

Levels of transculturalism and bilingualism in the Hungarian literature of Slovakia

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ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of transculturalism is capable of activating and generating meaning within various spaces, levels and layers of literature. The study discusses different levels of transculturalism through certain authors and texts in Slovakian Hungarian literature, along with transcultural authorial identity, the transcultural meaning-making machinery of texts, transcultural practices of the social context, and transcultural directions and gaps in reception. The purpose of the paper is to classify some of the transcultural phenomena we encounter and to unravel the relevant conceptual and interpretative levels.

KEYWORDS

transculturalism, bilingualism, Hungarian literature in Slovakia, authorial identity

INTRODUCTION

The appearance and use of the concept of transculturalism in the international and Hungarian literature of the subject have resulted in the articulation of new points of view, which placed the relationships between cultures and, more specifically, the discussion of literary phenomena, into a new framework (Welsch, 1999; Dagnino, 2015; Jablonczay, 2015; Thomka, 2018; Németh and Roguska, 2018a, b). While multiculturalism and interculturalism were based on the notion of

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homogenous cultures existing side by side and engaging in dialogue with each other, in the age of globalisation and digitalisation, transculturalism has questioned the possibility of the homogeneity of any culture. According to Wolfgang Welsch, by the end of the 20th century, a situation has been created that transcends the borders of national cultures and all cultures can only be interpreted from the point of view of mixing, permeation, hybridity and networking (Welsch, 1999).

In the following, I endeavour to outline a concept for the interpretation of transcultural phenomena through a minority or ethnic literature, namely, Hungarian literature in Slovakia. On one hand, the present paper is a sketch of a kind, but on the other hand, it contains elements ready to be formalised and continued, which in general make it possible to map and typify the transcultural relations of literature. Naturally, even this method does not promise the illusion of objectivity, but rather offers guidelines for the application of a model which can be further detailed in the case of other transcultural literatures. However, it is also possible that the transcultural positions and levels discussed here do not exist at all but are zero places or untapped, zero opportunities in the context of another literature of a different language.

INTERPRETATIVE MODELS BEFORE TRANSCULTURALISM

From an unreflected point of view, every minority or ethnic literature is placed in a multicultural/intercultural/transcultural position by its very existence. The Hungarian literature of Slovakia has always reflected upon its status as an ethnic minority literature and thereby created concepts such as a bridge role, a *vox humana* or the minority genius, going back as far the period between the two world wars. This self-reflection has placed the Hungarian literature in Slovakia, sometimes also called the literature of Slovensko, half way between the Slovakian and the Hungarian cultures and literatures. From another point of view, this position may be regarded as a limitation (Csehy, 2011, 127–166; Csehy, 2012, 249–288).

A completely different approach, however, has considered the Hungarian literatures that exist outside the present-day borders of Hungary as parts of a unified Hungarian literature, drawing attention to their shared traditions and common language. In the case of the Hungarian literature of Slovakia, the representatives of this standpoint often refer to the fact that the majority of published literary works do not deal with the issues of Hungarian identity in Slovakia, do not discuss the phenomena of Slovak-Hungarian cohabitation, nor do they reflect upon the unique traits of minority existence (Németh, 2005, 24–34).

These two standpoints, incompatible at first sight, raise the following introductory hypotheses, paradoxes and questions:

1. The concept of Hungarian literature in Slovakia generally presupposes multicultural/intercultural/transcultural relations.
2. A group of Hungarian literary historians in Slovakia (Alabán, 2017) thus concluded the following: Hungarian literature in Slovakia = Hungarian literature + Slovakian literature. This idea can more precisely be described by the theory of sets; the Hungarian literature in Slovakia is the section of Hungarian and Slovakian literatures: $C = A \cap B$.
3. However, reading the texts comprising the Hungarian literature of Slovakia convinces the reader that the majority of them do not deal with Hungarian-Slovak relations, nor with the issues of Hungarian identity; they do not use Slovakisms, nor do they build intertextual



relationships with Slovak literature, neither do they use the colloquial Hungarian of Slovakian, but the literary Hungarian language (Németh, 2005, 24–34).

