

IDYLIC FAMILY LIFE IN PÉTER ESTERHÁZY'S NOVELS (A SEMIOTIC APPROACH FROM A FEMINIST POINT OF VIEW)

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'T is a Woman's whole existence; Man may range
The Court, Camp, Church, the Vessel, and the Mars;
Sword, Gown, Gain, Glory, offer in exchange
Pride, Fame, Ambition, to fill up his heart,
And few there are whom these can not estrange;
Men have all these resources, we but one,
To love again, and be again undone.
(Lord Byron, *Don Juan*)

Feminist criticism

Most recent Western literary theories, such as structuralism, close reading, semiotics, etc. are also well known in Eastern Europe. They were accepted and explored at the time when the dominance of the Marxist approach was still very strong. The only theory that did not become popular in countries like Poland and Hungary was feminist literary theory. The East European societies do not have to fight for things, such as employment of women, longer maternity leave, or day care. Since 1945, all these changes have been implemented by the state and have had a significant impact on people's mentality. Whether this has had a fully positive effect on the position of woman is a moot question. It was accepted that a woman might be working outside the home for financial reasons; if her work was interesting, or if she was well-educated, she gained a certain social position and her family, including her husband, were proud of her. In the East European societies, a new kind of mentality has developed since the war: a woman's career became as, or more, important than the care of the family and children.

This situation explains, to a certain extent, why neither Hungarian nor Polish literature has any explicitly feminist writers. This also explains the lack of interest in feminism and feminist fiction *as political writing*, i.e. as the means of changing social reality and people's mentality. Besides, this mentality was

changed to such an extent that, due to a very low birth rate in Hungary, the state decided to encourage women to bear children and take care of them by giving the mothers a three-year-leave for each child and the right to return to their job after the period of absence.

However, since the beginning of the 1990s, feminist theory has been noticed in some way in both countries. Courses on the feminist perspective are now being given at the university of Budapest by American and English scholars (see Sükösd 1992). In Poland, an article about feminists, a kind of ironic dictionary of feminist terms was written by a famous Polish critic and published in one of the best literary periodicals (see K. Mtrak's article in *Literatura* 1992). Despite this, there are no books written from the feminist perspective, no translations of such books from other languages, no departments or chairs of Women's Studies and no advertisements encouraging women to apply for a job by suggesting that if they have the same qualifications as the male applicants they will be selected for the job in question.¹

In the West, feminist studies are very advanced and the feminist point of view is adopted to historical, sociological and literary research. Some Western feminist criticism argues that the whole history of literature has been written from a masculine viewpoint and that it has had a very important impact on the appreciation of some masculine values.

Consequently, literary work by women has been considered less interesting and marginal.² This is the reason why feminist criticism tries to focus on women's works and, specifically, on women's values. One example of this kind of research is Alison Light's book *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars*. The author focusses exclusively on women novelists and this is the most feminist aspect of her study. In my opinion, her book, as well as the greater part of feminist studies, can be considered a mixture of sociology of literature and reception-theory, both well-known in Eastern Europe. I would like to mention two examples of interest in feminine behaviour which do not adopt the feminist perspective. The first is a study by Éva Bálint and András Veres (1974), entitled *A sikertelenség környezetrajza* [The Topography of Failure], in which three novels by three male writers have been selected from a sociological perspective, documenting the impossibility of a happy life in a concrete Hungarian situation. One of them is a novel by Ákos Kertész, which depicts the relationship between a young girl, Vali Szombathy, and a worker, Ferenc Makra. She is ambitious, unconventional and she knows what she wants: to become an artist. He has perhaps enough talent to become a sculptor, but he has no artistic ambition and, as a result of his environment and the lack of education, he is only interested in a very traditional way of life (marriage, children, and a good housewife). When Vali gets pregnant, she

decides to have an abortion, despite the fact that she really is in love, and loved, and that the young man wants to marry her. She feels, understandably, considering the very difficult economic circumstances in Hungary in the 1950s that the acceptance of marriage and family life would make her own personal development and that of her lover impossible. The critics were very negative about such an outcome and accused the writer of lacking the ability to create a positive and hopeful end to the story. They also found Vali, as a character, to be unconvincing, exaggerated, monstrous and very problematic from the ideological point of view. Of course, this study, published in the 1970s, was influenced by Lukács' theory. I mention this example, because of the system of values which I will analyze later in my article. It is also interesting because it shows an unusual picture of a woman drawn by a male author. It is also interesting to know that the writer shows the unhappiness of the male character who has abandoned the young girl after the abortion and has chosen a traditional way of life: a marriage with a simple girl. In the end, Ferenc Makra commits suicide while, as the text suggests, Vali is happy, leading her unconventional life, somewhere outside Hungary, which she has left after the Revolution of 1956.

