



BORDER-NOVEL OR BORDERED NOVEL: A FEMINIST READING OF ERZSÉBET BÖRCsök'S ESZTER

by

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ABSTRACT

In my thesis I argue that Erzsébet Börcsök's *Eszter* (1939/1968) is a novel that proposes the problem of social limitations as they were imposed on a female subjectivity in the particular socio-cultural context of the interwar era in Vojvodina (Serbia, formerly Yugoslavia). Addressing the novel from the grounds of feminist literary theory, and parallelly exploring the specificities of Hungarian women's literature of modernism, I found that *Eszter* is a feminist novel that maintains strong connections with the tendencies of Hungarian feminist writing. I argue that *Eszter* is a feminist piece because it challenges the socially established patriarchal standards of the bourgeoisie in the local historical context; questions the validity of the ideal middle-class woman's normative image in modernism; claims that writing could be a way for the female self to break loose from the pre-empted categories imposed upon it; and problematizes the ways the author's position is occupied in the modernist patriarchal discourse. Through its subject-matters, such as women's struggle in coping with socially imposed limitations; the re-evaluation of the effects of 'compulsory heterosexuality' on female subjectivity, and, in relation to this, the issue of sexual double-standards; the re-assessment of marital bonds and motherhood; and the discussion of the necessitated choice women had to make between professional success and family life *Eszter* relates to the topical scope introduced by feminist writings in Hungary in the early 20th century.



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INTRODUCTION

For my readers I wish to make clear that this research had a personal stake for me. I set out to explore what kinds of identity constructions are possible for a feminist woman writer like me, who belongs to a national minority and resides in a multicultural environment. So I reached out towards women who, like me, wrote in their native Hungarian while living in Vojvodina, a multiethnic northern province of Serbia, formerly Yugoslavia.

What I found was very scarce. Although feminist literary studies has been proliferating for at least three decades now, and in the past fifteen years there has been significant work done on Hungarian women writers, the reception of Vojvodina Hungarian literature has been hardly touched by these tendencies so far. There are female writers in the Vojvodina Hungarian literary canon of course, but their work has been assessed according to an allegedly gender neutral, ‘universalistic’ system of values, established and maintained by mainly male critiques.

This is why I am indebted to the initiation “Outstanding Women of Novi Sad”, a project for the re-evaluation of Vojvodina women’s cultural heritage. They brushed off the dust of oblivion from Erzsébet Börcsök’s *Eszter* when publishing it in the Serbian language in 2002, and by embracing it into this feminist project, they indicated the plausibility of a feminist interpretation of the novel. Moreover, Éva Hózsá in her foreword to the Serbian edition and two subsequent studies was the first to analyze *Eszter* in the specific framework of women’s literature.

However, the question: what makes *Eszter* a feminist novel has not been addressed so far, nor the issue of its possible correspondences with Hungarian feminist writing in the early 20th century. This is what my research aims at: to tackle the novel from the grounds of feminist literary theory, also to forge connections with Hungarian feminist writing of the era.



This project has significance for multiple fields of research. In the context of Vojvodina Hungarian literary history it not only urges the acknowledgement of women's contribution, but asks for a revision of the so called gender-neutral theoretical grounds of the prevailing discourse. When mapping *Eszter's* location among Hungarian feminist writings of modernism, this project makes the claim that feminist thought knows no borders, and so the study of Hungarian women's writing in modernism cannot be complete without tracking how feminist ideas lived on and altered in specific contexts outside Hungary.

Considering the third field of research that I see this project contributing to, I may have only tentative arguments. The main reason for my reserve is that this field of research, the study of the multilingual and multiethnic regional Vojvodina literature has yet to be established. However, my reading of Börcsök's autobiographic novel suggests, that gender and class were greater hindrances of social advancement of a Hungarian woman in Vojvodina, then her nationality. A comparative study of Bunjevac, Croatian, German, Hungarian, Serbian, Slovak etc. women's writing in the interwar era would reveal whether there are similarities in the way women of different nationalities constructed their identities, and what means they found to subvert the patriarchal standards in their local context.

As I will show throughout my thesis, the greatest subversive potential of Börcsök's writing I see in the way it sheds light on the gendered nature of social expectations and how it reveals the distorting and harmful effect those have on women. On the other hand, I will engage with those dimensions of Börcsök's writing which point towards the possibility of female agency through the means of women's alliances and, in *Eszter's* case, writing.



Éva Hózsza designated *Eszter* a “border-novel”, partly because it reflects on the experience of facing new geographical borders (when Vojvodina became part of Yugoslavia in 1920), and partly for it proposes the problem of border-awareness as a human experience (2004b, 56-58¹). I suggest that *Eszter* is also a *bordered* novel, regarding that its reception so far has not maintained any connections between this novel and a broader body of feminist literature. The aim of this study is to open up the borders imposed by lack of scholarship, and to raise the border-awareness of readers of women’s literature.

¹ The translations from Hungarian and Serbian, including quotations from *Eszter*, are my work.



THEORETICAL GROUNDS

A text is never given. The interpretational framework(s) chosen to aid the forging of a meaningful reading construct(s) it. Since the interpretational framework I apply while reading *Eszter* is a multifaceted enterprise, the following subsections will focus on three distinct, but mutually constructive areas of reading women's writings. Firstly, in *What makes women's writings feminist writings?* I introduce the theoretical assumptions based on which I attempt to read *Eszter* as a feminist novel. The second subsection, *Assumptions* will focus on the relation of gender and genre, setting forth such contributions to the generic theory of women's autobiographical writings which strive to explain why women, particularly in the era called 'modernism', turned to autobiographical fiction as an alternative to autobiographies. Finally, in *Thinking with identities*, I engage with the insights of the scholarship on women's autobiographies which deal with the discursive and subversive potentials of marginalized voices, for the purpose of acquiring analytical tools.

WHAT MAKES WOMEN'S WRITINGS FEMINIST WRITINGS?

Albeit there has been a wide range of scholarly works devoted to answering this question ever since the 1960s, here I will begin with Elizabeth Grosz's 1995 chapter, *Feminism After the Death of the Author*. In this text through a presentation of reasons and arguments firmly anchored in post-structuralist theory, Grosz deconstructs the grounds of those stands which had tried to locate the guarantor of the meanings of a (feminist) text in the sex of the author, the content of the text, the sex of the reader and the style of the text, respectively. My motive for this reaching for this text is that in it Grosz not only sums up the previously posited answers, but after convincingly



arguing that they are partially or completely untenable, she offers a three-folded interpretational toolkit for future research on feminist literature. Touching upon her argumentation I will engage with those statements which pertain to the issues which emerge while reading *Eszter*.

Grosz in her reasoning against the idea that the sex of the author would guarantee that the produced text is a feminist one, marks that a female author can write in a ‘masculinist’ way, “according to prevailing patriarchal norms, in a mode of sexual neutrality, sexual indifference” (1995, 14). In *Eszter*, the position from which the narrative is brought into being, in other words: the narrator all throughout the novel remains unnamed and ungendered. The construction of this narrator is in harmony with the standards of 19th century realistic novels – it is neutral and seemingly omniscient – therefore it could be considered a ‘masculinist’ textual projection. However, “sexual neutrality” does not necessarily correspond with “sexual indifference”. A sexually neutral tone of narration could provide textual space for various points of view; among them such which are aligned with the normative patriarchal perspective, but also with those which defer from it. Consequently I consider it crucial to analyze the difference of *who sees?* versus *who speaks?*, or, in other words: to separate the focalization and the narrator, the way Genette has suggested (in Niederhoff 2009, 117).

Furthermore, through the discussion of the alterations of focalization, I will bring to light that in the textual world of *Eszter* a gradual shift can be detected from the most-knowing neutral narrator towards one ‘whose’ speech position is joined together with Eszter’s, ‘who’ therefore, knows no more than Eszter does. While an omniscient narrator is overwhelmingly present in the first part of the novel (published in 1939), the second part’s (1968) narrator is henceforward heterodiegetic (“third person”); but the narrative information it makes available hardly exceeds the cognition and experience of the main protagonist’s. With a reference back to Grosz’s claims



it seems that Erzsébet Börcsök was more ready to “write as a woman” in the 1960s than in the 1930s. For the purpose of understanding this shift, it is absolutely essential to unravel the socio-cultural context of Hungarian modernism, with a focus on the normative expectations towards the female writer, and to contrast these to the local conditions affecting Börcsök in the 1960s.

A general exploration of the context of early 20th century Hungarian women’s writing will be offered in the second chapter, followed by an exhaustive investigation into the reception of *Eszter I+II* in the 1960s, by way of which I will shed light on the Vojvodina Hungarian literary mainstreams’ expectations towards a woman’s novel.

From the broader perspective of women’s writing in the era of ‘modernism’, the historical contextualization of the text is ever so important. Such research would reveal that what could be seen as the ‘sexual neutrality and sexual indifference’ of writing, inserted in the right historical framework might show itself as one of the scarce passageways for a female author into ‘male’ authority (Lanser 1992, 18). The possible reasons for why female writers appropriated a heterodiegetic narrator, especially in the context of autobiographical writings, will be the topic of the next subsection, *Assumptions*.

Yet, for the sake of making a few more anticipatory remarks concerning the analytical tools used in this thesis, I return to Grosz’s other significant argument: that the reader (’s sex, gender or political stance) cannot be regarded as the guarantor of meanings either: “while there may be no singular or correct interpretation of a text, there *can* be inappropriate or incorrect interpretations” (1995, 17). The study of *Eszter*’s reception reveals a series of such inappropriate interpretations, where the text obviously resists the critical toolkit so forcefully applied, but more about that later. Here I wish to emphasize that the knowledge that a text could be interpreted in diverse



ways may become a powerful device of a female writer, particularly in a historical context where an explicitly female voice or point of view would have risked being discredited.

By following certain conventions of writing, the female author who has to strive for her authorial position can perhaps influence how a text would be read by that mainstream readership which turns towards a woman's writing with a particular set of normative socio-cultural expectations. Since these expectations are primarily concerned with the woman who shares her signature with the book, and only secondarily with the text itself, the separation of the female body from the narrator's voice as well as such instances of the narration which echo the standard patriarchal system of values, give the devil his due. However, this seemingly obedient pursuit of the generic conventions may provide space for digressions, for instance the involvement of other voices via the passing on of the narrative to a homodiegetic narrator (one who is the protagonist or character of the fictional world). The interferences resulted by this kind of plurality, and the analytical tools by which it could be approached, will be discussed in detail in the *Thinking with identities* subsection of this chapter.

Now, after these auxiliary comments on Elizabeth Grosz's outstanding argumentation – the way in which she deconstructed those theoretical stands which attempted to locate the guarantor of meaning in the author, content of the text, reader and style – I wish to turn towards answering the question stated in the title of this subsection: What makes women's writings feminist writings? Grosz's apprehensions are again instructive here. According to her, a text could be considered feminist if it uncovers the phallogentric approaches which regulate its socio-cultural context; proposes the problem of how the author's position is inhabited in the patriarchal discourse; engenders unprecedented discourses (1995, 22-23). These three ways through which a text may challenge the naturalized gender hierarchy I juxtapose with Ellen Rooney's observation that the



most significant move in feminist novel studies was a change in the concept of representation in the 1980s. Rooney suggests that understanding representation “as *productive* of differences rather than as *reflecting* predetermined differences” posits literature as an “active force” capable of constructing womanhood as well as dismantling it (2006, 89).

