


Hungarian queer: The chances of a paradigm in writing Hungarian literary history

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ABSTRACT

The study discusses the possibilities of the scholarly processing of Hungarian queer literature. In particular, it takes into account the diversity of interpretive strategies and focuses on methods that can productively liberate canonized interpretations and act subversively against the expropriation and manipulation of literary texts. The imported categories of queer study of literature can often only be applied with modifications to Hungarian and Central European literature. The author argues that queer interpretation is not a stigma, nor is it a trademark, but a field of freedom.

KEYWORDS

queer, Hungarian queer, interpretative strategies, Hungarian literature, Central European Literature

There are a number of valid methodologies for queer art research (Turner, 2000; Stevens, 2011, pp. 1–13; Stevens, 2015). A subset of these is also the methodology for studying art in the traditional sense of the term gay (LGBTQI+), one of the most comprehensive models of which is Christopher Reed's theory originally used for fine art (Reed, 2011, pp. 1–9.). This model inserts each work into interpretive fields delimited by intersections of two axes. One axis denotes shapes of social perceptions of otherness (natural or normative otherness, subversive otherness in the sexual collision space, aesthetics of self-identity, and fluid performativeness without a solid core of identity), and the other focuses on how to represent otherness explicitly (including works by both gay and non-gay artists), associatively (a double

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play of masks and signs), or as a product produced as the conscious art of the sexual minority. In Central and Eastern Europe, the recognition of queer art as a discourse and its perception as a valid form of talk about existence is also an indicator of freedom, since increasing homophobic rhetoric unfortunately often treats this form of art as a manifestation of the art of the “deviant West”.

THE STRATEGIES OF FOUNDATION-BUILDING IN THE CENTRAL AND EAST EUROPEAN CONTEXT

In the Hungarian, but also in the Central European (regional) context, the foundational works that created important applications of this scholarly discourse deserve special attention. Despite the fact that these experiments usually met with serious resistance in our region, they still released a lot of creative subversive energy. There were many phases, methods and coefficients of the formation of this discourse, therefore it is worth briefly overviewing the most important aspects. The conceptual framework of homothematics and homotextuality was almost crucial in this scholarly discourse: homothematics is primarily a content and text-centric approach, with homotextuality basing its method on the dynamics of signs and masks built into the text in addition to a structuralist-rhetorical analysis of the text (Stockinger, 1978, pp. 131–151; Keilson-Lauritz, 1991, pp. 63–76). The research on homosociality, marked by the name of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, includes men’s friendship and patterns of social, gender-segregated bonds, rivalries and self-organization: this method has also appeared frequently in regional discourse (Kosofsky Sedgwick, 1985). The poetics of “homosexualities” is based instead on the relationship between personalism and performativity. One bold variant of this is *queering*, which starts from the assumption that every text is queer, that queer theory is a way of reading literature, see e.g. studies by Kevin Ohi, E. L. McCallum, Tyler Bradway or Stephen Guy-Bray (Bradway–McCallum, 2019). The mapping of Czech-language and Czech-relevance manifestations of Central European queer culture was done under the leadership of Martin C. Putna, resulting in an independent, encyclopedia-like collection of studies that summarized the issue in a unique way in Central Europe, at an extremely high standard, and providing a full overview (Putna, 2011). On the Polish front, Piotr Sobolczyk wrote a similar summary work (Sobolczyk, 2015). In my own book, written in Hungarian and entitled *Sodom and its surroundings* (*Szodoma és környéke*), I addressed the same issue, summarizing the theoretical and research methodological aspects of the topic (Cseh, 2014). In the *Routledge International Encyclopedia of Queer Culture*, of the Central European literatures only Hungarian and Polish literature received independent entries (Gerstner, 2011, pp. 288–290, 456–457). This methodological summary partly indicates that the literary theoretical horizon of Hungarian discourse is part of an international discourse, but also suggests that it is difficult to construct a narrative depicting real literary movements without considering regional aspects. The second half of the present paper deals with the chances and possibilities of this narrative from the perspective of the queer chapter of a forthcoming, highly multicultural handbook on literary history. A handbook’s task is to inform, i.e. to offer a kind of intellectual “menu”, to identify categories, analogies, analytical aspects, as well as to offer a reliably factual and intellectually appealing rhetoric.



