

# Southern Slovakia in Literature

## (Stereotypes and Interethnic Contexts)<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

The main topic of the publication is the position and the mode of presentation of Southern Slovakia in the modern Slovak literature. From the point of view of Slovak literature, the most productive regions of the 19th century were the developed Western and Northwestern parts of the old Hungarian Kingdom (1000-1918). Before the beginning of the 20th century, Eastern Slovakia had not been intensively represented in the mainstream Slovak literature. The wide and intensive integration of the eastern regions into Slovak literature was realised only in the period between the two world wars. The last region to be integrated into the Slovak literature was Southern Slovakia. The process of adaptation in respect of this region was realised after the Second World War by the Slovak authors living there. Peter Andruška (1943), Ladislav Ballek (1941) and Ivan Habaj (1943) are the most important representatives of the postwar generation. The following authors have (directly or indirectly) reflected the problem of Southern Slovakia in Slovak literature after 1989: Peter Pišťanek (1960-2015), Daniela Kapitáňová (1956), Pavol Rankov (1964), Ľuboš Dojčan alias Koloman Kocúr (1964) and Peter Balko (1988). Southern Slovakia, after 1989, with its mixture of ethnic groups, has gained a place in Slovakian literature, but it no longer has the exotic aura it had fifty years ago. It still retains its borderland, multi-ethnic character, but in the meantime, Slovakian literature itself has become more understanding towards multi-ethnicity. That does not imply that the region's conflict-ridden nature has changed completely. At the same time, the Slovakian South is also becoming an increasingly magical region, which is an entirely new phenomenon in Slovakian literature.

**Keywords:** Hungarians; literature; majority; minority; Slovakia; South; symbol

The main topic of the publication is the position and the mode of presentation of Southern Slovakia in modern Slovak literature. This literature was born at the end of 18<sup>th</sup> century after the creation of the first Slovak literary language by Anton Bernolák (1762-1813).<sup>2</sup> The first modern Slovak novel was the novel *René mládenca príhodi a skúsenosti* (*The stories and experience of young René*) written by Jozef Ignác Bajza (1755-1836) in 1784. From the point of view of Slovak literature, the most productive regions of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were the developed Western and Northwestern parts of the old Hungarian Kingdom (1000-1918). The main centre

<sup>1</sup> Prepared and published with subsidy from Kultminor Project No. 18-170-00735.

<sup>2</sup> Anton Bernolák was a Catholic priest who had a talent for languages. He studied in the General Seminar in Bratislava/Pozsony/Pressburg. He published the new Slovak grammar book in 1787. He is the author of the large five-languages vocabulary, too (Czech-German-Hungarian-Latin-Slovak).

of these regions was Tynravia with the traditions of the oldest university<sup>3</sup> in the country and with good catholic educational and publishing infrastructure.

Since the first part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Northwestern region (Liptov/Liptó, Orava/Árva, Turiec/Turóc), with its important centres of the Slovak protestant community, has also become very active in literary life. Protestants represented only a minority of the Slovak population, but their influence during the romantic and realistic periods of Slovak literature can be qualified as predominant. The majority of authors were Lutheran protestants. Literary life was relatively active in the Middle Slovakian region, too. The protestant clergymen and intellectuals from the Gemer/Gömör, Hont and Little Hont regions were especially active. The protestant intellectuals lead by Ľudovít Štúr (1815-1856), Jozef Miloslav Hurban (1817-1888) and Michal Miloslav Hodža (1811-1870) adapted the new Slovak literary language on the basis of the Middle Slovak dialect. Later the Catholic authors had also recognized this reform and from the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, all representatives of Slovak literature started to use this language.<sup>4</sup>

Before the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Eastern Slovakia had not been represented intensively in mainstream Slovak literature, but many intellectuals studied in the famous educational institutions of Prešov/Eperjes.<sup>5</sup> (Vasiľová 2008, 11) The wide and intensive integration of the eastern regions into Slovak literature was realised only in the period between the two world wars. Bratislava/Pozsony, the city which had become the capital of Slovakia<sup>6</sup>, transformed into a predominantly Slovak cultural city in the interwar period, too. Before the First World War, the city had been populated predominantly by Germans, Hungarians and Slovaks, but the high number of Czech and Slovak civil servants, journalists and teachers, together with the newly arrived inhabitants, had gradually changed the ethnic and cultural character of the city.

