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*THE GENERATION OF 'THE WANDERING YEARS' – TRAVELING
CULTURE IN EUROPE AND IN HUNGARY BETWEEN THE WORLD
WARS*

Abstract

In my article, I try to offer a comparative view of Western European and Hungarian travel literature between the World Wars. First, I examine the changes of Western traveling culture in the post-war era, then I analyze the narrato-poetic features of the travelogue, as a popular literary genre of the 1920s and 1930s. In the second chapter of my study, I introduce the Hungarian contemporaries of Waugh, Green, or Orwell. They were the generation of 'the wandering years', as it was called by one of them, Antal Szerb. I argue, that the main questions of the Hungarian travelers and narrative characteristics of their works not just simply resemble to the Western authors', but they could give a relevant contribution to the contemporary European travel literature, emphasizing the integration of the thinking of Hungarian intellectuals to the European stream.

Keywords: travel literature; post-war generation; cultural history

Introduction

There was a generation of young writers and intellectuals (among others: Sándor Márai, Antal Szerb, Gyula Illyés, László Cs. Szabó and Ferenc Fejtő) who played a significant role in the reshaping of Hungarian traveling culture and travel literature between the World Wars. In my study, I try to introduce their works in the context of the European literature and cultural history.

First, I focus on the changes of Western mentality after the Great War, which led to the changing role of travel also in the contemporary literature, bringing the genre of travelogue in the limelight. I mention both poetic and politic characteristics of travel writings in the 1930s, arguing that these works are very typical of this age, connecting document and fiction to each other.

In the second part of my article, I analyze how the tendencies introduced above, appeared in the Hungarian culture and literature. Rethink of the autonomy of arts and literature was followed by debates also in the Western part of Europe in the shadows of the social and economic crises and threatening totalitarian ideologies of the 1930s. In Hungary, the situation was – if it might be – more serious after the lost World War which was followed by the dissolution of the historic Hungary as part of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. These events traumatized the whole Hungarian population of the Carpathian Basin, bringing Hungarian identity into a question. In the late 1920s and 1930s young intellectuals who have mostly lived and learned in Western Europe before, wrote such works as their Western contemporaries, trying to find answers to the serious questions of the place

of Hungary and Hungarian culture in Europe and the world, and to the modernization of the Hungarian society.

My aim is, to emphasize three significant points of the travelogues written by Hungarian authors from the generation of ‘the wandering years’: the question of genre and narration of these works, the changing identity of the traveling and writing self, and perception of the other cultures, forcing the traveler to face himself and his own culture.

Changing travel culture and literature in Europe

Experiences of the First World War and the succeeding social, economic and political shocks played an important role on the transition of Western traveling culture of the 1920s and 30s.

The remembrance of wartime sufferings and post-traumatic feelings of the succeeding years increased the longing of the survivors. Traveling became a lifestyle and also a typical means of self-consciousness and social analysis for the new generation of Western intellectuals between the two World Wars (Fussell, 1980). “We were a generation brought up on adventure stories who had missed the enormous disillusionment of the First War; so we went looking for adventure”, as it was written by Graham Greene (Greene, 1978, p. ix). The English writer and his contemporaries, grown up in the atmosphere of post-war disillusionment, regarded travel rather as a state of being than a source of knowledge, opposite to their Victorian fathers’ study trips. Evelyn Waugh recalls these times in the preface of his travel anthology *When the Going was Good*: “From 1928 until 1937 I had no fixed home and no possessions which would not conveniently go on a porter’s barrow. I travelled continuously, in England and abroad. [...] These were the years when Mr. Peter Fleming went to the Gobi Desert, Mr. Graham Greene to the Liberian hinterland; Robert Byron [...] to the ruins of Persia. We turned our backs on civilization.” (Waugh, 1959, pp. 7-8)

London, Paris and Berlin, capital of the Weimar Republic were above all the intellectual centers of post-war Europe, offering intercultural ‘home’ for political immigrants, adventurers and also for artists, writers and scientists, far from their native land. James Clifford who regarded the hotel as a relevant chronotope of these centers, a site of cultural encounters by dwelling and traveling at the same time argued in 1992 that “I began to imagine rewriting Paris of the twenties and thirties as travel encounters – including New World detours through the Old – a place of departures, arrivals, transits. The great urban centers could be understood as specific, powerful sites of dwelling/traveling” (p.104) This chronotope can be a frame for negative and positive visions of travel – and a lifestyle, too: “transience, superficiality, tourism, exile, and rootlessness” and “exploration, research, escape, transforming encounter” on the other hand (Clifford, 1992, p. 105). Travel was also a typical metaphor of the contemporary literature. It has gained a significant role both in poetry and prose, expressing the subject’s experiences of embarrassment and anxiety, and also unrecognizability of the surrounding world. *The Waste Land* (1922) from T. S. Eliot, *Ulysses* (1922) from James Joyce or Thomas Mann’s *Der Zauberberg* [The Magic Mountain] (1924) belongs to the most impressive works of the age, all having the spatial change as a central metaphor.

