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## SELF-REPRESENTATION AND IDENTITY: HUNGARIAN DRAMA AS A REPRESENTATIVE OF NATIONAL CULTURE

### ABSTRACT

There are paradoxes in the mediation of culture for foreigners. If the work to be offered remains unchanged, it might be indifferent for a foreign public. On the other hand, if the work is adapted to the receiving culture, it will necessarily go through alterations and loose elements of its original identity. The first part of the essay discusses international examples and theoretical aspects of the phenomenon, including the issues of stereotypes, canonization, prejudices etc. The second part is a case study taking into focus the example of Hungarian drama and how it has been received internationally, restricting the investigation to the English-speaking world. The time frame of one and a half century proves that there have been different reasons why some Hungarian dramatic works had been internationally appreciated, and it is stressed that “delegating” works, views and values is not an effective way to make the world acquainted with cultural values which are important for us.

**Keywords:** national culture, identity, self-representation, drama, reception

### I. GAIN AND LOSS IN THE MEDIATION OF CULTURE FOR OTHERS

In her essay entitled ‘On Not Knowing Greek’, Virginia Woolf writes the following, *we do not know how the words sounded, or where precisely we ought to laugh, or how the actors acted, and between the foreign people and ourselves there is not only difference of race*

*and tongue but a tremendous breach of tradition.*<sup>1</sup> This tremendous breach of tradition exists not only in the dimension of historical time connecting – or better say estranging – us from other cultures like the ancient Greeks but in the cultural, habitual distance of different contemporary cultures as well. One of the starting points of the interest towards a different culture can be the belief that almost the same meaning and influence can be reproduced in the receiving culture that has characterized the original one. But it is more than obvious that there are necessary, inevitable changes which go together with the mediation process.

#### a) Translation

The mediation of culture can be considered as a kind of translation, with the intention to reproduce a meaning with different means in a different context. Therefore, we have to transform, convert, refashion a piece of culture to adopt it and make it receivable for a different context and a different audience. Accordingly, reproduction through mediation goes together with giving up the original, and creating something else, something different. Gayatri C. Spivak claims that the location of the translation is an empty field between two languages.<sup>2</sup>

Restricting the problem of mediation of culture first to the field of translation, it can be declared that every translation is a paraphrase, since it is not enough to translate the text, but via translation the original text has to be explained as well. Therefore, the translation is not a primary text, since it includes the element of interpretation. The translator (or mediator) continuously makes decisions about the vocabulary, the structure of signs, the extension of references, and the general context. Very similar manoeuvres take place when a cultural product or event is being mediated for foreigners.

Going not as far in history as Virginia Woolf in her example about the Greeks, I touch upon briefly the case of a poet who himself translated his own poetry into English with tremendous success at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but who later was very much ambivalent with the results.

Coming from a culture that by its tradition and civilization was not linked to the Western culture, and which was in an unequal power relationship with the British Empire, the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore created auto-translations of his works, adapting them to the image of the East created by the English-speaking world of the West.

Tagore commented the following on his understanding of the expectations of an English audience regarding his poetry, *I believe that in the English version some portions of it may profitably be left out, for I find that English readers have very little patience for scenes and sentiments which are foreign to them.*<sup>3</sup> This little patience can probably be characteristic of most of the cultures towards other cultures.

<sup>1</sup> V. Woolf, 'On Not Knowing Greek' in eadem, *The Common Reader, First and Second Series*, New York 1948, p. 39.

<sup>2</sup> G. C. Spivak, *Outside the Teaching Machine*, New York 1993, p. 180.

<sup>3</sup> Cited by M. Sengupta, 'Translation as Manipulation: The Power of Images and Images of Power' in

To meet these presumed expectations, Tagore gave up the ideal to keep as much of the original as possible in translation, and he changed his Bengali poems in their English version to such an extent that they were very loosely related to the original ones. The simplification and adaptation of his poetry to the Western expectations of the English speaking world resulted in the Nobel-Prize for literature in 1913.

Two decades later, in a letter to Thomas Sturge-Moore, the poet wrote the following about this case of rewriting and manipulating his own poetry for a different culture, *As for myself, I ought never to have intruded into your realm of glory with my offering hastily giving them a foreign shrine and certain assumed gestures familiar to you. I have done thereby injustice to myself and to the shrine of the muse which proudly claims flowers from its own climate and culture. There is something humiliating in such an indecent hurry of impatience clamouring for one's immediate dues in wrong time and out of the way places.*<sup>4</sup>

The above example of Tagore shows that in the process of mediating culture for foreigners, there is an inherent element of manipulation, cheating, and misleading, and that the “other”, the receiving culture remains trapped in the cultural stereotypes created and nurtured through translations, images, messages, prejudices, and other components.

## b) Stereotypes

But there is a further, rather paradoxical element in this example, namely, that the cultural stereotypes are very often maintained and reinforced by those very ones who then protest against these stereotypes. The poet giving a “foreign shrine” to his works voluntarily gave up the peculiarity of the original, to serve the existing or presupposed stereotypes about his own culture by the others, in this case, by the West.

A similar attitude can be seen in the practice of giving presents for foreigners. In this gesture of representing our culture by a present, one can often experience how cultural commonplaces are reproduced. This is how Hungarians conserve the image of a “goulash-chikosh-paprikash”<sup>5</sup> nation which never existed, when they give such presents to foreigners as a horse leather flask, Hungarian red pepper, Tokay wine etc. which tell very little or better say nothing about Hungarians and their present culture, and maintain a romantic 19<sup>th</sup> century image of a nation they have very little in common with nowadays. Instead of giving for example books on contemporary Hungarian literature, or DVD-s of films, CD-s of music, which tell more about this country than the pseudo folklore artifacts.

When I served as director of the Hungarian Theatre Museum and Institute (1999-2004) we initiated regional cooperation based on this idea of promoting contempo-

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A. Dingwaney, C. Maier (eds.), *Between Languages and Cultures. Translation and Cross-cultural Texts*, Pittsburgh 1995, p. 166, *Pittsburgh Series in Composition, Literacy, and Culture*.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 171.