The last region to be integrated into Slovak literature was Southern Slovakia. The process of adaptation in respect of this region was realised after the Second World War by the Slovak authors living there. (Žilka 1981, 39) Peter Andruška (1943), Ladislav Ballek (1941-2014) and Ivan Habaj (1943) are the most important „Southern” representatives of the postwar generation. They were Slovaks residing in Southern Slovakia, i.e. in the region where Hungarians formed the majority. (Pynsent 1989, 80-81) Only Andruška was born in this region, Ballek and Habaj came from the northern and central parts of Slovakia, but they lived in ethnically mixed regions from their childhood. The father of Ballek was a Slovak civil servant (customs officer). The family of Habaj arrived to this region after the First World War

<sup>3</sup> This university was established in 1635 by the Hungarian cardinal-archbishop Péter Pázmány.

<sup>4</sup> Only some authors living in Eastern Slovakia represented the exception. These authors with Slovak national identities used Eastern Slovakian dialects in the first half of 19<sup>th</sup> century. E.g. Ján Andraščík and Andrej Čorba.

<sup>5</sup> The main protestant educational institution in the old North-Hungary (currently Slovakia) was the college in Eperjes/Prešov. The college was established in 1665 by protestant gentry and the citizens of the six free royal cities represented in the Lutheran synode (congregation). See Vasiľová, Darina: Prešovské kolégium Potiského dištriktu evanjelickej cirkvi a. v. (1850-1918). Universum, Prešov, 2008. 11.

<sup>6</sup> Slovakia was one of the four administrative-regional units of the first Czechoslovak Republic (1918-1938) in paralell with Bohemia, Moravia-Silesia and Subcarpathia.

to take part in the process of Slovak (and Czech) „colonization.”<sup>7</sup>

Ballek and Habaj have tried to present the Slovak „South” by using the method of making it look exotic. They drew a parallel between the cold, green, clear Slovak „North” and the more colourful, warm and complicated southern part of the country. The typical tree of the Slovak South is acacia in the contrast to the Northern and Slavonic limetree. The ethnically mixed heroes of Ballek are more or less urbanized persons.<sup>8</sup> Habaj’s heroes are mostly people from the countryside. For Andruška, the coexistence of Hungarians and Slovaks in Southern Slovakia is more or less a natural fact. The majority of Slovak readers got acquainted with the southern part of their country from the novels of the above-mentioned authors.

The following authors have (directly or indirectly) reflected the problem of Southern Slovakia in Slovak literature after 1989: Peter Pišťanek (1960-2015), Daniela Kapitáňová (1956), Pavol Rankov (1964), Ľuboš Dojčan alias Koloman Kocúr (1964) and Peter Balko (1988). Daniela Kapitáňová used the pen name Samko Tále to publish her *Kniha o cintoríne (Book About the Cemetery)*, set in the city of Komárno in Southern Slovakia. The novel parodies the nationalist propaganda and the general sentiment of Slovakia in the 1990’s through a mentally retarded protagonist (Samko Tále). The situation is similar in Balko’s novel, *Vtedy v Lošonci. Via Lošonc (Then in Losonc. Via Losonc)*, which, however, uses the perspective of a little boy to present various historical periods of 20<sup>th</sup> century Lučenec/Losonc.

In his novel *Rivers of Babylon*, Peter Pišťanek offers us a view of the underworld of Pozsony after its 1989 transformation. In that book, Hungarians are presented as rather provincially-minded people from the social periphery. One of the most popular authors of the period is Peter Rankov (1964), whose novel *Stalo sa prvého septembra (alebo inokedy) (It happened on the 1<sup>st</sup> of September (or some other time))* is set in the Southern Slovakian mixed-ethnicity town of Levice/Léva. Actually, Rankov’s main intention was not to bring the southern region closer to Slovakian readers, but rather to describe a highly complex period of Slovakia’s modern history. In fact, Levice/Léva was only a suitable backdrop for the dynamic action. The representation of the south of Slovakia and the Hungarians living there in a rural setting is also present in the postmodern novelette *Apáka mamáka* (2002) by Ľuboš Dojčan (pen name: Koloman Kocúr). The text uses an intensely mixed Slovakian language that is primarily characteristic of older ethnic Hungarians living in Slovakia. Another novel by the same author, *Sracia zbraň (Shit Weapon)*, set in a real Southern Slovakian village around the time of the disintegration of our civilization, i.e. 2031-2032, is more absurd. Kocúr’s Southern Slovakia is still recognisable for the reader, but no longer on account of its characteristic terrain, social structures or climate, but much rather its mixed (hybrid) language and the absurdity of linguistic arguments in the nationalist discussions. (Benyovszky 2018, 3)

The short novel *Svätý mäsiar zo Šamorína (Saint Butcher of Somorja)* (2016) from Peter Pečonka (pen name of an unknown autor) has in a similar style. This book also features a war between Hungarians and Slovaks in the near future, but the conflict also features Romani guerrillas and Czech commandos. The troubles