It is not by chance, that the age between the two World Wars means time when “travel writing had come of age” (Blanton, 2002, p. 23). Not just, because several excellent authors wrote such books, but travel literature, which was regarded as a less significant genre before, offered authentic means to represent a conflicted and anxious world. Among – and on the footsteps of – the travel writings of such worldwide-known authors as André Gide (*Voyage au Congo* [Travels in the Congo], 1927; *La Retour du Tchad* [Return from Chad], 1928; and *Retour de l'U.R.S.S.* [Return from the U.S.S.R.], 1936), the young generation of writers published such books, as *Journey without Maps* (1936) from Greene, or *Labels* (1930) and *Remote People* (1931) from Waugh, shoving a vision of a modern world, which is in many aspects absurd, chaotic and unrecognizable. According to Casey Blanton (2002) “Waugh, along with Greene and Robert Byron, established themselves as the giants of travel writing in this period by writing books that essentially questioned the norms of the fragmented modern world through irony.” (p. 21) The most important characteristic of these travel writings is, that the traveler’s spatial, geographic change deepens into an immense journey and the parable of his or her age. Outside landscape and events of travel inspire an inside reality weaved by memories and reflections. This new type of travelogue unites the features of “reportage” and “fable”, according to Samuel Hynes (1977) “In the best writings of the 'thirties, the two kinds interweave [...], and produce a dual-plane work with a strong realistic surface, which is yet a parable.” (p. 228) Greene’s *Journey without Maps* is regarded by Hynes as an example of this kind of writing (Hynes, 1977).

According to the Greene’s words cited above, escape and disillusion inspired Western travelers in the post-traumatic years of the twenties, but understanding of political events and description and interpretation of difficult social realities of the restless Europe and other parts of the world, became the most important questions for them in the next decade. The crisis of Western economies and values, and gaining ground of totalitarian ideologies encouraged the writers to rethink the autonomy of literature and role of the author. Hynes summarizes the annoying question of the 1930s, as “the essential aesthetic question of the decade: how can an artist respond to the immediate crises of this time, and yet remain true to his art?” (Hynes, 1977, p. 207) This kind of parabolic art emphasizes the pragmatic function of literature. Intellectuals of the thirties often regarded travel writing as a means for explaining politic ideas. “These beliefs”, as Bernard Schweizer writes “were sought as an antidote to the anxieties and perplexities of the period, just as travel was pursued as a means to clear the fogs of political confusion and to bring about ideological clarifications.” (Schweizer, 2001, p. 8) This attitude resulted often politically engaged works, and even choice of travel destinations were mostly not accidental, to dedicate the representation of foreign countries as political metaphor or allegory for home residents. André Gide travelled to the Soviet Union, sympathizing with the communist idea, but his travel account *Retour de l'U.R.S.S.* (1936) shows his disappointment in the regime of Stalin. The socialist George Orwell travelled to Northern England to meet with coal miners, and write his book *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937), and returning from the Spanish Civil War, his wartime travelogue *Homage to Catalonia* (1938). While the conservative – and then

fascist sympathizer – Evelyn Waugh draw a caricature of coronation of the Ethiopian emperor in his book *Remote People* (1931).

