

Gender, Literature, and Film in Contemporary East Central European Culture

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**Anikó Imre,**

**"Gender, Literature, and Film in Contemporary East Central European Culture"**

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**Abstract:** In her article, "Gender, Literature, and Film in Contemporary East Central European Culture," Anikó Imre discusses gender, literature, and film in Hungary in the context of East Central European national cultures of the 1980s and 1990s. Anikó Imre analyzes the analogous gender structures that underlie both nation and literature in these transitional cultures. She challenges both social science studies of post-communist transitions and studies of East Central European literatures and cultures for their traditional neglect of gendered desire as a political factor. Thereby, Imre adopts a deconstructionist, feminist, and post-colonial approach to Hungarian "postmodernist" literature and film, which, similar to other East Central European cultures, combine an intense interest in the female and the feminine with the refusal of political commitment conveyed in poetic forms. Imre investigates the interrelationships among these features in order to point to a male intellectual culture emasculated by colonization, whose use of "poetic pornography" disguises an effort to defend patriarchal privileges threatened by the effects of the transition.

## Anikó IMRE

### Gender, Literature, and Film in Contemporary East Central European Culture

There is a conspicuous similarity between the gender structures that underlie the modern nation and the modernist love lyric. Western feminist critics have begun to expose the transcendence and transparency associated with poetry in general, and the gender politics of the love lyric in particular. In her 1994 article, "'Corpses of Poesy': Some Modern Poets and Some Gender Ideologies of Lyric," Rachel Blau DuPlessis identifies the cluster of foundational materials upon which the lyric is traditionally built. Gender is identified as the thread that weaves (through) them: *Lyric, love, beauty, and woman* -- the four elements of the cluster -- inseparably interweave and naturalize one another: "Certainly poetry is always to be beautiful, and in these beauties linked to the beauties of Woman. And Woman must be beautiful -- soft and peerless and deep, even if raving, angry, hysterical.... Love will be poetic. Poetry will concern love; love will suggest sex, or at least forms of desirous imprisoning, loving predation, capture of richness. To be in love, to possess that beauty, is to be inspired to write. And willy-nilly, the whole cluster is reaffirmed" (72). DuPlessis analyzes how the notional cluster in which modernist poetry is embedded continually reasserts fixed power relations. Desire circulates among the elements according to the rules of the heterosexual, masculine economy, within a male homosocial triangle: An overtly or covertly male "I" speaks, as if overheard, in front of a loosely male "us" about (or to) a Beloved "she." The love lyric, in particular, is the expression of the "masculine, heterosexual desire" of a subject who is "looking at, and framing, a silent, beautiful, distant female object of desire" (71).

In a similar vein, many nationalist theorists have pointed out that nationalism maintains a homosocial form of male bonding, which legitimizes male dominance over women (on this, see, for example, Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, Anne McClintock's *Imperial Leather*, or George Mosse's *Nationalism and Sexuality*). The editors of *Nationalisms and Sexualities* observe that women are typically represented in discourses of the nation as the Mother, a trope of ideal femininity, "a fantasmatic female that secures male-male arrangements in an all-male history" (Parker, Russo, Sommer, and Yaeger 6). Nationalism satisfies an erotic need; it is represented and experienced as the love of a country (1). Whilst national imaginary is nurtured by figures of women, Geraldine Heng adds in "A Great Way to Fly: Nationalism, the State, and the Varieties of Third-World Feminism" (1997) that land and language are themselves anchored in female tropes (30). Anne McClintock observes in *Imperial Leather* that the temporal anomaly embedded in the foundational narrative of each nation -- that between a backward, fixed, mythical past and a progressive, forward-thrusting future -- is resolved through the naturalized gender divide: Men represent the active, political, future-oriented element of the nation, while women serve as its inert source and essence, as reproductive vessels of population and tradition. They gain membership and participate in the community only symbolically, through their family ties to men. Action and politics are restricted to an exchange among men, through a traffic in female objects or feminine signs (356-70). The inequality of sexual power that maintains both poetry and nationalism has been pointed out by feminist critics of nationalism and feminist critics of literature, respectively. However, the two paths have rarely been consciously connected, despite the fact that some historical situations beg for a joint reconsideration of nationalism and poetry in terms of gender and sexuality. The ongoing "transitions" from state socialism to global capitalism in Eastern Europe provide especially rewarding opportunities for such feminist intervention. This is what I attempt to do in the following: I examine the changing relationship of nationalism and poetic forms of expression in East European cultures of the 1980s and 1990s, with a closer focus on the somewhat unique Hungarian situation. First, however, it is necessary to establish how, in what sorts of historical situations poetry and poetic forms come to occupy a privileged place among cultural expressions of nationalism.