In this context, the concept of "negative images of women" in male writing seems to me a very ambiguous one. Following the stages in the development of feminist literary theory enumerated by Julia Kristeva (quoted by Mills 1989: 4), I would like to argue that it is possible and sensible to discuss negative judgments about women and female writers only in male critical writings and not in literary texts.

Another example of interest in the position of Hungarian women was a sociological study by Pál Lócsei (1985) *A női munkavállalás és a hagyományos magyar család* [Female Employment and the Traditional Hungarian Family]. From the modern (or feminist) point of view this very serious and interesting study is somewhat paternalistic. Considering the fact that an average Hungarian family is economically based on two bread-winners, Lócsei pleads for the possibility of part-time jobs for women working outside the home:

"What has prevented, and still prevents, the establishment of work places with 4-6 working hours for women who wished and wish to reconcile the dual tasks assumed by them?" (Lócsei 1985: 90)

The author is obviously convinced that there are some typically female activities, apart from the biologically determined ones, related to the household and motherhood, which can be done only by women. He cannot imagine that the option of a part-time job can be also taken up by men.

I would like to suggest that there are two main reasons for the lack of interest in feminist criticism in Eastern Europe: a social one and a purely theoretical one. Having explained the totally different position of women in Eastern Europe and its consequences for people's mentality, I would like to focus briefly on the theoretical aspect of feminist criticism.

An important group of feminist writers examines or criticizes the position of women in society, now or in the past. This kind of writing can be seen as 'documents of the time', and such texts are generally written in a realistic prose, which is a fairly direct representation of the real world. This kind of writing, feminist or not, was selected, evaluated and interpreted by the method called sociology of literature, which was the favourite theory of the Marxists: all problems were examined as illustrations of the struggle between people of different social classes, but no distinction was made between the situation of women and the position of farmers. In fact, feminist criticism, especially so-called Marxist-Feminism, is doing the same: it focusses attention on a group of human beings who are oppressed, this time because of their gender. It is interesting to see that Western feminist critics have a link with Marxism or with its point of view. Some feminist critics use Marxist terminology. For example, A. Light argues that even that feminism which allied itself with a socialist tradition seemed to have little to say about a sense of class difference in women's lives. The term 'consciousness-raising' in a feminist context³ reminds one of the term 'class consciousness' that was to be developed by the communist party. This kind of Marxist sociolect would be very irritating in the East European countries, especially after the change in 1989, when Marxist ideology became rejected. The problem is that feminism is closely connected with the socialist tradition, the Women's Movement, politics and, as such, seems to be more of an ideology than a scientific method (see Mills 1989: 3-4, 186-225).

However, one ideological task of feminist criticism that certainly makes sense is the revision of literary history. It is a feminist point of view that makes it clear to me that, according to one of feminism's arguments, Hungarian literary history needs some supplementing and should perhaps be rewritten. The absence of woman writers in Hungarian history of literature is obvious and, in some way, suspect, but the general opinion is that this fact is due to the low aesthetic level of their novels and poetry. It does not seem important to know who these female writers are and what kind of books they have written. For Hungarian literary history, the first step should be a registration of woman writers in the form of an annotated bibliography, which can be followed later by an analysis of the characteristics of Hungarian women's writing. The Hungarian female literary tradition, as far as it is known, is so

important that it can be argued that male authors such as, for example, Zsigmond Móricz and László Németh, were influenced by it.⁴ The problem is that most of the books written by women that are not considered part of the Hungarian literary canon are unavailable. However, book publishing in Hungary is now more free and, consequently, there are some re-publications of the female writers who were very popular before the second world war.⁵ As long as the criterion of gender is considered to be scientifically irrelevant, there is no hope for a change. It is significant that, at the moment, only Hungarian scholars living in the West pay attention to feminist criticism and female writers. One example of this interest is the 10th number of *Arkánium* (December 1992), a literary periodical edited by Hungarian (male) scholars and writers living in the USA and Canada, which published Hungarian translation excerpts from the works of Luce Irigaray (1992) and Constance Penley (1992). This is also the first attempt to appropriate the terms of feminist criticism into the Hungarian language.⁶

