


The phenomena of transculturalism and translingualism in the context of contemporary Hungarian Literature

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Received: April 1, 2022 • Accepted: September 27, 2022

Published online: January 13, 2023

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ABSTRACT

The paper discusses two defining phenomena of recent years: transculturalism and translingualism in the context of contemporary Hungarian literature. The first part of the article deals with the theoretical basis of transculturalism and focuses on the relationship between transculturalism and literature. The second part presents the most significant translingual authors of Hungarian origin and lists some of the most typical characteristics of their works. Finally, the paper poses a question about the place of translingual writers in the canon of national literature.

KEYWORDS

transcultural literature, translingual writers, Hungarian literature, literary canon

INTRODUCTION

In the areas of culture and literary theory, transculturalism has been one of the defining phenomena of recent years. It is part of a theoretical space whose key concepts are post- and transnationality, extraterritoriality, nomadism, otherness/alienation, bilingualism, multilingualism

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and translingualism, hybridism and (post- and trans-)migration. The prefix “trans”, the equivalent of the prepositions ‘through’, ‘across’ and ‘over’, refers to the border situation, as well as to the act of crossing. The second part of the term, “culturalism”, refers in a broad sense to so-called *cultural studies* and to cultural identity in general.

In her study on transcultural literature, Arianna Dagnino (Dagnino, 2013) differentiates between two uses of the concept of “transcultural”. One is about transcultural identity or orientation, to be understood in the “Giddensian sense”, or as a reflexive project, for which the person as an individual is responsible. The other, however, talks about a transcultural “critical perspective”, which claims that cultures are “temporary and confluent networks of interdependency” (Dagnino, 2013).

Wolfgang Welsch describes transculturalism in a similar manner. He suggests breaking away from thinking in the categories of “strange” and “common” as known from Johann Gottfried Herder’s traditional concept of separate cultures, for the sake of diversity, which he regards as more typical of today’s societies. Welsch claims that a unique cultural infiltration has evolved due to globalisation and migration processes, which has resulted in new, hybrid cultural forms (Welsch, 1999, 194–197). Therefore, says Arjun Appadurai, nowadays cultures must be regarded as irregular, unlimited and unstructured constructions (Appadurai, 1996, 46). “Nobody can question the persistent existence of long-held traditions, uninterrupted locality, national languages and cultural geographies”, says Edward Said. Apart from fear and prejudice, we have no reason to insist on “separate and differentiated phenomena, as if this were the only purpose of human existence” (Said, 1993, 382). Thus, in a broad sense, transculturalism does not accept the notion of culture as a monolithic phenomenon and suggests paying attention to what lies “between cultures”, in the cross-border region of cultures, where (at least) two cultures, languages and literature meet or collide.

AUTHORIAL POSITIONS

In relation to transcultural literature, the most frequently arising questions are those of mobility, the language of writing and identity. Reviewing these factors may help us point out the situations and positions that most likely provide the conditions for the emergence of transcultural literature. To do this, it is worth taking a look at Zoltán Németh’s division based on the author’s biographical position (2021). Németh differentiates two groups: 1. Authors who live in the country they were born in and 2. those who emigrated to a so-called country B¹ due to political, economic, family or other reasons.

The first group includes authors who: live in country A and write in language A (e.g. those living in Hungary and writing in Hungarian); live in country A and write in languages A and B (e.g. authors living in Hungary and writing in Hungarian and English); live in country B but write in language A (e.g. authors living outside the present borders of Hungary, writing in Hungarian); live in country B and write in languages A and B (e.g. authors living outside the present borders of Hungary, writing not only in Hungarian but also in Slovakian, Romanian,

¹Németh uses the following notions: country A: the country corresponding to the author’s mother tongue; country B: the country different from the author’s mother tongue; language A: the author’s mother tongue; language B: the author’s second language (Németh, 2021).



Serbian, etc.); live in country B and write in language B (e.g. authors living outside the present borders of Hungary, writing in Slovakian, Romanian, Serbian, etc.).