The Hungarian Generation of ‘the Wandering Years’

Along this time, there was a generation of writers also in Hungary, who were grown up in the free atmosphere of the 1920s, having the opportunity to gain personal experiences about Europe and the great world. Antal Szerb, member of this group of writers called themselves as ‘the generation of the Wandering Years’, referring to an essay from László Cs. Szabó, titled *Búcsú a vándorévektől* [Farewell to the Wandering Years] (1935) (Szerb, 2002).¹

Young Hungarian intellectuals, coming home from the Western parts of Europe were often shocked by the social and cultural realities in Hungary. Szerb compared the new returnees to György Bessenyei, key figure of the Hungarian Enlightenment, because they felt themselves much more European than their fathers and grandfathers, and after Paris, Berlin, London or Rome, they regarded the Hungarian literature as something very rural and boring (Szerb, 1998).² Rethinking the autonomy of literature and the role of writers was accompanied with serious debates also in Western Europe, but it meant a more depressing task for their Hungarian contemporaries. After the lost First World War, the historic Hungary as part of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy collapsed. Hungary lost at least two-thirds of its former territory with several well-industrialized cities and two-thirds of its inhabitants. Most of them were not ethnic Hungarians, but there were also more than 3,2 million Hungarian people who had to live outside the new borders of the country or to ‘repatriate’ to Hungary (Encyclopaedia Britannica, n.d.). During this time, the new Hungarian state had to face with a serious economical, and social crisis. These changes meant a great shock for the whole Hungarian population of the Carpathian Basin, and also for intellectuals. Their homeland, which was regarded before as part of a Central European power, became a small country in the periphery of the West.

Gyula Illyés, one of the former returnees, later recalled, that in Hungary they have all moved from the avant-garde to a commonly intelligible style (Szávai, 1988).³ What is behind it all is the need to act against the crisis. The drawing of poetic conclusions is in the line with Samuel Hynes’ statement, because they wanted to write such works which merges documentary and fiction, taking an x-ray of the era (Szávai, 1988). The search for the harmony of the two parallel tendencies registered by the British literary theorist as “reportage” and “fable” (Hynes, 1977, p. 228) can also be observed among the greatest of contemporary Hungarian literature. It can be proved by the popular prose forms among

¹ Antal Szerb (1901-45) was a Hungarian novelist, essayist and literature historian. In the 1920s he studied literature at University of Graz and Budapest, and at the Sorbonne (Paris). During this time, he lived also in France and Italy, and spent a year in London (1929-30) with a scholarship. He was killed in a labour camp in Balf, Hungary in 1945. He is one of the most famous victims of the Holocaust in Hungary.

² György Bessenyei (1747-1811) was a Hungarian noble and writer, who spent his young age in Vienna, as a member of the guard of Queen Maria Theresa. The publication of his drama, *Ágís tragédiája* [The Tragedy of Agis] (1772) is usually regarded as the beginning of the Hungarian Enlightenment. Returning home, after 1782 he lived in rural Hungary in privacy as a countryside landowner.

³ Gyula Illyés (1902-83) was a Hungarian poet and novelist. He lived in Paris between 1922 and 26 and studied at the Sorbonne. During this time, he belonged to the surrealist circle, as a friend of Paul Éluard, Tristan Tzara and René Crevel.

the generation of Illyés, combining documentarism and parable, as, for example, various versions of memoirs, essays, sociographic literature and travelogue.

Travelogues of the writers born in the first decade of the 20th century indicate a new era of travel writing also in the Hungarian literature, based on their constructions of identity and narrative characteristics. Travel narratives published between 1927 and 47 inspire many times such interpretations, which are crossing genre boundaries. Mihály Szegedy-Maszák regards *Napnyugati őrzéskönyv* [Patrol in the West] (1936) from Sándor Márai as a model text, showing the subjectivity of readers' decision about the reading of the work as fiction or autobiography in a provoking way (Szegedy-Maszák, 1991, p. 63). The book, reporting the writer's journey to France and Britain, despite its first person and present tense narrative, which evokes a diary, is subtitled as a 'novel from a journey', while the *Kassai őrzéskönyv* [Patrol in Kassa] (1941), written a few years later, has no genre designation, although its structure divided into chapters could refer to a more voluminous epic work, and – regarding to the topographic references of the titles – also to a travel writing. The title of Ferenc Fejtő's book, *Érzelmes utazás* [Sentimental Journey] (1936) refers to Laurence Sterne but does not provide briefing about its genre, although the title of the original version of the work published in the periodical *Nyugat* (Fejtő, 1935), includes the definition of 'travel diary' and the diary-like format was retained in the later edition.⁴ László Cs. Szabó's book *Doveri átkelés* [Crossing at Dover] (1937) is subtitled as *Picture of Western Europe*, while the description of the original edition's blurb also mentions pictures and documentary portrait of the age, as well as autobiographical confessions. But even the much more complex intertextual operations are not far from the contemporary travel writers. Works of Sándor Márai, whose travelogue corpus is comparable to its extent maybe above all to Gide's, are forming a not less complex intertextual space than the works of the French writer. Márai's travelogues reflect on each other and on other works from the writer, often rewriting parts of texts of other genres. For example, some chapters of the *Kassai őrzéskönyv* re-narrates scenes from Márai's novels and from his memoir, *Egy polgár vallomásai* [Confessions of a Citizen] (1934-35), from the differed horizon of the remembrance. In the first chapter titled *Bird's eye view*, the autobiographic narrator compares his journey to Kassa to the description of Péter Garren's arrival to his hometown in Márai's novel, *Féltékenyek* [Jealousies] (1937). While, in other chapters of the work, he narrates such determining experiences from his childhood and genealogy of his family, which may be well-known from his literary memoir for his readers (Márai, 2000, pp. 13-14, 62-83, 83-98).⁵ But the most special example may be Cs. Szabó's work, *Hunok nyugaton* [Huns in the West] (1968), referring with its title to the autobiographic novel of Gyula Illyés, *Hunok Párizsban* [Huns in Paris] (1946), narrating the writer's journey to Italy and France with his friend Illyés in 1946-47, while it refers from time to time