The reason why I chose Grosz’s discernment of what makes a woman’s writing a feminist writing as my guideline for reading *Eszter*, lies in the manner she brings together the two above-mentioned strands of understanding representation. Her first claim, that a text could be taken as a feminist one if it exposes that the definitions of womanhood and manhood accepted by the broader society are historical constructions, and therefore due to change, conceptualizes representation as reflection. Her third assertion, that a feminist text would give rise to thus far nonexistent discourses, however, draws on the concept of representation as production. The second claim, that a feminist text would problematize authorship as defined in masculinist terms, I see as being open towards both interpretations of the concept. This openness proves to be especially fruitful when, as in the case of *Eszter*, the protagonist of the fictional world is an author herself. The female writer’s struggles as reflected *and* constructed in *Eszter* will be the topic of the fourth chapter, while in the following I will examine the relations of female authorship, authority and autobiography.

ASSUMPTIONS

Mary Evans in her ‘biography of autobiography’ *Missing Persons* regarded the “prison created by the need for the coherent self” as the backbone of 19th and 20th century Western auto/biography writing (1999, 24). In Evans’ opinion, the development of self-consciousness and the negotiation of the boundaries of public/private were the most characteristic features of auto/biography writing in the aforementioned era (1999, 12). Through these features the Western



fantasy about ‘progress’ and ‘order’, respectively, were maintained (1999, 75-76), as well as “...the fantasy that individuals live lives which are separate both from general patterns in any culture and from other human beings” (1999, 128).

Evans’ apprehension that the Western fantasy of humans living individual lives totally isolated ‘from other human beings’ had a formatting effect on the past centuries’ autobiographical writings, which then interactively acted as fuel for “the culture’s desire for managed difference” and/or helped “to turn our backs on the shared circumstances of social life” (Evans 1999, 143), sheds light on the exclusive character of autobiography.

Discussing female autobiographies, Heilbrun suggests that despite the generic conventions of autobiography, until the 1960s women did not discuss their lives as exemplary, rather as “exceptions chosen by destiny or chance” (Heilbrun 1985, 20). She explains that if women in their autobiographical writings explored their achievements as ‘exceptions’, they would not threaten the patriarchal social patterns, moreover: they reinforced those patterns. Heilbrun goes on claiming that women during that same time disguised and/or displaced their personal battles, often times embedding them into some other form, such as fiction. This is why she suggests that ‘reality-testing’ should be more forcefully applied onto women’s fiction, because autobiographies were supposed to bear witness to a female self which embraced patriarchal standards (1985, 22-23).

Reading women’s autobiographical fictions Evans marked that conventional autobiography imposed such pre-empted limitations on the self to be constructed through writing, that by creating a ‘fictional self’, the woman writer “avoids the controlling form of the conventional autobiography” (Evans 2000, 76). That is: she gains more control over the narrative, which



enables the discussion of the influence of normative social requirements on the shaping of female selfhood as well as the impact of events which have affected her as a member of a community. Also, if autobiography is a historically specific construct which is accomplished through discursive practices, tying identity, memory and narration together, then autobiographical accounts could be approached as sites of memory where through the narration of one's past, various identity-positions and subjectivity-constructions are negotiated. Such a process necessarily involves reflective analysis of past selves – from which, according to Evans, the analysis of relationships between these selves and others is deliberately left out in Western autobiographical writing (Evans 1999, 128). While in a conventional autobiography these would be digressions disrupting the narrative, in fiction their diversity is a welcome contribution to the polyphony of the text.

THINKING WITH IDENTITIES

If, as John Gillis claims, only what is remembered could be perceived as identity, because the meaning of an individual or collective identity, “a sense of sameness over time and space,” is kept up by remembrance (Gillis 1994, 3), then identity is, just as memory, an ambiguous construction, which strives to locate something that did not exist before the act of location. This is reminiscent of Judith Butler's arguments. By her the signifying process never establishes an inert identity, rather the repetitions of signification perpetually construct it, thus ‘identity’ could be best described as a work-in-progress. Nevertheless, the repetitions of signification enforce certain rules, and therefore conceal that signification is in process – namely: concealing that the ‘identity’ is under construction. What these repetitions produce is the effect of an identity, mistakenly taken as the ‘identity’ itself (1990, 128-131); or to refer to Gillis again: “[i]dentities and memories are not things we think *about*, but things we think *with*.” (1994, 5)



In the following I will discuss what kind of identities I ‘think *with*’ while reading *Eszter*. Doing so, I will draw on such theoretical contributions to the scholarship of female autobiography which have dealt with the discursive and subversive potentials of marginalized voices. The common ground of these attempts is that in their interpretation of the identities constructed by women’s autobiographical texts they do not seek to create the illusion of sameness-over-time, rather they reveal a continuity of displacements. Therefore, they do not conceptualize identity as seamless, but reveal and embrace contradictions of a multiple identity.

In *The Politics and Aesthetics of Métissage* (1989) Francoise Lionnet forefronts a ‘rhetoric of selfhood’ which, in her view, straddles the distance between various cultural hierarchies. Drawing on autobiographical writings of Afro-American and Francophone woman writers, she argues that all of their narratives are quests for a different past, one that could be excavated from under the patriarchal and racial inscriptions, while these very inscriptions are also present in their writings in the form of internalized negative stereotypes (1998, 330). Lionnet claims that the autobiographical writings she examined engendered such multifold discursive textures – where the denotative and connotative layers could either contradict and subvert each other or reinforce and strengthen such ways of speaking which allow the writing female subject to address the implied reader without risking her position in the semiotic field of the vernacular (1998, 331).

With a reference to Michel Serres, Lionnet adds that the dialogue of different languages in Western culture aims at knowledge by means of which the interlocutors could eliminate ‘noise’. This ‘noise’ is constructed as/of all that is “not aligned with the dominant ideologies and conceptual systems of the West” – which, in the case of these colonized women’s autobiographies, explains why the dialogue exists *because of* the ‘noise’ and not in defiance of it. All what is foreign, unruly and troubling for those identifying themselves with ‘order’ and



‘civilization’, in other words the colonizing Western white men, makes that fertile ‘noise’ out of which these women’s speech and writing springs up.

Mae Gwendolyn Henderson in *Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics, and the Black Woman Writer’s Literary Tradition* (1989) also emphasizes the interlocutory or dialogical character of women’s autobiographical writings. Focusing on black women’s texts, Henderson claims that the interlocutory character of black women’s writings is only partly the outcome of a dialogic connection with an imaginary other; rather it is “a dialogue with the aspects of ‘otherness’ within the self” (1998, 344). In her interpretation Henderson draws on the notion of dialogism introduced by Mikhail Bakhtin.

“[A]t any given moment of its historical existence, language is heteroglot from top to bottom: it represents the co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions [...] These ‘languages’ of heteroglossia intersect each other ... forming new socially typifying ‘languages’ [which then] may be juxtaposed to one another, mutually supplement one another, contradict one another and be interrelated dialogically ... in the consciousness of real people – first and foremost in the creative consciousness of people who write novels” (Bakhtin 1981, 291-292).

Henderson added the categories of gender and race to the social groups ‘typified by language’ that Bakhtin offers as examples. She suggests that black woman writers’ autobiographical texts are spaces of heteroglossia – they are intersections of heterogeneous discourses; thus they consist of dialogues with the external discourses of racism and sexism, but also with the internalized distortions caused by racism and sexism.

To bring together these two strands of thinking with identities, Lionnet’s insights prove to be useful when analyzing the diverse frames of signification present in the body of the novel – such as: the monologues of different homodiegetic narrators, like the desperate Ángyika’s passionate verbal outburst or Rozi’s eerie story about how she became possessed by evil spirits – which



create multiplicity of textual layers that are in a dialogic relation with each other and the heterodiegetic narratee. It is exactly in between these layers where we can detect the ‘noise’ that Lionnet suggests us to ‘listen for’ in women’s autobiographical writings. Also, Lionnet points toward the implied reader who speaks the code of utterances, and thus enables the narrator to be subversive without leaving her securely established conventional place in the semiotic field. To this I would add that we shall think of implied readers: those who do not speak the code and those who do. If all the readers of the novel could understand the encoded ‘message’, the coding would be redundant. The uninitiated implied reader is envisioned as the agent of patriarchy, searching for the guarantors of order in the text. The usually neutral tone of the heterodiegetic narrator, the events’ linear order, and the developmental narrative of Eszter’s personal development could be considered as such guarantors. However, the digressions towards episodes of other women’s life stories, or the beginning of the novel, an initial digression towards the origins of the main protagonist’s life, are all such instances of unruliness and peculiarity, which induce ‘noise’.

This ‘noise’ we listen for comes from the fertile zone of heteroglossia, where dialogues with the sexism ‘outside’ and dialogues with its internalized distortions intersect with each other, as Henderson put it. The dialogues with the otherness within the self are transmitted into dialogues between the narrator and Eszter’s various states of mind as described by the narrator. Relying on Henderson’s apprehensions, I consider that there are such distinguishing features of the novel’s rhetorical construction of the protagonist which, instead of repressing ‘the other in her’, fully embrace it. Instead of rejecting those externally constructed features which in the semiotic field of the majority culture act like markers of her difference, through the focalization of the narrative the authorial self engages in a contesting dialogue with them. The dialogue with the ‘same’



forefronts the possibility of the acknowledgement of a tradition of one's own – in Eszter's case: a matrilineal genealogy and later the network of women's alliances – through which such a semiotic field could become established, where from the female writer / protagonist may enter into a challenging dialogue with dominant discourses. On the other hand, Eszter's attempts to embrace the otherness within could be equated with her writing.

How a text could convey different 'realities' for diverse readers, or rather, what the premises are of those 'realities' as understood by the readers, could be revealed when historically situating it in the appropriate socio-cultural context. The coming chapter will map out the local context through addressing the issue of female authorship in Hungarian modernism, as well as offering some insight into the existing scholarship on Hungarian female writers of the early 20th century. In the second part of the chapter an exhaustive discussion of the reception, so far, of *Eszter* takes place, by the means of which I wish to point towards the inappropriateness of a gender-neutral reading in the case of this novel.



THE BACKGROUND AND RECEPTION OF ERZSÉBET BÖRCsök'S ESZTER

WOMEN'S WRITING IN EARLY 20TH CENTURY HUNGARY

Engaging in the discourse over women's writing, I consider it necessary to commence with a historical inquiry into the semiotic field of the concept "women's writing" in Hungarian modernism. According to Györgyi Horváth, in Hungarian modernism a causal relationship was presumed between the author's sex and the quality of the work, insofar as there was such a specific horizon of expectations construed which was related only to the writings of purportedly female authors. She suggests that this horizon of expectations was imported into the literary sphere from broader debates on women's emancipation and their education in the late 19th century. The aim of these debates was to standardize an ideal female subjectivity which then could be achieved by means of education. As Horváth notes, the features derived from these debates "were simply the opposite of what we would call an autonomous subjectivity" (2004, 27), and alongside them such a normative female subjectivity was designed which determined the expectations towards female writers and their writings as well.

