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## Selling Hungarian Fiction in Translation: Agency and Process

### ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the publication of Hungarian fiction in translation, with a special consideration of English as a TL. I argue that the mediation of Hungarian literature, a supply-driven activity, is an interactive social event influenced by factors including power, dominance and economics. I identify the social networks and review the institutional background as well as the process of the selection, translation and publication of Hungarian fiction. I discuss the role of various actors in the mediation of Hungarian literature: Hungarian publishers and literary agents; TL publishers; and translators from Hungarian into English. Besides doing research and conducting interviews with people involved in the mediation of Hungarian literature, I also reflect on my own role as an actor in the field, especially on my experience as foreign rights director of a Budapest-based publisher of literary fiction. While I point out some of the challenges of the mediation of Hungarian literature, from unstable cultural policies, through lack of proper representation, to difficulties faced by translators and foreign publishers, I also stress that, in spite of these challenges, Hungarian literature has a surprisingly strong international presence. I inquire into the

reasons why foreign publishers choose to publish Hungarian literature, and why certain works have been particularly successful in translation.

*Keywords:* Hungarian literature, mediation of national literature, sociology of literature, sociology of translation

## INTRODUCTION

In this article I examine the process of the publication of Hungarian fiction in translation, with a special focus on English as a TL.

When I set out a few years ago to write case studies for my Ph.D. dissertation on the translation of Hungarian literary fiction, I realized that in order to understand the specificities of the mediation of Hungarian literature, it would be useful to depart from a text-based approach, and apply methods of the sociology of translation to investigate the process itself, i.e. the policies and strategies of agents working in this field. The main benefit of the sociological perspective is that it focuses on the people involved – their actions, their observable group behaviour and their institutions<sup>1</sup> – and it also allows me to examine the power relations underlying this process – already foregrounded by the “cultural turn” of translation studies – in connection with the situatedness of the agents in society.<sup>2</sup>

As Michaela Wolf writes in her introduction to *Constructing a Sociology of Translation*, from the choice of works to

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1 Chesterman 2006, 11.

2 Wolf 2014, 11.

publication and reception in the TL, the translation from a SL into a TL is an “interactive social event,”<sup>3</sup> conditioned by “influential factors such as power, dominance, national interests, religion or economics,” and mediated by social networks that “internalize the aforementioned structures and act in correspondence with their culturally connotated value systems and ideologies.”<sup>4</sup> The agents in these networks “generate conventions and norms as a product of social negotiation.”<sup>5</sup> In this paper I will identify these social networks, and review the institutional background as well as the process of the selection, translation and publication of Hungarian fiction. Besides conducting interviews with people involved in the mediation of Hungarian literature and the creation and analysis of a questionnaire for literary translators, this paper also draws upon my own experience as the foreign rights director of a Budapest-based literary publisher.

As discussing the whole process and all the agents involved would go beyond the scope of this article, I chose three groups working within, or closely involved with, the publishing world.

I have limited my analysis to the translation of fiction for two reasons. Firstly, because as an agent for Hungarian authors I represent mostly writers of fiction, therefore I am more familiar with this field. Secondly, because in my experience, the process of the mediation of other literary genres is often very different from that of fiction – literary journals, translators, theatres, etc. tend to play a much more important

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3 Wolf 2007, 3.

4 Wolf 2007, 4.

5 Prunč, 41.

role in the translation of poetry and drama than the avenues used for the mediation of fiction.

I focus on English translations, since translation into the hyper-central language ensures a high prestige for an author; as Pascale Casanova wrote in her seminal book *The World Republic of Letters*, in which she drew a map of global literary power relations, it is a “veritable consecration.”<sup>6</sup> Translation flows are highly uneven and attest to power relations: dominant countries export their cultural products, while dominated countries tend to export little and import a lot.<sup>7</sup> Also, the more central a language is, the more it has the capacity to function as an intermediary or vehicular language.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, translations into English (and, to a lesser extent, into German, French and Italian) often lead to translations into other languages.

#### MEDIATING HUNGARIAN LITERATURE THROUGH TRANSLATION: THE KEY ACTORS

Adapting the image of the Dutch sociologist Abram de Swaan for the system of the world’s languages,<sup>9</sup> Pascale Casanova conceived the literary world as a floral pattern, in which “the literatures of the periphery are linked to the centre by polyglots and translators.” In this figuration, she continues, “it

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6 Quoted by Heilbron and Sapiro 100.

7 Heilbron and Sapiro 96.

8 Heilbron and Sapiro 96.

9 Swaan, Abram. *Words of the World: The Global Language System*. Cambridge: Polity Press and Blackwell, 2001.

becomes possible to measure the literariness... of a language, not in terms of the number of writers and readers it has, but in terms of the number of cosmopolitan intermediaries – publishers, editors, critics, and especially translators – who assure the circulation of texts into the language or out of it.”<sup>10</sup>

Of these intermediaries, I chose to investigate the role of Hungarian publishers and literary agents, the international publishing world, and translators from Hungarian to English. The first and the second are networks I am part of and familiar with, and – besides being a literary translator from English into Hungarian – I have worked with Hungarian-to-English translators for sixteen years, first as editor of *Hungarian Literature Online*,<sup>11</sup> then as literary agent of Hungarian authors. Also, in the case of a peripheral language, translators have an importance that goes beyond the translation of a ST into the TL: my experience in selling the foreign rights of Hungarian authors as well as my present research attest to the fact that translators play a considerable role in the mediation of literature.

