



## **János Herceg's Literary Images**

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**Abstract.** János Herceg's essays and studies are depictions of Hungarian literature in Bácska/Yugoslavia/Vojvodina throughout several decades. An important background to his short stories, novels and notes on cultural and historical events is provided by his interacting literary images.

The delineation of the Hungarian literature of Bácska sprouting under the enticement of Budapest becomes formulated in the context of cultural history in Herceg's writings within the framework of "the Bácska character." The Trianon turnover gave life to Kornél Szenteleky's model of Hungarian literature in Yugoslavia. One of the contemporary presenters of the intellectual programme and local colours was János Herceg. Herceg's literary image regarding ethnic/national character is attached to Vojvodina.

János Herceg's concepts of literary conceptions, as I can discern from his essays and studies, are graded and supple, and next to the already mentioned context of cultural history (art history, folklore, local history, etc.), they are composed in the comparative relations system of Hungarian literatures, Slavic and world literature.

**Keywords:** Hungarian literature, Yugoslavia, Bácska (Bačka), Vajdaság (Vojvodina), János Herceg, stereotype

The traditional definition in Babits's sense holds that world literature is interested in great personalities who respond to each other through ages and countries, who are continuations of each other from century to century, and hold out their hands to one another above the heads of peoples. This approach rules out

commonplace literature, and opposes the contemporary “scientific trend” of literary theory which “detects a social phenomenon” in literature, too. This view is interested in the life of a community, one of whose life functions is literature itself. The modern vision finds great personalities or outstanding works less and less important. The commonplace writer, who gives expression to the community’s commonplace soul more compliantly, is more important; community itself is more important; and sometimes the public is more important than the writer, literary life or literature itself (Babits 1979, 10).

The “handbook” of the twentieth century science of literature, Wellek-Warren’s standard work on the subject, also raises the question of whether defining literature is to limit it to “great books,” which, whatever their subject, are “notable for literary form or expression.” Aesthetic function or fictive character are considered to be a distinctive feature of literature, yet for the sake of the tip they do not disregard the iceberg.

Within the history of imaginative literature, limitation to the great books makes incomprehensible the continuity of literary tradition, the development of literary genres, and indeed the very nature of the literary process, besides obscuring the background of social, linguistic, ideological, and other conditioning circumstances. (Wellek and Warren 2006, 22)

Up to the disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, our region (Bácska, Bánát/Bánság and Szerémség/Bačka, Banat and Srem) was part of Hungary. Important chapters of the prehistory of our literature are *the Hussite Bible* – a Bible translation in the Hungarian dialect of Szerémség – *The Memoirs about the Decay of Hungary* written by György Szerémi born in Kamonc (Sremska Kamenica), Mihály Szabatkai’s historical verse, the Renaissance centre of Péter Váradi at the castle of Bács (Bač) and finally, beginning with the eighteenth century, the press, book and literary culture of the developing economic and cultural centres in Újvidék (Novi Sad), Szabadka (Subotica), Zombor (Sombor), Nagybecskerek (Zrenjanin) and Kikinda. It is the printed book among others that makes our memoir and travelogue literature (Pál Jámbor, Izidor Milkó, Károly Vértesi), our first drama (Károly Csillag: *Devils Path* [*Sátán útja*], 1898), and the well-known prose writers public (Dániel Papp, Ferenc Herczeg, Elek Gozdsu, Dezső Kosztolányi and Géza Csáth). From the beginning of the nineteenth century, our region’s cultural life begins to orientate itself towards the fast developing city of Budapest. As Imre Bori put it, “The provincial intellectual centres had lost their importance, the province no longer produced intellectual goods, only consumed them, and so anyone who wished to make his way had to go to Budapest; the ‘provincials’ were left out of the bloodstream of intellectual life” (Bori 1998, 69).

The literary culture of the region thus became peripheralized, yet this was not a phenomenon specific to this region. It was of universal character valid for the whole country. Apart from Budapest the whole country was considered provincial (Kósa 2006).