<sup>5</sup> Goulash is a soup made of pork or beef, often mixed up by foreigners with a stew (which is called “pörkölt”); “csikós” is the horseman on the Hungarian plain (“Pusztá”); paprika is pepper, a basic ingredient of Hungarian cuisine.

rary culture. One of our projects has been the Visegrád drama series, including Czech, Slovak, Polish, and Hungarian plays in English translation.<sup>6</sup> The suggestion to use such publications as gifts was accepted e.g. by the then President of Hungary, Árpád Göncz (himself a playwright and a translator from English), who once wrote us a letter thanking for the idea, and telling how much our present of a bilingual exclusive publication of the set designs for Imre Madách's *The Tragedy of Man*<sup>7</sup> were appreciated by its recipients at different diplomatic events.

But it is safer to remain within the stereotypes than to make efforts – often less successful – to change the existing image of a culture. One has to make preliminary decisions about the primary aim of the cultural work to be mediated, whether it should keep as much of the original as possible, or if it should be adapted to the receiving culture as much as it can be. In the first case, there is the danger of rejection, incomprehensibility, while in the latter case there is the risk of losing the basic, unique features of the original work – what could be seen in the case of Tagore's poetry in English mentioned above.

### c) Canons

Every piece of art or cultural product belongs to and fits into a local, regional and national canon. This canon is determined by the local tradition and value system, which cannot be and is not necessarily demonstrated in its complexity to the foreign culture. This target culture nowadays is often an international receiving context, a global cultural market. It has different premises and interests than the sending cultural community.

The Hungarian practice in representing cultural products is dominated by the attitude of delegation, based on the intention that the other should get to know and accept the Hungarian canon and those domestic preferences that had determined the significance of a work of art. But it can very often be experienced that the receiving culture neglects the “original” position of a work and the value system around it, and led by its own premises and preferences it selects something else than what had been suggested for them.

Therefore when working on projects to introduce Hungarian cultural products for a special foreign audience, it is better to collaborate with representatives of the receiving culture, and let them select what is interesting for them, rather than trying to force our taste and delegate something less attractive for the possible audience. Working for the Hungarian cultural season in France in 2001 called “MAGYart”, and the similar project in the United Kingdom in 2004 called “Magyar Magic”, we in the Theatre Institute tried to promote projects with regard of the French and English partners' interests.

This was how we published for the “MAGYart” a Hungarian drama anthology and a collection of essays on Hungarian theatre,<sup>8</sup> and had a week in the Studio Theatre of

<sup>6</sup> *Visegrad Drama*, Vol. 1: *Weddings*, transl. by B. Day [et al.], Bratislava 2002; *Visegrad Drama*, Vol. 2: *Escape*, transl. by A. Zapałowski, Budapest 2004.

<sup>7</sup> *Scene by Scene. Set designs for Imre Madach – The Tragedy of Man*, Budapest 1999.

<sup>8</sup> *Théâtre hongrois contemporain*, Paris 2001; A. Lakos (ed.), *Théâtre hongrois d'une fin de siècle à l'autre: 1901-2001*, Montpellier 2001.

the Comédie-Française with rehearsed readings of contemporary Hungarian plays in November 2001, similarly to the “Magyar Magic” which included a sister program in the Cottesloe Studio of the National Theatre in London, in June 2004. The translation of the plays in both cases included the collaboration of the playwright and the translator, and the result often took into consideration the different habits and expectations of the foreign recipient audience.

#### d) The Balkans

The diverging canons and different traditions between “our” culture and the “other” cultures set up a variety of challenges, traps, and create a necessary presence of paradoxes. When Pécs applied for – and was later awarded – the title of European Capital of Culture, the town tried to identify and characterize itself by its difference from the previous Cultural Capitals. The declared difference lay in a term with strong geographical, political and cultural connotations, i.e. the Balkans.

In the application book, there is the following paragraph considering Pécs and its relationship to the South-East European region, *Pécs is a truly “Borderless City” that opens a cultural door to the Balkans, a region that does not yet belong to the European Union. Though Pécs is not located in the Balkans, it has a myriad links with this region, many more than any other Hungarian city. In addition to its Turkish monuments, these links are also reinforced by the South Slav minorities living here. Pécs is an important site on the cultural map of Croatia too; it has a Croatian secondary grammar school, a theatre and a cultural centre. Pécs may become the first European Capital of Culture to open a gateway to the rich multiculturalism of the Balkans, including its Islamic heritage.*<sup>9</sup>

The calling phrase for Pécs as the “gate towards the Balkans” is in itself a paradoxical gesture. The Balkans has no clear and common political, geographical, cultural definition, e.g. there are some fifteen different geographical views about the border of the Balkans, where the Balkans begins (from the border between Hungary and Croatia down to the border between Bulgaria and Greece). According to an anecdote Austro-Hungarian emperor, Franz Joseph II declared more than a century ago that the Balkans start at the gate of the Schönbrunn Castle in Vienna. Nowadays, those nations who live in this South-East European region consider that the Balkans is never equal to them, it always begins with the others, the other nation, the other culture. The Balkans starts from and with the others.

Primarily because of the wars of the 1990s in ex-Yugoslavia, many might have thought in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century that the region was (or is) unstable and dangerous. Why go to Pécs, if it so close to this region, if there is just a gate between this Hungarian town and the Balkans? But why not go there, if, it is a challenge? This dilemma includes a further paradox namely, how to inspire people of other cultures to become interested in the culture of a foreign town and its region. Either by stress-

<sup>9</sup> J. Takáts, *The Borderless City: The European Capital of Culture – Pécs, 2010*, transl. by A. Bocz, Pécs 2005, p. 33.

ing what can easily and immediately be understood, relying upon a general superficial knowledge, or the opposite way, by stressing the exotic, the strange, the unique, and the often not clearly identifiable features?

The “Balkans” as metaphor served the second function. It includes something of the uncanny (in the Freudian sense), and people can project a lot of undetermined presuppositions onto this term. There is one major problem with it though, that it is dominated by negative connotations. To clear up prejudices and misunderstandings the thematic years of Pécs towards 2010 from 2006 on included programs and projects which gave a complex and close view of the cultures of the Balkans.

