

The Place of Hungarian Literature  
within the Serbian Literary Polysystem.  
A Case Study<sup>1</sup>

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*Abstract*

The article examines the place of Hungarian literature in the Serbian literary polysystem, starting from the assumption that, when it comes to translating from less widely spoken languages, the role of personal initiative and the individual qualities of the translator become paramount. It is this same assumption that, on the basis of the comparison between the formation of the translation opus of Danilo Kiš, Aleksandar Tišma, Sava Babić and Árpád Vickó and the condition of possibility of the subsequent generations of translators (to which the author of the article also belongs), demands re-evaluation. The loss of the freedom of choice of works to be translated, which characterizes the new generations of translators, besides informing of the changed status of literature and of the increasing dominance of the capitalist logic of the literary market, induces to reinterpret the situation of the literary translator: if on the one hand he is, today, aware of not having any real power to shape the literary polysystem, on the other hand, however, he is fully aware that he can try to exert influence on the same literary polysystem indirectly, through the act of translation.

*Keywords*

cultural hegemony; literary polysystem; literary translation; types of translators

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<sup>1</sup> The author wishes to express his gratitude to Novica Petrović, the English proofreader of this article.



It is generally known that within the so-called smaller languages and smaller cultures the role of translated literature is not only far more important than in larger ones, the so-called hegemonic cultures, but that it even has a constitutive character, meaning that in the 'polysystem' of such national literatures (an expression coined, at least in the field of translation studies, by Itamar Even-Zohar), translated literature does not only exist parallel with a series of original works created in that particular smaller language, but that these two series, so to speak, intertwine in one direction. In other words, translated literature – especially that originating from larger languages and hegemonic cultures – significantly influences the original literature, actively shaping it. According to Itamar Even-Zohar, «to say that translated literature maintains a central position in the literary polysystem means that it participates actively in shaping the center of the polysystem» (2004, 193). If we accept the thesis of Itamar Even-Zohar that, in this context, Serbian literature, as a small one, belongs to the category of the so-called peripheral literatures, then it is even clearer what we are talking about here. In this regard, Even-Zohar claims that

Since peripheral literatures in the Western Hemisphere tend more often than not to be identical with the literatures of smaller nations, as unpalatable as this idea may seem to us, we have no choice but to admit that within a group of relatable national literatures, such as the literatures of Europe, hierarchical relations have been established since the very beginnings of these literatures. Within this (macro-)polysystem some literatures have taken peripheral positions, which is only to say that they were often modeled to a large extent upon an exterior literature. For such literatures, translated literature is not only a major channel through which fashionable repertoire is brought home, but also a source of reshuffling and supplying alternatives. Thus, whereas richer or stronger literatures may have the option to adopt novelties from some periphery within their indigenous borders, "weak" literatures in such situations often depend on import alone. (Ivi, 194)

The situation is somewhat different when it comes to translating from smaller languages, especially from the languages of neighboring cultures with which there have been centuries of contact (and sometimes, of course,

conflict as well). In such a case, the relationship is different, certainly more equal, and until recently, the individual talent, taste and personal affinities of certain translators played a much bigger role.

When it comes specifically to the translation of Hungarian literature into Serbian, the rich tradition which began in the middle of the nineteenth century continues today, despite the ever-changing cultural and political circumstances. The area of Vojvodina, as a kind of oasis of multilingualism, has always been rich in bilingual intellectuals who spoke both Serbian and Hungarian at a high level. Some of them were also excellent translators. Nevertheless, there is one essential difference between translators-creators, ie. poets or writers who were engaged in translation besides their original work, and professional literary translators for whom translation is their primary vocation. The basic difference between the category of translator-creator and that of the professional translator is that the creator type, in the nature of things, usually chooses what he will translate. Danilo Kiš, whose translation work will be discussed here, said himself, after all: «I never wanted to be a *Kulturträger* or someone who translates for any reason other than personal» (2007, 212).

Given that this paper is conceived as a kind of case study, we shall discuss here only two important names from the aforementioned categories of translators respectively. If we limit ourselves to the period from the second half of the twentieth century to the present day, in the first group of translators-creators we could primarily include Danilo Kiš (1935-1989) and Aleksandar Tišma (1924-2003). In the second group, the so-called professional literary translators, we shall include Sava Babić (1934-2012) and Árpád Vickó (born in 1950). Each of them, in their own way, changed the image of the polysystem of Yugoslav and Serbian (translated) literature.

