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CANADIAN LITERATURE IN HUNGARIAN TRANSLATION

Abstract

The essay gives an overview of Hungarian translations of Canadian writing – both from English and from French – with some critical response and observations about publishing policies. Over the years, first the short stories by Stephen Leacock, then novels by Margaret Atwood, Michael Ondaatjee, Mordecai Richler and Robertson Davies were published and well-received by Hungarian readers. The poetry anthologies of Québec and English-Canadian verse were presented with special care, but – to our regret – Québec fiction is very under-represented in Hungarian translation. Michel Tremblay's Les Belles-Sœurs, however was a great theatrical success both in Budapest and in Békéscsaba. These translations in the future should generate a theoretical discourse in criticism in Hungary.

Résumé

Cet article donne un aperçu sur les traductions hongroises de la littérature canadienne (de langue anglaise et française) avec quelques remarques sur la pratique éditrice et la réception critique. Pendant les dernières 75 années, d'abord les courts récits de Stephen Leacock, ensuite les romans de Margaret Atwood, de Michale Ondaatjee, de Mordecai Richler, de Roch Carrier et de Robertson Davies ont été publiés en traduction hongroise et très bien accueillis par le public hongrois. Aux deux anthologies illustrant la poésie canadienne et poésie québécoise a été consacrée une attention particulière, mais la prose québécoise est, malheureusement, peu représentée en Hongrie. Pourtant, la pièce de Michel Tremblay Les Belles-Sœurs a connu un véritable succès dans les théâtres de Budapest et de Békéscsaba. Il serait souhaitable que ces traductions donnent lieu à des discussions théoriques et critiques dans la vie académique hongroise.

The study of the translations and publications of Canadian writing in Hungary reflects not only interest toward a less-known literature, but also the various Hungarian publishing policies over the past three quarters of a century. The first Canadian works were translated and published in Hungary during the 1920s. *Maria Chapdelaine* and *Battling Malone* by Louis Hémon were both published in 1925, translated by Csetényi Erzi² and Török Tímea, respectively. The following year the prestigious Atheneum Publishing House brought out a selection of Stephen Leacock's stories from *Literary Lapses* and *Nonsense Novels*: the brilliant translation was the work of Karinthy Frigyes, an outstanding poet of the time. The stories "Gertrude the Governess", "Soaked in Seaweed", "Guido the Gimlet of Ghent", "Caroline's Christmas", "A Hero in Homespun", " "Q" A Psychic Pstory of the Psupernatural", "Sorrows of a Super Soul", "Maddened by Mystery", "The Man in Asbestos" and "The Unknown" in Karinthy's translation still form the core of any Leacock anthology in Hungarian. *Humoreszkek* came out again in 1955, while 1969, 1985 and the late 1980s saw the

¹ In Hungarian the Christian name follows the surname.

publication of three different Leacock volumes in Hungarian, including not only the first ten translations by Karinthy, but further stories translated by Szinnai Tivadar, Aczél János, Révbíró Tamás and Török András. (The titles of the books are *A rejtély tiika*, *Rosszcsirkeff Mária és társai* and *A két Eduárd*.) These translations provide us with excellent examples of a resolution to the translator's dilemma between being faithful to the original or keeping the target language in sight: the two approaches can be combined, so no wonder literary journals, even reviews of children's literature, often include one of Leacock's stories.

Karinthy's translations not only inspired other translators to make further stories by Leacock available in Hungarian, but also served as the starting point for an important event in the history of alternative theatrical performances in Hungary. Based on *Sorrows of a Super Soul*, director Malgot István and his movement theatre company staged a Hungarian and English version entitled *Egy magányos nagy lélek fejlődése, avagy Rosszcsirkeff³ Mária emlékiratai, avagy szerelmi románc a cári időkben/Sorrows of a Super Soul or the Memoirs of Marie Mushenough, or a love romance from the times of the tzar* in 1984. The performance drew unprecedented critical attention and was generally very well-received. Critics praised the unity of movement, visual elements, and music. Koltai Judit in the main role reminded us of the heroines of early silent films, while other artists used pantomime-like choreography. The most exhaustive review of the performance placed Leacock in a wider context: "*Rosszcsirkeff Mária* was originally a parody: approaching the typical features of 19th-century Russian novels in a hyperbolic way, Leacock wrote a parody with absurd elements. Karinthy translated it so that the text suggested a parody of the parody. This double-layer literary parody was then staged by Malgot István. (...) The movements of the puppet-like actors with their strong white make-up (...) reminded us of actors in silent films who expressed exaggerated emotions. (...) this system of movement itself looks parodistic. The characters around the heroine often look like wax figures, with dreadfully grotesque costumes, movements and masks. (...) to all this, another parodistic level is added by the music, compiled by Koltay Gergely from well-known Russian songs (...) This is truly spectacular theatre, in which a gesture, a tableau-like picture can tell us a lot about man and the relationships between people."⁴ It should also be noted that in addition to the merits of the original story and of the translation, in 1984 the subject of the parody, i.e., a journal-like book about the Russian painter, Mariya Bashkirtseva, accompanied by distorted tunes of Russian folk songs with a very primitive text in Russian, added an extra layer of political meaning in Hungary.⁵