⁴ Ferenc Fejtő (1909–2008), known also as François Fejto, was a Hungarian-born political scientist, critic and essayist. From 1938 he lived in France, worked at the Agence France-Presse (AFP), and at the Institut d'études politiques de Paris.

⁵ Sándor Márai (1900-1989) was born to a middle-class family in Kassa (now Košice, Slovakia). He lived, studied and worked as journalist and correspondent in Germany and France in the 1920s. In 1928 he returned to Hungary, but after the communist takeover he left his country again. After 1948 Márai lived as exiled in Italy and in the USA. He died in San Diego, California.

to Illyés's own travelogue, *Franciaországi változatok* [Variations from France] (1947). Beside these, travel writings could have often integrate such influences of contemporary novel writing, which were aimed to go beyond the realism: we could find many examples of tematizing of subjective time perception and processes of remembrance, associative narration, mounting fictional and real events on each other in the Hungarian travelogues from the 1930s and 40s. Overall, however, with the loosening of the boundaries between different modes of writing, the interactions of such genres as essay, novel, autobiography and travelogue became more characteristic than we could talk about some kind of one-way effect.

The change of the subject's worldview and narrated identity may be another characteristic of the genre's transformation. Bertalan Szemere, a 19th century Hungarian traveler could comment his travelogue, *Utazás külföldön* [Travel Abroad] in the Preface of the work as celebrating the faith in the human activity which fulfils the aim of world history (Steinert, 1983). Accordingly, the typical form of the narration of the identity may be the dissonant self-narration, defined by Dorrit Cohn, as "[a] lucid narrator turning back on a past self steeped in ignorance, confusion, and delusion" (Cohn, 1978 p. 145), by so doing "stress the cognitive privilege of the narrating over the experiencing self." (Cohn, 1978, p. 151) Opposite to it, travelers one hundred years later taking to journey in a permanently changing world which is ruled by inscrutable economic and political processes and in which the identity of the narrator and the unity of his personality is time-to-time coming in question. It arises as a permanent problem, an insurmountable incoherence (Márai), or as a changing quality (Fejtő). The monologue forms coming into view suggest the unfinished past, the changing identity of the narrator, and the lack of perspective. In the case of self-quoted monologue, according to Cohn, "by omitting clear signals of quotation, they run together their narrator's past and present thoughts, thereby suggesting that their ideas on a certain subject have remained the same" (Cohn, 1978, p. 164), thereby closing the gap that separates the thoughts of the past from their narration in the present. While, in self-narrated monologue the text focus on the experiencing self and narrating self is left out of the picture. Monologue forms often refer to unsolved existential crises, like in the case of Márai's narrator, who returns after decades to his hometown on the pages of the *Kassai őrjárat* (Márai, 1941).

The self-quoted monologue may also play a similar role, for example in the last part of Fejtő's *Érzelmes utazás*, during the narrator's Adriatic cruise (Fejtő, 1936). Here it is especially evident that monologue speech itself becomes a part of the transformation of identity and the crossing of its former boundaries, and not just stating it.

