

# The image of Hungarian Literature as a polysystem in Serbia: A brief overview

Marko Čudić\* 

Department of Hungarian Studies, Faculty of Philology, University of Belgrade, Serbia

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

Received: April 3, 2022 • Accepted: September 2, 2022

Published online: January 11, 2023

© 2022 Akadémiai Kiadó, Budapest



### ABSTRACT

The paper offers a general overview of the place that Hungarian literature occupies in the polysystem of translated literature in Serbia. Unlike established philological disciplines with a longer tradition (English, German, French or Russian philology), which offer several different historical overviews of the history of a given literature, thus enabling the experts, the students and the general public to gain a more systematic insight into the respective literatures, there has only been one history of Hungarian literature published in Serbia so far. Given the fact that it was published back in 1976, and that many aspects of its methodology and insights have become outdated, it is an urgent necessity to produce a new work on the subject, specifically for the Serbian readership.

### KEYWORDS

histories of literature, translated literature, literary polysystems, Serbo-Hungarian literary contacts

The place which literary works from the neighboring countries of Central and Eastern Europe and the Balkans occupy within the literary polysystem of some of these literatures – in this case Serbian – depends mostly on two factors: publishers' policies and the individual taste of prominent translators. What determines which work will be found in the literary polysystem of translated literature or, in other words, what a particular translator will consider important for translation and, ideally, impose on publishers himself/herself? Itamar Even-Zohar argues that this depends to a large extent on whether such a work fits into the polysystem of original

\* Corresponding author. E-mail: marko.cudic@gmail.com

literature in a given target language: “It is clear that the very principles of selecting the works to be translated are determined by the situation governing the (home) polysystem: the texts are chosen according to their compatibility with the new approaches and the supposedly innovatory role they may assume within the target literature.” (Even-Zohar, 2004, 193).

However, when it comes to translating from smaller and/or neighboring languages, Itamar Even-Zohar’s claim requires some additional nuancing. Namely, unlike established philological disciplines that deal with the great and influential languages and cultures of Europe and the world – English/Anglophone, German, Italian, Spanish/Hispanic, Slavic (particularly Russian) – and whose profiling has usually been worked out by entire generations and teams of scientists, historians and periodizers of literature – Hungarian studies as a philological discipline has been institutionally developing in Serbia (Yugoslavia) only since the 1960s at the Faculty of Philosophy in Novi Sad, and since the mid-1990s at the Faculty of Philology in Belgrade.

From the point of view of literary-historical knowledge that strives for a systematic approach, this is certainly an unfavorable situation. The author of this paper seeks to answer the question of what knowledge about Hungarian literature in the Serbian cultural environment can be acquired by an educated and passionate Serbian reader who does not speak Hungarian and, therefore, relies exclusively on translations, but also the question of what knowledge about trends in Hungarian literature can be acquired (apart from the not always reliable Internet sources) by, for instance, a Serbian literary expert who is not a Hungarian philologist by profession.

When several smaller nations live within the same supranational state such as the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, in which two nations, the Germans/Austrians and the Hungarians, enjoy a privileged status in comparison to the others – these discriminated others include the Serbs, of course, a significant part of whom lived north of the Sava and Danube rivers, in the more or less autonomous area of Serbian Vojvodina – then that is not always a very fortunate situation for the development of harmonious interethnic relations. If we bear in mind the consequences of the bloody events of 1848, it is clear that, especially since the second half of the nineteenth century, Serbo-Hungarian political relations, burdened with conflicts and recent traumas as they were, did not represent an ideal ground for cultural cooperation, especially since that cooperation could not be mutual due to the often unjustified attitude of superiority that Hungarians manifested towards the other, so-called smaller nations of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy.