These two, apparently incompatible standpoints raise the following questions:

1. Does an ethnic/minority literature *a priori* presuppose multicultural/intercultural/transcultural relations?
2. How and why have theories of minority literature come about which do not harmonise with the phenomena experienced during the reception of such literature?
3. Why do Slovakian Hungarian authors not integrate the Slovakian context into their texts?
4. How can the contradictions of the previous three points be resolved?
5. How can transculturalism and transnational literary criticism contribute to the discussion of the above phenomena?

On the basis of a theory from the time before transculturalism, the above questions can be answered in a way that does not resolve the problems but mobilises a new, different kind of dichotomy (Németh, 2013, 16–24). According to this, the works of Hungarian literature in Slovakia reflect two different kinds of strategy:

1. In certain texts, intercultural communication is not only present, but works as an important meaning-making poetics. These texts present the features of Slovakian and Slovakian-Hungarian reality: some of them use words, phrases or sentences in the Slovak language; others use Slovakisms taken from Slovakian Hungarian language use; some other texts represent the issues of Slovakian Hungarian identity; furthermore, a dialogue with Slovak literature can be detected and a Slovak literary influence felt. These works include novels such as Lajos Grendel's *New Hont-trilogy – Tömegsír* [*Mass Grave*] (1999); *Nálunk, New Hontban* [*Our Place New Hont*] (2001); *Mátyás király New Hontban* [*King Mathias in New Hont*] (2005), Péter Hunčík's *Határeset* [*Borderline Case*] (2008), György Norbert's *Klára* [*Claire*] (2004), as well as poems by Árpád Tözsér *Szülőföldtől szülőföldig* [*From Homeland to Homeland*] and *A kódváltás pragmatikája* [*The Pragmatics of Code Switching*].
2. In other texts, the phenomena listed above are not present either on the level of references or poetics. The works of Slovakian Hungarian literature are in conversation with the textual universes of Hungarian and world literature, and only the names of the authors tell of their Slovakian Hungarian origin. This group includes the following works: short stories by József Gazdag *Kilátás az ezüsthenyőkre* [*View of the Silver Pines*] (2004), volumes of poetry by Zoltán Csehy *Hecatelegium* (2006), Zoltán Hizsnyai *Bárka és ladik* [*Ark and Boat*] (2001), Attila Mizser *Szakmai gyakorlat külföldön* [*Internship Abroad*] (2003), Anikó Polgár *Régészőnő körömcipőben* [*Lady Archaeologist in High Heels*] (2009), Gergely Vida *Horror klasszikusok* [*Horror Classics*] (2010) and Árpád Tözsér's poems *Parsifal, Iuvenalis I., Euphorbos monológia* [*Euphorbos' Monologue*].

THE LEVELS AND RELATIONSHIPS OF TRANSCULTURALISM

Interpreting the works of Constance theoreticians (H. R. Jauss, W. Iser), Lucien Dällenbach draws “a general topography, in which these studies must be read. It is enough to assume that the literary fact operates in four interacting stages.” (Dällenbach, 1980, 130) He later added to



this statement that “ideally, a consistent reception theory should aim at aligning all the relations in question, as well as analysing all the issues that these relations raise as a whole or one by one” (Dällenbach, 1980, 131). He identifies four stages:

1. the subject and process of the production
2. the text
3. the subject and process of the reception
4. historical context and the subconscious

Taking into consideration the transcultural conditions, the operation of Dällenbach’s stages opens up opportunities for the interpreter that make it possible to view the levels of transculturalism and the positions of the author, the text and the reader in a much more sophisticated way. Thus, the position and operation of minority literatures are provided with a new framework of interpretation. Dällenbach’s theory also helps resolve the above-mentioned contradictions and paradoxes and answer the questions as it offers a far more reflected approach than previous standpoints.

The transcultural position of the author

Approaches in literary theory which concentrated on the author were largely dominant in the 19th century. Positivism especially focused on the author’s biography in as many “positive” details as possible, whereas historicism was looking for the “spirit of the age” embodied in the genius of the artist.

