

**Anna Borgos.2007. „Portrék a Másikról – Alkotónők és alkotótársak a múlt századelőn” [Portraits of the Other. Women Creative Artists and Creative Partners in the Last Century]. Budapest: Noran.**

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The title of Anna Borgos’s monograph is articulate and unambiguous, and yet it creates the impression as if the intention to make it as articulate and unambiguous as possible were a cover-up for an element of ambiguity in need of some circumscription, the disambiguation of which, however, met with some invisible obstacle. Starting from the end, we have the definition of the period: *múlt századelő*, more or less translated into English as the beginning of the *past* or *previous* century, a period to which, up until just a few years ago, one had simply referred as the beginning of *the* century. Whereas the referent of the phrase is still the same, our changed temporal relation to it has destabilised the concept ‘századelő’, which had been valid for about a century and which in Hungarian has special connotations because the compound word uses a phrase ‘elő’ that, being no longer an active noun in itself, has a connotation radiating a slightly nostalgic longing for a bygone era. However, in spite of its ending in a slightly outdated noun form (‘elő’) the phrase paradoxically indicates an inevitable connection to subsequent eras because of its ambiguous denotation, meaning both the beginning of the period and how this beginning also serves as a precursor for whatever comes later, indicating how integral a part this past period serves for our sense of contemporaneity. The phrase ‘századelő’, at the same time – as opposed to *századforduló* ‘turn of the century’, which can designate a period every one hundred years – gained an idiosyncretic meaning, specifically designating the beginning of the *twentieth* century only, with the entailed complexity of its sociocultural implications. The turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries brought about radical sociocultural changes among others also from the perspective of the role of women and the concept of femininity. The beginning of the century offered a variety of options for women inconceivable before, and prepared tendencies – which serve partly as the topic of Anna Borgos’s monograph – that to some extent continued to be present in our cultural history all through the twentieth century, and to the present.

Perhaps this is the very ambivalence that the expression ‘the past beginning-of-century’ both veils and unveils. Apparently what we mean by this is the beginning of the twentieth century, but the connotations also suggest a more organic link, a continuity and contiguity that create the ambivalence between a past designated as left behind, whereas it is just as much an intermediary phase, for us in the twenty-first century. The relation of this semi-past to the present is what is at stake in the monograph. As Borgos puts it, one of her central questions is how the newly emerging sociocultural tendencies brought about heterogeneous spaces for women, what kind of new role models and subject positions were made possible, and how all this bears a relevance for us today at the beginning of a new century (and millenium).

One can also discover similar, paradoxical expressions in other elements of the title of *Portrék*. One question is how the phrases *alkotónők* (‘female creators’) and the

untranslatable phrase *alkotótársak* (meaning both ‘partner creators’ and ‘creators’ partners’ and ‘partners in creation’ can be put together in a correlated syntagm, and how the two compound words can be, without dispersing the focus, the topic of a monograph. Since the two words have the same surface structure they can seem correlated to each other as in both cases the first part of the compound word ‘creator’ suggests agency. The shared structure of the two words, however, is questioned by the syntactic and semantic relation of the second half of the compounds. Whereas in the case of female creators the first part of the compound word obviously indicates subjectivity (‘the woman who creates’), the semantic-syntactic structural relation of *alkotótársak* is destabilised, as that word can be understood not only as partners in the act of creation, but also as partners of/to creators, with only the first one indicating active involvement in creation.

The parallel syntagmatic relation between the female creators and the ambiguous Hungarian compound word meaning both the partners in the act of creation and the partners of/to creators almost automatically attributing gender both to the creator and the partner is probably not even really ambiguous because the very fact that the female creator needs the gendered marker ‘female’ indicates that the creator by definition is male, and as such, the (his) partner, at least within a heterosexual matrix, is a woman. Such an implication is supported by the cover of the monograph, featuring Sophie Török, Ilona Harmos and Aranka Böhm, *primarily* known as partners to some of the most iconographic (male) creators of the ‘*Nyugat-generation*’, Mihály Babits, Dezső Kosztolányi and Frigyes Karinthy. The title of *Portrék* thus implies multiple ambiguities and multiple gendered encodings, deriving from the correlated positioning of the phrases ‘female creators’ and ‘partners of/to creators’, which, as a result of the double rhetorical gesture of both veiling and revealing, problematizes the relation between women – here specifically women of the early twentieth century, and creation.