Arcadian Adventures with the Idle Rich is the only book by Leacock that has been translated into Hungarian without abridgement: *A Mauzózeum Klub*, translated by critic, writer and translator, Szerb Antal first came out in 1943 and again in 1955. The foreword to this second edition reflects not only the political situation of that time, but also a general ignorance of Canadian literature. Stephen Leacock was first blamed for "not being a Marxist, he was far from socialism" although "he did possess the world

³ In Hungarian 'csirke' csirke means 'chicken'.

⁴ Nánai István. "Színházi műhelyek". *Színház*, 1984. 8:34-35.

⁵ For a more exhaustive analysis of the performance, viz. Kürtösi Katalin "The Alternative Theatre Adaptation of Leacock's *Sorrows of a Super Soul* in Hungary". *Theatre History in Canada/Histoire du Théâtre au Canada*, Vol.11, No.1, Spring 1990: 86-93, and Kürtösi Katalin "Reflections of Leacock in Budapest" *Canadian Theatre Review*, 56. 1988:81-82.

view and knowledge of the honest, intelligent citizen who realized that bourgeois development had derailed” but “did not know much about the basic relationships inherent in society.” Hegedűs Géza apparently did not know that Stephen Leacock, in addition to being a **Canadian** writer of parodies, was also a professor of political science.⁶

Martha Ostenso's *Wild Geese* appeared in G. Beke Margit's Hungarian translation in 1928, just three years after its first publication in Canada (*Szállnak a vadludak*, Révai Publishing House). In the preface to the first edition, critic Benedek Marcell pointed out the similarity between the Canadian novel set on the prairie and the contemporary Hungarian realist novels by Tömörkény István, Móricz Zsigmond and Szabó Dezső. The first animal story by a Canadian author translated into Hungarian (by Baktay Ervin) was *Sajo and her Beaver People* by Grey Owl. Since its first publication in 1940, it has seen several new editions with a new Hungarian title (replacing *A vadon fiai* with *Két kicsi hód*) and has become very popular within children's literature. During the early 1940s, it was followed by other books about life in the Canadian wilderness (*Singer in the wilderness* by William Byron Mowery was translated in 1940 and *One who Kills* by Ridgewell Cullum, *Policing the Arctic* by Harwood Steele, and *Forbidden Valley* by William Byron Mowery all in 1941), but for historical and political reasons no Canadian book was translated or published in a second edition between 1943 and 1955. Thus, the rich first fifteen years of the introduction of Canadian writing in Hungary were followed by a twelve-year break.

The re-appearance of Canadian writings in the Hungarian book market started with new editions of Leacock's humorous writings, of *Maria Chapdelaine* and the publication of *The whiteoaks of Jalna* by Mazo de la Roche, translated by Szinnai Tivadar. In 1956, the life of Norman Bethune was also published in two editions, in altogether 26,000 copies, with a foreword by Mao-Tse Tung. In the 1960s, the only two Canadian books to be published into Hungarian were *The Desperate People* by Farley Mowat (1965) and *River and Empty Sea* by Louis Vaczek (1968, second edition in 1982)—totalling almost 100,000 copies! This interest toward historical topics and animal stories has continued ever since—the list includes *Klondike: The Life and Death of the Last Great Gold Rush* by Pierre Berton (*Aranyláz Alaszkában*, 1974, with 20,000 copies, second edition in 1983, with 100,000 copies), *Sajo and her Beaver People* in two editions in 1976 (83,000 and 110,000 copies), *Never Cry Wolf* by Farley Mowat in 1976 (29,800 copies), *Nunaga: Ten Years in Eskimo Life* by Duncan Pryde in 1976, *The Bears and I* by Robert Franklin Leslie in 1979 and 1981, *The White Dawn* by James Houston in 1980, as well as Farley Mowat's *A Whale for the Killing* in 1982 and *Lost in the Barrens* in 1984. The number of copies and second editions suggest that these Canadian books were immensely popular over the decades in Hungary.