The second group, on the other hand, includes authors who: live in country B but write in language A (e.g. so-called Hungarian writes in the West); live in country B and write in language A but also use words and expressions from language B (using a so-called hybrid language); live in country B and write in languages both A and B (bilingual authors); live in country B and write in language B but also use words and expressions from language A (using a so-called hybrid language); live in country B and write in language B (Németh, 2021).

WHO ARE TRANSLINGUAL AUTHORS?

In my present paper, I wish to discuss the group of transcultural authors who live in a country different from their birthplace as a result of their own or their parents' mobility and write in the language of this country. Thus, the subject of my study are the so-called translingual authors, who write in a language other than their mother tongue.² In the considerations below, I mention the names and briefly present the profiles of a total of nine authors who are representatives of three groups: writers with a migration background, authors belonging to the second and the third generation of emigrants and authors who associate themselves with multiple cultures and do not identify with any single nation, language or culture. Naturally, the authors mentioned do not exhaust the long list of translingual writers of Hungarian origin. There were two criteria for selecting these names. Firstly, all of them are united by the fact that their work has been appreciated by both critics and readers. Secondly, they are the authors whose names are probably most often mentioned in the context in question, i.e. in considerations concerning the transcultural works of authors with a Hungarian cultural background.³ The first group, which is probably the largest in terms of numbers, includes migrant authors who left Hungary due to political, economic, family or other reasons and often had to re-start life from scratch in a new country without knowing its language. Such an author was, for example, Agota Kristof (1935–2011), who illegally crossed the border to Austria at the age of twenty-one, with her husband and four-month-old child after the defeat of the revolution of 1956. She ended up settling in a small village in a French-speaking Swiss canton, where she lived until her death in 2011. She only started writing in French after several years, when she had sufficiently mastered the foreign language. She told the story of this phase of her life in her autobiographical novel *L'analphabète* [*The Illiterate*] (2004). What literary criticism considers her most important literary achievement is her novel *Le Grand Cahier* [*The Great Notebook*] (1986), along with its sequels: *La Preuve* [*The Proof*] (1988) and *Le Troisième mensonge* [*The Third Lie*] (1991).

Melinda Nadj Abonji (1968-), a Serbian-born author who writes in German, also settled in Switzerland, although not in a French but a German-speaking canton. Unlike Kristof, who had actively decided to leave her homeland, with Nadj Abonji it was her parents who decided to emigrate to the West when she was only five years old. Her autobiographical novel *Tauben fliegen auf* [*Pigeons Fly Up*] (2010), which has won several prestigious prizes including the

²On translingualism see: (Kellman, 2003; Bányai, 2010; Trepte, 2013; Zagajewski, 2002).

³See, e.g.: (Dagnino, 2015; Maceri, 2007; Roguska, 2017; Szegedy-Maszák, 2007; Thomka, 2018; Toldi, 2011).



German Book Prize and the Swiss Book Prize, is about the hardships of growing up in emigration and the nostalgia for her irrevocably lost homeland. Her latest book, *Schildkrötensoldat* [*Tortoise Soldier*], published in 2017, has several Hungarian references, including the protagonist Zoltán Kertész, who is also from northern Serbia (Vojvodina) like the author herself.

Speaking of translanguaging, we must mention Edith Bruck (1931-), who left Hungary as a young girl, although in radically different circumstances from the two aforementioned authors. She was born in a Hungarian Jewish family in Tiszakarád, from where she was deported during the Second World War together with her parents and two siblings. She was taken to several concentration camps. Her mother died in Auschwitz and her father and brother in Dachau. After being freed from the camps, she first lived in Hungary, then in Czechoslovakia and Israel and, since 1954, in Italy. She is the author of over twenty volumes of prose and lyrics, in which she often revisits her childhood and the trauma caused by the concentration camps. She received a prestigious Italian prize, Premio Strega Giovanni, for her latest, autobiographical book, *Il pane perduto* [*The Lost Bread*] (2021).