There was a series entitled *East-West Passage – With the Balkans About the Balkans – Balkan World Music Festival and Balkan Gateway Interdisciplinary Conference*. It began in 2007, and in 2008 the second “East-West Passage” program included a multi-disciplinary and international conference entitled, *Challenging Differences – Culture, Ethnicity, Gender and Equal Opportunities* which welcomed philosophers, literary and cultural critics, anthropologists, filmmakers, artists, poets and writers from East and West to discuss these topics, encouraging innovative trans-disciplinary dialogues, reinforcing the role of Pécs, the “Borderless City” as a passage between Europe and the Balkans, between North and South, between East and West.

In 2008 the keynote speaker was Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak from Columbia University (USA), giving a talk entitled “Subduing Byzantium”. She questioned whether the Balkans and Europe are an adequate allegory of East-West, and she raised whether the three cultural capitals of 2010 (Essen, Pécs, Istanbul) mean yet another undoing of Byzantium.

The Indian-American literary critic and theorist coming from the global intellectual sphere spoke in a peripheral town, at the gate of the Balkans by her own presence demonstrating a paradox. Namely, sometimes one has to go far away to see one’s own conditions more clearly. In identifying herself as the “gate towards the Balkans” Pécs can represent and demonstrate the diversity, the variety of values and habits, and instead of creating a stable and fixed cultural identity, the town can show the very essence of culture, that it is always an alloy, an amalgamation, including heterogeneous particles. The fundamental challenge and paradox in mediating culture for foreigners lays in the task of preserving the uniqueness of this amalgamation, regardless to the fact, that the same components can be found elsewhere too, and that the arrangements of these elements are in a permanent change.

## II. THE CASE OF HUNGARIAN DRAMA AS A REPRESENTATIVE OF HUNGARIAN CULTURE

Several material and spiritual products can function as representatives of a national culture. Hungarian technical inventions, as biro pen, telephone news centre, Rubik’s cube, etc. Similarly, from the field of culture diverse artists and their works could be listed as representatives of Hungary, including the music of Béla Bartók and György



Kurtág, the films of Miklós Jancsó and István Szabó, the photographs of Robert Capa and André Kertész, etc. To restrict this broad spectrum of possibilities, I will limit my investigation into a narrow field, namely Hungarian drama, and overview how this artistic genre which has a double existence – linked both to literature and to theatre – could and can represent Hungarian culture. It would be impossible to try to review this genre's presence all over the world, even in major cultures, therefore I restrict my investigation to the point what is available from Hungarian drama for the English speaking world. That is quite a broad audience in itself, and English can often function as a mediator language for other major or minor cultures, drawing attention to a playwright or a play from the Hungarian (or other) cultural sphere.

### a) General condition of Hungarian plays in English

Regarding the first major part of the present essay it can be declared that, in the case of drama one can see both examples of “delegated” works and selections made by foreign publishers, theatres, and other canonizing institutions. As drama is connected to two forms of publicity i.e., stage performance and printed publishing, it could be possible to consider theatrical productions of Hungarian plays in the world as a significant form of mediating Hungarian culture to foreigners. But there is no database of international stage productions to turn to, and the data which could be gathered – often by chance – would not create a legitimate basis for interpretation. Therefore, in the following paragraphs, I will take into consideration the dramatic texts which are available in printed and published form in English translation. Although in some cases when the theatrical reception is well known or information it is easily available I will mention it too.

First, it has to be stressed that all major periods of Hungarian drama are represented in English translations, but in three different ways. The first period, which coincides with the birth of original Hungarian theatre in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, is represented by Imre Madách's *The Tragedy of Man*. This is the Hungarian play most often translated and published in English. The second period, the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century gave Ferenc Molnár's dramatic oeuvre to the English speaking-world with more than two dozens of his plays in several editions. The third flourishing period of Hungarian drama of the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is represented by anthologies, including dozens of contemporary dramatists with one or more plays by each, which gives the biggest variety of plays available in English in the history of translations of Hungarian literature.

### b) The nineteenth century and a representative example

Although there are some exceptional examples from the previous centuries, Hungarian drama was born in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Its birth was related to the political and cultural development of Hungarian reformers and revolutionary intellectuals to help the country regain independence, as in those times it was part of the Hapsburg monarchy. During the 18<sup>th</sup> century, most of the plays written in Hungarian followed foreign, especially

German and Italian examples, and many times these plays were not more than mere adaptations or loose translations of the original. Hungarian-speaking theatre also emerged at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but till the *fin de siècle* it had to live together with German language theatres which had been functioning in Hungary till the collapse of the Hapsburg monarchy in 1918.

There are three plays in the 19<sup>th</sup> century which constitute the core of Hungarian literary canon of that period. *Ban Bánk* (1819) by József Katona (1791-1830), *Csongor and Tünde* (1830) by Mihály Vörösmarty (1800-1855), and *The Tragedy of Man* (1862) by Imre Madách (1823-1864). *Ban Bánk* takes its subject matter from Hungarian history in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. In 1213, while Andrew II, king of Hungary was at a Galician campaign, his wife, Gertrude ruled the country. She was of German origin, and during the king's absence she was killed as a result of a conspiracy of Hungarian barons. Katona took the subject matter as an issue of national independence at the dawn of the Hungarian reformist age. The plot of *Csongor and Tünde* goes back to a 16<sup>th</sup> century Hungarian romance connected to medieval fairy-tales. The protagonist, Csongor is looking for happiness which he cannot find in the real world. Tünde who is a fairy represents an upper, everlasting world. Overcoming all the obstacles, Csongor finally finds and gets Tünde who gives up her fairy existence and becomes a part of the human world.

While these two plays remained within the Hungarian cultural interest, basically because of their topic and cultural embeddedness, *The Tragedy of Man* has become a well-known Hungarian drama all around the world. This philosophical mankind dramatic poem has more than twelve different English translations published in more than twenty different editions. The first translation made by William N. Loew was published in 1909 (New York), the most recent ones are by George Szirtes (1989), Thomas R. Mark (1989), and Iain MacLeod (1993). The play has nearly 120 known translations in more than 40 languages of the world.<sup>10</sup>

Grown from the disillusionment of the lost Hungarian revolution and fight for liberty in 1848-49, *The Tragedy of Man* gives a mankind vision of the civilized world, and shows that each attempt in history to humanize life and society had failed. The dramatic poem has been related to Goethe's *Faust* already by the first readers of the manuscript. The structure of the play is clear and transparent. Of the fifteen scenes, the first three and the last give a Biblical frame. Scenes 4 to 11 turn to history (ancient Egypt, Athens, Rome, medieval Constantinople, Renaissance Prague, Paris at the time of the Jacobean terror, contemporary London of the industrial revolution), scenes 12-14 depict the future (a phalanstery, outer space, and an Eskimo hut). At the beginning of the play, the Lord gives a chance to Lucifer to convince the first human couple that history is not worth to live through. Lucifer puts a dream on Adam, who dreams through history. The final scene returns to the place outside paradise as Adam wakes from his dream. What he saw and lived through makes Adam to think of committing suicide. Only the

<sup>10</sup> Madách: *The Tragedy of Man in the Languages of the World and on the Stage. Bibliography*, Budapest 1999, p. 3.



news of Eve's pregnancy gives him new hope and endurance, so that the Lord's inspirational message in the end prevails over Lucifer's scepticism.