Such a situation requires an extraordinary effort on behalf of a significant, spiritually superior individual who is able to rise above daily political trends and the atmosphere of animosity. The culture of the Vojvodina Serbs of the time had had just such an exceptional individual: poet, editor and organizer of literary life, Jovan Jovanović Zmaj, who stood out especially owing to his inspired Serbian translations of his great Hungarian contemporaries Sándor Petőfi, Imre Madách and especially János Arany. The exceptional, pioneering significance of Zmaj’s translations was perceived by the official Hungarian cultural policy of that time, so he was presented with the prestigious award of the Kisfaludy Society for his work in that domain. Although Zmaj’s translations today mostly sound too loose, metrically inconsistent and linguistically outdated, it is clear that without his initiative and pioneering impulse, more serious efforts aimed at translating Hungarian prose would not have commenced towards the end of the nineteenth and in the early twentieth century. In that respect, the greatest popularity was gained by the (late) romantic prose writer Mór Jókai, or as his name was then translated, Mavro Jokai (Jokaj). In Belgrade, in 1887, a very popular drama based on his novel *The Man with the Golden*



*Touch* was performed in theaters with great success. The fact that, in 1894, the Serbian King Aleksandar Obrenović presented him with the Order of Saint Sava with Grand Cross medal also testifies to Jókai's popularity. In the same year, Jókai became an honorary member of the Matica srpska cultural society.

The first half of the twentieth century brought great changes in the cultural policy. Nevertheless, even under these radically changed geopolitical circumstances – the area of the former Serbian Vojvodina joined the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, so instead of the former center (Buda)Pest, Belgrade *de facto* became the cultural capital of all Serbs – things remained the same in a way: the field of literary translation from Hungarian into Serbian still remained the domain of individual enthusiasts, among whom Svetislav Stefanović (who was shot by the Partisans immediately after the end of the Second World War), as well as Mladen Leskovac, who would continue his translation work well into the second half of the twentieth century, during the era of socialist indoctrination, when the idea of “brotherhood and unity” of all the peoples and national minorities of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia was imposed from the top.

This ideology, apart from its rigidity and essential historical naivety, had some very positive aspects, especially in terms of institution building and publishing policy, as well as the consequent gradual beginning of systematic work on shaping the image of Hungarian literature in Yugoslav (and within its framework, in Serbian) culture. Publishing projects such as anthologies of translations of Hungarian short stories or recent Hungarian poetry certainly belong to such praiseworthy, systematic attempts. Among them, the collection of selected short stories by important storytellers of the “golden generation” of Hungarian literature from the first half of the twentieth century stands out, entitled after a short story by Mihály Babits, *Six Acres of Roses*. An impressive team of editors and translators took part in this endeavor, and the anthology really represents, despite its spatial limitations, a very representative selection of the highlights of the Hungarian short story (Herceg, 1953). When it comes to poetry, representative selections of this kind are the extensive collection *Zlatna knjiga mađarske poezije* (*A Golden Book of Hungarian Poetry*), selected and translated by Enver Colaković (Čolaković, 1978) (although these are translations into the Croatian version of the once common Serbo-Croatian language, it is important to note that at that time the bonds between book markets of Zagreb and Belgrade were quite strong and lively, much stronger than today, when Serbia and Croatia are independent states), as well as the anthology *Novija mađarska lirika* (*Recent Hungarian Poetry*), edited by Ivan Ivanji and translated by Ivan Ivanji himself, Danilo Kiš and Ivan V. Lalić (Ivanji & Kiš, 1970).

In the last few decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> and in the first decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century the names of two great translators stood out – those of Sava Babić and Árpád Vickó. Like most translators with a large oeuvre who translate from a so-called minor language, these two doyens of the Serbian translation scene have their favorite authors who, owing to their translations and accompanying texts, have become far more important in the polysystem of Serbian (translated) literature than in the canon of their native Hungarian literature (the works of the philosopher and essayist Béla Hamvas, translated by Sava Babić, or those of György Konrád and the Novi Sad prose writer László Végel, both translated by Árpád Vickó, are good examples of this trend). However, it would not be fair to blame any translator for having his favorites and thus “distorting” the image of Hungarian literature in relation to the established, official Hungarian canon. After all, such is the nature of translation as an intellectual activity – the position that



certain authors and works occupy in a set of translated works in the polysystem (translated) literature of the target language cannot and should not necessarily be identical, or even similar to their position in the (original) literary polysystem of the source language.

