

# Slovakian Hungarian prose in Slovakia after the change of regime in 1989

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## ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

Received: September 19, 2020 • Accepted: September 29, 2020

Published online: February 16, 2021

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### ABSTRACT

The present study showcases the achievements of Slovakian Hungarian prose in the past three decades. It shows the changes in the literary institutional system brought about by the change of regime in 1989. It devotes detailed attention to the careers of Lajos Grendel and Alfonz Talamon; furthermore, it highlights some characteristic poetics and uses of language which resulted in intriguing works by Gábor Farnbauer, Attila Gyóry, Daniel Levický Archleb, Zsófia Bárczi, József Gazdag, Norbert György, and Péter Hunčík. It also touches upon the experiments of the younger generation of prose writers such as Zoltán Szalay and Pál Száz.

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### KEYWORDS

Slovakia, prose, change of regime, institutional system, postmodern, Lajos Grendel, Alfonz Talamon

### INTRODUCTION

A unique characteristic of Hungarian literature is that it has become polycentric as a result of the political decisions and the social changes caused by the post-1918 restructuring of public administration. According to Péter Szirák, this cultural polycentricism, differing from other language cultures, had come into being through the territorial division of a unified national identity (Szirák, 1999, p. 403). This polycentric literature was published in regional canons –

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Romanian (Transylvanian), (Czecho) Slovakian (Upper Hungarian), Yugoslavian (Vojvodinian), Transcarpathian (Soviet Union), and Western (Western European, American, Australian) literature (Németh, 2013, p. 20).

### Historical framework

(Czecho) Slovakian Hungarian literature goes back a hundred years and is usually divided into periods based on historical–political turning points. The term was coined after World War I, when the regions of Upper Hungary inhabited by Hungarians had become part of a new state following the breakup of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Geographically, they belonged to Czechoslovakia, but citizens of Hungarian nationality were not members of the new nation. Therefore, Hungarian people living there had to struggle to attain their positions, create their own cultural institutional system, and develop a new sense of self, all of which was a huge challenge in the 1920s, and literature took on a serious role in this. *Slovenskoism* was based on the experience of being different: Hungarians who ended up in Czechoslovakia differentiated themselves from Hungarians living in the mother country (i.e., in Hungary) while developing a new kind of relationship with the Czechs and Slovaks within a democratic state which provided a freer atmosphere than dictatorial Hungary, which retained semi-feudal characteristics. As a result of this change in position, the notion of *minority messianism* was born, according to which Hungarians separated from their center of culture and through their exceptional situation can show their nation new paths and can bridge the gap in a mediating role between the Hungarian and both Czech and Slovak cultures. However, after two decades of intense laying of cultural foundations, by virtue of the First Vienna Award in 1938 Hungary regained these territories inhabited by Hungarians; and as a result, the established structure of publishing houses and periodicals collapsed. In Tiso's first Slovak Republic in and around Bratislava and Nitra, there lived a significant number of Hungarians even after the First Vienna Award, but opportunities for publication had become very scarce for Hungarian intellectuals. Between 1945 and 1948, Hungarians living in Czechoslovakia were deprived of their civil rights because of an allegation of collective war crimes. During this period, also called the years of homelessness, in order to create a nation state via a forced population exchange, a great number of Hungarians living in Slovakia were forced to move to the Czech territories (in place of the Germans who had been driven away) and to Hungary (in place of the Slovaks living in Hungary who voluntarily moved back to Czechoslovakia). The Hungarians living in Slovakia could perhaps stay in their country of birth by reslovakization (which entailed the renunciation of their Hungarian nationality). This was a period of literary silence, since during the liquidation of minority institutions, Hungarian language periodicals and publishers were banned. The communist dictatorship established from 1948 on expected unconditional loyalty from Hungarians living in Czechoslovakia. As the situation gradually got back to normal, cultural life was reorganized in a strictly ideological framework: in 1958, *Irodalmi Szemle* [Literary Review], the first literary periodical in decades was started, and in 1969, the publishing house Madách Könyvkiadó was established. The fall of the communist regime, the so-called Velvet Revolution of 1989, brought about new changes, political pluralism, free-competition capitalism and the consumer society. Democratic Czechoslovakia split up in 1993 and the Hungarian population living there had to reposition itself in the independent Slovak Republic, often having to face political headwind.



## Self-definition and self-representation

The changes of empires, borders and ideologies also affected literary processes: the regular halts in publishing and having to start anew forced the (Czecho) Slovakian Hungarian literature to constantly question its own existence (Hangácsi, 2017, p. 39). This shows itself in the diversity of names, in the problem of structures with modifiers (Bárczi, 2011a, p. 9): between the two World Wars, the term “Slovensko” Hungarian literature was in use (the term carries a territorial reference, Slovakia’s place name used in Slovakian but with a Slovakian Hungarian transcription, which expresses the tension between foreignness and familiarity). During the time of totalitarianism, besides the geographical denominator (Czechoslovakian), the more general attributes of minority and nationality were also used, which are legal and political allusions to the relationship with the Czech and Slovak majority (the vulnerability to power), whereas the term “transborder,” created from a motherland perspective, also raises the question whether center and periphery can be divided. After the change of regime in 1989, beside Slovakian Hungarian, the syntagm “upland Hungarian literature” also began to gain traction (the latter mainly in non-academic publications). All of the above variations call our attention to the restraining framework of cultural boundaries, the peripheral situation of literature.