East Central European nationalisms undeniably exhibit symptoms of postcolonial nationalisms -- continued mimicry of the colonizer(s), self-deprecation, economic dependence, and the insistence on "good" nationalism as the small nation's rightful protection. Alexandar Kiossev uses the term "self-colonization" to describe East [Central] European nations' voluntary acceptance and mimicry

of "European" values. Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek argues that it would be legitimate and useful to extend theories of postcolonial studies to the study of East Central European cultures, by virtue of their colonization by the USSR, and a new "post-colonial situation that has emerged since 1989" ("Postcolonialities" 402-03). In "Configurations of Postcoloniality and National Identity: Inbetween Peripherality and Narratives of Change," Tötösy proposes the term "inbetween peripherality" to describe postcolonial situations such as those of the (East) Central European nations, where repeated political and cultural subjugation has coincided with relative national autonomy and cultural self-referentiality (see also Tötösy, *Comparative Literature*). While I consider the postcolonial analogy indispensable to a discussion of East Central European nationalized sexualities, I use the term "(post)colonial" with reservations, partly because of East Central Europeans' own resistance to it, partly because it would gloss over precisely those East Central European peculiarities that, I argue, make the region such an important in-between location for theory. The most significant such difference has to do with race. According to the model of colonial mimicry outlined by Homi Bhabha in "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse" (1984), the colonizer uses racial difference as a strategy to control the colonized. The logic of "almost but not quite" bears the crucial function of keeping the colonized at a distance while simultaneously shaping him in the colonizer's image. In Eastern Europe, where the majority of the population is white, instead of functioning as a constant reminder of the ambivalence of colonial identities, race has been a transparent vehicle to prove that East Central Europeans do belong to the core, even if their location in the world economy is peripheral. In the absence of a visible, "metonymic" axis of assimilation, identification with an idealized, enlightened "Europe" is still possible on the metaphoric, transcendent wings of the intellect -- most metaphorical of all, of poetry.

This does not mean, of course, that race is a redundant category in analysing this process of mimicry. Racial difference silently continues to confirm East Central Europeans' alleged superiority to racialized others, those in the Third World and mainstream postcolonial countries. "Eurocentrism" would be a more appropriate term to characterize East Central Europe's voluntary submission to Europe, to distinguish the process from the domination that East Central Europeans have endured from "non-European" empires such as Russia (the debate about Russia and Europe is of course an important one I am not able to discuss here; see, e.g., Neumann). Tellingly, the concept of "Eurocentrism" is free of negative connotations in East Central Europe. Leading national politicians and intellectuals, such as György Konrád, proudly describe themselves as "Europhiles," for example in *The Melancholy of Rebirth: Essays from Post-Communist Central Europe, 1989-1994* (1995). To "re-join Europe" has been the central goal of political campaigns, left and right, in post-socialist countries. Even though East Central Europeans have experienced a "temporary" economic setback due to the communist interval, the continuity with "Europe" is projected to have been unbroken in the sphere of intellectual achievement and artistic expression. Stanislaw Baranczak reiterates a widespread East European cliché when he calls East Central Europe "the kingdom of the intellect" (qtd. in Nowicki 22). This cultural conception of Europe is morally neutralized as synonymous with "human." To compensate for economic backwardness, East Central Europeans conceive of themselves as the true representatives of humanity -- the most "European" of all. Poetry is privileged as the most "human" form of expression, the least affected by questions of morality and politics. Ironically, the insistence on the linguistic-cultural identity of the nation is another trait that East Central European nations share with many post-colonial nations. According to John Hutchinson's binary typology of "cultural" and "political" nations outlined in his "Cultural Nationalism and Moral Regeneration" (1994), grounding nascent national unity in language and culture (as opposed to locating them within political traditions and institutions) was a major drive in late nineteenth-century India and China (130), as well as in early-nineteenth-century Poland, Ukraine, or Slovakia (123-26). Correspondingly, Benjamin Neuberger in "State and Nation in African Thought" (1994) points out the similarities between the goals and situations of many postcolonial African nations and those of the East European "Kulturnation" of the nineteenth century (234). East Central European models of nationalism generally ignore these parallels, together with the entire world outside of Europe. For instance, the

Hungarian sociologist György Csepeli adopts the binary model of development proposed by Hutchinson and others in his "Competing Patterns of National Identity in Postcommunist Hungary" (1991). Unlike them, he draws the geographical-political-cultural divide along the river Rhine. To the west of the river, he claims, national unity was "the outcome of the consolidation of administrative, legal and cultural institutions" while to the east, it was "formulated as a desire, lacking adequate economic, social, political and cultural foundations" (327-28). This latter type of nationalism, he adds, is defined by *culture* as opposed to *state*, and it demonstrates "an overwhelming concern for fictions and symbols" (328), most powerfully expressed in romantic poetry.

