

## The reportage and what surrounds it: Outlining the tradition and connections of two transitional genres in Hungarian literature

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### QUESTIONS OF TERMINOLOGY: REPORTAGE AND SOCIOGRAPHY AS NONFICTIONAL GENRES

Nonfictional genres are categorized differently in different national literary histories: in Hungary (as opposed to the Slovak or Polish practice), nonfiction genres are not seen as a part of literary history, and only studied as elements of the oeuvre of particular writers, in the form of case studies. Despite the fact that the concept of literary reportage does exist, the genre of reportage is thus only discussed within the frame of history of the press or (to use the currently customary term) media history.

I examine two genres related to Hungarian nonfiction, reportage and sociology, both of which can be seen as transitional genres, as they are connected to both journalism and sociology. I would first like to emphasize certain aspects of the definition of the genre of sociology, as, to the best of my knowledge, it does not exist as a literary genre of its own in other cultures. At first glance, sociology is related to ethnography, as it examines the life of rural communities. However, this does not mean that these two disciplines are identical. While ethnography deals with the culture of everyday life within folk/rural communities, sociology, closely related to ethnography, has an entirely different goal. As Polish sociologist Jan Szczepański writes, sociology examines the laws of the structure and progress of society (1973, 5). Sociology, this pragmatic science, thanks to the achievements of accomplished writers of the intelligentsia, turned into a transitional genre in the 1930s in Hungary that showcased certain characteristics of literature, sociology, and journalism – depending on which of the heterogeneous elements listed was most prevalent in a particular work.

In this study, due to restrictions of length, I can only aim to describe the beginnings of the two genres that are being discussed. From the point of view of social history, we can state that these are the products of (widely interpreted) modernization. As such, they are rooted in the processes of economical progress and accelerated urbanization as well as the birth of the urban and metropolitan bourgeoisie and the consequent rise of individualization, and the formerly oppressed social groups' pursuit of emancipation. On the other hand, the inevitable need for the modernization and the reformation of the economic and social relations of the village was also present in the creation of these genres. And even though the basic thematic orientation

of these genres has changed over time, it can be stated that the reportage was originally connected to the process of urbanization and the birth of the metropolis, while sociography was connected to the modernization of the village. At the same time, it must be noted that the birth of the latter genre is linked to members of the metropolitan intelligentsia: in Hungary, the turn of the 20th century was the period in which the so-called “second reformer-generation” appeared.<sup>1</sup> It was exactly this generation of reformers, emerging from the urban bourgeois intelligentsia, that recognized the necessity of the modernization of the village and the social uplifting of the peasantry.

In this study, I will first present the beginnings of Hungarian social reportage, then touch on certain parallels between the Hungarian and Polish literary reportage of the 1930s. The examination of these particular parallels is warranted by the fact that a significant development in the genre of reportage within Central Europe can be observed exactly in Hungarian and Polish literature, not only in the time period discussed here, but also later on, in the second half of the 20th century. In the second part of the study, I will talk about the development of literary sociography, with an emphasis on characteristics similar to those of the social reportage.

### THE HUNGARIAN SOCIAL REPORTAGE

Hungarian reportage as a journalistic genre emerged from crime coverage. The reporters had a close relationship with the police: their daily routine included visiting the head of police and certain detectives in order to obtain information on current crimes.

A veritable expansion of reportage took place at the beginning of the 20th century. The genre gradually became the most important element of all daily and weekly newspapers, and heavily influenced all other journalistic genres. The considerable influence of American journalism, especially related to the Hungarian-born Joseph Pulitzer and then so-called “New Journalism”, must be noted here.<sup>2</sup>

In 1925, 934 press products were in circulation in Hungary (including daily and weekly newspapers and monthly periodicals), 618 of which were published in Budapest. By 1942, the total number of press products reached 1379, with 779 published in Budapest and 600 published regionally, which shows the expansion of the regional press (Buzinkay, 1993). This enormous expansion had a number of different consequences. On the one hand, the number of sensationalist, shoddy pieces of writing grew considerably. On the other hand, reportages on the previously invisible aspects of metropolitan life also emerged in great numbers, shedding light on issues such as urban poverty and destitution. As a reviewer of Gézáné Antal’s *Túl a palotákon* (Beyond the Palaces) put it: “the reportage [...] brings into light and makes public the parts of the capital’s life which have previously stayed in the shadows and of which we have not known, and acquaints us with the surroundings in which we live”<sup>3</sup> (“*Túl a palotákon*”, 1913, 520).

