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Desire in Feminist Narration: Reading Margit Kaffka and Dorothy Richardson

Mária évei (*The Years of Mária*), the Hungarian Margit Kaffka's second novel, appeared first in serial form in the avant-garde journal *Nyugat* in 1912, and a year later in book form. Considering its storyline it would qualify only with reservation as a "New Woman" novel. Although the protagonist belongs to a generation of young women — from middle class or impoverished genteel background at the beginning of the twentieth century — who are studying to gain a diploma as elementary or junior high school teachers; the main theme of the novel is not Mária's struggle for gaining access to the professions or the difficulties encountered by the professional woman in her working or social environment. One could of course argue that the difficulties leading up to the heroine's suicide are very much connected with those facing the "New Woman" of the time (see Wittmann). But the aim of my study is not to analyse the novel primarily according to content-related issues; this has been done more or less successfully by László Fülöp in his 1987 comprehensive study on Margit Kaffka. Fülöp, in fact, sees the achievement of Kaffka's narrative as being a pioneering work in the genre of the psychological novel. According to this well argued assumption, Fülöp concentrates on the psychological development of the central female figure.

Far from wanting to take up a debate with Fülöp's sensitive and sensible interpretation, I want to focus on a different aspect relevant in and for the novel. It is the *literary* discourse within narration I wish to look at closely and read this as the major obstacle in Mária's interpretation of her *external reality*. By external reality I mean the inter-relationship of all the discourses the protagonist is situated in, and accordingly a network of social demands to which she is supposed to respond. A romantic literary discourse becomes crucially dominating in her formative years at the expense of all the others. In her struggle to live up to the visions of that romantic literary discourse Mária is less and less able to bridge the gap between those internalised *visions* and the more and more externalised *realities* of her socio-historical location. As this gap becomes eventually an abyss — Mária loses her hold on life.

For my reading of the female protagonist's plight manifesting itself in her

being *appropriated* by the relevant discourses and their inter-action, I found Michel de Certeau's thoughts on narration as theory and practice useful. He extinguishes radically and convincingly the difference between "content" and "form" of the literary text (his example is the fairy tale) by claiming that

Narration does indeed have a content, but it also belongs to the art of making a *coup*.... Its discourse is characterized more by a way of *exercising itself* than by the thing it indicates. And one must grasp a sense other than what is said. It produces effects, not objects. It is narration, not description. It is an *art* of saying. (79)

and

The story does not express a practice. It does not limit itself to telling about a movement. It *makes* it. One understands it, then, if one enters into this movement oneself.... (81)

The opening scene of Kafka's novel is the dormitory of a women's college in Budapest. It is at their last night after three years of sharing a room at teachers' college that the young women recall the major events of their time together and consider the future. They know that the sheltered life they lived all these years has come to an end, and that the requirements they will have to fulfil in their professional and especially social life will demand very different skills and attitudes from those practised at college. Job security could be expected only by the fortunate ones with connections in the higher bureaucracy, and their scholarship will have little bearing on their future financial situation. For a single professional woman in feudal-capitalistic Hungary, within a patriarchal society, there is an additional gulf between the sheltered existence in college and the uncertainties of earning one's livelihood. The young women themselves — all in their early twenties — thematise another break ahead of them: they will have to leave behind the cultivation of a shared romantic literary discourse if they are to succeed outside college.

What constitutes their shared romantic literary discourse? Could it be read as gender-specific at the historical time and location of the narrative? The literary texts which they enjoy and quote are Shulamite's story, Spanish romances, Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, Goethe's *Faust*, Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, the medieval story of Abelard and Héloïse, and similar ones. The *textual* beauty and power of romantic love/passion has an impact on them at a time when more ambiguous narratives of these very themes by Stendhal, Balzac, or Flaubert would have been also available to them.

One of the most interesting features of the novel seems to me to be the fact that the young women themselves are aware of the power of the *word* for them, and are able to problematise its ramifications. The main protagonist, Mária, is conspicuously absent from the opening scene, and enters the dormitory only after the friends ended their conversation. Through this device the reader can conceive

Mária as not being part of the insight gained by the other room-mates, namely, that they cannot afford any further an immersion into a romantic discourse which may be useless if not harmful in a process which requires of them to establish a subject position they can operate from, within the differing social discourses and practices.