In what follows, I examine examples of literary and cinematic manifestations of "poetic nationalism" during the "transitional" period of the 1980s and 1990s in Hungary, in a context of East Central European and Third World points of reference. It has been well established that, since the fall of state socialism, East Central European intellectuals have rapidly lost the prestige they had traditionally enjoyed, as a result of losing their dissident political status (see, for example, Deltcheva; Tötösy "Configurations," 97 and *Comparative Literature* 138; see also Deltcheva <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol1/iss2/4>>). Simultaneously, Western scholarly interest in East Central European literature and film has declined, revealing the fact that it had been nurtured by Cold War political considerations as much as by genuine curiosity towards little-known cultures. Since 1989, most academic inquiries, along with Western media, have directed their attention towards ethnic conflicts and economic transitions. As a result, East Central European nationalisms are generally approached in terms of categories such as "ethnic" and "political," as if they were "coherent and programmatic discourses with internal rationality" (Kennedy 4). At the same time, individual and collective desire remain the hidden, private elements of East Central European lives, and the question which identities are centered in nationalistic discourses and which are marginalized is regarded as irrelevant by most native and Western observers. This is not to say that there has been no interest in the "oppressed." On the contrary, a wealth of social science literature has emerged in the last ten years about the situation of East Central and East European women (see the collections by Berry; Funk and Mueller; Rai, Pilkington and Phizacklea; Gal and Kligman). However, as Slavenka Drakulic puts it in *How We Survived Communism and Even Laughed* (1993), Western feminists' "cold, artificial, slippery questions" about the "position of East European women" do not touch her reality (132). Susan Bassnett gives an illuminating account in "Crossing Cultural Boundaries, Or How I Became an Expert on East European Women Overnight" (1992): She critiques the sweeping geographical and cultural generalizations inherent in the very terms "the women question" in "Eastern Europe," the evolutionary and missionary model that assumes that East European women must inevitably go down the same path of feminist development as Western women have, and that "developed" Western feminism has nothing to learn from East European women's experiences and theories. I propose an anti-essentialist and feminist approach that allows to go beyond women's economic conditions and political representation and that takes into account their desires in relation to national cultures. It needs to be able to address women who are socialized, from the cradle, to love and cherish their nation through loving and cherishing its poetic culture, and who are unanimously prejudiced against all forms of feminism and socialist politics. While this may appear to be a utopian task, I am convinced that any approach that does not consider East Central European women's erotic attachment to their nation will not be able to convince them that their ultimate interests might not coincide with those of male national and intellectual elites. Poststructuralist theorists of coloniality, women of colour, and (post)-Third-Worldist feminists have successfully de-essentialized the nation to show that it is "an evolving, imaginary construct rather than an originary essence" (Shohat 190). Yet, East Central European nationalisms are still regularly left out of these analyses, bound as they are to their First-Third World binary framework.

A feminist analysis of East Central European cultures can only be effective if it is able to critique the essentialist sexual division that both poetry and nationalism insist on. Therefore, instead of victimizing East Central European women, I would like to read male intellectuals' insistence on sexual essentialism as attempts to naturalize certain desirable masculinities. Following the

postcolonial analogy I set up above, I argue that communist oppression and postcommunist inferiority to Europe -- which have perpetuated a recurring national failure to be "fully" European -- register in the sexual identity of East Central European men as a form of emasculation. This requires a compensatory infliction of sexual violation on the internal colonized: On women and other national minorities. While economic and social accounts gloss over the sexual effects of the transition altogether, it is easy to see that the current general uprooting of norms and expectations has also revealed a crisis of traditional forms of masculinity. As in the case of postcolonial nativisms (Mama 54-46; Heng 30-32), women and femininity are currently mobilized throughout the region to re-anchor national and sexual essentialisms. Drakulic laments in *How We Survived Communism and Even Laughed* that "we live surrounded by newly opened porno shops, porno magazines, peepshows, stripteases, unemployment, and galloping poverty. In the press they call Budapest 'the city of love, the Bangkok of Eastern Europe.' Romanian women are prostituting themselves for a single dollar in towns on the Romanian-Yugoslav border. In the midst of all this, our anti-choice nationalist governments are threatening our right to abortion and telling us to multiply, to give birth to more Poles, Hungarians, Czechs, Croats, Slovaks" (132).