Three further authors belong to the second and third generation of emigrants, which category refers to authors already born outside of Hungary. The parents of Tibor Fischer, Viviane Chocas and Zsuzsa Bánk emigrated from Hungary after the events of 1956. The first author was born three years later in London, the second, six years later in Paris and the third, nine years later in Frankfurt am Main.

The first and best-known book by Tibor Fischer (1959-), who writes in English, is the novel *Under the Frog*, inspired by the story of the author's father. The book covers the period from the end of World War II to the events of 1956. It tells the story of a friendship between two young basketball players, Gyuri and Pataki, while parodying the "achievements" of the communist regime. The story, characterised by black humour, was shortlisted for the Booker-prize.

Francophone Viviane Chocas (1962-) is the author of the autobiographical work *Bazar Magyar* (2006). Its main character is Klára, whose parents did everything in order for her to grow into a French woman: they would only talk to her in French, and they never told her about their life before emigration. They only retained their Hungarianness at the table, so Klára's Hungarianness was limited to the Hungarian tastes of her mother's kitchen. In *Bazar magyar*, the protagonist strives to unearth the "Hungarian element" in herself and build her hitherto non-existent Hungarian identity with the help of Hungarian dishes.

Zsuzsa Bánk (1965-) writes in German and is the author of several, critically acclaimed volumes of novels and short stories. Her most highly acclaimed book, winning several prizes, was her novel *Der schwimmer* [*The Swimmer*] (2004), telling the story of a Hungarian family, set in post-1956 Hungary. Her latest work, *Sterben im Sommer* [*Die in Summer*] (2020) is also set in Hungary, at Lake Balaton, and tells the story of a father living in Germany, suffering from cancer, who decides to spend his last summer in his homeland.

A separate group of translingual writers consists of authors of Hungarian origin who do not identify with any single nation, language or culture, who grew up in several countries and associate themselves with multiple cultures. One such author is Inez Baranay (1949-) who writes in English. She was born in Naples, Italy, to Hungarian parents, who then emigrated to Australia, where she completed her studies. In her teenage years, the family lived in Malaya for two years. As an adult, she has travelled extensively and lived in several places for shorter or longer periods, including South-East Asia, Europe, Morocco, India and the USA. She is the author of over a dozen critically acclaimed books which contain a lot of autobiographical



elements (e.g. *Pagan*, 1990; *With the Tiger*, 2008; *Always hungry*, 2011; *Local Time: a memoir of cities, friendships and the writing life*, 2015).

Also related to multiple countries is Ilma Rakusa (1946-) who writes in German. She was born in Rimavská Sobota, Southern Slovakia, to a Hungarian mother and Slovenian father. She spent her early childhood in Budapest, Ljubljana and Trieste, before taking up residence in Zürich, where she now lives. In her autobiographical work *Mehr Meer [A Sea of Seas]* (2009), for which she received, among other prizes, the Swiss Book Prize, she describes her journey from Rimavská Sobota to Zürich in a poetic language. She writes about the feelings of alianness and transience which accompanied her throughout her childhood. She also writes poetry and translates from French, Russian, Serbo-Croat and Hungarian into German.

Terézia Mora (1971-) is known as an excellent Hungarian-German translator, but she may be considered a translingual writer only with certain reservations. She was born in Sopron and grew up as a member of a German ethnic minority group in Hungary, which practically meant that she spoke both German and Hungarian from early childhood. Her first language was German – her mother’s mother tongue. However, the language of the school was Hungarian, which played a major role in her becoming a writer. Even though Mora is technically bilingual, her starting to write in German meant the “rejection” of the Hungarian language, which had been her first “literary language”. This greatly influenced her work, which is characterised by being “suspended” between two cultures, traditions and languages, typical of translingual writers. Another fact that should be emphasised is that Mora is one of the few translingual authors who write transcultural novels without greatly employing the autobiographical convention. She is the author of six volumes of prose works which have won several awards, including the novels *Alle Tage [Day after Day]* (2004), *Der einzige Mann auf dem Kontinent [The Only Man on the Continent]* (2009), *Das Ungeheuer [The Monster]* (2013). Their recurring themes and motifs include otherness, alienation and exclusion.

