

THE STATUS OF THE WOMAN WRITER IN HUNGARY

MIHÁLY SZEGEDY-MASZÁK

Eötvös Loránd University
Budapest, Hungary

It might be tempting to conclude, giving the prominence of male writers in the Hungarian canon, that until the late 20th century the question of women writers was rarely raised, if it all, and the contributions of women writers were peripheral. This conclusion, however, would be unfounded. Women writers have been significant in the Hungarian literary tradition for several centuries, as notable examples clearly illustrate.

Keywords: Hungarian literature, feminism, women writers, canon, reception history, Kata Bethlen, Judit Dukai Takách, Stefánia Wohl, Cécile Tormay, Emma Ritoók, Gizella Dapsy, Ágnes Nemes Nagy, Zsuzsa Rakovszky

What was the role of the woman writer in Hungarian literature? Not until the twentieth century did it become a burning issue. That does not mean, however, that the feminists of the years around 1900 were the first to pose the problem.

Needless to say, in a short paper I cannot do more than give you some samples. Instead of discussing such well-known writers as Margit Kaffka (1880–1918), whose best work, the novel *Színek és évek* (Colours and Years, 1912), written from a first-person perspective, questioning the self-identity of personality and thus the unity of plot, had been canonized long before the advent of feminist criticism, I shall focus on authors whose careers may indicate the precariousness of the social and artistic status of a woman writer.

My first example will show how misleading generalizations can be about the absence of intellectually independent women in earlier periods. Countess Kata Bethlen (1700–59) was forced to marry Count László Haller at the age of seventeen. Her marriage was a dismal failure. In her autobiography she admitted that she prayed for the death of either her husband or of herself. Influenced by Pietism, she was a devout Protestant, whereas Haller was Roman Catholic. Religion became for her an avenue of escape. Posterity cannot decide to what extent her dissatisfaction with her husband was due to emotional hostility. Her autobiography

and correspondence indicate that she was a highly cultivated woman of great intellectual integrity. After the death of her first husband in 1719, she married Count József Teleki, another Transylvanian aristocrat. In this case no religious difference affected her relations with her husband. At the age of twenty-three she became a widow for the second time. Determined to make up for the lack of a happy married life by being particularly strict with herself, she built up a huge library and supported schools.

She spared no pains in acquiring a first-rate knowledge of diseases and became a highly respected medical authority by self-training. In 1740 she gave financial support to Péter Bod (1712–69) and sent him to study at the University of Leyden. After Bod had finished his studies, she employed him as priest and librarian, and sponsored his publications. By forming contacts with the leading Hungarian intellectuals of her age, she did a great service to her country as the organizer of literary activity. Her correspondence proves that she gained the respect of her contemporaries. The care that she lavished on the activity of Bod reveals her unselfish attitude: having realized that the institutions of higher education were not open to women, she decided to cover the expenses of a talented male member of the lesser nobility who later became the author of the first encyclopedia of Hungarian letters. A careful administrator of her estates, she used much of her income to improve the health of the peasants that lived on her lands. Undeniably, her confessional work belongs to a very distinguished tradition. Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries numerous Transylvanian aristocrats wrote their *mémoires*. She may have been familiar with some of these works, among which the most original was written by one of her relatives, Count Miklós Bethlen (1642–1716), another Protestant.

In the nineteenth century literary activity and family life proved to be incompatible in many cases. The career of Judit Dukai Takách (1795–1836) is a telling example. Raised as the only child of a wealthy Transdanubean landowner, she received first-rate education in Sopron and attained national fame as a poet at a relatively early age. Celebrating the freedom of a young girl, she compared marriage to the life of a captive bird and spoke about the loss of a dear friend on the occasion of her wedding. Leading politicians visited her, and in 1815 Dániel Berzsenyi, the best poet of her generation addressed an epistle to her. Her promising literary career was cut short by her marriage to a nobleman in 1818. After the wedding the poems almost immediately ceased. The whole world that Dukai Takách had brought into existence was extinguished. Under the warmth of her affection for domestic life the stiffness had gone out of her pen. She had to conform to her husband's lifestyle. Children were born, and duties and responsibilities fell to the lot of the woman who loved privacy, music, and literature. Now she was the mistress of her husband's house with its splendid buffet. She was everything that the wife of an honest nobleman should be. So the years passed, very full, very ac-

tive. After ten years of a happy marriage, her husband died, and she married another member of her class, a respected lawyer. Troubles came upon her – she lost three children within two years. She maintained her silence. At the age of 41 she died of tuberculosis. Before her death she jotted down a few lines that seem to express a despair of an intensity unparalleled in her earlier works. Soon her poetry was forgotten. Although an edition of her verse was published in 1909 (Vadász 1909), today her name is known chiefly because of the epistle addressed to her by Berzsenyi. Her verse collection prepared by a Roman Catholic priest was ignored even by Sándor Weöres, the poet who in 1977 published one of her poems in an anthology of neglected verse (Weöres 1977, 461–3). Feminist critics tend to focus on the twentieth century and do not seem to remember that once Dukai Takách was celebrated as the Hungarian Sappho.