The second theoretical problem with feminist criticism is its inability to characterise women's writing: neither the poetical approach, nor the thematic point of view is able to define it. There are some attempts and statements, such as 'the symbolism of fluidity and female sexuality' in confrontation with 'the phallogocentrism of Western philosophical writings' (quoted by Mills 1989: 7), or the conviction that 'a link between fiction and life can be considered as the essence of feminist thought' (quoted by Mills 1989: 171). At the same time, there are those who argue that a text must be seen 'as discursive construct rather than reflections of an individual authors's experience' (quoted by Mills 1989: 8). But the fact that there is no agreed opinion amongst feminist critics can also be seen as a challenge to analysis of the male and female writing from this point of view.

The reconstruction of values

The analysis I will present here is a reading of Esterházy's novels, influenced by feminist theory and executed in semiotic terms. It is not my intention to show the positive or negative image of women in Esterházy's fiction, but only to show the fine interaction between the female and male characters and the system of values that underlines it.

At any times, every society has a number of values which are connected to its norms and rules. By norms I understand the rules which are fixed by law (Greimas' domain of *competence* and *performance*); by values I understand a much more subjective combination of meanings, ethical beliefs and ideas that change in time and are characteristic of a social group. Because they are not

defined by law, they can be discerned by empirical sociological research or by a survey of (literary) texts. The values belong to the domain of *manipulation* and *sanction*.

It is possible to reconstruct the feminist system of values, if we examine carefully their publications (Brouwer et al. 1990: 12) and interviews. From a feminist point of view, knowledge and technology, as well as some cultural, political and economic developments in our society, have had a positive impact on the women's lives. They enabled them to realize the following values:

- the opportunity to postpone and choose motherhood,
- smaller dependency on men,
- greater control over one's own destiny,
- engagement in public life.

The most committed feminists would formulate those values more strongly:

- independence,
- total control over one's own destiny,
- a career.

It is absolutely clear that these values are also masculine values, and the paradoxical situation is that what feminists wanted was to replace masculine values by some feminine values. It is significant that some successful women declare proudly that they have strength, vision and dominant behaviour while, at the same time, admitting that these qualifications are seen in our society as masculine (see interview with Madonna, BBC 1992). Another statement from the same interview made it clear that intelligent, independent women are not interested in marriage and children.

I would like to illustrate, using the Greimasian model, the system of values held by Vali Szombathy, the character from Ákos Kertész novel's:

Manipulation	Competence	Performance	Sanction
personal development	a strong will and possibility to do that	abortion	independence; impossibility to realize one aspect of femininity: motherhood

The more extreme form of behavior was manifested by Renate Dorrestein, a Dutch feminist, who was sterilized when she was twenty-two. According to Greimas' semiotic model, her life can be represented as follows:

Manipulation	Competence	Performance	Sanction
independence	a strong will and possibility to do that ⁷	sterilization	successful career; impossibility to realize one aspect of femininity: motherhood

The question is whether intelligence, independence and career exclude motherhood and a (happy) family life. I would like to show that this opposition (independence and career on the one hand and the motherhood and the family on the other) is typical of some militant Western feminists and those Hungarian writers who elevate family life. However, this fact is only apparently paradoxical.

The idyllic family life in the work of Péter Esterházy

I am now going to provide a semiotic analysis of the image of family life in Esterházy's first novel *Termelési-regény* [Production-novel]⁸ (1979) and in *Hrabal könyve* [A book of Hrabal], published in 1990.

