 1990’s, with the decline of the Milošević-era, but — due to the political, economic instability in Serbia, and the fact that more and more young people decide to study in Hungary — it has remained common since. On a number of occasions, the immigrant offices, university waiting lines and other places of transit were/are often located in Budapest, Szeged or at another "home to be" in Hungary; and the foundations of the new identity have evolved somewhere near this sidetrack.

Sacral space

The end of the sacral space’s stigmatization in pseudo-secular Central-Eastern Europe went parallel with the ideological shifts of the post-Soviet era. Churches, calvaries, roadside crosses or figures of saints became a familiar topos in the arts and even popular culture by the end of the 1990’s. The church, as one of the most emblematic structures of every local identity, had become a taboo after the Second World War and it was not advisable to use it for artistic purposes. However, in post-socialist Europe, churches were among the first previously suppressed emblems to appear as foucauldian heterotopias, marking the town centre, a traditional gathering place for the community, a space of interaction, history, relationships, durability and ritual communication. These objects are marked with their exception from regular communal time, and the sheer entering extracts the subject from temporal continuity. They often represent complex sites, comprising a wide array of meaning, thus becoming a guarded symbol of the community. Once again, a church became a site which is defined by the renewed relations established between the space it occupies, the institution it represents and the community, which on the one hand interprets itself through it, and on the other modifies it according to its communal needs. The sacral objects, as heterotopias of an imagined communal assembly, hence became sites bearing relations to the past as a vertical, and the present as a horizontal tie to a certain group, to ethnic origins and — last but not least — to language.
Aracs
centuries like
flayed skin
peel
from your ruinous walls
Above your sunken shrine
from rank weed
a wreath
the decay braids.27

Aside from the above mentioned traditional aspects of a sacral object as a heterotopia, a new quality of the late 20th century became apparent. One of the most interesting phenomena is that, with reclaiming its communal position, the sacral space had undergone a curious transformation. Vojvodina churches and monastery ruins, while re-entering the Hungarian collective self’s as an ethno-cultural blueprint, somewhat diluted their divine tone and painted it with an ethnical one. Medieval ruins of churches, monasteries and fortifications became a symbol of continuity, thus strengthening notions of the upcoming discourse, serving not only as links to a pre-socialist Christian (mostly Catholic or Calvinist) identity, and as a millennium-old tie to Western Europe, but also as a spatial memento of Hungarian presence, and as knots in a network culturally and historically interconnected with other places of the Carpathian Basin. In contrast to the previous discourse, where one of the key characteristics of the collective self-image was the perception of itself as a socialist identity rooted in the present and in a struggle for the future, the new one gave priority to the past, to the continuity in opposition to the previous mythology of discontinuity, and to the cultural memory embedded in architecture. During the 1990’s, the cultural journal Üzenet presented more essays on the buildings of this type in Subotica (Szabadka). To celebrate the new millennium, a series of historical essays were published in the 2000 issues of the journal Híd in order to commemorate these places28 The keywords were precisely the ones mentioned above: Carpathian Basin, Pannonia, Hungarian presence, middle ages, Christianity, Western Europe.

The Post-Yugoslav collective self of Hungarians

As stated before, the emblematic year of the shift is 1992. In this particular case, this was not just the end of the SFRJ; there is an additional, more
cultural background to it as well. As mentioned above, in the same year, the most important literary and art journal of the Vojvodina Hungarian post-avant-garde — the Új Symposion — seized to exist. This coincidence of political and cultural overlapping marks the beginning of a major identification shift, and clears the terrain for a process which resulted in a discourse, a collective self and a mental landscape different from the one before 1992. Although just a symptom, after the end of Új Symposion, one could not write about, publish about, or even imagine space as up to that year.