BASIC PROBLEMS OF HUNGARIAN DISCOURSE

Before turning to the streamlined overview of Hungarian queer and the identification of its focal points, I want to summarize the basic problems of the enterprise. The designation of the corpus is not consensual. This is especially problematic when we consider queer reading practice as a universal text comprehension method. But it is also problematic if we place it in a historical context: each era and discourse defines otherness in a different way, and we can easily find ourselves in the field of ahistorical nomenclature. Necessarily, the handbook will therefore be discussing briefly the old literary texts on otherness. The essential feature of the queer is the multiplication of angles of view and the challenge of heteronormative imperatives, so it represents a fundamentally alternative discourse that rearranges the canon, as opposed to “traditional” chapters. This could even free up interpretive language. The third problem of corpus selection is stigmatization: some authors and oeuvres within contemporary literature may be sensitive to the process of queering, and they often sense such interpretations of their works as labeling or reductive. Queer discourse is never totalizing, non-exclusive, it shows maximum dialogue ability even in its basic form, but at the same time, due to its vulnerability, it can easily violate creative sensitivities. The next problem with corpus designation is whether homophobic texts are part of this conglomerate. Some of the texts that can be classified into queer discourse are based on hiding, camouflage or mimicry: here one can think of the frequent use of pseudonyms, but e.g. in Hungarian, this is made possible by non-gender-specified grammatical forms, as some of the queer texts can only be classified into discourse through paratexts. From the point of view of the technique of signs and masks, a key role is played by certain types of motifs, twists and rhetorical procedures, such as, for instance, the proportion of coordinations and subordinations, the presence of chiasms, catachreses, increased decorativeness, or, in contrast, reduction increased to near silence. But cultural-historical schemes and mythological or biblical allusions are also important (e.g., the abduction of Ganymede, the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus, the story of David and Jonathan), as these are also vivid role possibilities in cultural memory (Woods, 1998). In this discourse, the code system of intertextuality also necessarily enjoys greater appreciation. Because queer is a discourse coming from the fringes, it often finds itself in a very vulnerable position from the perspective of mainstream scholarship. Some kind of emancipatory or activist overpolitization is often suspected behind it, although its purpose is not fundamentally different from the scholarly goals of other theoretical-interpretive strategies: it creates possible interpretations for texts in literature conceived as a form of relevant discourse about existence, or initiates ossified interpretations. Although it is judged by the complexity of discourses of otherness, it grows beyond them, as it is generated in constant interaction or, so to speak, in tension. One of the most effective ways of resisting the oppression of minorities and their erasure from cultural memory is the most stubborn field of freedom. David J. Getsy put it this way: “I will not agree to be tolerated. This damages my love of love and of liberty” (Getsy, 2016, p. 13).

FOCAL POINTS OF HUNGARIAN QUEER DISCOURSE: POETRY

The discourse of Hungarian literary studies, with the exception of a small segment, can still be considered conservative regarding gender-based interpretations. Based on the stereotypes



regularly confirmed by national curricula, Hungarian literature is advertised as specifically masculine literature, and its emphasis on relentless masculinity within the framework of the myth of heroic national character is still strong today. A common thesis in old Hungarian literature is that Hungarian literature had little affinity for love lyricism, not even to make room for a “self-serving” or emancipatory presentation of a socially stigmatized emotion. At the same time, the homoerotic register of Janus Pannonius’s Latin poetry, revitalizing antique ideals, is already vividly connected to the system of similar texts in contemporary world literature (Csehy, 2014, pp. 85–117). The first exposure of the queer aspects of Janus Pannonius’ poetry had to come “from outside the circle”: the foundation was laid in Marianna D. Birnbaum’s English language monograph (Birnbaum, 1996, pp. 52–65.). In the prevailing discourse, ridiculous arguments live on such as e.g. the view that homosexuality is “a foreign fashion”, introduced by the Italians of Queen Beatrix, a phenomenon alien to the national character. Later, Janus’s homoerotic poems were tied exclusively to the fashion waves of poetic fiction, while “authentic” biographical “data” were extracted from his other texts. The first poem written in Hungarian with a special homoerotic subject was written by János Szakhmári Fabricius. Written in 1577, it is part of an epic composition compiled about “immoral love”, in a moderately moralizing tone: a Greek poetic work of prose in Latin mediation (Csehy, 2014, pp. 118–227).