Other important agents include the Hungarian state, literary scouts, authors, readers, critics, academics, journals and websites. The scope of this article does not allow a thorough investigation of the role of all these agents. In order, however, to furnish a cultural-political context, I will take a cursory glance at the role and the institutions of the Hungarian state.

For the mediation of the literature of a peripheral language like Hungarian, which is supply-driven rather than

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<sup>10</sup> Casanova 20–21.

<sup>11</sup> <https://hlo.hu/>

demand-driven,<sup>12</sup> a sound and reliable cultural policy is indispensable. Even countries where the official languages are central or semi-peripheral have state marketing and subsidy programmes for the translation and publication of their literatures. Yet when discussing the role of the state in the mediation of Hungarian literature in translation today, one of the challenges we immediately encounter is the risk of rapid obsolescence. Cultural policy in Hungary has been in continuous flux for the last few decades: institutions and programmes have been created, only to be abolished, at a pace that has made it very hard for actors in the publishing market to plan ahead.

Founded in 1997, the translation grant programme of the Hungarian Book Foundation followed the example of the Finnish FILI and the Norwegian NORLA, and was the first organization of its kind in Central Europe.<sup>13</sup> In 2011, the Foundation was abolished by the government, and its functions were assigned to a newly established office within the Petőfi Literary Museum, a prestigious institution located in the centre of Budapest. In 2012, the Publishing Hungary programme – operating in the Balassi Institute, which coordinated the activities of Hungarian cultural institutes worldwide at the time – was established with the aim of promoting Hungarian book culture, particularly Hungarian literature, abroad, through the network of cultural institutes, including participation at international book fairs.<sup>14</sup>

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12 Vimr.

13 Füle 3.

14 Initially financed by a national fund (National Cultural Fund – NKA), after 2016 the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade provided the budget for Hungary's participation at international book fairs and festivals.

In 2019, the Publishing Hungary programme was abolished, and the Petőfi Literary Fund (PLF) was created within the framework of the Petőfi Literary Museum. This new institution has taken over the tasks of the Publishing Hungary programme, as well as those of the Hungarian Book Foundation. The fact that translation support and the organization of book fair presences are now located in the same institution is advantageous for this reorganization. It is also an important benefit of the new conception that, as the PLF is not an organization belonging to the ministry, it is in a position to plan several years ahead, and prepare a guest of honour presence at book fairs, for example. It is to be noted, however, that the PLF is viewed with hostility by a number of authors and publishing professionals who regard its establishment as a politically motivated move by the government. While it is too early to make an assessment of the work they perform, they certainly have considerably more funds at their disposal than had the Hungarian Book Foundation, and they have announced a variety of grants for publishers, translators, writers and theatres.

#### A) HUNGARIAN PUBLISHERS AND LITERARY AGENTS

Although cultural policy can create a favourable (or unfavourable) climate for the mediation of a national literature, a lot depends on publishing professionals who represent authors and their works in the international publishing world.<sup>15</sup>

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15 For a clear and simple overview of the process and the actors of the lifecycle of a book in translation, cf. the infographics of the website *Publishing Trends*: [http://www.publishingtrends.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/BookInTranslation\\_FINAL-3.pdf](http://www.publishingtrends.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/BookInTranslation_FINAL-3.pdf).

In the international book market, the foreign rights of an established author are usually represented by a literary agent or agency. In some countries (France is a pre-eminent example) it is not uncommon for publishers to double as agents. Although literary agencies are often national, the largest and best known ones tend to be international. The latter represent prestigious authors and can often achieve better conditions than smaller or national agencies or publishers.

In communist Hungary, where publishers were state-owned, and every step in publishing was imbued with political power (rather than economic considerations), a state organ<sup>16</sup> represented Hungarian authors' rights exclusively from the 1950s to the 1990s. This situation changed soon after the fall of the communist regime in 1989. In the early 1990s, some internationally successful writers – among them Péter Esterházy, Imre Kertész and Péter Nádas – signed with major German publishers for the representation of their foreign rights. Other writers continued to be represented by Artisjus, the legal successor of the state organ (until it ceased to be a literary agency in 1995), and unless they received offers from foreign publishers or agencies they were dependent for the representation of their foreign rights on their publishers, who, however, had neither the experience nor the wherewithal to function as agents for their authors. Neither did the literary agencies founded in the mid-90s in Hungary have the capacity to represent Hungarian authors. Therefore, most Hungarian authors were left without proper representation of their foreign rights. Even today, although there are several literary agen-

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16 Bureau for the Protection of Authors' Rights (later renamed Artisjus).



cies in Hungary, none of them represent Hungarian (or, for that matter, foreign) authors, acting rather as sub-agencies for foreign publishers and literary agencies in the Hungarian market.

Thus, Hungarian authors found – and, to a large extent, still find – themselves in a threefold predicament: writing in a peripheral language; being citizens of a state where cultural policy is fast-changing, heavily politicized and rather unreliable; and lacking a literary agent.