The play is a significant Romantic-era response to major 19<sup>th</sup> century ideas in the field of philosophy, politics, natural sciences, and the issue of historical development. Moreover, the play represents Madách's deistic view of the world, which is expressed by the Lord in the opening scene,

*It's done, the great act of creation.  
The maker rests. The wheel's in motion  
And will rotate upon its axle for  
A hundred million years before  
A single cog wears out. Take wing  
My sentinels, begin your orbiting.  
Once more let me admire and hear the sweet  
Sound of your circuit, smooth beneath my feet.*<sup>11</sup>

Although Madách describes his work as a dramatic poem, he included suitable stage directions. For its philosophical features, frequent changes of scenes, inclusion of supernatural elements, the play has always been a challenge for the theatre, but from its first performance in 1883 it has constantly been on the stage in Hungary. This was the play which opened the new permanent building of the National Theatre in Budapest in 2002. Although the foreign stage reception is not discussed here, it has to be mentioned that *The Tragedy of Man* has been produced quite often, especially in the German-speaking countries. It was first published in German translation in 1865 in Budapest. After its world premiere in 1883, it was published between 1886 and 1894 in seven different German translations within the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy.<sup>12</sup> This proves that though we restrict our view on the English reception, Madách's play has been a significant representative of Hungarian culture through one and a half century.

To sum up the characteristics of how *The Tragedy of Man* has represented Hungarian culture one can say that the paradox of this is example that it has no Hungarian ingredients, neither in characters, nor in plot or subject matter. Although the dramatic poem was written by a Hungarian author in Hungarian language, it is not specifically Hungarian. The general features, like Biblical themes, episodes of European history, philosophical approach etc. has made it much easier for the international reception to accept and include Madách's work in a universal canon. There is another fact about Madách which is significant in connection of canonization. Although he published poetry and wrote some six plays, in the Hungarian cultural and literary canon he is seen as an author of one work, *The Tragedy of Man*. Only experts in the field of 19<sup>th</sup> century literature consider his other works significant, the public sees him as a writer of a single piece.

<sup>11</sup> I. Madách, *The Tragedy of Man*, transl. by G. Szirtes, Budapest 1989, p. 23.

<sup>12</sup> K. Podmaniczky, *La réception de la Tragédie de l'homme d'Imre Madách dans le monde germanophone (1862-2003)*, Thesis/dissertation, Le Mans 2009, p. 372.

### c) An international theatrical trademark, Ferenc Molnár

The Hungarian millennium in 1895-96 celebrated the arrival of the one-time conquerors of the Carpathian Basin in 895-896 by several cultural, economic events and developments. One of these projects was a fever to set up new theatre buildings. Budapest, which was founded in 1873 by the union of three previously separate towns (Pest, Buda and Old Buda) had become a cultural capital by the end of the century. The present Hungarian theatre system, 90% of the currently used theatre buildings were built at the *fin de siècle*. This process went hand in hand with the flourishing period of new Hungarian drama. By the time when World War I broke out, there had been a group of very talented playwrights influenced by naturalism, symbolism, the technique of the well-made or conversational play. Their plays had become a cultural export product of the Hungarians from the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The most successful and internationally best-known dramatist from this generation has been Ferenc Molnár (1878-1952), the most popular Hungarian dramatist in the world, especially in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The success of Molnár cannot be separated from his generation of the millennium, which gave several talented artists, composers, thinkers to the world, like visual artist László Moholy-Nagy, composer Béla Bartók, or philosopher George Lukács, just to mention a few.

Molnár has almost his full theatrical oeuvre available in English, mostly published between the two World Wars. His universally successful plays are known for their lightness of touch, boulevard sophistication, and romantic portrayal of a merry, carefree Budapest in the first decades of 20<sup>th</sup> century. His success can mostly be attributed to the fact that between 1908 and 1930 he was a celebrated dramatist on Broadway. Many of his plays have had a foreign world premiere, often in New York. Although for the world he stands on his own as a unique example of Hungarian theatre, in fact he is one of the many talented Hungarian dramatists of the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century who had been less fortunate with their international reputation.

Despite the obvious cynicism of his plays, Molnár indeed was a sentimentalist. He had a remarkable skill in creating the unexpected with a touch of humour that amuses by its very subtlety. In every Molnár play and narrative there is a deep undercurrent of pity and tenderness. There are no real villains among his characters, nor are they ever placed against a solid background. His major success was *Liliom* (1909), which is still often produced as a musical with the title, *Carousel*. Although not directly, Molnár is related to the Liverpool Football Club's anthem, "You'll Never Walk Alone", because the song originates from the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical, *Carousel*, based on Molnár's *Liliom*. The play depicts ordinary men with sentimentality, combines aspects of naturalism and symbolism. Molnár often chose the theatre as the subject matter of his plays. In *The Guardsman* (1910), the hero is an actor who tries to test his wife's fidelity by seducing her in the role of a guardsman. *The Play's the Thing* (1926) is about the birth of a play for the theatre, an impudent farce-comedy, fresh, funny, and frivolous. His other topic was to ridicule feudal aristocracy which has outlived its time, a subject that he explored in *The Swan* (1920), and in *Olympia* (1928). Molnár learned

a lot from the French well-made play, from playwrights like Scribe, Dumas fils, Sardou, Augier etc. He not only translated their comedies, but directed them as well, therefore it can be said that he learned the dramaturgy and the techniques of writing play from these playwrights.