A new kind of journalist emerged through the pursuit of exploring the seamy side of metropolitan life: the investigative reporter, who wasn’t interested in sensations, but in uncovering social issues. One such journalist was Kornél Tábori (1879–1944) who could in fact be viewed as the first Hungarian investigative reporter, a colleague

of the liberal *Pesti Napló* (Pest Journal) and from 1907, a member of its editorial board. Tábori wrote multiple books which presented the previously unknown aspects of the life of the Hungarian capital.<sup>4</sup> The key word to describe his writing would be “objectivity”: Tábori aimed to confront his readers with social issues and to spur them to find solutions. He was dedicated to familiarize his readers with the heavy fate of those in poverty, living at the bottom of metropolitan society. As opposed to other reporters who painted the destitute as criminals, Tábori did not criminalize poverty nor the poor themselves.

In the foreword of his famous book, *Pesti élet* (Life in Pest, 1910), titled “Reportage and Photography”, he declared his *ars poetica* as follows: “Primacy is the key. And quickness. And the completeness of information. [...] The journalist has to be noticing, perceiving, questioning” (Tábori 1910 [Tomsics 2006, 46]).<sup>5</sup> The author of *Pesti élet* made a clear distinction between the duties of the journalist and the work of the sociologist and psychologist, who, as he writes, analyze and dissect phenomena. According to Tábori, the reporter does not seek the psychological, sociological or ethical causes and explanations for the things he has witnessed, and confines himself to describing through words and pictures what he has observed. The concept of the image is important here, as the visual representation of events gained an increasingly greater role in Tábori’s activity. He worked with professional photographers, and also liked to take photos himself: he was the author of the famous album, *From the Horrors of a Country Condemned to Death. Inspection-Tour Through the Misery of Budapest*, published in 1920 (46). The English title was for a good reason: Tábori’s aim was to make Western diplomats and politicians learn about the then turbulent state of the country.<sup>6</sup> Prime Minister Károly Huszár initiated the creation of the album documenting the destitution in Budapest and personally appointed Tábori for this task, as he was known as a reporter and documentary photographer whose work was centered on metropolitan poverty. The primary goal of the prime minister was to evoke sympathy in the West (and Western European politicians). This first album of social documentary photography was created from 16 photos by Tábori. Its curiosity laid in the fact that, even though it employed posed pictures (meaning its models posed for the photographer, rather than being candid shots), the authenticity of the photos was unquestionable, as Tábori signed every picture with the exact location of their shot, and the names and addresses of the people they depicted.<sup>7</sup>

Kornél Tábori was a professionally well-prepared, socially dedicated and sensitive journalist. He compared his own role to that of an explorer who, through his detailed reports, could present the truth in its multicolored reality for his readers. In this regard, we can rightfully compare his work as a reporter to the reportage of writers of the turn of the century and the interwar period.

## THE REPORTAGE OF POLISH AND HUNGARIAN WRITERS – THE PARALLELS

In the first half of the 20th century, multiple Hungarian writers made a living from working on the editorial boards of daily papers or journals, much like their Polish colleagues (such as Władysław Reymont, Bolesław Prus, Melchior Wańkowicz and

Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński). The most important writers of modern Hungarian literature, such as Zsigmond Móricz, Lajos Nagy, Sándor Márai, Dezső Kosztolányi and Frigyes Karinthy all wrote reportages for such papers as *Budapesti Napló* (Budapest Journal), *Vasárnapi Újság* (Sunday Paper), *Est-Lapok* (Evening Papers), etc. The former two authors dealt mainly with the rural issues, while the latter three were the representatives of the urban problems.