Some Hungarian publishers have tried to remedy this situation by doubling as agents. The Sárközy and Co. Literary Agency was founded in 2011. Bence Sárközy, then co-founder and director of Libri Publishing, now CEO of the Libri–Bookline Publishing Group – the biggest actor in the Hungarian book market – represented mostly authors published by the Libri group, but also some established authors of other publishers. The agency has had some remarkable international successes, including selling the rights of *No Live Files Remain* by András Forgách, as well as several books by Vilmos Kondor, to a number of foreign publishers.

A notable example of a Hungarian publisher doubling as a literary agent is Magvető. Founded in 1955, Magvető is the publisher of the only Hungarian winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature, Imre Kertész, and of the only Hungarian winner of the Man Booker International Prize, László Krasznahorkai. Magvető Agency represents around thirty authors, all of them writers – mostly of fiction – published by Magvető Publishing. Typically (though not invariably), once a Magvető author achieves international fame, they tend to sign with international – German or American – agencies

or publishers. This may be at the author's own initiative, but sometimes foreign publishers approach the author and make them an offer for world rights, rather than translation rights into their own language only.

Since 2016, I have been working as foreign rights director of Magvető where I am responsible for the representation of about thirty of Magvető's Hungarian authors. I am also partly responsible for acquiring foreign titles for Magvető's list, which is not typical in the international publishing world – in hegemonic and more prosperous cultures, a middle-sized publisher like Magvető, publishing around seventy new titles annually, would usually have separate individuals, or even departments, responsible for acquiring and selling rights. (Clearly, less differentiation of job profiles means less time devoted to individual authors and books, adding to the imbalance of power between cultures.<sup>17</sup>)

As mentioned before, selling Hungarian fiction means engaging in a supply-driven rather than a demand-driven activity. However, although politically and economically Hungary does not have a high status, the strong interest in Eastern European, and especially Hungarian, literature in certain territories after 1989 is still alive to some degree. Because of the relative scarcity of cultural contacts with the “cultural capitals” of the hyper-central language – London and New York – it is difficult, however, to sell the translation rights into English, which is in many cases a shortcut to consecration in the international literary field. Yet looking at the list of TLs of titles sold by Magvető between 2017 and

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17 Prunč 44.

2020,<sup>18</sup> it is surprising, especially in view of the reputation of English as “notoriously impoverished, by comparison with other countries, when it comes to literary translation”<sup>19</sup> that English is the most translated language in this list, with six titles. A reason for this may be that although the percentage of translations from any language into English remains extremely low (around 4%), there has been a recent surge in English-speaking territories in the number of small, independent publishers interested in publishing translated literature of a high literary standard and who are looking for symbolic rather than economic value. In the words of Barbara Epler, the publisher of *New Directions*: “I always hope to feel the walls inside my mind moving around – or, more to the point, being moved around – thanks to what I am reading.”<sup>20</sup>

As Gisèle Sapiro demonstrates,<sup>21</sup> such publishers fight the hegemony of English in a globalized book market by trans-

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18 See Appendix 1. In order to understand the position of this list – i.e. how representative it is for selling the rights of Hungarian fiction in this period – two caveats need to be kept in mind. The first is that although the most widely translated Hungarian authors are mostly published by Magvető – Imre Kertész, László Krasznahorkai, Péter Esterházy, György Dragomán and Attila Bartis –, these authors are represented by foreign agents or publishers. This list, therefore, is not representative in the sense that it does not include foreign rights sales of the most widely translated Hungarian authors. The second point to keep in mind, however, is that Magvető is the Hungarian publisher which sells the foreign rights of the greatest number of Hungarian literary authors; and in that sense, the list is fairly representative.

19 Donahaye 5.

20 Esposito.

21 Sapiro 428.

lating from many languages, thus contributing to cultural diversity. Compared to the political-economic status and the population of Hungary, the number of literary fiction and poetry titles translated from Hungarian in the United States is surprisingly high. According to the *Three Percent* database, eight titles were published in the US in 2008 (out of a total of 361 titles), which earned Hungarian the twelfth place in the list of languages in that year.<sup>22</sup>

A bibliography of first English translations of Hungarian novels published between 2000 and 2016, compiled by Anikó Szilágyi as part of her Ph.D. thesis,<sup>23</sup> attests that while authors who already have a high status in the international literary space were mostly published by prestigious publishing houses, the works of a number of authors who are less well-known internationally were released by small, independent publishers who choose to publish a Hungarian author for a variety of reasons. Some of these publishers specialize in Hungarian or Eastern/Central European authors: examples include the (now dormant) London-based Stork Press, the Prague-based Twisted Spoon Press, and New Europe Books, based in Williamstown, MA and run by Hungarian-to-English translator Paul Olchvály. Other publishers have a strong personal affiliation to Hungarian authors or translators – *Death of an Athlete* by Miklós Mészöly came out from Bluecoat Press, a Liverpool publisher specializing in photojournalism, run by the brother of the recently deceased translator Tim Wilkinson, who did not manage to find a literary pub-

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22 Sapiro 429. Hungarian is preceded by French (58), Spanish (50), German (33), Arabic (27), Japanese (23), Russian (20), Italian (14), Portuguese (14), Chinese (12), Hebrew (12) and Swedish (11).

23 Szilágyi 2017.

lisher in English for Mészöly, a major post-war writer. Other independent publishers, like the New York-based Contra Mundum Press (the publisher of Miklós Szentkuthy) state on their website that they are constantly on the lookout for voices that “still remain in relative oblivion, works that alter and disrupt standard circuits of thought.”

