János Kenyeres **18**

Migrants in Literature
Hungarians in Canada

In recent years, migration has become a global issue, with heated debates about immigration and its consequences. This is especially true of Europe, where policy makers and a significant part of the general public consider the arrival of refugees and migrants as a dangerous process, posing a threat to the established social order and disintegrating the nation conceived of as an ethnically uniform and culturally homogeneous entity. As Tibor Frank, the pre-eminent scholar of migration, observes, "migration is as old as humanity" but the "size of the mass of migrants is constantly growing" and the "sympathetic reception of migration as well as the deep revulsion against it are ultimately governed by national stereotypes, the theoretical background of which are described, inter alia, by national characterology" (Frank, my translation).

In the current political and ideological environment, it is interesting to examine how Hungarian immigrants have been viewed and received in Canada as reflected in literary works. Therefore, in the following pages I wish to examine some literary representations portraying Hungarian themes and characters in the work of non-Hungarian-Canadian authors. The category "non-Hungarian-Canadian" is arbitrary and non-literary, but for my purposes it is unavoidable in order to explore how immigrants, in our case, Hungarians, are perceived by their new compatriots in their new homeland. This representation shows the other side of the coin, as it were; in a multicultural country where immigration has been considered for several decades as a positive process with significant benefits for Canada both by the various governments of Canada and the general public, literature may serve as a test to show how politics and ideology boil down to tangible cultural manifestations.

In some works, Hungarian characters have no special features attaching them to Hungary or its culture. As Richard Teleky claims about the protagonist of Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* (1992), "Nothing we learn about Almásy gives him the identity of a Hungarian. His ethnicity is without meaning – merely a word […]" (Teleky 61). Although this is true, the English patient's background as a Hungarian Count adds to the oddity of the protagonist. In other works, too, "Hungarianness" expresses a sense of strangeness, the atmosphere of otherness, often coupled with some rough-and-ready stereotypes applied to Eastern-Europe or Central Europe as a region. To say that Hungarian ethnicity is without meaning is true only to the extent that the nature of Hungarian identity often remains unspecified, and it is mostly used to express a feeling of estrangement and a difference from the social level, mind-set or perspective of the other characters of the work, the narrator or the general reader. In what follows, I will proceed from simple to more complex descriptions of Hungarians.

As for Me and My House is a novel by Sinclair Ross consisting of fictional diary entries by the wife of a preacher during the Great Depression. In the novel, published in 1941, we come across these lines:

> he went on to tell us about one of the boys at school he lets go riding. Steve was the first name, Rumanian or Hungarian, about twelve or thirteen, his mother dead and his father a labourer on the railroad. Not very-well looked after, living in a little shack near the station with his father and some other woman (Ross 48).

In the background of the story there looms a hostile small-town community unwilling to accept the boy. Steve's identity as a Rumanian or Hungarian clearly indicates that what matters is his East European background, which associates him with poverty and ill-treatment in this Canadian prairie fiction. However, Steve, as an individual, is described with some more sophistication, he is represented as having positive and negative features as well: "Sensitive and high-strung, hot-bloodied and quick-fisted" (Ross 48) and also an "ominously good-looking boy. The limbs were free and well-proportioned (Ross 54)"; at the same time, there is a sense of strangeness about his language: "He speaks good English, but with a force and inflection that in contrast to our monotones sounds a little impetuous" (Ross 55).

In the novel the preacher and his wife wish to adopt the boy but the plan falls through; two Catholic priests come and take him to an orphanage on religious grounds.

In Leonard Cohen's first novel, *The Favourite Game* (1963), we find these lines: "Steve, the Hungarian tractor driver, passed below the balcony, picking a white flower from a bush. They were levelling out some land for another playing field, filling in a marsh" (214). Later in the novel we learn this:

> Martin Stark was killed in the first week of August 1958. He was accidentally run over by a bulldozer, which was clearing a marshy area. The driver of the bulldozer, the Hungarian named Steve, was not aware that he had hit anything except the usual clumps, roots, stones. Martin was probably hiding in the reeds the better to trap his enemy (221).