The task of a literary translator, after all, cannot be to adjust the work that he presents to the audience of the target language to the canon of the original literature. Every literary translator, especially from a minor language, has his/her own vision of a given national literature, so perhaps in that sense we could talk about, for instance, “Hungarian literature according to Sava Babić” or “Hungarian literature according to Árpád Vickó”. The differences between the original Hungarian literary canon and what is accepted in Serbia as great assets of Hungarian literature are perhaps most eloquently testified by the fact that if we asked the average reader on the street, especially an elderly one, to name a few Hungarian writers they know and like to read, the most common answer by far would be – Lajos Zilahy (!), who, in the Hungarian canon, belongs to the category of the easily readable, “palatable”, almost best-selling writers with no serious literary value. And yet, even among a more demanding literary audience, almost the only name that could be heard in such a street flash opinion poll would be the name of Béla Hamvas. Serbian readers can best find out about the abundant Serbian reception of Béla Hamvas from the book *Povodzivi* by Sava Babić (Babić, 2004). This reception varies from enthusiastic newspaper articles and essays to serious philosophical studies, but all these texts about Hamvas have one thing in common – an almost religious-sectarian tone of unconditional enthusiasm and acceptance. In a way, the authors of these texts do not perceive Hamvas as a thinker, writer or essayist, but rather as a prophet, as a herald of a new age, as a comprehensive critic of the epoch whose every word we simply have to believe, without any critical reservation(s). The mere titles of these texts often testify to this.<sup>1</sup>

Faced with such a rich translation heritage, but also with the altered circumstances in the literary market – where for many publishers the criterion for publishing a work by a certain author, even if it comes from a relatively well-known neighboring culture, is increasingly often the author’s success in the West, especially in the Anglophone world – today’s translator of the younger and middle generation does not seem to have as much influence on publishers as translators of earlier generations used to. Therefore, the most interesting phenomenon in the Serbian literary market comes in the form of the contemporary prose writer László Krasznahorkai. Krasznahorkai was not an unknown author to the more demanding part of the Serbian cultural public, owing to the cult films *Satantango* and *Werkmeister’s Harmonies* by Béla Tarr. However, in order for Serbian publishers to be interested in the books on which these films were based (and shown in movie theaters in Belgrade more than two decades ago), it was necessary for Krasznahorkai’s novels to be successful in the Anglo-American world. According to the (un) expectedly good reactions of the audience and critics,<sup>2</sup> it seems that perhaps a new cult of writers is emerging when it comes to Hungarian literature in Serbia – a László Krasznahorkai cult of sorts. However, as useful as the cult of a certain writer is in terms of drawing attention to a neighboring literature and culture, it can also be potentially dangerous if that cult turns in the direction of mystification and esotericism, as in the case of interpreting some of Hamvas’s works.

<sup>1</sup>The present author has written on that topic more extensively elsewhere (Čudić, 2018).

<sup>2</sup>The present author has written on the Serbian (and partly, Croatian) reception of Krasznahorkai’s novel *The Melancholy of Resistance* (Čudić, 2016, 75–88, 163–178).



In addition to the above-mentioned anthologies and voluminous individual translation opuses, in some thematic issues of certain literary magazines, published at irregular intervals in Serbia and in the region of the (former) Serbo-Croatian language area, overviews of certain literary tendencies, genres or works of a group of authors in mostly contemporary Hungarian literature have been presented, which could have been a useful source of valuable information for dedicated readers.

As it might be obvious from even this brief presentation of the reception and the image of Hungarian literature in Serbia in general, it is quite natural that this image differs in many ways from the official literary canon of the source language culture. Nevertheless, there is a need, especially in the philological segment of the learned general public, to be informed about the canon of a smaller, neighboring literature via a systematic review of the history of a given literature. It would be ideal if that review was written by one of the domestic experts on that literature, in this case, by one of the Hungarian scholars from Serbia. If this is not feasible, one can also rely on translating some of the existing, canonical histories of literature. Sava Babić was partly guided by this logic when, in 1976, he published his translation of *A History of Hungarian Literature*, written by three authors, Imre Bán, János Barta and Mihály Czine (Ban et al., 1976). Once upon a time, during the lectures he was delivering to Belgrade students of Hungarian studies – among whom was the author of this paper – Sava Babić said that he asked the authors of this history of literature to adapt some parts of the text to Serbian (Yugoslav) readers, i.e. to try to look at certain elements of the history of Hungarian literature in a somewhat broader, South Slavic and Balkan context. It will remain a secret, of course, to what extent the authors of the book were able, given their competencies, to meet this completely justified request on the part of Sava Babić. In any case, the result of Babić's translation efforts has so far been the only systematic history of Hungarian (as a whole, not regionally determined) literature published in the Serbian language.

