
The Erotic Bases of “Enhanced Reason” and “Intensified Senses”:

THREE SHORT STORIES BY LÁSZLÓ MOHOLY-NAGY

Oliver A. I. Botar

These three stories appeared in Moholy-Nagy’s friend Iván Hevesy’s journal *Jelenkor* [The Present Age], of which Moholy-Nagy was himself an Editorial Board member, and perhaps more significantly in *A hét* [The Week], the liberal Budapest literary journal edited by Ferenc Kiss that had been an important precursor to *Nyugat* [Occident], the journal to whose stable of writers Moholy-Nagy aspired the most during this period. The fact that Moholy-Nagy was the member of the Editorial Board of a not-insignificant Budapest literary journal is an indication of how seriously he took literature around 1917-1918. As I have discussed at length elsewhere, it is crucial for those interested in Moholy-Nagy to understand that his early ambitions were first and foremost literary, and that he maintained this interest in literature, particularly drama, poetry and experimental prose, throughout his career.¹

There are a number of themes raised by Moholy-Nagy in these stories. They include his relationship with his absent father, his concern with the rigid class structure of Hungary and his place within that structure, gender politics during an age of rapid social change, his own sexuality, and the relationship between eroticism and sensual experience, particularly of vision. I will only be able to touch on some of these

themes in this short introduction, focusing on the last of them, because it relates to Moholy-Nagy's place within the early 20th century Biocentric discourse, the focus of my research on Moholy-Nagy. Given that I introduced this research topic publicly in the talk I gave at the Delaware Symposium published in this volume of the HSR, I think it is appropriate to focus on that theme here.

Perhaps the most poignant tale—at least from the point of view of Moholy-Nagy's own life—is “Meeting,” in which the budding writer publishes an account of two boys' encounter with their otherwise absent father. Given that Moholy-Nagy's narrator is a small boy and that in the story he actually uses the first names of his two brothers in real life, we can only assume that this is, in effect, a first-hand account of his own boyhood experience. It is the most penetrating glimpse into his longing for a father that we have. Seen this way, it is also one of the few autobiographical writings by him that remains to us.

The voices he assumes in “Meeting” and “The Wonderful English Dance Troupe”—that of himself as a rural middle-class boy and that of an urban middle-class young man—are his own. In “Maris,” however, Moholy-Nagy assumes a working-class voice. One would have thought that he would do so in order to demonstrate his (essentially non-existent) working-class *bona fides* at a time (late 1917) when he was being increasingly drawn into the Leftist circles of the Budapest avant-garde.² However, rather than an edifying picture of struggle against oppression, this glimpse into the world of young (probably suburban) butchers and house-maids reveals a sordid pattern of erotically driven misogyny, even on the part of the narrator, whose attitudes echo those of Corley, a young man who exploits young working-class women for sex and money in James Joyce's short story “Two Gallants” published in his seminal 1914 collection *Dubliners*. While it is unlikely Moholy-Nagy knew Joyce's story at the time, it is uncanny how close they are in mood and theme.

A similar pattern of erotically driven misogyny, more than tinged with class snobbery, is presented to the reader in the remarkably mature telling of “The Wonderful English Dance Troupe.” Like much of his poetry of the time,³ both “Maris” and “Dance Troupe” are permeated with (his own) late adolescent sexual tension. In “Maris” there is even a decidedly Freudian passage in which the narrator relates a dream he had of his fellow worker and rival for a girl's affections, Jóska: “That night I dreamt of a large, naked pig. I must have tossed about a lot because in the

morning the quilt was completely twisted up. As I stared, scared, at the pig, it suddenly turns into a big, naked man. So big that I was barely able to turn my head to look up at him. He was like Jóska, but it was as if it wasn't him after all. I run to the door, I want to yell, but he's already caught me, choking me like a kitten. From outside I thought I heard Jóska laugh. What could this mean?" But Jóska is only one of the foci in this story, the other is Maris, the pretty young maid from across the way with a secret. Moholy-Nagy clearly felt that women were getting the short end of the stick, so to speak, in the sexual politics of the time: these are stories of appalling misogyny and do not portray the male youth of the time—working class or middle class—in a positive light. They are either callous, or cowardly, or both. They are unable to channel their erotic impulses into healthy, balanced relationships with women. Moholy-Nagy is clearly sympathetic towards the women in these stories, and critical of the men. One cannot help but think that Moholy-Nagy's engagement with the Feminist photographers of Olga Máté's circle through his friendship with Erzsébet (later Ergy) Landau, and his later ready willingness to engage with the Feminist women's communes of central Germany, were in part spurred on by this sympathy.⁴ While the break between the mother and father in "Meeting" is not specified (the boys were ignorant on this count), the Grandmother's suggestion that the boys' father is a *csavargó* (translatable as bum, but also as tramp) hints at unrecorded sexual transgressions as much as it does of a father who abandons the family.