In East Central European culture, Hungarian literature and films of the 1980s and 1990s provide a unique opportunity for anti-essentialist, feminist, and postcolonial readings of "poetic nationalism" for several reasons: The aesthetic trend that emerged in Hungarian literature and cinema in the late 1970s has shown a marked departure from the engagement with socialist realism, a requirement of an earlier period. A new mode of literary and cinematic communication developed, often in the course of collaborations between writers and filmmakers (see Szegegy-Maszák 430; Bodnár 61-62). These works presented themselves in terms of the liberation of the individual from the "super-politicized communication" of "really existing socialism," and from the Lukacsian concept of "aesthetic reflection" -- the pivotal notion of the centrally prescribed relationship between socialist art and cultural politics (see Töttössy 882-83). Since the literary and cinematic works that resulted from this break with socialist realism shared many of the aesthetic features of Western postmodernist literature -- intertextuality, subversion and mixing of genres, the questioning of grand narratives -- they have most often been referred to as "postmodern" (Tötösy, "Configurations" 90). In Hungary, going far beyond being a stylistic fashion, postmodern culture has functioned as an "elite communicative model," where "the 'elite' consists of the *literati*: Writers, critics, filmmakers, university students" (see Töttössy 884).

I want to suggest that the break with socialist realism and East Central Europeans' demonstrative gestures of relinquishing the traditional burden of collective representation can, and should be interpreted as an act of preserving the traditional privileges of collective representation in a period when national representation became impossible. By the late 1970s, it had become increasingly difficult to maintain the appearance of the clear-cut opposition between "the system" and "intellectual resistance" -- a Manichean scheme that benefited both sides. Most "dissident" intellectuals were directly supported by and were coopted by the regime, and censorship had eroded to the extent that it had become a game that both sides depended on (see Paul; Quart). In exchange for playing by the unspoken rules, intellectuals were allowed limited power, freedom of expression, and travel. In Hungary, these changes were thoroughly linked to the emergence of capitalist forms of economy within state socialism, allowing citizens relative prosperity within the "second economy" under the Kádár regime (Kolosi and Rose; Kapitány and Kapitány). Hungary -- due to the economic reforms of János Kádár's "goulash communism" -- was considered to be the "happiest barracks" of the socialist camp from the late 1970s through the 1980s (see Arpad; Kuczi; Kolosi and Rose; Lengyel; Hankiss). In *Intimations of Postmodernity* (1992), Zygmunt Bauman refers to similar changes East Central Europe-wide as the "postmodern stage" of communism: A period when needs became something to be celebrated and enjoyed, not simply to be satisfied (169). The contradiction between the lingering official communist rhetoric and the realities that defied it at every moment made it impossible to separate truth from lies in the Hungary of the 1980s. The anti-communist Aesopean rhetoric had lost its referent and had become a game in itself. Cynicism and fantasy, which had already been important modes of expression as a result of decades of public communication in which "information [was] the most

valuable article of commerce" (Arpad 22), became indispensable resources of survival. Intellectuals' escape from oppositional politics into "pure poetry" and postmodern play afforded them a relatively safe place "beyond ideology", where they were able to continue the allegorical discourse of the "we" without having to take full political responsibility for it. What I need to emphasize here is that literary and cinematic representations of this "transitional" period registered political and social changes that were not representable at the time by any other means. To borrow Fredric Jameson's terminology from "Class and Allegory in Contemporary Mass Culture: *Dog Day Afternoon* as a Political Film" (1985), rather than being instruments of a new, non-collective self-consciousness, these cultural representations were symptoms and signs of emerging collective self-consciousnesses that only blossomed into quantifiable forms after 1989. These self-consciousnesses are not present in the works' overt messages or in the authors' declared intentions (the liberation of the individual from politics), but, rather, in the "raw material": In the inadvertent formal contradictions which, as Jameson asserts, the reading/viewing public is always sensitive to. Rather than reading the overt messages of these "postmodern" works and the declared intentions of their authors, which criticism on both sides of the late Iron Curtain has been invested in decoding, I read them through the inadvertent cracks and fissures of those intentions. Nowhere are the cracks and fissures more self-revealing, nowhere lie the contradictions more on the surface than in the representation of gender and sexuality.

