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Review Article: The Wedding Gown Writes Back.

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Abstract: In Central Europe nowadays universities, research institutes or museums are attempting to reconfigure the region's complex history from the perspectives of formerly forgotten or marginal/ized individuals and groups. Besides initiatives such as the opening of the Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw, or of the Center for Queer Memory in Prague, new studies and literary works presently (re-)create narratives that challenge the generally accepted past. Two recently published Hungarian books, a novel and a study that partly deals with the novel, exemplify this revisionist tendency. Ildikó Lovas' novel, *Spanyol Menyasszony* ['The Spanish Bride'] (2007), which questions the cult of Géza Csáth (1887-1919), the writer and psychoanalyst who was also a drug addict that murdered his wife, renders the fictional diary of Csáth's wife and victim, Olga Jónás (1884-1919); Anna Borgos' study, *Nemek között: Nőtörténet, szexualitástörténet* ['Between the Sexes: Women's History, Sexuality History'] (2013), examines the Csáth affair within an inclusive analysis of women's positions, roles and sexuality in the Hungarian culture of the last century. In this article Chmurski traces the ways in which both authors reread the lives and tragic marriage of Csáth and Jónás.

Keywords: *Hungarian literature, Women's writing, women's studies, gender studies, Vojvodina, Géza Csáth, Olga Jónás*

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The two books discussed here, one by Ildikó Lovas, a Hungarian writer in today's Serb Vojvodina (once Hungarian Vajdaság), and the other by Anna Borgos, a Budapest psychologist and researcher, revisit nineteenth and twentieth century Hungarian history attempting to reclaim women's place in the canonical narratives of the Hungarian national past. Lovas was born in Subotica/Szabadka, the birthplace of writer Géza Csáth and his poet cousin Dezső Kosztolányi. Lovas studied Hungarian language and culture in Novi Sad/Újvidék, the capital city of the Vojvodina region, where she later worked as a journalist for the local television station as well as for the most important Hungarian-language newspaper outside Hungary, *Magyar Szó* ('Hungarian Word'). Since 1987, she has published a dozen books and many articles in important literary journals in Vojvodina (e.g.: *Üzenet*, *Új Symposion* and *Ex Symposion*) and in Hungary (*Jelenkor*, *Műhely* and others). In 1998 she was awarded the Zsigmond Móricz Prize for promising young writers. Anna Borgos studied Gender Studies at the Central European University, CEU, in Budapest and obtained her Ph.D. in psychology from Pécs University. She currently works at the Magyar Tudományos Akadémia, MTA (Hungarian Academy of Sciences) Faculty of Psychology and publishes in numerous academic journals, including *Thalassa* and *Journal of Lesbian Studies*. Borgos has participated in and edited numerous volumes dealing with neglected and marginal/ized characters from the past (see especially the volume by Borgos and Szilágyi 2011).

In their respective volumes, *Spanyol menyasszony* ('The Spanish Bride') and *Nemek között: Nőtörténet, szexualitástörténet* ('Between the Sexes: Women's History, Sexuality History') both Lovas and Borgos feature and discuss women's perspectives on past events from a feminist or gender-sensitive point of view, thus calling for an equal or at least a more balanced treatment of men's and women's voices recalling the past. Even though their texts were written in entirely different genres, fiction as opposed to academic study, their shared goal is to complete or rather rewrite Hungarian history/his-story with (at least) two her-story chapters. More specifically, both authors rewrite the (hi)story of Olga Jónás (1884-1919), wife of Géza Csáth (pen name of József Brenner, 1887-1919), a writer, psychoanalyst and morphine-addict. Although Csáth killed Jónás, the tragic story of this couple was for decades dominated by his narrative and point of view, whereas hers remained silenced. Because each of the two books deals with many issues and questions, in this review I chose to focus mainly on the two works' treatment of the story of the Jónás-Csáth couple in order to showcase the similar as well as the differing aims and points of view of the two authors.