Although it turns out that Mrs. Stark does not press charges for criminal negligence, the reader is not informed of any more details about Steve, the Hungarian tractor and bulldozer driver.

In Margaret Laurence's novel *A Jest of God*, published in 1966, the owner of the Parthenon Café is called "Miklos," with a short "o." If this is the only typo in his name, he is probably Hungarian, if a caron or hacek is also missing from top of the letter "s," he may be a Slovak or Czech. His nationality is not mentioned explicitly when he appears in chapter four: "Outside the Parthenon Café, Miklos is sponging his windows dawdlingly, spinning the job out to last the morning while his wife waits stoically on the customers

inside" (Laurence 74). Later, in chapter nine, he is again mentioned briefly with no specific reference to his nationality or characteristics:

> "Could I – could I have another coffee, please?"
> "Certainly, madam."
> Madam. Ten years ago Miklos would have said Miss. He has a built-in acclimatizer to take note of the years without having to notice (Laurence 195).

A Hungarian tractor driver, a poor boy with no mother and a reckless father; a café owner sponging his windows; when these features are put together, they carry a clear message about the social standing of the Hungarian and/or East European immigrant to Canada.[1]

There are, however, other associations and connotations that the word "Hungarian" may invoke. In Leonard Cohen's famous song "Take This Waltz" (1986), based on Federico Garcia Lorca's poem "Pequeño vals vienés," the image of the "Hungarian lanterns" creates a slightly decadent and dilapidated Central European atmosphere, since the Hungarian lanterns are linked to Vienna: "Now in Vienna there's ten pretty women [...] There's a concert hall in Vienna [...] In a dream of Hungarian lanterns [...]" (Cohen, "Take this Waltz").

Often, Hungarian is not an essentialist concept but embodies a sense of hybridity, while the characters are credible and lifelike, such as the Hungarian-Gypsy mother in Robertson Davies's *The Rebel Angels* (1981), where the narrator's father is a Polish engineer:

> Not all Gypsies are nomads, and my Mother's family had been musicians in Budapest for generations, because the Gypsy musicians would much rather play in comfortable restaurants, officers' clubs, and the houses of rich people than wander the roads. [...]
>
> My Father was a strong character, and though he loved my Mother greatly, and loved to think of her as a Gypsy girl, it was clear that he wanted things in the family to go in the upper-class Polish way. My Mother dressed like a woman of means, and some good shops repressed her taste for gaudy colours and droopy silhouettes. She rarely spoke the Romany that was her cradle lan-

1 As Marilyn Rose has noted, the meaning of the word "hunky" is highly ambiguous. In the Canadian context, it may refer to Hungarians, Lithuanians, Poles, Tyrolians, Russians, Ukrainians, Ruthenians, Galicians, Slavs and Bohemians; it also has a pejorative meaning as a synonym of "bohunk," denoting "uneducated and unskilled Eastern European" immigrants; however, it may also mean " 'being in a good position' and being 'all right' " (Rose 93). As far as Canadian literature is concerned, Rose invokes Hugh Garner's "Hunky" (1963), Robert Kroetsch's *But We are Exiles* (1965) and Sinclair Ross's *Sawbones Memorial* (1974) as using the term.

> guage except to me and to Yerko, and her ordinary language with my Father was Hungarian… (Davies 130–131).

In addition to the vivid characterisation, Hungarian words like "Édesapa," "Édesanya," "Mamika" or "Ciganyak" (even though the latter has two typos) all add to the authenticity of the atmosphere depicted (Davies 132–133), and their meanings are either carefully explained by the narrator or can be inferred from the context. However, the Hungarian-Gypsy-Polish hybridity ends up in the narrator's identity crisis, which happens to surface at a Hungarian concert:

> I did not like the first part of the concert, which included a Festival Overture by Dohnanyi and something by Kodaly; the conductor was giving us a Hungarian night. When Egressy appeared on the platform to play the Liszt Piano Concerto No. 2 I felt hostile toward him. I turned off my ears […]. During the fifteenth [Hungarian Rhapsody], in which the Rakoczi March appears in so many disguises, I became a wreck, emotionally and to some degree physically, for I wept and wept beyond the power of my handkerchief to staunch my tears (Davies 151).

