



Intercultural Identity in Beáta Thomka's Literary Interpretations

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Abstract. The author of the paper starts from the hypothesis that beyond the literary works, the interpretation carried out in the spirit of the poetics of culture can also contribute to the elimination of stereotypes characteristic of the Balkan region. In her volume of studies entitled *Southern Themes [Délvidéki témák]*, Beáta Thomka collected her interpretations of the literary works created in the region, namely, the analyses of texts and images which, at the same time, dispose of a significant identity forming potential. In the preface of her book the literary scholar of Vojvodinian, Balkan descent, investigating her own intellectual identity, conceives it with the help of the term border situation. The description of the border situation requires an interdisciplinary research: the simultaneous application of the considerations of historical science, sociology, minority research, ethnography, as well as history of religion, literature, language, folklore, culture and literature, since the interspersedness and the interwovenness, similarly to every culture, also constitute the dominant feature of the culture of the region. Beáta Thomka is convinced that the ethnic and intellectual border crossings can be made patterns of the condition of self-preservation. The description of the forces, working against the cultural habits, observed in the works of Ivo Andrić, Danilo Kiš, of the Serbian short story writers of the turn of the century, of Ottó Tolnai, Ferenc Maurits and others, creates a quality which, similarly to the primary literary works, contributes to opening up the respective culture.

Keywords: national stereotypes, intracultural identity, the poetics of culture, communicative memory, cultural memory

Beáta Thomka, Vojvodinian by birth, whose activity in the field of literary studies has been evolving in the Hungarian scientific medium for two decades, has gathered in her volume entitled *Southern Themes* [*Déli témák*], published two years ago, her writings analysing literary works created in the region of former Yugoslavia or presenting comprising intellectual processes characteristic of the region. A greater part of the texts included in the volume are interpretations, nevertheless, my study is not centred on the evaluation of hermeneutical procedures. Instead, I wish to expound on how the literary works, through what specificities of theirs, are capable of producing effect against the categorizing social knowledge in Beáta Thomka's interpretations. The conclusions of the *Southern Themes* are shaped by profound culture theoretical considerations, with the help of which the real extension of her argumentation and conclusions becomes discernible.

For a longer period her interest has been oriented towards the questions of cultural identity, in this way her starting point considerably differs from the standpoint of the research of stereotypes. Social psychology describes the processes, producing meaning and identity, of social communication. The individual, who always carries out his/her perceiving activity as the member of a social group, comes up against a strong contextualizing effect within the group:

Consequently, the individual gets into a strong field of homogenization within the ingroup; in order to hold his ground, further distinctions are needed until the own 'I' shows itself as unique. As a result, we perceive our own group as being more heterogeneous than the outgroup; the outgroup seems to be more homogeneous, however, the characterization of its members is confined to what separates them from our group. Ingroup heterogeneity and outgroup homogeneity are also explained by the fact that our knowledge about the outgroup is much more restricted than about our own group. And this is the moment when stereotypes, stereotypical thinking appear on the scene; they offer points of reference regarding the outer group also when we dispose of little information, serving the claim for a mentally structured environment. (*On Hungarian-Hungarian Stereotypes*)

In his lecture held at the University of All Knowledge, György Hunyady surveyed, in a remarkably comprehensive manner, the formation of the psychology of the national character and its possible orientations. He set forth several phenomena groups, among which the research into nation characterology pursued in the nineteenth century, the research of stereotypes spread from the United States from the 1930s onwards; finally he pointed out the perspective of the comparative version of national characterology. As opposed to those according to whom the historical change of time works against national togetherness, he proved the opposite of the statement through the example of the American society. The

consistently assumed individuality of the American people did not lead to a citizen-nation, as it is well discernible that the insistence on the American lifestyle, on the strikingly unified national standard resulted in a community consciousness. He designated the nation as being the greatest natural unit of transformation. At the end of his lecture he hinted at the possibility of the inner transformation of the Hungarian national consciousness, seeing an opportunity for slowly reshaping the counter-selective world view characteristic of it (Hunyady 2004).