1992

The August issue of Új Symposion came out with no signs of future interruption, yet after that, no further issues appeared. However, a new journal of a very similar profile and featuring the similar authors soon came to life in Veszprém, Hungary, significantly named EX Symposion. Yugoslavia was falling into pieces, and the authors who fled from the military draft — or due to other existential reasons — saw themselves forced to establish a new forum. This journal is still in existence today. During the same period, a younger generation came to age in Vojvodina, and established at home, a Novi Sad-based sequel to the journal simply naming it Symposion, which — albeit in a somewhat altered form — also still exists today. It gathered authors and artists from the region, but due to the financial difficulties, issues came out quite irregularly. The journals Híd and Úzenet were fairly unaffected by the course of events of the 1990’s. Híd has been undergoing radical transformations since the mid 2000’s, giving place to authors from a younger generation, and traditionally publishing literary utterances from the post-Yugoslav area, but also paying attention to contemporary literatures of neighbouring Hungarian canons. Úzenet seized to exist in 2006. The daily and weekly newspapers have gone through considerable alterations as well, each of them developing a profile more and more affected by the shift. The Forum publishing house in Novi Sad (Újvidék) and the theatres in Novi Sad (Újvidék) and Subotica (Szabadka) Újvidéki Színház and Szabadkai Népszínház — although new publishers and new theatres were founded — remained most likely the least affected institutions in this period (aside from organisational and financial problems). They will most likely have to deal with the shift in the second half of the 2010’s, for the geo-cultural and ethno-cultural discourses are competing in these institutions since the 1990’s as well. What remained, and has prevailed for the
last two decades is the idea of a Hungarian community in the Vojvodina, which identifies itself with canons channelled through both discourses. There is, however, a strong tendency of development — which can be observed since the mid-1980’s — parallel with ethno-centric nationalisms in Central-Eastern Europe. References to space remain more and more in the ethno-cultural framework of southern Vojvodina. Furthermore, cultural and political connections to the Western-Balkans — although still existing — weakened, and the Hungarian community became increasingly integrated with other Hungarian communities in the Carpathian Basin.

In the meantime, the Hungarian community in Yugoslavia decreased from almost half a million, as it was in the 1960’s, to somewhat more than 300,000 in the 1990’s, and a bit over 250,000, according to the 2011 census. This was partly due to a combination of a low birth rate and assimilation, and partly to emigration. The entire state became smaller and smaller, and its name also changed several times, from SFRJ to the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, then to Serbia and Montenegro (when the name Yugoslavia disappeared altogether), and eventually to Serbia alone. One can see that, from the second half of the 1990’s, a new identificational basis was not so much an option, but more a necessity. Since it was an anachronism for the Yugoslav Hungarians to identify with a country which existed only as a cultural memory, the community had to turn elsewhere for an identificational basis. The 1990’s are in this sense the watershed between a firmly established geo-cultural identity, and the fracturing rest of something believed to be an everlasting cornerstone of the collective identity, evolving to something new.

The ethno-cultural discourse

Due to the increased mobility in the past couple of decades, and to the fact that a holiday, a longer trip or even a resettlement to Hungary became more usual than in case of any other post-Yugoslav state, experiences of these spaces have also changed. Since encounters with Hungary became more frequent than with landscapes of the Western Balkans, literary texts represented a collective identity quite different from the previous one. Hungarian spaces, thus, became a recurring setting in poems, short stories and novels. Streets, squares of Szeged, boulevards and subway stations of Budapest, the beaches of Balaton became more and more represented. Therefore, mental distances between a city in Hungary and a town in Vojvodina were reduced. One could say that post-Yugoslav landscapes were abandoned during the 1990’s only to be reintroduced as snapshots on tour-
The shift resulted not only in spaces on a macro level, but — as we can see in the excerpt above — on the micro level as well. Unlike the Hungarian literature of Yugoslavia, especially in the 1960’s, 1970’s and 1980’s — where Budapest may be briefly mentioned as a city abroad — the Hungarian capital is no longer a distant, foreign city today. References to its streets, squares, parks, shops broke down the alienated topographical element to a more pedestrian scale. Authors today integrate and perceive these spaces as the ones belonging to a shared knowledge, generational memory, mythology and pop culture. In literature, narratives connected to these spaces have been presented as the subject’s generic narratives embedded into a wider social context, thus merging them into a metanarrative

“We have departed into the summer night
of urine stinking Pest
[...]
after
my first girl died of cancer
I drank brandy on the Wesselényi-road
[...]
the morning of Buda came through the window
the suffocating Sun glittered.”