Hungarian feminism was modeled on the British example. The first newspaper of the movement appeared in 1871. Stefánia Wohl (1848–89), a Jewish-born feminist organized a salon with her sister that was attended by such international celebrities as Liszt. Her writings were published in British and Scottish newspapers. One of her novels was published in Jena in 1889, under the title *Rauschgold: Roman aus der ungarischen Gesellschaft*, probably by the author. The English version of the same work, *Shamgold*, appeared in London in 1890, and a Polish translation in the same year. The original version, *Aranyfüst*, was harshly attacked by Jenő Péterfy, the best Hungarian critic of the late nineteenth century, who compared the style of the novel to the language of the popular German magazine *Die Gartenlaube* (Péterfy n. d., 40). "Posterity has to agree with Péterfy", says Anna Fábri, in her book on 19th-century Hungarian women writers, published fifteen years ago (Fábri 1996, 147).

Although the aesthetic value of works published by women writers in the later nineteenth century was questionable, the status of women underwent significant changes. From 1896 they could study at the Humanities and Medical Faculties of Hungarian universities. In 1904 an Association of Hungarian Feminists was founded. In 1913 a world congress on universal suffrage was held in Budapest.

What stance should we, readers living in an age marked by the rise of gender studies, take toward the women writers of the early twentieth century? At least two opposing views open up. The first option is to distance ourselves from the political conflicts associated with the 1919 Commune and the peace treaty signed in 1920. The second option is to attempt to discover the motives underlying left-wing and right-wing feminism. By 1920 a sharp boundary separated socialist women living in exile from women who backed the conservative establishment. On 1 August 1919 the dictatorship of the proletariat collapsed. On November 16 the counter-revolutionary National Army marched into Budapest. Its leader, Miklós Horthy, was greeted on the steps of the House of Parliament by Cécile Tormay (1876–1937), the organizer of the National Association of Hungarian

Women (MANSZ). Before 1914 this writer emerged as a cultivated cosmopolitan, a friend of d'Annunzio and Anatole France. The style of her early short stories resembled that of the French decadents, her first novel, *Stonecrop* (1911), portrayed a Croatian woman who tried to liberate herself from the burden of a bad marriage (Tormay 1922), her second, *The Old House* (1914), possibly inspired by *Buddenbrooks* telling the story of the successful assimilation of the German-speaking bourgeoisie to the Hungarian population, met with international success. The Dutch translation (Tormay 1926) came after the German, Swedish, Danish, English, and Finnish, in 1926. The chasm is striking between these works and *An Outlaw's Diary* (1920–21), a harsh attack on the so-called bourgeois revolution of 1918, the dictatorship of the proletariat and its leaders of Jewish parentage (Tormay 1924). Its explanation would require a deep and meticulous analysis. The fact that from 1923 until her death Tormay was the dignified and benevolent editor of the journal *Napkelet*, supporting not only conservative but also left-wing authors of Jewish origin proves that in the twentieth century the rapid changes of historical circumstances were inseparable from the mutability of political views.

The National Association of Hungarian Women had around one million members, so it is safe to suggest that the conservative government of Count István Bethlen could not achieve economic and political stability without the support of this institution. Besides, the highly successful cultural policy of Count Kúnó Klebelsberg was heavily indebted to the journal that Tormay edited with the help of two eminent scholars, the historian Gyula Szekfű and the literary scholar János Horváth. One of the goals of the journal was to publish the works of young women writers.