If we now focus on the first part of the title of the monograph, we see that it, too, contains an ambiguity, in the term *Mások*, or the “Other.” As defined by Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* – and since then widely used and re-contextualised as a key term by feminist, postcolonial and cultural theories – this term has the attributes of the inessential in its binary opposition to the One, to the Absolute. The capitalized – and as such, emphatic – key word of the main title, thus, serves to reinforce the meaning of the subtitle that defines women as partners of/to creators, and even female creators, as the Other, whose position as active agent is ambivalent or even dubious. Yet, at the same time, because of the mutual semantic interference of the main title and the subtitle, *this* Other is no longer exactly *that* Other: but has come to have a face of her own, or more precisely, several individual faces with both visual and verbal portraits, with each having heterogeneous subject positions and individual (her)stories and narratives. Whereas in the early twentieth century, female creators by definition were positioned as the Others of (male) creators, here they no longer simply *exist* in the Victorian sense of the word as opposed to men’s *activities* (as crystallized by Robert Graves’s volume title *Man Does, Woman Is*), and the narratives of their portraits suggest their active agency.

After this rather lengthy semantic introduction, the question is how this very consciously chosen title of Borgos’s monograph is implicated in the multiple ambiguities of its contents. Dissecting the title, of course, was not a gratuitous act. At first reading, there is a tangible clumsiness to it – and I personally had problems remembering it –, and yet one must admit that after taking all its potential meanings into consideration, it

seems a perfect title for a monograph whose primary aim is partly to trace the alternatives that iconoclastic women had in the early twentieth century if they sought to abandon traditional feminine roles, and partly to map the sociocultural and psychosocial backdrop against which these new feminine narratives were written. So what seems to be at stake is the question whether the available roles and subject positions meet the standards of the dominant value system, or put it differently, how the roles these women played questioned and re-wrote accepted notions, customs and attitudes.

Borgos's monograph – as indicated by the three portraits on the cover – focuses on the analysis of the self-positioning of three 'writers' wives', Sophie Török, Ilona Harnos and Aranka Böhm: the interpretation of their life stories can be read in the second, most bulky unit, comprising two thirds of the volume ('Relatedness and Creation: The Analysis of the Life Stories of Three "Nyugat-Wives"'). The first section, entitled 'Feminine Role Strategies in the Psycho-historical and Cultural Context of the Early Twentieth Century', however, is just as exciting because although the question posed seems a lot more eclectic, it is in this very diversity that this special social field is revealed where the possibility of certain self-definitions could and, actually, did appear, even if some of them proved slightly dubious. In spite of the title's suggestion of a broader context, the first chapter is centered primarily on psychoanalysis, with whose concept of femininity feminist theory has always been at odds — see the numerous challenges to Freudian psychoanalysis (suffice to mention Dorothy Dinnerstein, Nancy Chodorow, Juliet Mitchell, Jacqueline Rose, Jessica Benjamin, Jane Gallop, or the 'French' feminists like Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous; or Toril Moi and Stephen Marcus, who have subjected Freudian texts to a rhetorical-deconstructive reading).

As the subchapters of the first main section show, Borgos analyses the relationship between psychoanalysis and women (or femininity) from various perspectives. That the result is complex, heterogeneous and self-contradictory is not her fault at all, and one can but agree with her conclusions that there is a basic discrepancy between Freud's theoretical writings and those of his contemporaries, between the images and concepts of femininity as created by their patients and by the proposed therapies of these patients, and between the contemporary women's self-articulatory and identificatory strategies that became available at that particular psycho-historical moment in time. This included the fact that women got involved in the discourse of psychoanalysis, not only as patients but also as analysts, which one can consider as a success because all of a sudden a few women became partakers of a discourse with high prestige that grew out of a (masculine) medical science and that had a great impact upon the changed concept of the human being in the twentieth century. This *is* an achievement by all means even if – as Borgos's analysis points out – the presence of female psychoanalysts was always tinted by the Freudian concept of femininity to a smaller or greater extent.