An in-depth inquiry of the binary opposition of female subjectivity versus autonomous subjectivity in modernism was offered by Andreas Huyssen, who argues that modernist aesthetics tried to protect itself "against something out there" by constructing a scheme alongside which genuine cultural achievements belonged with modernism's ideally autonomous, objective, coherent, rational self; while de-centeredness, dependency, emotions and irrationality belonged with the masses that remained outside of, and opposed to "true art". This dichotomy was not only hierarchic (rational versus emotional as high versus low) but strongly gendered as well,



designing “feminization” as the fiercest enemy of “high” culture. The network of signifiers consisting of emotions, irrationality, the mass and woman was set against authentic cultural values, which were hence posited as “the prerogative of men” (1986, 47-51).

As indicated by Horváth, in Hungarian modernism this ‘scheme’ was so deeply ingrained, that despite the achievements and considerable success of particular female writers from the turn of the century on, there was hardly any detectable shift in the assumptions commonly attached to femininity and subsequently to women’s writing from the 1860s until the 1930s (2004, 23).

So it was in a fairly hostile environment that from the late 19th century onwards, but mostly from the turn of the century, that women’s literature began to prosper in Hungary. Similarly to other Central European countries, women writers in Hungary reached out towards formerly rarely, if ever, discussed areas and topics. New subject-matters, such as women’s struggle in coping with socially imposed limitations, female (hetero)sexuality and, related to that, the issue of sexual double-standards and the re-evaluation of marital bonds and motherhood, became broadly discussed in women’s writings (Schwartz 2008; Fábri 2001; Hawkesworth 2001). In her outstanding enterprise: *Shifting Voices: Feminist Thought and Women’s Writing in Fin-de-siecle Austria and Hungary*, a comparative study of Austrian and Hungarian late 19th and early 20th century women’s movements and women’s writing, Agatha Schwartz maintains that the strong presence of bourgeois understanding of gender relations effected that woman writers sometimes utilized an essentialist discourse which attempted to re-construct women’s traditional role in society, however: these texts also strived to work for the improvement of women’s status in education, professional and private life. These themes were present in contemporary essay-writing as well but gained a more overt representation in fiction (2008, 16-17).



When it comes to the interpretations of Erzsébet Börcsök's work, the only scholarly endeavor so far that has located her in the canon of Hungarian women writers of the first half of the 20th century was Anna Fábri's 2001 chapter titled *Hungarian Women Writers 1900-1945* in *A History of Central European Women's Writing* (ed. Hawkesworth, Celia). Fábri's brief description of the situation of Hungarian literary life in the newly established Kingdom of Yugoslavia: "Hungarian literature in Vojvodina was fighting a desperate battle to organize itself to survive." (2001, 176) is in concordance with the way the major works on Vojvodina Hungarian literature depict the era (Bori 1998; Bányai 1996; Utasi 1984). Unfortunately in her assessment of Börcsök's production, Fábri also seems to echo the Vojvodina Hungarian literary canon that was established by male critiques claiming that Börcsök's "writings strove for an objective portrayal of the problem of nationality. The young heroines in her works face up not only to the challenges of a drastically altered situation, but also to the expectations of small closed, self-protective communities." (Fábri 2001, 176). Thus in this, so far, only study that located Börcsök in the canon of Hungarian women's writing, her work is described as singular and specific while its topical and poetic connections with Hungarian women's literature in modernism are not discussed. Vojvodina Hungarian literary history, when it comes to male writers of the interwar era, strives to forge relations with broader Hungarian literary tendencies (Bori 1998; Utasi 1984), but since it has been virtually untouched by studies on women's writing, Börcsök's work was never situated among female literary achievements of the period.

Although the historical contextualization of Börcsök's writing still remained a task to be accomplished, a turn towards the study of her writing in the specific framework of women's literature can be perceived since 2002, when *Eszter* was translated into the Serbian language by Lidija Dmitrijev. Now, before engaging with these scarce but precious sources, I wish to outline



the understanding of Börcsök's work by the mainstream literary criticism of Vojvodina Hungarian literature as constructed and re-constructed by male critiques from the publication of her first novel in 1933. Doing so, I attempt to emphasize that the tendencies of this criticism resonate with the general characteristics of 'masculinist' criticism, as described in feminist scholarship (Spender, 1989; Gilbert, 1985; Armstrong, 2006).

“ONCE ACCLAIMED, BUT NOW DENIED”

Dale Spender's sentence (1989, 27) summarizing the shift that occurred in 17th century female novelists' reception from their peer's evaluation to the latter canonical assessments, could just as well be a description of Erzsébet Börcsök's reception as unfolding in time. Spender's further remarks explaining a possible reason for this shift are also instructive when tracking the alteration of the places offered for Börcsök in the Vojvodina Hungarian literary canon. She suggests that the early recognition of female novelists was due to the genre – the novel – itself being in a “state of flux” with “little form to follow”, so women writers could appropriate some space in literature; but once things became stabilized, “the traditional relationship of the sexes reasserted itself”, and men dominated the literary world again (1989, 28). Similarly, while Vojvodina Hungarian literature, under the leadership of Kornél Szenteleky, and around the literary journal *Kalangya* edited by him, struggled to organize itself in the early 1930s, every contribution, among them of female writers, was welcome. From 1931, Erzsébet Börcsök was present in the journal through multiple short stories, but her greatest accomplishment at the time was her first published novel, the very first Vojvodina Hungarian novel, *A végtelen fal* [The Endless Wall] in 1933. Still, despite this seemingly unquestionable share of Börcsök in the foundation of Vojvodina Hungarian literature, in Utasi's *Irodalmunk és a Kalangya* [Our Literature and the Kalangya, 1984], the most thorough analysis of the journal and its circle to



date, Börcsök's name is mentioned only in passing. Another telling example is that in Imre Bori's *A jugoszláviai magyar irodalom története* [History of Hungarian literature in Yugoslavia, first published in 1968], the work which has determined the post-Second World War canon of Vojvodina Hungarian literature, although Börcsök's novel is discussed, its primacy is not stated. I wish to note here, that the last attempt to locate Börcsök among the founders of Vojvodina Hungarian literature dates back to 1963, when through the eyes of a peer, János Herceg stated that "[*A végtelen fal*] had all the features to establish the foundations of a regional literature" (1963, 284).

The coeval reception of *A végtelen fal* was not unanimously acclaiming either. Szenteleky, who from the late 1920s hurried the production of genuinely Vojvodina-rooted literary works, in a letter written right after receiving Börcsök's manuscript exclaimed that Börcsök's text will be the first "truly contemporary novel authentically from the Vojvodina", and a major success (Szenteleky 1943, 323). The novel was well received, but presumably not to Szenteleky's expectations. In a heated article he stands for Börcsök, claiming that the reason of her spoiled success is that the Vojvodina Hungarian audience follows the mistaken critical practice of assessing local achievements by comparing them to 'greater' works of art, with no regard to the contextual differences (Szenteleky 2000, 207-208). In the same journal Károly Szirmai, an acknowledged prose-writer of the 1930s, in his review of *A végtelen fal* was much less supportive of Börcsök. He scrutinized Börcsök's "lack of sense for composition" and ended his review with the conclusion that Börcsök's novel displayed a "weak libretto, but noble art of writing". Significantly Börcsök got his approval because she is *not* writing like a woman: "fortunately she nearly ever strolled into a particularization typical of women writers", "at the best places her sentences show masculine nobility" (Szirmai 1933, 409-410).



I consider it necessary to make a digression here toward the semiotic field of “women’s writing” in the local socio-cultural context. Since no one has investigated into the issue per se, I will make assumptions based on the use of the term(s) in literary criticism. From Szirmai’s inverted argumentation the following features of women’s writing could be deduced: engagement with details, lack of compositional strength, emotionality (Szirmai 1933); all of which are posited as the despicable ‘other’ of ‘noble’ and ‘masculine’ qualities, which evokes Huyssen’s claim about “the persistent gendering as feminine of that which is devalued” in modernism (1986, 53). Szenteleky’s addition was that he described *A végtelen fal* as a ‘feminine’ or ‘womanly’ novel [asszonyos regény], because the topic of the shared life of Hungarians and Serbians in Vojvodina Börcsök approached along the lines of a love story between a Hungarian girl and a Serbian boy (in Bori 1998: 104), which suggests that Szenteleky identified women’s writing with a particular topical scope. Pursuing Börcsök’s reception from the 1930s till 2000, I noticed no shift in the theoretical grounds behind the critical assessments. As I will show, throughout this time male critiques readily identified the same set of topics as ‘feminine’, moreover, they devalued those same characteristics in Börcsök’s writing which already the first reviewer, Szirmai scorned: emotionality, detailed descriptions, loose composition.

This inertness of the critical approach is well exemplified by Bori’s article on Börcsök in his academic literary history *A jugoszláviai magyar irodalom története* [JMIT – History of Hungarian literature in Yugoslavia, first published in 1968]. In this Bori agreed with Szenteleky, that *A végtelen fal* is a ‘womanly novel’, and in the same sentence added that actually *Eszter* is Börcsök’s “true ‘woman’s novel’ [asszonyregény]” since there “[t]he image of female destiny is in the forefront of [Börcsök’s] inquiry” (1998, 104-105). So in 1968 he took Szenteleky’s



concept on without any comments. Similarly he took this article in to the otherwise much-revised 1998 edition of *JMIT* without any changes.

Since *JMIT* represents the canon of Vojvodina Hungarian literature for generations of readers (it was the ultimate handbook of Vojvodina Hungarian literature for decades), I find it important to introduce Bori's further views on Börcsök. It is not only Szenteleky whom Bori returns for a word or two. His assessment of Börcsök's *A végtelen fal* is reminiscent of Szirmai's review, insofar as Bori considers that Börcsök spoiled the narrative because she "turned emotionality into a thesis" (1998, 104), playing down Börcsök's accomplishment by pushing it on the 'less important', 'lower', 'feminine' side of emotionality. When it comes to *Eszter*, Bori acknowledges that it displays possibilities for the "greater composition" of a family novel, but "it is obvious, that she is the most interested in her main protagonist's destiny" (1998, 105). Apparently he considers that *Eszter* could have been a more majestic work of art if it wasn't for its topic: a woman's life. This assessment is reminiscent of a tendency Sandra M. Gilbert observed: that the private lives of women are of no interest for male historians of literature (1985, 32).

Bori is not alone with his perspective. In the most concise study to date on Börcsök's novels Utasi critically observes the "female-supporting lopsidedness" in her novels which "prioritizes the dimensions of female world of feelings" (1994, 119). Reading this it comes as no surprise that according to him, Börcsök showcases such "authorial short-circuits" which resulted that "the female writer could not exceed the level of light reading" (1994, 118). That female writers were considered to produce 'light' readings was also noted by Huyssen, who marked that by covertly passing a strong judgment over values, in modernism the genres and tendencies of mass culture (as the dark, despised other of high culture) were generally attached to or identified with



women's accomplishments (1986, 48). Utasi was not the first to forge this link in Börcsök's reception: related to her short stories Gerold wrote about "the naïve adaptation given by the female writer", comparing her to Steinbeck, Solohov and Kosztolányi, who, according to Gerold, all solved a similar task much better (1963, 954).