How can we explain the prestige of Tormay? The clues may be so numerous that it is difficult to find a concept that would integrate them. All we can do is to sum up the most telling clues. Although she was not a great writer, the artistic qualities of her best works were respected even by those who disagreed with her politics. "*Stonecrop* is one of the best psychological novels written in Hungary; it is full of brilliant impressionistic descriptions of landscape, and the dramatic tensions are expressed in a style of great intensity", as a prominent contemporary novelist writes in his recent history of modern Hungarian literature (Grendel 2010, 164). It could also be admitted that Tormay's attitude towards Communism and towards the loss of two thirds of the territory of her country met with the approval of the majority of Hungarians. A proof of her international reputation was that she succeeded Madame Curie in the cultural committee of the League of Nations. Gravely ill, in 1936 she joined Paul Valéry in defending La Commission Internationale de Coopération Intellectuelle, an institution condemned by Hitler's Germany (Jarrety 2008, 965). In her speech made in French she praised the League of Nations and underlined the significance of the supranational character

of the legacy of Classical Antiquity as a cultural model for "the community of all nations" (Tormay 1937, 183–5).

Although she had no university education, she spoke several languages and was widely read. Her contemporary Emma Ritoók (1868–1945), another representative of the traditional middle class, studied with Simmel at the University of Berlin, and published not only fiction but also thoughtful essays on Russian, Scandinavian, and Hungarian authors. Before 1918 she was in contact with Ernst Bloch and belonged to the so-called Sunday Circle of Radical intellectuals that included the philosopher György Lukács, the writer Béla Balázs, the political scientist Károly Mannheim, the art historians Lajos Fülep, Arnold Hauser, Károly Tolnay, and Frigyes Antal. In 1919 she turned against that group.

Neither Tormay nor Ritoók married. It seems impossible to know to what extent it was their decision to remain single. On the face of it, both preserved their independence in private life. When we state that the political events of 1919–20 broke the continuity of their careers, it has to be admitted that the Commune and the peace treaty had a similar impact on most of their contemporaries. The fact that they were women may have made them especially vulnerable. They responded to the abrupt political changes in a similar way. One could draw a parallel between *An Outlaw's Diary* and at least two works by Ritoók: the verse collection *Dark Months* (1920) and the parabolic novel *The Adventures of the Spirit* (1921). Yet there was a significant difference between their careers. Having given up her artistic goals, Tormay gave valuable intellectual support to the conservative régime, whereas Ritoók could never come to terms with her failure; her unpublished memoirs (preserved in the National Széchényi Library, in Budapest) suggest that she regarded herself as a human being neglected or even ignored by society.

Posterity was not kind to them. In Communist Hungary Tormay's books were banned and her personal belongings destroyed. In recent years her books were published but since not much of her correspondence has survived, it would be virtually impossible to know the role she played in international feminism, although it is known that she corresponded with such successful women authors as Matilde Serao, Selma Lagerlöf, Edith Wharton, and Karin Michaelis, and joined the Soroptimist organization, an international association for women in professions, working through projects to advance the status of women, started in California in 1921. One could add that in some cases female solidarity overruled political considerations. In February 1923 Dezső Kosztolányi, one of the major Hungarian writers of the early twentieth century, sent a letter to Tormay, asking her to help Gizella Dapsy (1885–1940), a poet who organized an association for Communist women in 1919 and strongly condemned anti-Semitism after the fall of the dictatorship of the proletariat. Tormay visited the head of the Hungarian state, and Dapsy was released from prison, although she could not resume her teaching ac-

tivity. Rivalry aside, there were serious disagreements between the two right-wing authors. In her mémoires, the Protestant Ritoók attacked the Roman Catholic Tormay for her friendly contacts with prosperous ladies of Jewish origin and for working with assimilated Jews in the framework of the National Association of Hungarian Women.

The official propaganda of the Hungarian Communists placed a special emphasis on the equality of women and men. International feminism was condemned; Hungarian Soroptimists, for instance, were persecuted. In 1948 the outstanding poet Ágnes Nemes Nagy (1922–91) was silenced by the Communist authorities for representing "bourgeois" values. A description of the status of the woman writer during the four decades following World War II would need an analysis of the totalitarian political system introduced two or three years after the end of the War. Since such an investigation would go far beyond the limits of this short essay, I have to skip the period 1945–90.