As they summarize the events of their three years together they acknowledge the intellectual freedom and economic security the college offered to them. They are also aware that the kind of sexual identity they created for themselves was made possible only within the parameters of a sheltered existence. The stories they relate about themselves are examples of romantic notions about love, as constructed textually for them and by them. Sexuality is invoked and "lived out" through textuality: "we inhaled into our nerves all imaginable passions of Western and Eastern literatures and their fantasy-women" (268).¹

During their college years these four young women — the fourth being Mária — try to "put into practice" their discursive knowledge of love but fail in a socially practical sense. While quite a number of their fellow students get engaged during college years — the four friends, who are also founders of a "Linguistic and Literary Circle," remain within the stronghold of textuality. They recall at their last evening together, how one of them, Vica, fell in love with a young physician who would have married her, but in the course of their correspondence she exhausted the relationship through soul-searching and the man withdrew. As one of the protagonists formulates it: "what was in those letters! More than ultra violet refinements and no factuality — every country girl would have known the way how one has to direct such a thing into a more practical harbour — towards Hymen. But here *the word* was important, and in the end the young man did not know himself any more what he was to understand or to want" (269).²

Another of the young teacher-candidates, Klári, falls in love with a Roman Catholic priest whose sermons she attends for a whole year without ever speaking to him. And Józsa, the third one, cultivates for two years a passion for her brother-in-law; the way to express her feelings is to tell his children the story of Andersen's *The Garden of Paradise*. Again the relevance of the literary discourse is stressed where emotions are located. As one of the young women summarizes it: "Only those can be so brave with *words* who are in control of all

1 "ásztunk az idegeinkbe keletnyugat litteratúrájának és minden álmodott asszonyának minden kigondolható szenvedélyét" (268; this and all subsequent translations from the Hungarian are mine).

2 "de hogy mi volt azokban a levelekben! Lilán-túli finomságok és semmi tény — minden vidéki fruska tudta volna a módját, hogy kell az ilyet gyakorlatibb révbe terelni — Hymen felé. De itt a szó volt a fontos és végre a legény maga sem tudta már, hogy mit értsen és mit akarjon...." (269).

their bodily expressions or have no clue of anything else anyway" (270).³ But even the way Klári ironically narrates their literary cult of romantic notions, is recognised as being itself part of the critiqued discursivity. One of them comments to Klári:

But in what a perfect elevated prose was all this said, Klári, in what broad epic and at times even in a rhythmic motion flew the "word" from your mouth. And it is you who dares to make fun of us? You could have accompanied yourself by lute: "Hear my song!" — Well, yes, that is the main thing with us, my dear; that is why we will remain starving at life's wedding feast. The storytellers play their lute at the table and below the window of the wedded, but remain always outside. If at least one of us had truly talent — to write for example! But not at all, this is all strange, inhaled stuff, the narcotics of our ripe youth.... And it is instead of love, indeed! ... "I'll put on a clean shirt, because I shall talk to my beloved today!" — said Boriska in springtime once.... (272)⁴

The three room-mates are shown to be aware of their sexuality as predominantly textually constructed. They also know that after leaving college they will have to learn to fit in with different discourses if they want to survive as sexual beings and be integrated socially into society as women. They assume they will eventually marry despite the added difficulty of being more independent than other young women their age and therefore seen as threatening to both sexes (e.g., 273). While they are discussing their past and future, the reader is given information about the central female character through the comments of the other three young women. They discuss her acting talent, her beauty and her "textual affair" with a famous writer which is based solely on correspondence. This seems even to them out of step with the conventions of college inmates to "practice" romantic literary notions.

But by making the protagonist absent in the very first scene of the novel where the conflict between textualised sexual desire — and sexuality in its socially coded forms — is thematised, our attention is drawn to a narrative device. Mária's absence may emphasise that she is not able anymore to participate in a sobering intellectual exercise which may require a distancing

from textual practices endangering her ability to cope with how she is situated in social discourses — because she already may have let herself be *appropriated* by the romantic literary discourse. Her speaking presence is not made to be felt since "she is somewhere reading or writing her memoirs," as one of her friends remarks. And she never looses her dependence on the written word and significantly, it is at the very end of the novel that Mária reflects on the college years, echoing her former colleagues views. But by then she sees death as the only way out of the pathological *cul-de-sac* she finds herself in.

