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WOMEN'S LITERARY TRADITION

The following text is the shortened version of the Preface of my monograph titled "Women's Literary Tradition" (2013) which studies the life and work of five Hungarian women writers of the twentieth century. It explores the reasons why they have either been forgotten by literary history and left out of canons and consequently from schoolbooks despite being acknowledged and well known authors in their own time (as it happened to Renée Erdős [1879–1956], Minka Czóbel [1855–1947], Anna Lesznai [1885–1966] and Ilona Kosztolányiné Harnos [1885–1967]), or, in the case of Ágnes Nemes Nagy (1922–1991), the so called masculine poetess, who, as the fact came to light after her death, had been writing poems all her life in a female mode and style secretly, it explores the reasons for her being canonised only at the expense of such a sacrifice. Throughout the book I apply a style based on a concept I had developed in my previous volume "Speaking the Unspeakable: Trauma and Literature" (2008), the concept of "personal reading" which can manifest itself in a kind of cross-genre writing combining elements of academic and fiction writing.

A TRADITION OF ONE'S OWN

I had been hoping that it would not be like this. After all, I took my final exams at secondary school exactly twenty-five years ago, and the situation could have changed in the meantime. I borrowed the schoolbooks and textbooks of literature most commonly used in secondary schools nowadays.¹ I went to pick them up, collected them in two large shopping bags and leafed through them impatiently, one after the other. I was looking for women writers. Nothing has changed. Four series of schoolbooks know Sappho. Then 2300 years pass. Women do not write. Around 1840 (but only in one of the series) Emily Brontë appears, around 1910 Margit Kaffka² (in several series), and fifty to sixty years later, Ágnes Nemes Nagy (in each series). Surprisingly, students can read Sylvia Plath if they are taught from an alternative book, but they only meet this single woman writer. And this student-friendly textbook by Arató-Pála is in fact only the friend of boys: the first theme block is titled "Small Boys and Big Boys". You look for stories about girls in vain. Only boys are playing in the courtyard in the picture on the first page.

"Canon is the »willful remembrance« of a society, the obligation to remember. (...) Societies shape their self-image and make their identities continuous for generations by creating a culture of remembrance; (...) and they adopt different ways to do so"³ – writes Jan Assmann. The self-image of Hungarian society does not involve remembering women writers. Collective amnesia. Women writers are not part of the canon, they do not form our identities. We do not read them, do not talk about them, do not teach them. Not only is it true for Hungarian, but foreign women writers

as well. Oblivion spreads over them. One of the textbooks, for example, lists some of the famous foreign writers of the era at the end of each chapter. There are no women among them. We are not obliged to remember women writers, not obliged to remember women who write.

“To interrogate a tradition, venerable though it may be, is not longer to pass it on intact” – states Pierre Nora.⁴ I write about women’s literary tradition. I want to know the reasons why Hungarian literary history keeps forgetting women writers. I work like a detective. I want this tendency to change, so that today’s women writers – I among them – will not fade away from literary memory. Let literary tradition change!

Literary processes include their agents – people and institutions – who form them. It’s been a popular belief for some time that a really good piece of literary work is bound to become well-known sooner or later; a really good writer will be famous – although he (she?) might not live to see it. We tend to forget that it does not happen by itself. Texts get in contact with each other via people – writers, readers, editors, critics, publishers, and booksellers – within an institutionalized framework and in the (digital) media. Literary life has its actors, and they, in turn, have goals, interests, social status, social roles, feelings, decisions. Which piece of literary work is good and which is not? Which one is worthy of being included in textbooks, and which one is not? How do we define the norms, standards, viewpoints, which serve as a base for these decisions? Relations of interest and power form the common taste of an era, culture and community. Hungarian literary history does not speak about it, except for feminist literary historians who write about women’s literature and who are in fact in a “ghetto” as a consequence. Literary history pretends that something – that is in fact shaped by people – is natural; yet, people, men and women alike, have been framing it based on the age-old habituated norms and rules of a men-centred society according to which women can only come second. Literary history accepts that women writers are not talked about.