"The Wonderful English Dance Troupe" also manifests the young Moholy-Nagy's fascination with big-city life, from its public entertainments and public transportation systems (especially streetcars) to its telephone system—and this combination of the erotic and metropolitan calls to mind some of the poems, such as "Like a Telegraph Wire Conveying Strange Secrets" and "Together All Day, and Now Homebound Alone"⁵ that he was publishing in *Jelenkor* at the time. For Moholy-Nagy, Budapest represented a utopian dystopia or rather a dystopian utopia that was both highly technologized and intensely eroticized, and this eroticization of the technological, this combination (in other words) of the biological and the technological, is perhaps one of the keys to understanding his subsequent oeuvre. In a sense, the erotic charge of his youth folded—after he moved to Berlin in 1920 and began his married life with Lucia Schulz (they wed in January of 1921)—into his engagement with the *Biozentrik* (Biocentrism) of Raoul Heinrich

Francé (Francé Henrik Rezső), who held that all technology, including the “human” variety, was “natural.”

Thus it may be worth reading Moholy-Nagy’s engagement with technology and nature not only through Francé (as I have done)⁶, but also through the thinking of another apostle of biocentric thought in early twentieth century Central Europe, Francé’s one-time collaborator Wilhelm Bölsche. Bölsche held that the “life force” was literally identical with the sex drive, and he revolutionized the thinking of many a young person at the time through his influential books such the turn-of-the-century *Liebesleben in der Natur*, published in Hungarian as *Szerellem az élők világában* in 1913. Given Bölsche’s popularity in Hungary at the time,⁷ it is worth speculating that Moholy-Nagy read Bölsche’s books while he was still in Hungary. There certainly seem to be echoes of Bölsche’s conception of the life force as the sex drive in Moholy-Nagy’s review of his fellow *Jelenkor* Editorial Board member László Garami’s poems of adolescent sexual awakening, published in the April 1918 edition of *Jelenkor*. As I have already stated elsewhere, this review clearly demonstrated Moholy-Nagy’s early engagement with European nature-centric thought.⁸ Thus, when Moholy-Nagy writes of the “mysterious force” which causes the woman’s thighs to “vibrate,” he seems to be referring to Bölsche’s sexual/life-force as much as to (or even rather than) Bergson’s *élan vital*.⁹

Elsewhere (for example in my contribution to this volume) I have discussed the ways in which Moholy-Nagy’s interest in our sensory apparatus and its training, indeed expansion, was rooted in his essentially rational and biocentric view of the world, and the way in which this pedagogical notion came to be a central part of his aesthetic conception by the summer of 1922.¹⁰ But there is clear evidence in these stories that his notion of the close association between the rational, the sensory and the erotic, indeed the notion that the *heightening* of the rational and the sensory was achieved through the erotic, is present in his thinking as early as 1918. Hesitant to approach a young dancer in whom he had an intense sexual interest, but anxious to have her explain why she had stood him up a couple of days before, the young protagonist of “The Wonderful English Dance Troupe” confronts the girl nervously in a popular restaurant. When she responds favourably to him, his nervousness is transformed into a kind of erotic/perceptual frenzy: “I drew out a card and next to the address I added my telephone number. I said goodbye and bolted like a half-wit. I think I was feverish,

but this fever was pure, one that enhanced reason and intensified my senses. The scene of the two girls and four young men sitting at the table was fixed clearly in my consciousness.... The whole room etched itself sharply into my vision with its overflowing, foamy beer, gaping mouths and fluttering waiters; the definitively outlined pattern of a colourful kaleidoscope.” It was the young man’s erotic and emotional frenzy that cast everything around him into such high—and kinetic—relief.