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of an “imagined community,” (Anderson) centralised by Budapest. These
narratives, representing parts of a map, channelled an integrated imagina-
tion of a sovereign collective self, overarching state borders. Furthermore,
they delimited landscapes, and separated them from other spaces not in-
habited by the community in question. The line separating one imagined
community from another was radically redefined.

The Hungarian capital is, naturally, not the only mentioned city. Hun-
gary’s map became bit by bit more detailed, and over the decades —
through personal links — the communal network of landscapes evolved
into a densely woven structure. We can read about the same link in the
poem entitled A veszprémi emigráns költők (Emigrant poets of Veszprém)
by Krisztián Tóbiás:

‘cos
an emigrant poet in Veszprém
stays the same
an emigrant. 31

Prior to the shift, one of the most characteristic identificational
points was the Adriatic Sea. As Yugoslavs, the Hungarians of Yugoslavia
considered this part of the Mediterranean as an all-encompassing lan-
dscape, while adjacent to the shift it turned either into a nostalgic com-
monplace of cultural memory (and along with other spaces, it was referred to in
Past Tense) or into a tourist attraction not differing from other destinations
abroad. While István Domonkos, Ottó Tolnai or Ottó Fenyvesi wrote doz-
ens and dozens of poems about the shore, the islands, the waves, their col-
our, smell and shape, the representation of the spaces in contemporary lit-
erature is rare and quite different — even within one oeuvre. Tolnai writes
about being cut off from the sea in 2001:

Now, when I’ve been cut off the Adriatic sea
for over
a decade [...] 
I hear very often
the bell of Tijesno. 32

The importance of the loss of the Adriatic is quite vividly depicted
in Tolnai’s book Világítótorony eladó (Lighthouse for sale), published in
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2010. The novel is mainly about people who were connected to the “Yugoslav Riviera”, who travelled there for decades, lost it during the war and in some cases reclaimed it again afterwards, only this time as foreign tourists. This short novel is precisely about the value of the Adriatic, what it stands for and what it meant, when this heterothopia faded and was made indifferent. It is perhaps the perfect example of how the landscapes forming a collective identity and the spatial matrix of minority literature could change due to a shift in only two decades. In the early 1950’s, the Adriatic transformed from the Italian and Croatian seaside, and from the holiday resort of the upper middle class to ‘the’ Yugoslav shore for all of its citizens — which was not the case in previous times, nor in the interwar years, and not even before that, during the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. It was not a landscape of the working class, but of the chosen few who could afford it. Yet, in the Yugoslav era, it became the foucauldian heterothopia of vacation, remodelling time, space, collective perception and communication within its range. For a few months, the whole country migrated to the shore. During the 1990’s, however, this drastically changed. While Yugoslavia was vanishing from the map, Hungarian literature was gradually losing a complex site which was extensively present from the early 1950’s to the early 1990’s, leading to a vast number of iconic works by István Domonkos, Ottó Tolnai, Katalin Ladik. The Adriatic reappeared in the mid-2000’s merely as a space of nostalgia, differing from its previous image not only in sentiment, but — for the younger generations — as a site abroad, not a part of their own inhabited space.

Conclusion

While reading poems, novels or plays, one can see that spaces which were once crucial to the community of the Vojvodina Hungarians became marginal, while new, Hungarian-defined spaces became more important. On the one hand, there are hardly any texts today about the Croatian seaside, the Bosnian mountains or the Neretva river; on the other hand, many are now about streets and squares of various cities within ethno-cultural boundaries. The collective self is a construct perceived — metaphorically speaking — from a Budapest perspective, and not from a Belgrade one any longer; the community imagines itself as a subdivision of an all-Hungarian homogenous ethnic community, and not as one of the many communities in ethnically and culturally heterogeneous Yugoslavia. The framework of today is stretched on the Carpathian Basin, and not on the Western Balkans, as it used to be.
The shift in question has been a long-term process, thus its stages exist in a more or less syncretic form, harmonising and levelling out one another between generations. Despite the fact that one can find both extremes of the shift within one opus and/or representation of a collective identity, it does not necessarily end in a paradox or a contradiction. On the one hand, one can find texts with yugonostalgic or balkanesque overtones, and on the other, ones which belong more in a Mitteleuropean or Hungarian cultural context. Essays by László Végel or novels by Ottó Tólnai — authors of an older generation — often speak nostalgically about Vojvodina landscapes with an Austria-Hungarian touch, the Vojvodina interwar years, but also about Yugoslav spaces of their youth. There are also authors who do not step out of a sharply defined local discourse; Aaron Blumm, for instance, never leaves his native Kishegyes (Mali Iđoš), and stories of Kálmán Jódal or Attila Balázs mainly stay in Újvidék (Novi Sad). Novels by writers in their twenties or thirties, such as Károly Barlog, Tamás Kiss and Csaba Szögi, or short stories and essays by György Szerbhorváth are mostly about liminal experiences of space, non-spaces and transitional spaces. Most importantly, poems, novels, plays, short stories adjacent to the spatial shift, are written almost by every generation, from Ottó Tólnai and Attila Balázs, through Árpád Nagy Abonyi and Ferenc Kontra to Károly Barlog, Tamás Kiss, Anna Terék and Orsolya Bencsik. Their subjects move through a wide variety of spaces, strengthening the characteristics of the paradigm after the shift.