WHAT DO TRANSLINGUAL AUTHORS WRITE ABOUT?

If we look at the writings of the aforementioned, as well as other translingual authors, we may discover that their texts share a number of characteristics as regards plot, as well as structural and linguistic solutions. Similarities may primarily be detected in the topics of the texts. A significant part of the works written by translingual authors are identity stories, which most often feature topics and motifs such as experiences of migration, travelling and generally being in motion (e.g. Ilma Rakusa’s *Mehr Meer*, 2009; Melinda Nadj Abonji’s *Tauben fliegen auf*, 2012; David Szalay’s *Turbulence*, 2018); the foreign language as a communication tool, the processes of the acquisition of the literary language and “losing” one’s mother tongue (e.g. Agota Kristof, *L’alphabet*, 2007); accounting for one’s own and the ancestors’ past (issues of memory and post-memory) (e.g. Livia Bitton Jackson, *I have lived a thousand years: Growing Up in the Holocaust*, 2013; *My Bridges of Hope: Searching for Love and Life After Auschwitz*, 2014, *Hello, America: A Refugee’s Journey from Auschwitz to the New World*, 2014; Edit Brück, *Chi ti ama così [Who Loves You Like This]*, 1959; Sacha Batthyány, *Und was hat das mit mir zu tun? [A Crime in the Family]*, 2016; Deborah Feldman, *Unorthodox: The Scandalous Rejection of my Hasidic Roots*, 2021); the experience of alienation, exclusion and otherness (e.g. Terézia Mora, *Alle Tage*, 2006); eating and drinking as identity-forming factors, etc. (Viviane Chocas: *Magyar bazar*, 2006, Krzysztof Varga, Węgierska trylogia [*Turul-trilogy*], 2009, 2015, 2017).



Furthermore, similarities can also be discovered in the form of the works. Observing the structure and linguistic layer of the works of translingual authors, a striking feature is the hybrid nature of these texts. In order to illustrate this phenomenon, let us examine the novel by Melinda Nadj Abonji, *Pigeons Fly Up*, already mentioned earlier in this paper. The main text of the book was written in German, but it includes a lot of words, phrases or even whole sentences in other languages, especially Hungarian, but also English, Serbo-Croat and Swiss German. Another interesting example to mention is a novel by Charlotte Mendelson, *Almost English* (2013), which was published in Hungarian in 2017 under the title *Törtmagyar [Broken Hungarian]*. As Ágnes Strickland-Pajtkó writes in her paper analysing the Hungarian translation of the novel: “[...] the struggle with language is running on two levels: on the fictitious level of the narratives, which mainly manifested in the English language errors, as well as on the unconscious level of the author’s own language use, which becomes the territory of Hungarian language errors” (Strickland-Pajtkó, 2019, 27).

If, however, we look at the genres preferred by translingual authors, we can see that the majority of these works are either autobiographies or narratives including autobiographical elements – although these are obviously not the only forms of expression. The works of the above-mentioned translingual authors are almost exclusively autobiographical. The only exception in this group is Terézia Mora, one of the few translingual authors who write transcultural novels in which they make little use of the autobiographical convention.

TRANSLINGUAL WRITERS AND THE HUNGARIAN LITERARY CANON

For obvious reasons, the work of translingual authors cannot be classified in any of the national literature. They are all in a kind of suspension between (at least) two nations, languages and cultures. Their works cross the borders of cultures and literary conventions, thus eluding simple definitions, descriptions and analyses. This fact often makes their work marginalised or even trivialised. Thus, although on the one hand, their exoticism can be attractive to the publishing market, on the other hand, as they are not classified as part of any national literature, they are often reduced to curiosities and swept aside by literary criticism.