At the same time, in these works, in parallel with the identity, the narration of otherness and cultural differences also shows a change. Comparative cultural analyses as indispensable part of the 19th century travelogues indicate the impact of the romanticism's idea of 'the people's soul'. For example, Szemere's reflections often concern with the connections between the natural conditions of some countries and the mentality of the people living there. The perspective of travel writers of the Hungarian Reform Age (from 1825 or 30 to 1848) is typically directed towards the future, because they are looking for oppor-

tunities of their homeland's development in their experiences gained abroad. Their starting point is the idea of the national community which is projected to the future, and should be carried out intentionally by the common human activity. Their point of view is commonly universalist, believing in the unity of world history and progress of humankind. Contrary to them, travel writers between the World Wars were surrounded by dangerous ideologies and they felt to be charged by 'the burden of history' with the feeling that their own wills and acts are limited. The past surviving unconsciously in customs and cultural reflexes, determines the present and future, as we can read in the often ironic examples ranked by Márai and Fejtő, while memory is blurring in the passing time. Instead of the search for aesthetic experiences, poetic impressions and points of interest, which were typical of the preceding travel literature, the viewpoints of the new travelers are determined by the analysis of foreign cultures' objects endowed with symbolic contents. This change of point of view also fundamentally determines the way of narration: instead of a postcard-like presentation of visual elements emphasizing an aesthetic experience, confessional and essayist monologue forms come to the fore in travel writings. Zoltán Szabó writes in 1939 reviewing the contemporary travel literature, that their genre is not description but self-examination on the pretext of the landscape, because the horizontal journey of travelers always turns to vertical (Szabó, 1989). The narrator's identity can always be grasped in the difference between the external and the internal environment. The external environment is one for all of them: the landscape with culture, memories and peoples, but the internal environment is different. Márai travels between the landscape and the middle class, Cs. Szabó between the landscape and the books, and Fejtő travels between the landscape and his own emerging worldview (Szabó, 2001).

In this way, the experience of cultural diversity being revealed in European and non-European travels may become a means of confronting the traveler with himself and with his own culture. However, in contrast to the travel narratives of the Romantic era following the 'Bildungsroman' narrative, travelogues of the years between the World Wars generally lack a purposeful development model which could promise the possibility of equalizing differences and thus fulfilling the narrator's identity. The narrator moves on the border of two worlds; the alienation from his homeland's social and political crisis, and the experience of homeliness often found in a stranger cannot be combined within the framework of any great narrative. At home he is exiled from democracy, abroad he is exiled from the homeland, notes Zoltán Szabó about Cs. Szabó, who wrote his Western European travelogue *Doveri átkelés*, while János Kodolányi, talking about the sunlight of Finland, reminds the reader of the homeland's shadow (Szabó, 2001). The voice of the travelogues, which testifies to personal involvement and gives an account of experiences, can thus shed a particularly sharp light on the social and cultural problems that were also the most important topics in the journalistic essays of the period. Above all, symptoms of the European economic, social and political crisis, the effects and spread of the threatening totalitarian ideologies, and the analysis of the responsibility of the scribes, in relation with the search of the Hungarians for a place in Europe and the world.

Conclusions

The flexible narrative structure of the genre of travelogue has made it suitable for embracing topical themes in the decades of the 20th century. During the 1920s and 30s, and then in the years following the Second World War, the Hungarian writers who set to conducting intellectual patrols travelled almost all over Europe, and even to the periphery of Asia and Africa. They looked for the signs of the decline in the West predicted by Oswald Spengler (Sándor Márai: *Napnyugati őrzéret* [Patrol in the West, 1936] and *Európa elrablása* [The Kidnapping of Europe, 1947]; László Cs. Szabó: *Doveri átkelés* [Crossing at Dover, 1937]); followed in the footsteps of Nordic utopia (János Kodolányi: *Suomi, a csend országa* [Suomi, the Country of Silence, 1937]); or of the Soviet utopia (Gyula Illyés: *Oroszország* [Russia, 1934]; searched for the 'Magical Orient' in the land of the East (Márai: *Istenek nyomában* [In Search of Gods, 1927]); or visited the successor states of historic Hungary and the former Austro-Hungarian Monarchy (among others: László Németh: *Magyarok Romániában* [Hungarians in Romania, 1935]; Ferenc Fejtő: *Érzelmes utazás* [Sentimental Journey, 1936]; Cs. Szabó: *Erdélyben* [In Transylvania, 1940]; Márai: *Kassai őrzéret* [Patrol in Kassa, 1941]), meanwhile, by analyzing the crisis of European and Hungarian culture and society, the traditions of the Hungarian travel literature were also reshaped.

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