In Bács-Bodrog county peripheralization aided the awakening to consciousness of the region. "Love the home-country in the county" – was the motto composed by Ede Margalits in 1883. The paradigm of "the Bácska character," of a claim for cultural and literary detachment developing from the inside is reflected in the titles of the local papers which include the name of the region (*Bácska, Bácsmegyei Napló, Bácskai Hírlap, Bácskai Gazda, Bácskai Ellenőr, Bácskai Közérdek* [...]), the activities on the reconstruction of past history of The Bács-Bodrogh County Historical Society [*Bács-Bodrogh Vármegyei Történelmi Társulat*], the editing of local literary anthologies (*Bácsbodrog-megyei árviz album, Bácskai emlény*), local folktale collections (*Bácskai dalok, mesék*), and last but not least the founding and activities of the Literary Society of Bács-Bodrog County [*Bács-Bodrog Megyei Irodalmi Társaság*] (1905). This geo-culturally tinted narrative, which brings to life the early history of the region, has created an identity which is an always unwillingly chosen, questioned or even ignored local cultic tradition (Ispánovics Csapó 2010). But it IS a tradition! And a very authentic one.

Our literary history considers the year of 1918 – the time of political, social and economic break-up – the date of birth of Hungarian literature in Yugoslavia, which started its awakening and the independent, so-called inner development in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. This is the year which we mark as the beginning of the period of intellectual ripening and self-defining to which János Herceg is an active contributor. The provincial Hungarian writers had, after long inner debates, become Hungarian writers of Vojvodina/ with the attribute of Vojvodina.

The literary battle-fronts which came to the foreground in these debates were not unequivocal, and *in those days there was not a single writer who consistently remained clinging to his opinion*. We can find them now in the camp of deniers, now in the camp of defenders of this literature (...) The real significance of these debates lies in the fact that the basic questions of Hungarian literature in Yugoslavia became settled: from now on Vajdaság (Vojvodina) was not only the framework of this literature but also its native soil, and the writers accepted the fact that they had become Yugoslav Hungarian writers. [ellipsis and emphasis in the original] (Bori 1998, 73)

This *vacillation* and *long maturing* can also be traced in János Herceg's textual world. His essays and studies depict the author's literary images within the scope/relation of Hungarian literature in Bácska/Vajdaság/Jugoszlávia (Bačka/

Vojvodina/Yugoslavia). These are literary visions, which are embedded into a rich panorama of social and cultural context, keeping in mind the aesthetic quality, while at the same time also reproducing certain stereotypes of our literature. They sometimes weaken, sometimes strengthen, shade or think these perceptions further. The first one of them is: *the autochthous, organic, intensive Hungarian culture/literature has no preliminaries*; the beginning is 1918<sup>1</sup> when Kornél Szenteleky announced his programme amid the new social and political circumstances. The second one is: *Bácska is a sick, dreary and utilitarian country*. The third one is: *There are no Understanding readers*.

In 1927, the article *Conditions of Hungarian Literary Life in Yugoslavia* [*Magyar irodalmi állapotok Jugoszláviában*] by Rezső Péchy-Horváth, a journalist working for several papers, was published in the Pandora, a paper whose editor in chief was Lőrinc Szabó; he characterizes Hungarian cultural life in Yugoslavia by depicting it as follows:

There is plenty of money to spend on merry feasting and gorging, high stakes card games, drunken champagne revelries, wedding parties lasting for several weeks or merrymaking to the accompaniment of Gipsy music, but no money to spend on culture. (Péchy-Horváth 1927, 8)

This opinion makes János Herceg pick up his pen and write his paper entitled, *A jugoszláviai magyar irodalom* [*Hungarian Literature in Yugoslavia*] (1928), trying to save the renown of the local literature and of “the good old times.” “... *there has never been an active literary life in Vajdaság*. In peacetime, too, *if a person had an ambition to become a writer, he immediately ran up to Pest*, and there he either mixed in with the rest of ordinary scum or became a Budapest writer” (Herceg 1999a, 7). And why was there no *active* literary life? There had been no suitable readers, literary journals, press or publishers. In spite of all, Herceg refers to the so much scorned greasy soil of Bácska as to humus, “a soil which, although not capable of producing a genius, has its values now as it always had;” Dezső Kosztolányi, Géza Csáth and some others, who could not be called insignificant writers, came from Bácska (Herceg 1999a, 8).