The above observations are reinforced by interviews and conversations with translingual authors. These reveal that for many of them, the feeling of alienation is inherent in being in a public space. This feeling was repeatedly experienced, among others, by Agota Kristof. During an interview, in response to the reporter’s statement that it cannot be easy for a French writer living in Switzerland who feels Hungarian to “define herself”, she presented her papers and said:

“(...) Look here. I have a Hungarian passport. I am a Hungarian citizen. But actually, neither country accepts me as their writer. I am standing somewhere on no man’s land. The Swiss are not particularly interested in my being a writer. The French label me ‘Francophone’, which clearly indicates that although I write in French I am not French. After emigration, I felt that there was no point in continuing to write in Hungarian. I would have no readers at all. Today, my books are read in almost forty languages and I think it does not matter anymore what nationality I claim to be.” (Papp, 2009)

The above words prove that in 2009, when this interview was published, the author regarded it unimportant to declare her belonging to any nation. At that time, she had long established herself as an author, was approved by literary critics and readers all over the world, and she did not need



any “good connections”. However, attaining such a position had taken long years, a lot of energy and at least the same amount of resignation. Her first attempts at writing and her struggles with the alien French tongue are recounted in one of her best-known works: *The Illiterate*.

A similar path is outlined by the statements of Edith Bruck, who is a Jewish author of Hungarian descent, writing in Italian. In an interview, she answered the question whether she regarded herself as a transnational writer, an Italian writer or an author belonging to the Jewish diaspora, she gave the following answer:

“Let us say transnational. Unfortunately, I am not regarded as an Italian writer. I think that I will remain a foreigner all my life. This is my experience in a place that is, on the whole, very hospitable, but which does not consider me an Italian, because whenever someone writes about me, I am referred to as a Hungarian Jew or a Hungarian author. People often do not know that I write in Italian, many think that my books are translated...” (Maceri, 2007)

These words show that Bruck, similarly to Agota Kristof, feels excluded. However, the difference between the two writers is that while for Kristof, the fact that she did not belong to either literature, did not seem to matter, for Bruck, it is a source of disappointment. Firstly, she does not feel she is a Hungarian writer and does not want to be regarded as one and secondly, she resents Italians considering her a foreigner.

Philip Balma, the author of the only monograph dedicated to Bruck’s work (2014), draws our attention to the same problem. He noticed that for many Italian scholars, who only deal with authors whose “Italianness” is unquestionable, it poses a problem to place Bruck in the arena of world literature. According to Balma, Bruck’s unclear national identity lead to the marginalisation of her oeuvre, which in turn resulted in her not receiving her proper place in the canon of Italian literature.

In the light of the above observations, the situation in Germany seems interesting. It is widely known that the German publishing market is one of the strongest in Europe.⁴ An important part of it consists of authors of non-German descent who write in German, many of whom find their way into the canon of German-language literature. One such author is Terézia Mora, mentioned before in this paper. In 2013, she was awarded the German Booker Prize⁵ for her novel *The Monster*, and in 2018, she received the Georg-Büchner Prize, which is considered the most prestigious literary prize in the German-speaking world. Even before Mora attained the status of a “full German author” among German readers, she had twice been awarded the Adelbert-von-Chamisso Prize⁶ (in 2000 and 2010). For over thirty years, this prize was awarded to German-language works by authors whose mother tongue was not German,⁷ allowing many of them to enter the German publishing market.⁸ However, the mere fact of establishing such an

⁴Achieving success in Germany offers a great chance for a book to replicate its success in other European countries. Therefore, it is the common practice of both Polish and Hungarian publishers to publish books that have previously been successful on the German market.

⁵Since 2005, this annual prize has been awarded to the best novels written in the German language.

⁶The literary prize of the Robert Bosch Foundation was awarded between 1985–2017.

⁷On the history of the award and the reasons for its termination, see: (Pabis, 2018).