Publishers tend to decide to make an offer for a book after reading the whole book or at least an excerpt.<sup>24</sup> However, the literary agent has to be convincing enough to awaken the interest of the publisher so they request a review copy, and it is often on the basis of the topic or the story as told in the catalogue copy or summed up by the agent that they do so. An article written in Hungarian on the reception of Hungarian literature in the Netherlands quotes a Hungarian academic, a Hungarian-to-Dutch translator and a journalist working in the Netherlands who all agree that Dutch publishers are more interested in Hungarian books that are dark in their themes and in their outlook – that talk about oppression, lack of freedom, totalitarian regimes, or victimhood.<sup>25</sup> For the Dutch reader, says Vera Illés (the journalist), the typical Eastern European writer is a victim, and their books are written from the point of view of the victim. This reflects my own experience to a certain extent – I have had negative feedback from foreign publishers about certain books that had been very well received by critics and readers alike in Hungary on the grounds that they were too optimistic, and not in the vein of the best writing their readers had been accustomed to from Hungarian writers. Yet this does not seem

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24 Büchler 9.

25 Wekerle 54-56.

to be true for rediscovered classics that have been extremely successful in various TLs – Márai's *Embers*, Szerb's *Journey by Moonlight* or Szabó's *The Door* –, although it should be noted that the authors themselves were victims of totalitarian regimes in various ways: Antal Szerb was killed in the Holocaust; Sándor Márai chose exile after the Communist takeover in 1948 as he thought (rightly) that his works would be censored; and Magda Szabó's writings were banned in the 1950s.

As publishers increasingly rely on authors being able to accept invitations to give talks and interviews, some of the challenges I have to face as an agent of Hungarian authors are linked to factors not strictly related to the works themselves. For many publishers it is important that the author should speak English; and for some publishers in certain countries, the political views of the author matter as well. Concerns about the financial viability of a Hungarian book are also a factor foreign publishers tend to consider.

To sum up, this overview lays bare the social conditions behind the representation of Hungarian authors' translation rights, and thus their chances to be "consecrated" in the international literary space. After the fall of the communist regime, Hungarian authors found themselves in the void as they entered the market economy. In the following decades, a "subtle hierarchy"<sup>26</sup> was established. Once an author represented by a Hungarian publisher or agent became internationally famous, in the 1990s they typically gravitated towards Berlin (the literary capital for Central European writers), and signed an agreement for the representation of their foreign rights with German publishers or agents, while

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26 Casanova 117.

some who became famous in the 2000s, signed with English or American agents, i.e. agents located in London or New York, the literary capitals where the hyper-central language is spoken. As Casanova observes, “In the aftermath of decolonization, then, the major literary centres have been able to go on maintaining a sort of literary protectorate... which allows them to exert a literary form of political power.”<sup>27</sup>

B) THE INTERNATIONAL PUBLISHING WORLD AND  
INTERNATIONAL LITERARY PRIZES

The last few decades have seen the increasing professionalization and internationalization of the publishing industry. Thanks to the internet, publishers can now request and receive books in pdf versions from other publishers and literary agents in a matter of seconds; the relatively new profession of literary scouts<sup>28</sup> has made it easier for publishers to gain information about recently published books that might fit their profile; and the numerous book fairs, festivals, fellowships and other international events provide occasions for publishing professionals to meet each other and exchange information about new books.

Thus, the fact that a major publisher from one of the literary centres (i.e. Britain, the US, Germany, or, more rarely, France or Italy) has published a Hungarian book – especially if the book turns out to be a success – will increase the likeli-

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<sup>27</sup> Casanova 117.

<sup>28</sup> Literary scouts are hired by foreign publishers to monitor certain segments of the publishing industry and recommend books for their clients.

hood that publishers in other countries will be interested in it.

In the 1990s and at the beginning of the new millennium, Germany was the springboard for the success of Hungarian literature. Katharina Raabe, editor of Suhrkamp Verlag, was a key figure in the discovery of Hungarian authors. In an interview given in 2017 to the Hungarian weekly *Élet és Irodalom*,<sup>29</sup> Raabe mentioned the special “aura” of Hungarian prose and the “seismic” effect in Germany of rediscovered Hungarian authors such as Sándor Márai, Antal Szerb and Ernő Szép. The success of Hungarian fiction in the German book market – which was not necessarily accompanied by financial success – in the decades after the fall of the communist regime seems to have been due to the fact that Germans felt a special affinity with Hungarians. Lately, however, while the market share of Hungarian titles has remained high in Germany compared to other Central European literatures, interest in them in the region has flagged. This may be due partly to the death of crucial figures like Péter Esterházy, Imre Kertész and György Konrád – writers who were well-respected in and often visited Germany, who spoke German and could update German publishers about recent developments in Hungarian literature –, and partly to the fact that, for social and political reasons, the interest of German readers has turned towards other regions.

Today, the importance of foreign publishers spreading the word about a Hungarian book is still paramount. However, it is less concentrated on German publishers like Suhrkamp and works in a more diffused way. Word of mouth can also be very helpful: it often happens that a book is sold in many territories – in exceptional cases, for example during a major

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29 Győri.



book fair, within a few days – after it gets mentioned by one publisher or agent after another.

