

The Image of the Danube in Contemporary Novels Associated with Hungarian Culture

Monica MANOLACHI*

Abstract

The natural elements of inhabited areas often shape people's lifestyles, psychology and worldviews, influencing their moods, decisions and actions. Rivers in particular are often associated with the historical development of human relationships and the emergence of settlements and urban life. This paper explores the representations of the Danube in four contemporary novels by Hungarian authors or set in Hungary: The White King (2008) by György Dragomán, Train to Budapest (2008) by Dacia Maraini, Under Budapest (2013) by Ailsa Kay and Los Amantes Bajo el Danubio (2016) by Federico Andahazi. The aim of this analysis is to show how the river operates as a framework of "liquid modernity" (Bauman, 2000) in each of these works, it has a representative power of its own and determines people's destinies and human relationships in heterogeneous cultural contexts. It functions both as a natural backdrop for historical events and as a means of expressing and conveying emotions, creating a transnational political identity that is both socio-cultural and deeply intimate.

Keywords: *liquid modernity; Hungarian culture; contemporary literature; representations of the Danube; transnational literary canon*

Introduction

The research on how rivers appear in literature is not new. In his study on American literary tradition, for example, T. S. McMillin (2011) described literature as "a way of bringing together two complicated systems, rivers and meaning, to see what each can tell us about the other" (xiv) and proposed "a style of thinking that can be of use in investigations of both the meaning of rivers and the nature of meaning" (xviii). Previously, P. J. Jones (2005) examined the image of rivers in Roman literature and culture. More recently, M. Ziolkowski (2020) explored the critical role that five big rivers play in Russian literature, while M. Bozovic and M. D. Miller (2016) edited a collection of articles that approach the poetics and the politics of the Danube from an interdisciplinary point of view.

* University of Bucharest, Romania. monica.manolachi@lils.unibuc.ro

From a sociological perspective, M. Schillmeier and W. Pohler (2010) examined “the contested social relevance of the River Danube” (25) as a starting point for new ways of imagining Europe, highlighting the need to reconnect nature and culture at various levels by leaving their traditional separateness behind. Therefore, it becomes necessary to read literature anew, from an ecological and transcultural perspective in order to achieve a better grasp on the possible future of (Central and Eastern) Europe.

Since this article considers the image of the Danube in contemporary novels associated with Hungarian culture, the primary corpus was selected to reflect what critics and academics A. Kiséry and Z. Komáromy (2016) called “the interplay of the national and the intercultural” (17), an approach to the Hungarian literary canon which includes works in Hungarian, possibly influenced by other literatures, along with Hungarian literature in translation, ethnic minorities’ literatures and literatures in exile. They propose “the understanding of national culture as a particular, local conjuncture in global flows of cultural exchange and of human migration” (11) and dwell on cultural memory as “a force of identity construction whose stabilizing and confining power is premised on an ongoing process of selection and interpretation” (18). All four novels touch on subjects that affected many people in the past, causing unfortunate death and great suffering then (war, holocaust, deportation, forced labour, forced migration) and fruitless disputes in recent decades.

Drawing on previous conceptualizations of possible forms of remembering and representing traumatic events, T. Kisantal (2020) argued that “the strategies of collective memory in Hungarian discourse after 1989 can be considered as characteristically competitive” (49), with one rhetoric that fights for recognition at the expense of other rhetoric. A distinct approach would be the model of multidirectional memory, “a network where the memory of one event can reinforce other ones, creating a dialogue among these groups and memories” (56). As a result, the selection of the four novels suggests a possible recontextualization of a turbulent past via a liquid way of thinking suggested by the presence of the Danube, “at the same time a cultural *and* a natural object” (Schillmeier and Pohler, 2010: 27).

In the preface to the second edition of *Liquid Modernity*, Z. Bauman (2012) challenged the rapport between solidity and flexibility, between durability and transience as descriptors of the modern human condition: “Modernity without compulsive and obsessive modernization is no less an oxymoron than a wind that does not blow or a river that does not flow” (v). He recognized the processual nature of improvement by using the noun *modernization*, whose root is a verb, an action, a movement, rather than the noun *modernity*, whose root is an adjective, a description, a status quo. Since rivers simultaneously have a fluid substance and usually a fixed route, their literaturization may operate as

a host for a better understanding of the world in which nature plays its own role.