Danilo Kiš did that primarily through translating poetry. His translations can also be seen as a kind of parallel (micro-)opus. He translated mostly French, Russian, and Hungarian poetry. From Hungarian poetry alone, he translated 274 poems by 26 Hungarian poets. The dominant part of this micro-opus, as many as 99 poems – more than one third of the total corpus of Hungarian poetry he translated – is the poetry of Endre Ady (1877-1919), the greatest exponent of Hungarian modernism, who was Kiš's great youthful discovery and a literary figure that he identified with.

The extent to which young Kiš identified with Ady and his worldview is perhaps best evidenced by Kiš's early travelogue *Izlet u Pariz* (2007, Trip to Paris), where the then twenty-four-year-old Kiš views Paris through Ady's eyes, identifying with the position of a young Eastern European marginal person in the 'center of the world' of that time.

The prose writer from Novi Sad Aleksandar Tišma, by translating exclusively prose, also achieved a significant parallel opus. If Ady's poetry could be considered perhaps the magnum opus of Kiš's translation oeuvre (at least when it comes to translating from Hungarian), then Tišma's most interesting translation endeavor is probably his Serbian translation of the novel *Sorstalanság* (1975; *Fatelessness*, 2004) by the Nobel Prize laureate Imre Kertész. Considering that the theme of the Holocaust was also the dominant theme of Tišma's writing, it could be said that Tišma, in a certain sense, was Kertész' 'ideal translator'. And if books have their own destiny, then it could be said that translations also have their own destiny, that, moreover, they often imitate the destiny of the original. Thus, for example, the publisher was as uninterested in Tišma's translation of Kertész' novel for years as the Hungarian publisher was initially uninterested in publishing Kertész' debut novel – *Fatelessness* itself – in the early 1970s. Only when Kertész received the Nobel Prize in 2002 did the Serbian publisher realize that he had a manuscript of the translation of this novel in the drawer, made by the excellent prose writer Aleksandar Tišma.

The main difference between professional translators and translators-creators, therefore, is that, for the former, translation is his/her primary intellectual activity, and that he/she is often not, unlike the latter, in the situation of being able to choose what to translate. Nevertheless, there are, or at least there have been until recently, exceptions in this respect – translators who understood their work as a certain kind of intellectual mission, making their own selection of authors and works which they considered important. And usually, among such selected authors, there sometimes emerges a name that, over time, acquires a cult status in the culture of the target language, which is usually not at all to be seen in the culture of the source language. This can be the result of the translator's deliberate maneuver, manipulation even. Namely, the translator, by his/her choice and determining the number of works translated, if he/she is persistent enough,

can not only fit the given work into the existing literary polysystem, but can also actively shape that polysystem.

Such is the situation with the work of the esoteric philosopher and essayist, former internal dissident, Béla Hamvas (1897-1968), who gained a cult status among readers in Serbia in the 1990s, owing to the extraordinary effort of the famous translator and essayist Sava Babić (1934-2012). It is no coincidence that Hamvas, with his esoteric and alternative theories and concepts, in the midst of the crisis of the 1990s, gained such a reputation among Serbian readers. It is enough to take a quick look at some of the review titles with which critics once welcomed Hamvas's works to see immediately their great enthusiasm for the works of this writer. On the other hand, the tone of these reviews sometimes gives the impression of a certain sectarian exclusivity, and they are very much at odds with the rather more restrained and objective tone in which the works of other writers are usually welcomed (not only Hungarian, of course). It is possible that the translator and popularizer of Hamvas's works, Sava Babić, wanted it that way, but it seems that this all too obvious disproportion in favor of Hamvas puts other Babić's translations into an unjustly marginal position<sup>2</sup>.

In any case, among the wider readership of Serbia, especially among the older generation, Hamvas is still practically synonymous with Hungarian literature, just as, for example, Sándor Márai (1900-1989) is in Italy. Paradoxically, the aforementioned Márai remained in the shadow of Béla Hamvas, although Sava Babić very lucidly assessed that the best part of Márai's oeuvre is not, for example, the world bestseller *A gyertyák csonkig égnek* (1942; *Embers*, 2001), but his essays and diaries, as well as a novel dedicated to Gyula Krúdy (1878-1933) entitled *Szindbád hazamegy* (1940, Sinbad goes home). It is a great pity that Márai's diaries, written in exile, did not meet a serious critical response in Serbia, given that a potentially very productive parallel with Miloš Crnjanski's (1893-1977) decades of life in emigration could have been drawn.