The transcultural literary interpretation also places great emphasis on author-centred ideas, as it is through events in the biography, such as nomadism, changing one’s country or language, etc. that an author is regarded as or transformed into transcultural (from Agota Kristof to Melinda Nadj Abonji). On the other hand, though, in the case of ethnic minority literatures, further possibilities and definitions come into play:

1. From a biographical point of view, every Slovakian Hungarian author is transcultural, as they live on the boundary between two languages and cultures. Slovak-Hungarian contact phenomena play a decisive role in everything from everyday life through educational institutions to the linguistic scene (visual language use).
2. In Slovakia, a different level of transculturalism is present in the case of authors who had not received a Hungarian-language education, but attended Slovak-speaking schools. Different levels of education may result in an author becoming bilingual, for example Peter Macsovszky.
3. Besides Slovak-Hungarian identities, certain added identities such as Jewish or Roma may also result in different levels of transculturalism, as in the case of Piroska Szenes, László Pálovics and Alfonz Talamon.
4. The term ‘inner migration’ is used in the case of authors who leave the area inhabited by Hungarians and move to other parts of Slovakia where the Slovak language is dominant. The best examples are authors such as Gyula Duba, Árpád Tózsér, Gábor Farnbauer and Zoltán Szalay, who all live in Bratislava.
5. Authors moving to Hungary or living in Hungary for an extended period include László Tóth, Imre Varga, Attila Mizser, Tímea Péntes and Tamás Plonicky. One of the most extreme examples of this kind of identity is Gábor Kálmán, who was born in Nové Zámky



(Érsekújvár), spent his childhood in an area inhabited by Slovaks and entered the literary world as a Budapest writer. According to his own narrative and self-determination, the Hungarian literature of Slovakia does not acknowledge him as a part of that scene.

6. Authors of migrant or cosmo-nomadic identity, some of whom have lived abroad for years, share the experience of global mobility by receiving scholarships and attending international conferences. Slovakian-born József Czákó lives in Germany; Mária Mórocz in Australia; Péter Macsovszky has lived in the Netherlands, Brazil and Australia; József R. Juhász has spent months as a performer in China, India and Mexico; Zoltán Csehy has spent extended periods in Italy, Germany and Switzerland as a literary scholarship holder and a speaker at conferences; Pál Száz has lived in Sarajevo, Paris and Prague, etc. Ilma Rakusa, who was born in Rimavská Sobota (Rimaszombat), also belongs to this group, as her mother tongue is Hungarian, but she does not write in this language.

The question why general theories of minority literature have come about which do not correspond to the phenomena experienced during reception can be answered through the survival of approaches to literature concentrating on the authors' biography. In other words, a great many texts of Hungarian literature in Slovakia cannot be interpreted through Hungarian-Slovak realia. The answer is the following. Those literary historians who regard Hungarian literature in Slovakia as the section of the two sets, Slovak and Hungarian literatures, actually approached literature from a positivist basis, that is to say, using so-called positive facts such as political and social data, as well as the authors' biographies. Viewed from this angle, indeed, all Slovakian Hungarian authors, or rather the whole of Hungarian literature in Slovakia, appears multicultural/intercultural/transcultural. The question, however, how the above-mentioned relations appear on the level of the text, remains unanswered by this concept.

The transcultural position of the text

Approaches in literary theory that are usually language-centred and focus on the text not only exclude the author from the interpretation, but may go as far as erasing the author's position and claiming the "author's death". These trends, including Russian formalism, structuralism and deconstruction, mainly characteristic of the 20th century, usually regarded the interpretation of literature as the application of rhetorical operations.

The transcultural features of the text often cannot be fully related to the author's biography. The experience of migration does not necessarily appear in the texts of the migrant author and vice versa: a non-migrant author may also elaborate a migration related story. The situation is similar with Hungarian literature in Slovakia: not every Slovakian Hungarian author recounts the experiences of the Slovakian Hungarian world and a non-Slovakian author may also portray Slovakian Hungarian realia, as we see in Éva Bánki's novel.

The possible positions of transculturalism in Slovakian Hungarian texts are the following:

1. The text reflects on transcultural relations or even uses them as an original form of poetics, but it is not Slovak-Hungarian transculturalism that is integrated into the texts. For example, in Anikó Polgár's collection of poems *Lady Archaeologist in High Heels*, ancient Greek mythology is copied onto the stages of a present-day story of a birth; Zoltán Csehy's volume *Hecatelegium* builds on the possibilities of Latin poetry and several poems by Árpád Tőzsér (e.g. *Euphorbos's monologue*) build transcultural relations with classical literature.