It seems that at the end of the 1920s, in the shadow of the royal dictatorship, the prospects were very much the same. “*Writers in Vajdaság orientate themselves outwards*” (Herceg 1999a, 8). *Outwards*, this time again, means Budapest. The young Herceg goes to the Hungarian capital, following the footsteps of the activist writers of the emigrants from Pécs and József Debreceni.

<sup>1</sup> This – for a long time stereotype – date as a historical landmark has become rather questionable as a historic turning point. Just as the view which imposes the bounds of a social or political era on literary eras.

Accordingly, his confession-like literary ideal is: "(...) my goal is that the Hungarian literatures of the successor states should integrate the literature of the home country without exception, and enrich and enlarge *the sole trunk of the Hungarian intellectuality*" (Herceg 1999a, 9). Zoltán Kalapis names this mosaic stone in Herceg's life, (which is missing or has not been recorded in the literary lexicons yet), "the Budapest detour." Éva Toldi talks of the young writer as of the student of a Budapest gymnasium, "who had his passport withdrawn after the 6 January 1929 dictatorship and thus could not return to the Mester Street Realgymnasium as a private student (...)" (Toldi 1993, 16). In the view of the writer of the monograph, the loss of his passport was probably the consequence of his above-mentioned piece of writing in addition to Herceg's activist, leftist orientation.

In 1929, the nineteen-year-old János Herceg founded a journal under the title *IKSZ* in Zombor. The article formulating the programme of the journal, which had only one issue, states, "the *IKSZ* is not universal, it is not of Vajdaság (...)" it intends to be the manifest of the world view and life manifestation of a young generation brought up in a sick era (...)" (Herceg 1999b, 12).

The 'not universal' was meant to suggest – Csaba Utasi wrote – that they do not belong to the Hungarian literature, since they follow their separate autochthonous paths; the 'not of Vajdaság' referred to the provincial character and level of our average literature of the time; therefore it did not mean the rejection/negation of the region (...). (Utasi 1984, 101)

Utasi's statement could lead us to the thought that this was the time when Herceg, who was brought up on European activist and avant-garde views, started to become familiar with Kornél Szenteleky's programme of literature, the theory of local "couleur," according to which beyond the colours of the surroundings, of the local countryside of Bácska and Vojvodina, the only real sense of the region's literature is the summoning up of its actual spiritual complexion and mentality.

"You kept vigil from night to night beside the bed of the sick Hungarian literature in Vajdaság, you sacrificed your life for it [...]" Herceg wrote in 1935, in memory of the deceased Szenteleky (Herceg 1999c, 43). These are words of empathy, not only for the organizer of local literature but also for "the sick literature," whose "cure" will turn into the programme of Herceg's literary opus. Following the ill-success of the foundation of his journal, and in the shadow of "the sick literature" another break-up occurred, another intermezzo in Budapest. In 1936 János Herceg moved to Budapest again. "What could become of me here at home, I ask myself the question, not unjustifiably, and undeniably terrified from the definition itself: 'a minority writer'" (Herceg 1989, 22).

Two years later, in his work entitled *Bácska as a Literary Educator* [*Bácska mint irodalmi nevelő*] (1939), János Herceg still argues with Kornél Szenteleky's precepts. In his view the *landscapes of Bácska* are void of poetic colours. Here the culture has become domesticated by the landscape, blending into each other and fading the various colours and customs. In this place only the "the local renaissance of materialism," the power of the soil and the life laws of making one's fortune seem to work even in cultural and literary relations. Is it possible for the theory of local *couleur* to work here?

*Art in Bácska can have no specific colours*, for such colours do not exist in Bácska. Even ethnographically the map only shows blotches: islands, which although they have still preserved something of the outward appearances of the traditions, nevertheless, do not alter in any way the unity of the spirit of Bácska. Because, naturally, the *couleur locale* as a literary means of expression does not only reflect colours but an entire, organic life, whose constituent parts are: spirit and soul, the atmosphere of the landscape and cultural tradition. In the art of Bácska even spirit and soul are not able to become intertwined. (Herceg 1999d, 59–60)

This is the specificity which creates and moulds Dezső Kosztolányi's and Géza Csáth's views of the world, too. Their art buds out from the landscape.

