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For nearly ten years now I have been teaching Hungarian literature to international university students in Budapest and during my courses I was often faced with the image they had in mind about Hungarians, like for example that Hungarians like kissing in public places a lot, or that they do not care much about politeness or fashionable clothing. However, I did not have such an extensive experience with images of Hungarians *in texts*, let alone in contemporary texts written by foreigners with literary aspirations. Luckily some books of that kind have been translated into Hungarian recently, and in them a vast variety of textual functions and cultural meanings of Hungariennes can be found.

Kati Kovács' essentially autobiographical book, *Vihreä rapsodia* ("Pepper Rhapsody"), winner of the "Comic book of the year" Prize in Finland in 1994, was translated from Finnish into Hungarian in 2009. In the summer of 1975 Kati Kovács, a 10-year-old Finnish girl of Hungarian origin, spent three days with the family of her Hungarian pen pal, Erika, and twenty years later she turned her memories of the journey into a surrealist comic book. With a personal, subjective tone focusing on the little girl's intellectual development, *Vihreä rapsodia* tells how Kiti, the protagonist finds her way from a silent "stomaching everything" state into a more grown-up ego state where she is finally able to stand up for her interests and feelings, speak out, and decline food. Consequently, the story unfolds on a psychic level rather than on the level of contemporary Hungarian realities, where Hungary as a world rioting in bizarre gastronomic pleasures serves as a raw material handy for constructing a narrative full of oral metaphors. The theme of dumplings (and their metaphorical usage) serves as the main guideline in the story, as can be seen when Kiti, having endured some minor emotional offences from her hosts and having had a "lump" in her throat (the Hungarian equivalent, "gombócot érez a torkában" for this phrase features "dumplings" instead of "lump"), is continuously offered dumplings and other traditional Hungarian dishes like pork feet stew (*körömpörkölt*), pork sirloin (*disznóvесе*), tripe stew (*pacal*), fried pork fat (*sült szalonna*), and *pálinka*, all of which may seem weird for the senses and tastes of non-Hungarians. In the beginning the silent little girl obediently swallows everything she is offered (we can see her drinking goat milk at dawn, having an enormous ice cream in her hand, or eating a huge amount of raspberries, etc.), all of which is logically

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followed by a somewhat naturalistic depiction of her diarrhea, indigestion and bedwetting. In contrast to the logical plot developing up to this point, the comic book soon turns into a surrealistic story with a plot formed by a bizarre dream logic mixing the exotic elements of Hungarianness with unexpected shots and an emotionally troubled way of storytelling—perhaps this is why its genre is “rhapsody”. Kiti soon runs away from her hosts, and with the help of some magic dumplings she bundles off the Tatar hordes, who have just re-attacked Hungary, out of the country, then she pays a visit to a country village, a brothel, a thermal bath and a circus. These episodes are loosely linked, full of oral and sexual references, traumatizing and perhaps even a little taste-provoking. In the end, Kiti tastes a magic soup made by a Turkish magician in the circus, with dumplings floating around in the soup that take the forms of each and every characters of the story, including for instance the father who suddenly turns out to have a “sulkily arrogant” taste, or the mother having a “self-righteous taste of a house flannel”. Kiti returns to her hosts with this new knowledge in her head, and for the first time in her life she succeeds in declining the dumplings offered to her in an imperative way, that is to say, she is able to stand up for her interests. While Kati Kovács’ comic book is a story about the difficulties of growing up, where Hungarians are depicted as an exotic nation rioting in corporeal pleasures, it should be noted that this image of Hungarians although not very flattering and occasionally also very naturalistic, fits well into the narrative of personal development, which is the main focus of the book.