Mavis Gallant's short story "His Mother," first published in 1973, takes the reader to the Budapest of post-1956 Hungary and depicts the bleak and dreary life of a widow whose only son emigrates to Scotland, leaving her behind. Although the plot of the story is not centred around Hungarian-Canadian immigrant experience or the reception of Hungarians in North America, the Canadian author's narrative shows a multi-faceted picture of Budapest, ranging from the elegant and aristocratic atmosphere still present to the poverty of post-World War II Hungary, which can nevertheless be surpassed by style and social rank, as is suggested. The mother, who is never invited by her son for a visit to Scotland, is described in the following way:

> a stately careless widow with unbrushed red hair, wearing an old fur coat over her nightgown, her last dressing gown had been worn to ribbons and she said she had no money for another. […] On Saturday afternoons she put on a hat and soft gray gloves and went to the Vörösmarty Café. It had once had a French name, Gerbeaud, and the circle of émigrés' mothers still called it that. 'Gerbeaud' was a sign of caste […]. The aristocrats were those whose children never left Europe, the poorest of the poor were not likely ever to see their sons again, for they had gone to Chile or South Africa. Switzerland was superior to California. A city earned more points than a town. There was no mistaking her precedence here; she was a grand duchess (Gallant 28).

The mother's pretentious aristocratic lifestyle is counterpointed with a photograph of her otherwise happy son's way of life in Glasgow:

> He had never missed a monthly transfer of money, he was faithful about sending his overstamped letters and the colored snapshots of his wife, his child, their Christmas tree and his wife's parents side by side upon a modern-looking sofa. One unposed picture had him up a ladder pasting sheets of plastic tiles on a kitchen wall. She could not understand the meaning of this photograph [...]. This was a picture she never showed anyone at Vörösmarty Place, though she examined it often, by several kinds of light. What did it mean, what was its secret expression? She looked for the invisible ink that might describe her son as a husband and father. He was twenty-eight, he had a mustache, he worked in his own home as a common laborer (Gallant 30).

The story depicts various character-types and social classes through the tenants of the mother, employing a narrative technique which uses the shifting perspective of the characters. The eastern physical features of Hungarians are expressly mentioned by the narrator; one of the tenants, Ilona, has "a cross-looking little Tartar face" (Gallant 31), while her grandfather, as he is getting old and strained, looks Chinese (Gallant 32). The story raises the question of language as well: over time, the son's Hungarian letters to his mother contain more and more English words, and Ilona is criticized by her grandfather for failing to speak Hungarian in a proper and educated way.

Tito, the Hungarian character in Yann Martel's *Self* (1997) comes from the Hungarian minority living in south-western Slovakia. Martel – author of the renowned novel *The Life of Pi* (2001) – is a careful and well-prepared writer and the fact that Tito is not a typical Hungarian name and that it reminds one of Marshal Tito of Yugoslavia is specifically mentioned by the first-person narrator (250). As a commentator has noted, "[i]n the depiction of Tito's character we can follow the way in which Martel proceeds from the figure of the 'exotic' immigrant, now and again invested with stereotypes, to the representation of the colourfully attractive personality of the lover" (Kürtösi 175–176, my translation). The most prominent Hungarian feature of this postmodern novel, however, is its use of the Hungarian language; apart from a few sporadic Hungarian words and phrases, four and a half pages of the novel contain two columns, of which one is an (abbreviated) excerpt from Béla Balázs's libretto for Bartók's *Bluebeard's Castle*, entirely in Hungarian, whereas the other column is a lyrical rendering of the scattered thoughts and emotions of the narrator triggered by listening to and being exposed to Hungarians and the Hungarian language, including the contemplation about the change of personality caused by shifting from one language to another:

> The first time I heard Tito speak his mother tongue, with ease and delight, my draw jopped, as I put it to him later. A new Tito seemed to arise before my eyes. With a changed mien, with a different register in his voice, with expressions and gestures hadn't seen before. I wasn't sure I knew this Tito. I had to tap him on the shoulder and say, 'Tito, is that you?' He laughed. 'Yes, of course it is.' He was Tito again, and I had another visa stamp in my passport. Even

> after three years I could renew my sense of wonder at his fluid gibberish. When I didn't want to travel, when I tuned out, then Magyar became a seashore, a soothing background noise amidst which my day-dreams could float. Anyway, whether flying for free on Malev or sitting by the seashore, I was never alone for long. One Hungarian or another invariably interrupted my reverie with words that I understood (Martel, *Self*, 263–264).

The use of a foreign language and the deliberate colloquial mistake "my draw jopped" (in place of "my jaw dropped") reveal Martel's fascination with language in the tradition of James Joyce, whereas the Orlando plot of the novel is strongly linked to Virginia Woolf.

Martel's interest in things Hungarian is also demonstrated by his short fiction "The Facts behind the Helsinki Roccamatios" (1993), where the narrator and his dying friend suffering from AIDS are passing the time by making up the story of an imaginary family in Helsinki while recalling important events of the 20th century – one event for each year. 1956 is dedicated to Hungary: "1956—The Soviet Union invades Hungary to bring to heel a country reluctant to march to the drumbeat of communist totalitarianism. Material damage to the country is heavy, and two hundred thousand refugees flee the country for the West" (Martel, *The Facts*, 62). Dry words serving as bare facts in a story otherwise steeped in emotion. If Martel's short story can be trusted in such matters, Hungary in the 20th century is largely remembered for 1956. In the story, the only other Hungarian reference is made to "Lazlo Biro," who, in 1938, invented the ballpoint pen.

Margaret Atwood's "Wilderness Tips" is the title story of a collection of short stories published in 1991. The main character of this short fiction is George, "whose name is not really George" (Atwood 197). He is in fact Hungarian, who "spent the forties rooting through garbage heaps and begging, and doing other things unsuitable for a child" (Atwood 197). There is no mention of the war, there is no mention of any excuse. The third person narrator does not seem to be interested. George fled from Hungary in 1956, became very rich in Canada through unscrupulous business dealings and married into a wealthy Ontario family. In Toronto he first became the lover of Prue, but eventually married Portia, Prue's younger sister, although continued to sleep with Prue on and off. The story takes place at Wacousta Lodge, which was named by the sisters' great-grandfather after John Richardson's novel, a place where George loves spending his time. As to the characterization of George, he has "a foxy smile," "long canines," a "dangerous-looking scar over one eye and a few bizarre stories" (198). He is a womanizer, constantly cheating on his wife. The narrator makes sure that George is not someone the reader should trust.

As Kürtösi notes, in portraying the character of the Hungarian "George," Atwood "uses the well-known stereotypes about Hungarians: Hungarians are, on the one hand, endowed with special sensuality, while, on the other hand, they are extremely inventive in difficult situations. As the popular saying goes, a Hungarian will step in the revolving door behind you but will eventually emerge ahead of you" (Kürtösi 170, my translation).

Kürtösi's sense of objectivity in describing such a portrayal prevents her from making any critical comments. As opposed to such a detached critical stand, Richard Teleky has described Atwood's narrative technique with harsh words that carry their implications to the value of the whole short story: "By reducing George's connection with humanity to a kind of ethnic shtick and making a joke of his ethnicity, the story loses its moral centre, and any potential for social criticism," adding that "George comes from a genre different from the story's naturalistic Canadian characters" (Teleky 59).