Lovas' fictional work features two parallel story lines evolving in Vojvodina in two different time periods: one is Olga Jónás' fictional diary-like narrative about the last years of her life with Csáth, which Lovas at times weaves together with authentic entries from Csáth's own actual diaries. The other story line is a contemporary heroine's coming-of-age memories of the formerly Yugoslavian and communist Vojvodina as well as of the dismantlement of federative Yugoslavia in the early 1990s, with this girl's experiences greatly resembling author Lovas' own professional life, e.g., her work at the regional television station. Borgos, in turn, compares Lovas' fictional diary of Olga Jónás to contemporary scholarly analyses of the couple's life and its tragic end (Dévavári 2000, Kelecsényi 2009, Szajbély 1989, 2004), through which three distinct perspectives on women's lives in Vojvodina emerge. The first of these belongs to the character Olga Jónás, who "narrates" her life and the drama of a woman who "married the

country's most genial doctor but [who] live[s] with a piece of shit" [*az ország legzseniálisabb férfiához mentem feleségül, és egy szarcsimbókkal élek együtt*] (234, all translations are mine, M.Ch.). The second voice belongs to Ildikó Lovas, the writer who through her masterful prose has a semi-autobiographical character tell her own parallel story and who thus draws an analogy between women's emancipation in communist Yugoslavia and their condition in the same region in the first decades of the twentieth century. The third is the voice of Anna Borgos, a contemporary scholar who embraces these two her-stories and confronts them with dominant history accounts, including Csáth's persistent cult in contemporary Vojvodina and Hungary.

Lovas' double plot attempts to reconstruct the past of a single place at two different moments. Born in Szabadka (as opposed to Olga Jónás who was born in Budapest in an assimilated Jewish family), Lovas partly narrates her own search of identity as confronted and inspired by the tragic fate of her predecessor narrator who lived in the same area. Accordingly, the chapters in Lovas' book move between two story lines, one ironic and distanced in its depiction of the author's professional and personal successes and failures, affairs with men, marriage and divorce that lead to her final emancipation. This is the story of a young woman's encounters, teenage dreams and fascination with popular culture (from Diana Ross to Sarah Kay and the Queen band) in communist Vojvodina. The second story line depicts Olga Jónás' last years with Csáth and their little daughter, Olga, in the small Vojvodina village of Regőce, where Csáth worked as a doctor during and immediately after the First World War. Lovas' title, alluding to a Spanish dress, encapsulates the struggle of both heroines: the Spanish wedding gown about which the earlier one dreams is to be understood as a symbol of the social roles and claims imposed on and determining women's bodies and choices in the later woman's narrative. Jónás' narrative depicts her love life and disillusionments -- which are confirmed by her husband's diary -- as well as her gradual awakening of ever-more conscious desires simultaneously with a growing realization that her marriage with Csáth has become like a life in prison.

In Lovas' interpretation, Jónás eventually understands that her marital relationship, as dictated and monitored by the period's socio-cultural context, is destroying her; she even discovers the revolver with which Csáth is going to kill her but still remains unable to free herself and flee, right to her anticipated tragic end. Lovas highlights the asymmetry of the couple's marital relations in very suggestive scenes; for example, Csáth forbids Jónás to cross a chalk line he drew in their house and he forces her to take so-called disinfectant baths of pink-purple water-dissolved permanganate of potash. The stories of both women narrators, Olga and Ildikó, are laced with recurring refrain-like sentences such as the above-quoted confession about living with a genius turned into a "piece of shit," or the one in which each one of them discovers or reveals that: "I think that, essentially, I'm still a virgin" [*Én, azt hiszem, lényegileg még szűz vagyok*] (9).

We have to bear in mind that it is due to historical circumstances -- from the Trianon Treaty to the dismantlement of Yugoslavia -- that figures of writers and poets such as Csáth and Kosztolányi have remained cultural heroes for the local Hungarian-speaking community. The statues of these figures decorate cities such as Subotica/Szabadka, their works are commemorated and often quoted, yet the role of their life companions is dismissed or forgotten. In the case of Kosztolányi, his wife Ilona Harnos' 2003 well-known memoirs complete, at least

partially, the story of their shared life, but in Csáth's case we lack this kind of an autobiographical her-story counter-narrative (see Borgos' account of Harmos' memoirs in Borgos and Szilágyi 2011). Olga Jónás' life remains obscured by the myth of her husband as retold in books, academic publications and conferences in Subotica/Szabadka and elsewhere. Furthermore, it is never Jónás' testimony about the couple's last days, but Kosztolányi's account about Csáth's death, that is quoted by every writer and scholar dealing with the writer's life and family. This state of things may have motivated Lovas to propose a far more ambitious project than to simply oppose Csáth's cult by Jónás' invented diary; for this purpose she integrates in her book entries from Csáth's diaries and letters illustrating what it could have been like to live within this couple's relationship, or prison house, as Jónás experienced it.

