

## Born a Woman and Made a Woman

### Women's narratives and their authority

Sélei Nóra: *Lánnyá válik, s írni kezd: 19. századi angol írónők* [19<sup>th</sup> century English woman writers] (Debrecen: Kossuth Egyetemi Kiadó, 1999)

Nóra Sélei's book is a rare new work of literary and feminist studies in Hungary. It is not only about six novels by 19<sup>th</sup> century English women writers, but poses such questions to the discipline, to reading texts, that are still very rare in Hungarian academic works and proclamations. The majority of literary scholars and critics seem to maintain that the study of literature can and must be separated from the study of things that are "outside" the text, that a text can and must be read without considering the historical and cultural circumstances among and of which it speaks. They thus want to retain the notion of a universal science, keep the notion of "value" unchallenged, as if value judgements were not culturally and historically specific.

Feminist practice, and feminist studies with it, must challenge the universalist stance of this kind of discourse by exposing its inherent dual-

ism. Feminist scholars have been arguing that the universalist stance (with its conflation of the masculine to represent the human and the confinement of the feminine to a secondary position of devalued "otherness") rests upon a classical system of dualistic oppositions, such as, for instance: active/passive, rational/irrational, universal/particular, masculine/feminine. They argue that this dualistic mode of thinking creates binary differences only to ordain them in a hierarchical scale: if the speech of men is what is universal, then the speech of a woman is either similar to it, and then she approaches universality as an exception in her similarity; or, if it is different in any way, it is particularly *of women* – hopelessly other from the stance of the masculine/universal norm. Of course, for a long time these possibilities were not at all self-evidently given to women. The novels of Charlotte and Emily Brontë were well-received by critics until their sex was revealed: as women novelists, they became shocking and immoral.

What emerges in post-structuralist feminist re-readings of critical stances and literary works is a radical redefinition of the text and of the textual away from the dualistic mode: away from the artificial separation of "inside" and "outside," aesthetics and politics. The text is approached by

these critics as both a semiotic and a material structure, that is to say not as an isolated item locked in a dualistic opposition to a social context or to an activity of interpretation. The text must rather be understood as a chain reaction encompassing a web of social relations. Séllei's interpretations of the six novels she has chosen entail a series of questions about the concept of women in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, about places from which to speak, about the possibilities of women to have their own narrative, about their relationship to their sexed and sexualised bodies, merged with very close readings of the texts. What is at stake in this textual practice, therefore, is not only the activity of interpretation but also that of decoding the network of connections and effects that link the text to an entire sociosymbolic system. What we are faced here is, in other words, a new materialist theory of the text and of textual practice. Séllei seeks out connections and effects that move beyond existing intellectual and paradigmatic frames in Hungarian literary studies.

Her study, which focuses on semiotics, spaces, bodies and modes of speech, shows to what extent the existence of a woman writer's voice was not self-evident in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As she elucidates in the introduction, the formation of a women's tradition nec-

essarily rearranged literature and its history. And the rewriting of history necessarily displaces the hegemonic history which poses itself as objective knowledge: it creates an alternative history, displaying that any history is necessarily fictional (p. 15). The knowledge of rewriting of history is based on this critical self-consciousness. The 19<sup>th</sup> century writers whose works are interpreted in this book, however, were not conscious of this: they had to carve their way through contradictory frames, and create a place from which to write, a narrative which contains their vision of the world and of the contradictory frames. Thus it is often a doubleness that marks their texts: a double consciousness, a submission to and a critique of frames (either those of gender or those of a genre), a submission to and a critique of the linguistic markers and codes they use.