Although the concept of the book, as well as most of the tenets presented in it, might seem outdated today and burdened with the discourse of vulgar, "linear" Marxism, to this day it is the only book from which a Serbian reader who does not speak Hungarian can gain a systematic insight into the main trends, currents and authors presented through all the epochs and centuries of Hungarian literature. A unique value of this book is its thorough bibliography containing all literary works translated from Hungarian into Serbian to date, which, according to the author's alphabetical list, was compiled by Marija Čurčić (Čurčić, 1976).

The first major unit of the book, which includes a review of Hungarian literature from its beginnings until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, was written by Imre Bán. This part of the book consists of five separate chapters, in which the old Hungarian poetry, the literature of the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the Baroque and the Enlightenment and Classicism are presented chronologically. Each chapter is further divided into smaller subchapters in which the historical-political context and the genre patterns of epochs are discussed, and the oeuvres of a number of important authors are described in detail. The second large chapter of the book is organized according to the same principle. The author of this chapter is János Barta. The whole chapter covers the literature of the nineteenth century. The five subchapters provide an overview of the literature of early Romanticism, Romanticism, early Realism and some Populist movements. The period between Romanticism and Realism is discussed in a separate subchapter. The chapter ends with a review of the last thirty years of the century. János Barta considers the authors of this epoch to be the forerunners of modernist(ic) trends.



The last big chapter of this history of literature, which deals entirely with the Hungarian literature of the twentieth century, was written by Mihály Czine. This section is the most extensive of the three — it consists of eight subchapters, and of all the other chapters of the book, this is the one which is, quite understandably, burdened with ideological, Marxist-Leninist reading. This is evident if we consider the fact that the author divides Hungarian literature between the two World Wars according to their ideological-thematic focus into three movements: bourgeois middle-class literature, revolutionary socialist literature and the literature of the popular (populist) movement. He also speaks of literature produced after the WWII as written “after the liberation”, using the terminology of the official historiography of the time. This ideological stubbornness (although it is much more likely that Czine, a man of an essentially bourgeois middle-class background and orientation, was simply forced to write in that vein) is somewhat mitigated by the fact that the author also showed a certain sensitivity to the problem of Hungarian writers living outside Hungary. He mentions that they do exist and write, in the section entitled “Minority Hungarian Literature” (Ban et al., 1976, 326–327), but nothing more than that, nor does he mention any specific names or works.

In addition to the aforementioned book, the only remaining systematic review of a regionally determined segment of Hungarian literature published in Serbian is the book *The Literature of Yugoslav Hungarians* written by the Novi Sad Hungarian scholar Imre Bori, and also published in 1976 (Bori, 1976).

The value of Bori’s book is that it is not limited in time, which means it includes the works of Hungarian authors from Vojvodina published after 1920 – a time after which the Hungarian literature of Vojvodina took a separate course from the literary trends in Hungary due to historical reasons (it was precisely in this year that, after the Treaty of Trianon, the region of Vojvodina officially became part of the newly formed Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes). In the first part of the book, Bori discusses Hungarian literature not only in the region of Vojvodina but also in the entire South Slavic area, including Slavonia, Baranja, Dalmatia and Slovenia. In fact, Bori sees the beginnings of Hungarian literature in this area in the heretical movements that culminated in the first translation of fragments of the Bible into Hungarian, known as the Hussite Bible, and these beginnings also include poems written in Latin by Janus Pannonius. Bori is guided by the regional principle, which means that, for instance, he sees Géza Csáth and Dezső Kosztolányi as the forerunners of today’s literature of Vojvodina’s Hungarians. Bori divides the history of Yugoslav Hungarian literature into the period between the two world wars (1919–1944) and the period after the Second World War, almost until almost the publication of his book (1944–1974). The youngest authors at the time, such as Ottó Tolnai, István Domonkos, János Bányai and others, gathered around the literary journal *Új Szimposion*, to which and to whom – to the magazine itself and to each of the important authors individually – Bori dedicates one subchapter. That sensitivity to the achievements of the youngest generation of writers makes Bori’s history of literature truly unique for that time.