It was not necessary for a long time in historiography and other academic fields either to remember what women had done or what had happened to them. “What we know of women’s past are those things men consider significant to remember, seen and interpreted through a value system that places men at the center” – writes Gerda Lerner.⁵ By the end of the nineteenth century the self-image of historiography as an academic discipline has evolved, and it in turn has defined which areas and topics were considered important and which not. Women’s activities (everyday life, parenting, entertainment) belonged to the latter group, thus historiography had not even mentioned them until recently.

The same process of exclusion can be observed in the field of literary genres, styles, and topics: as opposed to the serious, the patriotic, the national, the pathetic, the tragic, the intellectual, the logical, the masculine, everything that was considered feminine, light, flippant, frivolous, charming, natural, emotional, sentimental, sensual, illogical and chaotic appeared and was treated as less valuable as well. These gender-based binary oppositions determine and pervade all areas of thinking, culture and society including literary memory. However, Hungarian secondary school textbooks do more than that. They have been sending a message to the largest part of the population for generations that says: women do not write. Yet, it is not true.

Moreover, this message is not articulated, one can only deduce it from the fact that women writers are not present in the textbooks. Most people acknowledge this without, in fact, realizing it. If textbooks discussed what kind of social and literary roles women – and, for that matter, men – had in the past centuries, and how this

resulted in not remembering women writers, it would be a fact that could be interpreted and understood, and not a hunch remaining unformulated and causing anxiety. The latter is a restraining power that keeps alive the feeling of unworthiness and ambivalence towards writing, which phenomenon is widely discussed in feminist literary criticism. Consequently, not only do our textbooks paint a false picture about our past in this respect, but they also bend the future in a direction that would not allow change concerning neither the image, nor the position of women writers.

Canons are the “product of tradition” „the institutionalised grammar of expectations” determining “which cultural products possess an unquestionable value for an interpretative community” – writes Mihály Szegedy-Maszák. Canons “...presuppose a heritage that we take for granted, yet, it is not accessible directly, thus it needs to be acquired”.⁶ The process of acquisition happens in education. Education conveys canonised tradition and values. Institutions present the past and make it accessible, and, according to Mary Douglas, also “create shadowed places in which nothing can be seen and no questions asked”.⁷ Communal and collective memory maps those relations of the present that determine how we can see the past.

However, says Gerda Lerner, “women have been left out of history not because of the evil conspiracy of men in general or male historians in particular, but because we considered history only in male-centered terms. We have missed women and their activities, because we have asked questions of history which are inappropriate to women.”⁸ What, how and whom do we need to ask in order to change this? We need to know what happened in the past, how we have forgotten women writers, and, furthermore, we need to know who is entitled to talk about the past and on behalf of the past in the present. That is, who represents and who can represent the past? If nobody talks about it, women’s literary tradition will remain silent.

And lastly, the question is not only whether we speak about women writers, but also how we speak about them. Do we build narratives around them in which their activity or they themselves lose value? (Hungarian literary history depicted Minka Czöbel in the latter way, looking down at her, describing her as an ugly, tense and annoying spinster. The achievement of writing the most progressive poetry in Hungary for the decade of 1895–1905 has been granted to her, but in a modality suggesting that it happened only by chance, not due to her conscious efforts.⁹) Or do we try to read them in a way so as to free them from the stigmatization of gender-based bias and enable them to find a way to literary tradition?

Canons and tradition determine our reading habits.¹⁰ We read Renée Erdős based on our reading experience of Endre Ady, the most well known poet of the same era in the first decade of the twentieth century, and we read Ilona Kosztolányiné Harnos as the wife of the most prominent novelist and poet of the 1920-ies and the 1930-ies, Dezső Kosztolányi. It is not easy to change this habitual reading approach.