The majority of these postmodernist texts exhibit a striking thematic concern with femininity and the female body (see Tötösy, "Configurations" 96-99). Many of them employ female protagonists as the male intellectual's, and, on a larger scale, as the nation's, representatives. These women are all beautiful -- often racialized, ravenously sexual but, at the same time, submissive and nurturing, victimized and idealized. They embody the "postmodern" intellectual's attempts to preserve his own absolute identity with the help of the "natural" female body and, at the same time, to extend his own metaphorical freedom through the performativity of the feminine and the playfulness of postmodernist aesthetics. These -- ostensibly depoliticized -- representations are markedly re-poeticized. The pose of allegorical discourse remains, but the Aesopian allegory imperceptibly dissolves into metaphor at the crucial points, where the referents should be revealed. My readings are concerned with these points of transition and rupture between allegory and metaphor; with the places where a feminist interpretation can expose the patriarchal-national subject behind the elusive, transparent postmodernist-poetic subject; where the erotics of patriotism and the erotics of high modernist poetry cooperate to conceal shifts from national "we" to male, intellectual "I"; and where the poetic guise of presentation fails to hide the fact that male-ness is a series of masculine performances. My goal is to make the hiding, self-defensive male, national body visible behind the omnipresent female one, and expose both as discursively and ideologically constituted. The prototype, and a much revered example of Hungarian postmodernist literary works in which "men write in the feminine" is Sándor Weöres's cycle of poems, entitled "Psyché" ("Psyche"), written, in segments, throughout the 1970s. The protagonist and narrator is a fictional nineteenth-century Hungarian poetess, Erzsébet Lónyai nicknamed Psyché. Generically, "Psyché" is a combination of memoir, diary, lyric poems, translations, and letters, accompanied by a fictive biographical study by one of Psyché's imaginary contemporaries, and by a real critic's review. It is written in untranslatable, artificial, and archaic Hungarian. Psyché herself is the adopted daughter of a Hungarian count and the natural daughter of a Gypsy woman. According to a typical Hungarian critical account Psyché's Gypsy ancestry explains her propensity to "extremes," "adventure," and "amours" in spite of the convent education she received as a result of her more distinguished paternal heritage (see Vajda 1988, 18). This description of Psyché's extremisms is euphemistic: In the narrative she appears simply, biologically, promiscuous. She makes contact with outstanding Hungarian and European male artists of the age -- Goethe, Hölderlin, Beethoven -- but this intellectual "elevation" of her character only slightly counterbalances her inability to resist sex, and her almost predatory seductiveness. Vajda's comment on Weöres's "Psyché" illustrates the broader interpretive context where "'Psyché' goes beyond the display of Weöres's empathy and love of games and turns into a feat of psychological transvestism as well. We experience the lives, loves, maturation into a woman and later mother,

the happiness and sufferings of a real woman. Going even further, as Zoltán Kenyeres writes ... Psyché is the virtual creation of a life-style and a new possibility for life. The dream of a late rococo, early Biedermeier literature in an independent and free Hungary, where poets are not burdened by the need to express the crucial problems of society and the nation but are free to devote themselves to the common manifestations of love, joy, and sorrow: this is the dream of a Hungarian literature, European in character, one that could afford the luxury of being Hungarian in language and not necessarily in subject" (Vajda 1988, 20; my translation). This interpretation is typical of the way in which gender is invariably excluded from among valid categories of politics and criticism. The transcendence of female experience is not rendered problematic in the national imaginary, because it is made clear that Psyché is not a real woman. She is an allegory of the Hungarian intellectual, who is castrated by political oppression. He wishes to transcend the binding political tasks of a national artist by elevating Hungarian literature to the level of "Europeanness," which is coterminous with "human." The paradox that this transcendence of the national is conditioned on the gender privileges of the Hungarian artist is effaced in the "absence" of real gender difference, which characterizes the sphere of poetry.