Termelési-regény is a novel about a young writer, Esterházy Péter,⁹ his wife and their two children, and his family (his parents, his brother, his aunts, uncles and cousins). The novel has two narrators: an impersonal, third person narrator and a very involved one who, like Goethe's chronicle writer, Eckerman, whose name he has adopted, writes a kind of a first person chronicle about an admired novelist. This impersonation results in an ironically exaggerated attention to the young novelist to the detriment of everybody else, including his wife. Furthermore, the narration of the whole novel is ironic and intertextual, with commonplace and conventional images coherently presented with meta-linguistic commentaries. This novel paints a perfect and harmonious family life and the image of an 'ideal woman'.

Esterházy's *Hrabal könyve* is also about a writer's family, his wife Anna and their three children. This novel is to some extent autobiographical. There is some tension between the husband and his wife, who is pregnant with her fourth child and, this time, sees motherhood as a burden. The novel has a third

person narrator, but several times the narration is taken by Anna (apparent Direct Speech) who talks about her family in general and about her feeling and fascination for the older novelist, Bohumil Hrabal. In this novel, which also has a happy-ending, the idyllic atmosphere is mixed with some reality.

The *Termelési-regény*

Adopting Greimas' terminology, it can be said that the discursive configuration of *family life* occupies an important place in some of Esterházy's novels. This configuration can be described as:

the life of a family in its customary way of doing it; the family is a group of people that consists of parents and their children, in a large sense aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents.

There are, of course, more configurations in the novel such as *politics, social life, literature* etc. A short enumeration of the thematic roles of both actors shows the configurations to which they belong:

The roles of the masculine character, Péter Esterházy:

<i>politics:</i>	a person of aristocratic origin: an Esterházy, a Hungarian citizen, a novelist;
<i>social life:</i>	a person of aristocratic origin, a Catholic, a novelist, a footballer;
<i>literature:</i>	a (famous) novelist, a friend of famous writers, a literary critic;
<i>family life:</i>	a husband, (to some extent) a lover, a father, a child (of his parents), a brother.

The roles of the feminine character, Mrs Esterházy:

<i>family life:</i>	a wife, (to some extent) a mistress, a housewife, a mother
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In semiotic terms, this distribution of roles means that the female actor is connected to the configuration of *family life* only and that inside it she has fewer roles than her husband.

In some way, Esterházy's text confirms the statements of feminist criticism:

'Traditionally women's lives have been imagined in relation to men's lives, as the daughters, mothers, mistresses, wives of men. They have, in consequence, been imagined either in terms of a single role, psychologically important to men (virgin, temptress, bitch, goddess) or in terms of their single social and biological function in male society (preparing for marriage, or married).' (quoted by Ruthven 1990: 73)

The author of *Feminist Literary Studies*, K. K. Ruthven argues that a good deal of this would be equally true if the terms were simply reversed:

'Traditionally men's lives have been imagined in relation to women's lives, as the sons, fathers, lovers or husbands of women.' (Ibid.)

Sadly, he does not mention the most important part of men's images, namely their social roles and their career, which mean their attachment to other configurations such as, for example, *social life*.

Their thematic roles determine the space in which the characters move: it is clear that Mrs Esterházy never ventures outside her home, she has no friends of her own, we know nothing about her family or her education prior to her marriage. This is quite strange considering that the setting of the novel is Hungary in the 1970s and that the text relates to political and social reality by, for example, ironically using Marxist sociolect. In the 1970s, most Hungarian women were working outside the home. In contrast, the only place where Mrs Esterházy plays her roles is in her home. Consequently, with one exception, her family name is not given:

'I can, for example, look at a million faces, and yet I hold Gitta Reén the fairest one of all.' (Esterházy 1979: 303)

This is the only time when Gitta's family name is mentioned. It is also noticeable that it is the very name of the author's wife. It is significant that Mrs Esterházy has several names given to her by the narrators. All these names are connected with her husband's point of view:¹⁰ the wife of Esterházy, a Lady, the marvellous lady Gitti, Frau Gitti, my little Gittus, sweet Gittis etc. Most of these names express adoration and love and, as a whole, the text expresses the love for a woman who has accepted the traditional distribution of tasks within the family and has undertaken to do the cleaning, the cooking, the sewing, the caring for the children, and the entertaining. The distribution of roles between the female and masculine characters is clear cut, but Mrs Esterházy is allowed to be irritated about the way things have turned out. Some situations are presented ironically and the irony touches the male character, in particular, but he will never change. The passage introducing Mrs

Esterházy into the novel illustrates this well: the chronical part of the novel starts with the conventional image of a man looking for his sports gear and indirectly accusing his wife of having put it away. Mrs Esterházy's first utterance in the novel is the question: 'Are you blind?' (Ibid., 133); her irritation is emphasised by the narrator's comment who qualifies her question as an utterance 'without any rhetorical quality'. Mrs Esterházy's second utterance is given by the narrator in indirect speech without a comment: it is a question about whether her husband's visitors want some coffee.