The generation arising in the early 2000s also debated the durability and legitimacy of the notion of “Slovakian Hungarian literature” and deemed it unsuitable to describe the current state of events. One of the originators of this debate, Zoltán Németh, whose much-quoted essay, “Szlovákiai magyar irodalom: létezik-e vagy sem?” [Slovakian Hungarian literature: does it exist or not?], while offering numerous possibilities of categorizing the works and careers which might be grouped under the term, also brings face-to-face the two directions of thinking about Slovakian Hungarian literature. The first view primarily concentrates on the text itself, while the other emphasizes historical, social, cultural and territorial determination (Németh, 2004a, pp. 11–27). József Keserű suggests that Slovakian Hungarian literature should be discussed exclusively in an institutional sense: in the context of esthetic communication, he suggests using the more neutral term “minority” (Keserű, 2010, p. 79). In his further studies, Zoltán Németh repeatedly revisits the problem that in the minority literature approach, the question of identity versus language is decisive (Németh, 2013, p. 19). He identifies two different interpretations: according to the first one, Slovakian Hungarian literature is a specific literature which profits from the achievements of Hungarian and Slovak literature, and by discussing the fates of minorities, it also takes on a culture preserving role mediating through language. The second approach, on the other hand, posits that the language of Slovakian Hungarian literature is colloquial Hungarian; and as a result of this, these works are born out of different poetics and do not really share any special common characteristics (Németh, 2015, p. 82). Zoltán Csehy talks about a relationship oscillating between these two extremes, in which both aesthetics-based and devoted literature can exist, meaning that minority literature can be on the one hand the subcultural field for striving for emancipation, but on the other hand it is also a stigma borne by the author through assuming different (community) roles (Csehy, 2016, p. 168).

## The institutional framework of (Slovakian Hungarian) literary life

As a result of the change of regime, the structure and conditionalities of (Czecho)Slovakian literary life have changed. Providing financial support was the biggest problem, which had been



heavily influenced by the relationship between the governing parties and the Hungarian community in Slovakia. Besides public sources, private individuals, foundations and local governments helped with publishing and arranging literary events. The Hungarian support system has also regularly contributed to providing the necessary financial background for Slovakian Hungarian literary life; but at the same time, granting of financial support has become subject to the expectations of political governments, especially in recent years.

Before 1989, socialist cultural policy kept the potentially subversive, anti-regime literary movements easily under control via its monolithic structures (a single, heavily censored publishing house and one periodical were allowed to exist), but after the change of regime, new magazines and publishing houses with individual profiles emerged one after the other. Besides *Irodalmi Szemle* that has been active since 1958, other venues appeared in the literary scene: *Kalligram* in 1992, *Szörös Kő* in 1996, and *Opus* in 2006. These journals have certainly undergone changes throughout the years according to different editorial concepts. *Irodalmi Szemle*, currently headed by Attila Mizser, is a significant forum of contemporary literature (not only for authors living in Slovakia) which also stands out with its thematic blocks (e.g., transculturalism, pseudonym literature, Palóc Hungaro-futurism). Besides its printed version, it is also published with different contents online. *Kalligram* (with current editor-in-chief Sándor Mészáros) does have a strong canon-forming potential even on a pan-Hungarian level, thanks to the significant Hungarian and transborder authors published on its pages, its thematic issues and last but not least, its unique design (created by Tibor Hrapka). *Opus*, the journal of the Hungarian Writers' Association in Slovakia, opened up to the use of multimedia as well as both popular and fringe genres, especially under the editorship of Péter H. Nagy. (Recently, there has been a change of editors; the journal's profile under Péter Jancsó as editor-in-chief is still evolving.) *Szörös Kő*, which is mainly published online these days (editor-in-chief: Attila Balázs F.), primarily provides publication opportunities for early-career writers. The extremely dynamic online cultural magazine, *dunszt.sk* (editor-in-chief: Zsolt Beke) has been around since 2016. It does not only reflect on literary (and artistic) processes but has also been publishing high quality literary material for the last few months.

Besides literary journals, publishing houses also have an important role. A number of new publishers: Kalligram Kiadó, Nap Kiadó, Lilium Aurum Kiadó, AB-Art Kiadó, Méry Ratio, Plectrum, Phoenix, and Pozsonyi Kifli have emerged alongside Madách Kiadó, which has undergone several changes after the change of regime. Among these, Kalligram, founded by László Szigeti, became the most prominent due to the unparalleled value it promotes both in terms of quality and quantity. As a transborder publishing house, it has succeeded in becoming an intellectual and cultural center that influences the development and history of pan-Hungarian and even Slovakian literature. All of this can be traced quite well by highlighting a few of their activities: they have published significant contemporary authors, from Miklós Mészöly through Endre Kukorelly, Szilárd Borbély, Zoltán Csehy, and Dénes Krusovszky to Zoltán Németh; their *Tegnap és Ma* [Yesterday and today] book series, which includes more than thirty monographs so far, leading literary scholars (e.g., Mihály Szegedy-Maszák, Péter Balassa, Ernő Kulcsár Szabó, Gábor Tolcsvai Nagy, Beáta Thomka, Péter Szirák, Zoltán Németh) discuss and reinterpret oeuvres of artists like Géza Otlík, Péter Nádas, Péter Esterházy, László Nagy, Miklós Mészöly, Lajos Grendel, and Alfonz Talamon, among others, applying up-to-date understanding of literature; it has also started a similar series with the aim of reevaluating important oeuvres of Slovakian literature; the publishing house has taken upon itself to publish critical editions of



canonical Hungarian authors (e.g., Dezső Kosztolányi and Gyula Krúdy); its book series *Mercurius Könyvek* [Mercurius Books] has provided opportunities for historical, sociological and linguistic scholarly analyses of the Slovakian Hungarian experience; it has called attention to Central Europe as a unified cultural sphere through the works of Czech, Polish, and Slovak authors (Bohumil Hrabal, Tadeusz Konwicki, Dominik Tatarka, and others); it has played a great role in introducing Hungarian literature (Sándor Márai, Péter Esterházy, Pál Závada, etc.) to Slovakia; etc. (Németh 2018, pp. 98–100).