I would now like to highlight a single piece of these writings: one of the first reportages of Zsigmond Móricz (1879–1942), which is an emblematic example of the genre of sociographic reportage. This writing was published in 1910, titled “Ökörítő”, named after the location of the reportage, a small village. In it, Móricz recounts a tragic event which transpired in Eastern Hungary: 350 people burned alive at a dance held in a barn, which was kept closed so that no one could enter without paying the entrance fee. The writer tries to find the answer to the question of how such a tragedy could happen, while describing the immediate surroundings of the eponymous village, the bog near Ecsed, in great detail. He speaks of the practices of the lords living nearby, regularly cheating the local peasants, leaving them robbed of their traditional means of making a living. He suggests that the mentality of the local peasantry, their unique selfishness and avarice, emerged due to the impact of different factors. Analyzing them, Móricz reaches the conclusion that the institutions of the state and the local administration are both to blame for this tragedy. It is also unquestionable for him that both constant, centuries-long poverty and the low level of education have played a considerable part in the situation escalating to such extremes.

Władysław Reymont, the author of the sweeping epic *Chłopi* (The Peasants, 1904–1909) is a worthy Polish counterpart of Móricz, and his tireless work as a reporter travelling around the country is one aspect in which their work is comparable. Although less well-known beyond Poland, Reymont is also seen as the country’s first modern reporter: he was only 27 years old when his reportage series “Pilgrimage to Jasna Góra” was published in *Tygodnik Ilustrowany* (Illustrated Weekly) in 1895, making him instantly famous. This first report already showed the qualities of his mature writing through his exceptional observational skills and his personal attitude of recording events as a participant. Reymont was able to show the facade of the country itself through his portrayal of the mass of four thousand pilgrims. It must be noted, though, that at the time of its publication, his writing was not called reportage, but “a description of original form” (Szczygieł 2014, 102).

Among the literary reportages, the travelogues written in the 1930s detailing the experience of journeys in the Soviet Union must also be mentioned. Antoni Słonimski’s “Moja podróż do Rosji” (My Journey to Russia, 1932) belongs to this collection of works, as well as the writings of his Hungarian colleagues Gyula Illyés and Lajos Nagy both wrote Soviet travelogues in 1934.<sup>8</sup> As we know, these journeys were conceptual, carried out according to rigorously pre-planned scripts. It is exactly this that makes these reports so edifying to read and compare today, also taking their wider contexts into consideration (this would, however, need be the topic of another study).<sup>9</sup>

## SOCIOLOGY AND SOCIOGRAPHY IN HUNGARY IN THE FIRST HALF OF THE 20TH CENTURY

Sociology as an academic field came to be primarily thanks to the efforts of two social scientists, Ferdinand Tönnies (1855–1936) and Sebald Rudolf Steinmetz (1862–1940). According to Steinmetz, sociography was empirical sociology itself, which “aims to describe and characterise, through all possible means, the general state of a particular nation at a certain period of time”<sup>10</sup> (Bartha 2013, 95). The beginning of the 20th century was the period for establishing sociology as a scientific field in Hungary, and contemporarily, the birth of sociography. Between the years 1900 and 1919, scientists and writers grouped around the periodical *Huszadik Század* (Twentieth Century) worked on creating the methodology and practice of empirical sociology. The evolution of sociography was connected to the social and political endeavours of the turn of the 20th century. This was the period in which the new generation of intellectuals emerged, whose members pushed for social reforms and became the key figures of the revolutions of the autumn of 1918 and the spring of 1919 in Hungary. Political scientist Oszkár Jászi and his colleagues wished to found politics on scientific grounds, and initiated the elaboration of empirical sociology for this reason. Their program was stated as follows: “we must work out the anatomy and physiology of Hungary, as we can only propose scientific politics with such a foundation: politics which are living reality, and not a utopia” (Jászi 1910, 8). This was the first attempt at a scientific surveying of social destitution, the uncovering of a field which was previously entirely unknown and unheard of. Róbert Braun and his colleagues carried out ground-breaking work in village research with their sociographies. In the 1920s, following the shock of the two revolutions, the Republic of Councils and the Treaty of Trianon, this work continued in the paper *Századunk* (Our Century). These initiatives can be compared to the other researches of similar aims in the region: for example with the works of the American sociologist William I. Thomas and of the Polish Florian Znaniecki, representatives of the so-called humanist sociology. Their most well-known work is the ground-breaking *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (published in five volumes between 1918 and 1920). They are also comparable to the interwar works of Romanian Dimitrie Gusti, the founder of the Bucharest school of sociology and creator of the methodology for research of villages and peasant life.<sup>11</sup> Gusti invited young Hungarian village researchers in 1935 and 1936 for a joint summer methodological research camp, which lasted until the Romanian authorities closed it down.