From the beginning to the present, casting of a gay sense of life in a literary form has been tied with strong threads to the topoi of the ancient tradition. This primarily means the survival of homoerotic mythical and narrative patterns. From the Middle Ages essentially until the 20th century, this literature was forced to be confined to a code system that had legitimizing power or could be enforced within normative schemes unless it was homophobic, offensive, or satirical. In addition to the universe of antiquity, other viable possibilities included, e.g., the friendship rhetoric of the biblical history of David and Jonathan, or the cult of St. Sebastian, who in modern times has become downright the “patron saint” of homosexuals. One of the beautiful examples of the model-seeking, antiquating discourse is Ferenc Faludi’s homoerotic Rococo eclogue, which is a variant of Publius Vergilius Maro’s 2nd eclogue. A similar trend prevails in the rewritings of desire models: Miklós Zrínyi or Mihály Vörösmarty retell the Vergilian model of the love of Nysus and Euryalius and of Alexis and Corydón in line with their own needs. The cult of the exotic can also be categorized here, especially the works reminiscent of the overheated sensuality of fashionable orientalism (e.g. the ballad by János Arany entitled *The Two Pages of Szondi* or the Arabic poems of György Faludy). In these texts, desire is never “perverted,” it is natural and endemic, possibly by a foreign norm, a form of oriental sensibility and sensuality. It is also clear from this context that in such a historical approach, the play and dialogue of the texts must also be taken into account, and more than once the queer nature can be read from this textual dialogue. Mapping the dynamics of removal (what mask does the author wear?) and of approximation (how does the author apply the exoticism of the borrowed phenomenon to their own textual world?) helps a lot in setting up a possible queer constellation.

Another similarly clever method of maintaining ambiguity is to make the schemes of love poetry ambivalent. Due to the grammar of the Hungarian language, with its lack of grammatical gender and gender marking on nouns via inflection, it is not necessary to clarify the exact gender relations, and this can often present literally translators working with languages with grammatical genders almost impossible challenges. The crossing of the gender boundaries can easily go unnoticed, unreflected or ambivalent (e.g. in the lesbian poems of Sophie Török or Minka Czóbel or even – also very consciously – in the early poems of Ádám Nádasdy). According to



Péter Nádas, Ádám Nádasdy's love and erotic poetry is special precisely because he "cleansed emotions of their gender" (Nádas, 2006, pp. 190–191).

Another way to divert attention, on the other hand, is to spectacularly amplify pan-sexuality: this is especially true of the decadent, Art Nouveau style and its serious or ironic, re-emerging neo-varieties (camp and queer art). This overcompensatory nature dominates in the erotic registers of the poetry of e.g. Mihály Babits, József Berda, but it is also present in Sándor Weöres's poems. The depiction of the eroticization of the homosocial environment can also be included here (e.g. the poetry of poets János Pilinszky and Pál Toldalagi, who had attraction for each other): this tendency is often related to the celebration of masculinity and its metaphORIZATION to transcendence, playing with the dynamics of signs and masks. At the same time, homosexuality also appears explicitly in Pilinszky's poem *Bread*: this is what caused this text to be "omitted" from the first edition of his collected poems (Csehy, 2014, p. 440). The poet mixes the transcendent metaphor of bread and leaven with the concrete reality of the boy's body. Pilinszky has become an emblematic figure of queer sensitivity: András Gerevich made a remix of erotic poems with exponentially homoerotic accents, an erotic poem from Pilinszky's hidden motifs, but similar motif borrowings also appeared in Péter Olty's poems.