Based on Jenny Sharpe's feminist work on allegory and postcolonial violence, Monique Tschofen argues in "Post-Colonial Allegory and the Empire of Rape" (1995) that -- even though the trope of rape is not identical with literal rape -- the two are situated along a continuum. Rape encompasses a spectrum of represented sexual relations that signify violence, violation, and domination. Rape can occur even when the dominated woman is supposedly willing and desiring (Tschofen 503-05). In her readings of postcolonial novels, Tschofen wishes to "undermine and unravel the typology that makes it possible for this mode of allegorical signification to challenge and resist colonial power structures and yet reinforce patriarchal power relations" (503-4). Tschofen shows, for instance, that the literal and symbolic levels are inseparable in the Sudanese author's, Taleb Salih's novel, *Season of Migration to the North* (1966); there is a constant slippage between the two. Even though the English women who are violated by the colonized protagonist yearning for mastery are supposed to be metonymical, they are still being raped. "The personal is steeped with political meaning, sexual relations become a way of waging war, and the woman's body is a battle field: a territory to be scouted, fought over, and possessed, a fertile semiotic field upon which layers of meaning can be projected" (506). Tschofen's other example, Dany Lafarriere's 1985 novel, *Comment faire l'amour avec un Nègre sans se fatiguer*, also "uses representations of rape in order to create a textual allegory of resistance" (511). But, while Salih's novel asks the reader to overlook the literal by reading violation metaphorically, Lafarriere's is a playful, postmodern text, which creates a contract with the reader to forget or ignore the trope of rape altogether, "even though it is on every page of the book" (513). The similarities between these postcolonial texts and "Psyché" are unmistakable. There is a complex allegorical contract at work between the text and its readers, specific to the conditions of decaying state socialism. On the one hand, it issues the "hermeneutical imperative" of national allegory, that "crucial aspect of the liberating and resisting imperative of postcolonial writing" (Tschofen 501). On the other hand, it is also understood that Psyché's fickle, ironic postmodernism is a rightful refusal of the expectation of naive representational realism prescribed by socialist realist aesthetics. According to György Konrád such a refusal justifies, in an "artistic society" (37), a certain kind of hermeneutic nihilism. The duality of these liberties provides unlimited representational freedom over the female body. The traditional entitlement to national representation, and the simultaneous release from the responsibility of representation, makes it very difficult for a potential feminist effort to foreground the continuity between the textual and the sexual. Such an effort is prevented in several ways: Psyché is the author's invention. She is removed from the contemporary and the familiar to a mythic past, which is, at the same time, a nostalgically evoked part of national history, embedded in a coveted European cultural context. This era is represented in a language that is at once real and fictional. Psyché's Gypsy blood, which, in the biological essentialism of the national imagination, is solely responsible for her excesses, is not the blood of real Gypsies, but of exotic, free, art-loving creatures: products of the Eurocentric, orientalizing fantasy that the Hungarian artist mimics. She is worlds apart from real, contemporary Gypsies (today's appropriate



terminology is "Roma"), who are being blatantly marginalized throughout Central and East Europe. Significantly, Psyché, is half-Gypsy, half "poet-nobleman": A perfect allegory of the feminized, but beautiful and rebellious, "noble" artist, whose masculinity is clearly tied to her intellect, which, in turn, easily sheds the guise of fictional femininity. On the one hand, Psyché is a woman forged out of the two man-made stereotypes that have been endlessly employed in European arts to contain the threatening, castrating aspects of women's sexuality: She is a whore who becomes a mother by the end. This duality is a strategy to keep a safe distance from the female-ness that the feminine image necessarily implies. On the other hand, and unlike "real women," Psyché is a creative intellectual whose promiscuity is determined by external factors that are beyond her control. As an allegory, she is for and about men with maternal productive talent in a politically prostituting, feminizing historical situation.

Two questions emerge at this point: Can male intellectuals, Psyché's allegorical referents, emerge from this risky play with a female persona "unharmed," untainted by femininity? And, how are women expected to, and allowed to, identify with such androgynous images? The answer to both questions depends, to a great extent, on the historical and social context in which the reception takes place. In the 1980s, when intellectuals still enjoyed at least nominally the protective shield of their high modernist cultural privilege and dissident status, putting on a female mask was a much less risky act than it has appeared to be since 1989. DuPlessis's description in *Writing Beyond the Ending* aptly describes the mechanism when she claims that the postmodern poet remains the "third term" of modernist poetry, "mediating between the polarized sexes," in the spiritual realm where men and women are equal in the spirit of "psychic and intellectual androgyny" (74). The voluntary revelation of the fractured basis of his work provides him with a degree of "femininity," but it is strictly metaphorical, easily contained. As DuPlessis later notes, "it is a strong position to be both male oneself and masculine / feminine in one's own writing, but avoiding the three dangerous places of writing practice: The 'male but stupid,' the feminist, and the effeminate" (1994, 75). As for the second question, it is not likely that women who have read Psyché found anything objectionable in its gender scheme. A thorough training in reading "their" culture through the filter of national allegory teaches women to identify with the point of view of their internal colonizer, while they suppress or are ashamed of ambivalent emotions. The claim that Hungarian nationalism is "transcendent" -- is always, simultaneously, the expression of "human" -- creates a make-believe common ground that includes women. Thus, the centrality of the female image must have even reinforced women's false sense of inclusion in the national collective, while it has modeled and naturalized male-dependent heterosexuality.