2. The background to the reflected transcultural relations is constituted by Slovak-Hungarian cohabitation, as well as the Slovakian Hungarian experience and identity. Examples of this are novels by Lajos Grendel *Négy hét az élet* [*Life is but four weeks*] (2011), Péter Hunčík *Borderline case* (2008) and György Norbert *Claire* (2004).
3. Operating bilingualism or the Slovakian Hungarian language use as poetics. Possibilities for doing so are the following:
 - a. Building Slovakian language texts into the literary work of art.
 - b. Texts working with phrases typical of Slovakian Hungarian language use.

These two phenomena are often inseparable and follow from each other, as in György Norbert's novel *Claire* or Árpád Tózsér's poem *The Pragmatics of Code Switching*.

Rokkó Juhász uses the widest transcultural opportunities offered by the vehicle of languages in his volume of poetry *Cumi-cumi* (2016), which contains no actual poems but only lists of Hungarian words that are also meaningful in other languages. Thus, poems in Hungarian as well as in a hybrid language were born at the same time, and authors not speaking Hungarian became able to write poetry in Hungarian, while meaning itself escaped authorial competence.

4. The effect of the foreign-language environment on the creative process and the text:
 - a. Keeping silent or the complete lack or zero position of a text: the texts "did not follow" the authors into their migration when they found themselves in a transcultural situation. Texts which were not written abroad belong here. Some Slovakian Hungarian authors, such as József Czakó and Mária Mórocz, who left their homeland, stopped writing in the foreign-language environment. The loss of language and loss of writing can also constitute a transcultural experience.
 - b. Suspending writing in Hungarian or changing languages. An example of this is Gábor Farnbauer who, as a writer in Bratislava (Pozsony), gradually gave up writing in Hungarian and switched to Slovak.
5. Language change, bilingualism, multilingualism. The possibilities of transculturalism can be as manifold on the level of the text as on that of biography. We can mention Ilma Rakusa, whose mother tongue is Hungarian, but who has several identities (Hungarian, Slovenian, Swiss), writes in German and is not acknowledged by historians of Hungarian literature in Slovakia. Another representative of this category is Mila Haugová, whose mother tongue is also Hungarian, but who writes in Slovak with the exception of one volume of poetry (*Őzgerinc* [*Venison*] (2000)) in Hungarian, but is not mentioned by the *Lexicon of Hungarian literature in (Czecho)Slovakia*. Further down the same line is multilingual Péter Macsovszky who, with his seventeen Slovak-language volumes of poetry and nine volumes of prose, belongs to the forefront of contemporary Slovak literature, where he occupies a much more canonised position than in Hungarian literature or in the Hungarian literature of Slovakia with his five Hungarian-language volumes of poetry. Last, but not least, let us mention Gábor Farnbauer, who has published Slovak texts after his Hungarian-language volumes.
6. Total language change in the case of authors with (some) Hungarian ancestors. Authors belonging to this group are only listed by contemporary Slovak literature, even though they come from a Hungarian or a mixed family, like Veronika Šikulová, Agda Bavi Pain (Jozef Gaál), Derek Rebro, Uršula Kovalyk. Some of them speak fluent Hungarian, some a broken version and some not at all.



On the level of the text, Hungarian literature in Slovakia cannot generally be regarded as transcultural because a large part of it is constituted by texts that were created on the basis of the Hungarian literary tradition and did not build transcultural relations with Slovak literature. The whole of Hungarian literature in Slovakia cannot be reduced to the representation of the Slovakian Hungarian identity or any one topic such as the depiction of Slovak-Hungarian literary and linguistic relations. The text of the Slovakian Hungarian author is placed in the terrain of literariness in the widest sense in the same way as the text of any other author, whether they be French, German, English, Indian or Chinese. The author is free to build a tradition and create an original poetics from a wide variety of genres, modes of writing and elements of style. Thus it is truly transcultural in the global sense and cannot be restricted to the slavish following of Slovak-Hungarian relations.