As a result of the change of regime the cultural space became freer and more open, with more possibility to cross over: differing from earlier practice (only in exceptional cases could they publish their works in Hungarian periodicals abroad), the authors living in Slovakia could not only choose a forum from within the country but could publish in Hungarian and other transborder print journals (*Élet és Irodalom*, *Alföld*, *Bárka*, *Tisztatáj*, *Jelenkor*, *Műút*, *Prae*, *Korunk*, *Látó*, *Híd*) and online platforms (*szifonline.hu*, *kulter.hu*, etc.). It also happened that a poet, critic, literary historian living in Slovakia became the editor of a Hungarian journal for years (e.g., Zoltán Németh for *Új Forrás* between 2001 and 2006), or even editor-in-chief (Attila Mizser for *Palócföld* between 2008 and 2016). Thanks to the abolishing of cultural borders, authors living in Slovakia could become members of literary organizations (József Attila Kör [Attila József Circle], Szépírók Társasága [Society of Hungarian Authors], Fiala Írók Szövetsége [Fellowship of Young Writers]), they were eligible for scholarships and awards (József Attila Prize, Kossuth Prize, Márai Prize, Bródy Prize, Artisjus Prize, Alföld Prize, etc.).

It is important to highlight that in the 90s, several discourses of literary theory living alongside each other provided frameworks of interpretation, and building upon these, a new generation of literary historians, theoreticians and critics (Krisztián Benyovszky, Zsófia Bárczi, Zoltán Németh, Zoltán Csehy, Anikó Polgár, József Keserű) emerged at the millennium. Its members, due to their theoretical knowledge, made studies and criticism a strong genre after their lack in earlier periods (Németh, 2003, p. 240). Not only did they reinterpret the already published works, but also generated an intense critical reception for fresh writings, helping them become canonized. At the same time they did not consider Slovakian Hungarian literature their exclusive field of analysis. In 2001 they founded the Sambucus Society of Literary Studies, and in 2006 they launched *Partitúra* [Partiture], a periodical of literary studies. This journal featuring theoretical treatises, analyses and reviews has been published by the Faculty of Central European Studies at the Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra since 2007, with Krisztián Benyovszky as editor-in-chief.

The national organization of the representatives of Slovakian Hungarian literacy, the Society of Czechoslovakian Hungarian Writers, was already formed in December 1989. From January 1993 on, under the name of Society of Slovakian Hungarian Writers, it has taken on the responsibility of protecting authors' rights and organizing literary life: it announces public calls (Pegasus, Arany Opus), organizes literary festivals and talent nurturing camps, hosts publications, establishes and awards prizes (Imre Forbáth Prize for poetry, Alfonz Talamon Prize for prose, Tibor Simkó Prize for children's literature, Lajos Turczel Prize for social science). From the 2010s on, a number of members have left the society in several waves because of their dissatisfaction with its functioning and mentality. In 2019, an independent organization was formed under the name *Bázis – Magyar Irodalmi és Művészeti Egyesület Szlovákiában* [Base – Hungarian Association of Literature and Art in Slovakia], with members including fine artists, dancers and actors alongside literary artists.



## Tradition, antecedents

The constant interruptions characteristic of Slovakian Hungarian literature have also left their mark on the relationship to tradition. Authors often felt that they had to start anew, and for this reason they would battle heroically to establish a tradition. At the same time, Zoltán Csehy points out that everyone who sets foot in the literary space devoid of political or geographical boundaries has to face the Hungarian literary tradition and decide which values to embrace and renounce. “Only a dilettante lacks literary traditions, someone who hopes for a place for themselves in a narrowed down space” (Csehy, 2008 – The trans.). Zoltán Németh calls Slovakian Hungarian literature an offshoot literature, one that reflects the changes in Hungary with some delay, “living off of cultural morsels coming from the center that is Hungary.” (Németh, 2004a, p. 26) It reflects ironically on the non-existent tradition, e.g., Lajos Grendel in his “Csehszlovákiai magyar novella” [Czechoslovakian Hungarian short story], and the “oeuvre” of Sándor Tsúszó, brought to life in the 90s by Zoltán Híznyai and later used as a collective mask or disguise.<sup>1</sup>

Between the two World Wars, the communal-social, identity-forming function of literature was brought to the fore, which resulted in the marginalization of the esthetic function (Bárczi, 2014, p. 19), and resulted in the proliferation of dilettantism. Although poetry was the dominant genre of the period, Zoltán Fábry and other literary critics urged the birth of a Czechoslovakian Hungarian novel to systematically examine the existential and moral concerns of individuals stuck in a minority position, as well as the changes brought about by the turn of political events (Bárczi, 2014, p. 24). This program could not be completely fulfilled by the dominant writers of the era, such as Mihály Tamás, István Darkó, Viktor Egri, Piroska Szenes, and Pál Neubauer; yet the expectation lived on in the second half of the century and only lost its primacy after the change of regime. In the interwar period, several different trends, poetics and interpretative styles lived side by side in the Slovensko Hungarian literature, from certain strands of esthetic modernism through the avant-garde to neo-rusticism.