The following commentary focused on novels published over the past two decades is part of a larger practice of incorporating the discursive imagination associated with the Danube into the mainstream political discourse about life in Central and Eastern Europe.

Picturing the Danube-Black Sea Canal

When Tollef Mjaugedal (2007) asked György Dragomán what he thought about the so-called nostalgia for communism, the Hungarian writer said that, given his own family story of forced migration from Marosvásárhely (or Târgu Mureş) to Budapest in 1988, he felt no nostalgia and it was good that there were divergent views on the topic as, in reality, people may have had different experiences.

In his novel entitled *The White King* (2005), he tells several interconnected stories set in the 1980s, through the perspective of Djata, an 11-year-old boy born in the Hungarian community from Transylvania. He is waiting for his father, an engineer who is forced to work for the canal that today links the Danube and the Black Sea. His father is kept in the labour camp for political reasons and sends letters to his wife and son from time to time. When the letters stop coming and they do not receive any news from him, the boy imagines his father has fled the country. His absence is compared with that of another boy's father who "swam across the Danube and went to Yugoslavia and from there to the West, but they hadn't heard a thing from him since then, they didn't even know if he was alive" ("Tulips", para 3). The Danube as a labour camp and as a dangerous water frontier to cross, to escape dictatorship, are two of the most prominent gloomy representations of the river connected with the Romanian history of the 1980s. Dragomán's novel emphasizes the former.

In contrast with the predominantly positive propagandistic communist coverage of the Danube-Black Sea Canal, inaugurated in 1984, the novel describes it as a labour camp associated with hard work and oppression: "You weaklings wouldn't last even a day at the Danube Canal." ("Tulips", para 9) Given the difficult working conditions and the political abuse, the place is depicted as a potential source of infection: "men die of smallpox because that disease still flares up here and there along the Danube Canal, especially in the re-education camps" ("Pickax", para 29). Although the camp is located far away, in Dobruja, the author shows its adverse influence on the main characters' intimate and social life in his town from Transylvania: "my father was taken to the Danube Canal because my grandfather and grandmother didn't like my mother too much" ("Gift", para 1). Such uneasy family relationships, determined by opposite political views, affect both the father's

and the son's destiny. As a result of his father's detention, Djata's friends begin either to envy the boy for his freedom or to deride him for becoming an orphan.

All the above aspects reach a climax when Pickax, a construction worker from the Danube Delta [1], performs a magical bloody ritual, inspired by local Lipovan folklore, to help Djata better "see" his father. The ritual presupposes the use of several elements – a sparrow, mud, human hair and blood – to shape a winged doll, plus a flashlight and a mirror. The last object is particularly relevant because of its metamorphic powers on the boy's imagination: "The mirror now billowed like waves on water, and then all I could see was brown, muddy, wavy water, it seemed I was a bird flying above the water" ("Pact", para 14). When the mirror becomes liquid, it does not simply reflect the objects in front of it, but it functions like a drone equipped with a video camera, which allows the viewer to see the landscape from above:

suddenly I saw all sorts of ramps and roads scooped into that high clay wall and people working on them, so many people that they looked like ants, they were digging and swinging pickaxes and pushing wheelbarrows, and then the image turned, and there was my father ("Pact", para 14)

At the individual level, the ritual serves as a rite of passage that reflects the boy's coming of age in difficult times for his family. At the collective level, the ritual is meant to make readers better understand the role of a huge engineering project for both people and nature.

French philosopher Bruno Latour begins his book *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (2005) with a cartoon that features the following dialogue between two pupils: "'In the sixth chapter of *Proverbs*, it says: go to the ant, thou sluggard, consider her ways and be wise.' 'I tried that. The ant didn't know the answer either.'" (v) Dragomán's protagonist compares the workers with ants, his father being one of them, but he finds it meaningless why his family has to suffer so much while the authorities and the future users do not care.