Yugoslavia had vanished, and it is not very likely that contemporary authors of the post-Yugoslav space will ever develop a similar, interdependent geo-cultural identity in the Western Balkans as it was the case in the SFRJ. The dominant myths have been deconstructed, made either nostalgic or stigmatised, a uniform and interconnected spatial perspective has become fragmented, and another perspective (institutionalized mainly in Budapest) has already developed. The collective self imagines the inhabited landscapes as a web within the Carpathian Basin, a Deleuze-Guattari-type rhizome growing and developing in consonance with the Hungarian language, culture, history, and nonetheless with the common knowledge and mythology shared with its contemporaries. Hence, after the shift in question, it is impossible to talk about Hungarian authors from Vojvodina as it was possible before. The borders became more liquid than it was ever the case in the 20th century; legitimization and censorship are no longer a regional issue to the extent that it was before. Furthermore, with the integration of the nation-state into supranational governmental formations, and the transformation of the concept of nation itself, which can —
as Habermas proposes it — even be called post-national, reconstruction of an independent and autonomous Hungarian regional canon in today’s Vojvodina — as in the 1950’s, 1960’s, 1970’s, 1980’s and even in the 1990’s — has become impossible.

During this shift, the space inhabited stayed put, and the identification changed only through spatial reinterpretations. The community inhabiting this space tried to build a new collective identity based on the “corner of the world” given, and although their own space remained more or less what it was, the points of reference moved towards other criteria of identification. If we perceive the shift during the past two decades as a continuum with many sidetracks, dead ends and failed identificational attempts, we can detect a firmly established collective identity on both ends, and an identificational vacuum which lasted for about ten years, roughly from the mid 1990’s to the mid 2000’s. Landscapes, which were parts of the Yugoslav geo-cultural identity, have given their place to spaces which now form a still developing, amorphous Hungarian ethno-cultural identity, with notions of regional and local spatial elements. The regional literature in question is now an established sub-system of Hungarian literature, and the community a dispersed southern part of an ethno-culturally defined Central European state.

Where all this leads, and when the next shift will occur, we can only guess; but even now we can already see signs of further fragmentation, together with the development of a multicentric and multicanonic discourse of a networked-like Hungarian literature amidst the regrouping communities of Europe. Despite the legitimizing impact of institutions and manifestations in Budapest, cultural production will most probably articulate itself through a wide array of regional canons instead of an institutionalised single one, dictated from one centre. We can observe these regional canons in their initial forms in Újvidék (Novi Sad), Szeged, Debrecen, Pécs, Kolozsvár (Cluj), Marosvásárhely (Târgu Mures), Pozsony (Bratislava)... These urban centres usually provide a necessary critical mass for artistic utterances. They are university centres, with a theatre and at least one journal dealing with literature and criticism, gathering authors who came to these cities mostly due to educational purposes. These centres are already interconnected, providing a platform for cultural production, which would not have been possible before the 1990’s, but which will most probably be the case in the near future.
Bibliography


Further reading

Domonkos, István – Tolnai, Ottó: Valóban mi lesz velünk. Forum Könyvkiadó. Újvidék. 1968.s