Notable cases of Hungarian books published in several territories after success in a central language include *Journey by Moonlight* by Antal Szerb, marketed by its British publisher, Pushkin Press, as “the consummate European novel of the inter-war period.” Although the novel has cult status in Hungary, it is still surprising that a rediscovered Hungarian classic from 1937 should have as many as three different English translations (two of them published in 2016, by two different translators).<sup>30</sup> As Len Rix, the translator said in an interview, “Pushkin decided to do *Journey by Moonlight* because of the success of the novel in Italy.”<sup>31</sup> *Journey by Moonlight*, as well as other books by Szerb, also sold very well in Britain.<sup>32</sup>

Another sign of international success is a major international literary prize, which is also a powerful means of putting writers into the limelight. The international sales of Imre

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30 In fact, *Journey by Moonlight* has four different English translations as Peter Hargitai’s 2016 version substantially differs from his previous translation. Remarkably, the novel was also published in Hungarian by a British press: Antal Szerb (sic). *Utazás holdvilág*, Bletchley, JiaHu Books, 2017, printed in Wrocław. (Peter Sherwood, personal communication, 21 March 2021)

31 Elekes.

32 Judit Mudriczki offers a contrastive textual analysis using Lawrence Venuti’s concept of ‘cultural inscription’ to explain the popularity of Antal Szerb in the UK. Mudriczki argues that “the domesticating strategies the translator applies result in and thus explain the differences between the Hungarian and the English texts in the examples cited, because instead of a literal translation, his wording of the English text is determined by the conventions of English prose and the expectations of his assumed English readers.

Kertész soared after he won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2002; in fact, he became the most widely translated Hungarian author in the first decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>33</sup> There have been around sixty new foreign publications of László Krasznahorkai's books since he won the Man Booker International Prize in 2015.<sup>34</sup> It was the Prix Femina étranger, awarded to the French translation of *The Door* in 2003, that launched the international success of Magda Szabó, the most translated Hungarian woman writer.<sup>35</sup> Subsequently, Len Rix's translations of three of her novels – *The Door*, *Katalin Street* and *Abigail* – also received a deluge of prizes.

There is one international prize which, although not comparable to the Nobel or the Booker in terms of prestige, results in a high number of translations: the European Union Prize for Literature (EUPL), financed by the Creative Europe programme of the European Commission, with the aim of promoting the circulation of literature within Europe. As there is a generous EU grant for publishers of European fiction, a grant which favours publishers who include EUPL winners in their proposal, many publishers applying for it – especially publishers based in less wealthy countries – buy the translation rights of EUPL winning books to increase the likelihood of their being awarded the grant. When Magvető's author Réka Mán-Várhegyi won the prize in 2019, within a few days we received offers from dozens of publish-

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33 Kertész's best known novel, *Fatelessness*, was published in two different translations as the first one was considered inadequate.

34 [http://krasznahorkai.hu/book\\_list\\_en.html](http://krasznahorkai.hu/book_list_en.html)

35 Although an English translation by Stefan Draughon already existed (Magda Szabó. *The Door*, East European Monographs, 1995).

ers (who could not have read the book in such a short time), and sold the translation rights to eight territories.

To sum up, on the level of the international publishing world, it is more likely that foreign publishers will undertake the publication of Hungarian authors if they had already been successful in one of the central languages or if they had received major international literary prizes. Often, success is equated with economic success, yet it must be stressed that “The market of symbolic goods is a specific type of economy that functions according to its own criteria of valuation,”<sup>36</sup> and – as mentioned before – foreign publishers may have reasons other than economic to publish Hungarian works. These reasons, however, “cannot be reduced to a political balance of power” – there is a more complex relationship between dominated and dominant that involves “a strictly literary competition”<sup>37</sup> as well.

### c) TRANSLATORS

I started to write this article with certain preconceptions in mind concerning the role of translators in the mediation of Hungarian fiction, reflected in the questionnaire<sup>38</sup> I created for Hungarian-to-English literary translators. I incorporated the responses of fourteen individuals in the following section – responses which corroborated some of my preconceptions and disproved others.

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36 Heilbron and Sapiró 94.

37 Casanova 116.

38 See Appendix 2.

In the case of translation from a peripheral language, the role of translators as “literary ambassadors” is indispensable. It is often translators who recommend books to TL publishers – only one of the fourteen translators who completed the questionnaire answered that they had never approached publishers/journals with recommendations of Hungarian works, with four of them responding that they “often” approached publishers or journals. This approach is rarely motivated (or rewarded) economically: the majority of the translators are not satisfied with the amounts paid for their work.<sup>39</sup> However, as one translator notes, it ensures “utmost creative independence, whereby translators can focus on authors without having to worry about commercial viability”.<sup>40</sup>

There are typically only a handful of literary translators working from Hungarian towards any language, even central and hyper-central ones. Altogether about twenty to thirty translators work with English as a TL, and less than ten of them are commissioned to translate most Hungarian literary fiction that comes out in English translation. (The majority of the translators who answered my questionnaire fall into this category, with several books and journal publications to their name, though a few well-known translators did not complete the questionnaire.) They mostly have other jobs besides literary translation (editing, publishing, writing, teaching), with the exception of two translators, at least one of whom is retired, and does not depend on literary translation financially. They are all much in demand: most of them have

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39 “On a scale from one to five how satisfied are you overall with the amount(s) paid for your work?” Five: 2 answers; four: 3 answers; three: 4 answers; two: 4 answers; one: 1 answer.