The change in the flow of the river mirrors the change in Djata's parents' destiny. Redirecting the natural flow of the Danube by building a solid new course for part of its waters, for example, matches Djata's father's change in behaviour and physical appearance towards the end of the novel, when he is brought in a prison van to attend his father's burial:

his blank stare just wouldn't go away, as if he didn't know at all where he was, his eyes were glittering like glass and it occurred to me that it wasn't Father I was seeing, no, it was no longer him, he didn't remember me or Mother anymore, he didn't remember a thing, and he didn't even know himself anymore ("Funeral", para 22)

As the title of the novel suggests, *The White King* is a parable of masculine authority in the context of three generations (grandfather, father and son), of paternalist state power relations related to a huge engineering project and of strict rules like those of a dictatorship applied no matter what people, like wooden or plastic chess pieces, might feel.

From a thematic perspective, Dragomán's novel covers the importance of the canal as a solid construction, the rigidity of the ruling apparatus and its traumatic effects on individual destinies. However, its picaresque style in the first-person singular, with very long engaging sentences and a predominantly anecdotal and colloquial register, suggests the assimilation of the idea of fluidity and transformation at the level of the aesthetics, coexisting with the urge to share personal stories that could have a therapeutic effect in the communities affected by the harsh working conditions.

A trans-European view of the Danube

In *Train to Budapest* (2008) by Italian novelist Dacia Maraini, young journalist Amara Sironi travels from Florence to several places from Central and Eastern Europe in 1956 to report on post-WW2 life and politics. In parallel, she wants to find out what happened to Emanuele Orenstein, her pre-war childhood friend, who used to write her letters from Vienna between 1941 and 1943, where he moved with his parents, and later from a ghetto in Łódź, where they were taken by the SS troops.

The first letter that Emanuele sends her begins by mentioning the river in the first sentence: "Dear Amara, yesterday we went for an outing on the Danube with our teacher. We skated on the frozen water." (Ch 4, para 1) Although brief, this reference marks the social significance of the river, its socialization, and the "culturalization of nature" (Schillmeier and Pohler, 2010: 26) through literature, and sets the tone for the rest of the novel.

On her journey by train, Amara befriends a man named Hans, based in Vienna, who travels to Poland to meet his daughter. When they reach the border between Austria and Czechoslovakia, she helps him solve his bureaucratic problems by filling out a form in which she writes they are relatives. Otherwise, the officials would have held him for two days. Later, he sends her a letter in which he expresses his gratitude, writes the love story of his parents and offers to give her a helping hand to find Emanuele. In this letter, Hans mentions the Danube and its surroundings as an idyllic site, the perfect place for romance:

My father was studying music at the famous conservatory in Vác. He wanted to be an orchestral conductor. My mother had studied singing in Budapest and had won a scholarship to Vác to follow a course at the conservatory which was reputed to have produced great singers. One evening they met and walked beside the Danube under a

huge moon that made their eyes shine and silhouetted them against the long white riverbank. [...] They spent all that night chattering. And in the morning, when the sun had warmed them, they decided to take a dip in the river naked. They never even kissed. Just lay close together in the sun without their clothes, then left each other, each going home. But they began writing to each other and after two years of lively correspondence, they decided to get married. (Ch 10, para 6)

Amara's search for Emanuele, her wish to reunite with him although not knowing yet if he is dead or alive and his letters which she keeps in her bag "as her most precious possessions" (Ch 6, para 10) represent her intention to return to an age of innocence, her hope to reconnect with the pre-war times and people. The above representation of the Danube in Vác reflects the same intention, a mnemonic exercise meant to counterbalance the aftermath of the war and the horrors of the holocaust described in the novel.

Another example in which the identity of a river and of a person are brought together is the WW1 story of Emanuele's maternal grandfather. The Austrian emperor made him a hero after he lost an arm when trying to disable an explosive so his fellow soldiers could cross the bridge over Kolubara, a tributary to the Sava River, itself a tributary of the Danube. Whereas his grandfather was a hero of and a contributor to the imperial project—small brooks make big rivers—, Emanuele is rather an antihero who serves as an embodiment of loss and suffering, a reminder of the monstrous effects of authoritarian and belligerent regimes. The destiny of his lost parents is as implacable as the unrelenting force of a big river like the Danube. Individuals cannot fight against its huge natural force alone. Instead, a translocal approach could help individuals as part of multi-sited communities maintain a balanced relationship with its essential dynamics.