All the traits of the characters and their roles are static and strongly opposed to one another: there is an opposition between the euphoric (connected to the female character) and the dysphoric (connected to the male character).

euphoric

vs

dysphoric

she is a beautiful woman

'Frau Gitti looked up with sleepy eyes. The Master again observed with admiration the morning smoothness of her face, the vivid red of her mouth, the blinding darkness (not exactly like that!) of her eyes, the soft arch of the eyebrows, the intimate neutrality of the base of her nose ("exxcellent!") and the tired purity of her forehead;

he is not a really handsome man

while he, the Master, always wakes up wrinkled like a bulldog.' (Ibid., 336)

The above example shows that most of the descriptions are finely ironic, mainly because of the stereotypes which are embedded in the language. Such use of language is typical of the whole text of the novel and emphasises the stereotypical situations in which all things and characters are presented. I shall return to this problem later on.

When there is no intention to compare the woman's beauty, then it is shown from her husband's viewpoint:

'Frau Gitti's thighs are *first class*; coming at the women from the psyche: she fulfills the most extreme adolescent dreams of the Master!' (Ibid., 176)

'Lady Gitti was as pretty as a picture. Her olive skin and her freckles positively radiated outwards, fragrant, colorful bubbles of air floated towards the city. The Master closed his eyes, people stopped in their tracks everywhere, and just stared and stared.

«You know, my friend, I saw my wife, I personally, with my very eyes!» (Ibid., 342–243)

Returning to my earlier discussion, we find more examples of the opposition between the euphoric and the dysphoric in the text:

she is practical

Frau Gitti helps both of them

Gitti has to list the things that are missing, like spoons and small plates

she advises him to open the door and to look

she is a very good cook

she is always busy and helpful

'The plates were changed (thanks to Lady Gitti's presence in the background, [...].)' (Ibid., 185) 'Fragrant black coffee beckoned invitingly, the result of Lady Gitti's blessed hands.' (Ibid., 208)

she is a very good and caring mother
when their daughter is bleeding because of her fall from the bicycle, she is the first to run to help

he is very clumsy

once, when he once tries to console a crying baby, he falls into the bed

once he serves breakfast in bed, but forgets to bring half of the things

when he asks who is ringing at the door

he never cooks

but he can make some tea

at home, he is mostly sitting

in his favourite arm-chair, reading newspaper and receiving visitors; Gitti's illness is a disaster, it makes clear what takes up most of her days: there are so many dirty dishes in the sink, that he cannot fill the kettle to boil some water for a cup of tea.

he tries to be a good father

he makes first an literary association: 'Blut muss fließen knüppel-dick, vivat, hoch, die Republik!' (371) Then, he also helps the child.

In the light of the above examples, it is absolutely clear that the narration of *Termelési-regény* is not realistic. Firstly, the accumulation of stereotypical

situations, behaviours and statements is obvious. Secondly, the use of language is such that it does refer not only to reality, but also to the literary and everyday language. It is a feature of Esterházy's style that he makes use of literary and linguistic stereotypes. In this context, it is important to realize which stereotypical situations are *not* shown and which descriptions are *not* ironically stereotyped. All things which have to do with family ties, religion and fidelity are presented without irony; they are the unquestioned values. (The fact that some characters show quite an immature behaviour at the table or in the church is relevant only to them, and not to the values themselves.)

Let me give an example: The young husband is absolutely faithful to his wife. Of course, he notices other women and he likes some of them, but they never attract him physically. The structure of the text could make it possible that, in the stereotypical situation of a famous writer touring Europe, he should flirt with some attractive girls or have an affair, but this is not the case. Not even an (imaginary) meeting with Gina Lollobrigida and her proposition to visit her in the evening can breach his fidelity. On the contrary, at night he passionately desires his wife.