As the introduction stresses, almost all of the women writers began to publish under male pseudonyms, except for Jane Austen who hid herself (was hidden) as "A Lady" and Elisabeth Gaskell who published as Mrs. Gaskell - marking herself as a wife and a mother. The introduction and the texts Nóra Séllei chose to translate and publish in the Appendix, help to situate the writers and their works: the apologia written by Jane Austen's

brother, which is based on the reduction of the figure of his sister as a writer, Robert Southey's uncle-like advice to Charlotte Brontë, stating that writing is not at all a womanly profession, the uproar of critics when they found out that the authors of *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre* were not men, and the immediate politicisation of the woman who moves beyond the boundaries that are set to her gender, show what these writers had to face and elude while necessarily internalise as well. The place from which their speech originates is necessarily that of a counter-speech, and is marked by this doubleness: they inevitably have to use a patriarchal code, but to what extent it remains patriarchal and to what extent they eventually change it is a question that comes up again and again in Séllei's interpretations.

The male character in George Eliot's short story, *The Lifted Veil*, who does not behave according to the norms he should comply with, and thus does not fit his immediate environment, seems to question essentialist notions of gender roles – yet, at the same time, the short story reflects and reiterates the commonly used myth of the “dangerous female,” and the writer often dissociated herself from feminism. This inherent dualism is very significant in the works interpreted by

Séllei: they often fluctuate between a reiteration and a rewriting of patriarchal stories. It is not possible not to reiterate them – as Séllei says, “this is what is coded in the nature of power” (p. 27). Luckily, the voice of dissent, the speech from its “outside” is also coded in power – and this compliance with and critique of gendered power relations is what links these authors and their works to one another.

Nóra Séllei's aim, as she puts it in the introduction, is both to re-read texts that are canonised and often interpreted, and to find works that are forgotten: the reinterpretation of well known texts displays the characteristics and possibilities of feminist interpretation, while it is also a basic theory of feminist literary criticism that there are hidden and forgotten texts which are worth re-reading (p. 31). Her main questions focus upon the relationship of the novels to then existing paradigms, and their dissimilarities to or displacements of those paradigms (in order to make available fictive spaces to women), and to what extent rewritten paradigms became more appropriate to the narratives of women who had a different vision of society and women's place in it than male writers. Thus it is inevitable that Séllei reflects upon cultural and social questions of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and that the dialogue of social, cultural and

structural questions shapes her interpretations.

Her reading of Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* raises the question of the connection between choices in narrative typologies and political attitudes. Contemporary readings of Richardson and Fielding also explicitly thematised this conjunction. As Claudia Johnson elucidates, sensitivity was a term reformists often used, while conservatives condemned it, because they held it responsible for the spreading of moral relativism and radical individualism instead of suggesting compliance with social control. At the same time, however, sensitivity was also a favourite term of Burkean reactionaries, who wanted keep feelings and emotions in the frame of the family, as opposed to individual thinking (quoted on pp. 57–8). Jane Austen's novel, which is the first she intended to publish, but the last that actually was published, maintains an ongoing dialogue with sentimental and Gothic narratives. This dialogue is full of irony: the novel turns to these other narratives with the subversive attitude of parodying them – and this dialogue is also the fictive space in which it places itself. It is a parody of Gothic fiction, which is about that which cannot be uttered according to the laws of language – the laws of the female characters' lan-

guage. Nóra Séllei shows how Austen weaves her attitude to the political and moral debates about the types and proper forms of behaviour and upbringing of women into her narrative, through playing with existing frames of narration.

Séllei's interpretation of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* concentrates on the writer's critique of the romantic creator/genius. According to her reading, the author's main question concerns the place of the monster, and she traces its location in the mind of the monster's creator. The closer reading of the creator's attitudes shows that Frankenstein not only transgresses the limits of knowledge, but does this in compliance with an aggressive vision of approaching (winning over) nature and science. His forceful penetration into that which he desires denies the subjectivity of the other. The psychoanalytic readings of his dreams (in which he kills his mother and his love) and his relations show that in the psychic space he dwells in there is no love or any possibility of a real interpersonal relationship, only desire that nevertheless denies what it desires, the desire to possess, and a solipsistic self-containedness. One of the major problems that Frankenstein has to face concerns physicality and embodiment. Séllei, with a fine and well-considered move, reads the position of

Mary Shelley as an author as that of the monster: the silenced being regarded as the other, the desired and disregarded object of a genius's love. She does this through an additional reading of the first preface to the novel, written by Percy Bysshe Shelley (in which he refers to the author as "he," without actually naming "him"), and Mary Shelley's second preface, written more than a decade later, in which she turns to the familiar self-denial of a being denied.