Compared to the female psychoanalysts' relative success story, it poses greater difficulties to consider those 'failed disguises' as self-creating strategies that were 'chosen' by Freud's or Sándor Ferenczi's famous or less famous, but by all means psychically wounded, mostly hysterical female patients. In their cases, the tension between their dreams, desires and psychosocial boundaries led to their 'choosing' psychic illnesses, with a residual option of resistance only: as in Dora's case, breaking off (Freudian) psychoanalysis, but, unfortunately, not even their later life story proves that

they could successfully resolve their psychic troubles. Most of them, however, were not granted even this amount of resistance either. One of the most shocking examples provided by the volume is that of Elma Pálos, who – in Borgos’s interpretation – even four decades later ‘almost repeats Ferenczi’s characterization of hers’ (67). At that time, Ferenczi enacted a multiple authority figure for Elma: he was ‘her therapist, father and potential husband’ (59), so it is not surprising that even several decades later Elma is incapable of deviating from *his* definition of *her* to any alternative self-definition.

There exists a tendency in contemporary feminist theory that looks upon women’s madness, and upon hysteria specifically (which, in turn, served as a basis for Freudian theories) as potentially subversive, resisting the dominant discourses of power, and creating an alternative semiotic system and language (a theoretical position represented, among others, by H  l  ne Cixous, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar), but there are just as many feminist theoreticians who question this romanticizing concept, most famously Shoshana Felman in her ‘Women and Madness: A Critical Fallacy’. Borgos’s critical case descriptions and her analysis of Freud’s notion of femininity – partly based on her interpretation of Freud’s rather (in)famous essay ‘On Femininity’ displaying his biased assumption (or rather misogynist prejudices) so succinctly – seem to support and take side with the latter critical position. In her view, the hysterical female patients did not create an effective counter-discourse capable of articulating a position that resists prejudices against women, whereas, at the same time, Borgos also argues that although the so-called mad women of the era could not create an alternative language to protest against that Language of the Father, the era itself, including psychoanalysis, was still suitable for new conceptualisations of femininity.

What kind of clothes women wore at the beginning of the twentieth century may at first seem to be a minute and negligible detail, both in a literal and abstract sense. However, it was of great importance in terms of their self-definition and self/body-image, with a new concept of women’s clothing contributing to the liberation of the female body from its limitations and constraints both in a symbolic and physical way (note, for example, that in England, the clothes of the early-twentieth-century New Woman weighed one tenth of the Victorian women’s clothes). The discussion in the monograph to *A n  i testkultura   j utjai* ‘The News of Women’s Body Culture’ (1977) by Madzsarn   J  szi Alice creates a link between the psychosocial environment and psychic illnesses like hysteria and neurasthenia diagnosed by contemporary psychoanalysis.

One of the most valuable sections of Borgos’s monograph is the chapter “‘You’re the exception on this point’ – Women Healers’, which in its title perfectly indicates the ambivalence characterizing the psychoanalytical position on women. The quotation which provides the title of the chapter is, of course, from Freud, who rhetorically excises women analysts from the concept of femininity, but on account of the very act of rethorizing their exceptionality, he denied ‘normal’ femininity the possibility of entering the intellectual and scientific field. The existence of women psychoanalysts, including their being addressed by Freud, thus, indicates a new position of the Other: exceptions who are nevertheless already present in the field of the dominant discourses of science and psychoanalysis. The chapter tells about intriguing female careers of Freud-disciples and Hungarian women analysts, and the only reason the reader comes away slightly dissatisfied is that all are recounted much too briefly, but it is to be hoped that the

outlines provided of these career models may later serve as starting points for further studies.