Árpád Vickó, a little younger than Sava Babić, a translator with a truly impressive oeuvre, can be considered an offshoot of the 'old school' insofar

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<sup>2</sup> I have already written about the Hamvas cult in Serbia elsewhere (Čudić 2018, 27-28).

as he has programmatically translated authors who are (or have been) spiritually and linguistically close to him for decades. And although it would be unfair to single out only one author, the Serbian reception testifies to the fact that, of all the authors presented by Vickó to the Serbian readers, the greatest influence in Serbian intellectual circles has been that of the works by György Konrád (1933-2019), his essayistic works being rather more influential than the novelistic ones. Given the skeptical and ever-questioning spirit of Konrád, which cannot in almost any way be compared to Hamvas's apodicticity, we can assume that the audience that reads Hamvas and the audience that reads Konrád are not necessarily the same.

The logic of the capitalist market, which has been increasingly visible in publishing since 2000, has not, of course, bypassed the Serbian publishing scene. In that sense, the globalization, and the dominance of marketing tricks of the world's major publishing houses and bombastic blurbs by the media certainly do not create an atmosphere in which translators can have a significant impact on publishers. In that sense, Serbian publishers are increasingly guided by the interpretations of a certain book, primarily in the English-speaking world.

Therefore, when the present writer was contacted by the editor of the Belgrade publishing house Plato with the idea of translating the novel *Az ellenállás melankóliája* (1989, *The Melancholy of Resistance*, 1998) by the contemporary Hungarian writer László Krasznahorkai (b. 1954) into Serbian, it didn't come as a big surprise, knowing that the novel had been translated into English and had had a great impact in the English-speaking world. However, in addition to a very important problem to do with translation as craft – how to deal with Krasznahorkai's specific syntax – another essential question arose, namely, what kind of literary polysystem such a work would belong to. The dynamics of reception can, of course, never be accurately predicted, but based on those reviews that place the work in a comparative context, it is clear what paradigm and what horizon of expectations it fits in with, especially considering that the films of Béla Tarr and László Krasznahorkai *Werckmeister Harmonies* (1994) and *Satantango* (2000) preceded the publication of the first translation of Krasznahorkai into Serbian. In that respect, the opinion of the film and literary critic Milan Vlačić stands out. Vlačić (2013, 22), namely, compares this book to José Saramago's novel *O Ano da Morte de Ricardo Reis*

(1984; *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis*, 1982) the novel *Austerlitz* by W.G. Sebald (2001) and Thomas Bernhard's *Der Untergeher* (1983, *The Loser*, 1991).

In a changed constellation of power in the literary market, where a neighboring literature is introduced indirectly, through the echo of a certain work in distant but influential literary milieus (such as British or American), and where the voice of the translator is much less heard than in previous epochs, the question arises as to whether there may be, after all, room on some other level for a certain subversion or radical action that could indirectly influence the interpretation of a certain work, regardless of its reception in the West, making potential domestic interpretations at least a little bit more original and authentic. The answer to this question, it seems, is again given by Itamar Even-Zohar, who recognizes this possibility in the very act of translation – if, in the given culture, translation occupies a central place in the literary polysystem, and we have seen that in smaller cultures this is the case:

Since translational activity participates, when it assumes a central position, in the process of creating new, primary models, the translator's main concern here is not just to look for ready-made models in his home repertoire into which the source texts would be transferable. Instead, he is prepared in such cases to violate the home conventions. Under such conditions the chances that the translation will be close to the original in terms of adequacy (in other words, a reproduction of the dominant textual relations of the original) are greater than otherwise. (2004, 196)

Any such translation attempt is, of course, extremely risky, because it depends on broader literary processes over which the translator does not necessarily have control. According to Even-Zohar,

of course, from the point of view of the target literature the adopted translational norms might for a while be too foreign and revolutionary, and if the new trend is defeated in the literary struggle, the translation made according to its conceptions and tastes will never really gain ground. But if the new trend is victorious, the repertoire (code) of translated literature may be enriched and become more flexible. (*Ibidem*)

I have already written elsewhere about the specific difficulties I faced while translating *The Melancholy of Resistance* into Serbian (Čudić 2016, 19-38). In summary, I would just like to briefly elaborate on a more general, textual rather than a specific lexical or idiomatic example, which could perhaps serve as an illustration of such a more radical decision on the translator's part.