Yet, it seems that what Utasi found as the greatest problem of *Eszter* is the proliferation of particularizations: "Börcsök, lacking the necessary self-control, heaps up such details and data which are uninteresting from a poetical point of view" (1994, 123). Based on Naomi Schor's research, Armstrong marks that engagement with details was associated with women's writing since the 18th century, indicating also what those writings lacked: a more economic arch of narrative (Armstrong 2006, 105-106). Utasi's reflections on Börcsök resonate along the same lines, insofar as he considers that the details distort the composition of the novel, and thus in *Eszter* the woman writer achieves "an even lower level of economy" than in her other novels (1994, 124). This way it is but "storytelling, aimlessly" (Utasi 1994, 123); or with the wording of an earlier assessment: "an unfulfilled promise" (Gerold 1972, 101).

However, Utasi recognized that in *Eszter* Börcsök experimented with the genre of Bildungsroman, and both Bori and Gerold marked the autobiographical dimensions of her writings. Yet, as they evaluate the reality constructions of Börcsök's prose, they impose an androcentric criteria disguised as universal. Utasi states, that Börcsök with her unnecessary meandering slows down the time-flow of the novel and "it becomes even more drowsy than the time-flow of the early 20th century was" (1994, 124). While back in 1963, Gerold as a young contemporary of Börcsök wondered why she still narrated an isolated life when "we have overgrown that"; and immediately answering he declares that Börcsök imposed similar limits on her characters as her own, so that "the writer's fault is [...] that she got stuck and makes [her



characters] stuck in Banat”, to conclude with even more (gender-) blind cruelty: one cannot talk about tragedy concerning her writings, only about “the writer’s tragedy” (1963, 953-955). Obviously these critiques were unable to recognize that the “slower” time-flow or the “isolation” of the characters could be interpreted as the literary reconstructions of a woman’s different perception of time and space.

After the overview of the *malestream* reception of Erzsébet Börcsök’s oeuvre and particularly *Eszter*, in the followings I will introduce those interpretations which turned towards the novel with a ‘gendered lens’.

21st CENTURY RE-READINGS

Since translation and re-reading are mutually interchangeable metaphors, I consider Lidija Dmitrijev’s translation of *Eszter* in the Serbian language as the first attempt towards a re-contextualization of the novel. Indeed, this endeavor placed the novel in a feminist context, in the serial of books “Outstanding Women of Novi Sad” published by the Women’s Studies and Research Group “Mileva Marić-Einstein”. Gordana Stojaković’s review in *Feminist Europa* already reads as a response to the former gender-blind reception, insofar as she accentuates that it is through the minute description of the details of everyday women’s experience that *Eszter* achieves to be a “history of women’s silence and suppression mutely accepted as a part of women’s lives”. Stojaković also pioneered in apprehending that the autobiographical text of the novel sublimates the experience of a talented woman who “due to socially constructed roles” was able to write only in her youth and after being retired (2004, 50), indicating the plausibility of autobiographical research on *Eszter* – a task that I take on in the following chapter.



With the preface written to the Serbian edition of *Eszter* followed by two articles on the novel, Éva Hózsa is the scholar who has devoted the most attention to the novel so far. In the preface she offers a rich listing of possible aspects for *Eszter*'s reading, many of which I will pick up in this thesis. Hózsa reveals that “*Eszter* is distinguished from the others because she sees”, though she does not engage with the characteristics of *Eszter*'s vision as constructed in the text, nor with the subversive potentials engendered by this vision – two aspects that I will investigate into. Certain other brief apprehensions of Hózsa, such as that already as a child, *Eszter* had discovered that men and women are valued by different standards; that *Eszter* rejects the pre-empted role models; and that the novel is sometimes openly critical of women's position in the society (2002, 5-7), will also gain some more substantiated argumentation in the subsequent chapters.

In her *A Szenteleky-kultusz regénybeli lenyomata* [The imprint of the Szenteleky-cult in a novel], raising attention to the novel's autobiographical dimensions, Hózsa declares that the prior reception neglected that *Eszter* could be interpreted as “a *witnessing* novel about the literary *beginnings*” [italics in the original] in the Vojvodina Hungarian context, a topic otherwise so eagerly researched by male historians of literature. The *Kunstlerroman*-aspect of the novel gets mentioned as well, just like the issue of narrative closure, adding that “in *Eszter*, just like in most female autobiographies, [in the closure] the dilemma of two pathways is present” (2004a, 31-32). I will devote the 4th chapter to discussing these dimensions; however, I handle Hózsa's views concerning ‘the cult's’ importance in *Eszter*'s life critically.

Hózsa's most recent take on the topic, *Két határregény* [Two Border-novels, 2004] has a special importance for me, since it was from her discussion of the “subversive, border-dismissing” attitudes present in the novel, and her suggestions that the text, while offering an interpretation of



an artist's life, deals with the border-experience of existence (2004b, 58), that I got the impetus to read *Eszter* as a border-novel – in my interpretation: a novel of gendered borders.

In the next chapter I will analyze the autobiographic features of *Eszter*, at the same time engaging in the possibilities offered by the genre of autobiographical fiction. Through my interpretation I attempt to forge connections between the novel and the tendencies of Hungarian feminist fiction in modernism, with the aim of mapping *Eszter*'s location in that particular body of texts, and also to answer the question: why do I regard *Eszter* as a feminist novel?



E FOR ERZSÉBET AND ESZTER: ERZSÉBET BÖRCsök'S ESZTER AS AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL FICTION

In the case of Erzsébet Börcsök's *Eszter* I consider that an initial, textual displacement took place when Börcsök constructed a 'fictional self' (Evans 2000), instead of writing an autobiography. In other words, she displaced her autobiography with the fictional biography of Eszter Módra. This way the text of *Eszter* is approachable as a palimpsest, a record which consists of several interconnected but independent layers, a "surface that retained all impressions yet offered itself constantly as a clean surface upon which new inscriptions could be made" (Radstone-Hodgkin 2006, 7). My interpretation will attempt to be another 'new inscription' onto the palimpsest of the novel which will bring together the biographical narrative of Börcsök and the autobiographical narrative of the novel, with the aim to retrace the female identities discursively constructed in this multilayered textual world.

In this chapter I conceive autobiography as a historically specific construct which is accomplished through discursive practices, conceiving the autobiographic accounts as sites of memory where through the narration of one's past, various identity positions and subjectivity constructions are negotiated. Although in my perception autobiographical writing doesn't reflect an a priori stable identity (rather the repetitions of signification – writing – discursively construct it), I also acknowledge Grosz's apprehension that "the sexuality and corporeality of the subject leave their traces or marks on the texts produced" (1995, 21). The authorial presence in autobiographical writing may be retraceable in the form of such 'footprints' in the texture of the fictional world which can be pursued going 'backwards', following the biographical traces of the



author, and ‘forwards’, looking into the produced discursive persona’s dimensions. For that reason the footprints of the author could act as such “hinges” (Grosz 1995, 21) where the producer (the author) and the product (the text) are sliding onto each other or away from each other. In the case of autobiographical fiction, due to the author’s greater control over the narrative than in the case of autobiography proper (Evans 2000, 76), the examination of what footprints were incorporated in the textual world and to what kinds of discursively produced selves they relate is a compelling task.

I consider it important to begin by listing the novel’s correspondences with Börcsök’s biography to circumscribe the grounds of my further explorations, as well as to demonstrate that my interpretation is not governed by an ‘all women’s writings are autobiographical’ type of an attitude, a pattern which Stanton warns about (1984, 133).

FOOTPRINTS IN THE TEXT

or: what suggests that Eszter is an autobiographical novel?

Erzsébet Börcsök’s life is usually described as having two fruitful writing periods – her youth (1930s) and her retired years (late 1960s) – framing a long period of silence during which she never published. Börcsök is not an exception in this matter. Reading the biographies of early Vojvodina Hungarian writers in recent major literary history works (such as Gerold, 2001; Bori, 1998), one easily gets the impression that they never existed apart from their date of birth, possibly death, and the facts related to their publications. So when contrasting Erzsébet Börcsök’s biographical data to the lifestory of Eszter Módra, I rely on those very scarce biographical inputs that I tracked down in the historiographies of Vojvodina Hungarian literature. A further source was a 1933 letter by Kornél Szenteleky, the editor of Börcsök’s first



novel, to the publisher of the novel, in which he describes the poverty stricken life of the Börcsök family: as one which hardly gets by with the father's pension as a railroad-worker (Szenteleky 1943, 332). According to the novel, Eszter Módra's father was a railway employee as well, and after the family's return to Yugoslavia his miserable retirement allowance was the their only income.

Another of the verifiable data of the biography which has a significant role among the textual footprints of the author in the novel is the date of birth. Erzsébet Börcsök was born the 9th of November, 1904. In the novel, Julcsa, the maid of the Módra family, scribbled the current year '1904' on the cellar's wall a moment before she heard the Módra family's newborn daughter Eszter, crying out for the first time. Eszter was baptized ten days after being born, on Erzsébet's day – 19th of November, therefore Eszter was born the 9th, same as Börcsök. Furthermore, the name of the saint on whose day she was baptized is also instructive, as well as the fact that the reader can never learn what name the mother had originally chosen for her newborn, because the excited baptizing companions – among them the godmother and the father – who took the tiny girl to the church had simply forgotten it. This loss of the original name is a trace we will follow further when discussing Eszter's relationship with her mother, later on in this chapter.

The publication year of Eszter's first novel is a further trace. The exact year, 1933, I gained with mediated inference: Eszter's novel was issued shortly after her editor, mentor and idol died. From the description of the man's position in the Vojvodina Hungarian literary life, his approach to the novice writer, and the hints at his disease facilitate the identification of the character with Kornél Szenteleky. Szenteleky died in 1933, the year when Börcsök's first novel: *A végtelen fal* (The Endless Wall) was issued. The outstanding importance of the protagonist's relationship with the acknowledged writer in the fictional world of *Eszter* is going to be addressed related to



the novel's Künstlerroman dimensions in the next chapter. An additional input from literary history: Börcsök had a selection of short stories published in 1936. Eszter, after 2 years of recovering from the trauma caused by the loss of her paragon (supposedly 1933), puts together a book of prose, which is issued early the next year – 1936. Finally, to round up this collection of textual footprints of the author, I wish to highlight the correspondences of the novel's ending with Börcsök's biographical data. Eszter's story finishes with her marriage (by my approximation sometime in 1938/39), while *Eszter I* marked the end of a fruitful era of writing for Börcsök. The further implications of the slippage of the end of writing and the end of life-story, into each other will be also discussed in the last chapter.