One might gain an added insight as to the significance of the romantic discourse/s for the young women in college but especially for the central female figure, Mária, if one looks at the specific texts named in the first chapter. Concerning their historicity the story of Shulamite as narrated in the Old Testament is the earliest one. In this mainly dialogic *Song of Songs*, Solomon is accredited with authorship. Love is considered "as powerful as death," its conception does not separate the spiritual from the sexual. Although this unity of love is still celebrated in the two medieval texts, Tristan and Isolde and Abelard and Héloïse, also in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, not so in Goethe's *Faust* — but in all works consummated sexual passion is inevitably followed by punishment which may take the form of enforced exile, castration, celibacy, death, etc. Socio-political and socio-historical explanations for the "punishment" of the protagonists are inherent in these literary discourses. Texts of German romanticism — prevalent reading in Hungary at the time — may have emphasized a reading of these earlier texts according to which the spiritual component of sexual passion would have been extended and expanded. For instance, Ricarda Huch cites Tieck who seems to regret this development: "Im Mittelalter (er hätte sagen sollen im Altertum) war die übersinnliche, außersinnliche Liebe nicht von der sinnlichen getrennt, sondern sie waren mit Leib und Seele verbunden, in der höchsten Vergeistigung gesund, in dem freiesten Scherz unschuldig" (241). Huch herself summarizes the discursive construction of love by the German romantics: "Nun stehen die geistigste und die sinnlichste Liebe getrennt, feindselig einander gegenüber" (241).

The cultivation of the spiritual component of love remains part of Western culture. Freud gives acknowledgment to this romantic construct in comparing it to the "oceanic" feeling of religiosity. But he sees this feeling, which claims to overcome the separation between I and universe, as brought retrospectively into religion as an element of "consolation." Denis de Rougemont devotes a major part of his book, *Passion and Society*, to trace the link between passion in literatures and religions, and ascertains that "the passionate love which the myth [of Tristan and Isolde] celebrates actually became in the twelfth century — the moment when first it began to be cultivated — a religion in the full sense of the word, and in particular a Christian heresy historically determined" (137).

The narration in *Mária évei* changes with the second chapter: from there on

3 "Csak az lehet ennyire merész a szóval, aki aztán ür minden mozdulatán, vagy nem is ért egyébéhez!" (270). One might recall that in Andersen's fairy-tale the prince loses paradise because he follows his desire and is not able to restrain his body's motion.

4 "Hanem, hogy micsoda kifogástalan, numerózus prózában volt mindez, Klári, milyen szélesen, epikusan, helyenként mégis lüktető menetben folyt ajkadról a 'szó.' Még te mersz csúfolni minket, öreg? Lantot verhetnél volna hozzá: 'Hej, regé-remem!' — Biz igen, ez a fő minálunk, édesem; ezért fog koppanni az állunk az élet lakodalmán. A regós lantot ver az asztal mellett s a nász-szoba ablaka alatt, de kívül marad mindig. Ha legalább valamelyikünknek igazán tehetsége volna — írashoz például! De nem, ez mind csak idegen, felszívott dolog, az érett fiatalságunk narkotikuma.... És a szerelem helyett van, igen! ... 'Tiszta inget veszek, mert ma beszélni fogok az ideálommal!' — mondta Boriska egyszer tavaly..." (272).

it is predominantly Máriás's observations, her letters and diaries which serve as narrative focus. After leaving college Mária finds employment as a teacher in a provincial town. She has to share a small flat with her widowed mother and younger sister. Social codes — which are enforced by her mother — demand of her to participate in dances and balls just like all the other "girls" of "higher society." Mária lives in constant tension: the utter lack of privacy in her home situation, and the all too obvious task to attract a future husband on social occasions require her to constantly perform. It is not an acting out of roles she would want to identify with, like the role of the obedient and loving daughter towards a mother embodying values Mária does not share. For her the lack of privacy is as much humiliating as the socially superimposed participation in husband catching performances. She seeks refuge in textual pleasures: she keeps up the letter writing to Seregély, the "famous author," reads French novels, and writes her diary.