As the examples above show, the interest in the life of the peasantry and the demand for learning about the particular problems of village life was a general trend in Central Europe. Beyond the already stated facts, this also proven by a Polish initiative similar to the project of the Hungarian village researchers, a call for applications by the Institute of National Economy that invited the journal of peasants, a tome of which was published in 1935.<sup>12</sup> The Hungarian village researcher movement was called for by politicians, who initiated it to be able to assess the country’s state post-Trianon, and the consequences of the 1929–1932 economical crisis. Following this, a sociographical series was published in eight volumes between 1935 and 1938.<sup>13</sup>

The first sociography which drew a considerable reaction was the work of the then 24-year-old Zoltán Szabó, *A tardi helyzet* (The Situation at Tard, 1936).<sup>14</sup> Tard is a village situated in Northern Hungary: the author travelled there and lived together with the villagers for weeks, gathering material on their living situation, their working conditions, and the life of the peasants. The village showed a whole chain of social issues which I will not describe in detail I would only like to talk about Szabó's methodology.

In the introduction of *A tardi helyzet*, Szabó describes the *ars poetica* of sociography as follows: the goal of research work is to awaken society's conscience, and to cause panic within society at large, because only this can lead them to recognize their situation and make the necessary decisions in order to reach the changes desired to mend it. The primary ethical demand of sociography is the responsibility for the community, and because of this, its most important task is the creation of a diagnosis. The goal of writing is exclusively to uncover the facts – the writer is solely responsible for the facts, their mission is the service of society (1937, 2–6).

Working as a journalist in the interwar period, Zoltán Szabó was the emblematic figure of the village research movement who approached sociographical writing with an academic intent. He must be viewed differently than the belletrists, the great authors of 20th century Hungarian literature who also published reportages and sociographies. One such writer was the already mentioned Zsigmond Móricz, the grandmaster of Hungarian realistic prose. Móricz's authentic depictions of the state of rural Hungary and the characteristic figures of small towns and villages, as well as his psychologically faithful depiction of the peasantry's mentality contributed to the recognition of a world that, for the lack of previous representations, was more or less a blank page in Hungarian literature.

Another good example is Gyula Illyés, whose important contributions to sociography will be discussed below. Illyés first experimented with the naturalization of avant-garde poetics (French surrealism in particular), later going on to create a significant oeuvre by renewing representational poetry through the revival of the 19th century tradition of folkishness.

*Puszták népe* (1936; *People of the Puszta*, 1967) by Gyula Illyés was published in the same year as *A tardi helyzet*. The work presented the unimaginably bleak living conditions and hopeless situation of the most oppressed and poorest group of the peasantry, those in the Transdanubian lands. Almost a century after the end of serfdom, the descendants of the former serfs were exposed to even greater threats than their forebears. The population belonging to this social group was one third of the interwar Hungarian population. The author of *Puszták népe*, who grew up among these people, was a gifted observer and had a striking talent for depictions. He succeeded in portraying the life of the peasants as if he was mapping out a previously unknown continent. Though *Puszták népe* is not a novel, all the characteristic elements of Lawrence's novels can be found in Illyés' work: the idyll, the descriptions, the backgrounds and the figures, the tragical and comical episodes.<sup>15</sup> The encyclopedic depth in depicting the servants' life, the composition's likeness to a novel's structure and its unique narration makes *Puszták népe* an emblematic work. The narrator's point of

view changes over the course of the story, being partly subjective and personal (he recounts his childhood and talks of the characteristic members of his family and immediate surroundings). However, he also views the world that he has already left behind at an objective distance. This change of view creates a bitter irony. One of the most moving of the many memorable passages of the book is the confessional one, which portrays the emotional and cultural baggage and thus the ambivalence of social elevation for those who have managed to rise thanks to the sacrifices of their parents and grandparents:

Yet there was no family group – and this applied particularly to the foremen and overseers – of which one or other branch was not seized by the desire to go up in the world. How far could they rise? And what did the community vegetating below gain from their advancement? And what did those who advanced gain for themselves? [...] The second generation staggered and blinked in the blinding light above; it became drunk with the rich, free air and soon lost the ground from under its feet. Oh yes, it certainly developed... Like a plant transferred from the Arctic to the Equator it began to dwell and shine, but this very sudden and boisterous radiance was a warning that it was devouring itself. Driven on by feverish credulity, it grew by leaps and bounds, ever higher and further from its roots. The boys “made good” in the world. [...] Once their fathers had lived in the secure alliance of a close-knit community; now their sons found themselves on an equally slippery soil. They tried to hang on, they stumbled around, and thrown completely off balance, restlessly hastened on the fulfilment of some secret punishment. If not on themselves, then on their sons. They were not attractive, though they were certainly innocent in all respects. They had become traitors, but traitors to what? They themselves did not know; such matters never crossed their minds. Yet their nature was the restless, self-consuming nature of the traitor, or at best the exile (Illyés 1967, 292–293).

This book turned out to be a revelation for Hungarian culture. Zsigmond Móricz compared *Puszták népe* to Dostoevsky’s novels, as he reasoned that Illyés’ work gave notice of a world deeply sunk in the collective subconscious of the national community. As the reviewer himself noted, the greatest benefit of works of this kind is that the authors of the sociography take it upon themselves to speak in the name of those who have no power or capability to speak themselves, because they have been “buried alive”. This assertion points out a greatly important aspect of the existence of the peasantry: the lack of capability for self-expression and the lack of competence with language, which is an additional dimension of oppression. It is Illyés’ great merit that he made this pattern visible and directed attention to it.

Despite the fact that sociography (or at least in the form in which it came to be in Hungarian culture) can be seen as a unique *hungaricum*, the appearance of similar genres in the 1930s was not an isolated phenomenon. It is enough to mention the Przedmieście (Suburb) group, working in Warsaw and Lwów (Lviv), which had a program similar to the Hungarian ones. The writers of the group, such as Zofia Nałkowska, brought attention to groups on the margins of society, to the problems of the proletariat and the unemployed, presenting their realities objectively, without any touch-ups. It is exactly the intent of getting to the truth through objectivity which brings them closer to sociographers, and connects them to other movements of European literature, such as the Neue Sachlichkeit in Germany or the LEF and Novy LEF in the Soviet Union.

Sociography as a peculiar genre of nonfiction proved to be a strong and viable tradition in Hungary, picking up again between 1945 and 1948 (the so-called second blooming of the genre), then living its renaissance during the 1960s. In a slightly modified form, even contemporary literature includes sociographic features. This, however, is another story.

## CONCLUSION

From the examination of these two genres of Hungarian nonfictional literature, we can conclude that reportage and sociography have similar features. The two traditions are bound together by the same, or at least very similar, authorial intent: the cognition and presentation of previously unknown realities, the uncovering and discovering of reality. A similarly shared characteristic is their dedication of uncovering social issues, their respect for facts, and, in connection with (and partly thanks to) this, their authenticity, which is also guaranteed by the subjectivity of the lived experience. The genesis of the two genres is different, however: the Hungarian reportage grew from crime coverage, while sociography emerged as a partial discipline of sociology, which was meant to serve as an instrument for the rise of the peasantry, helping them to reach their deserved social rank. In both cases we are dealing with transitional genres, and thus it is important to note that the classification of a particular work and the question of its belonging to literature depends solely on its aesthetic worth.