In this very intertextual and meta-literary text, there are some very brief statements, spoken and repeated by both actors, which are conspicuous by their simplicity:

'You darling.' (Ibid., 201, 202, 303)

'It's great living with you.' (Ibid., 303, 345)

There are also statements without irony or poetry:

'Big Boss, I love you,' he said to the sleeping woman. 'I love you because you're gorgeous, you have a fine mind, and because your ass is absolutely purrfect.' (Ibid., 443)

There are also erotic descriptions in the text such as, for example, those of Gitta in the bath (349) which in addition to being simple and lacking irony, express her husband's great admiration for her beauty.

In Esterházy's novels, a happy family life is a very important value, but it seems to be in conflict with a woman's independence. This means that a value such as one's independence is absent, because dependence is seen as an intrinsic part of love.

Using the Greimasian model, the system of values held by Frau Gitti can be illustrated as follows:

Manipulation	Competence	Performance	Sanction
happiness	marriage	love and dependency	happy family life

In this context, I would like to suggest that the values in the discursive configuration of Esterházy's family life are based on Christian virtues, for example, on selfless love.

Hrabal könyve

The Novel *Hrabal könyve* is a tale about a family, with the character Anna as the central actor. This is almost a realistic story, but there are two actors in it who do not belong to the 'real world': they are angels sent by God to protect the family happiness. Once upon the time, God needed to send one angel only, the archangel Gabriel, to announce the pregnancy, but in modern times, when the protection of pregnancy is the main problem, God needs two helpers. One of them was earlier called Gabriel, but nobody uses his name now. In times that have changed, God and the two angels will not intervene, they can only watch the events: the angels, installed in a Lada car communicate with God by modern technological equipment and in a very modern language. The installation of the two observers makes it possible to present Anna from a point of view other than that of her husband's, but the result is the same: the angels are delighted with her beauty and they express this in a very sexist language, talking about her 'pretty ass'. Of course, they are not really 'dangerous' as men. Besides, Anna sees them as spies.

There are many thematic and poetical¹¹ similarities between the two novels: Anna's husband is a writer,¹² the family ties are very important and Anna who is presented as a pretty and desirable woman, is consciously and extremely devoted to her family. However, Anna has a much more independent personality than Frau Gitti. This is apparent from the enumeration of her roles which are, nevertheless, still only connected to the discursive configuration of *family life*: a wife, (to some extent) a mistress, a housewife, a mother, a daughter-in-law, a daughter, a niece.

Anna sees herself as having more roles and tasks. Let me illustrate this by citing one of her statements:

'I can see and understand that I'm needed around here. Only sometimes I think that someone is needed here and not me, a kind of anonymous jack-of-all-trades, lover, wife,

family, secretary, mother, mother in lieu of mother, interior decorator, cook, kitchen help, spiritual solace, corrector, gardener, receptionist, nurse, charwoman, friend, [...].'
(Esterházy 1990: 151–152)

It is clear that all these words have, as a common characteristic, the notion of servitude.

As the above quotation shows, Anna has a voice in the text: the third person narrator “allows” her to take over the narration about herself and to present her interior monologues. Her husband and her family constitute a big part of it. Most of her inner thoughts are addressed to the Czech writer, Bohumil Hrabal, in whom Anna’s husband is interested, since he is writing a book about him. Through her husband, Hrabal becomes present in the family and becomes her friend. This is a really grotesque situation: only thanks to her husband can Anna have somebody to whom she can tell her problems, but it is a very logical solution, because, like Frau Gitti, Anna is mostly enclosed in her home and surrounded by her children, husband, and her family. She only goes for a short walk early in the evening and then she thinks about the life that she has accepted and loves. However, there is some tension in this novel and, this time, this tension is inside Anna herself.

euphoric	vs	dysphoric
it is fine to have always somebody around		it is tiring to be never alone
after nearly twenty years, she still adores, loves and desires her husband		she dreams about Hrabal and she speaks to him in her mind
she adores her parents-in-law		she never had a really good relationship with her own parents
she likes cooking		she is not patient enough to make a good soup (like her mother-in-law did) she is not able to get up early every morning to prepare breakfast for her family (like her mother and mother-in-law did)
she loves her children		she is frightened by her fourth pregnancy

It is not the desire for personal development or career that forces Anna to think about the abortion, it is only the tiredness.