One cannot help but notice that this state was immediately preceded by the protagonist’s addition of his office telephone number to his name card: his access to this relatively new communication device is clearly linked to the experience described in the story. Indeed, later in the story, the telephone becomes the direct conveyor of sexual tension in what must be one of the earliest descriptions of such an exchange in Hungarian literature: “The next day at three in the afternoon she telephoned me. I should bring along the poem this evening, the Ann Lee. ‘Couldn’t we meet this afternoon,’ I asked? ‘No, no,’ and her voice sounded uncertain through the receiver. ‘Oh, why not?’ I badgered, I insisted. ‘No, no, it’s not possible. But you’ll bring it this evening? You’ll come, won’t you?’ she purred. I promised.” The eroticization of communication technologies such as the telephone and the internet during the late 20th century are suggested and predicted by Annie’s sensual invitation at the end of this conversation.

These moments of heightened perception became the goal for the more mature Moholy-Nagy. But rather than through late-adolescent horniness — presumably as his own hormonal states slowly subsided, he sought to achieve them, and to teach others to achieve them, through a “New Vision,” a “Vision in Motion,” as he later termed it. This “Vision in Motion” was first expressed within Moholy’s oeuvre as a “colourful kaleidoscope” brought on by erotic desire. If the sensory is always, to some extent, erotic, Moholy-Nagy’s “Vision in Motion” always carries with it a certain erotic charge and the erotic charge of Moholy-Nagy’s entire oeuvre cannot be ignored.

As mentioned, I have only been able to discuss a few of the several important themes that Moholy-Nagy introduces in these stories. It is to be hoped that the re-publication of these stories will spur further scholarly interest in them. Along with his poems and early critical writing, they both prefigure and *begin* his life-long artistic project, and thus take on a greater importance than mere juvenilia would.

NOTES

¹ On *A hét*, see Judit Frigyesi, *Béla Bartók and Turn-of-the-century Budapest* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 71. On Moholy-Nagy's early literary ambitions, see Oliver A. I. Botar, *Technical Detours: The Early Moholy-Nagy Reconsidered*, (New York: The Graduate Center, City University of New York and The Salgo Trust, 2006), 24 ff. and Oliver Botar, Introduction to "Four Poems of 1918 by László Moholy-Nagy," *Hungarian Studies Review* (Spring-Fall 1994). See also Valéria Majoros, "Moholy-Nagy László két világháborús verse" [Moholy-Nagy's two World-War One poems], *Enigma*, 7, 28 (2001).

² See Botar, *Technical Detours: The Early Moholy-Nagy Reconsidered*, 24 ff.

³ Botar, "Four Poems of 1918 by László Moholy-Nagy."

⁴ Oliver A.I. Botar, *Természet és technika: Az újraértelmezett Moholy-Nagy 1916–1923* [Nature and Art: Moholy-Nagy Reconsidered 1916–1923] (Budapest: Vince Kiadó, 2007), 72–75.

⁵ Botar, "Four Poems of 1918 by László Moholy-Nagy."

⁶ See my contribution to this volume and my publication "The Roots of László Moholy-Nagy's Biocentric Constructivism," in *Signs of Life: Bio Art and Beyond*. Ed. Eduardo Kac (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2007), 315–344.

⁷ Wilhelm Bölsche, *Das Liebesleben in der Natur. Eine Entwicklungsgeschichte der Liebe* (Jena: Eugen Diederichs, 1898–1902). In Hungarian: *Szerelem az élők világában: A szerelem fejlődéstörténete és földi vándorútja*. Transl. Ödön Wildner, József Merényi, Zoltán Sidó and Dezső Kremmer, (Budapest: Athenaeum, 1913). In English: *Love-Life in Nature. The Story of the Evolution of Love*. Transl. Cyril Brown). (New York: Albert & Charles Boni, 1926). Many of Bölsche's books appeared in Hungarian translation before 1920.

⁸ László Moholy-Nagy, Review of Árpád Garami, *Gyötrődő, szerelmes tavasz* [Anguished spring in love], *Jelenkor* [The present age], (April 1918), 1, no. 5, 138–141. See also my lecture published in this volume.

⁹ As Moholy-Nagy analyzes it in Garami's poems, this force is an all-consuming, general energy. Garami's narrative voice no longer "searches for the object of this desire," but rather for "only the abstract image of this all-incorporating beauty." *Ibid.*, 159.

¹⁰ Botar, *Technical Detours: The Early Moholy-Nagy Reconsidered*, Parts Two and Three.