The way in which "erotic" postmodernist works have provided a bridge in this transition is best illustrated by comparing Péter Esterházy's pre-1989 book *Kis magyar pornográfia* (*Little Hungarian Pornography*), and his post-1989 *Egy nő* (*She Loves Me*): The former, an ironic set of anecdotes in which the political and the personal/sexual inseparably interweave, relies on women and the feminine to convey a collective, gender-neutral powerlessness. Esterházy introduces the book this way: "This is the author's most East-European book, and his most helpless, too. It was written in 1982-83, in the overripe period of the Kádár era, under small, Hungarian, pornographic circumstances where pornography should be understood as meaning lies, the lies of the body, the lies of the soul, our lies. Let us imagine, if we can, a country where everything is a lie, where the lack of democracy is called socialist democracy, economic chaos socialist economy, revolution anti-revolution, and so on ... Such a total, all-encompassing lie, when from history through green-pea soup, when from our father's eyebrows and our lover's lap everything is a lie, not to mention this theoretical yet very tangible presence of threat, all this makes for a highly poetic situation" (v-vi). While, according to this, the national "we" is being corrupted by communist oppression, in the book it is only the prostitution of *women's* bodies that is depicted as "natural" and morally deplorable. Men's "prostitution" by other men always appears in invisible quotation marks, is metaphorical, tragic, temporary, and it ennobles through the suffering imposed. It appears as if women's "natural" prostitution were necessary, precisely, to protect the boundaries of the male body and poetic soul from contamination with the performativity of the feminine. The implied audience of Esterházy's preface is a masculine political subject, who is familiar with the "absolute"

meaning of "democracy." The appeal is to the idealized European Man, whom the feminized, East Central European man emulates in a subtle version of colonial mimicry. In contrast with *Little Hungarian Pornography*, Esterházy's post-communist novel, *Egy nő* (1995), translated into English as *She Loves Me* (1997), appeared without a preface. The cover features the naked ass -- any euphemism would falsify the effect -- of an otherwise clothed woman, part of an unspecified Egon Schiele painting. The image combines a clever marketing strategy with an allusion to the book's European high modernist pretensions. It is also a visual commentary on the book's obvious intention to celebrate the freedom of calling everything by its name. The text wallows in destroying taboos but, while there is still the resonance of something vaguely political about this triumph over the shadow of censorship, freedom of speech seems to translate into unlimited liberties to name women's most intimate body parts and sexual acts. National allegory, or the right to undifferentiated representation, does not disappear altogether in Esterházy's work in the historical and aesthetic transition between *Little Hungarian Pornography* and *A Woman*. In the latter, erotic and pornographic descriptions continue to mix with details of life under communism and postcommunism. Communism continues to function in Hungarian culture of the 1990s as a referent evoked with a mixture of bitterness, humour, and nostalgia. The triviality of the "us" versus "them" binary opposition is evident in its very projection into everyday sexual situations. Yet, the text also reveals the eagerness to continue the allegorical game, partly because it has been a source of pleasure, partly because it is as familiar, available, and safe as women's bodies, unlike the much more inscrutable rules of postcommunist games.

The intellectual, however, retains the right to analyze the transition, and tries to affirm his artistic autonomy through indispensable references to the feminine. As Esterházy blatantly puts it elsewhere, "those who can speak must speak for those who cannot" (*Elefántcsonttoronyból* 18). Talking about a recently published literary collection, he, "as a temporary woman writer," "objects to the fact that women are missing from the anthology" (40). In other words, he will not only continue to do the talking for women, but will even represent an allegedly feminist cause on their behalf. Somewhat later, he describes his intention to liberate his writing from the burden of politics: "I will allow politics as little weight in my writing as, for instance, the weight of a light female shoulder" (72). The reliance on the female and the feminine in representation not only does not register as political, but even provides naturalizing imagery for the triviality of politics. On the one hand, Esterházy dismisses the earlier, allegorical politics of the "we" in sarcastic terms: "Perhaps the most egotistic society in history built itself here on constant reference to this virtual we" (144). At the same time, his entitlement to a position outside of the "we" remains unquestionable even after the transition. As in his novels, he asserts his "natural" place in the family of male Hungarian poets and writers, thereby justifying his birth right to a politically neutral status. "I am an indebted and grateful son and product of Hungarian literature, and, at the same time, I am someone who is indifferent to some of the important traditions of this literature; for instance, that fact that it makes the collective its central value. I am not attracted by the heroism that follows from this. Then I would rather be a woman writer than a real man" (77). Tötösy makes similar observations about the work of Endre Kukorelly, another Hungarian postmodernist writer, whose poetic texts circle "around and about relationships with women, interweaving the national and the political contexts in the personal one" and while Kukorelly's reliance on the female and the feminine is "profoundly patriarchal" and male-oriented, he chooses to call himself a "feminist" ("Configurations" 97-98; see also *Comparative Literature* 139-40).