⁸This prize has been awarded, among others, to the following writers of Hungarian descent: 1995 – György Dalos, László Csiba; 2000 – Terézia Mora, Aglaja Veteranyi; 2003 – Ilma Rakusa; 2004 – Zsuzsa Bánk; 2006 – Zsuzsanna Gahse; 2008 – Léda Forgó; 2010 – Terézia Mora.



award proves that the problem of unequal opportunities between authors of German and non-German descent exists and requires a solution. It is another question, though, how the writers themselves treat this issue. Reading interviews with authors of non-German descent who write in German, one may have the impression that belonging to one or the other national literature is not particularly important for them. In this light, Melinda Nadj Abonji gave a remarkable answer to the question whether she considered herself a Hungarian writer:

“No, I am simply a writer. I would not want to commit myself to any one nation. Throughout my life, I have been in contact with various countries, but it is not my job as a writer to identify myself as a member of a particular nation. It is not important to me, as I exist in a cosmopolitan environment.” (Techet, 2011)

The “non-Hungarianness” of translingual writers is also reflected in the works summarising the history of Hungarian literature. The majority of these do not even mention writers in the 20th century who are of Hungarian descent but write in languages other than Hungarian.⁹ The only exception is the three-volume literary history, *A magyar irodalom története* [*The Stories of Hungarian Literature*], edited by Mihály Szegedy-Maszák and András Veres (2007), published in 2007, which discusses translingual writers in two places. In his essay entitled *A száműzetés prózairodalmáról a 20. század második felében* [*On the prose literature created in exile in the second part of the 20th century*], Sándor Hites writes that the discussion of Hungarian literature written in the West cannot exclude authors who did not write in Hungarian, as “the mother tongue is not a clear criterion” (Hites, 702). Nevertheless, in the latter part of the chapter, he does not discuss works by translingual writers, only analysing texts by authors who live in the West and write in Hungarian.

Mihály Szegedy-Maszák, by contrast, paid more attention to authors writing in a language other than their mother tongue. He devoted the chapter *A magyarság (nyelven túli) emléke* [*The memory of Hungarianness (beyond language)*] (2007, 831–837) entirely to the work of Tibor Fischer, an Anglophonic author of Hungarian descent. The fact that such a chapter can be found in a history of Hungarian literature suggests that its author regarded Fischer’s works as Hungarian. It is nevertheless interesting how the author of the chapter explains the way in which the analysis of a work not written in Hungarian had found its way into a Hungarian literary history:

“In the 20th century, the literature created outside the state borders attained key importance. By the end of the century, as a result of cultural unification following economic unification more and more works were written in Western countries which were *not related to Hungarianness through the language*. The work of authors of Hungarian descent living abroad can be regarded as a kind of *appendix* to the history of Hungarian literature.” (*my italics*) (Szegedy-Maszák, 2007, 831)

This quote proves that, although the author of the chapter acknowledges the indisputable connection between Fischer’s works and “Hungarianness”, yet he tries to avoid saying that this oeuvre is a full part of Hungarian literature. Instead, he calls it an “appendix” to “actual” Hungarian literature.

Thus, the works of Hungarian authors writing in languages other than their mother tongue are almost completely left out of the official histories of Hungarian literature, which does not mean that Hungarians are oblivious of their activities. The work of translingual writers of

⁹See, e.g.: (Kulcsár Szabó, 1993; Schein and Gintli, 2007; Németh, 2009; Grendel, 2010; Gintli, 2010)



Hungarian origin has been the subject of a relatively large number of publications in literary scholarship and literary criticism.¹⁰ However, the vast majority of these only focus on the work of a particular author. Thus we may conclude that a summary which would take a comprehensive look at the topic in question is still waiting to be written.

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¹⁰See, e.g.: (Thomka, 2018; Toldi, 2011; Strickland-Pajtkó, 2018; Lomboš, 2018; Petres Csizmadia, 2018; Roguska, 2017).



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