40 Komporaly.

won prizes and/or grants, and twelve of them answered that they had already declined jobs on grounds of being dissatisfied with the author, the book, the publisher, the payment or the deadline. Their job consists in much more than translating a Hungarian work commissioned by a foreign publishing house: ten translators answered that they did promotional work for authors – meeting publishers and cultural organizations; writing reviews, essays and introductions; giving interviews to literary and cultural journals and websites; appearing jointly with authors when they are invited to events; giving talks on Hungarian literature, and so on. Yet only one translator answered that they sometimes got paid for these activities, with all the others answering that they never did.

The job of the translator is often seen as self-effacing, invisible and not well remunerated. Often, translators are paid a lump sum, though some publishers include royalties – usually 1 to 4 per cent of the net consumer's price of each copy sold<sup>41</sup> – into their contracts with translators. In the latter case, the sum paid on submitting the translation is an advance, though unless the translated book becomes a bestseller, the translator is not likely to receive substantial royalties. Six of the translators answering the questionnaire responded that they had never received a royalty, eight responded that they received a royalty once, regularly, or sometimes. Even those who did receive royalties, added that it was “very symbolic”; that “publishers tended to cheat on their statements”; and that the royalty was “payable only after the author's advance (generally bigger than the translation fee) has earned out.”

Yet although they are not well remunerated, translators do have power. Until the 1990s, the notion of the ideal transla-

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41 Büchler 18.

tor, modelled “on the logocentric construct of the decontextualized ‘sacred original’”, reduced translators “to the status of transcoders and translation machines.”<sup>42</sup> However, cognitive science-based theories started to acknowledge that the “world knowledge” of the translator was part of the cognitive processes in translation.<sup>43</sup>

The way the translator transfers a literary work into the target culture is an effect of the translator’s *habitus*, i.e. their mindset and attitudes conditioned by the social world.<sup>44</sup> The *habitus* of a translator can be observed in their “more or less subjective and random choices”,<sup>45</sup> but translators themselves often formulate their guiding principles. It is interesting to compare the *habitus* of two translators of László Krasznahorkai, and the assessment of their differences by the author himself.<sup>46</sup> George Szirtes considers that, above all, a translation should have coherence in the TL:

A bad translation is one that has no life in the receiving language. ... For me a translation should have a force equivalent,

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42 Prunč 40.

43 Prunč 41.

44 Pierre Bourdieu’s definition of the *habitus*: “the generative principle of responses more or less well adapted to the demands of a certain field, is the product of an individual history, but also, through the formative experiences of earliest infancy, of the whole collective history of family and class.” (Quoted by Gouanvic 158–59)

45 Gouanvic 158.

46 Both translators won the Best Translated Book Award for their translations of Krasznahorkai’s *Satantango* and *Seiobo There Below*, respectively – and, moreover, they won the award two years in a row: George Szirtes in 2013 and Otilie Mulzet in 2014.

or close to equivalent, to the force of the original in the original language. ... I suspect translations live in an imagined terrain that is not entirely fixed. They inhabit the air between two cultures.<sup>47</sup>

“As George is a poet he had always wanted to catch the essence, a mood; Otilie wanted to make a more exact translation,” Krasznahorkai noted in a piece written for *The Guardian*.<sup>48</sup> Otilie Mulzet herself said in an interview that rather than recreating the work as if it was written in the TL, her translation actually exhibits the strangeness of the original:

I really try to convey what I feel is unique about the original, why it wasn't written in English and perhaps never could be written in English. I want my translation to be something impossible yet extant, something existing on the border of two utterly incompatible worlds, and yet to be a bridge between those worlds. I want the reader of the English version to feel the same shock I felt when reading the original. I don't want to make it easy or acceptable, or to over-domesticate the text.<sup>49</sup>

The metaphor used by the two translators – the translation living in an imagined terrain, as if hovering in the air between two cultures, as opposed to the translation as a bridge, impossible yet extant – expresses the difference between the *habitus* of the two translators. Otilie Mulzet's approach comes across as source-oriented, aimed at conveying the form and

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47 Györe.

48 Krasznahorkai.

49 Stivers.

structure of the ST; while George Szirtes' is target-oriented, focusing on the forms and cultural norms of the TL.

The *habitus* of these two translators are well within common norms<sup>50</sup> of translation. There are some cases, however, where translators had deviated from the norms, and their works were very well received, arguably *as a result of* their deviation from the norms.

Indirect translation – i.e. translating from a mediating language – is normally frowned upon by authors, translators and critics alike. Yet Sándor Márai's *Embers* has been a great success in many languages, including in English, in Carol Brown Janeway's translation from German. In this case, the indirect translation seems to have contributed to the success of the novel. Analysing the rendering of certain Hungarian expressions in the German and the English versions, Peter Sherwood arrives at the conclusion that by eliminating the mannerisms of the Hungarian text, the German translation became more readable than the Hungarian, while the English translation, eliminating the remaining mannerisms almost entirely, became the most accessible of the three versions.<sup>51</sup>

Miklós Bánffy's *Transylvanian Trilogy*, published in English by the London-based Arcadia Books, was a success with critics and readers alike. This trilogy, written by a politician, foreign minister in 1921–22 and influential cultural figure in Hungary and in Transylvania, is not very well known in Hungary. The translation is an interesting example of collaborative translation, by Bánffy's daughter, Katalin Bánffy-Jel-

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50 On the concept of norms see Toury, and Chesterman 1997.