Since the late 1970s, ongoing interest has also been shown in Canadian poetry and fiction, which first manifested itself in anthologies of Québec and English-Canadian poetry (1978, 1983). Both collections of poems were edited by Canadian critics (Eva Kushner and James Steele, respectively) who wrote the postscripts, while Hungarian

⁶ In his “Introduction to the book, its writer and translator” Hegedűs Géza also wrote, “At the age of seven, Leacock immigrated to Canada with his parents,” but then goes on to say that *Arcadian Adventures* is “one of the funniest books of twentieth-century American literature” and that “Stephen Leacock is considered by many the greatest American writer of humour after Mark Twain”. *Magvető Könyvkiadó*, Budapest, 1955: 4

scholar Köpeczi Béla (Vice-Secretary of the Hungarian Academy, and Minister of Culture at the time of the two publications) wrote the prefaces to both volumes. *Óda a Szent-Lőrinc folyóhoz* introduces twenty-one Québec poets through 105 poems, starting with Alain Grandbois and focussing on contemporary Québec verse. *Gótika a vadonban*, on the other hand, starts with the Poets of the Confederation, and includes an 'ethnic' poet (Mary Melfi) among the twenty-four poets writing in English. The English-Canadian poems are translated partly by well-known Hungarian translators (Képes Júlia, Tótfalusi István and Petri György), and partly by Hungarian-Canadian poets like Kemenes Géfin László and Vitéz György; the English-Canadian poetry anthology, therefore, represented a step forward in Hungary's recognition of poets writing in Hungarian in Canada.

Contemporary Canadian fiction was first represented by the novels of Margaret Atwood and Jacques Folches-Ribas. Pataricza Eszter translated *Surfacing* as *Fellélegzés*, which is a bit misleading with the positive ring of the word including a feeling of relief from problems which the original does not imply. (Interestingly, in the notes to the English-Canadian poetry anthology, which includes eleven poems by Atwood, 'surfacing' is translated more accurately as 'lebegés'.) In his afterword to *Surfacing*, Takács Ferenc states that for readers outside Canada Atwood personifies what modern Canadian literature can mean for the world, adding that "the life and fate of women for Atwood serve as a metaphor for Canadianness, (...) a materialisation of Canadian identity (or, more exactly, of the lack of, or troubles with, identity)."⁷ While Takács praised Atwood's style and contribution to Canadian criticism, fiction and poetry, the reviewer of the party's mouthpiece claimed that the purification of the heroine in Atwood's novel cannot be genuine, since its starting point is 'bourgeois individualism', so the novel becomes "one-sided since it does not know what to do with the values of modern culture and almost sees an interrelatedness between advanced technology and the decay of the soul".⁸

Contemporary Québec fiction was first represented by *Une aurore boréal* by Jacques Folches-Ribas (1984, translated by B. Kovács Ágnes). This choice is more than surprising since the short novel has a very weak and sentimental story replete with clichés and the writer is not mentioned in any handbook or encyclopaedia dealing with Canadian culture. Hungarian readers do not have access to novels by Anne Hébert, Gabrielle Roy or Hubert Aquin in translation, so neither traditional nor experimental Québec writing was chosen but a short novel that never played a role in Québec fiction. The balance improved slightly with the publication of *La guerre, Yes, Sir!* by Roch Carrier in 2000.⁹

⁷ Takács Ferenc. "Utószó" - Margaret Atwood. *Fellélegzés*. Európa Könyvkiadó, Budapest, 1984: 229.

⁸ Forgách Iván. "Könyvszemle. *Fellélegzés*". *Népszabadság*, 1985. február 5.

⁹ Roch Carrier. *Háborújunk, Yes, Sir!*, translated by Kürtösi Katalin. Lazi Kiadó, Szeged, 2000. As the translator is also the writer of this article, an evaluation of this translation would be inappropriate here. Suffice it to say, that the literary review programme on Hungarian national radio broadcast an interview on the writer and Québec novels.