Molnár was born in Budapest on 12 January, 1878 as the second son of Dr. Mór Neumann, a Jewish physician, and Jozefa Wallfisch. In the preface of one of his books he summarized his biography in the following laconic, ironic way: *1878, I was born in Budapest; 1896, I became a law student at Geneva; 1896, I became a journalist in Budapest; 1897, I wrote a short story; 1900, I wrote a novel; 1902, I became a playwright at home; 1908, I became a playwright abroad; 1914, I became a war correspondent; 1916, I became a playwright once more; in 1918, my hair turned snow-white; in 1925, I should like to be a law student at Geneva once more.*

What can be added to this brief sketch is that he changed his name from Neumann to Molnár in 1896. The year he wrote this biography is the year between his two major plays, *The Glass Slipper* (1924), and his biggest success, *The Play's the Thing* (1926). In the 1930s, he travelled extensively in Europe, often saying that he had a five-room apartment, with a room in Budapest, in Vienna, in Karlsbad, in Venice, and in Nice. Because of Hungarian laws against the Jews and the spread of fascism in Europe, he emigrated to the USA. On 12 January 1940, his birthday, he arrived at New York City, and moved to Hotel Plaza, where he lived in room 835 until his death on 1 April 1952. Living in exile, he tried to work for Hollywood, and besides he worked on mystical and philosophical plays, but he could neither reach his previous success nor his technical brilliance.

Molnár wrote altogether 42 plays, the first in 1902 (*The Lawyer*), the last ones in the 1940s in exile. His dramatic career had two peaks, the first one at the beginning of his dramatic career, when at the age of thirty his play, *The Devil* was performed all over Europe and in the US. Before World War I, he had a few foreign productions, including *The Wolf* (1912). The second peak happened during the second part of the 1920s. During these years he had several foreign, mostly American productions of his brand new plays. In 1928 his *Collected Works* were published in twenty volumes in Budapest. Next year, a collection of his plays was published in English. Although Molnár has remained on the repertoire of the theatres both in Hungary and abroad, he has become a modern classic of entertainment. The fact that after several decades, or almost a century, many of his plays can be seen on stage proves his artistic significance and theatrical influence. His contemporary, Dezső Kosztolányi (poet, novelist), has described Molnár's plays as semi-tragedies and semi-comedies, games between instinct and cleverness, sense and sensibility.

Molnár creates very effective stage situations; he can convince the audience that his character sketches are real social types. His structures are clear, his plots are logical. What differentiates him from the representatives of the French well-made play is that, beyond the superb techniques of dramaturgy, there is always some undercurrent of sadness, some sentimental sorrow about the essence of life in his best plays. Molnár can be related to several of his contemporary playwrights. He can be linked to Oscar

Wilde, whose comedies influenced him by their paradoxes, wit, ironic tone; to Arthur Schnitzler, who criticised the bourgeois life-style and morals; to Gerhart Hauptmann, who gave him example with his new-romantic plays; to Maurice Maeterlinck, by his strong stage effects, and theatrical mysticism; and to Luigi Pirandello, with the questioning of theatre boundaries and the theatre's preference against reality. This broad network of fellow dramatists prove that, among the reasons that Molnár could have become part of the international theatre repertoire there are these matches with his best contemporaries.

Molnár has taken most of his subject matters from the yards and apartments of Budapest, and has always focused on private life and its emotional relations. Although he has not been an innovator of modern drama, he could synthesize different techniques and aesthetic trends of his time as the above list of European dramatists show. His plays combine romance and realism, motives of a fairy tale, naturalistic images of low life, middle class partnerships, role playing on, and off stage. The structure of his plays is excellent, they have superb dialogues.

As mentioned above, his biggest international success was *Játék a kastélyban* (*The Play's the Thing*). The Hungarian title means *The Play at the Castle*, while the English title given by the translator, P. G. Wodehouse, refers to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, its Mousetrap scene. The play premiered in 1926 both in Budapest and in New York City. The American production was a huge success, running for 260 nights, while in Budapest it was a modest production with 46 performances. The presence of this Molnár play on the international stage is demonstrated in indirect forms as well. For instance, it appears in the oeuvre of Tom Stoppard. Stoppard made an adaptation of Molnár's play in the mid-1980s which premiered in the National Theatre London, with the title, *Rough Crossing*. The publication of Stoppard's play declares that it is *freely adapted from Ferenc Molnár's Play at the Castle*.<sup>13</sup>

Unlike *The Tragedy of Man* which is often considered as a book drama, written by someone with strong poetic and philosophical expression but with no theatrical practice, Molnár belongs to those great dramatists who had first-hand practical experience of the theatre, writing for actors and directing their own plays. The comparison is not of the value but of the nature when I refer to the practice of Shakespeare, Molière or Brecht. Molnár could set up a dramatic situation with funny effect from almost anything. It is said, though not proven, that in *The Play's the Thing* he had made a bet that every time the word "lemon" was to be mentioned, the audience would laugh. The play which in Hungarian is subtitled as "an anecdote", according to Molnár originated from a real life episode. This is what he wrote about it, *My wife* [Lili Darvas] *and I were stopping at the Hotel Imperial in Vienna. She was then learning German. All day long she had to recite classical German plays. One afternoon an intimate friend called on me, and as we were chatting amiably, he suddenly jumped up. He had heard Lili's voice in her room saying in fluent German, "I love you, I love you! I shall die of love for you!" Both of us went to the door and, upon opening it, found Lili reciting declarations of love to her tu-*

<sup>13</sup> T. Stoppard, *Rough Crossing. Freely Adapted from Ferenc Molnar's Play at the Castle*, New York 1988.

tor, Dr. Hock, the German director. Utterly harmless, yet how disturbing it sounded! That's how I got the idea, but you can just as well say that I got it from Hamlet.<sup>14</sup>

From such a real life situation which is not ordinary, he could create a dramatic potential brilliantly orchestrated for the stage.

This technical-dramaturgical talent is very similar to those dramatists who have been the major representatives of the well-made play. Therefore, regarding Molnár's dramatic oeuvre as a representative of Hungarian culture involves a similar paradox as Madách's mankind dramatic poem. Although the local colour element in Molnár's plays is often Budapest, the dramatic view and the dominance of private life issues, the topic of cheating, adultery, jealousy etc. make these works easily acceptable and adaptable for the international stage. Unlike Madách who wrote in *The Tragedy of Man* about issues of mankind, Molnár focused on everyday bourgeois life in a major European city. There is no history, therefore no national history in his plays. But because of these contemporary private life issues of the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century his plays could become a popular and easily understandable product of Hungarian theatre, culture of the time.

