

Hungarian *Fin-de-Siècle* Woman Writers

Judit Kádár

Agatha Schwartz: Shifting Voices. Feminist Thought and Women's Writing in Fin-de-Siècle Austria and Hungary. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2008. 277 pages. ISBN: 978-0-7735-3286-1. \$80.00.

Owing to the efforts of the Canadian scholar Agatha Schwartz, the transparency of the wilderness of Eastern European feminist thinking has significantly grown. Her latest book helps trace the main fields of Austrian and Hungarian feminist theory and fiction at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries. She divides the development of feminist thought in the two constitutional parts of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy into two phases or "waves" (roughly the 1880s and the 1900s). Schwartz surveys the main goals of the bourgeois women's movements in the two "very patriarchal societies" (p. 17) and using some, mainly Bakhtinian terms such as "internally persuasive discourse" and "heteroglossia" she illuminates the presence and shiftings of different approaches ("voices") of women writers to such questions as women's rights to higher education and economic independence, sexual happiness and their rejection of the moral double standard.

Schwartz's accomplishment is particularly remarkable as her investigation has been set back by the lack of (basic) research, especially with regard to Hungarian women writers. (In the ex-communist countries feminist research of the past started only in the 1990s.) However, the choice of the subtitle also might have hindered the scope of the investigation to some extent. No doubt, it is the cultural achievements of the *fin-de-siècle* Vienna, with names such as Sigmund Freud and Gustav Klimt, among others, that have been treasured in modern cultural history. However, the restriction of monitoring the years between the 1880s and the 1910s results in the neglect of the radically new political circumstances after WWI even though some oeuvres Schwartz analyzes belong to both the pre-war and the post-war period. Also the inclusion of the biography and works of some important authors from the 1920s-1930s could have better explained some shiftings of women's voices –

even if these uncertainties Schwartz carefully analyzes characterized the writings of the previous era. Maybe it would have been more fruitful to extend the period to the beginning of WWII as Sigrid Schmid-Bortenschlager and Hanna Schnedl-Bubeníček did in their *Österreichische Schriftstellerinnen 1880-1938* who closed their bio-bibliography with the year of Austria's occupation by Nazi Germany which was followed by the outbreak of the war only a year later. Thus their periodization included the decades following the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy in 1918, which did not put an end to feminist writing in either country, although it deeply affected some writers' thinking. (Surprisingly enough, the Austrian and Hungarian women's movements developed autonomously even under the fifty years of common government of the Dual Monarchy. As Schwartz points out, communication was restricted to "occasional reports on each other's activities and publications in their respective journals." (p. 16)

Auspiciously, Schwartz has transgressed the self-imposed *fin-de-siècle* time constraint occasionally; one of the Hungarian novels she found worth analyzing was published in 1923. Renée Erdős's *The Big Scream* indicates a certain change in the author's thinking that could have been more thoroughly understood if the readers had been aware of the post-war political and cultural atmosphere. At the beginning of her career in the 1900s, the young writer made a name for herself by her subversive poems in which the female counterpart of the Nietzschean "Overman," her (unmarried) "Overwoman" openly expressed female sexual desire. By the 1920s Erdős had rejected her bold poetry and in her novels she identified herself with the patriarchal standpoint of the Catholic Church. Although her orientation toward a conservative concept of women's role started already in the 1910s, it gained strength after WWI, in connection with the growing anti-Semitism in Hungary that blamed the Jews for the heavy (territorial) losses of the war. (Born in an orthodox Jewish family she even converted to the Catholic faith.) The words of the bishop in *The Big Scream* who warns the young, newly married female protagonist "that women's sexual thirst is unquenchable unless it is sated by a higher calling, namely, motherhood" (p. 179), represent one viewpoint among many in the heteroglot dialogues of the novel, as the Canadian scholar states. However, the fact that Erdős puts those words into the bishop's mouth has bearing on the understanding of one of Schwartz's most noticeable observations. According to her findings, some of the Austrian writers described self-seeking positive heroines who had taken into consideration self-realization before motherhood (e. g. Grete Meisel-Hess in her novel *Fanny Roth: Eine*

Jung-Frauengeschichte published in 1902). Meanwhile, in spite of their struggle for independence, the protagonists of the most popular Hungarian women writers finally got at childbirth as redemption in spite of their dissatisfaction with patriarchal society. (Maternity as solution seems to have become a dominant discourse in the novels published after the Great War.) In connection with this phenomenon Lola Réz Kosáryné's absence from the volume is regrettable, so much the more as after the publication of an essay on feminism in 1914 she became a highly acclaimed woman writer in her country between the two world wars, not irrespectively of her Catholicism. In her early essay she supported the educational and professional rights of women but in the same writing she emphasized that a woman's most important task is motherhood, and in her main work, a feminist historical novel tetralogy published during World War II, while reproving the oppression of women she maintained the idea that for the sake of children mothers should submit themselves to their husbands' patriarchal rule. Her feminism that was strongly influenced by her Catholic belief seems to contain the fundamental inconsistencies of feminist thinking in Hungary in the first half of the 20th century.

The strengthening of the position of the (always dominant) Catholic Church in post-war Hungary that had gradually lost its influence in Austria might also explain the relative lack of such topics as women's right to sexual happiness and lesbian relationships in Hungarian women's literature. These themes were present in the literature of the era (and not only in literature: the scandalous lawsuit of the leader of the conservative women's organization, the writer Cecile Tormay who had been accused of homosexuality got wide publicity in the 1920s), but women authors did not write about them as openly and directly as the Austrians, as Schwartz states in her book.

The biography of some Austrian writers Agatha Schwartz has included in her comparative study raises a peculiar problem: three of the Austrian feminist authors (Franziska von Kapff-Essenther, Maria Janitschek and Grete Meisel-Hess who certainly belonged to the radical wing of feminism) spent a considerable part of their life in Berlin, one of the intellectual centres of the contemporaneous world. The unquestionable influence of this progressive milieu renders it difficult to decide to what extent their achievements belong to (without them doubtlessly more conservative, less complex) Austrian feminism.

The book contains a "Bibliography of Hungarian *Fin-de-Siècle* Woman Writers" compiled by the author that lists some writers who wrote their main works following the First World War (e. g. Mária Berde, Mariska

Gárdos), however their inclusion in the appendix is more merit than fault. Agatha Schwartz's bibliography is the first such compilation made after WWII and with the whole book it will certainly prove to be a solid base for further study.