English-Canadian fiction has been regularly translated over the past fifteen years.¹⁰ *Joshua Then and Now* by Mordecai Richler was published in Hungarian (translated by Sárközy Elga) in 1986 and was well-received and praised for its style.¹¹ The second Richler novel in Hungarian translation is *Barney's Version - Így látta Barney*, translated by Szász Imre (1998). While in Hungary Richler represents English-language Jewish-Canadian writing, Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient (Az angol beteg)*, translated by M. Szász Anna and Szász Imre, (1997) shows the multicultural voice in Canadian literature. The fictional story of Hungarian-born Count Almásy made the novel extremely popular here. *Anil's Ghost - Anil és a csontváz*, translated by Greskovics Endre - and *The Rebel Angels - Lázadó angyalok*, translated by Szaĕffkó Péter - were both published by Európa Kiadó, the most prestigious publishing house of world literature as part of the Christmas book fair in 2000. The sole example of the Western Canadian novel in Hungarian is *The Invention of the World* by Jack Hodgins (*Feltalált világ*, translated by Sebestyén Éva).

During the past ten years, publishing policies have changed significantly in Hungary. While in the late 1970s and 1980s there was a remarkable effort to introduce the most valuable works of the so-called 'less-known' literatures, much of the publishing industry shifted its orientation to markets and profit margins in the 1990s, giving way to popular readings like Mazo de la Roche's *Jalna* books or L. M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables*. Another symptom of the political changes with regard to Canadian literature was the 're-patriation' of Hungarian-Canadian writers and poets who had left the country for political reasons, and were therefore banned in Hungary. Many books by these Hungarian immigrant writers in Canada contain autobiographical elements; some were originally written in Hungarian, then translated into English and published in Canada, and finally appearing in Hungarian bookshops. Most of these writers achieved great success on the North American continent, like George Jonas with his *Vengeance: The True Story of an Israeli Counter-Terrorist Team (Megtorlás. Egy izraeli antiterrorista csoport igaz története)*, translated by Szántó Péter, (1990), or *In Praise of Older Women* by Stephen Vizinczey, which arrived in Hungary after its 41st English edition (*Érett asszonyok dicsérete*, translated by Halász Zoltán and Mészöly Dezső, 1990). *Notes from the Rainforest* by Faludy György and Eric Johnson is the memoir of the greatest living Hungarian poet set against the rainforest background of Vancouver Island (*Jegyzetek az esőerdőből*, 1991). George Gabori, another member of the 1956 wave of immigration remembers Hungary of the 1930s, as well as Dachau and his 'goulag' experience of the early 1950s in his *When the Devils were Most Free (Amikor elszabadult a gonosz)*, translated by Halász Zoltán, (1991).

Hungarian-Canadian poets were represented in *Vándorének*, the first anthology of immigrant Hungarian poetry, published in 1981. Ten years later, a new series dedicated to masterpieces of Hungarian verse written in the Western world was opened with *Az ájtatos manó imája*, the collected poems of Vitéz György. *Fából vaskarikatúrák*, Zend Róbert's posthumous collection of parodies was published in 1993.

In this paper I have collected Hungarian translations of Canadian writing published in book form, although this does not offer the full scope of the topic. During the past

¹⁰ Research concerning the period between 1987 and 2000 was done by Enyedi Sugárka who is writing her M.A. thesis on this topic.

¹¹ Antal Gábor. "Légy bátor és erős. Mordecai Richler regénye". *Magyar Nemzet*, 1986. december 1.

twenty-five years—thanks to the efforts of university professors of Canadian literature, Jakabfi Anna, Martonyi Éva, Molnár Judit and Szaffkó Péter, among others—journals of world literature and culture (*Nagyvilág* and *Magyar Napló*) have also devoted special issues or sections to Canadian literature translated into Hungarian. Mention should be made of the as yet unpublished Hungarian translation of *Les Belles-Soeurs* (the work of Alföldi Aliz, and Parti-Nagy Lajos): Tremblay's play was performed over 50 times by a leading theatre company in Budapest and also produced in the town of Békéscsaba.¹²

In conclusion, various types of Canadian writing—fiction, poetry, non-fiction, children's literature—have been available in Hungarian since the mid-1920s. The next step should be to systematically incorporate them into the critical and theoretical discourse and thus facilitate the selection process at publishing houses of new works for translation.

¹² On the Hungarian stagings of *Les Belles-Soeurs*, see Kürtösi Katalin "Les Belles-Soeurs en Hongrie", *Cahiers de Théâtre JEU*, No. 94. 2000.1. mars: 169-173.