#### d) A representative of the Central European region

It is not a surprise that from the first decades of post-World War II period, there are no plays translated into English. After the war, Hungary fell under the influence of the Soviet Union. The first decade of show trials, personality cult, harsh totalitarian dictatorship led to the revolution in 1956. After the Communist party doctrine of "socialist realism" in the arts, which produced no works worth mentioning, from the early 1960s there were some changes in politics and culture in Hungary. This new period had two representative genres, theatre and film. Despite authoritarian political control and censorship these arts became aesthetically the most significant forms. The first genre to re-emerge with a brand new voice after the style of "socialist realism" was drama. Representing this new grotesque, ironic, absurdist point of view had been István Örkény (1912-1979).

For taking part in the 1956 revolution by his writings, Örkény was not allowed to publish until 1963. During the years of his suppression, he started to develop a new style, a new tone, a grotesque-ironic way of expression which characterized his last creative period. He also created a new genre, the "one-minute stories".<sup>15</sup> The dominant genre of his last twelve years was drama, he wrote seven plays during this period.

His first grotesque play, *The Tot Family* (1967), opened a new period in Hungarian drama. His other major plays are *Catsplay* (1969), *Stevie in the Bloodbath* (1969/79), *Blood Relatives* (1974), *Keysearchers* (1975), and *Scenario* (1979). All of them have been produced in the United Kingdom and/or in the United States in the 1970s and 80s, and some have become a repertoire piece. In the number of his foreign produc-

<sup>14</sup> F. Molnár, *The Play's the Thing*, transl. by P. G. Wodehouse, Budapest 1991, p. 13.

<sup>15</sup> I. Örkény, *One Minute Stories*, transl. by J. Sollosy, Budapest 1995.



tions he is next to Ferenc Molnár. Örkény has been the representative of the Central European variant of the absurd or grotesque, the master of black humour. He was indebted to the theatre of the absurd, especially to Beckett, Ionesco and Dürrenmatt, but he had more in common with the Central European absurd or grotesque drama, like Sławomir Mrożek and Václav Havel. But the strongest influence had come from Franz Kafka, Örkény's acknowledged inspiration.

His biggest stage success has been a play about the love triangle of old people, with no direct reference to the political system. *Catsplay* depicts two sisters, one living in wealth in West Germany on a wheelchair, the other in Budapest in everyday frustrations, but with a full emotional life. The latter one, Mrs. Orban calls and writes to her sister, Giza, to tell her how she had been betrayed by her lover, Victor, a retired opera singer; and her best friend, Paula. The following scene is the episode when Mrs. Orban has caught the lovers in the act, and she tells it to Giza.

*When I saw the food arranged just the way I had described it to her, I went mad. I picked up the plate of noodles and poured the whole thing over Paula's head. The effect was very dramatic – she let out one long shriek and ran slipping and sliding out the back way on a trail of wet noodles. That was the last time I've had the pleasure of her company. You know me, Giza, as soon as I let off a little steam, I calm down. In the moments that followed I behaved perfectly – even you would have been proud of me. Besides, I was at a distinct advantage. Victor couldn't get up. He has a habit of kicking off his shoes when he eats. He seemed to have kicked them out of reach and was too ashamed to be seen in his socks. So he was groping around, trying to find them with his feet, but couldn't. It was then I said – very calm and stately: "I am sorry Mrs. Krausz cannot be with us. As for you, sir, our relationship is now at an end." I wish you could have seen him then, Giza, flustered, panting, telling me I misunderstood the whole situation, begging me to hear him out. "I feel sorry for you, sir," I told him, "but please, I never want to lay eyes on you again." Then he said he couldn't live without me. It was nice to hear, of course, but I didn't weaken. I remember that I folded the curtain very carefully and returned it to the dentist with apologies. And then I left – with my head held high.<sup>16</sup>*

Mrs. Orbán's disappointment pushes her to a suicide attempt, she takes a handful of drugs, but when she awakes from her long sleep, she realizes that Giza has arrived to her from Germany. The play ends with a funny game where its title comes from, cat's play, the women meowing at each other.

Örkény was part of the emergence of Central European grotesque and absurd, including literature and film. His plays were received by the Western culture as a representative of the Central European region's absurdist literature, along with Mrożek and Havel. When the creator of the term "theatre of the absurd", Martin Esslin gave a list in 1969 of the dramatists of this kind of drama of the area he wrote, *absurdist playwright: Mrożek, Różewicz, Brożkiewicz, Grochowiak, Herbert in Poland; Havel, Smoček, Klíma, Uhde, Karvaš in Czechoslovakia; Örkény in Hungary*.<sup>17</sup> Therefore it can be declared that Örkény has been considered not only as a Hungarian dramatist, but

<sup>16</sup> Idem, *Catsplay. A Tragi-comedy in Two Acts*, transl. by C. Györgyey, New York 1976, pp. 58-59.

<sup>17</sup> M. Esslin, 'Eastern Absurdist: Sławomir Mrożek', *Drama at Calgary*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (1969), p. 13.



as a member and a representative of the Central European absurd drama of the period as well.<sup>18</sup> This means that he has been identified not just as a Hungarian author but as a writer from the Central European region who happened to be Hungarian.

There is one further aspect regarding his representativeness though. In the first major part of this essay I referred to the Balkans as an area from which every nation tries to distance itself. When Mrożek, Havel, and Örkény had been celebrated as representatives of the theatre of the absurd, they were located within Eastern Europe. Martin Esslin's paper uses the term "Eastern" as well. During the period between the two superpowers, the world was divided between the East and West, the Soviet Union and its (forced) allies, and the United States and its allies. There was an "iron curtain" in the middle of Europe, politically, and mentally, which saw one side as a homogeneous Eastern bloc, from East Germany to Bulgaria. But the bloc was not homogeneous inside, and historically and ideologically the Central European identity had not disappeared. Middle Europe or *Mitteleuropa* was a culturally valid category between the two World Wars. Therefore it was very easy to get back to this identity in 1989-90 when the political system changed in the region and the new democratic states were formed. The concept and identity of Central Europe was shadowed and oppressed during the decades of socialism when the whole region was called Eastern Europe, but it did not disappear. When in the late 1960s a significant group of playwrights entered the stage they were seen as members of a cultural community, which in those times was combined with a political community as well, i.e. critics of the communist regime. Örkény was one of them, to such an extent a – then Eastern, later – Central European, as much as a Hungarian.