Upon further scrutiny it appears, however, that there is no single positive character in the story: the three sisters and their brother all have their own failings; and the narrator is keen to put some distance between herself and each one of them. Atwood's narrator is ironic, witty and removed, and apparently finds pleasure in being unpleasant. Thus, the characterization of George is somewhat harsh and exaggerated. He is someone from Eastern Europe who has killed three people once, to which the narrator ironically adds that "though only two of them were strictly necessary" (Atwood 203). Moreover, he has engaged in shady deals in Canada, becoming rich by misusing the benevolent nature of Canadians: "He made his money quickly, and then he'd made more. […] These people were lax and trusting, and easily embarrassed by a hint of their own intolerance or lack of hospitality to strangers. They weren't ready for him. […] A hint of opposition and he'd thicken his accent and refer darkly to Communist atrocities" (206–207).

George's difference manifests itself in his language use and language competence as well. At one point of the story, he spills his coffee and exclaims "Fene egye meg!" (209). Apart from his heavy accent, he has difficulty understanding certain expressions in English. He contemplates what "Wilderness Tips" might mean (207), and is also bothered, according to the narrator, with the meaning of "a sea of maggots" (202), even though this latter metaphorical phrase would pose no problem to any Hungarian speaker.[2]

The sisters' brother, Roland, is completely unable to come to terms with the otherness of George; he regards him as a stranger, an immigrant, a nomad, a barbarian: driving in his car, he sees "new townhouses with little pointed roofs – like tents, like an invasion. The tents of the Goths and the Vandals. The tents of the Huns and the Magyars. The tents of George" (Atwood 211). This vision of George is similar to the colonial conception of Indigenous people as being uncivilised, bloodthirsty and cruel, posing a threat to the colonists, and equally similar to the way in which migrants are often viewed in Europe and elsewhere in the world these days. Roland's associations are certainly not flattering to George, nor to his fellow Hungarians in Canada or his old homeland; however, on the diegetic level of the story, due to his ways and success in business life, George is just the opposite of this vision. Even though he is an immigrant, he becomes the winner in this Anglo-Saxon family, where the three sisters and their brother fail to achieve their goals in life. The only true representative of the family's social status was the great-grandfather, long ago, whose painting is now hanging on the wall, and George

2 The same metaphor works in Hungarian: "tengernyi kukac," "tengernyi lárva," tengernyi féreg" – no matter how "maggot" is translated.

and the great-grandfather are expressly connected and identified in the text, offering insight into one of the sister's, Portia's mind: "Her great-grandfather watches her in the mirror, disapproving of her as he always has, although he was dead long before she was born. 'I did the best I could,' she tells him. I married a man like you. A robber king'" (Atwood 218). What happens here is that the text subverts its own prejudices and exalts George as the true descendant of the great-grandfather and thus the role model of the family, eventually becoming, quite paradoxically, the positive character of the story, an immigrant J. R. Ewing in Canada. This view of George stays with the reader, even in the face of Portia's suicide by drowning herself in the lake as a result of seeing George, her husband, betraying her with Pamela, her sister, at the conclusion of the story.

If Atwood's short story focuses on a Hungarian character depicted, to a significant extent, as a male sexual predator, Morley Callaghan's novel *Our Lady of the Snows*, published in 1985, centres around a Hungarian high-class female prostitute, Ilona Tomory, who, in contrast, has expressly noble and sophisticated personality traits in addition to being extremely beautiful, aristocratic and attractive. The theme of sexuality nevertheless connects Atwood's short story and Callaghan's novel, and one wonders why two prominent Canadian fictional works link Hungarian characters to this theme. It is difficult to provide an adequate explanation in lack of empirical evidence suggesting that Hungarians in Canada have been prone to leading more promiscuous sexual lives than any other ethnic groups; however, the concept of literature imitating literature may provide an answer. The Hungarian-Canadian Stephen Vizinczey's *In Praise of Older Women: The Amorous Recollections of András Vajda* quickly became a leading bestseller in Canada, where it was first published in 1965 before becoming a roaring success selling about five million copies worldwide in the subsequent decades. Vizinczey's novel centres on the early sexual adventures of its male protagonist, the Hungarian-born András Vajda, a middle-aged philosophy professor at the University of Michigan. The great success and fame of the book could easily offer the association of sex and eroticism with Hungarian immigrants. In addition to employing the theme of sex and eroticism, Callaghan's *Our Lady of the Snows* also contains a good deal of Hungarian history, including the way in which Hungarians were perceived in Canada in the aftermath of the 1956 revolution. The latter is well-exemplified by the following lines, told by one of the Canadian characters:

> I talked to her about Hungary. She was born there but came here with her parents in '56, the Hungarian revolt, Cardinal Mindszenty and all that stuff. Remember? It looked for a while like all Budapest was going to land in town, the sympathy for them got a bit ridiculous. I'm told there actually was a campaign to move the whole Budapest Opera Company here. A cultural blessing and all – and then someone pointed out that the local opera company wouldn't take too kindly to this. Now all those Hungarians you meet around here [...] are, or were, aristocrats. Ever meet one who wasn't an aristocrat? (Callaghan 37–38).

The title of the novel, *Our Lady of the Snows*, is open to multiple interpretations, including reference to the Holy Mother, the sparkling white Bradley House where most of the plot is set, and Ilona Tomory, who at one point of the story is described as follows: "the snow swirled around her, the flakes in the light dancing around her head. In no time, the snow whitened the long mink coat. Then, moving towards the taxi, she was a tall and superior white lady coming out of the brightness into the shadows" (32–33).

As has been seen, Hungarian (or half- or partly-Hungarian) characters represent (or more accurately, are represented as) various types of immigrants, ranging from the lower social classes to aristocracy and the artistically or sexually inspirational, from the inscrutable alien to the successful wealthy businessman, at times combining these aspects in ways where even the Hungarian language plays a pivotal role. At the same time, it should be noted that the concepts, plans and specific steps taken in the context of the official Canadian multiculturalism policy, whose main objective has been to assist immigrants, are reflected only to a rather limited extent in the literary works examined. One reason for this fact is that part of the works mentioned above had been written before the multiculturalism policy was implemented; moreover, art does not serve as a direct mouthpiece for political ideas. Literature reveals such layers of the human predicament, human fate and human conflicts for which even the most attentive, accepting and helpful social atmosphere can only partly provide solutions.

Although what the word Hungarian means is never told precisely, Canadian literary representations, when viewed synoptically, offer a remarkable variety of different forms, types and features. It is this diversity which has a real meaning and significance.

Bibliography

Atwood, Margaret. *Wilderness Tips*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1991. Print.

Callaghan, Morley. *Our Lady of the Snows*. Toronto: Macmillan, 1985. Print.

Cohen, Leonard. *The Favourite Game*. 1963. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1994. Print.

— —. "Take This Waltz." 1986. Audio.

Davies, Robertson. *The Rebel Angels*. 1981. Toronto: Penguin Books, 1997. Print.

Frank, Tibor. "Népvándorlás." *Élet és Irodalom*. LIX.27 (3 July 2015). Web.

Gallant, Mavis. "His Mother." *The New Yorker* (August 13, 1973): 28–33. Print.

Kürtösi, Katalin. *"Világok találkoznak": A 'másik' irodalmi ábrázolása Kanadában*. Szeged: JATEPress, 2010. Print.

Laurence, Margaret. *A Jest of God*. 1966. New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1970. Print.

Martel, Yann. *Self*. Toronto: Vintage Canada, 1997. Print.

— —. *The Facts behind the Helsinki Roccamatios*. 1993. Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2004. Print.

Rose. Marilyn. "Sinclair Ross's 'Foreigners.'" *From the Heart of the Heartland: The Fiction of Sinclair Ross*. Ed. John Moss. Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1992. 91–101. Print.

Ross, Sinclair. *As for Me and My House*. 1941. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1991. Print.

Teleky, Richard. *Hungarian Rhapsodies: Essays on Ethnicity, Identity and Culture*. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1997. Print.