FOCUS AND FOCALIZATION

In the first part of the novel the heterodiegetic narrator stands for the socially accepted patriarchal discourse of late bourgeois modernism, and critically handles every divergence from a normative ideal of girlhood. The narrator's critical approach to Eszter is in concordance with a much discussed feature of women's autobiographical writings which is the acceptance of the assumed connection between femininity and self-belittling (Brownley and Kimmich, 1999; Heilbrun, 1988; Gilbert and Gubar, 1985), except in *Eszter I* it is not the main protagonist who talks down to herself (as it would be the case in an autobiographical narrative), but the narrator.

In the context of Hungarian modernism such a critical approach on the narrator's side could also be interpreted as foreground justification as the main protagonist did not sufficiently satisfy the normative requirements towards female characters. As Horváth pinpointed, in Hungarian modernism women's writing was allowed, even supported, as long as the author followed the 'generic conventions' of being a woman writer; namely, if she subscribed to the normative ideal both with her authorial persona and what she represented in her writings (2004, 26). Since Eszter



often has unconventional, therefore subversive views on various issues, the narrator's intra-textual criticism could be interpreted as a vindication of extra-textual attacks.

Yet, if I rely on Evans's apprehensions concerning the subversive potentials inherent in the omniscient narrator's figure when used in female autobiographical fiction (2000, 78), I see a further interpretation plausible. The horizon of expectations towards women's writing in Hungarian modernism was structured along the lines of a general stereotypical image of an idealized, normative female subjectivity. Female subjectivity was constructed as the 'other' of the autonomous, coherent, male modern individuum: decentered and dependent. Therefore, when a female writer like Börcsök uses the strongly authoritative position of an omniscient narrator in her novel, it could be perceived as the deconstruction of the presumed causal relationship between the author's sex and the authorial presence in her writing. Insofar as she exposes that a female author can have authority over her textual world, Börcsök performs a feminist move by problematizing the ways the author's position is occupied in the modernist patriarchal discourse.

The different displacements in the narrative allow for an even richer set of interpretational moves. Throughout *Eszter I* the omniscient narration often shifts into a narration focalized via Eszter's perception, while in *Eszter II* the heterodiegetic narration is in an interplay with the homodiegetic (first person singular) narration present in the central protagonist's inner monologues and diary entries. The position of Eszter as the focalizer and the inclusion of her homodiegetic contemplations into the novel I consider as additional proof that *Eszter* is an autobiographical text. The change between the two parts of the novel, as well as its probable reasons I will address later.



Here I wish to add that the ‘noise’ which springs up from in between the narration and the focalization in *Eszter I*, as well as the heteroglossia present in the correspondence of the narration of Eszter’s life and the inserted episodes from other women’s lives also provide grounds for the contestation of modern patriarchal standards. The way one of Eszter’s identity’s main features is constructed could be instructive here. She is only a couple of months old when her family goes to a gathering, and leaves her, the ceaselessly whining infant, behind with Julcsa, the maid. Julcsa wishes to sneak out to the street to meet a handsome soldier, so she prepares a tea for the baby from opium poppy seed pods. From this time on opiatedness becomes a specific epithet of Eszter’s, in whom “the blood pulses more lazily, the thoughts roll more slowly; she lives in an eternal opiated isolation from others, and gazes with an eternally staring astonishment at life, that she never perfectly understands” (Börcsök 1968, 42²). Later on these two initial motives: that she was an annoyance for everyone and that she had a distorted perception due to the effect of the narcotic, are forcefully inscribed into her identity. However, this segment of the narrative, the one with the drug, posits Eszter as someone who *accidentally* has a different understanding of the world than the generally established and accepted one, constructing a powerful narrative tool for later inclusion of subversive views.

By positing Eszter as an “opiated” subjectivity, the narration at the same time reduces the subversive power of those experiences which she faces as a woman, and opens up towards experiences of someone ‘different’. One possible interpretation is that this narrative construction supplies the culture’s need for controlled alterations, fulfilling a generic characteristic of modern autobiography (Evans 1999, 143). Nonetheless, if applying the framework I developed based on

² Subsequent quotations from the novel are marked by page number only.



Lionnet's and Henderson's insights, it becomes apparent that there are such occurrences in the narrative where it is exactly Eszter's "opiated" vision which enables instances of dialogics.

In the following I will offer a reading of those features of the novel which in my interpretation challenge the socially established patriarchal standards of the era, either through digressions towards other women's life stories as perceived by Eszter as a focalizer (in *Probing women*), or via the dialogue between the narrator's and the main protagonist's altering visions about girlhood, and in the second part of the novel, about womanhood (in subsection *Who's to blame for her aimless life?*).

PROBING WOMEN

By opening up the textual world of the novel for episodes from various women's lives, more narrative space is offered for the construction of the self's relations to others, which, according to Jelinek is a differentiating feature of female autobiographies (in Stanton 1984, 140). Among the many female associations which are of importance in Eszter's life, there are two which play a formative role in her youth: her relationship with her mother, and with her godmother, Ángyika.

As Evans suggested, autobiographical fiction allows such extensions to autobiography which facilitate the inclusion of narrative segments which would be beyond the scope of an autodiegetic (first-person) retrospective narrator (2000, 76). A good example for the greater freedom of autobiographical fiction compared to autobiography is that the re-construction of the protagonist's 'beginning' can be part of *Eszter's* narrative – an incident which would certainly disrupt the credibility of an autodiegetic narration. Yet, the episode describing the pregnant mother's hesitation over whether she should keep her fifth child or abort it, has more significant consequences than proving the 'greater freedom' gained by choosing autobiographical fiction



over autobiography. The narrative of the novel constructs a story of beginnings which radically erases the male component, placing the decision over the life of the fetus in the hands of two women: the mother and the midwife. The father's answer to his wife's question, if she should keep the child or not, is: "Damn it, this is your deal, women's thing." (17), suggesting that the mother had power over childbearing. The way the mother's scope of power is constructed exhibits similarities with late modern English domestic novels, where women had certain "cultural power" within the household (Armstrong 2006, 105).

In *Eszter* the mother gains further strength from an alliance forged with the midwife, and finally consolation in the thought that "perhaps it will be a girl" (19). That Eszter can live because two women allied inspired by the prospect that the newborn might be a girl, constructs a powerful matrilineal connection, reinforced by the fact that by being a girl she is fulfilling maternal expectations. This connection is further strengthened by the fact that the mother chose a name for the newborn, but the 'forgetful' father had her baptized with a name of his choice. Therefore Eszter's entrance into the symbolic order is equaled with her entrance into the Father's order, however: that the novel reveals that an initial, matrilineal naming took place, which suggests that in the sphere of the mother-daughter relationship the mother had a necessarily failed attempt to make the infant enter the realm of symbolic on her own terms. Eszter's maternal attachment is powerfully construed through these episodes, foregrounding an explanation for her further "oscillations" between the mother's world and heterosexual bonds.

In the framework of generic conventions of autobiography these episodes gain additional importance considering that certain scholarly works on the genre claim that autobiographical fiction predominantly starts with the "loss of beginning" (Benstock 1999, 11). Furthermore, while the narrative reaches out towards the integration of maternity, it pursues a step which



Hirsch describes as a revolutionary moment in women's fiction when the modern female protagonists "allow themselves to know the mothers' stories" (1989, 96-97). In *Eszter*, quite radically, the explorations of the mother's story embrace investigations into the mother's femininity and the parents' sexual relations. One of these instances brings together Eszter's mother and Ángyika in such a context where through the contesting dialogue between the narrator's 'neutral' storytelling and the reflections of the child Eszter as the focalizer, a criticism of the double sexual standard of the community becomes possible.

The story in a nutshell goes as follows: Ángyika, Eszter's very attractive godmother, the wife of Eszter's paternal uncle has an extramarital affair, as a result of which the whole small-town community turns against her. During the time of the affair's fermentation Eszter is a guest at Ángyika's upper middle class home, and the child seemingly becomes enchanted by the lavish lifestyle of her godmother. The narrator's comments concerning Ángyika's behavior are rather curious, pondering: "Is such a sinful woman, who, if they pass Malatenszki [the beloved one] during their walk, gets home shivering and holds the child so powerfully that she almost suffocates? And if in the evening-time [...] while scrubbing the little feet, she tells about her own thrashings, is that a sin?" (60). To which the answer will arrive through the child's inner farewell monologue, when her mother takes her away from the 'fallen woman': "I am sorry, godmother, I don't know what's happening. [...] I only know that there is no better, more warm-hearted woman than you are." (64). Here via the saturated (opiated!), sensitive Eszter as the text's focalizer, such a textual layer is opened up which challenges the double-faced bourgeois assumptions, according to which a woman is 'naturally' monogamous, while men have a tendency for promiscuity (Schwartz 2008, 75). So a woman who seeks sexual pleasures outside of wedlock is not a 'proper' woman, she is deviated, a monster. Therefore woman's worth is



equated with her success as an exemplary wife, while the same system of values has a much more flexible framework for the evaluation of men's actions, which, again based on the narration of the novel, takes in consideration both their performance at work and their position in the social network of the community; furthermore, the sexual hints at their behavior with women other than their wives is commonly taken as a marker of their joviality.

Exactly the double-standards, which openly require marital faithfulness from women while overlooking men's fallacies, are uncovered by Ángyika in a fierce moment. After having been declared a 'fallen woman', she pays a visit to the Módra family, in search for her husband. The narrator notes the circumstances of the visit with casual indifference: "[the Módra's] had no time to care for her. She was not invited into the house either, and they locked up the kids." (65). Formerly Ángyika was the most welcome visitor of the house, receiving distinguished attention from every member of the household, especially Módra himself. Now, the fact that she was not let inside and that the kids were "locked up" indicates a conviction that the 'deviated', 'immoral' woman-monster might 'contaminate' them. After depicting the state of affairs, the priorly omniscient narration shifts into the peeking Eszter's perspective. Through Eszter as the focalizer the narration constructs an open, curious look at Ángyika, reflected in Eszter's inner wondering: "Is this [her], this deranged, frightened woman?" While the narrator stays neutral, the focalization is compassionate, and this constellation again generates such an in-betweenness of voices, such a 'noise', which offers an alternative understanding of the forthcoming situation: Ángyika's verbal duel with her brother-in-law. To the man's furious moral lessoning ("you dirtied our family!" etc.) her bitter but ironic answer is: "You men... you dare to shout at me? [...] What really troubles you is that I wasn't yours!" (65). Obviously in this exceptional situation her outsider status allows her an open criticism of the sexual double-standards, and



since this episode takes place early on in the narrative, it designs a cognitive pattern for the reading of further relations of the sexes as represented in the novel. For example the way Ángyika re-enters the family circle is quite thought-provoking: when the Módras and their friends got tired of her husbands' complaints, they simply construed a situation when the two could stay alone and get together again. Everything happened according to plan, and Ángyika was reintegrated seamlessly. This episode suggests that though the violation of the sexual double-standards stirred heated reactions, in the long run the maintenance of an easy going family life was more important.

Additionally I wish to highlight, that as Schwartz showed, the discussion and criticism of sexual double-standards was a major topic of Hungarian feminist writings in the early 20th century (2008, 16; 75; 122), so the above interpretation is one of the links which connects Börcsök to that body of writings.