Since rivers often determine social life and shape human consciousness, language is sometimes influenced by their everyday presence. When Amara and Hans approach a representative of the police archives in Krakow, where they think they might find documents about Emanuele, the local officer replies: "Water under the bridge, Signora Sironi. The dead are dead." (Ch 12, para 23) In this context, the reference to the river suggests that what happened in the past cannot be changed: if Emanuele stopped sending letters, it may mean he either died or he does not want to see her. However, Amara and Hans continue to search for him, believing the contrary, that history can be rewritten when research is encouraged and there is evidence.

Apart from that, history is not simply water under the bridge: if that were the case, then people might risk repeating it. Even though individual and collective loss may be huge and people may want to forget rather than remember the past, there are voices that emphasize the ethical significance of the events for the new generations. For example, in his address delivered in 1992 as part of the Jean Améry Symposium at the University of Vienna, Nobel

Prize winner Imre Kertész (2011) explained what his idea of the Holocaust as culture means: "The Holocaust is a value, because, through immeasurable sufferings, it has led to immeasurable knowledge, and thereby contains immeasurable moral reserves." (76)

The first Metro line to cross the Danube

With *Under Budapest* (2013), which is part detective novel, part historical novel, Canadian writer Ailsa Kay succeeds in providing a complex reflection on the 20th-century Hungarian cultural identity and to offer readers a page-turner about the 1956 Revolution and its consequences for the present. In short, Agnes and Tibor, mother and son, travel from Toronto to Budapest for different purposes in the winter of 2010. She is searching for her sister Zsofi, whom she lost contact with in 1956. He is a historian taking part in a conference and trying to recover from a love affair with a married woman. Instead, they find a nationalist society, far-right politics, ruthless businessmen and streets rife with crime.

What motivates Agnes to travel to her birth country after about half a century is that another immigrant tells her about her own flight to Canada in the 1950s: "Zsofi and I escaped together. Through the tunnels." ("Gellért Hegy", 1, para 86) The author draws on the history and the mythology of the Budapest underground tunnels to put the events into perspective and to give the narrative more depth.

The network of tunnels under the Castle Hills used to serve military purposes and were used as shelters and storage during WW2, whereas the tunnels under the Castle Garden Bazaar used to be storage spaces for goods. Sections of these tunnels were incorporated into the M2 metro line, whose first plans were made in 1942, but whose construction was suspended after Stalin's death, from 1954 to 1963. That was the epoch when thousands of workers were brought to the capital to reconstruct the city centre and build the deepest metro line in the world at the time, a political decision supported by the Soviet regime. The main message of the propaganda was that commuting via subway would save time and people could watch movies instead. In reality, people needed dwellings and many country people died while working in the tunnels. In the 1950s too, Agnes's father, Miklos, was taken by the authorities and not allowed to go home:

And then, eight years later, he was arrested and put on trial – a drama, a farce – and found guilty of plotting to sabotage the building of the Szabadság Híd. He was the engineer in charge, and he *loved* that bridge – the utile grandeur of it, its purposeful, elegant, weight-bearing bastions. Plus, he was a good communist. Why would a good engineer and a good communist make a bridge that would only fall down? ("Now or Never", 'Tuesday, October 16', para 66)

Maddened at her husband's absence and at the psychosis caused by building the tunnels, but feeling he might be still alive, Agnes's mother, Margit, wanders through the city in the autumn of 1956, trying to help her husband, whom she strongly believes is held underground:

"Miklos, sooner or later, the revolutionaries will attempt to seize Communist Headquarters. I know it. I'm not hopeful they will win, but they will try, and when they do, you have to be ready." And with that, Margit drops the pistol down. She counts to ten before she hears a watery plunk far, far, far below ground, and then she drops the bullets. "Shoot that door down if you have to, Miklos. But don't get killed." ("Now or Never", 'Wednesday, October 24', para 48)

Besides presenting the Danube as a powerful natural force that needs to be harnessed through political determination and huge investments, so as to improve social life in Budapest, it is also depicted as a constant presence that influences people's personal and inner life. Travelling by metro, Agnes feels overwhelmed when "she's *under* the Duna, under that wide, weighty flow that banks can hardly hold when it floods" ("Gellért Hegy", 3, para 89), a subtle expression of her own guilt over leaving her sister Zsofi in the arms of her former lover and fiancé, Gyula, a student actively involved in the 1956 Revolution, a construction engineer during communism and a businessman after its fall. Agnes and Gyula used to meet on Margit Island, a lovers' favourite place now and in the past. When the two went home, they felt that the river separated not only Buda and Pesta, but also their own bodies and destinies:

In two hours, she will walk back to her family's dark apartment on Visegrádi in a dense part of Pest, while he heads in the other direction, over the bridge to Buda, to the gardens and steep climb of Rozsádomb, where all the party officials live, including his father. ("Now or Never", 'Tuesday, October 16', para 23)

Later, after Gyula is taken to prison for protesting against the Soviet regime, he has enough time to think about his childhood spent down the river:

When I was little, I imagined living in the Duna. Shimmering windows open into watery rooms. Stairs spiral deeper and deeper, but nothing goes wrong and no one ever falls. I'll make a city like that. No. That's a child's dream and we're not children anymore, are we? ("The Safe Room", para 215)

When Agnes and her son Tibor return to Toronto, she meditates on her hyphenated identity not only as a Hungarian living in Canada, but also as a person with a past and a present very different, difficult to reconcile on her own:

The photos slide. Agnes narrates. And it helps with that feeling that she'd been living with since Budapest, the feeling that she was two people: one, Agi, the lover of Gyula and sister of Zsofi, and two, Mrs. Agnes Roland, inside this tidy bungalow enclosed in a green lawn, encircled by wide asphalt road. How impossible. How utterly impossible, to live a life so decisively divided. She'd believed that in Budapest she would bridge it. ("After Budapest", para 50)

Besides connecting North America and Eastern Europe, personal life and history, first-generation and second-generation immigrants, real and fictional Budapest, novelist Ailsa Kay makes Hungarian language flow like a tributary into the big river that the English language is. She refers to the Danube as Duna, sprinkles the dialogues with *persze*, *csókolom* or *egészségedre*, mentions local food like *palacsinta* or *körözött* or nicknames like *Gombas* and uses the Hungarian names of various sites, buildings and publications not simply to hint at the local flavour, but to naturalize the language of a small country with the help of literature.

A transoceanic view on the siege of Budapest

Set mostly in the mid-1940s, the novel *Los Amantes Bajo el Danubio* (2016) by Argentinian author Federico Andahazi tells the love story between Hanna, a woman from the Hungarian Jewish community, and Bora, an aristocratic painter. After being married for several years and residing for a few years in Istanbul where Bora is sent as a diplomat, the wave of antisemitism during the Second World War causes them to grow apart. She starts dating her Jewish childhood friend, Andris, in secret and becomes closer to her ethnic community. Bora and Andris end up fighting in a duel, but none of them loses his life. Eventually, Hanna and Andris get married, while Bora starts a new life with Marga, the daughter of his parents' countryside property's administrator. When mass executions begin, Bora decides to give shelter to his ex-wife and her husband, hiding them in the basement of his villa. When the conflict intensifies, Hanna and Andris are helped to leave the country for Sweden. During the siege of Budapest, Bora and Marga wake up one morning to the sound of an explosion that destroys their house and forces them to flee the country as well. The construction and the style of the novel as well as its suspense and introspective approach prove that, in spite of the political conflict and social psychosis, love wins in the end. What role does the Danube play in this entangled story?

Firstly, it constitutes a silent narrative framework: the first and the last chapters begin with the same words, "A lot of water had passed under..." (9 and 324). It is a subtle hint that the account given in the rest of the chapters is not *agua pasada* or something to be forgotten, but a story to be told and retold. A significant distinction is that at the beginning only the Chain Bridge [2] from

Budapest is mentioned, whereas at the end of the novel *Puente Alsino* from Buenos Aires is mentioned too, which suggests the novel assembles several domestic and diasporic aspects of Hungarian culture and history.