Could the poet of *The Complaints of a Poor Little Child* [*A szegény kisgyermek panasza*] have seen here anything in this land, where nature was left without any metaphysical reminiscence, where nature has been worn away from all its outward appearances, colour, beauty, atmosphere; the outer skin has peeled off and the naked hard matter has emerged in its crude bloody reality? (Herceg 1999d, 60)

In his texts of Kornél Esti, Dezső Kosztolányi laid bare "(...) with the knife of materialism" the secret of the spirit enwrapped in matter, while Géza Csáth "searched with all his life for the unknown secret, the hidden cracks of matter." The central motif of Károly Szirmai's vision was "mud, fog, state of matter without contours" (Herceg 1999d, 61).

In the same year, "Instead of wide national horizons, regional!" (Herceg 1999e, 74) – Herceg's proclamation sounds in his writing under the title *Goal and Confession* [*Cél és vallomás*].

*Not only once had the members of the intelligentsia left Vajdaság and its people in the lurch. Twenty years have not yet passed since they fled from here with suspicious heroism and well-calculated burst of national*

*enthusiasm. And the rest of them, with shimmering hopes on the watch for Europe's bursting dams, do they care more about the people?* It is here that the intellectuals, the writers and precursors of culture ought to be, and not just swimming on the surface but plunged a little under water [...] One must live here with one's whole heart, and spend one's energy here in whatever way is possible. (Herceg 1999e, 74)

This is a break. This is a break with the county's civil servant stratum and its writers; a break with the ideals of youth days, the avant-garde artists of form and the emigrant writers from Pécs. But this is an alliance with the region and with minority existence. From this moment, the concession to tradition means treading more and more along Szenteleky's path.

In 1940, as the editor in chief of the literary magazine *Kalangya*, János Herceg wrote the following:

The Hungarians of this region have not got used to an independent life; they have never had the role of the initiator, and as people living ethnographically in the most colourful region of the Monarchy, have always been reduced to acculturation. Their board has always been – more or less well – intentionally scribbled over by others, and all they had to do was adapt to the text. (Herceg 1999g, 103)

Following from the above, although the region did have writers, *an independent Hungarian literature has never been constituted in the region*, Herceg states, “we are devoid of tradition and devoid of a past, which has never been abounding with heroic deeds in this land” (Herceg 1999h, 135). Regionalism has never become literary material, for the very reason that the local writers have become educated on universal Hungarian literature. “It is unavoidable that our literature should develop its specific aroma and taste. Our whole life exhibits significant differences compared to the life of the body of the Hungarian nation” (Herceg 1999i, 162) – the editor of the *Kalangya* declares in his regional programme.

In 1940, János Herceg wrote about *Bácska's exquisite mysticism*. He saw this land as a vast and fatalistic, stormy corner of the country, “(...) here behind the mask of prosperity a gruesome drama has been taking place in the thick atmosphere of simple-minded negligence ever since” (Herceg 1999g, 105). The source of the storm was the pre-war, peacetime Bácska, characterized by Herceg as

full of wine barrels and huge cauldrons, the lords of the county living all the time as if celebrating a public feast where one chatted only in anecdotes and the gipsy musicians played the tunes of Come back to Sorrento after the

czardas. It was in this part of the country that the frenzy of the millennium lasted longest. They might have clung onto it for the reason of its being the last occasion to let off steam, or perhaps they were watching the pink clouds with such fervour because the storm was already in the brewing. (Herceg 1999i, 156)

There were writers living here in this Bácska, “who associated themselves with this land,” Herceg said and then called on them to account for the local colours and profundity: “They lived here as if they were living in a rich colony. For them this land was only space, they could see it only horizontally, and they were not interested in its heights and depths” (Herceg 1999k, 199). It is true – Herceg added to his conclusion –, the viewpoints, and the historical, social and political background of Hungarian literature in Vojvodina are different.