The transcultural position of the reader

The discovery of literary theoretical approaches emphasizing the central role of the reader originates from the fact that the text in itself, without a reader, is dead. Furthermore, every text only exists in readings – it does not have an “original” meaning. Along the lines of these discoveries, 20th century hermeneutics and reception aesthetics found it essential to study the historicity of a text, as well as follow the changing trends of reception and the stages of canonisation and marginalisation.

While reading texts from the Hungarian literature of Slovakia, some paradoxes may arise from not recognising the position of the reader. Thus, we can refer to the approach of those literary histories that consider Hungarian literature in Slovakia to be in the section of Slovak and Hungarian literatures. In their interpretation, the texts are actually read on the basis of homogeneous Hungarian literary traditions. Multicultural/intercultural/transcultural readings can only be validated on a theoretical basis not displayed by many of the texts of Hungarian literary criticism in Slovakia.

The possible levels of transculturalism in the Slovakian Hungarian reception of these writings are the following:

1. Transculturalism as a blindspot in the reception of transcultural-bilingual authors – when the critic does not know that the text in question was created by a bilingual author. Thus, the author and the text are automatically placed into a homogeneous national paradigm.
2. The opposite of this practice is the conscious use of transcultural readings. A fine example of this is the poet Emília Viktória Labay, born in Budapest, writing her first works in Czechoslovakia under the name of Mila Srnková and continuing to write in Slovak, Hungarian, English and German under the name Mila Haugová (Petres Csizmadia, 2018a, 165). Gabriella Petres Csizmadia provides an exemplary transcultural reading of the works of Pál Száz, who turned the language variety used atNA Pered into the language of literature (Petres Csizmadia, 2018b, 85–94). Anikó N. Tóth successfully uses the opportunities of transculturalism in connection with the books of Gábor Kálmán and György Norbert (N. Tóth, 2017, 33–44; N. Tóth, 2018, 73–84). In a large-scale study, Zoltán Csehy interprets the texts of Péter Hunčík, István Bettes and others in a similar manner (Csehy, 2016, 166–190).
3. Reflection on and study of the phenomenon when the texts of language-switching authors written in different languages interpret each other through their works. Furthermore, it is also worth reflecting on the way in which the Hungarian texts of bilingual authors preserve



the imprint of Slovak literature and their Slovak texts rely on the Hungarian literary tradition. Mila Haugová, for example, writes in her diary that her own poetry had been inspired by Hungarian poetry. Péter Macsovszky's texts have a very strong Hungarian layer, of which we now only mention his exceptional use of pseudonyms. It was certainly inspired by the name-games of Sándor Weöres (Psyché), Péter Esterházy (Csokonai Lili), Zoltán Hízsnyai (Tsúszó Sándor), Lajos Parti Nagy (Sárbogárdi Jolán), András Ferenc Kovács (Jack Cole). (Actually, Macsovszky also writes Slovak poems under a Hungarian pen-name).

4. The study and criticism of the approach which deems to detect the transcultural condition in the whole of Hungarian literature in Slovakia. This approach regards Hungarian literature in Slovakia as a specific literature, as a homogenous corpus connecting Slovak and Hungarian literatures, thus rendering readings based on linguistic facts impossible.

All this does not mean that transculturalism as a theoretical basis could be treated as a homogenous quality which resolves the theoretical issues of Hungarian literature in Slovakia once and for all. On the contrary, we must be aware that several opposing views appear within transculturalism and that the concept of transculturalism is itself historical, which means that our attempts at interpretation by no means promise any objective and final meaning-making. The position of the reader raises awareness to the logic of temporality; it actually entails a reflection upon the historical aspect, namely, the acknowledgement of the fact that the concept of Hungarian literature in Slovakia has changed over time. It has meant different things in different historical periods and it also provides contradictory and opposing concepts in the present day. By this, we are already foreshadowing the next level of transculturalism of Hungarian literature in Slovakia.

The transcultural position of the context

In the second half of the 20th century, trends of literary theory appeared that mainly focused on contextual phenomena in their interpretation of literary works. They convincingly demonstrated that texts are never read by a "sterile" reader. The reader is always personal, with a specific identity, shaped by a specific historical context. The context of the work is thus always provided by actual cultural, historical and identity issues, and the reader always reads the text along well-defined interests and contexts. The reading will depend to a considerable extent on whether the reader is a man or a woman, heterosexual or homosexual, middle class or not, what his/her religion and skin colour are, etc. The contextualisation of different identity possibilities has called forth the achievements of post-modern feminist literary criticism, ecological criticism, new historicism, ethical criticism, post-modern cultural anthropology and transnational literary criticism.