Between 1948 and 1989, the ideological violence rooted in Marxist-Leninist principles left its mark on works of literature, the rules of which were dictated by the so-called socialist realist style. Politically loaded, generic works were born showing a manipulated image of reality. Due to the dilettantism of their formulation, these texts might appear as parodies to contemporary readers (Németh, 2010, p. 98). The intention of modernizing prose can be observed from the sixties, even in the case of authors who are considered representatives of realist prose, such as Gyula Duba and László Dobos. Also striving to create the Slovakian Hungarian novel, they both started experimenting with metaphorization, the deconstruction of linear structures, and film-like cuts. The unique prose language of Dezső Monoszlóy, who applied the “dream technique” and the circular structure, had a great effect on the members of the so called “Fekete szél” [Black Wind] generation<sup>2</sup> emerging in the seventies. Lajos Grendel, who also started out around this

<sup>1</sup>Several poets and prose writers – e.g., Slovakian Alfonz Talmon, Zoltán Csehy, István Z. Németh, Hungarian Lajos Parti Nagy, Yugoslavian Bálint Szombathy, Transcarpathian Károly Balla D. – have published works under the pseudonym “Sándor Tsúszó”. Moreover, fictitious studies have been written about the fictitious author, containing analyses of his fictitious volumes, and even situating his oeuvre in literary history (Németh, 2015, pp. 86–87).

<sup>2</sup>The authors included in the *Fekete szél* [Black Wind] anthology, edited by Gyula Duba and published in 1972: József Bereck, Antal Fülöp, Ferenc Keszeli, Magda Kovács, János Kövesdi, Anikó Mikola, Imre Varga, and Gábor Wurcel.



time, doubted the communicability of history, and placed the tradition of the Slovakian Hungarian novel in an ironic or absurd context (Bárczi, 2011b, p. 29).

In the 80s, members of the Iródia-movement or -generation found the Slovakian Hungarian theme to be unproductive, and they consciously connected themselves to the processes in Hungarian and world literature. Their most important authors – Alfonz Talamon, Gábor Farnbauer, Zoltán Hizsnyai, József Juhász R. – did not employ registers strengthening regionality but instead exploited the possibilities of esthetic creation of meaning, thus having a decisive effect on literary movements in the 90s (Németh, 2005a, p. 36).

### Poetics, prose writers, oeuvres

1989 brought about a chiefly political change, of course, which created new possibilities, mainly in the construction of a literary establishment. But the changes in literary processes do not (necessarily or exclusively) depend on politics and cannot be linked to specific dates. In any case, the postmodern paradigm shift and the tendencies referred to as the “prose turn” taking place in Hungarian literature since the 70s also had a seminal effect on authors living in Slovakia. Zoltán Németh differentiates between three postmodernist strategies. The early postmodern responds to the challenges of existentialism and realism based on the experiences of late modernism: its characteristics are a sensitivity towards metaphysical problems, the inclusion of metanarrative elements, the multiplication of points of view, the play of identities, the imitation of style, the productive recycling of past experiences and textual forms, and the use of irony and parody (Németh, 2012, p. 16). Its most significant branch is magical realism, which walks the thin line between the realistic and the irrational, introducing a community through the use of myths, tales, and folklore in the course of its metaphorical storytelling. Németh groups the works of Miklós Mészöly, Péter Nádas, László Krasznahorkai, Ádám Bodor, János Háty, László Darvasi, Lajos Gren del, Norbert György, Gábor Kálmán, Zsófia Bárczi and others under the category of early postmodern. The second, so called “areferential” strategy of the postmodern builds on neo-avant-garde experiences on the material level of the text. According to the representatives of the paradigm referred to as “textual literature” – Péter Esterházy, László Garaczi, Lajos Parti Nagy, Gábor Farnbauer, among others – the text is the world itself: they consider reality outside of language illusory, which is why conscious intertextuality, rewriting, imitation of style, ironic-parodistic phrasings, an eclectic style, linguistic gags, and the mixing of registers become important for them (Németh, 2012, p. 24). An accompanying phenomenon of this strategy is the play of masked identities, from Esterházy’s Lili Csokonai through Lajos Parti Nagy’s Jolán Sárbogárdi to Zoltán Hizsnyai’s Sándor Tsúszó. The third kind of postmodern (referred to as “anthropological”) focuses on the questions of power, tackling social issues, the nature of otherness, and the displaying of marginal points of view. It takes inspiration from the experiences of postcolonial and feminist literatures. Autobiographical genres (diaries, memoirs, autobiographies) gain greater value (Németh, 2012, p. 35). Its representatives include Péter Esterházy, Pál Závada, Endre Kukorelly, György Dragomán, Krisztina Tóth, Lajos Gren del, Péter Hunčík, and Pál Száz. These three strategies of the postmodern are not strictly separate: all three of these might appear within a single oeuvre.

All these phenomena are also observable in the development of Slovakian Hungarian literature. The following sections will discuss this: I will highlight a few oeuvres of serious professional reputation as well as works elaborating on unique poetics, which will provide a possible pattern as we twist and turn the kaleidoscope of “Slovakian Hungarian literature”.