György Faludy wrote the first homoerotic poetic cycles of Hungarian poetry in a modern sense: the exoticism of the Amár poems presents love in the trinity of exile, eros, and a kind of neo-Art Nouveau sensibility. Inspired by ballet dancer and (Latin writer) poet Eric Johnson, the love sonnets are read as modern versions of the homoerotic sonnets of Shakespeare, Michelangelo and Lorca. Faludy also spoke openly about his bisexuality in his autobiographical prose (*My Happy Days in Hell*), and his practice as a translator was strongly intertwined with his desire to interpret homoerotic world poetry (Faludy, 1988). The unbridled diversity of his poetry organizes the homoerotic theme into a powerful voice, and it is also well documented that he was familiar with anthologies of the early emancipatory gay poetry of his age (e.g., the collections *The Male Muse* by Ian Young and *Angels of the Lyre* by Winston Leyland, Young, 1973; Leyland, 1975), although (and this is clear from the notes in the margins), he was not overly delighted with them.

Hungarian poetry is gradually going beyond circumventing the normative order of expectations and developing self-principled systems of ideas. This self-created world does away with the stereotypical expectations of the socio-cultural space and appears to the public as a possible alternative aesthetic of existence or cultural model. With the advent of the gay subcultural press (in which the magazine *Mások* [Others] plays a central role), an alternative, often movement flavoured, special gay public poetry has also emerged (Takács, 1993; Csehy, 2014, pp. 546–584). The parallel trajectory of artists who later became significant literary figures began in the columns of *Mások*. András Gerevich's first openly gay poems, Ádám Nádasdy's gay short stories also appeared in this subcultural space under various pseudonyms in the early 1990s. Péter Olty published his poems in the mainstream and prestigious (by now defunct) literary periodical *Holmi*, as well as (especially his emphatically homoerotic works) in subcultural *Mások*.

The poetry of Ádám Nádasdy, which developed from an anecdotal poetry combining tiny perceptions of everyday existence with pseudo-naive humor, gradually became a conscious poetry of identity, one of the highlights of which was the volume *The Order I Create* (2002). András Gerevich's homoerotic body poetry reached its culmination in his book *Men* (2005): the originality of the poetic language created from a body-centric starting point was enhanced by the polyphony of identity and the breakdown of heteronormativity. To counterbalance the



heteronormative literary canon, Agáta Gordon also started writing poems under the name Etella József, referring to the classical poet Attila József, expressing the female variant of the name. Her text *Goat Lipstick* (1997) experimented with a consciously queer spelling that violated the rules of the genres, oscillating between poetry and prose. It is this text that initiates queering into a way of writing and, with its rich rhetorical inventiveness, creates a unique sound that is both firmly and radically “different” in its grammar. While the Western tradition of aesthetics prevailed in Mátyás Dunajcsik’s poems, János Rosmer’s volume *The Back Seat* (2010) developed the nuances of a language based on the radical body image and subcultural rites of queer discourse.

Olivér Imre Horváth created the “homunculus” of a virtual poetic plastic surgery related to Victorian English discourse and camp mythology in his book *non-sympathy* (2016). Péter Olty also subverted the discourse narrative of the heterosexual medium from the direction of video games and a new gay mythology in his book written in innovative antique meters, *In a Hetero Medium* (2019). Mention may be made here of verse cycles or series that thematize queer or gay aspects as merely textual identities, such as e. g. Dénes Krusovszky’s *Hart Crane* cycle or András Ferenc Kovács’s Cavafy variations.

FOCAL POINTS OF HUNGARIAN QUEER DISCOURSE: PROSE

In prose, the theme of otherness comes to fruition in modern literature. The literature of the age of antiquity can be described along the course of contemporary European discourse: passionate, ambiguous friendship stories appear in Hungarian renaissance prose (and baroque school dramas), there are many non-normative sexual elements in genres related to the sermon (in Péter Bornemissza’s writing, for instance), and homophobia is an important element in the rhetoric of enemy formation (e.g. in Péter Pázmány’s polemical writings), but there are also positive examples in some sermons and Biblical exegeses.