Most Hungarians are familiar with and like Endre Ady and Dezső Kosztolányi, we studied their works at length at school. We haven’t even heard of Kosztolányi’s wife, let alone knowing that she wrote a memoir the manuscript of which was hidden in a library archive and came to light only in the first decade of the new millennium.¹¹ However, she used to be an acknowledged writer publishing short stories and fiction in her own time, and was a well-known actress as well. But literary history only remembered her as the wife of a famous writer, we have only kept count of the biography she wrote about her husband. Consequently, it is difficult to find a point of view from which her work is valuable and interesting alongside her husband’s but, at the same time, independent of it. (I have attempted to find such a

point of view in the chapter about her under the headings of 'body', 'mirror' and 'trauma'.)

The poems of Renée Erdős are similar to those of Endre Ady. The language of Ady's poetry has soaked in deeply enough to determine what kind of texts we accept as poetical. It is of no avail that one learns after, or even knows before reading Erdős's poems that in fact the sequence of events is the reverse, i. e. it is Ady's poems that are similar to those of Erdős,¹² our reading experience will only change if we make a conscious effort. Knowing that if we compare the two poets, due to the established expectations and norms of reading, Erdős will almost certainly come in second, as we will feel her poems more lengthy, redundant, too emotional, one-sided, and her most common subjects of love and womanly issues will not seem important, and knowing that the reason for these impressions is that according to our canonical norms we are used to considering only poems dealing with serious manly issues in a succinct way good, we can try to think of viewpoints that will make it possible for the works of forgotten woman writers to find their way to literary tradition, even if this reintegration happens via a retrospective process.

A way to do that could be a gender-sensitive interpretation of literature, feminist criticism and gynocriticism, and even more so, since these trends – being rooted in women's liberation and suffragette movements – are characterized by a strong cultural critical attitude which means they want to act, to stand up for change, to influence what they perceive and what they describe with academic tools. It is a plausible choice even though it is belated by almost forty years: Elaine Showalter named gynocriticism the school that engaged in the works of women writers, women's literary tradition, the characteristics of women's writing in 1979.¹³ Since then the second and third waves of feminism have passed; gynocriticism is outdated from several aspects. Yet, this retrospective tradition building cannot be avoided in Hungary as it guarantees that today's women's literature will not be forgotten. We cannot but carry out this gynocritical work being aware of the experiences, theories and insights of the last forty years, because contemporary women writers need predecessors to lean on in order to become a part of the tradition themselves.

To solve this theoretical problem I propose to consider writers as heroines/heroes of the stories written about them in literary history, textbooks and public opinion. We can only reach them via this constantly changing story revised by literary memory. When we talk about a writer we cannot mean the real person, neither their works, but the representations of values and attitudes this figure in the story provides. Writers are especially suitable for this representative function, because a significant amount of documents accompany their lives: they write and critics write about them, and their letters and diaries etc. are also kept by later generations and in archives. This concept means, in a way, the re-interpretation of gynocriticism, finding these not easily accessible stories that are written over and over by literary history and public opinion, as the past changes in our memories, as if there were novels unravelling at the knots of the web of literary history. The novels about writers are written by literary history and they represent what a given epoch thought about them.

Only in the last decades have we started to rediscover women writers in Hungary, the conscious work that has been a well-known practice for a much longer time in the USA and in Western Europe – one that results in the reintegration of women writers who had previously fallen into oblivion to literary history. Thus women's literary tradition is still silent in the eyes of the classical-official canons. It is a hidden tradition that is blurred on the many-coloured palette of literary languages and canons. I think that it is possible to draw the line of the literary tradition of

twentieth century women writers, because it exists as an underground stream, and, paradoxically, it can be sensed by sensing its lack. Contemporary women writers feel the lack of their own tradition as groundlessness or rootlessness. We can think of this phenomenon in similar terms concerning earlier points of the tradition-line as well: had we not forgotten about the poems and novels of Renée Erdős about love, passion, the role of women and their relationship to men, had we included them in our canon, Ágnes Nemes Nagy would not have had to hide her female poems. And that could have had a freeing affect on today's poetry as well.