51 Sherwood 2011.



en and Patrick Thursfield.<sup>52</sup> Although no comparative study of the Hungarian and the English edition exists yet, it can be surmised that the reason for the success of Bánffy's works in English translation – as opposed to their relative marginality in Hungary – is partly due to the fact that the translators substantially modernized the language of the ST.

When discussing norms, it must be noted that as opposed to translators who work with Hungarian as their TL, TTs produced by Hungarian-to-English translators are very rarely edited by bilingual editors. To my question “If you translate for publishers outside Hungary, who edits your work?”, *none* of the translators responded that they ever had bilingual editors (though two of them answered “it varies, depending on the publisher”, which may or may not include the possibility of a bilingual editor). Four answered “nobody” or “I don't know”, and eight responded that their work was edited by in-house editors. The lack of a bilingual editor is almost certainly due to economic factors as their fee would raise the costs of a translated book to the extent that it would have a much smaller chance of being economically viable. While unedited TTs leave ample space not only for the *habitus*, but also the eventual lack of linguistic or cultural competence of the translator, TTs edited by in-house editors lacking SL knowledge shift the translation towards TL orientation. The latter may have the benefit of readability, but it may also result in an over-domestication of the ST.

It must be added, however, that all translators who completed my questionnaire responded that they consulted other

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52 The translators received the Oxford-Weidenfeld prize for their translation of *They Were Divided* in 2002.

people when they translated literature: almost all of them (13) consulted the author, many of them consulted editors and other translators (6–7), with other answers including academics, critics and target-culture readers. Also, eleven of them had already visited the House of Translators in Balatonfüred, Hungary, where they had the opportunity to discuss their translations with colleagues, authors and critics.

While they are satisfied with the House of Translators, their opinion of Hungarian state institutions promoting translation is mostly negative.<sup>53</sup> To the question “In your opinion, what more could/should the Hungarian state do to support translators from Hungarian into English?”, nine translators gave (more or less viable) professional suggestions – e.g. offering more grants and scholarships; adopting a higher profile at international book fairs; setting up a specialized website for prospective translators, etc. Three translators, however, responded that this question was completely irrelevant as long as the system continued to be unprofessional and lacking transparency.

Aside from the TL texts they produce, translators can become “the authority who manipulates the culture, politics, literature, and their acceptance (or lack thereof) in the target culture.”<sup>54</sup> Translators working from Hungarian to English gain significant symbolic capital by being one of the few individuals who are able to mediate the culture of a small language into the hyper-central language. Some of them often

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53 On a scale from one to five: five: 0 answers; four: 1 answer; three: 4 answers; two: 5 answers; one: 4 answers.

54 Álvarez, Roman, and Carmen-África Vidal, editors. *Translation, Power, Subversion*, Clevedon and Philadelphia etc.: Multilingual Matters, 1996, quoted in Wolf 2007, 11.

voice their opinion on Hungarian literature, culture and politics. In certain cases, the authority of the translator antedates their work as a translator: George Szirtes, a Hungarian-born British poet, winner of the T.S. Eliot Prize, and the translator of László Krasznahorkai, Dezső Kosztolányi, Sándor Márai and Magda Szabó, among others, has written a number of articles for *The Guardian* on contemporary Hungarian politics. In other cases, the authority of translators stems from the fact that they are translators of writers who have a high status in the international literary space: Tim Wilkinson, the translator of Imre Kertész (and perhaps the most prolific translator of Hungarian literature<sup>55</sup>) wrote essays and reviews on Hungarian literature; Otilie Mulzet, translator of László Krasznahorkai, has given a number of interviews on Hungarian language and literature, and has recently translated an article by Hungarian writer Gábor Schein on literature and politics in Hungary. Mulzet is also the series editor of the Hungarian list of Seagull Books.

I started this section by stating that I had had certain pre-conceptions concerning the role of translators in mediating Hungarian fiction, and my questionnaire reflected those pre-conceptions. After analysing the responses, my conclusion is that the role of translators is in fact even more significant

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55 “In a 15-year burst of activity from the turn of the century he translated nine volumes by Kertész, two of which remain in manuscript, as well as works by such contemporaries as György Spiró, Iván Sándor and Miklós Mészöly, and also contributed dozens of shorter pieces, criticism as well as translations, to magazines. A further dozen full-length works remain unpublished, including two by the Man Booker International Prize-winning László Krasznahorkai. He devoted his final active years to the demanding philosophical oeuvre of the modernist Szentkuthy, of which five volumes have appeared.” (Sherwood 2020)

than I had initially surmised: most of them actively promote Hungarian literature by approaching publishers and journals with recommendations and most of them do substantial pro bono promotional work. The responses also indicated that translators act much more independently of other agents in the book market than I had assumed: they only have sporadic contact with Hungarian publishers and, although some of them have received grants, fellowships and prizes from the Hungarian state, they are mostly suspicious of and/or not satisfied with the work of state institutions. As expected, most of them feel that they are not in an advantageous position economically when negotiating with TL publishers – they cannot secure substantial royalties and are often underpaid; however, they do have symbolic power in the TL culture as in addition to translating STs – unedited by bilingual editors – they often select and interpret the texts and the culture themselves. Thus, translators are mediators not only between national cultures, but between ideologies as well.<sup>56</sup>