The oeuvre of **Lajos Grendel** (1948–2018) is without a doubt among the most important achievements in contemporary Hungarian prose. His extraordinarily successful start and quick canonization was helped by a lively Hungarian reception, which viewed the author as one of the active participants of the prose turn. (The validity of the earlier interpretations was later doubted and further elaborated upon by later interpreters.) He is the only Slovakian Hungarian author featured in Ernő Kulcsár Szabó's literary history, in which he receives praise for the creation of his unique storytelling formula, developed from the language use of minority literary tradition, as shown in his novel trilogy *Éleslövészet* [Live-fire Shooting] (1981), *Galeri* [Gang] (1982) and *Áttételek* [Transpositions] (1985) (Kulcsár Szabó, 1993, p. 167). Examining his early prose, Péter Szirák pointed out that Grendel recognized the boundaries of dialogic ability of the Slovakian Hungarian literary tradition and the deficiencies of its esthetic values, and therefore – influenced by Miklós Mészöly and Péter Esterházy, among others – he set off in a different direction: on the one hand, he was interested in the wider sphere of the Hungarian epic tradition – Gyula Krúdy and the turn-of-the-century short story writing – and on the other, in the French *Nouveau Roman* (Szirák, 1998, p. 106). In the novels *Éleslövészet* and *Galeri*, the mediated nature of the past, the loss of trust in the communicability of history, the blurring of lines between fiction and reality and the thematizing of the discontinuity of personal and social existence all have central roles. From a narrative perspective, he chooses to break linear time, disregards cause and effect, uses mosaic-like editing, and applies the marked distancing of story and storytelling and the multiplication of metanarrative elements. Zoltán Németh assumes that the view of history in Grendel's early novels had an effect on the (pseudo)historical novels which appeared in great numbers in the 90s: the works of János Háty, László Darvasi, and Zsolt Láng (Németh, 2015a, p. 85). Also, in *Áttételek*, the conjuring up of the past has an important role as it balances out the protagonist-narrator's empty life. In this story of decline, self-analytical and self-reflective passages are built into the storytelling.

In Grendel's novels published at the turn of the decade and in the early 90s, one can observe a point of view perpetually questioning the individual's existential situation. *Szakítások* [Breakups] (1989) introduces the story of a love triangle into a moral parable of clashing ways of living. In *Thészeusz és a fekete özvegy* [Theseus and the Black Widow] (1991), focusing on personal crisis, he establishes an intertextual connection with *Szakítások*, while narrowing down the space for procedures of creating meaning of myth deformation (Szirák, 1998, p. 110). In *Einstein harangjai* [Einstein's Bells] (1992), the author exposes the operating mechanisms of Eastern European absurd systems in a fictitious autobiography, while presenting the falling apart of the protagonist-narrator's personality in a farcical way. *És eljön az ő országa* [And His Kingdom Shall Come] (1996) intends to portray the period leading up to and following 1989. According to Zoltán Németh, the novel may be interpreted from the perspective of Central European catastrophism, which conveys the crisis of a shaken trust in the freedom and self-image of a personality (Németh, 2000a, p. 138). The critic does not differentiate between various stages of his oeuvre; instead, he calls attention to Grendel's "shifts in style", which do not necessarily coincide with the textual boundaries of the novels. He differentiates five types of language: the first one is the decentralized-deconstructed-relativized post-historical text (*Éleslövészet*); the second one is the anecdotal, investigative writing organized of fragments of ethical relativisms (partly *Éleslövészet*, *Galeri*, partly *Áttételek*); the third one is the monological stream of consciousness based on existentialism (partly *Áttételek*, then *Szakítások*); the fourth one is the ironic, world-modeling, absurd fictionality (partly *Szakítások*, then *Thészeusz és a*





*fekete özvegy, E. harangjai, És eljön az ő országa*) (Németh 2000b, p. 151). The 1999 *Tömegsír* [Mass Grave] markedly breaks with the fictionality strongly present in the previous three or four novels and establishes its new language under the banner of hyperrealist rhetoric, the emphatic referentiality of which can be related to that of minimalist prose (Németh, 2000b, p. 157).

This is continued in the novel *Nálunk, New Hontban* [In Our New Hont] (2001), which, employing the tradition of Mikszáth, returns to the prose language used in *Galeri*. The parodistic, slapstick-like fictitious anecdotal elements not only portray the struggles of the inhabitants of a fictitious small town after 1945, but also tell the story of the Central European colonization of the Hungarian minority in Slovakia (Németh, 2005b, p. 81). In *New Hont*, Grendel creates the present mythology of the province by telling satirical stories of the loss of mythology (Bányai, 2007, p. 49). *Mátyás király New Hontban* [King Matthias in New Hont] (2005) combines two storylines and paints an ironic picture of the fates of those who lost out on the change of regime, shown from an insider's perspective (Elek, 2006). The critical reception of *Tömegsír, Nálunk, New Hontban* and *Mátyás király New Hontban* treats these novels as a trilogy.

Among Grendel's later novellas, *Négy hét az élet* [Life Is But Four Weeks] (2011) stands out, in which he examines what kind of memory could be created in a web of silence and lies (Horváth, 2012). This "elimination novel" takes account of the disappearance of the Hungarian middle class with a splayed narrative technique similar to that of *Eleslővészet*. His final work *Bukott angyalok* [Fallen Angels] (2017) conducts acts of processing the past and, like most of Grendel's works, brings its protagonist and readers face-to-face with the basic questions of existence.