The first major part of Borgos's work, then, focuses on psychoanalysis, but starts off from a broader cultural background (which, in itself, could serve as the basis for several monographs), examining the question of women's social-role and career options. This is presumably why there is subchapter in this section on 'Canon and Identity', investigating the ambivalent position and the contemporary reception of Margit Kaffka as the iconic (and token) woman writer of *Nyugat*. The chapter, however, is disproportionately short compared to the section on psychoanalysis, although, considering the main focus of the monograph, this section should have been as central as the one on psychoanalysis. The length and placement of yet another subchapter raises similar questions: 'Sublimation on a Leeway', which analyses the cultural positioning of the (male) writer's wife as a psycho-historical role model, a discussion of which could be much more relevant as an introduction to the chapters on Török, Harmos and Böhm. From this perspective, the place and function of the chapter 'Canon and Identity', analysing the issue of femininity and creativity, becomes slightly questionable too, no matter how fascinating the section on Margit Kaffka is.

This slight critique leads us back to the question raised about the title of the monograph: how and on what basis can the female creator and the partner of (male) creator be juxtaposed, particularly in case the latter is understood in the non-creative sense of the word. Although the internal structure of the volume is not always clear – to which category of the title do, for example, female psychoanalytic patients belong –, the very internal contradictions, the unsuitability of categories, the inevitable deviations indicate almost symptomatically that in this age one can no longer talk about 'the' Other as such, but must be added: the Other, but from what perspective? Which Other? How does the definition of yet another Other contribute to the definition of *this* Other? And in the same way as the 'exceptionality' of women psychoanalysts cannot be understood without the case studies of female patients in classical psychoanalysis and without the Freudian concept of femininity, the analysis of the sociocultural field that 'the' Hungarian modernist woman writer could enter (even if she remained another 'exception' or token woman) is just as necessary to shed light on the gendered asymmetry of the notion of creativity, covering up its own masculine encodings, which bears a relevance on the partners of creators as well.

All this ambivalence, diversity and even structural self-contradiction are necessary for the analysis of the complex role that is usually dismissed with a nonchalant gesture: a writer's wife. The most detailed analyses of the volume, however, convincingly prove that in that age the writer's wife fulfilled a special and heterogeneous position. It meant surpassing the traditional gender and cultural roles, but at the same time being contained in traditional roles, in the background of which one can even discover the debate in *Nyugat* on the crisis of marriage as an institution because that debate was concerned with a re-thinking of marriage and marital relations, including notions like dependence and autonomy. In this context, it is highly ironical that Sophie Török, who is not only a partner of a creator but can be justifiably called the most genuine creator in her own right from among the three writers' wives discussed, became Babits's wife as a result of a rather nasty exchange between him and Lőrinc Szabó (147), and all through her life, she played the role of the wife and enthusiastic disciple, while

she also functioned as ‘clerk, minister of finance, secretary and everything else [for Babits] that a man illiterate in the practical aspects of life may need’ (160-62). It is, perhaps, not coincidental either that the central motive for the struggles between Ilona Harnos and Dezső Kosztolányi is the ambivalence in both of them concerning what they want of the other, with both of them anxious about their ego boundaries, but at the same time also looking for a physical-mental-intellectual partner in each other (248). Compared to this couple, Aranka Böhm is a writer’s wife in the sense of the word that she is only a partner of the creator (Frigyes Karinthy), who, on the other hand, is stretching, testing and re-defining the boundaries of this very partnership: she is using her sexual appeal (and later her independence derived from her doctoral degree) so that ultimately, compared to the other two women, she radically re-writes the notion of the partner of the (male) creator.

According to Borgos’s monograph, thus, it is impossible to fix or pinpoint the meaning of femininity, the Other, the female creator or the partner of the (male) creator with taken-for-granted, unambiguous, and easily accessible notions if we place them in the context of the early twentieth century. And although her monograph pursues its own questions with an exemplary consistency, albeit with varying points of view and in varying contexts, the very novelty of these issues (at least in Hungarian studies) may open new vistas for further research, whether in the area of literary studies, psychoanalysis, or on the interdisciplinary boundaries of these two and perhaps even further disciplines.