From the aspect that an artist beholds, he changed to that of a scientist in other places: “The ethnographic, geographic, landscape and spiritual aspect, political stratification and past history of our region is unique” (Herceg 1999g, 108). This change in tone was due to the programme of the editor of the journal. Herceg wished to strengthen the journal’s minority policy line, and so he gave more space to scientific works (sociography, folklore, minority policy and history).

In 1943, János Herceg went beyond his own view of the landscape. “I deny that this region has no characteristics of its own differing from all other Hungarian landscapes. Our Bácska is as rich and colourful as Transylvania, all we need is to find the writer who will find his tone attuned to this landscape here (...)” (Herceg 1999o, 248).

The *re-annexed Bácska* made the *Kalangya*’s editor rewrite his task. The aim was to foster the process of the region’s becoming independent in the face of the powers of decay and breaking up. To work towards this goal *by pointing out the local variant*, the *Kalangya* “(...) from now on does not bring down from the north, but sends messages up from here to the north and all other parts of the country” (Herceg 1999r, 269). The emphasized starting point was “(...) this territory has not had intellectual traditions (...) *The Délvidék* (Southern Hungary) *has not had any intellectual tradition, it has always been dependent on Budapest* (...)” (Herceg 1999j, 172). In 1943 Herceg wrote the following lines:

Bácska was too close to Pest, why would it have reflected on its own future fate, when seemingly it had no reasons for doing so, when others up there looked after it. Its political role was also on the whole the private affair of its lords, and its cultural institutions opened their doors towards Pest. Economically, it was the Hungarians who lived at the bottom of the granary of the country. Consequently, we in Délvidék could not speak of national consciousness and cultural or economic independence. In addition, perhaps it



was in this region that the number of assimilated Hungarians was most numerous. The schools and the consequences of living together have integrated a great number of German and Catholic Slav families into the Hungarian population. Those long train lines, which carried the Hungarian civil servants out from the Délvidék in nineteen hundred and nineteen, left no doubt in anyone that the days of the Hungarians in this rich, beautiful part of the country were numbered, and if fate was not to have mercy, everything that was Hungarian would perish from here within a lifetime. (Herceg 1999n, 238)

These are lines of demarcation, just as are the following sentences which were said in defence of a sovereign community, culture and literary policy: "Hungary, the home country has liberated us, but it is we who have preserved the Hungarian population of this region" (Herceg 1999i, 171). Herceg wished in defence of the results to bring to consciousness the fact that the Hungarian population of the re-annexed Bácska could not be compared to the Hungarians of the pre-war, peacetime Bácska. This was a new, responsible self-consciousness. "We did not belong to Hungary and we did not wish to belong to Serbia. We have developed a specific kind of mentality and a *characteristic minority spirit*. History presented this Janus-face not only to Délvidék but also to Erdély (Transylvania) and Felvidék" (Herceg 1999j, 173). Herceg edited an anthology under the title *In the Shade of the Walnut Tree* [*A diófa árnyékában*] in 1942. The volume which presented short story writers from Délvidék was published in Budapest. The editor discreetly put forward "(...) that certain landscape colours and qualities distinguish us, writers from Délvidék, from our fellow writers living in different circumstances, in different parts of the country" (Herceg 1999l, 227). It was only in the light of the circumstances that the Hungarians in Vojvodina could join the flock of the Hungarian nation.

In 1943 János Herceg recalled the memory of Kornél Szenteleky "in the spirit of literary and intellectual fidelity" (Herceg 1999m, 236), and a year later talked of him as of his master: "he thought of me as of his own pupil (...)" (Herceg 1999s, 274). As Szenteleky's pupil he formulated the writers' artistic task with unequivocal unanimity: "(...) a writer's duties are not simply to his nation but also to himself and to his region; *consequently, a writer finds himself in his nation and his environment*" (Herceg 1999o, 247).

Want and shortage do not define the beginnings merely. "Next to the nightmare of traditionlessness" (Bányai 2006) there is the other usual lament to tempt: the reader, there is no understanding reader. In the thirties, the poet Lajos Fekete, who had come from Pécs, could sell twenty-four copies of his book in Vojvodina, the *Kalangya* was struggling with its five-hundred copies. Nevertheless, János Herceg was trying to tint the picture. The fault was not only in

the readers. Did literature fulfil its role? Was it in conformity with the requirements of *dulce et utile*?