According to Zoltán Csehy, several of Grendel's texts unfold in a space within a political and poetic margin of tolerance. His way of writing could even be called a public aesthetics, which "paradoxically only appears to be radically new: in reality, it approaches traumatic questions very "tactfully". This tactfulness, however, opens up a way for the inclusion of otherness and in the end becomes the key to a discourse" (Csehy, 2016, p. 170).

Grendel's works also affect Slovak literature. Thanks to translator Karol Wlachovský, his works were also available in Slovakian almost simultaneously with their original publication. He influenced authors such as Vladimír Balla, Ján Litvák, Václav Pankovčín and Pavol Rankov. According to Wlachovský, besides Pavol Vilikovský, Grendel is the most widely translated Slovakian author, who contributed to Slovakian Hungarian literature's breaking out of its regional boundaries (Keresztesová, 2016, p. 20).

**Alfonz Talamon** (1966–1996) had only a good decade of creative work in his tragically short life, yet penned such texts that attracted the attention of leading critics and literary historians. His start can be linked to the Iródiá Group, which would constantly seek out new voices. Although usually Grendel is mentioned as one of Talamon's masters, and his short stories and novel convey an experience of otherness, they should not be interpreted in the context of (Czecho)Slovakian literature but in the wider context of world literature (those of Latin American magic realism as well as the Central European absurdism, marked primarily by the names of Kafka and Hrabal) (Németh, 2001, p. 52). Already his first volume *A képzelet szertartásai* [Rituals of Imagination] (1988) showcased, with its many voices and layers, his exceptional writing skills, with short stories including the volume's eponymous piece, or "Az éjszaka árkádsorai" [Archways of the Night], *A pikádorok ivadéka* [Offspring of the Picadors], and "A nap, melyen ledőlt az első kiszáradt eperfa" [The Day the First Dead Mulberry Tree Fell].



In 1992, he published a novel, *Gályák Imbrium tengerén* [Galleys on the Sea of Imbrium], which shows the hardships of the protagonist wandering in the labyrinth of inscrutable power from a double perspective. The story is punctuated by dream scenes, with fantasy and reality constantly overriding each other (Németh, 2001, p. 135). The volume titled *Az álomkereskedő utazásai* [The Travels of the Dream Peddler] (1995) contains seven short stories, and it deals with the themes of the dominance of dreams and imagination, travel, an anxiety caused by the uncontrollable factors endangering the individual, the fetishization of women, and the father as someone to identify with as well as a source of danger (Németh, 2001, p. 198).

One of the most often emphasized features of Talamon's prose is the monological narration, which conveys the lonesome protagonist's anxieties and peregrination – sometimes in the first person singular, sometimes addressing the self, or through a third person singular free indirect speech (Németh, 2001, p. 157). His narrator-protagonists are characters losing or constantly altering their identity, who are incapable of communication, have drifted to the margins of the human community, who only feel at home in the world created by their overactive imagination and dreams where they can live out their schizophrenic, sexual, narcissistic desires. Many of the stories attempt to record a certain state of consciousness, the defining element of which is self-interpretation. Self-reflections on the one hand thematize creativity-related sufferings, while on the other hand they culminate in self-deprecating comments. The observable metanarrative processes include self-reflection through visuality (Keserű, 2000a). It is noteworthy that the constructed experiencing selves are indifferent to concrete life situations and to their social constraints (Németh, 2001, p. 163). An important organizing principle of the text is remembering: it often cuts the text into parts, keeping the referential context of the story in motion (Németh, 2001, p. 114). With his long sentences generated by automatic writing, Talamon creates a textual world with a special atmosphere: one can witness the uncontrollable proliferation of language through the intertwining, twisting, attractive syntax teeming with surreal imagery, which sweeps away the illusion of the recordability of meaning (e.g., *A pikádorok ivadéka*). His orgiastic texts, in which sometimes the subject of writing gets lost, offer readings that are perpetually self-destructive (Németh, 2001, pp. 109–110). The “megasentence”, which can take up the entire text itself (e.g., *Az ősök földje* [Ancestral Land]), has become the author's trademark.

Talamon's posthumous work, written under the pseudonym “Samuel Borkopf”, is titled *Barátaimnak, egy Trianon előtti kocsmából* [To My Friends from a Pub before Trianon]. In its extensive critical reception, there have been several suggestions as to its genre: it can be read as a string of short stories and as a novel as well. The former is supported by the fact that the individual texts are only connected by the person of the narrator-author. If read as a novel, the interchangeability of chapters facilitates a combinatorial reading (Nagy, 1998). Straightforward categorization is also difficult as the volume remains unfinished because of the author's death. The basic plot of the text features an innkeeper in a multi-ethnic village who tells entertaining stories to his patrons. Members of his audience also appear in the stories, showing that the storyteller is interested in recalling and reconstructing shared memories, in keeping the community's memory alive (Nagy, 1998), especially as these friends are not in fact present (they have either left or died). The narrator turns the clumsy characters into heroes, transforms their deeds into legends, endowing the time of the story with a mythical dimension (Keserű, 2000b). As a new element compared to the earlier volumes, the storytelling in *Barátaimnak*... activates irony in its different manifestations: paralleling or interchanging the sacred and the profane (e.g.,



comparing events in national history to the deeds of the characters), the misinterpretation of historical events, the characters being underinformed (Keserű, 2000b). According to Péter Rácz I., Talamon's posthumous volume is a remarkable continuance of the anecdote-style storytelling of Hungarian prose tradition. Its mode of storytelling that pits linguistic realities against a world outside language, contributing significantly to the realignment of contemporary Hungarian prose writing and reading (Rácz I., 1999, p. 224).