In closing, let me refer to a contemporary poet. Zsuzsa Rakovszky was born in Sopron, a town close to the Austrian border, in 1950. Since 1986 she has been a freelance author. Influenced by Emily Dickinson and Elizabeth Bishop, she has emerged as one of the best Hungarian poets of her generation. A single mother, she lives in her native town, earning her living by translating from English. Her first volume *Prophecies and Deadlines* was published in 1981. In 1994 Oxford University Press brought out *New Life*, a selection from her verse translated by the Hungarian-born British poet George Szirtes. Her first prose work *The Serpent's Shadow* (2002) became a commercial success. The German translation *Im Schatten der Schlange* was published by btb Verlag in 2005. It is a pseudohistorical novel, an Ich-Erzählung, the story of a seventeenth-century woman who became the wife of her own father under the name of a girl who had died. The treatment of a double and questionable identity is coupled with a series of dream narratives. An old woman writes about her youth in a visionary style that is strongly reminiscent of Rakovszky's verse. The opening paragraph of the second chapter of this 467-page-long novel in the yet unfinished translation of Thomas E. Cooper may suggest that Rakovszky's huge vocabulary and long sentences represent a prose style that is much more nuanced than the language of some Hungarian writers whose works may be overrated in Western countries:

Throughout the journey back to the village I had been in something of a benumbed daze, as if within me there lingered neither thought nor feeling and my mind remained alive only to the sights of the trip. To this day I remember every detail, how the dry winter rushes stood rigid against the collapsing banks of snow along the ditch by the road, how the fissures shone dark in the parchment-colored soil rising on either side of the pass, and how the gnarled roots twisting forth from the sheer walls gleamed in the faint glow of eventide. How at one

turn the moon, shrouded in mist, appeared before us in the grey sky, growing ever brighter against the darkening firmament and rising so rapidly as we journeyed onwards that I began to fear it might suddenly loom over the wheel tracks carved in the frozen mud of the road and the horses, affrighted by its lurid glow, would bolt, dragging the wain who knows where. And later, when the dark of night had encircled us, how the remaining patches of snow on the rooftops and the black soil of the furrowed fields glimmered like errant souls as we passed through the villages, how the straw chaff shone in the mud in the corners of the yards and the splinters of ice in the ruts of the road glistened in the ever more churlish cold of the moonlit night. The thatch roof houses louring in the darkness watched us with mistrust, and I huddled low in my seat, for I dimly felt that perhaps I had committed some awful trespass and would only evade retribution if I managed to return to the village unnoticed.

Beyond any doubt, this prose is not easily translatable. The considerable merit of Rakovszky's work lies in blurring the distinction between the perceptible and the conceptual. Image and interpretation are inseparable. A short poem from a volume published in 1987 could illustrate the power of her diction, despite the fact that the English version is weaker than the original. In the Hungarian text there are no similes:

They were burning dead leaves. Must oozed with scent,
tar bubbled and blew.
The moonlight glow behind the thistle bent
like a torn rainbow.

The street was a forest, night slid into the heart
of deepest autumn.
A guilty music blew the house apart,
with its fife and drum.

To have this again, just this, just the once more:
I would sink below
autumnal earth and place my right hand in your
hand like a shadow. (Gömöri – Szirtes 1996, 239)

In 2008 Zsuzsa Rakovszky was nominated for the Kossuth prize. She sent a letter to the authorities that she would refuse to receive the prize while Ferenc Gyurcsány was the Hungarian prime minister. The next year the socialist politician was forced to resign, so in 2010 Rakovszky was awarded the prize. Living in her native Sopron, this poet shuns society. Her example shows that today a woman writer of great integrity can have an unquestionably high social status in Hungary. Western countries are to be blamed for their reluctance to recognize the significance of Rakovszky's work.

References

- Anna Fábri (1996) "A szép tiltott táj felé": A magyar írók története két századforduló között (1795–1905).
- George Gömöri – George Szirtes (eds) *The Colonnade of Teeth: Modern Hungarian Poetry* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books).
- Lajos Grendel (2010) *A modern magyar irodalom története: Magyar líra és epika a 20. században* (Pozsony: Kalligram).
- Michel Jarrety (2008) *Paul Valéry* (Paris: Fayard).
- Jenő Péterfy (n. d.) *Magyar irodalmi bírálatok* (Budapest: Királyi Magyar Egyetemi Nyomda).
- Cécile Tormay (1922) *Stonecrop*. Translated by Emil Torday (London: Philip Allan & Co.).
- Cécile Tormay (1924) *An Outlaw's Diary*. Translated by Emil Torday (New York: Robert M. McBride & Co.).
- Cécile Tormay (1926) *Het oude huis*. Translated by J. Jorissen (Amsterdam: Van Halkema & Warrendorf).
- Cécile Tormay (1937) *Küzdelmek – emlékezések* (Budapest: Genius).
- Norbert Vadász (1909) *Dukai Takách Judit élete és munkái* (Budapest: Franklin).
- Sándor Weöres (ed.) (1977) *Három veréb hat szemmel: Antológia a magyar költészet rejtett értékeiből és furcsaságaiból* (Budapest: Szépirodalmi).