But does women's literature exist at all? Many, including contemporary women writers in Hungary – even those publishing chick lit bestsellers – protest against the use of this expression,¹⁴ saying that there are not several literatures but only one that exists the way it is, and the gender of the author does not have to be taken into account. What counts is only the aesthetic value of literature. As long as “women's” literature is contrasted with literature “as such” and not with “men's” literature, one can clearly understand that this protest is in fact against the marginalisation of women writers. If a certain issue of a Hungarian literary magazine or journal does not include the work of any women writers, it is never called a “special issue of men's literature”, it is just an ordinary issue. On the other hand, if there are only women writers published in an anthology, it is called a “collection of women's literature”.

I use the expressions “women's literature”, “women's literary tradition.” If we don't use them, it will only do harm to women writers, as it did before. Women's literature denotes women authors and the works written by them that mostly engage in problems concerning women, call out to women readers, and are characterised by a certain female mode of writing.

I consider myself a woman writer. I am a woman and I write. And I need to fight the pressure of silence. I believe that an approach of personal reading can stop the tradition of forgetting. I can talk about women writers of the past if I show myself and also how I see them and how they have shaped me. I see myself in their mirror and see them in mine. This approach entitles me to insert them at a certain point into a line of tradition at the end of which I imagine myself, that is, to call them my ancestors. I visited room after room in the tradition of women's literature. I have opened doors, sat down at desks. The rooms were dusty, the desks were covered with dust as well. Only a few people had entered before me. But I am here now.

NOTES

¹ The textbook series are authored by Madocsai, László (Budapest, Nemzeti Tankönyvkiadó), Mohácsy, Károly (Budapest, Krónika Nova), Pethőné Nagy, Csilla (Budapest, Nemzeti Tankönyvkiadó), Füzfa, Balázs (Budapest, Krónika Nova) and Arató, László-Pála, Károly (Budapest, Műszaki). They were all published several times, some of them in revised editions in the second half of the 2000s.

² Margit Kaffka (1880–1918) was the most renowned woman writer in the 1910s, and the only one from the era whom literary history did not forget and appreciated highly. She belonged to the group of writers gathered together around the literary journal “Nyugat” (West).

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- ³ Assmann, Jan, *A kulturális emlékezet: Írás, emlékezés és politikai identitás a korai magaskultúrákban*. Transl. by Hidas, Zoltán, Budapest, Osiris, 1999, 18.
- ⁴ Nora, Pierre, *Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire*. *Representations*, Spring 1989, 7–24., 10.
- ⁵ Lerner, Gerda, *The Majority Finds Its Past: Placing Women in History*. Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2005 (1979), 168–169.
- ⁶ Szegedy-Maszák, Mihály, “A bizony(talan)ság ábrándja: kánonképződés a posztmodern korban.” *Minta a szőnyegen*. Budapest, Balassi, 1995, 76–89.
- ⁷ Douglas, Mary: *How Institutions Think?* Syracuse University Press, 1986, 67, 70.
- ⁸ Lerner, Gerda, op. cit., 140–141.
- ⁹ See Pór, Péter, “Utószó”. In: Minka, Czóbel: *Boszorkány-dalok*. Budapest, Szépirodalmi, 1974, 241–263.
- ¹⁰ Szegedy-Maszák, Mihály, op. cit.
- ¹¹ Kosztolányi Dezsőné Harnos, Ilona, *Burokban születtem*. Ed. Borgos, Anna, Budapest, Noran, 2003.
- ¹² See Kádár, Judit, “A „zseniális poétalány”: Erdős Renée szubverzív lírájáról.” *Alföld*, 2001/6, 57–67.
- ¹³ Showalter, Elaine, “Towards a Feminist Poetics.”(1979) In: *The Poetics of Gender*. Ed. Miller, Nancy K., New York, Columbia University Press, 1986, 222–247.
- ¹⁴ See for example an interview about women’s novels with bestseller novelist Éva Fejős: Mihalicz, Csilla, “Milyen a »női regény«?” *Ötvenentül.hu*, 2008. 08. 14. www.otventul.hu/page.php?PageID=3284