The crisis of nationally privileged masculinities has provoked defensive attempts, throughout East Central and East Europe, to coerce women into remaining faithful resources for the nation state. This general antifeminist backlash has blamed women for the emasculation of men and the abandonment of family priorities (see Occhipinti; Mihancsik; Goven; Eisenstein "East European"; Dolby). The demonization of "monstrous" women in Hungary already started in the 1980s, condemning women who had made an alleged alliance with the communist state against men. Spokespersons of the electronic and media campaign -- among them leading dissidents writers and journalists -- have accused women of destroying the nation by refusing to bear children and by abandoning their husbands; of following their insatiable sexual appetites, and of neglecting

their natural duty of nurturing children (see Goven 224-35; Kürti 276-77). The analogy with women's situations in postcolonial nations is impossible to miss. Amina Mama claims in "Sheroes and Villains: Conceptualizing Colonial and Contemporary Violence Against Women in Africa" (1997) that, in emerging nations of Africa, the masculinity of nationalist discourses is a source of male bias. While nationalisms always call on "the new woman," postcolonial leaders such as Kwame Nkrumah are unable to view women beyond reproductive and nurturing roles (54-55). Zillah Eisenstein levels similar charges against Václav Havel and Mikhail Gorbachev ("East European" 312-14). This hostile atmosphere explains why East Central European women have been so cautious to associate themselves with feminism. They have perfectly internalized the guilt and the shame of the colonized, transferred to them by men whose colonized masculinities are permanently insecure. Unlike Renata Salecl, who faults post-communist women for not being able to see femininity as a performance (5), I think that most East Central European women's choices are extremely limited, unless they are willing to face complete alienation from their environment. Most women, especially in positions of relative empowerment, opt to perform a masquerade: they identify, or pretend to identify, with the masculine viewpoint, conform to the sexual roles approved by the national imagination, and never address gender as a political matter (Mihancsik). Thus, in the Hungarian antifeminist campaign, such politically active and publicly present women as Kata Beke and Magda Gubi joined the woman-bashing chorus, implicitly distinguishing themselves from "bad" women (see Goven).

How can feminism make a meaningful intervention in a situation where women have gone from communist-nationalist colonization straight to post-communist-nationalist demonization? As a first step, gender should present itself as an issue; it should have a name; it should be possible to separate it from the sexual essentialisms in which it is firmly grounded, and from the nationalistic discourses that daily confirm this grounding. The hermeneutic project of reading through the inadvertent and intentional ruptures of reifying national discourses has just barely begun in East Central Europe. As Susan Rubin Suleiman says in "The Politics of Postmodernism after the Wall (Or, What Do We Do When the 'Ethnic Cleansing' Starts?)" (1997), politics does not reside in texts themselves, but in the ways they are read. They are what they do for a community at a particular place and time (Suleiman 53). Judith Butler suggests in *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (1997) that feminists should read pornographic texts "against themselves"; not as constitutive of or representative of what women really are, but as allegories of "masculine wilfulness and feminine submission", as expressions of a desire that "repeatedly and anxiously rehearses its own unrealizability" (68). From this deconstructive theoretical position, the apparently disconnected phenomena of Hungarian postmodern art's aesthetic (ab)use of the feminine, the current anti-feminist backlash, and the invasion of pornography, can be read and critiqued as thoroughly interrelated processes. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak defines a deconstructive critique as one in which someone says "no" to a structure she/he intimately inhabits. Accordingly, she claims, feminism and postcoloniality both operate from a "deconstructive stance" (794-95). As I try to suggest, recent East Central European, "feminized" (post)communist, (post)modernist texts provide many opportunities for such deconstructive critiques. Such analyses would counter the "plural text" with an analysis of the "political status of the plural self" (Suleiman 53). Textuality does not help explain the killing in Bosnia, writes Suleiman (53). But violence occurs not only in its most horrific version, in war; there is the textual rape of women I am discussing here. And as Chela Sandoval urges, such violence can only be opposed by another kind of violence, the "violent shattering of the unitary sense of self, as the skill which allows a mobile identity to form takes hold" (23).

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