One of the most enigmatic and confusing books of the 90s is the "thought novel" *Az ibolya illata* [The Scent of the Violet] (1992) by Gábor Farnbauer (1957). It creates a completely new genre without any existing tradition, and (also) discusses its own creation and existence as a text. Each and every totalizing reading of the book is doomed to fail. It is a text, lingering at the borders among a critical review, an essay, and a study, that traces the meandering within the text and the movements through different intra- and intertextual relations. Its dominant stylistic modality is that of conceptuality, the seriousness of which is constantly counterbalanced by irony (Benyovszky, 2004a, pp. 70–72). The narrator strives to de-write the subject: instead of actual characters, thoughts are made the protagonist, while the narrator remains a developing self with a bound perspective whose identity unfolds in a series of events in a process of self-discovery (Beke, 2004, p. 82). One of the unique characteristics of Farnbauer's language use is the strong presence of an essayistic quality, infused with the conceptual apparatus and logical reasoning of the language of natural science (Vida, 2004, p. 92). Verbal language is limited to the representation of the perceptible but it can be substituted with the combinatorial language of mathematics. The subject attempts to create a language that makes it possible to control the infinite (Vida, 2004, p. 95). It also contains visual effects and expands the possibilities of linguistic play. As to its form, a parallel can be drawn with Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (Németh, 2005c, pp. 114–115). The thought novel also warns that, due to the figurative nature of language, the exact sciences can also become parts of literature (Németh, 2005c, p. 123).

Attila Gyóry (1967) attracted attention mainly by his inclusion of the punk subculture in his work. His writings thematizing sex, drugs, rebellious border-crossing and self-indulgence found in his volume of short stories *Vércsapolás* [Tapping Blood] (1992) were seen as a breaking of taboos, made even more prominent by their frequent use of slang and obscene language. His 1993 novel *Kitörés* [Break-out] is the Slovakian Hungarian version of the picaresque novel (Kocur, 1999): its vagabond punks experience the bliss of freedom during their adventures in Western Europe and recognize their earlier constraints. Elements of biopoetics are also present in the text, with bodily needs playing a major role. The short stories in *Az utolsó légy* [The Last Fly] (1995) are still characterized by their outspokenness, but the crisis of the punk subculture can also be felt. Gyóry's novel *Ütközés* [Collision] (1997) is an attempt at creating the Hungarian cyberpunk novel. In a globalized, multicultural world, its aberrant characters struggling at the fringes of society lead a computer-driven "techno-pop" lifestyle: with the help of drugs and the internet, they end up in a virtual reality and have multi-sensory experiences. The protagonists of *Kerékkutya* [Wheel Dog] (2002) are misfit big-city intellectuals and artists, driven by their will to and ultimate desire for pleasure (drugs, sex, alcohol, eating, meditation). Gyóry organizes the reading of the novel along the dealing of tarot cards which questions concerning existence through language, sexuality, (card)play, and the identity generated by coincidence within them (Németh, 2004b, p. 286).



**Daniel Levicky Archleb** (1975) tells us about a post-apocalyptic world following an era of catastrophes. His “novel of passing” *Aua és Atua* [Aua and Atua], co-written with his (fictitious) co-author Upor Tonuzaba, employs the code of SF and dystopian novels: it presents its characters (and the reader) with an extreme image of the future. In his interpretation, civilization may be responsible for the destruction of nature, and thus, his heroes strive to eliminate civilization. Ridding themselves of their moral obligations, they fight against their construed enemies under the banner of different (compatible, interchangeable, even contradictory) ideologies, such as green ideology, racism, or feminism. Through the depiction of a series of problems, the inclusion of horrifying scenes, and the brutality of expression, the novel shocks and removes the reader from established norms, while also creating a dilemma of interpretation, forcing them to confront their own existential predetermination (Keserű, 2004, p. 242).

**Zsófia Bárczi** (1973) has remarkable volumes of short stories to her name. The works found in *A keselyű hava* [The Month of the Vulture] (2004) create a complex textual universe relying on different literary traditions, e.g., magic realism and Eastern tales. A recurring motif of this prose world is the miracle, revealing itself through events that contradict the laws of nature. Other plot-forming forces are the secret, which provides a space for forms of withholding, the presence of images with magical functions, and the interactions among texts and images (Benyovszky, 2004b, p. 226). In connection with the short stories in the volume, Zoltán Németh highlights the emphatic and complex depiction of female fate and female storytelling as well as the colorful play on the possibilities of female writing, in which womanhood is portrayed as something exotic, a mood and a nostalgia, a transcendent, mystical, and elusive identity that suffers under authority (Németh, 2009). The volume entitled *Vidéki lyányok énekeskönyve* [Songbook of Country Gals] (2018) can be read as a special kind of breviary: it contains a multitude of genres and voices, ranging from folktale-like stories to scientific treatises. The stories are often set in a university or library environment, which sets their tone and linguistic register. The most important common feature of the texts is the author’s intellectual humor and her irony stemming from linguistic ingenuity (Csanda, 2019).