There have been a number of other works published in Serbian that address the history or cultural history of Hungarians, but specifically speaking, there are no other histories of Hungarian literature in Serbia. Insight into the comparative aspects of Serbian and Hungarian literature and into Serbo-Hungarian cultural and literary contacts is provided by two collections of scholarly papers published by Novi Sad based publishing house, Matica Srpska, which bear the title *From the History of Serbo-Hungarian Cultural Relations* (running to two volumes to date) (Kovaček & Lastić, 2003; Farago, 2019). The special value of these publications is that,



in reviewing the cultural ties between the two nations, they are not strictly limited to literature, but cover other aspects of culture, as well.

If we consider the dates of publication of these works, it becomes clear that there has long been a need to write a new, updated history of Hungarian literature, adapted for Serbian readers, for the new generations of Hungarian philologists, as well as for the wider intellectual public of Serbia. This, however, is a different issue that goes beyond the scope of this paper.

## REFERENCES

- Ban, I. [Bán, Imre], Barta, J. [Barta, János], and Cine, M. [Czine, Mihály] (1976). *Istorija mađarske književnosti*. Preveo s mađarskog Sava Babić. Novi Sad, Matica srpska – Forum.
- Babić, S. (2004). *Povodzivi. Drugi o Savi Babiću*. Beograd, Čigoja štampa.
- Bori, I. (1976). *Književnost jugoslovenskih Mađara*. Novi Sad, Matica srpska.
- Čolaković, E. (ed. and transl.) (1978). *Zlatna knjiga mađarske poezije*. Zagreb, Nakladni zavod Matice hrvatske.
- Čudić, M. (2016). *Négy kísérlet Krasznahorkai Lászlóról/Četiri ogleđa o Laslu Krasznahorkaiju*. Beograd, Filološki fakultet Univerziteta u Beogradu.
- Čudić, M. (2018). Szemelvények a magyar irodalom utóbbi néhány évtizedének szerbiai recepciójából. *Szépirodalmi Figyelő*, 2018(6), Budapest, pp. 27–39. [http://epa.niif.hu/01400/01433/00089/pdf/EPA01433\\_szepirodalmi\\_figyelo\\_2018\\_6.pdf](http://epa.niif.hu/01400/01433/00089/pdf/EPA01433_szepirodalmi_figyelo_2018_6.pdf) (Accessed: 27 March 2021).
- Čurčić, M. (1976). Bibliografija knjiga iz mađarske književnosti prevedenih na srpskohrvatski jezik. In: Ban, I., Barta, J., and Cine, M. (Eds), *Istorija mađarske književnosti*. Preveo s mađarskog Sava Babić. Novi Sad, Matica srpska – Forum, pp. 347–424.
- Even-Zohar, I. (2004). The position of translated literature within the literary polysystem. In: Venuti, L. (Ed.), *The translation studies reader*. London and New York, Routledge – Taylor & Francis Group, pp. 192–197.
- Farago, K. [Faragó, Kornélia] (ed.) (2019). *Iz istorije srpsko-mađarskih kulturnih veza 2/A szerb-magyar kulturális kapcsolatok történetéből 2*. Novi Sad/Újvidék, Matica srpska.
- Herceg, J. [Herceg, János] (ed.) (1953). *Šest jutara ruža i druge novele majstora mađarske pripovetke*. Prevod Lidija Dmitrijevič, Đura Ruškuc, Aleksandar Tišma. Novi Sad, Bratstvo-jedinstvo.
- Ivanji, I. and Kiš, D. (ed.) (1970). *Novija mađarska lirika. Preveli Ivan Ivanji, Danilo Kiš i Ivan V. Lalić*. Beograd, Nolit.
- Kovaček, B. and Lastić, P. (ed.) (2003). *Iz istorije srpsko-mađarskih kulturnih veza/A szerb-magyar kulturális kapcsolatok történetéből*. Novi Sad/Újvidék – Budimpešta/Budapest, Matica srpska.

