

Varga, Virág and Zoltán Zsávolya. Eds. *Nő, tükör, írás: Értelmezések a 20. század első felének női irodalmáról* [Woman, Mirror, Writing: Interpretations of Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Women's Literature]. Budapest: Ráció, 2009. 494 pp.

Reviewed by Agnes Vashegyi MacDonald, The University of British Columbia.

It is time to effect a revolution in female manners – time to restore to them their lost dignity – and make them, as a part of the human species, labour by reforming themselves to reform the world.

Mary Wollstonecraft. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.

What kinds of literary examples are available for women authors in Hungary today? What position do Hungarian woman authors occupy in the country's literary canon? How should we read their works from the past and from the present? What should we base the differentiation between serious works of literature and pulp fiction by women authors? Does an andocentric view influence the reception of women authors' works today? How and why? Are there more works by women authors yet to be discovered? These and other similar questions have been raised by Hungarian literary scholars over the past few years with the intent of bringing forth research about women's literature (*Nyitott műhely*[Public workshop], 2010). *Nő, tükör, írás: Értelmezések a 20. század első felének női irodalmáról* [Woman, Mirror, Writing: Interpretations of Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Women's Literature] available in Hungarian, published by Ráció in 2009, is the first book of the "female reKON" ["női reKON"] series edited by the Hungarian literary scholars Virág Varga and Zoltán Zsávolya. The book offers a new approach to feminist research and its reception in Hungary. As Varga and Zsávolya explain in their "Preface," the idea of women's literature—past, present, and modern—has gained acceptance in contemporary literary studies in Hungary (2009, 9). The series title "női reKON" reflects this acceptance and thus, refers to both the "the reconstruction" and "reconnaissance" of the approaches to Hungarian feminism and women's literature. By doing so, the book also suggests reconstructing, recognizing, and also recollecting, recommending, reconditioning, reconsidering, recovering, (re)canonizing and (re)interpreting women authors and their works in Hungary. The prefix 're' is important here to emphasize, because there is evidence that feminism and women's literature had gained attention in the past in Hungary (consult Acsády, 1999; Fábri, 1996; Jánossy, 1911; N. Szegvári, 1981; Schwartz 2008; Tóth, 1975). By (re)building a feminist literary forum, scholars and readers can REconstruct and REcognize additional discourses about Hungarian woman authors.

The notion of '(re)-building' as the underlying project of *Nő, tükör, írás* can then be seen, I propose, as a *Frauenbildungsroman*. The self-development of female protagonists in *Frauenbildungsroman* as a twin genre of *Bildungsroman* was first characterized by the German Annemarie Schimmel in her "Ein Frauenbildungsroman auf dem Sindi" in 1964, arguing that women's self-growth is a valuable interpretation within the genre. Most recently, American literary scholars have recaptured the concept of *Frauenbildungsroman*, such as Wendy Alexia Rountree's *The Contemporary African-American female Bildungsroman* (2001), and Olga Bezhanova's *The Female Bildungsroman in Twentieth-century Spain: The Trajectory of the Genre* (2008), all of which can be adopted for the case of Hungarian women writers' works and feminist literary scholarship as laid out in *Nő, tükör, írás*. If we consider *Bildung* not as an

organic, but rather, as Todd Kontje suggests, a “social phenomenon which constructs male identity and offers him a place in the patriarchal Symbolic order” (1993, 103), then the genre of *Bildungsroman* may be appropriated by feminist critics for the examination of not only the development of a feminist protagonist but also of woman writers and feminist scholarship in Hungary. The structure of the “női reKON” book series of Hungarian women authors with *Nő, tükör, írás* as its genesis reflects such a self-development of feminist literary studies in Hungary, along with its articles formed in a progressive chronology, and thereby reading them as so, grants us—perhaps heuristically for me—an hermeneutic and epistemological analogy of the *Frauenbildungsroman*.

As a social phenomenon, the *Bildungsroman* is a genre that portrays historical change parallel to the protagonist’s self-development, and in turn it offers a new way of defining that change. While the history of women in Hungary has appeared in official writing historiography, the experiences of female protagonists and their authors were meant to be understood within the larger socio-economic and political sphere of society, not isolated or self-contained. For contemporary Hungarian literary feminist research *Bildung* can be adopted in terms of what Kontje sees as the “transformation of the public sphere; the restructuring of the family; the codification of gender roles, and the making of sex” (1993, 111). I see this notion of the ‘transformation of the public sphere’ in reference to a change in perception of the scholar and the reader equally, or as János D. Mekis explains in the first article of the volume, how “the idea of women’s literature (“női irodalom” or “nőirodalom”) is slowly finding its home in the Hungarian literary criticism and historical discourse, although it has not yet become a household name such as ‘women writers, women’s writing, women’s literature’ definitions in English literary studies” [A női irodalom (másként nőirodalom) fogalma lassan meghonosodik a magyar kritikai és irodalomtörténeti diskurzusban, noha korántsem vált még olyan természetessé, mint a *women writers, women’s writing, women’s literature* kifejezések az angolszász irodalomértésben”] (2009, 11). It is safe to say though that Hungarian feminist literary scholarship has finally come into its own, into adulthood after experiencing many years of growing pains, through a troubled quest for identity. In this sense, the volume, understood as *Frauenbildungsroman*, then affords a sense of (self)developmental relation to society, and also an interaction fundamental to the genre of women authors, so that we can identify, clarify and deconstruct gender bias inherent in traditional (andocentric/patriarchal) accounts of scholarship and reader reception.