Lovas' attempt to reconcile fact and fiction in her work could be compared to Péter Esterházy's *Revised Edition* (2002), which is based upon and quotes secret police documents about the activities of the writer's father, Mátyás Esterházy; in both cases a supplementary, more autobiographical (Esterházy) or less autobiographical (Lovas) narrative superimposes itself upon historical facts. If Esterházy confronts fragments of secret police documents on his father's life with three successive diary excerpts in his father's fictional portrait as depicted in Esterházy's earlier *Harmonia Caelestis* (2000, English translation 2004), then Lovas inserts quotations from and allusions to Csáth's writings in Jónás' imaginary memories and even merges the two kinds of texts within her own more personal 1980s narrative (see Csáth's diary in English translation, Csáth 2000). Thus both authors use postmodern strategies in order to reconsider the past by recovering its different voices, be they as fragmentary and contradictory as can be, all for the sake of letting the truth of the time and its people emerge from in-between and underneath the lines.

In addition to Lovas' thematic treatment of her subject matter, she masterfully duplicates the styles, genres and atmosphere of the times she writes about, from realistic autobiography to romantic-ironic love story and from melancholic confession to inter-textual script-like play. These inventions include not only direct quotes of Csáth's writings but also their possible echoes and reverberations, such as a naturalistic scene of chicken killing that carries the feminist message that even though men like to write about animal slaughter, it is women who know what to do with the killed animal, meaning how to cook it. Thus Lovas mocks Csáth's short story *A Tor* ['Pig slaughter'], which aims to create an analogy between pig slaughter and the (probably forced) loss of virginity. One could also quote, for example, some scenes by the Palics Lake, where Csáth and Kosztolányi used to iceskate. In the contemporary part of her novel, Lovas' style becomes self-ironic, as in the following chain of questions: "Is it possible to fall in love with a bald boy? With whom is it easier to fall in love: a bald boy or an athlete?" [*Lehet-e kopasz férfiba beleszeretni? Kibe könnyebb beleszeretni: kopasz férfiba vagy egy sportolóba?*] (30). All these styles and modes serve the same goal of sounding and thus liberating forgotten, dismissed or marginalized women.

Anna Borgos' study, *Nemek között*, is divided into three parts. In the first part, entitled "Symptoms and Stories" ('Tünetek és történetek'), she combines gender and literary studies with psychoanalytic theory in her analyses of works of women writers of the early twentieth century, like Gertrude Stein or Sophie Török, as well as the much less known Alice Jászi Madzsarné. Borgos examines the autobiographical portraits of these authors and their fictional depictions of

their heroines by posing questions about the ways in which these women spoke about themselves, meaning their body, soul, and psyche. She also discusses how medical discourse, including psychiatry and psychoanalysis of the early and mid-twentieth century, dealt with women's sexuality or hysteria, which was a recurrent diagnosis of women's mental states. In this part of the book Borgos discusses in detail the figure and diary of the practically unknown Júlia Kovács, the wife of novelist, playwright and critic Lajos Hatvany (1880-1961), as well as the figure of Olga Jónás, whom Borgos approaches with the aid of historical documents, scholarly studies and Ildikó Lovas' novel about Jónás. In this context, Borgos lists possible parallels to Lovas' project, meaning women's literary works that rewrite well-known his-story narratives, like Margaret's Atwood *Penelopiad* (2005) or Carole Ann Duffy's *The World's Wife* (1999), which depict, respectively, the myth of Odysseus from the point of view of his wife, Penelope, and a collection of characters, stories, histories and myths originally focusing on men (see, e.g., poems such as "Mrs. Sisyphus," "Mrs. Faust," or "Frau Freud").

The articles in Borgos' book are evidently inspired by the work of Foucault, as she studies mental state/health and its behavioral expression within the given social order, and more specifically for the Csáth-Jónás case, mental-behavioral normalcy and its borders. Her book as a whole deals with a number of female figures, writers and artists (Sarolta/Sándor Vay, Anna Lesznai, etc.) from that same period who broke various sexual and gender role taboos, most outrageously perhaps Vay (on whom see Borgos' earlier article "Sándor/Sarolta Vay, a Gender-Bender in Fin-de-Siècle Hungary" in Vásvari and Tötösy 2011).