According to the interpretations included in the volume, identity is primarily formed by the relation to the contents of culture. I would like to illustrate the identity forming character of culture through Jan Assmann's theory positing culture in relation to community memory, though his name is not referred to in the book. In his volume examining the connecting links between cultural memory and religion, Assmann (2007) calls the neuron-based individual memory, of social character from the start, with Maurice Halbwachs' term, as communicative memory; he discovers the partial, relative inner insolubility of the culture theories of Halbwachs, Nietzsche, and Freud in the fact that they regarded culture as the product of communicative memory; it remained unimaginable for them to conceive it as a phenomenon with symbolic significance. By structuring the communicative memory, of a chaotic structure, containing oblivion and memory in a contingent combination, Nietzsche created the form of memory establishing culture, namely the "memory of will." He deduced culture from man's capacity to keep his given word, thus for him every version of culture appeared as a constraint weighing heavily on the individual from the outside. Indeed, culture primarily consists of texts serving counter-presentive memory, however, these do not, or do not only, formulate connective constraints, but they also serve as identity shaping, community forming explanations (Assmann 2007, 15-16).

Assmann regards cultural memory as an archive containing the texts of collective memory, and grasps its determining feature by opposing it to tradition (and to the corresponding terms existing in other cultures). Tradition, as a textual domain simultaneously available for a certain community, is a static category, and as such, it is incapable of expressing the dynamics of inner forces making possible the renewal of cultural memory. In Assmann's approach, cultural memory simultaneously comprises all the written memories of humanity created in different periods, not only the ones publicly recorded at the respective moment, but also the transitorily marginalized ones. The assumption of the latent, subconscious layers of memory can owe much to Freud's culture theory, however, Assmann regards memory as being individual, and dissociates himself from the conception of the collective memory as a psychological unit. He indicates the forgotten, marginalized memory contents as the generators of changes. The literary and historical narratives created in different periods offer alternative memory contents for the actualization of the present.

Assmann marks the extension of cultural memory with the term *invisible religion* of Luckmann's culture-theoretical argumentation. The invisible religion, the uneliminable value basis of every human society, does not always coincide with the *visible religion*, namely the cult. According to Assmann, with the modern-age distinction of the domains, competing with one another, of metaphysics, ethics, art, literature and science, with the secularization process thrusting into the background the validity of the visible religion, the twofold state, characteristic of a few societies of the ancient Orient was restored, again, in European culture. In the early period of ancient Egypt the invisible religion originally comprised two partial domains: distinct prescriptions regulated the relations among people as well as cult. Today the enumerated social value spheres: "on the one hand, contrary to the visible religion, constitute the domain of the profane, on the other hand, they can advance to religion substitutes or civil religions any time, as also now, as always, they are embraced by the invisible religion, that is, the – today of course more problematic, hidden and unstable – strive for the sense-universe" (Assmann 2007, 60-61).

In her disquisition Beáta Thomka inspects the questions of "intellectual legacy shaping mentality and attitude" formed in the southern region. She assigns as the task of the attitude unfolding in her volume and consistently carrying an inner viewpoint the preservation and summation of the elements having the power of forming identity in the culture of the region. As a consequence of the repeated reconfiguration of borders in the twentieth century, without leaving their homeland during their lives, the generations living in the region where she comes from, in Vojvodinian Banat, became again and again subjects of different state formations. The territory which used to be officially called border defence region has been characterized by ethnic diversity ever since the settlings taking place during the reign of Maria Theresa. The long-lasting and close cohabitation of the linguistic, religious and cultural groups of the region has resulted in the fact that the differences have also been transcribed in the inner structure of the micro-communities of families, as a simultaneous possibility of integration and disintegration from the point of view of individual identity. In each case, Beáta Thomka sees a chance for the summation preserving the differences both at an individual and a community level: "it is possible to treat the differences in every formation, way of living, at any level, and diversity can be unified in a fruitful polyphony," in this way: "by laying emphasis on the possibilities of *preservation as reinterpretation*, and treating this as an individual life mission or community programme – a historical experience of a higher order can be acquired" (Thomka 2009, 11). The essence of the cultural identity model represented by her is polyphonic identity, preserving the differences against the univocality of social choice.

At the beginning of the first chapter entitled *The poetics of cultural identity* she draws attention to the results of the international symposiums held in Athens, Finland and Canada, based on which reason can be seen in the fact that the culture