Secondly, the vocabulary associated with the river, the bridges and water in general is used to describe powerful feelings and sensations and to produce a therapeutic effect. The river is there to mirror various stages of Hanna and Bora's love relationship. The second time they meet in the garden of the Gellért Hotel, they take a leisurely stroll that determines their destiny:

For the first time, they crossed the Chain Bridge together. They went on foot from Buda towards Pest. In the middle of the bridge, they stopped to look at the Danube, on whose surface the inverted Parliament was replicated. Leaning on the handrail, they looked into each other's eyes and, without saying a word, they wondered how they would continue. They were in the middle of the bridge, too, as far as they were concerned. They could see both equidistant ends. They only had two options: go forward or go back. Even if they wanted to, they couldn't stay halfway forever. (Andahazi, 2016: 53)

When Bora is informed that Hanna lies to him, he follows her by car, crossing the bridge from Buda to Pest, to discover she is meeting with Andris. Hanna's preference for her childhood friend is described as an imagined geography: "She returned to the small island of the past, the same where Andris lived." (167) This brief commentary is an allusion to the history of the islands down the river, especially the Margaret Island, with its Medieval mystical aura and its unthinkable atrocities during the winter of 1944-1945. It might be interpreted as an echo of the Jewish tradition that brings Hanna and Andris together in their small community and which has been a source of cultural resistance in many parts of the world.

As a result of Hanna's betrayal, Bora and Andris duel over her, which reflects the clash between two worlds: the former is an anxious solitary artist coming from a Hungarian family with an aristocratic pedigree, whilst the latter is the resigned embodiment of the average people and of the small details that make humans happy.

Later, while antisemitism rises and Hanna and Andris stay hidden in the basement, the pressure of spending day after day underground is overwhelming: "They would have wanted to cry until they broke down in tears and, turned into water, run free through the drains to merge with the Danube that flowed, mighty, as close as it was unreachable." (24) For months on end, they only have each other and the preserves existing in the cellar: "They embraced like two castaways on a desert island." (165)

Time goes by and Marga comes to accept them in the house and even comes with the proposal that Hanna and she change roles for one day: Marga stays in the basement with Andris, while Hanna and Bora share the villa as if

she still were his wife. When discussing this plan, Marga and Bora imagine the way Hanna will spend her time in the attic, admire the Danubian landscape from the window, feel the breeze, hear the sound of ships and smell the flowers. In reality, this move makes them feel even more anxiety after they go out and cross the river on foot under the eyes of the German sentinels: she becomes paranoid, accusing him of ruthless manipulation, while he bursts into tears helplessly and his desperate weeping is “a cry of several generations” (247), an accumulation of suppressed unhappiness.

Before the Swedish help Hanna and Andris flee the country with false passports, she clings to her religious background and to nature: “Hanna said a few prayers in Yiddish and remembered the blue sky and the waters of the Danube as she had seen them the day she went for a walk with Bora. She wanted that to be her last memory.” (251) Shortly after, the day Bora sees his villa bombarded and destroyed, he and Marga leave the city, while the river is there to guide them to a new unexpected direction: “They wandered off along the Danube, dazed, to nowhere.” (259) In the end, “nowhere” becomes South America, where Hanna and Bora meet again years later, trying to find an answer to the question “why” which, like Ariadne’s thread, takes the reader out of the narrative labyrinth of history: Why did she betray him? Why did he protect her?

As a fictionalized biography of his paternal grandfather, Andahazi’s novel focuses on showing the facts rather than telling the answer, on describing individual terror rather than depicting massacres. One way to solve the mystery is to read recent history books such as *The Forgotten Massacre: Budapest in 1944* (2021) in which historian Andrea Pető addresses two important questions regarding the memorialization of the Hungarian holocaust: When did the persecutions of the Jews start? What is the responsibility of the Hungarian state in these persecutions? (7)

The choice of referring to the Danube throughout the novel reminds us that rivers both separate and unite their banks and the people who inhabit them. In 1944-1945, Buda was occupied by the Germans and Pest was invaded by the Soviet Army. Hanna’s two lovers, Bora from Buda and Andris from Pest, may seem enemies at first, but the author demonstrates their eventual friendship and strong ties beyond the mundane conception of the human condition as well as the tense interdependence between tradition and modernity. From another angle, born and bred in a rather well-off environment in the countryside, Marga “felt sorry for the river imprisoned between the cement embankments and the bridges” (229). Since she longs for the pastoral atmosphere and feels trapped in the city, she rejuvenates when they end up in the Argentinian countryside, where she gives birth to a boy. Danube is there to remind the readers of natural resources and landscapes in contrast with the sometimes-oppressive cityscapes and the impact of the so-called civilization.