NOTES

1 The research for this paper was funded by the Balassi Institute in the period 2010-2013.
2 Current census: Vojvodina has 1.92 million inhabitants, and a Hungarian minority numbering 251,000 (13% of the total).
3 In Serbo-Croatian: Bratstvo-Jedinstvo.
5 “Zajemčuje se svakoj narodnosti da, radi ostvarivanja prava na izražavanje svoje narodnosti i kulture, slobodno upotrebljava svoj jezik i pismo, razvija svoju kulturu i da radi toga osniva organizacije i uživa druga ustavom utvrđena prava.”, in Ustav 1974, član 247.
7 “mindennek ellenére a magyar munkás nyaralása jóval szervezettebb/ mert hát nekik is vannak munkásaik/ és nekünk is vannak munkásaink” (Domonkos-Tolnai 1968: 22.)
Igor Štiks accurately describes this devaluation of the geo-cultural identity, through the loss of citizenship using the case of independent Slovenia. (Štiks 2010)

12 “Ha hirtelen meg kellene mondani, miért is érint olyan nagyon az Adriának ez a hirtelen, minden előkészület nélküli megvonzása (állítólag katolikus keresztlevelel már lehet utazni Horvátországra), akkor az elhagyott vniki márványbányáik (lásd Böcklin) mellett minden bizonytal a zuljanai muskátlőkékat is megemlítetném.” Ottó Tolnai, “Feljegyzések a vég tónusához,” in. EX Symposium, Benyúlás 1992/1-2.
13 See archive on: www.exsymposion.hu
15 “Itt a már alig lélegző/ létező Arankánál/ gyorsan hullani kezdtek/ a levelek/ közülük mind jobban/ kicsomósodnak/ a fészkek/ és bennük már/ az ősz fészkel/ Nálunk a már alig lélegző/ létező Arankánál/ nagyra nőtt/ a parlagok/ csööde és csööde/ már-már az álarcént/ fészülő égit er.../ lomha madarak/ redőzik, csőrözik/ az enyészetet/ égalnayi madár/ s a kivesző fák/ kihült fészkek/ vajon jövore is/ azok kötênnek itt/ akik az idén/ ide rakták,./ sikerítették őket?!?”
16 Bachelard 1964: 47.
17 Macondo – an imaginary town in Gabriel García Márquez’s novel 100 Years of Solitude.
18 “Das postmoderne Denken is voller Träume von gemeinschaftlichen, lokalen Wahrheiten und Gewißheiten, von denen man hofft, daß sie jene Aufgabe der Zivilisierung übernehmen, die die umfassenden, universalistischen Wahrheiten und Gewißheiten der Nationalstaaten nicht erfüllen konnten; man hofft, daß sie eine Einheit von Denken, Fühlen, Willen und Handeln stiften und damit Gewalt nur als unberechtigt denkbar erscheinen lassen. Die neotribalistischen postulierten Gemeinschaften können jedoch gar nicht anders, als an diese Hoffnungen zu glauben.” (Miller-Soeffner 1996:59.)
20 Ovo je Jugoslavija!/ Ovo je Srbiya!/ Ovo je Vojvodina!/ Ovo je Liman!/ Ovo je zgrada!/ Ovo je kerov kurac! Ez (itt) Jugoszlávia!/ Ez (itt) Szerbia!/ Ez (itt) Vajdaság!/ Ez (itt a) Limány!/ Ez (itt egy) épület!/ Ez (itt) a kutyék fásza! Jung Károly: Változatok Pilinszky négysorosára – Limányi anzix. In: Jung. 2002. 51.o.
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28 Essays about Aracs church ruins, or the medieval Cistercian monastery located where today the Pétervárad (Petrovaradin) fortress stands, the ruins of Bács-fortress – from where the name Bácska (Bačka) originates, the small 12th century church at Marót (Morović)....
29 It is interesting that the first issue bare the subtitle: “Benyúlás” (Reaching into), and the third: “Talajvesztés” (Losing ground).
32 most hogy immár egy évtizede/ el vagyok vágva/ az adriától/ [...] gyakran vélem hallani/ azt a tijesnői harangot (Tolnai 2011: 12) (it is also symptomatic that the book was published in Pécs, Hungary)