Ángyika's instance of unmasking will also become formative of Eszter's understanding of sexuality, as I will discuss later. Yet, this quarrel had an instant effect on a fourth party, Eszter's mother, who overheard Ángyika's response, which for her translates as "What do you want when you are not a woman any more for your husband either?!" (66). The narration again exploits a rhetoric of uncertainty: "What could a worn down, desperate young woman do, who always lived for her family, wearing so many burdens for them, when another, younger, prettier woman comes along [...]" This formulation of the question supports the established moral standards as represented by the father; namely that a woman's pursuit of sexual pleasures brings along suffering for her whole surrounding. However, in the context constructed through the dialogic relationship of narrator and focalizer (a context which allows for compassion with the 'fallen woman'), an additional understanding of the relations becomes possible. According to this, it is



not the mother and Ángyika who are opposed to each other, but two women and a man, and through him the social establishment, which expects women to be devoted entirely to their wedlock and their children.

I see the mother's attempt to commit suicide as a response to the utter despair over realizing that her sole guarantor of value – her status as a wife – is unreliable. As Schwartz noted, for women of the generations that never questioned the validity and the values of bourgeois marriage, suicide “stands for the refusal to comply with the prescribed behavior” (2008, 181). Eszter's appearance made the mother change her mind, which on the one hand reinforced the importance of the mother-daughter relationship, positing Eszter as the one who gives, if not life, then meaning for life to the mother. On the other hand it re-established that socio-cultural definition by which the importance of motherhood replaces and/or supersedes the importance of wifedom. This idea is also promoted by a structurally similar episode in the second part of the novel, where the adult Eszter rescues her female friend, Teci, who wants to commit suicide after discovering her husband's adultery. Eszter convinces her friend to opt for life with these words: “Come home! The children are waiting for you.” (285).

There is one more place in the novel where a woman strives to escape despair by ending her life, and that is when Eszter reaches for poison. I will pursue the discussion of this episode together with other shifts and displacements in Eszter's identity construction in the next subsection. Here I wish to dwell on some additional women's stories that were integrated into the body of the novel and thus allow for a wider scope of sight into women's lives in the given socio-cultural framework.



Eszter's apprehension that "[Married] women sometimes very well know how to remain silent." (281), functions like, to borrow Hózsza's wording, a "key-sentence" (2004a, 30) for reading many of the female characters, among them Eszter's muted mother, the above mentioned Teci, or Médi, Eszter's very young sister-in-law, who after marrying a much older man, entering into a formerly unknown environment (from middle-class urban lifestyle into working-class rural circumstances) and finally, having a miscarriage, falls into a stupor. Still, it seems that there are women who can and dare to speak out for themselves. One of them is Rozi, the "manwoman [emberasszony]" (93) as the village calls her: an elderly maid who remained single, swore and smoked, and had an immense knowledge about herbs and potions. The other such self-asserting female character is Aunt Örzse [néni], an old peasant woman who managed her life independently, and when in business, she "sent her husband out of her way" (265). The third female character who acquired herself an amount of freedom of speech and action is Eszter's artist friend, Virág, who chose not to have children in order to devote all her energy to sculpting. So, taking a cross-sectional view of the female characters in the novel, a significant phenomenon occurs: the middle-class and lower middle-class women are muted, while the peasant women and those who stepped out from the middle-class framework by choosing arts as their profession are more self-assertive. This suggests that the criticism of the gender relations in *Eszter* has well defined class implications. In other words: it is aimed at the gender hierarchy of the bourgeoisie per se.

In the next subsection I will address how the narrator constructs Eszter's identity versus the discursive identity constructed through Eszter as the focalizer. The dialogue of the two discourses creates a rich textual network of critical apprehensions concerning the circumstances of lower middle class female life.



“WHO’S TO BLAME FOR HER AIMLESS LIFE?”

The title of this subsection I took from the novels’ second part (249), and throughout the following discussion I wish to engage with the various answers provided by the different stages of Eszter’s identity construction. Heilbrun’s statement that female autobiographers up until the 1970s usually hid or displaced their anguish (1999, 20) can be a useful starting point for investigation of the dialogic relationship between the narrator’s and the focalizer’s mutually contesting ‘vision’ of Eszter’s identity. In the case of *Eszter* a plausible interpretation would be that the initial textual displacement of Börcsök’s autobiography with a fictional narrative served the purpose of hiding. Additionally the protagonist’s struggles as a woman are disguised by the initial narrative about her being ‘opiated’. For instance: according to the narratorial comments Eszter could have gotten married and lived a “normal” life if it was not for her “opiated” nature which made her slow in decision-making (230-231), which explanation serves as a disguise for Eszter’s struggles to avoid the pre-empt role-models available for her.

Still, in the second part of the novel (written in the 1960s) a great deal of anguish is directly revealed through Eszter’s homodiegetic ponderings and her diary notes. Important to note here, that a very significant shift can be observed in the narrator’s and the focalizer’s construction of Eszter’s identity when contrasting the two parts of the novel. While in the first part (1939) the narrator maintains a distanced, neutral tone towards the events, in the second part (1968) the narrator is often outright critical of the gender-biased social establishment (of the 1930s). While all the other features of the novel (poetics, structure, topics) support the coherency of the two parts, the narration distinguishably alters. I understand this as an outcome of a considerable sense of ‘freedom’ provided by the historical distance, so it comes as no surprise that in the 1960s Börcsök’s narrator could articulate a more outright criticism of the 1930s. The historical distance



is the most explicitly present in the next passage: “*that* era was faulty, which raised women only for the home, only for the family” (249, italics mine). At the same time Eszter, the focalizer ‘sees’ more of the unfair treatment of women in the first part (as exemplified earlier by the Ángyika episode), while in the second part Eszter in her inner monologues considers herself as the main if not the only reason of her failed life, never pondering the effects of social circumstances. This feeling of Eszter, that there is “something wrong” with her resonates with Friedan’s description of middle-class women’s self-evaluation, described in *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963 as “the problem that has no name” (in Greene 1991, 33).

Here I wish to follow the ‘opium-track’ through the novel to shed further light on how female personal battles are constructed as a disguised, ‘no name’ source of tension. The ‘opiated’ nature of Eszter’s character is used by the narrator in the first part of the novel to explain Eszter’s disinclination towards heterosexual relationships, while in the second part of the novel it shows up in her own ponderings about her connections with men.

In *Eszter I* the girl witnesses two situations which must have had a formative influence on her understanding of sexuality. Later as an adolescent she becomes a victim of intra-familial abuse. The first episode, the duel of Ángyika and Módra, I described earlier. The second time was when the teenage girl became the eye-witness of a sexually heated battle between the parents. In this episode Eszter’s mother finds his husband staring at the house’s sleeping, young, female guest’s uncovered body in the middle of the night. After a short, accusing verbal interaction the aroused man pushes his wife back in the bedroom, wanting to have sexual intercourse with her. The woman well understands that the desires are not aimed at her, and tries to push him away. All the while Eszter, who had slept with her mother that night, peeks from under the covers. “She didn’t understand the tension of events behind the moment (...) her mother’s disgustful rejection, her



father's raging demand aimed at [the woman's] humiliation." (148). If it was not for Eszter's interruption (she cried out), marital rape would have occurred. Although Eszter saw the man as wanting to humiliate the woman through forced intercourse, and despite a comment of the narrator – that "[Eszter] until then believed that the life of adults is a charmingly beautiful, elusive something" (148.) – which suggests that a change occurred in Eszter under the traumatizing effect of the events, still; this experience of hers is never mentioned again. Nor that a relative of the family nearly raped the adolescent Eszter, traumatizing the girl to such an extent that she was in delirium and fever for weeks afterwards. "Of course" Eszter never told anyone the cause of her illness – by then she already knew how to remain silent. However, in the context of these events the narrator's struggle to construct the reasons of Eszter's aversion towards men around her 'opiated', therefore slowly reacting body, seems a hardly tenable explanation. The clues in the narration – "growing she became almost bodyless" (136); "her silhouette was almost unnaturally frail" (149); "if only her senses ever spoke out" (162) – lead towards an image of Eszter as a woman detached from her body, a wholly spiritual being. By positing Eszter as a young woman with hardly any carnal features and thus explaining her sexual 'indifference' with her airy, spiritual, visionary, 'opiated' and religious 'nature', such a female identity is constructed which reinforces one of modernism's most perseverant dualistic representations of women: the Madonna-whore dichotomy. However, not only the construction of Eszter's identity suggests that Börcsök (similar to many female writers of modernism), internalized patriarchal standards, but that when the narration critically handles the above-mentioned features of Eszter's personality, it does so in compliance with the theoretical claims of male psychology, namely Freud's theory about the 'archaic' virginal reaction that women show before having heterosexual experiences (Schwartz 2008, 121). That Eszter through her personal experiences might have



been traumatized and thus shied away from heterosexual relationships gets no particular attention throughout the narrative. Nevertheless, these instances are in a dialogic-contesting relation with the narration which imposes the motive of Eszter's 'opiated' nature as a pattern for explaining all of her anguish.

Eszter's identity is constructed differently in the second part of the novel, mainly because, to the double-perspective constructed through an omniscient heterodiegetic narration and the focalization via Eszter, in *Eszter II* a third perspective is added: that of Eszter's homodiegetic narration. As I stated before, *Eszter II* was written in the 1960s, so the autobiographical events here are revised from three decades away, but significantly it is only in *Eszter II* that the main protagonist's diary gets function in the narrative. The re-appropriation of these diary-fragments offers a dialogic relation to the past, through which possibly controversial memories are re-constructed from a triple perspective: that of the heterodiegetic narrator, and that of Eszter, the focalizer, and Eszter, the homodiegetic narrator.

Apart from the shift in the narration everything else supports the cohesion of the two parts. Both the storyline and the topical and motivic connections very forcefully link them together. The narration still constructs Eszter as an 'opiated' personality (193), although, the importance of this feature is gradually faded by what's perceived as a "puppet-life moved by outside forces" (Hózsá 2004b: 56). Passages like "The world is more and more chaotic. [...] The curtains are yanked from behind." or "She didn't have to be cursed, the whole world has been cursed already." (336-337) are of those very rare textual places where there is some indication of the happenings outside Eszter's immediate surroundings. The text allows for a more accurate historical localization of events when mentioning "eagles [that] flapped in the heights for life or death..."(337), which in the context of the 1930s could be related to the violent rise of the Third



Reich, with the eagle as a central symbol. These textual instances gain great importance because of the contrast between them and the rest of the narrative: apart from the quoted pages the whole novel constructs Eszter's life as completely untouched by history. For example: that she moved to Yugoslavia after graduating from high school is tragic for her because her dreams about the beginning of a new life remain unfulfilled; though not because of the new political context, but because of her parents' uttermost poverty.