*Nő, tükör, írás* is a collection of 41 articles from many scholars, from various forums even beyond the country’s borders, which engage Hungarian women authors’ works between 1890 and the 1930s – a number of them who had been forgotten and now recovered. The book offers a cross-sectional view into the apparently comfortable and economically secure women’s lives of the *fin-de-siècle* Hungary, those who could afford writing for pleasure or even for a career. Middle-class comfort and economic security, however, often came with the price of women living and being represented in submissive and domestic roles. *Nő, tükör, írás* illuminates such tension endemic of early 20<sup>th</sup> century patriarchy by examining and reconstructing ideologies pertaining to women and women authors’ roles in Hungarian society and culture in order to give them *reconnaissance*. Some of the essays are more descriptive in the style of portraiture about a given author, such as Judit Kádár’s piece about Kosáryné Lola Réz, Anna Borgos’s study about Sándor/Sarolta Vay, and even Judit Szilágyi’s depiction of Ernő Osvát. Others are in-depth examinations of a given woman author through concepts of modernism, feminism, intertextuality, and psychoanalysis among others. The book also contains depictions of women as active and independent agents, such as József Földvári’s [“A lying

woman is not a liar,” Terka Lux is no Terka Lux” [“Egy hazug asszony nem hazug asszony”, Lux Terka nem Lux Terka”], Rita Mallász’s “Cilike, the public educator” [“Cilike, a népnevelő”], and Judit Kádár’s “The ‘genius poetress’. Renée Erdős’s subversive lyricism” [“A ‘zseniális poétalány’. Erdős Renée szubverzív lírájáról”]. The volume’s essays about the wives of famous male authors of the established Nyugat-circle, such as Zsófia Szilágyi’s on Dezsőné Kosztolányi in “From Cinderella to the Wicked Stepmother” [“Hamupipókétkől a tüzes cipőben táncoló mostoháig”] and about Sophie Török, Mihály Babits’s wife, by Izabella Simon, Anna Borgos, and Zoltán János Papp, reveal how these woman authors negotiated, through their subjective psychology, their independence and artistic efforts in the overarching shadow of their husbands.

There can be a parallel drawn between the acceptance and acknowledgment of Hungarian women writers of the early 1900s and today, explains Varga in an interview to Balázs Pongrácz, since prejudice, gender role-playing expectations, and discrimination against women are still rampant in contemporary Hungarian society (2010, 3). Women authors of the early 1900’s Hungary were expected to write about ‘woman’ themes, such as, motherhood, marriage, and love, while the expression of their erotic desires and intellect was challenged or attacked by most male critics (Varga in Pongrácz, 2010, 3). Comparably, Zsávolya emphasizes to look beyond trying to define “női stílus” or “woman style” in Hungarian literature, and instead examine the historiography of the act of writing by women, that is, the fact that women *also* write, and have always been writing (in Pongrácz, 2010, 4). Indeed, with the rise of literacy in the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Hungary, women, as authors and readers, had a never-before-seen access to an abundant print media. Magazines and books became the ‘medium’ and the ‘message’ at once inciting women to step out of their traditional roles, demand suffrage, study, pursue careers, write and publish. To this effect, print media served as a forum for dissent and social criticism for some of the leading women authors of the time, such as Margit Kaffka, Cécile Tormay, and Anna Lesznai. *Nő, tükrök, írás* contains several anthologies which capture the lives and works of these women authors and shows how their novels, short stories, and poems had helped pave the way for change for many Hungarian women of the time, particularly for those in the germinating feminist movement, by taking up pertinent issues about women, including domestic roles, marriage, education and career, sexuality, class and social status, poverty, and suffrage. Novels, such as Kaffka’s *Színek és évek*, [Colors and Years] (1912), Tormay’s *Bujdosó könyv* [An Outlaw’s Diary] (1925), and Lesznai’s *Kezdetben volt a kert* [There Once was a Garden] (1966) became totems of early feminist scholarship along with the creation of the bourgeois woman, and now once again of contemporary women’s studies and literature in Hungary.

In *Nő, tükrök, írás* politics or the political alignment of some of the women authors is manifestly pushed into the background, not with the intent of suppression or repression, but so that rather the literary content and context can be brought to the forefront. At the same time, the editors acknowledge that it is difficult to speak about pure literature which is untouched by any political ideologies and that analyses of women authors’ works ought to be carried out through an interdisciplinary approach with a social science angle. Unmistakably in almost each article, women are always presented in the given Hungarian political, cultural and historical context. *Nő, tükrök, írás* was launched in late 2009 during a gala event of reading and music at the Rómer House in Győr in front of a large audience, including scholars and members of the enthusiastic public. The objective of such a hyperbolized introduction to the book was to bring attention to women writers and to widen the literary discourse for the public eye (Varga in Pongrácz, 2010, 1). Yet, the book does not speak to your average reader. Each article is written in a highly

abstract scholastic Hungarian which is interspersed with the contemporary jargon of literary theory in English; it adopts and emulates many post-modernists, post-feminist, and post-structuralist analyses of the past twenty years from France, England, and the United States. While such application of concepts elevates the discourse, it could also scare away some readers who are interested in Hungarian women writers but are unable to grasp the specialized language. What is missing from this first volume is a short biography about each contributor, and also a subject or name index which, according to the editors, would be included in the final volume...a few years away. The photos on the cover and inside the pages of the book by Nóra Dénes and Ferenc Tepes are beautiful, keeping with the legacy of the Hungarian art photography school, however, they seem rather out of context with the articles since they portray a female model in contemporary settings. This first issue of the “női reKON” series was developed in a mere span of one year. The next volume will concentrate on the period between the late 1930s and late 1940s, and it will include further studies about Cécile Tormay, the female writers of the *Nyugat* review, and until-now unknown Hungarian women authors.

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