'I don't want to have any more children, ... No, no, no I don't want them anymore. I don't want to carry my big belly, my big bloody belly any more, I don't want to wear the same dress for half a year, no more iron for me, no more throwing up, no more pain, no more hospital [...]' (Ibid., 114)

Anna speaks about the abortion to Hrabal, and she revolts against her husband. Finally he persuades her to keep the baby, sitting in the kitchen and caressing her hand, by the following arguments:

'[...] he was clearly struggling with words,' if ... if you want ... if you want it ... then ... then I will give birth...'. (Ibid., 144)

The novel ends with the happy-end, Anna shall bear her child. As she herself says, a miracle has happened, so the angels were not sent in vain. Using Greimas' framework, her life can be depicted as follows:

Manipulation	Competence	Performance	Sanction
happiness	marriage and motherhood	acceptance of the fourth pregnancy	happy family life

Happiness is, of course, a very relative notion. In this novel, happiness means living in the family and working for it. The wife and the husband have totally different tasks, but the same goals. He brings bags of cement, when the family house is being built and spends whole days in his study writing books. She cooks and the attention that the text pays to the preparation of meals is significant: eating together in a family, eating with friends, offering food to a stranger (to console him) become the sharing of food, creating a community in the Biblical sense. Happiness means, thus, living closely together and serving each other. This is, of course, a very traditional model of life. It can be called paternalistic from feminist viewpoint, but it is simply based on other values: dependence, solidarity, happiness through other people, sense of being useful. In the light of some interviews with Esterházy, the family (and the church) appears to be the very place for a lonely human being (Keresztury 1991: 24).

The acceptance of all the tasks connected with the family life is explicitly expressed by Anna:

'I'm a wife, with a stress on all three words.' (Ibid., 147)

'It was my choice. I'm free and I'm confined, that's my condition.' (Ibid., 152)

These words, spoken by a female character in a book by a male writer will not sound convincing to everyone. The whole thing looks more like an idyllic and, in some way, romantic, male fantasy.

This novel creates a fairy land, where good heroes always get their just rewards.

Notes

1. This kind of 'positive discrimination' is current in the Netherlands.
2. Feminist studies give us examples of 'discriminating' behaviour against women writers: 'It may be respectable to write about Conan Doyle or even Raymond Chandler but Christie remains beyond the pale, [...]. It is an extraordinary fact, given the centrality of her work to British cultural life, that no self-respecting British critic has ever written at decent length about her, [...].' (Light 1991: 64)
The Hungarian critics and scholars show a similar attitude.
3. '[...] 'consciousness-raising' came to signify a variety of related activities which are spelled out in Juliet Mitchell's definition: the process of transforming the hidden, individual fears of women into a shared awareness of the meaning of them as *social problems*, the release of anger, anxiety, the struggle of proclaiming the painful and *transforming it into the political*.' [my emphasis] (quoted by Ruthven 1990: 71.)
4. The connection between Kata Bethlen and Margit Kaffka on the one hand, and Margit Kaffka and the two above-mentioned male writers on the other is certainly worth considering.
5. As an example, I would like to mention the reprint of two novels by Renée Erdős (1879–1956), a Hungarian female author. The Hungarian critics were unanimously negative about it (Illés 1972, Iszlai 1990). It is also significant that only a scholar outside Hungary is interested in analysis of books considered to be trivial literature. I allude to the paper presented by L. Kemenes Géfin at the Modern Languages Association Convention (Toronto 1993), entitled *Female Identity in the Novels of Renée Erdős*. I would like to thank the author for allowing me to read his manuscript.
6. Another example of research from feminist viewpoint into Hungarian literature, written in Hungarian is the article by a Dutch scholar (Molemkamp 1994).
7. Sterilization is not allowed in Eastern Europe.
8. This novel is translated into the French: Esterházy Péter: *Trois anges me surveillent. Les aveux d'un roman*. Traduit du hongrois par Agnès Járász et Sophie Képés. Paris 1989: Gallimard.
9. This novel is to some extent autobiographical. This is the reason why the name of the author and that of the most important character are the same.
10. In Hungarian: Esterházy felesége (113), az asszony (ibid.), a mester felesége, a csudás Gitti asszony (138), Frau Gitti (139), Gittuskám (ibid.), Gittus (173), Édes Gittis (176), etc. All the quotations from Esterházy 1979.
11. We can also recognise the typical Esterházy's style which I have just described in connection with the *Termelési-regény*.