Conclusions

The above analysis is a glimpse into a literary network of fictional characters that take us to several parts of the world, not only to Hungary but also to other countries from Central and Eastern Europe as well as from North and South America and the Middle East, thus facilitating both a regional and a global bird-eye view on cultural hybridity, liquid modernity and transnational belonging.

These four novels allow readers to compare and contrast the problematic condition of individuals and families whose life happened to be linked to the Danube, either in favourable or unfavourable circumstances. For Djata, the river is both a natural spirit that has stolen his father and one that teaches him about social and political responsibility. For Amara, it is a pretext to explore less-known chapters from the history of Central Europe and to find moral value in times of unspeakable hubris. For Agnes and Tibor, the Danube operates as a metaphor for the collective unconscious of Budapest, which silently shapes individual identities and communities. For the characters in Andahazi's novel, the river functions as an indelible feature of belonging, in spite of the transatlantic distance and the terrible memories it may evoke.

From a stylistic point of view, the lens of liquid modernity favours a series of postmodern writing techniques (e.g., self-reflexivity, irony, unreliable narration, intertextuality, fabulation, and temporal distortion) capable of creating meaning out of socially and politically meaningless contexts like detention, armed conflicts, violent mass unrest and massacres. Furthermore, the simultaneous naturalization of history and socialization of the river through fiction eventually contribute to a productive cultural third space where former renegades (e.g., protesters, non-Aryan, anti-communist, exile) can find legitimacy. Having exposed a relative variety of narrative approaches and subjectivities that go beyond the nationalistic discourse, a possible ensuing question is what such heterogeneity is good for, which may be a topic for further research.

Notes

[1] Contrary to what the locals might think, the Danube Delta is rather unknown abroad. Sociologists Schillmeier and Pohler (2010) argued that: "It still represents a *terra incognita* of and for European studies." (35)

[2] The first permanent bridge built across the Danube in Hungary and opened in 1849, the Széchenyi Chain Bridge was blown up by the retreating Germans in 1945 and then rebuilt and reopened in 1949.

References

- Andahazi, F. (2016) *Los Amantes Bajo el Danubio*. Editorial Planeta.
- Baumann, Z. (2012) *The Liquid Modernity*. Polity.
- Bozovici, M. and M. D. Miller. (2016) *Watersheds: Poetics and Politics of the Danube River*. Academis Studies Press.
- Dragomán, G. (2008) *The White King*. Trans. Paul Olchváry. Houghton Mifflin.
- Kay, A. (2013) *Under Budapest*. Goose Lane.
- Kertész, I. (2011) *The Holocaust as Culture*. Trans. Thomas Cooper. Seagull Books.
- Kisantal, T. (2020) "Beyond the Battlefields of Memory: Historical Traumas and Hungarian Literature." *Porównania / Comparisons*, vol. 27(2), 47-58. Available at: <https://pressto.amu.edu.pl/index.php/p/article/view/26882/24646> Accessed on 10 July 2023.
- Kiséry, A. and Z. Komáromy. (2016) "Introduction: World Literature in Hungarian Literary Culture". In Kiséry, A., Z. Komáromy, Z. Varga (eds.) *Worlds of Hungarian Writing: National Literature as Intercultural Exchange*. Rowman & Littlefield, 1-27.
- Latour, B. (2005) *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory*. Oxford.
- Maraini, D. (2010) *Train to Budapest*. Trans. Silvester Mazzarella. Arcadia Books.
- McMillin, T. S. (2011) *The Meaning of Rivers: Flow and Reflection in American Literature*. University of Iowa Press.
- Mjaugedal, T. (2007) "With *The White King* I wanted to write a book about freedom in a society where freedom should not be possible." *György Dragomán Online*. <<http://gyorgydragoman.com/?p=163>>, Accessed on 10 July 2023.
- Pető, A. (2021) *The Forgotten Massacre: Budapest in 1944*. De Gruyter Oldenbourg.
- Schillmeier, M. and W. Pohler. (2010) "The Danube and Ways of Imagining Europe." *The Sociological Review*, vol. 58(2), p. 25-43.
- Jones, P. J. (2005) *Reading Rivers in Roman Literature and Culture*. Lexington Books.
- Ziolkowski, M. (2020) *Rivers in Russian Literature*. University of Delaware Press.