of the Balkan region, interwoven from the threads of the cultures of various nations, is not unique, as every culture “according to its own character, in itself, is intercultural from the start” (Thomka 2009, 21). Pondering the chance of intercultural identity in the Central European region, she states that since the change of regime contemporary Hungarian literature is more directly connected to the European one. The events of today’s Hungarian literature unfold in front of a European public, wider than before; as a consequence, the reception abroad discovers the literary works created under minority circumstances being on a par with those created in Hungary. The European reception receiving the literary works from Hungary as well as the Hungarian ones simultaneously, in parallel, serves as the experience of the inner interculturality of Hungarian literature. Beáta Thomka hopes the alteration of Hungarian common literary knowledge from the reception, enjoying equal rights, of regional forms of literary consciousness. The possible patterns of the outlined integrative conceptional aggrandizement of the Hungarian literature may be the researches surveying the new literary unity formed with the unification of the two Germanies. The southeastern region offers less a model to follow, as here, until the recent past, the disintegrative cultural experiences prevailed. Beáta Thomka ponders the chance whether the generations having experienced the trauma of the civil war can set about, beyond documenting the events, to reevaluate the historical events. It can be well seen from the above, that the need of forming an intercultural unity is not articulated in the volume as the exclusive task of those living in the southern region.

The second study of the volume sets forth the diversified process through which a part of the South Slavic intellectuals, expatriated together with the falling apart of former Yugoslavia, constrained into a minority situation, in spite of the extremely traumatic community experience, elaborated an attitude preserving the elements of the old, common cultural space and reorganizing them in a new nexus. Beáta Thomka is interested in the phenomena which make the equalization possible. Inasmuch as she examines the chance of integration in a medium chopped by the historical tragedies of the recent past, in the situation of divergence intensified to paroxysm the unity is created by exceptional intellectual efforts. She evaluates the literary works created simultaneously, in parallel, as well as the responses given to the crisis. Under the new, minority circumstances the South Slavic intellectuals were confronted with such challenges which they could meet by means of intensifying their intellectual capacities, of activating the opinions representing the poise, while their original speciality got politicized in a way unexpected also for them. The final result, the books, the establishment of connections against the isolating processes essentially reinterpreted the destructive processes, opposed to culture: “The edification of the historical, present and migrational processes is, among others, the alternative cultural vision deriving from the intellectual values of the former YU, which invariably carries value creating energies” (Thomka 2009, 44).

The next unit contains the interpretation of two outstanding Serbian prose achievements of the recent past. In the interpretation of the *Gravel Hour* [*Fövenyóra*] the central question is the relationship between the document annexed to the end of the literary text, the letter written by the author's father, originally written in Hungarian, published in the Serbian version translated by the author, as well as the fictitious narration, moulding the main character, Eduard Sam, bearing the features of his father who disappeared in the deportation from 1944. In the world of the novel the relations are reversed, it is not the explanation that has a documentary value, instead, the fiction takes over the role of commentary. Beáta Thomka quotes Danilo Kiš's words, in which he defines prose as *exposure*: "It discloses the fact that there is no integrity in a disintegrated world, and the only thing that we can still do with prose is to find, within its integrity, our own" (qtd. in Thomka 2009, 71). The novel, "contrary to the monological character of monocultural literary works, conveys an originally *dialogical cultural concept*" (Thomka 2009, 74). Beáta Thomka identifies the most poignant example of cultural interwovenness in chapter 66, in the allusion to Attila József, occurring in Eduard Sam's first-person confession and existence summation, about the bitter plants growing out of the heart. According to her, the covert quotation transforms the soliloquy of chapter 66, isolated from all earlier contexts linked to the figure of the protagonist, into a self-reflexive summation of the author.

In the case of the *Bridge on the Drina* [*Híd a Drinán*] she considers the world literature reception as essential, and this means also the stake of the readers from Hungary. In connection with the linguistic and stylistic diversity of the original literary works, which is lost in translations, she states the following:

The various foreign and mother tongue stylistic and lexical layers moulding Andrić's prose language resound in a rare and special combination, fulfilling various poetic tasks. Out of these, it is not only his Serbian, Bosniak and Turkish archaisms that have original connotations, exclusively characteristic of this poetics, but also the impersonal, distant, almost rigidly lucid tone and mode represented by his narrators. (Thomka 2009, 63)

In his lecture dedicated to the question to what extent the reading experience of the carefully balanced grand historical narratives can be efficient in healing the collective neuroses created by historical cataclisms, resulting in the repetition of the bloody past, manifesting themselves in the repetitive constraint of actions, Paul Ricoeur contested in the historical narratives the possibility of the *posteriorly repeated execution* of the past, but pointed out, at the same time, that if the historian understands the people living formerly as subjects resembling us, capable of looking backward and forward, it becomes possible for him to relate the events differently from the order of *retrospective fate illusion*. According to Ricoeur,

history, with its unavoidable objectivity, facilitates the “memory work” bringing the cure of communities, as long as historians “at the ‘probabilistic’ level of their own grand *narrations*, offer far-reaching alternatives besides the semi-official history which is liable to get stiffened into the grand narratives of collective memory” (Ricoeur 1999, 61). Andrić’s novel contributes to healing the traumata of collective memory with its specificity that it offers its readers orientative points differing from the contents of stiffened collective memory: it is in the situation of the repetitive constraint that the offer transmitted by carefully balanced, moderately conservative narration proves to be invariably actual.