#### e) The decades of anthologies and delegated dramas

The period of Hungarian drama represented the best in English translation with the highest variety of plays is from the 1970s onwards. In four anthologies (all published in the 1990s) fifteen translations have been published. The majority of the dramatists represented in these books were born after World War II. These anthologies include the following dramas (in the chronology of the plays), Géza Páskándi (1933-1995) *Sojourn or unus est Deus?* (1968); István Csurka (1934-2012) *Cheese Dumplings* (1974); András Sütő (1927-2006) *The Palm Sunday of a Horse Dealer* (1975); Gábor Czákó (b. 1942) *Pigs* (1964/1978), István Örkény *Stevie in the Bloodbath* (1969/1979); Géza Bereményi (b. 1946) *Halmi* (1979); Mihály Kornis (b. 1949) *Kozma* (1982) – two translations; György Spiró (b. 1946) *The Impostor* (1982) – two translations, *Chicken-Head* (1985); Ákos Németh (b. 1964) *Müller's Dancers* (1988); András Nagy (b. 1956) *The Seducer's Diary* (1992); Andor Szilágyi (b. 1955) *Unsent Letters* (1993); Péter Kárpáti (b. 1961) *Everywoman* (1993).<sup>19</sup> Besides, four separate volumes were published in 2004 as part

<sup>18</sup> P. P. Müller, *Central European Playwrights within and without the Absurd: Václav Havel, Slawomir Mrożek, and István Örkény*, Pécs 1996.

<sup>19</sup> The drama anthologies mentioned are these, E. Brogyányi (ed. and introduction), *New Hungarian Drama. Plays*, Budapest 1991; A. Tezla (selection and ed.), *Three Contemporary Hungarian Plays*, Budapest 1992; C. Györgyey (ed. and transl.), *A Mirror to the Cage. Three Contemporary Hungarian*

of the “Magyar Magic” in the United Kingdom. These plays are – listed in chronological order –, Zoltán Egressy (b. 1967) *Portugal* (1997), János Háty (b. 1960) *The Stonewatcher* (2000), Ákos Németh *Car Thieves* (2002), and Péter Kárpáti *The Fourth Gate* (2002).

While the plays of Sütő, Páskándi and Csurka deal with the issues of power and the oppression of the individual, the generation of Bereményi, Spiró and Kornis focuses on the experience of absence. For the regime of János Kádár, the central taboo had been its own origin, namely the events of the 1956 revolution and its retaliation. Members of the generation, who were children in the 1950s, have grown up in a vacuum, without an awareness of their own past. Their fathers kept silent about their individual and the collective past, which gives the major motive of the plays written by the generation of absence in the 1970s and 1980s. Their plays can be described by the missing father, as in *Halmi*, *Chicken-Head*, *Encounter* (1979) by Péter Nádas (b. 1942), *Alleluia* (1979) by Kornis. The missing elements include the missing hero, the missing plot, the absence of human contact, the absence of self-identity etc. The attempt of this generation to dramatize the unspoken led to innovative dramatic techniques.

György Spiró, the doyen of contemporary Hungarian drama, is the only dramatist of the generation of absence who has been continuously present on the Hungarian stage. His biggest successes so far have been *Chicken-Head* and *The Impostor*, both translated into English. *Chicken-Head* is a naturalistic tragedy about the social and economic disaster of the 1980s told through a story of adolescent crime and social impotence. Similarly to Edward Bond's *Saved* and its descendants, the play depicts the life of the lower classes in a public yard of a house to be destroyed. *The Impostor* takes its subject matter from an episode of Spiró's most successful work, his novel, *The X's* (1981). The hero of the play is Wojciech Bogusławski, the greatest figure of Polish theatre in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The action takes place in the Polish theatre of Vilnius in Lithuania where the famous actor is expected for a night of guest performance. Bogusławski suggests Molière's *Tartuffe* to be performed with him in the title role. Because of the guest's suggestion the secret police arrests the actor, Rybak playing the messenger of the king. Thus, the last scene of *Tartuffe* is excluded, the royal pardon does not arrive, and the play ends with a ridicule of the Russian Czar. When the investigation starts, Bogusławski is on his way to create new legends. The last scene of the play refers to this.

STAGEHAND: *Listen, Rybak... It was that Maestro's doing... And you know why? Because he's got it all buttoned up. He's got men among the Czar's people, and the officers. Even the Czar's closest circle friends, believe me. I know...*

PROPERTY MAN: *It's Bogusławski's way. He shows up, works a miracle, then buggers off. That's his method.*

STAGEHAND: *Because he's got men in all the right places. Men he can count on. Here, too, he had us figured out...*<sup>20</sup>

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*Plays*, Fayetteville 1993; L. Upor (selection and introduction), *Hungarian Plays. New Drama from Hungary*, London 1996, *The International Collection*.

<sup>20</sup> G. Spiró, 'The Impostor', transl. by J. Sollosy, in A. Tezla (selection and ed.), *Three...*, p. 237.

From the younger generations after the generation of absence András Nagy, Andor Szilágyi, Ákos Németh and Péter Kárpáti each have a play in English translation in the anthology *Hungarian Plays. New Drama from Hungary* (1996). They started to write plays after the mid-1980s. The most talented of this generation is Péter Kárpáti, who exclusively writes plays. His recent major works are, *Everywoman* (1993), available in English, *Orb* (1995), *All-wave Receiver* (1997), *Tötferi* (2000), *The Fourth Gate* (2002), available in English. Since the early nineties, Kárpáti has created a unique drama technique, and developed a unique language. Although his plays at first glance seem to be naturalistic, their language is characterized by visual and emotional richness, and poetic strength, similar to the Irish J. M. Synge's dramatic *oeuvre*. The documentary feature turns into symbolic and philosophical. As far as technique is concerned, he uses several different fragments, fractions, mosaic elements. In his recent plays, Kárpáti has developed a style what makes him the Béla Bartók of Hungarian drama. He gathers different dialects, mixes mass media with authentic folklore, synthesizes cultural elements of several social groups, minorities of Hungary and the Carpathian Basin. This mixture of cultures does not erase the differences and distance. On the contrary, these heterogeneous elements reserve their independence. His characteristic method is to counter-point different media, e.g. gypsy rural life with a pop star's world (*All-wave Receiver*), folktales with post-modern anachronisms (*Orb*, *Tötferi*).