The possible levels of transculturalism in the context of Hungarian literature in Slovakia are the following:

1. The historical contexts of Hungarian literature in Slovakia, starting with the concepts of Slovensko literature between the two world wars, followed by the official expectations of the communist era, also considering the viewpoints of Slovak literary criticism, followed by concepts after 1989. The explicit or latent debates of the different approaches are also part of the diachronic and synchronic studies.



2. Hungarian literature in Slovakia, placed in transnational literary criticism: re-reading the texts of Hungarian literature in Slovakia through the ideas, vocabulary and viewpoints of transnational literary criticism and transculturalism.
3. The study of the context of the so-called unified Hungarian literature in Slovakian Hungarian and Hungarian works of literary history.
4. The context of the so-called “over-the-border” Hungarian literatures: the comparative study of Transylvanian (Romania), Vojvodina (Serbia), Trans-Carpathian (Ukraine), western, etc. Hungarian literary approaches through the eyes of the Hungarian literature of Slovakia.
5. The study of the issues of minority narratives such as womanhood, homosexuality, otherness, strangeness, etc. in the context of transculturalism.
6. The interpretation of names as transcultural signifiers. The Slovak spelling of Slovakian Hungarian authors as a visual or graphic effect immediately represents some form of foreignness within the text, for example Péter Hunčík, Klaudia Gužák, Mila Haugová. Using two different name varieties is a specific case: Péter Macsovszky publishes his Slovak texts by the name of Peter Macsovszky and his Hungarian texts as Macsovszky Péter, whereas the Hungarian spelling of his surname gives a feeling of foreignness to the Slovak reader.
7. The study of those literary phenomena and modes of writing when a Slovakian Hungarian author writes about similar topics as an author of world literature – in other words: transculturalism, migration and globalisation appear as Slovakian Hungarian experiences, as for example in Nóra Fábíán’s *A nagyváros meséi [Tales of the Big City]* (2002).
8. The study of the internal transcultural relations of the Hungarian literature in Slovakia, inasmuch as the Slovakian Hungarian experience is not homogenous. A different mentality and language use characterise, for example, the Slovakian Hungarians of Csallóköz, Mátyusföld, Gömör or Bodrogköz [different regions of Southern Slovakia]. The study of the so-called Ipolyság-novel could provide an excellent opportunity for such an interpretation, as this small border town [Šahy], the former seat of Hont County plays a cardinal role in some works of both Slovak literature and Hungarian literature in Slovakia, for example in Ladislav Ballek’s *Palánk-novels (A segéd. Könyv Palánkról, [The assistant. Book about Palánk]* 1977), *Akácok. Második könyv Palánkról [Acacias. The second book about Palánk]* (1981), Lajos Grendel’s *New Hont-trilogy*, Péter Hunčík’s *Borderline Case*. A high-level description of internal transcultural relations characterise Pál Száz’s collection of phyto-legends *Fűje sarjad mezőknek [Grass Sprouts in the Fields]* (2017).

The consistent use of the principle of context results in the benevolent “writing apart” of the concept of Hungarian literature in Slovakia, which leads to the multiplication of its potential meanings and the concept itself may gain new, unexpected dimensions, which could not appear heretofore. Activating different theoretical bases and including this concept in individual stories of identity are two important strategies of transculturalism, as it builds on the possibilities of dynamism, constant movement, transgression and the crossing of boundaries.

CONCLUSION

For contemporary literary scholarship, it seems an appropriate procedure to copy different theoretical frameworks onto each other or incorporate one within the other and look for connection points between them. This practice might yield unexpected results, serving as



inspiration for further research. Each of the points outlined above could be elaborated as a separate study, along a strategy that examines the Hungarian literature of Slovakia on the basis of the recommendations of transculturalism for vocabulary and interpretation, looking for connections between the author, the text, the reader and the context. Firstly, the study of minority literature could profit from this and secondly, it could become the starting point of studies for which it is predestined by the unique features of its authors, languages, readers and contexts.

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