Eszter II is the story of those fifteen years the main protagonist spent in the parental house in Banat, a region of Vojvodina from her graduation until her marriage. As the biographical data of Börcsök indicates, she also lived with her elderly parents in a small village in the Banat from 1923 until the late 1930s, so I consider the identification of Eszter's diary notes with Börcsök's own diary entries a plausible interpretation. It is Eszter's diary that communicates that she feels like a complete failure. Already Hózsa noted that Eszter accuses no one but herself for her aimlessness and her unfulfilled dreams (2004b, 57). Here I wish to point towards further implications of this feature of the main protagonist. As I suggested earlier, Eszter's 'nameless' syndrome displays similarities with the "problem that has no name" of suburban middle-class housewives as famously described by Betty Friedan. This proposes that Börcsök, in her isolation had a perhaps unparalleled sensitivity towards women's problems among her contemporaries. From the aspect of Hungarian women's writing, Eszter's self-condemning personality is also of importance, so much so that the integration of Börcsök's novel into this canon would probably result in the revision of certain claims, like: "the self-accusing type of woman in Hungarian literature was created by Magda Szabó [in *Az ajtó* – The Door, 1987]" (Jastrzebska 2004, 38).

Self-condemning brings Eszter to a desperate move. One evening, when her parents are away, she reaches for poison. The toxicant she intends to take is the drug her mother takes to ease her



pains ... opium. Significantly the narrative here, in this instance of a possible ending, joins two major motives of Eszter's textually constructed identity. When Eszter takes the lethal substance from the mother, the source of life, and with it powerful maternal connections are posited as a potential source of death. From another point of view, that the substance is opium directs the reader towards an interpretation: that Eszter actually wants to take Julcsa's deed to an accomplishment and finish her half-poisoned existence. The sound of a violin from the distance sinks Eszter into joyous memories, and reconnecting her with her more forceful, optimistic self makes her drop the drug. From this time on Eszter starts seeking connections, and soon the life that in her moments of hopelessness she described as a "blank page" (274) will be filled – with writing.



WRITING FOR LIFE:

THE KUNSTLERROMAN ASPECTS OF ERZSÉBET BÖRCsök'S ESZTER

Making up stories in order to escape the dullness of the lower middle class family's everyday life was a practice that Eszter developed at a young age. The novel's narrator, as in other cases when it addressed particularities of female behavior, approaches this phenomenon through questions: "Was it the adolescent girls' pastime? Or was it [originated in] the old time opium...?" (143). Again, the narration exploits the rhetoric of indecisiveness, but while doing so it actually proposes two interpretations: one which relates Eszter's intentional daydreaming to her opiated-visionary nature; and one which forges a connection with her gender. Pursuing the latter trace I came to the conclusion that in *Eszter*, the central protagonist writes not despite, but because she is a woman, which is reminiscent of Benstock's claim that writing could be a way for the female self to break loose from the pre-empted categories imposed upon it (1999, 12).

So far, reception has neglected or played down this interpretation of the novel. It comes as no surprise, since, as I showed in the 2nd chapter, even Börcsök's achievement of writing the first Vojvodina Hungarian novel was understood by her contemporaries as Szenteleky's accomplishment. The 1930s Vojvodina Hungarian literary life's approach to Börcsök is well exemplified by Szenteleky's letter to the novel's publisher, in which he objected to getting half of the royalties after Börcsök's *A végtelen fal*, claiming that "after all, still Börcsök wrote that novel" (1943, 331). The publisher's decision to pay half of the royalties to Szenteleky illustrates the literary circle's understanding of 'authorship' and 'authority' in the 1930s: it was conceptualized as a 'masculine' feature.



Gilbert and Gubar's located the "roots of 'authority'" in modernism as constructed along the lines of a paternal relationship between author and text which was derived from a "historical confusion of literary authorship with patriarchal authority". They claim that "the metaphor of literary paternity" implies that female authorship is impossible. Accordingly the male is considered to be the author of all the females whom he has authority over, and conversely: "if he authored her she must be his property" (Gilbert and Gubar 1984, 5-13). I argue that the same cultural conviction can be retraced in the publisher's decision, namely: since Szenteleky engaged Börcsök into the circle of writers, along the lines of the above detailed conventional understanding of "literary paternity", he was seen as her 'author', so whatever she made belonged to him. In spite of Szenteleky's objection, and that he, in a letter written immediately after receiving Börcsök's manuscript, exclaimed that Börcsök's text will be the first "genuinely contemporary novel authentically from the Vojvodina" (Szenteleky 1943, 323), the later Vojvodina Hungarian reception never failed to overemphasize his role in Börcsök's career, as if without him Börcsök would have had nothing to offer (Bori 1998; Utasi 1994).

This understanding of their relationship influenced some of the research on the autobiographical dimensions of *Eszter* as well. I consider Éva Hózsa's call for a re-reading of the 'beginnings' of Vojvodina Hungarian literary life with the inclusion of *Eszter* as a "witnessing novel" (2004a, 31) a crucial step towards the revision of our literary history on more gender-equal grounds. However, I see her interpretation of *Eszter* and the literary leader's relationship as one which actually reinforces the status of Börcsök as a devotee or follower of Szenteleky, insofar that as in Hózsa's interpretation the character whom the reception identifies with Szenteleky incited *Eszter*'s speaking up and thus her breaking out from her "inner dialogues" towards writing (2004a, 30). The correspondence with the literary leader (his supportive approach towards



Eszter's ambitions) was undoubtedly an outstanding point of reference for Eszter, but she had been writing for a long time by then, so the claim that 'Szenteleky' (meaning the character pinpointed as his equivalent in *Eszter*) induced her writing is untenable. On the other hand, in the framework offered by feminist scholarship on the socio-cultural construction of female authorship in modernism the spiritual dimensions in Eszter's perception of 'Szenteleky' could be interpreted as a necessitated displacement in the discourse on female authorship (Brownley and Kimmich 1999; Heilbrun 1985; Stanton 1984; Gilbert and Gubar 1979).

In the followings I will examine how Eszter's inclination towards writing and consequently her relation to literature was constructed in the novel. I have distinguished three stages: before Eszter established a connection with Vojvodina Hungarian literary circles and particularly 'Szenteleky'; after the connection has been made and during their correspondence; while the third stage concerns the effects of Eszter's literary success and her subsequent pullout from literary life and surrender of her ambitions as a writer.

INTOXICATED BY WRITING

In *Eszter I* the adolescent protagonist already shows an inclination towards making up stories, but it is in *Eszter II* that her disposition turns into an "intoxication ... more joyful and more torturous than any other" (227). Further on the narration forges a link with childhood amusements: "[t]his disposition has been following her ever since her childhood" (228), which supports my claim that writing was a strong undercurrent of Eszter's existence from an early age. More importantly the narration also reveals how the adolescent girl and later the young woman struggled to keep it secret: "She feared for it, hid it. They don't get it, they might make fun of her." (228). This 'they' in Eszter's immediate context was meant to signify her four brothers, but her awareness and secrecy also implies a self-consciousness which is often manifest in women



who write. As Domna Stanton argued, female autobiographers frequently perceive the act of writing as a “fundamental deviance” because in their case the “phallic pen” was transmitted to a woman, and that often results in a particular uneasiness leading to a defensive position (Stanton 1984, 139). Stanton’s claim concerning female autobiography could be related to the concept of female “anxiety of authorship”, set forth by Gilbert and Gubar. Because of the “historical confusion” of patriarchal authority and literary authorship, women were excluded from among the creators of culture, and writing was considered unfeminine. Female writers who internalized this image had to struggle not only with their surrounding’s prejudices, but with their own innermost barriers (1984, 43-59). The unease or embarrassment Eszter displays I interpret as such an “anxiety of authorship”. Moreover, I argue that Börcsök’s own unease about being a female author is also detectable in the way the discourses concerning writing are constructed in *Eszter*.

While Eszter experimented with writing, her talent was represented at first as an external transcendental force. Eszter as the focalizer sometimes perceives it dualistically: “demons and good spirits fighting above her head” (227); but when writing allows her to step out from her domestic isolation, then as “a benevolent fairy-hand slipping the pen in her hand...” (293). However, when a paper turns her stories down, Eszter readily decides to give up writing, because “[s]he wants to be like everyone else.” (297), which is a formulation strongly manifesting the conviction that because of her talent she is ‘different’. Another telling momentum to which I wish to pay closer attention to is when she reaches for pen one more time, and “her unconscious fingers are writing, crying out with shameless openness...” (302).

All these utterances could be interpreted as instances of heteroglossia, for the most common signifiers of Eszter’s writing: ‘demons and spirits’, ‘intoxication’, ‘unconscious body’ all carry



dialogic potentials because of their former uses in the textual world of *Eszter*. The transcendent beings are reminiscent of the old maid Rozi's eerie story about how she was possessed by evil spirits – her explanation to her outcast, “manwoman” status in the rural society. This textual trace indicates that Eszter as another ‘possessed’ woman also risks being expelled from the society and from among women. With this the effects of writing are constructed in such a way which reverberates with the claim of Gilbert and Gubar, that the female writer, having neither models nor the possibility to become an example herself, feels that “the act of writing will isolate or destroy her” (1984, 48). I consider that in *Eszter* this fear speaks through the metaphors of ‘possession by spirits’ and the wish to be like ‘other people’.

The description of writing as “intoxication” links it to Eszter's ‘opiated’ nature, and by that writing is posited as having been induced again by an outside force, just like when it was constructed as the result of transcendental powers. In both cases writing is something that Eszter has no authority over, so she becomes an author, but has no authority over her authorship. In my interpretation this textual displacement folded back onto Börcsök's biography reveals her internalized “anxiety of authorship”. I consider the *Kunstlerroman* aspect of the novel as Börcsök's displaced attempt to come to terms with the effects of writing about her life.

That the *Kunstlerroman* dimension of the novel is as well an autobiographical account, is suggested by those narrative sequences in which Eszter's innermost experiences as an author – like the sudden sharp awareness for details that could enrich her writing, while at the same time what she perceives as a haze that veils everything else (308-309) – are depicted. These passages are the hardest to disentangle in the whole novel, omniscient narration and third person singular narration through Eszter as the focalizer plus Eszter's inner monologues being intermingled in them. Furthermore, the omniscient narrator frequently evaluates the events and in particular the



impacts of writing on Eszter's life from a point of reference outside the timeframe of the storyline. I consider that this reference point is of Börcsök, who in the late 1960s re-constructed her struggles as a young female author through the fictional self of Eszter. For this reason I read the novel's *Kunstlerroman* aspect as the most intimate account of the pain Börcsök endured when surrendering writing for having a family. I will return to the narrative traces of this pain when discussing the closure of the novel, in the last subsection. Here I wish to focus on the textual traces of the joy of writing.

Alongside "intoxication" and "spirits", the narrator's third metaphor for writing locates it in the body, in the "unconscious" motion of the fingers – pointing towards an interpretation of writing as an erotic act, which can be also underscored by Gilbert and Gubar's study where they maintain that in the Western tradition writing is an "autoerotic act" of the paternal author (Gilbert and Gubar 1984, 6). Contrasted to the background of this argumentation, I interpret Eszter's autoerotic enjoyment in writing as a subversive symbol of female self-satisfaction, pointing towards a female self as a source for bodily and intellectual pleasures. This eroticism becomes even more accentuated since Eszter, as I have shown in the third chapter, is otherwise constructed as having a supposedly slow-moving body that never reacts to men.

It comes as no surprise then, that with the man who, according to the narrative, had a lasting and moving effect on Eszter, she established the initial connections through writing.