*Everywoman* is the medieval *Everyman* set in Budapest in the 1990s. Kárpáti transforms the allegorical figures of the morality play into ordinary, trivial characters of today who give the social environment of Emma, the heroine. By this he draws the relational network of an individual thrown into the alienated life of a (post)modern city. Emma, who suffers from cancer, has to face the account of her life. Taking a woman as the central character, Kárpáti includes the motives of fertility and productivity, pregnancy and womb cancer. At the very end of the play, while preparing herself to lay on her deathbed, Emma speaks to her relatives and acquaintances, *I don't understand. Why do you all look so anxious? I've settled everything, haven't I? There's nothing left to worry about... [...] Mother... what's the matter? Sorry? Are you angry with me for something? [...] You said, you didn't need chicken, or turkey, or salami, that you have your poker and pulses... and now, she's angry! Mother! What's the matter? Look, I've settled everything, don't annoy me, O.K... Look, I've had a hard day, and now I'm tired.*<sup>21</sup>

Three of the four plays published in 2004 take place in contemporary Hungary.<sup>22</sup> Kárpáti's drama, subtitled "A Klezmer piece" is the exception, as it is based on traditional Hassidic stories, focusing on a small Ukrainian Jewish community. Among the three plays with a contemporary theme, *Car Thieves* takes place in the semi-underworld of

<sup>21</sup> P. Kárpáti, 'Everywoman', transl. by J. Bradley, in L. Upor (selection and introduction), *Hungarian Plays...*, p. 242.

<sup>22</sup> The four plays were published by Oberon Books and sold both separately and as a boxed set. Z. Egressy, *Portugal*, transl. by R. Craig, London 2004, *Channels (Hungary)*; J. Házy, *The Stonewatcher*, transl. by P. Porter, London 2004, *Channels (Hungary)*; P. Kárpáti, *The Fourth Gate*, transl. by D. Kelly, London 2004, *Channels (Hungary)*; Á. Németh, *Car Thieves*, transl. by Ch. Walker, London 2004, *Channels (Hungary)*.

Budapest, where a group of youngsters involved in petty crimes meet a big-time criminal. *Portugal* is about an intellectual who escapes from his secure life in Budapest with the plan to travel to Portugal. We see him in a village where he stops and starts to flirt with the innkeeper's daughter. But his wife shows up, takes him back to the capital, the village becomes the same dull and poor place as it was before. *The Stonewatcher* (the original Hungarian title means, *Géza the Kid*) is about an autistic boy in his mid-20s who lives with his mother in a small village. Workers get him a job in the nearby stone-mine, where Géza has to watch to avoid accidents. After a while, he finds the job useless and meaningless. He is tricked by the workers who make a fake accident for him, but when he realizes what happened, he gives up the job, and continues the same boring life at home where he had started from.

Most of these plays from the 1990s and the 2000s express the disillusionment of the millennium years, when after a decade of democracy and capitalism, many people experienced the dark side of the new world, not the dreams and promises. As these experiences are new only for those countries where for four-five decades the socialism determined the life of the society, this disillusionment cannot have the same influence in those democracies – many of them belong to the English speaking world – where democracy has a centuries old history. The plays of the 1970s and 80s reported about the experiences, feelings and mood of the Kádár regime, those recent plays of the past two decades depict the experiences of the new capitalist era. A part of the plays was selected as representative by Hungarian publishing houses, therefore they can be seen as “delegated” examples, while others were selected by foreign experts and institutions. We do not see such an outstanding play or dramatist as in the case of Madách or Molnár, but we see a greater variety with a smaller presence and influence. This is not something to regret, this is the present situation of Hungarian drama in the English speaking world.

#### **f) Summary: the many and the few, significance and trivia**

I started with the general issue of paradoxes in the mediation of culture for foreigners and arrived at certain literary works, dramatic pieces as representatives of Hungarian culture. In the above examples, we can see two major trends in cultural representation and mediation. In the case of the well-received, canonized plays and playwrights the dominant side is the international interest and selection. In the case of the latter examples, the anthologies, one can see the intention and effort to mediate (contemporary) Hungarian drama to the international market. This effort can be seen both in the way of selection and how these works are presented and interpreted in the forewords and introductions of these anthologies. These anthologies and plays published in English in the past two decades represent the approach of delegation, as if it were the practical and effective way to push national works into the international canon. In the background of this view lies the conviction that, what is important for us, what Hungarian cultural history, literary history considers the core of the canon should be accepted by the rest of the world as well. But it is obvious that there are different views, aspects and concepts which determine the ranking of works in the context of international culture and world

literature. These concepts are changing and there is no key to control them. When the original works are changed for a foreign reception, i.e. an adaptation is made from the original one then something similar happens to what Rabindranáth Tagore had made with his own poetry, adapting them for the English language, culture, and taste, and by adapting, changing them at the same time. There is always a loss when a work is mediated to and received within another culture, a loss which can be called misunderstanding as well. But it is not something to think of as a problem, it is the inevitable feature of the process.

The dramatic canon in the (English speaking) world acknowledges two Hungarian dramatists, Imre Madách and Ferenc Molnár, the major work of the first, and the dramatic oeuvre of the second. This can be related to two features of their works. On the one hand, they lack national topics. On the other hand, already at their first appearance, these works could have been related to well-known international samples, the work of Madách to great philosophical dramatic poems, the plays of Molnár to the popular genre of the well-made play. Therefore, we can say that Hungary has a dramatist in the aristocratic register (Madách), and another one in the popular register (Molnár). What Hungarians can do regarding this situation is to acknowledge it, but it is not possible to create a change in it, as it does not belong to the national competence and power to make direct modification in the international image and canon of Hungarian culture. This is not a national competence, but an international one.

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