## CONCLUSION

My aim in writing this article has been to draw a partial sketch map of the terrain that literary fiction written in Hungarian has to navigate in order to find its place in the international publishing world. I detailed some of the challenges of the mediation of Hungarian literature, from unstable cultural policies, through lack of proper representation, to difficulties faced by translators and foreign publishers, economic and otherwise. I have also stressed that, in spite of all these

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<sup>56</sup> Wing-Kwong Leung 138.

challenges, Hungarian literature has a surprisingly strong international presence, with a number of Hungarian writers having a high status in the international literary world and a relatively large number of Hungarian works translated into foreign languages, including English.

The sociological perspective helped me identify and discuss some of the underlying issues of the mediation of Hungarian literary fiction, including the challenges and opportunities of supply-driven translation in a globalized book market.

As my main goal was to highlight the importance of networks and individuals involved in the process of the mediation of Hungarian literature, there are a number of important issues I encountered during the course of this research that require further investigation. For instance, the role of Hungarian-to-English literary translators in interpreting Hungarian culture calls for further examination; a contrastive analysis of the status, practice and *habitus* of these translators and translators working with Hungarian as a TL may also yield interesting results. I hope this analysis will serve not only to clarify certain issues related to the mediation of Hungarian literature, but will also prove useful for further research on the above-mentioned issues.

## APPENDIX 1

**Titles sold by Magvető Agency between 2017 and 2020:  
target languages**

|              |           |
|--------------|-----------|
| English      | 6         |
| French       | 6         |
| Italian      | 5         |
| Bulgarian    | 4         |
| German       | 4         |
| Macedonian   | 4         |
| Arabic       | 3         |
| Czech        | 3         |
| Polish       | 3         |
| Romanian     | 3         |
| Serbian      | 3         |
| Slovak       | 3         |
| Albanian     | 2         |
| Slovene      | 2         |
| Chinese      | 1         |
| Croatian     | 1         |
| Finnish      | 1         |
| <b>Total</b> | <b>54</b> |

APPENDIX 2

**Questionnaire for literary translators from Hungarian into English**

1. What percentage of your work consists of literary translation from Hungarian into English?
  - a) between 10 and 40 percent
  - b) between 41 and 80 percent
  - c) between 81 and 100 percent
  
2. What genres of literature do you translate? (e.g. poetry, short stories, novels, excerpts from novels, essays, children's literature) Please list all that apply.
  
3. Do you have any other job(s) besides literary translation? If you do, please give details.
  
4. How do you obtain literary translation work? (Tick or underline all that apply)
  - a) Through publishers based outside Hungary
  - b) Through publishers based within Hungary
  - c) Through journals (whether online or otherwise) published outside Hungary
  - d) Through journals (whether online or otherwise) published within Hungary
  - e) Hungarian state institutions
  - f) Other: .....

5. Do you yourself ever approach publishers/journals with recommendations of Hungarian works?

- a) Yes, often
- b) Yes, sometimes
- c) No

6. Do you occasionally do promotional work for books/authors translated by you? (e.g. giving interviews, writing reviews/essays, meeting publishers, giving talks, etc.) If you do, please give details.

7. If you do promotional work, do you get paid for it?

- a) Yes, always
- b) Yes, sometimes
- c) No

8. Do you usually receive a lump sum for your translation, or does your contract with publishers include royalties as well? If you receive a royalty, how much is it in general? (Please give a percentage)

9. If you translate for publishers outside Hungary, who edits your work?

- a) In-house editors
- b) Bilingual editors/translators
- c) It varies, depending on the publisher
- d) Sometimes I don't know/I am not told
- e) Nobody



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10. Have you ever received any grants for your translations? If yes, from whom? (e.g. Hungarian state, PEN, etc.) Please give as much detail as you can.

11. Have you received any prizes for your translations? If yes, please give details.

12. Have you ever visited the House of Translators in Balatonfüred?

- a) No
- b) Yes, once
- c) Yes, several times

13. On a scale from 1 to 5, how satisfied are you overall with the amount(s) paid for your work?

14. On a scale from 1 to 5, how satisfied are you overall with the publishers/journals you work for?

15. On a scale from 1 to 5, how satisfied are you with the deadlines that publishers/journals set for you?

16. On a scale from 1 to 5, how satisfied are you overall with the Hungarian state institutions promoting translation?

17. When you translate literature, do you ever consult other people? If yes, who? (Tick or underline all that apply)

- a) The author
- b) The editor(s)
- c) Other translators
- d) Other(s) .....

18. Have you ever declined a literary translation job from Hungarian into English? If yes, why?

19. In your opinion, what more could/should the Hungarian state do to support translators from Hungarian into English?

20. In your opinion, what more could/should publishers in Hungary do to support translators from Hungarian into English?

21. In your opinion, what more could/should foreign publishers do to support translators from Hungarian into English?

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