12. This time it is the husband who has no name. The third person narrator calls him simply 'the writer'. When Anna takes over the narration she speaks about 'my husband', using often a somewhat archaic form, or she expresses her feelings for him by calling him 'my happiness', 'my darling', etc.

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Die Ungarn, ihre Geschichte und Kultur

Edited by L. Kósa

Ein hervorragendes Autorenkollektiv unternimmt hier erstmals den Versuch, den Leser über alles, was zur Hungarologie gehört, zu informieren. In diesem Werk sind sämtliche das Ungarn und Ungarn betreffenden Kenntnisse kurz und knapp zusammengefaßt. Nach einer Einführung in die Hungarologie, ihrer Begriffsbestimmung, der Anzahl und territorialen Verbreitung der Ungarn in der Welt folgt ein Überblick über die ungarische Sprache, deren Verwandtschaft und Perioden. Das Kapitel über die Geschichte Ungarns beginnt bei der ungarischen Urgeschichte und erstreckt sich bis hin in die neueste Zeit. Die Literatur und Künste werden ausgehend von der ältesten ungarischen Dichtung nach Perioden und Themenkreisen bis in die jüngste Vergangenheit hinein behandelt. Die Ethnographie, die ungarische Volkskultur, deren historischen Schichten und Stellung in Europa bilden den Schluß dieses umfassenden Werkes. Die Bibliographie enthält in den Weltsprachen erschienenen Studien und Bücher, die zur weiteren eingehenden Orientierung verhelfen.

Das Buch wendet sich an alle, die sich mit der ungarischen Sprache befassen und die Vergangenheit sowie Kultur der Ungarn kennenlernen möchten, es richtet sich an jene, die zwar ungarischer Abstammung sind, aber nicht in diesem Kulturkreis aufgewachsen sind oder leben, und es ist für all die von Interesse, die mehr über Ungarn wissen möchten, als ein Reiseführer vermittelt. Gleichzeitig bietet es das erforderliche Grundwissen für ein ausführliches Ungarnstudium.

Readership: historians, undergraduate students, general public

In German, 1994, 508 pages, 17 x 25 cm.

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Akadémiai Kiadó, Budapest

Nous, les Hongrois

by I. Nemeskürty

Cet ouvrage n'est pas un traité d'historiographie, mais comme les autres livres d'István Nemeskürty, une lecture captivante qui facilite la compréhension du présent de la Hongrie par la présentation de son passé.

L'auteur traite l'histoire de Hongrie dans l'ordre chronologique, de la conquête du pays à 1947, date du traité de Paris. Nous lisons avec intérêt les événements qui marquèrent le règne du roi saint Etienne, fondateur de l'Etat, et celui des autres Arpadiens, l'époque de la maison d'Anjou, la gloire des Hunyadi, l'occupation turque et les malheurs du pays divisé en trois parties. L'auteur nous fait connaître le monde des kouroutz, puis nous présente l'empire Habsbourg, le mouvement des jacobins hongrois, les guerres napoléoniennes, la Réforme, ainsi que la révolution bourgeoise, la guerre d'indépendance de 1848; puis le Compromis. Il consacre tout un chapitre à la tragédie de la première guerre mondiale, ainsi qu'à la période qui va du traité de Trianon à celui de Paris.

Le volume est complété d'une Petite encyclopédie, qui contient des données de base vulgarisatrices sur les personnalités hongroises ou les personnalités étrangères en rapport étroit avec l'histoire de Hongrie. Cet appendice enrichit la matière du livre, le rend plus systématique et plus facile à utiliser.

Readership: historians, undergraduate students, general public

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