In one of the most exciting studies of the volume she rates the short stories written in Serbian language of authors who lived in Dalmatia and Bosnia, determined by the imagery of regional belonging, to the former, real cultural environment of the Hungarian short story production created at the turn of the nineteenth-twentieth century. In the last third of the century, in these environments the former heroic epic-like viewpoint made place for a clear-out, objective view and narration. The plot of the short stories unfolds in the micro-communities of the region, presenting mosaic-like division from patriarchal, religious and ethnic viewpoints. The short prose works of Petar Kočić, Laza Lazarević, Simo Matavulj or Ivo Ćipiko are characterized by clear-out structures, preserving archaic elements, dramatic storyline, and functional poetics. In the course of the comparison, the short stories of the Hungarian turn of the century partly appear to be a parallel phenomenon, and partly get into a new value perspective. For example, the parallel reading of the works by Simo Matavulj and Kálmán Mikszáth leads to the following conclusion: “The immediacy of Mikszáth’s style, in my view, is often unnatural and follows the conventions of the written, not the spoken way of rendering the story, or it even conforms to the formed rules of his own way of writing. In Matavulj’s way of communication the tradition of the *skaz* emerges more spontaneously” (Thomka 2009, 102).

Beáta Thomka continues the series of the southern themes with the presentation of phenomena immediately forming her own identity. The paper placing the intellectual orientation of the review *Új Symposion*, which has become legendary ever since, into the perspective of the changes of the context, itself applies the technique of collage, a procedure favoured by its editors. The interpretations on the – not yet complete – oeuvre of the writers of the first Symposion-generation are open in the same way as the one above, as their identity forming potential cannot yet be recorded with a definite validity. On the pieces of Ferenc Maurits’ series entitled *Metamorphosis* of Kafkaesque inspiration, the lines seem as if they were the *cardiograms of a tragic life perception*, while in view of the anthropology of images the conclusion of the engravings offers a staggering opportunity of self-understanding. In Ottó Tolnai’s prose, often displaying alter-egos, “usually the time of narration from the foreground is characteristic, and

neither the past event becoming the subject of speech breaks the *very moment of the present*. (...) The unified subject is dissolved in the speakers, still, the manifestations of the *narrative instance* without a focus preserve and make discernible the social context of speech” (Thomka 2009, 167-169).

The question arises in the reader how the study on the generic questions of the essay or the one on Péter Balassa's essay writing is connected to the southern themes. According to Beáta Thomka, the great literary essays are pervaded by the strive to sum up and pass on the artistic and intellectual experience lived as an elemental one. While reading Péter Balassa's essays, she refutes with two arguments the common opinion accounting for the language of the essay as a means of self-expression. Inasmuch as the essay is “a contemplative prose genre; its inherent possibility is the representation of the reflected, *backfolding* attitude in the basic sense of the term. As a consequence, it cannot resound as the speech of the person, but rather as that of the critical self-perception, of the rendering of account fulfilling the review.” On the other hand, the essay is a form of a well constructed discourse, “rhythmic, tempo changing, taking short steps, slowing down, coming near, offering perspective,” fulfilling the artistic form requirement (Thomka 2009, 191-192). The only account of a journey, belonging to the genre of the essay, does not elaborate a literary theme; instead, it offers the reading of the image of the city of Leiden. The description of the community scenes, of the space experience triggered by churches and house walls, the outlook of the interior space of the museum turns back to the southern questions, since, as a consequence of the time coincidence, the meanings of the blockade enclosing Sarajevo irrevocably mingle into the image summing up, as it were, the Holland culture, arousing the feeling of intimate familiarity in spite of the time distance, preserving the Protestant codes, namely the weekly seaside pleasure ride of the royal family.

One of the most significant contributions of Beáta Thomka's interpretations is that she describes not the abstract mechanisms of the examined Balkan and Central European cultural motion changes. In her interpretations the consistently intercultural and at the same time self-reflexive perspective authenticates the indicated orientation experience of the literary works and intellectual processes.

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