In the works of both Borgos and Lovas the case of Olga Jónás captures a significant place, with both authors discussing various texts about Csáth and Jónás and exploring Vojvodina as the stage of the couple's tragic relationship, and both allow Jónás' voice and focus to counter-balance those of Csáth. In both volumes, Jónás' diary-like narrative enables the authors to question women's social roles, as manifested throughout Lovas' work by her recurring allusion to a central metaphor of women's clothing. With the freedom provided by fictional works, it is Lovas in particular who expresses critical views about her subject matter. In the novel, following her marriage ceremony, Jónás criticizes the norm of her time for married women to be named by the full name of their husbands suffixed with *né*, meaning 'Mrs.': "I always longed for this moment, sure of the fact that I am a nice girl and thus my life will be in order, but now it seems it's all over: I don't even have a name" [*Mindig erre a pillanatra vágytam, annak bizonyítékára, hogy rendes lány vagyok és rendes életem lesz, de most úgy tűnik, vége mindennek: már nevem sincs*] (212) (on the 'disappearance' of married women's own names through Hungarian naming conventions, see Vasvári 2015: 203-235). Jónás' search for her lost or obliterated name continues when she searches for her name in Csáth's diary: "I'm looking for my name, for its first letter, O, as if it was a sigh, a yawn, while the pain itself moves into your head" [*...a nevem keresem, a kezdbetűjét, O. mintha valami sóhajtás volna, ásítás, miközben maga a kín, ami beköltözik az ember fejébe*] (155). This and other recurring scenes of Jónás' readings in Csáth's diary become forceful metaphors of Lovas' own project: to re-read, rewrite, complete and correct the dominant narrative on this couple's story. In other words, if women's presence in Csáth's personal narrative, and by extension in the dominating social discourse of the time, remains but "a sigh, a yawn," an initial or a suffix, then all further or other forms of the silencing of women would

result in always assigning black letters to men and empty white paper to women, which is just the reality that Lovas challenges.

Both Lovas and Borgos quote from Csáth's diaries and thus expose his sadistic, contemptuous attitude toward women in general and toward his wife Olga in particular, as e.g., in the advice he gives his brother: "Do not ever occupy yourself with one woman, be constantly in a relationship with at least two women. Never get married!" [*Soha csak egy nővel ne foglalkozz. Legalább 2 nővel állj állandóan viszonyban. Ne házasodj!*] (241). Borgos, in addition, shows that the "deep asymmetry, double morality" [*mélyiséges aszimmetriája, kettős moralja*] in this couple's life as described by Lovas is confirmed by external documents and testimonies about the couple (112). To illustrate this asymmetry, Borgos uncovers Csáth's notorious escapades with many women, as detailed in his diaries and indirectly alluded to in his short stories, which she contrasts with Jónás' girlish fascination with the couple's blacksmith neighbor in Regőce, or with Jónás' wish to flee with her companion Veron, a character added to the Csáth-Jónás story by Lovas' rendering.

Relating to Csáth's psychological abuse and desire of total control over Jónás, Borgos quotes letters sent during 1912 to and from the Stubnyafürdő baths (today's Turčianske Teplice in Slovakia) and the Csáths' home, in which Csáth instructs Jónás to write down and send him lists of her daily activities, including those planned for the coming days (114). Despite this imbalanced state of things between the two, Borgos, like Lovas, ascribes to Jónás greater strength and mental stability than to her drug-addict husband (87, 236). Unlike Csáth, who minutely recorded in his diaries his morphine consumption, weight, instances of sexual intercourse, afternoon catnaps and readings (see Chmurski 2013), Jónás in real life, as opposed to her depiction by Lovas, did not need to write a diary like her husband, first because she did not engage in adventurous and disastrous deeds like he did, and second because she simply accepted her life as it was; she experienced and responded to her life's events, colors and images with no need to account for or classify them.

The two works, Ildikó Lovas' novel and Anna Borgos' study, together complete the project of a critical revision of the Csáth myth initiated a few years ago by a number of biographical studies (Varga Z. 2014) and that of analyzing Csáth's prose from feminist and critical perspectives (Németh 2001). Overall, Borgos' research concords with critical discourse-analysis explorations of the ways in which modern psychological, psychoanalytical and psychiatric discourse constructs mental health and illness boundaries, which is a widely discussed topic since Foucault (Didi-Huberman 2003, Schuster 2010). The two authors are part of the trend of questioning canonical visions of the past developing not only in Hungary but all over Central and Eastern Europe as elsewhere (see Filipiak 2006, Tomasiuk 2014, Helbig-Mischewski 2010). But even in Hungary alone, one can quote quite a few publications of contribution to the project of unearthing women's experiences and views, in which Borgos often takes part (e.g., Bakó and Tóth 2008, Varga and Zsávolya 2009, Takács 2011, Borgos and Szilágyi 2011). In the context of contemporary changes in historical and fictional writing, the merit of the works of Lovas and Borgos and other such projects lies in their questioning of and adding to canonical perspectives on the past experiences and voices of forgotten or marginalized women, as well as in their establishing an alternative, complementary genealogy of their own contemporary position as meritorious women with a view of their own.

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