Contemporary critics of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, who, after learning that the author was a woman, regarded the novel as rude and indecent, because of the tone of its autobiographical narrator, and accused her of "moral Jacobinism," "Chartism and revolt," recognised the tone of the woman narrator as potentially revolutionary (even though the narrative does not refer to politics at all, cf. pp. 140-1). The very act of giving voice to a female figure, the creation of a narrator who strives to write her own story as opposed to the ways, tones and narratives prescribed for her, is a political act (just as prescriptions are political). This led Séllei to highlight the problem of finding a different voice and writing a different narrative than what is expected in the chapter about this novel. It is possible to read the novel as the creation of a

narrative about the narrator as opposed to all other histories that try to narrate and confine her. The relevance of this reading is most astonishingly shown in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, a novel written by Jean Rhys (Nóra Séllei mentions her in a footnote), in which Rochester's wife, the madwoman, narrates her version of their story. Séllei concentrates on the methods of silencing in this chapter – her close reading reveals scenes and expressions which show the difficulties of the narrator's intention: giving voice to herself, and being able to direct her story.

To re-read *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë, Séllei chose metaphors of space, houses and bodies as points of departure. By claiming – in contradiction to traditional interpretations – that there is not a self-evident and symmetrical opposition between the two generations of the characters and especially between the two houses, the Earnshaw and Linton families, she displaces what has been formerly central in most analyses, and concentrates on the characters' relations to the order that shapes their bodies and the spaces they dwell in. Central to her re-reading are the place of illnesses in the narrative and a psychological rendering of the relationship of woman characters to eating and their body. Another major element of feminist criticism and Séllei's reading is that

they explicitly regard seeing as interested – Séllei thus also broadens the interpretation of the narrators' position.

In the chapter about George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*, Séllei relies on interpretations that regard the novel as the re-writing of the tradition of the Bildungsroman. Like other writers, Eliot had to write her narrative according to given, traditional forms of narration, but as they would have negated her as a woman, a different subject with a different place in society and the sociosymbolic order than men, she also had to re-form that tradition. Like many characters in the other novels read by Séllei, her central character, Maggie Tulliver does not find the space offered by existing narratives liveable. She does not recognise herself in the narratives that she is advised to accept: she wants to leave those texts and live another story (p. 282). As she cannot find the possibility to live a life more suitable for her, she is doomed to die – as is her brother, who is similarly confined by rules that define his place. None of them can live in a dialogue with the system of norms they live among as individuals: and indeed, no one in the novel can. Séllei mentions the seemingly contradictory fact that women are the most stout-hearted defenders of the social order in the novel: which

is not a real contradiction, in the end, as they have to prove their own value and to prove that there is some kind of value in their submission. This gives them the feeling of having some power – which is, however, represented in its frailty in the narrative: they can only use it to rule over the household and to overstress insignificant regulations. In this way, the story shows the defects of existing norms, but does not, cannot offer a way out, other than the death of the main characters. The contradiction that Nóra Séllei also showed while interpreting Eliot's short story in her introduction, lives on here – and it corresponds to the contradiction George Eliot had to face as a woman writing as a woman while using a male pseudonym, as a woman writing about the difficulties of individuals who cannot comply with the existing gender norms, while refusing all kinds of feminist arguments.