Translated from Hungarian by Orsolya Gyárfás

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The term “second reformer-generation” is used to refer to those artists, scholars and politicians active in Hungary between 1896 and 1914 who, each in their own way, saw the modernization of the half-feudal country as their most important goal. See Horváth 1961.
- <sup>2</sup> The term “New Journalism” is most commonly used today to describe a trend of American journalism from the 1960s to the 1980s instead, headlined by journalists such as Tom Wolfe (who also edited the book from whose title this name originated), Truman Capote, Hunter S. Thompson, Norman Mailer and Gay Talese. Its style, opposing the traditionally “invisible” journalistic attitude striving for objectivity, was characterized by a dedicatedly subjective tone, the use of literary reminiscences, and the emphasizing of “truth” as opposed to the “facts”. See Fakazis 2016.
- <sup>3</sup> “megvilágítja, nyilvánossá teszi a főváros életének olyan részleteit is, amelyek sokáig teljes homályban voltak, a melyekről nem is tudtunk és megismertet azzal a környezettel, a melyben élünk” (“Túl a palotákon” 1913, 520).
- <sup>4</sup> See Tábori – Székely 1908 (Vladimír Székely was a police clerk who co-authored a number of books with Tábori, providing the information on which Tábori’s writings were based); Tábori 1909.
- <sup>5</sup> “Az elsőség a fő. Meg a gyorsaság. Meg az információ teljessége. [...] Az újságírónak meglátónak kell lennie, észrevehőnek, kérdezőnek” (Tábori 1910 [Tomsics 2006, 46]).
- <sup>6</sup> Following two failed revolutions and World War I, Hungary turned from a middle-sized European country into mini-state, losing two-thirds of its land and population. This led to considerable disproportionateness in the structure and functioning of its economy. See *A két világháború közötti Magyarország gazdaságtörténete* [The History of Economics in Interwar Hungary]. Accessed November 14, 2018. <http://www.bibl.u-szeged.hu/ha/gazd/gazdasag/index.html>.
- <sup>7</sup> A further proof of Tábori’s dedication is his charity work. He organized tours to Western Europe for

children in need in order to improve their health, and also worked for the Országos Gyermekvédeő Liga [National League for the Protection of Children] as a marketing manager (to use a contemporary phrase).

<sup>8</sup> See Illyés 1980; Nagy 1989.

<sup>9</sup> I am thinking of the writers and works of the so-called “disillusionment literature”, such as Arthur Koestler (*Darkness at Noon*, 1940; *The Invisible Writing. The second volume of an Autobiography*, 1954), André Gide (*Retour de l'URSS*, 1936) and Ervin Sinkó (*Roman eines Romans. Moskauer Tagebuch 1935 – 1937*, 1990) – among many others.

<sup>10</sup> “[A] szociográfia egy adott korban minden eszközzel leírni, jellemezni igyekszik valamely nép összes viszonyait és állapotát.”

<sup>11</sup> Gusti’s methodology was the monographic processing based on empirical studies.

<sup>12</sup> According to Joanna Radziejewicz “[The diaries] had a great impact on readers both at home and abroad. They earned a place in the history of literature as monuments of the interwar poverty and the exploitation and oppression of the working masses” (2016).

<sup>13</sup> The authors of these works were Zoltán Szabó (1912–1984), Géza Féja (1900–1978), Gyula Illyés (1902–1983), Péter Veres (1897–1970), Ferenc Erdei (1910–1971), Gyula Ortutay (1910–1978), Lajos Nagy (1883–1954).

<sup>14</sup> The book was published in 1936, however, the date shown on the cover [of the first publication] is, mistakenly, 1937.

<sup>15</sup> For more, see Szili 1984, 53.

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## The reportage and what surrounds it: Outlining the tradition and connections of two transitional genres in Hungarian literature

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Report. Sociography. Literary report.

This study aims to examine the emergence and connections of two non-fictional genres, the report and sociography. Modernization forms the background for both genres: the report is a product of urbanization, while sociography was created by the need for the modernization of the village and the necessity of the peasantry's emancipation. The study describes the parallels between the two genres based on the work of the first noteworthy Hungarian journalist-reporter, Kornél Tábori, and the activities of the sociographers of the 1930s, touching on their connections to literature and sociology as well. The study also discusses the literary report, as cultivated by both Polish and Hungarian writers at the turn of the century and during the interwar period. The closing remarks point out the parallels between sociography in Polish and world literature (the Przemieście group, Neue Sachlichkeit, LEF, Novij LEF).

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