Viviane Chocas’s novel *Bazar Magyar* (“*Hungarian Bazaar*”), originally published in French in 2006 and translated into Hungarian in 2007, also focuses on Hungarian dishes and features Hungarianness as an important factor in the protagonist’s life story. The “Hungarian Bazaar” is a Hungarian deli shop in Paris where the protagonist Klára Séli born in 1962 and modeled after the author, spends much of her childhood, because her parents, who have fled from Hungary in 1956, decided to get rid of all their Hungarian roots except for the Hungarian cuisine. That is why Klára’s way to her secret but “real” identity leads through doughnuts filled with peach jam (*baracklekváros fánk*), strudel (*rétés*), blood pudding (*hurka*) and potato casserole (*rakott krumpli*). For Klára, it is the untold story of her parents and the unspoken Hungarian language that are “materially” present in these dishes that “open up the way for her towards an unleashing life.” Therefore, while in Kati Kovács’ story, Hungarian dishes block the main character’s way to something important and they need to be “digested” so that the main character could proceed on her way, in Chocas’ novel, they open up an exciting new world waiting to be discovered. At the age of 17, Klára starts to learn Hungarian in secret, passes a school-leaving exam in Hungarian language, then in 1986 goes to Hungary, and in 1989 she stands there at Kossuth Square, right in front of the Hungarian Parliament in Budapest, as a journalist reporting about the proclamation of the Hungarian Republic for a French newspaper. The year 1989 frees the tongue of many Hungarian people, including Klára’s father, as suddenly everybody wants to tell his or her story about 1956. The only exception is Klára’s mother, who still does not want to speak about the past or speak in Hungarian, at least not until her teenage love turns up six years later. The mother, however, even as she opens up about the past, keeps the secret about her family’s Jewish identity, which is uncovered only in 2005, when Klára’s uncle discloses his memories. Chocas tells a story about the slow self-disclosure of a family in a very lyric manner, usually grouping the

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episodes around illustrative sensory depictions of Hungarian dishes with, for instance, most of the chapters having the name of a dish as their title. Therefore, in this book Hungarianness is portrayed from afar and from a slightly sugarcoated perspective, where Hungarian is “a barbarian language passionately glowing”, “a fruit”, and where the first Hungarian relative whom Klára meets is “a Gypsy-Turkish knight going to war” or possibly “an opera singer”. Although there are a few critical comments disseminated throughout the novel, like, for example, that Hungarian men drink too much, or that Hungarians take pleasure in “making others eat”, Hungarianness is still essentially portrayed as an identity first denied by the parents, and then eventually embraced by them, though with great difficulty. That is to say, Hungarianness is portrayed as a kind of origin that has been lost and found, a world that is painfully beautiful and where the narrator, upon seeing his slightly illuminated aged father singing Hungarian songs in his birth village, can feel that he “finally became that stranger that he never dared to be before my eyes.”

Hungarians are depicted in a totally different way and in different role in *Jaap Scholten's Berichten uit de voormalige Dubbelmonarchie* („*Messages From the Former Dual Monarchy*”), which was originally published in Dutch in 2008 and translated into Hungarian in 2009. The author is a Dutch journalist who moved to Hungary in 2003 and not much later he started to publish short reports about his Hungarian experiences in a newspaper in the Netherlands. *Messages From the Former Dual Monarchy* is a collection of these reports that — in contrast to the above-mentioned books that actually aimed at telling the story of an inner, psychic journey with Hungary as a framework — tries to present Hungary as it is in reality, with a clear aspiration to raise the interest of Dutch readers. Accordingly, Scholten's work gravitates much towards the exotic, the bizarre, the weirdly other in as much as it is a catalog of eccentric figures. We meet, among others, Hungarian aristocrats who had been to Rhodesia, a witch arriving from Moscow, the woman president of the Hungarian Association of Astrology (who predicted that the Scholtens would buy her house, as they did end up doing), the reptile keeper of the Budapest Zoo returned from Africa, a bear keeper parading around in animal skins, a girl who plans to launch a lie&untruth shop, dancing Gypsies, a 59-year-old man pulling a farm-wagon across Hungary with his two hands, and Hungarian aristocrats of Transylvania returning to their castles in ruins. All figures are well-written, but Scholten selects them mainly from the two extreme points of Hungarian society — aristocrats coming back from exile and people vegetating in deep poverty —, while the wide social strata in between, the “average Hungarians” are characterized only by rather generalizing statements. Many of these statements are already familiar to (more self-critical) Hungarians as well — such as, for example, that Hungarians are pessimistic, follow a life strategy well recorded by a well-known Hungarian saying “if my cow dies, I hope my neighbor's cow will die as well”, have a tendency to look for “loopholes” everywhere thereby evading or escaping an obligation, or that they drink too much), while others are less familiar — such as that Hungarians do not pay much attention to keeping their teeth healthy, are atrocious team players, and dislike moving. Moreover there are other statements that seem to be included in the book because of some badly decoded cultural differences or some misinformation—like that the Hungarian countryside was lagging behind in the year 1934 because at 4 a.m. all the shutters are down in the villages and it is “as dark as in Ukraine or in Africa”, or that it was in