<sup>7</sup> The title of the Habaj’s trilogy from 1980-1986 is *Kolonisti (Colonists I-III.)*

<sup>8</sup> The most famous novel of Ladislav Ballek is *Pomocník (Assistant/Helpmate)*.

begin with a football match that turns into a battle and in which a young girl loses her life. The story of the entire novel seems absurd, but readers are also made uncomfortable by the postmodern borrowings from the real world of Slovakian-Hungarian relations and politics after 1989. Southern Slovakia, with its mixture of ethnic groups, has gained a place in Slovakian literature, but it no longer has the exotic aura it had fifty years ago. It still retains its borderland, multi-ethnic character, but in the meantime, Slovakian literature itself has become more understanding towards multi-ethnicity. That does not imply that the region's conflict-ridden nature has changed completely. At the same time, the Slovakian South is also becoming an increasingly magical region, which is an entirely new phenomenon in Slovakian literature.

The picture of Southern Slovakia in Slovak literature displays the typical features of multicultural coexistence and ethnic stereotypes. These stereotypes in literature have a very long history. Hungarian literature before 1918 presented the Slovaks as an integrated regional part of the Hungarian population with lower provincial and social status. (Žilka 2018, 20-21) Slovak literature of this period presented the Hungarians as a predominant community of the Monarchy (civil servants, doctors, attorneys, professors etc.) and, importantly, as enemies of the Slovaks. However, the Slovak national movement saw its main enemy in the type of the „Magyarized” (assimilated) Slovak renegades. (Fülöpová 2018)

This situation changed after the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, but only slowly. The image of Hungarians as representatives of the higher classes and of an unfriendly state prevailed during the interwar period, too. The image of Hungarians became more complicated and complex in literature after the Second World War. Hungarians in the Slovak novels – especially after 1989 and from the perspective of the rich inhabitants of the capital city, Bratislava – have been portrayed as conservative and provincially-minded people, with a greater degree of paternalistic understanding.

As for the perspective from the smaller cities and towns, this is more different. For example in the district town of Levice/Léva, situated on the traditional Hungarian-Slovak ethnic border in Southern Slovakia, we find a large number of Hungarian and Slovak intellectuals and writers. The Hungarian writer Géza Féja (1900-1978) wrote a very interesting book<sup>9</sup> about the city in the genre of Sociography. The main „hero” of this novel is a small Hungarian city in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Féja described the mentality and problems of different classes and segments of the local society before the First World War. Thirty years after, the Slovak Anton Hykisch (1932) also wrote his own novel<sup>10</sup> about the town. This book is less political and social. Hykisch focused on the interpersonal problems of his heroes living in the city with the nuclear power plant. They were afraid of nuclear catastrophe like the one in Chernobyl. The description of the city in the period of late socialism is more or less realistic. The author stressed the mixed character of the city without the ethnic tensions. For Hykisch, Levice/Léva represents the typical southern city.

The perspective viewed from the southern cities and regions is very original in

9 The title of the book is *Bölcsődal* (Song from cradle, 1958).

10 He is the author of the novel *Atómové leto* (The nuclear summer, 1988).

the novels of Lajos Grendel (1948), a Hungarian writer living in Slovakia as a member of an ethnic minority. Grendel has created the topos of New Hont in literature. New Hont is the fiction of the marginalized small town on the periphery of global history with mixed population. New Hont is not an exotic place from the point of view of the mainstream Slovak and Hungarian national cultures. The author used the methods of magical realism. His novels are popular among both the Hungarian and Slovak readers.

## ANNEX

### Symbols and stereotypes regarding the Slovak North and South

North	South
Upperland/Highland	Lowerland
hills and mountains	plain
pine-needles	green-woods
limetree	acacia
brooks	rivers
Granum	Danube
cold weather	heat summers
white winter	muddy winter
rurality	urban culture
heavy circumstances for a life	fertility
natural cleanliness, moral purity	complicated and sophisticated mentality
homogeneity	heterogeneity
poverty	wealth
villages and small towns	cities and villages
inland	borderland
farmers and craftsmen	farmers, businessmen
anti-capitalism	enterprise, business spirit
predominant white, green and blue colours	predominant green, yellow and brown colours
moderate style and mentality, temperance	wild and sprightly temperament or mentality, sometimes cruelty
peace, quiet	social and mental dynamism
submission	pride and self-confidence
Slovaks	Hungarians, Slovaks, gypsies
simple foods	sharp foods
wild nature	luxuriant vegetation
good air	heavy air, sultriness, sultry atmosphere
stability	often changes of borders

woods	fruitfull gardens
traditional vegetables, forest fruits	fruits from gardens
close, introvert mentality	openess, opening mentality
shaved faces	moustache
blond hairs	dark hairs

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