In the opening chapter of the novel (this scene was omitted from the *Werckmeister Harmonies* film), in the ominous train scene, the narrator's voice mixes with the flow of thought one of the passengers, the petit bourgeois Mrs Pflaum. Both of these voices are characterized by the long, circular phrases typical of Krasznahorkai. In contrast, her fellow traveller, an old woman who suddenly invades Mrs Pflaum's private space, speaks in primitive, short sentences, in an ordinary lowland dialect typical of the south-east parts of Alföld, or the Great Hungarian Plain. However, this language is not representative of the so-called "peasant common sense" but is rather a rustic form of speech already contaminated by the discourse of the media and propaganda. The central problem of the translator at this point is how these sudden linguistic and stylistic register changes can be preserved in the actual translation. The main question is which dialect from the rich dialectal repertoire of the Serbian language should be chosen in the translation, or whether it is appropriate to choose a specific dialect at all, or just to somehow deviate from the norm<sup>3</sup>.

The choice of dialect is indeed an extremely delicate matter within the Serbian linguistic corpus, especially given the political and social changes of recent decades. However, political correctness, which would presuppose the use of a neutral language here that is only slightly different from the standard variety and cannot be geographically localized, would quite certainly not result in an adequate textual equivalence in the target language. There are situations where the translator has to take a risk and this, in my opinion, is precisely a situation of that kind because, given that it is an opening scene, it inevitably establishes the basic tone of the text, determining the reading of later chapters. At the same time, this approach

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<sup>3</sup> According to György Papp, it is an unfortunate choice to opt for a specific dialect in such cases (2001, 74-75).



entails potential pitfalls. There are situations, as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak points out, «[...] where attending to the author's stylistic experiments can produce a different text» (2004, 400).

Finally, I decided to create a mixture of dialects that are more characteristic of the speech of Serbs in Bosnia and Croatia, which may sound strange, alienating, or unexpected in the given text, because in the Great Hungarian Plain region and in the adjacent Serbian province of Vojvodina we meet these Serbian dialects less often than, for instance, in the Republika Srpska entity of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The main argument in favor of this decision could be that, in the original text, we encounter an unexpected, almost shocking change of register in this scene, and this had to be somehow transposed into the target language as well. I had a feeling that, in translation, the transition from the standard Serbian language of the narrator to the dialect of the Serbs in Vojvodina would not have had such an unexpected effect. Of course, such subjectivity or radicalism imposed by the translator can also polarize the target readership audience, which, at least judging by word-of-mouth criticism or praise, I have had the opportunity to experience personally.

Hopefully, on the evidence of this example alone, the reader could at least gain a slight insight into the complex cultural and literary sign system in which Krasznahorkai's works are embedded or intended to be embedded in the Serbian context. In such a case, the responsibility for the reception of one or more works by a certain author in a given culture lies primarily on the shoulders of the translator. In this context, the publishing strategy, driven primarily by the pursuit of profit or the hope of a lightning-fast positive critical response, may not help, at least when it comes to Krasznahorkai's works. Because even reading Krasznahorkai, let alone translating his books, is very time-consuming, which directly contradicts the *Zeitgeist* of the era we live in. It is feared that the 'philosophy' of instant solutions will soon encompass the so-called high literature as well. And in this case, one of the first victims of this trend, especially in smaller cultures, in smaller languages, will be translation and translated literature. As Emily Apter puts it, «[...] global languages are shifting the balance of power in the production of world culture» (2006, 3). What could the solution to this problem be?

Perhaps trying to do away with the persistent trend of obligingly following the patterns of Western reception; and trying to choose and act according to our own tastes instead. It is by no means certain that the same authors and the same books should be translated in Eastern and Central Europe, written by Eastern and Central European writers, as in the West. Our reading habits, our historical experiences (and mostly common historical traumas) are very different from those in bigger, western European or overseas nations, despite the sad fact that we have been far too often on the opposite sides of the barricades. In this respect, the Hungarian-language Kalligram Publishing House, based in Bratislava, which follows a deliberate translation strategy, can provide a good example of what is to be done: they translate and publish Slovak and Czech authors guided by their own taste, rather than follow the trends dictated by the Western book markets. The literary polysystem can, it would appear, be actively shaped even from inside a fellow small(er) culture. And the role of the translator, the influence of his/her individual taste in this process is not to be underestimated.

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