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Hungary where feudalism collapsed last in Europe. Readers are also informed that Dutch people appreciate the most that Hungary is cheap and that there are no black people in Hungarian society. Scholten tells his stories with wit and charm, even though he regularly seems to rely a little too much on the statement (also quoted in the book) of Otto Friedländer—alias Otto Zoff, Austrian writer, 1890-1963, who emigrated from Austria to Italy and the U.S. in 1935—, according to which “the real Hungarian is either a gentleman or a peasant, there is no third option”. Thus, the image of the Hungarians depicted in this book evokes a society of semi-feudalism, in which, with the exception of aristocrats and Romas—the latter presented in order to accord with the image that nineteenth-century Romanticism developed about them—and some eccentric figures, there is only a scarce number of Hungarians who get the narrator’s sympathy. Hence, in this book Hungary practically becomes a metaphor for a land that is both sublime and primitive, but also essentially weird and wild.

Bob Dent’s subjective account of everyday life in Hungary, *Inside Hungary From Outside*, published originally in English by a Hungarian publishing house in Budapest in 2008 and translated into Hungarian in the same year, is more realistic than Scholten’s book, perhaps because the author has been living in Hungary far longer (since 1986) than Scholten, and also because the writings on which this book is partly based were originally addressed to foreigners living in Hungary, i.e. to readers who could easily compare what they read with what they actually experienced. The relatively chronological order of the book is broken occasionally by some thematic chapters dedicated to special issues like that of Budapest, the countryside, 1956, or the oddities permeating the history of Hungarians. Dent employs a compound genre, incorporating accounts about peculiarities of everyday life in Hungary, tourist guide-like paragraphs about, for instance, a Stalin-faced devil in one of the churches in Sopron or Nagybjom possessing the title of “European Village of Storks”, witty anecdotes about how the members of the music ensemble R-GO paraded on the bank of river Danube in 1982 in front of the author’s camera or whether composer Franz Liszt did really have a silver bathtub, and longer essayistic parts offering historical background information about King Matthias, the Revolution in 1956, the schools maintained by the Loreto Sisters or the Reburial of Imre Nagy and so on. Dent tries to be both interesting and accurate as he does not only notice and record peculiarities but usually also offers some background information or a well-argued hypothesis. He suggests, for instance, that Hungarians may not be interested in the Revolution of 1956 because of the painful memory and the ongoing over-politicization of the event, or that the still undiminished popularity of blonde jokes has something to do with women’s movement having been expropriated and distorted by state socialism. It is also interesting to read his observation that in Hungary, people, who live in blocks of flats, have a much more varied social background than those in England. As one can see from his paying attention to people living in blocks of flats, Dent is at home exactly in that world of average Hungarians that is missing so much from Scholten’s work. Dent has an eye for the quality of supply in shops, the over-complicated system of banking costs and opening hours, the red tape, the nursery school system, the fact that Hungarian pubs differ from their English counterparts, but also for such tiny things that Hungarian cupboards had a cutting edge under socialism, the *Betyárs*—i.e. Hungarian Robin Hoods in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century—were taken out of the Hungarian Biographical Encyclopedia by 1994, or how weird it can feel to live in

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Bugyi (a town, whose name literally translates as “panties” in English). Dent is an observer who is only seldom judgmental but very sensitive to cultural differences and whose book yields a complex, rich and accurate picture about Hungarians. Moreover, his is the only one among the authors discussed here that do not overstock Hungarianness with metaphorical meanings—it is about everyday life in Hungary as seen by someone who is not native but feels very much at home in this country.