Homosexuality in the modern sense first appeared explicitly in the genre of the crime novels or mysteries. The fourth volume of Soma Guthi’s crime novel was published under the title *Homosexual Love (Detective Tuzar’s Diary)* in 1908 (Guthi, 1908). Despite the itemism of the current issues of contemporary legal, medical and criminal discourse, the novel seemed exponentially modern in its age. The exploration of subcultural and popular literary discourses is still to be carried out in this regard, as well. In the modern novel, the presentation of the full eroticization of the homosexual environment played a central role almost from the beginning: it is enough to think of masterpieces such as Sándor Márai’s *The Rebels*, Margit Kaffka’s *The Ant Heap*, or Géza Ottlik’s *School at the Frontier*, also focusing on the literary aspects of homosociality. However, in Gábor Thurzó’s novel *Days and Nights* (first published in 1944, later revised under the title *The Fish and the Net*), homosexuality is almost in direct focus. Károly Esztergályos’s film *Male Nude* was also inspired by Gábor Thurzó: the film director generously “homeroticized back” the sexual system of relations in Thurzó’s later novel *The Shame* (1961) and his play *The Back Door* (1963), which were made to be “shy” by necessity.

It is with such “shyness” that László Márton explains the fading of Thurzó’s genius, the degradation of his autobiographical oeuvre to lies, a life work that started out as excellent but was falsified and castrated via acts of self-censorship (Márton, 2008, pp. 260–264). The queer reading of Thurzó’s works obviously has to include in the interpretation the reconstruction game that e.g. Károly Esztergályos played so successfully to the end. In the prose of both Márai



and Thurzó, a great role was played by the alien figure embodying otherness, the actor who became entangled in roles and became a perpetrator and a victim at the same time, and who, “fleeing” from the scene of the act, leaves behind decadent “destruction”, superabundance, and an unsatisfied desire for freedom. Diaries and texts creating a similar degree of intimacy play a major role in the development of queer discourse: the alternative history of gay emancipation can be almost traced in Sándor Márai’s diaries, but the genesis and “spiritual charge” of homosexual writing plays an important role in a homophobic approach (Márai analyzes the gay “style” of Proust, Gide, Wilde, and Cocteau in several entries, for example).

Erzsébet Galgóczi thematized lesbianism in her short novel *Within the Law* (1980). The truth-seeking attitude of the investigative journalist Éva Szalánczky, the subversive concept of otherness, the protagonist’s stigmatized love for Livia, who has grown tired of heteronormative roles, the meshing of the narratives of defecting and suicide paint a unique picture of the Hungary of the 1950s. The novel was made into an outstanding film entitled *Looking at Each Other* in 1982, directed by Károly Makk. A homoerotic body depiction appears in one of the threads of Péter Nádas’s *A Book of Memories* (1986) both as a field of freedom and as an overwriting and subversive revelation of the homoerotic tradition that can be marked by the names of Thomas Mann and Marcel Proust (Bazsányi, 2018, pp. 161–273). Despite the strong radicalization of the depiction of otherness, it remains in a similar poetic role in the monumental novel trilogy *Parallel Stories*, but in his autobiographical work *The Well-Lit Details*, it becomes a component of self-analysis.

The gay thread of Péter Esterházy’s novel *Seventeen Swans* (1987), written under a female pseudonym, Lili Csokonai, says something new in the discourse of the tradition of antiquity and that of the overpoliticized, “dissident” body. One of the insert short stories in the *Pancreatic Diary* (2016), *The Story of Covalent Bond*, appears as a counterpoint to the trauma discussion generated by the decaying body. Men skiing while having sex on the slope of death, in the freezing winter of the fear of death, produce the grotesque bodily acrobatics of hedonism and vitalism, while also symbolizing a cancer that takes possession of and destroys the body.

Gábor Németh’s short story *About Truth or Móricka Imagines Things* (2017) provides a demanding in-depth analysis of homophobic aggression. The conflict between heteronormative façade construction and otherness emerges with elemental force in the short stories of Judit Hidas (*Like a Girl Seeking Protection*) and Krisztina Tóth (*Swing*), among others. One of the defining strands of Gábor Lanczkor’s novel *The God of the River* (2014) explores the conflict between the priestly vocation and homosexuality. And Ádám Nádasdy’s volume of short stories entitled *The Bearded Neptune* (2020) presents many variants of gay love, from repression to self-realizing anarchism.