The volume of short stories *Kilátás az ezüstfenyőkre* [A View of Silver Firs] (2004) by **József Gazdag** was met with an exceptional recognition in literary circles. Its interpreters praise Gazdag’s extraordinary skill as a writer, the defining features of which are the closedness of the world he depicts, a monological way of speaking, the vivid depiction of the world of physical objects, the richness of his space and world construction, cinematic imagery, linguistic suggestiveness, and reductionism (Keresztesi, 2004, pp. 1,297–1,299). Its protagonists – lonely and unable to communicate – steadily end up trapped in existential conflict. His volume entitled *Egy futballfüggő naplójából* [From the Diary of a Soccer Maniac] (2015) also received significant attention: it creates a unique genre by merging the op-ed (soccer reportage), short fiction (feuilleton), and the essay. In these tightly written texts, soccer transcends itself: it becomes the interpretant of existence and literature (Varga, 2017).

**Norbert György** (1972) published his novel entitled *Klára* [Claire] under a “pseudonym” created by switching up his first and last names (György Norbert). The novel shows the stages of the protagonist’s search for identity while wandering in a multicultural linguistic space. Its poetic program was to create an artificial, hybrid novel language by including Slovak-Hungarian contact phenomena as well as English phrases and textual fragments, thus giving up on the



illusion of a sterile literary language, and taking part in the local, mental, linguistic, and personal positioning of foreignness (Csehy, 2016, p. 174).

The novel *Határeset* [Borderline case] (2008) by Péter Huncík (1951), with its anecdotal editing, also has its characters move around in a multicultural Hungarian–Slovak–Jewish milieu, thematizing the conflicts of minority existence. It can be interpreted as a text evoking geocultural modes of reading that expresses a markedly Central European worldview using rhetorical tools characteristic of magic realism (Keserű, 2017, p. 88).

Zoltán Szalay (1985) has published three volumes of short stories (*Ártatlanság* [Innocence], 2006; *A kormányzó könyvtára* [The Governor’s Library], 2010; *Felföld végnapjai* [The Last Days of the Uplands], 2017) and three novel (1a)s (*Nyelvjárás* [Dialect], 2007; *Drága vendelinek* [Dear Vendelins], 2014; *Faustus kisöccse* [Faustus’ Little Brother], 2019), all of which are characterized by a tension between the desire to tell a story and a questioning of the evolution and existence of the text (Márton, 2019; Melhardt, 2020, p. 569). His texts use philosophical elements and mythic and apocalyptic visions, and they often revolve around absurd Eastern European life situations, tales of decline, and the traps of becoming a writer. He is no stranger to ironic and satirical imagery. His novels can also be of interest due to their revitalization of the codes of the artist-, career-, devil-, meta-, and social novel.

Pál Száz (1987) published his first volume titled *Arcadia* in 2011, in which he displays his exceptional linguistic creativity: he creates two parallel textual worlds in the love story, mixing the tropes of classicism, rococo, and sentimentalism, and the love comedy made up of Renaissance clichés (Bazsányi, 2011). *Arcadia* can be read as a study of style and a parody as well. His collection of short stories *Halott föld, halott lányok* [Dead Land, Dead Girls] (2013) makes use of the *Nouveau Roman* technique, among others. The author’s phytology entitled *Fűje sarjad mezőknek* [Grass Grows on Meadows] (2017) attracted the greatest attention. This unique genre establishes a fruitful connection with a diverse range of textual traditions, from the Bible through mystery plays, fables and herbaria to contemporary works (Mellár, 2018). The loose string of phytoaphorisms, phytoicons, phytoenigma, phytology, and phytoanecdotes evokes the past of a village community and a family in it through the gestures of folk storytelling and oral history. The special feature of the phytology is its use of a regional dialect (“mátyusföldi”, “maradi”) which is made “spectacular” due to the verbatim transcription of the dialectic elements, while also drawing a multilingual, multicultural region through Slovak–Hungarian contact phenomena, loanwords, and hybrid-language sentences (Petres Csizmadia, 2018, p. 85). Its most basic innovation is that the use of dialect does not serve the aim of getting to know folk life or the preservation of traditional linguistic forms in Száz’s stylized sociolinguistic space; instead, certain elements of the non-standard language constitute the patterns of thought of certain characters, which are in turn supplemented by the languages of literary tradition (Csehy, 2016, pp. 184–185).

Among the prose writers emerging in the 2010s, Gábor Kálmán (1982) is worthy of attention with his short story cycle/novel entitled *Nova* (2011), set on the Hungarian–Slovak language border and containing stories of deterioration, as well as with his “father novels” *Temetés* [Funeral] and *Janega Kornél szép élete* [The Beautiful Life of Kornél Janega]. The same goes for István Veres (1984), with his collection of short stories *Galvánelemek és akkumulátorok* [Galvanic Cells and Batteries] (2011), and his novel *Dandaranda* (2013), which brings into play the feeling of cultural foreignness; and Noémi Bogyó (1970), with her novel *Vakfoltok* [Blindspots] (2017) thematizing the change of regime. Based on their work published in



periodicals, the forthcoming volumes of prose by **Hajnal Csilla Nagy** (1992) and **Tamás Ploniczky** (1990) are also highly anticipated.

## SUMMARY

The post-1989 political and cultural processes shattered the closed framework of “Slovakian Hungarian literature”. Postmodern strategies resulted in extremely versatile, multi-layered, and often highly original textual worlds of prose and oeuvres, which, also falling short of being a paradigm-changing force, stepped out of the scope of regional aesthetics, garnered attention and earned a place in the contemporary (pan-)Hungarian literature.

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