The *civilians* have a negative attitude – Herceg says – they do not need ‘local’ literature. Why should they, when our literature cannot come up with the kind of tune, either in space or time, which might strike the thick ears of the bourgeoisie? It does not come up with anything that could excite interest or offer anything common to share with the readers so that they could feel: this is meant for us to read. (Herceg 1999e, 68)

If the statement “all art is ‘sweet’ and ‘useful’ to its appropriate users” (Wellek and Warren 2006, 31) is accurate, then one only has to find the appropriate reader. Or is it the artist who should accommodate himself to the requirements or readers of the region? Herceg seemed to take a stand in favour of this attitude when he wrote the following:

We must not only try to attain artistic perfection but first of all express our *people* and environment; to mould in ourselves the *folk consciousness of Vajdaság*, the outcome of the medley of influences in the regions populated with Serbian, Hungarian and German people. But in order to achieve this one does not need only self-confidence or artistic instinct, but first of all the sacrifice of the wider horizon for the narrower one. When the ropes which are holding your *people* tight cut into your flesh, your outcry will not be left without an echo (...). (Herceg 1999e, 69)

When Herceg talked about the reader, who did he have in mind? When looking into the mentality of the peasant population, he explained that bourgeois and peasants were two opposing social and economic classes of society with different mentalities. “The Hungarian peasants had a closed culture, and they ensured entailment and continuity. The bourgeois physiognomy was shaped by the world’s exchange of goods and soul” (Herceg 1999f, 89), and due to its assimilative elements Paris was often closer to them than the local Ludas-pusztá. The term “popular/folk,” “was not yet a literary definition here. The Hungarians constituted an ethnic group in this region of which everyone was part. The *Kalangya* also wished to address not only one stratum of the society but the entire Hungarian community” (Herceg 1999t, 301).

János Herceg became disappointed as the editor of the *Kalangya*. The reading public in Vajdaság turned out again and again “to be literarily uneducated, who appreciated dilettantish work much more than real values” (Herceg 1999g, 107). The local readers did not understand the *Kalangya* nor the Hungarian literature in Vojvodina, because “their education is defective” (Herceg 1999h, 134). His

viewpoint changed, shifted in 1943. It was not solely the readers who were to take the responsibility. It was also up to the writer to do something. Ferenc Herczeg, the son of the pharmacist in Versec (Vršac) "(...) proved that it was not the public to blame if it did not want to take in a writer's work. According to him, the fault is in the writer who does not know how to, or does not wish to put into words the things the audience expects from him" (Herceg 1999p, 258). In János Herceg's interpretation the writer of *The Gyurkovics Girls* was not a writer to attend to the reader with his pliability. On the contrary, both in addition to, and contrary to the refined style and romantic milieu, he asserted his critical standpoints against the Hungarian gentry with a kind of superior and cool elegance. And he did it being a celebrated, popular writer!

Another exemplary instance was Dániel Papp who, in Herceg's opinion, "(...) did not have an easy task, since a writer succeeding Ferenc Herczeg had to adapt to the taste of the readers, the fashion and the threaded path, or else an absence of interest would have swallowed him up (...)" (Herceg 1999t, 299). Viewing from the aspect of Kornél Szenteleky's objectivity and realism, Dániel Papp's exotic milieu did not make the grade. But János Herceg put his finger on the spot when he realized that Papp's textual world should not be viewed from the topography of Bácska, but from the spirit of Bácska, in order to arrive at an organic, literarily authentic, "clear image drawn with thick contours" (Herceg 1999t, 301).

János Herceg therefore broke with the stereotype which has had its influence until today when, slowly but delicately unfolding, it indicated that our region had its own prehistory sprouting from inside the region. A kind of prehistory which, now and then, independent of Szenteleky's canon, managed to find its local, understanding reader. And all this had happened in terms of Bácska/Vajdaság self-consciousness.

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