ARTISTIC ARTICULATIONS OF GENDER ROLE VIOLATIONS

The queer aspects of the plasticity of biological gender can be studied in the poetry of Sándor Vay, who, although born in the second half of the 19th century as Countess Sarolta Vay, reconstructed her identity and life as a man (Borgos, 2007). His figure was embodied again in the prose of Gyula Krúdy, in the poems of Kinga Fabó, and in the novel *VS* by Zsuzsa Rakovszky (2011). The poems of the Hungarian artist El Kazovsky written in Russian reflect the bizarre self-definition according to which the author sees himself as a man with homoerotic sensitivity



enclosed in a female body. The androgynous characters can also be classified as a movement of gender diversity: in Ferenc Juhász's enormously long epic poems, gender interoperability emerges as an almost continuous poetic opportunity, and in the metaphorical colossuses of hybridity these bizarre othernesses are often organized into chains. The theory of the inherent androgyny of the act of writing influenced many authors in the explicit formulation of the phenomenon. These primarily creative psychological or anthropological motives also belong to the queer universe.

Depictions of temporary (s)exchanges of gender role violations appear early in modern Hungarian prose literature: Markovits Rodion's report novel *Siberian Garrison* (1928) or Aladár Kuncz's work *The French monastery* (1931) about the "French exile" depict how gender becomes malleable in the closed, homosocial medium and played an enormous role in the dethronement of masculine hegemony (Takács, 2018, pp. 57–118). Zoltán Lesi's contemporary volume *High Jump* (2019) brought into play the discourse of intersexuality and sport imbued with power-political aggression, and argued for the unsustainability of the stereotypes of the concept of masculinity. The figure of the protagonist, consciously emerging from his own biological gender with an intention of creating an identity, entered Hungarian literature with Tibor Noé Kiss's novel *Incognito* (2010). Mimicry as a way of life is gradually transformed into a "self-forgotten" identity and a natural way of life. A memorable piece in Zsuzsa Selyem's series of short stories titled *The First End of the World We Spent Together* is the story *The Perfect Photo*, in which three hedonistic trans actors (Cesaria Winner, Victoria Public and Charlie Demon appearing in full regalia) come into "contact" with football hooligans at a Dracula festival in Transylvania.

This register could also include texts that aim to break down stereotypical, heteronormative male roles, such as e.g. the exploration of the image of masculinity in relation to the father concept by Imre Kertész, or the stratification of Gergely Péterfy's perceptions of otherness.

TEXTS OF THE POPULAR REGISTER

The enumeration of the gay or queer strands of contemporary Hungarian prose goes beyond the scope of a paper such as the present one, and manifestations of the popular register have not even been mentioned yet. Tibor Rácz-Stefán's specifically gay books, or Levente Lakatos's popular books which, however, only occasionally touch on the subject, or the works of Ferenc Vidra which show a more chiseled, more complex image of otherness, are good examples of the popular possibilities of the subject and queer sensitivity. Of course, "gay" crime novels have also been written in Hungarian, and the topic has also appeared in comic literature.

A similarly exciting segment is the mapping of the queer line of youth and children's literature, which is still quite young, but at the same time provoking enormous societal discourse. The diversity of discourses of otherness is well represented by the world of the texts of the fairy tale collection *Fairy Tale Land for All*, which provoked extremely radical, unusually strong political reactions (such as the theatrical physical destruction of the book and the reading of some of its texts in the Hungarian Parliament). The model of the rainbow family, for instance, also appears in the children's poems of Dénes Krusovszky, and Zsófia Bán's fairy novel titled *The Cool Owl and the Third Grade Class, or Everybody Can be Other*, which de-taboo-ified the discourse of otherness, indicates the viability in Hungary of this way of speaking, considered still very subversive and now also legally limited.



CONCLUSION

In summary, it is safe to say that the paradigm of the Hungarian queer can be conceptualized from many directions, in many ways: it is appropriate to see it as a system with a particularly rich range of diverse sets which often intersect and contain common elements. The network of paradigms of otherness intertwines with mainstream networks. Queer approaches create various new interpretive constellations that can enrich the sky of Hungarian literature as spectacular constellations. In the current situation, the queer cannot be viewed apolitically: the queer not only interprets and analyzes but also fights with commitment for the freedom of interpretation and analysis.

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