MORE LIGHT!

The way Eszter is finally associated with the leader of the interwar Vojvodina Hungarian literary life, the person whom the reception identifies with Szenteleky, is also instructive. The story gets introduced by the following contemplation: "No matter how she has banged the gates her entire



life, those gates have never opened when banged. It had to let be. Once ... the gates opened up smoothly, all by themselves.” (302). Börcsök’s reception often mentions her deep belief in destiny, which is taken to be a concomitant feature to her being from the Banat (Hózsza 2004a; Bori 1998). I consider it more significant that in *Eszter*, it is when the protagonist chooses to be passive-feminine that the gate towards the literary leader, and subsequently success opens up. “[Eszter] sees light all at once. It shows a village window. »Look! That’s where light comes from. That’s where to go!« (...) The shades cleared up from her eyes and she was able to see in distance. (...) The objects, the notions have gotten meaning. Things have gotten filled with life.” (305). The semiotic field constructed around ‘Szenteleky’ and his role in Eszter’s life consists of the chain of signifiers: light – meaning – distance /perspective – which in the textual world of *Eszter* emphasizes the spiritual aspect of writing.

That the beacon for Eszter the writer is posited in a window has further significance, because windows always had a central function in her life. It was the light through a window that showed Eszter’s mother in such way, that the midwife felt compassion with her and supported her in keeping her fetus, Eszter; it is through a window that Eszter is shown to the world outside the family circle for the first time; Eszter’s first vision is induced by a sight from a window –the Virgin Mary’s sculpture in the garden of the convent; as an adolescent she spends most of her nighttime leaning out the window, listening to the nocturnal noises; her first experimentation with maintaining contact with an attractive young man happened through the window. She sat in the window with poison in her hand when contemplating suicide ... Through these experiences the motive of windows, as the threshold that separates Eszter who is stuck in the domestic sphere from the outside, public life, became a powerful symbol of her isolation. Although in *Eszter II* according to the narrator’s comments “she banged the gates”, via Eszter the focalizer, the silent



longing of the windowsill-life grows into an intense textual experience. The contesting dialogue of the two (the narrator from the 1960s and Eszter's ponderings, often channeled through her diary-fragments written in the 1930s) create a tension in between Eszter's self-understanding and the narrator's interpretation of hers. This unresolved tension is again a source of 'noise', listening to which the im/possibilities for public action offered by the era, as represented by the omniscient narrator, and the im/possibility of taking action from the confines of the domestic sphere of women, as represented via Eszter (focalizer and/or homodiegetic narrator), a criticism of the gendered division of spheres can be discerned.

This stream of interpretation is further accentuated by the following circumstance: Eszter finally steps out of the immediate circle of the parental home when she receives a call on her own terms, when "There, in an other distant window his candle twinkles." (308). The communication of the two, Eszter and 'Szenteleky', is therefore constructed as an exchange of equals, and despite the spiritual dimensions of Eszter's admiration of the literary leader, in which her respect and gratefulness for the man and her passion for writing overlap, the narration maintains that there was a unique, tacit understanding present between them. The spiritual aspect of this relationship is constructed through those instances when the narrator slips into Eszter's point of view: "For her he was a saint, who resurrected all her hopes. Whatever is beautiful, good, lovely in a woman's soul, all of that emerges for his pleasing." (308). Through Eszter as the focalizer her whole achievement as a writer is interpreted as an accomplishment induced by the mystical power of 'Szenteleky'.

In Börcsök's attempt to construct Eszter's writing around a spiritual call, I see a pattern that was discussed by Heilbrun. She claims, that in those women's autobiographies who did something notable or socially representative in their lives, a spiritual call is given great importance when



explaining why a woman would undertake a task “in no other way excusable in a female self” (1985, 18); while Brownley and Kimmich noted that woman writers’ acceptance of the assumed link between femininity and self-effacement makes it hard for them to envision themselves as the authors of their life stories (1999, 1). I see the construction of the ‘Szenteleky’-relationship around a spiritual experience as a justification, for Eszter is doing something extraordinary as a woman, but I also see it as a “hinge”, where the author and the text are sliding into each other. The ‘Szenteleky-experience’, along with the other metaphors which played out writing as an external force, shows Börcsök’s struggle to find an excuse for a current story that she authors – for being an author at all.

The specific context in which she lived and wrote helps to understand the reasons of Börcsök’s need for such justification. From the early 20th century on arts was a field which opened up for women in Hungary, besides medicine and teaching (Schwartz 2008, 103), but to attend universities or to pursue a free-lance artist’s life was really available only for women of privileged backgrounds (Hawkesworth 2001, 124). In the 1930s, during her most fruitful era as a writer, Börcsök lived in utter poverty in a small, isolated village in the Banat, and, given the difficulties that local literary life faced, with no hopes whatsoever that she could make a living from writing. In this context I see the narrative construction of writing around an irresistible external force in *Eszter* as an explanation for why she *still* devoted the best of her energies to arts.

CLOSING TIME

In the novel Eszter experiences more and more the odds of being a female writer. The passages in which she reflects on the outcomes of her literary successes are openly critical of men’s approach to a female writer. In chapter XIX in a lengthy inner monologue Eszter scrutinizes



those men who were charmed by the fame attached to her name, but rapidly repelled by the poverty of Eszter's family. Besides the sarcasm of the descriptions of men fleeing in panic from the Módra's home, there is also a straightforward criticism of men's expectations articulated: "Poverty is the point where (...) admiration melts down. A medieval chastity belt wouldn't protect her better than this crappy little peasant house!" (331). These utterances pass a strong judgment of the coeval system of values, which measured a woman's worth by the size of her dowry.

As I stated earlier, in the passages concerning Eszter's experiences as a writer, her inner monologues and the omniscient narration is sometimes inextricably intertwined. The way the narrator constructs Eszter's identity and the way Eszter, as the homodiegetic narrator constructs it gradually slides into each other, so the presence of an autobiographical voice is the strongest here. When Eszter sobers up after being immersed into writing, and starts pondering her future, the relation of the omniscient narrator and the focalization/homodiegetic narration becomes mutually contesting once again.

Eszter swiftly apprehended that men only wanted to "rub shoulders with the woman writer" (331) and also that there is a potential for gaining a measure of fleeting pleasure from this admiration. But she did not want to be a "bitch thrown in water" (334.) nor an "oddball that others ostentatiously examine", because she had "no more strength nor desire to enact this lie" (335) and take on the role of the admired woman. So Eszter refused to accept the pre-empted role models available for a female writer bitterly recognizing that arts does not offer a way out from among the gendered borders of social expectations. Exactly this recognition leads Eszter to a surrender of writing for the traditional female role of a wife.



However, her decision to enter wedlock is constructed rather ambiguously. The narrator postulates marriage as Eszter's only possibility, because unless "she cannot stay straight for too long. Someone has to be chosen. She has to belong to someone. If not, she will become trash. (...) one cannot go forever. One has to arrive once..." (348), positing heterosexual bonding as the only meaningful destination for Eszter. Yet, when the narration focalizes through Eszter's perception, her situation is revealed from a different angle: "The ring has gotten tighter around her." (348). This sentence reverberates with a commonly used expression in Hungarian: "szorul a hurok", literally: "the loop is getting tighter", which figuratively means to have the gallows at one's face. With the displacement of "ring" for "loop" this sentence suggests that it is actually the social requirement of 'compulsory heterosexuality' that Eszter experiences as the gallows at her face. She is well aware that marriage requires the surrender of writing, which again connects her to Hungarian women writers of the era, whom professional gratification and family life seemed not possible together (Schwartz 2008, 34).

The novel's last scene depicts Eszter's wedding. She wears dark clothes, "the bridal bouquet weighed her arm down heavily", the church lacks light, Eszter "droops on the arm of the groom" (354). In my interpretation the construction of the last passage allows for a double reading: it could be seen as a marital ceremony as well as a funeral procession, suggesting that Eszter's entering the wedlock is the burial of Eszter, the author. With this, the closure of *Eszter* deconstructs the euphoric versus dysphoric (marriage versus death) binary opposition of standard closures in women's novels in modernism (Miller in Heilbrun 1999, 16).

The construction of the marital ceremony as a funeral is the novels ultimate criticism of the social circumstances which do not allow for creation and procreation together for a woman. This criticism is prepared by an episode in the last chapter, where Eszter's female friend, Virág,



herself an artist too, warns Eszter that if she chooses motherhood, she has to give up writing (352). The first part of the novel *Eszter* was published in 1939, the same year when Börcsök's daughter was born, the year after which she published nothing for over 25 years. Knowing this, one could interpret Virág's words as a self-fulfilling prophecy, if it had not been for their placement in the composition of the novel. Since her character belongs to the second part of *Eszter* (1968), instead of a prophecy, her statement reads as an explanation for the artistically empty 25 years of Börcsök. This instance exemplifies what, based on Grosz, I call a "hinge", where the margins of the text fold in and inscribe themselves in the text: the storyline of *Eszter* ends where writing ended for Börcsök.



CONCLUSION

I my introduction I revealed that the study of Erzsébet Börcsök's *Eszter* has a personal stake for me. From the beginning I understood this research as a stage of my quest for identity constructions which could be plausible for a feminist woman writer like me, who belongs to a national minority and resides in a multicultural environment.

My engagement with the intermingled system of the narratively constructed female identities of *Eszter* revealed that even if bordered by socially established patriarchal standards, constrained by expectations towards fulfilling the ideal woman's normative image, and being offered nothing else but pre-empted role models to live up to, women are still able to devise identities which, in the shorter or longer run, annihilate borders. The reading of this novel showed that feminist thought could travel through borders, cultures and time, forging alliances between women across frontiers, language barriers and history.

In my interpretation it is feminist inspiration that enables the interplay of the sometimes mutually contesting, other times mutually supportive constructions of identities in *Eszter*. Also I see that in the fictional world of *Eszter* feminist awareness helps the main protagonist in recognizing the complexity of the impediments of a woman's social advancement. Lastly I found that through multiple topical and structural connections between *Eszter* and Hungarian feminist writing of modernism, the novel exhibits the border-annihilating aspect of feminisms.

Since Börcsök's work was never situated in among Hungarian feminist writings so far, I presume that its inclusion would result in a more thorough understanding of the ways feminist thoughts travelled through borders and altered in local contexts. Also, the novel displays a rich set of



subversive narrative solutions, some of them perhaps for the first time in the history of Hungarian women's writing, so a comparative study embracing *Eszter* would probably indicate a revision of the history of tropes and figures in Hungarian women's literature.

In the context of Vojvodina Hungarian literature this thesis proposes not only the acknowledgement of Erzsébet Börcsök as a feminist writer, but urges for the inclusion of gender as an analytical concept in the theoretical grounds of reception, which is not currently the case. Moreover, the reading of *Eszter* as an autobiographical piece of the first Vojvodina Hungarian woman writer asks for the revision of the history of literary reception on more gender-equal grounds.

Finally, my interpretation of *Eszter* puts forward the problem of internally imposed borders of national and other imagined communities, as well as suggesting that feminist thought can raise the border-awareness of individuals and collectivities.



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