What comes into the focus in the chapter about Elisabeth Gaskell's *Cranford* is the language of a community that consists mostly of women, its code systems, and its gradually growing openness to change and inclusiveness. As Séllei says, the first sentence of the novel has a "militantly feminist" tone, as it stresses the separatedness of Cranford women, which is "strengthened by the

notion of a mode of life that is declared to be sufficient for them" (p. 321). The adjective is questionable in itself (why the "world of presence, undisturbed by any lack or desire" is *militant*, if not because the existence of such a world is threatening to the existing social order), but the series of domestic images in this very first sentence also contradict it: the image of amazons is immediately smoothed away by the description of their activities – they rent apartments, plant flowers, keep geese, discuss literature and help whoever gets into trouble... On the very next page Séllei herself says that indeed, they do not even have power over themselves. Their order is based on that of the late Mr. Jenkyns, and any disturbance of that order (the order of petty rules that regulate all their everyday activities) seems to be dangerous for them. However, the loose structure of the narrative moves through a series of disturbances of this order, and the novel can be read as a utopia of inclusiveness: the ideal of the narrative is not the separation of the sexes according to an essentialist norm, but the deconstruction of the "naturalness" of gendered norms of behaviour.

A slipping into often used patterns of expression can also be found at other places in the book; this shows

how difficult it is to write in a way that contradicts naturalising tendencies at all points. In quite a few parts, Séllei uses expressions like "feminine narrative" or "female voice," "feminine characteristics" (while talking about Latimer in *The Lifted Veil*), or uses the term "feminine principle" without quotation marks or any reference to the non-naturalness of these adjectives, thus leaving gaps in her text that contradict what she otherwise does in her comments and readings: the conscious and well-argued problematisation of these categories. Séllei, one of the still very few feminist literary scholars in Hungary, is to a considerable extent in a similar position to the woman writers she chose to re-read. In a part that does and does not belong to the text of the book, the two pages 'Acknowledgements,' she reflects the tone of the 19<sup>th</sup> century woman who began to write. The first paragraph talks about the writer's doubt concerning her *authorship* (which is a rare feature in Hungarian literary criticism, and one can only wish more critics would doubt the *authority* of their speech), and the last, a somewhat apologetic paragraph states that her husband took on more responsibilities while she was writing (the point of comparison remains unspecified) – again a sentence that marks her as a woman for whom it is

not at all "natural" to write a book-length study.

There is another recurring, and related, but probably more significant slip in the study, though. In the introduction to this review of Séllei's work, I stressed the crucial importance of a new way of reading in feminist criticism: the deconstruction of the borders of what is "inside" and "outside" the text, the irrelevance of this false dualism that builds a border between what is aesthetic and what is political, while there is no such border. Literature, as public speech or writing is political through and through. Séllei's readings do disrupt the boundaries between "literary" and "ideological" when she reads texts as parts of a wider sociosymbolic system. At certain points, however, she seems to disrupt her own reading, suggesting that the two can be separated in some way. "Both if we approach the world of the novel from an aesthetic, or from any kind of political/ideological point of view;" in sentences like this, she seems to try to dualise what is non-dualistic in her interpretations: how could one separate what is aesthetic and what is political in the choice of narrative strategies of the novels interpreted,

and in their reworking of those strategies, so as to create a narrative space for a subject who has a different view of the social order than what is dominant, for example? This reasoning could easily lead to the dismissing of Séllei's own readings as "only" political - what is most probably done by that most ideological group of critics who strive to depoliticise aesthetics. By writing that feminist criticism steps "out" of the borders of literariness "in a narrow sense," and that aesthetics is "ideally" apolitical (pp. 369-70), she maintains a contradiction that is created in order to preserve the universalist stance of the realm of the aesthetic and its being closed to what is "outside."

But what marks the book in the end, despite these few slips which seem to contradict the author's intentions, is one of the last sentences about the presence of the political in all kinds of cultural discourse, and Nóra Séllei's careful reading of the chosen texts and their contexts. This study of 19<sup>th</sup> century woman writers shows what feminist literary criticism can bring to the field of literary scholarship, offering points of departure that render engaging and informative re-readings of texts.

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