The authors and titles mentioned in connection with the French novels are also revealing: Maupassant's *Bel-ami*, Flaubert's *Salammô*, and an unspecified historical novel by Merimée, the author of *Carmen*.⁵ Although there are no further comments in the narration referring to these names or texts, it seems in keeping with the focus of my inquiry to try to explore whether these different kinds of literary discourses may have been instrumental to move Mária into a slightly changed subject position. These nineteenth-century French texts can be read as narratives interrogating the notions of immortal love, presenting its dark side, narrowing it to sexual desire which often turns into violence and despair. Female characters in these novels are objects of male desire which is mostly misogynist in its manifestations. Mária as reader remains seemingly unresponsive to the discursive deconstruction of formerly acquired textual desire. Although the "realities" of married life for women — as she observes them during her visit in Budapest — correspond to the relationship of the sexes as narrated in *Bel-ami* for example, there are no connections made in the heroine's consciousness. The reading of these French novels serves rather to increase Mária's intellectual independence from her family and the small-town community, which distances her from the social practices around her. The hidden irony within the narrative reveals itself when Mária makes tangible claims for some independence from the stifling social codes of her provincial environment by receiving in her room a "Bel-ami"-type bachelor. But then she acts inconsistently with the image she creates of herself towards the young man when she slaps him angrily for having responded to their mutual sexual attraction. And later on, when she finally is engaged to Apostol, a teacher colleague, and intends to marry him, she gets emotionally involved with another easy going bachelor, a regional party

candidate. This time she wants to translate her flirt into a "proper" sexual encounter, the more so because her future husband expects her not to be a virgin any more. The sexual encounter never takes place because the man forgets or avoids her visit, and all she is left with is humiliation and desperation. Her literal downfall — she lets herself fall into the river from a bridge — may be understood as an attempt to step outside the romantic discourse which guaranteed her a kind of immunity, even if only an unhappy one.

But has Mária really stepped outside the romantic discourse? Is it not rather that she translates other kinds of literary discourses back into a romantic one? She plays in the brief encounter with Darvas, (the successful party candidate who becomes a member of parliament) the momentary role of *Carmen* in a middle-class provincial town milieu — but is daydreaming about him at home in such a way that she transforms her first "realistic" assessment of him — who seems to be a slightly nobler and Hungarian version of *Bel-ami* — into her former romantic fantasy. He might find in her the love of his life. This daydream is a repetition of the one she created for herself a number of years earlier, when having her textual affair with the "famous author" Seregély. Another repetition of a vision seems to emphasise Mária's inability to free herself from the masculinist romantic literary discourses she became captured by and to understand their social implications. The romantic vision is about the encounter of a man and a woman, who do not even know each other's name but spend an hour of greatest ecstasy together, and then part without seeing one another ever again. Also, the heterosexual romantic notion that a woman "gives" herself to a man and makes him happy simply through this act of "sacrifice" — is part of the heroine's conception of sexual encounter.

Despite the vicious discursive circle which seems to have gained control over the female protagonist of Kafka's novel, Mária is not constructed as fixed in her subjectivity. In her imagined love affair with Darvas, the new member of parliament, she recalls for the third time the legend of Tristan and Isolde, but this time with a shift in emphasis. Not only is the first Isolde referred to but also the second: "And the other Isolde who bursts out laughing bitterly during a hunting party when she jumps on horseback over mud: 'Why did you laugh?' — Just because even this cowardly mud which splashed itself under my skirt is more courageous than my kingly husband, Tristan!" (416)⁶

The insertion of this detail as quotation corresponds with Mária's preoccupation at the time with sexual intercourse and its implications. She reads manuals on intercourse and motherhood, and is repulsed and anguished at the same time. She also comes only now to understand that her lie to Apostol, her fiancé, about

6 "És a másik Izolda, aki keserűen kacag fel a vadászaton, mikor átugratja lovát egy mocsáron. 'Mit nevetél?' — 'Csak azt, hogy ez a gyáva sár is, a szoknyám alá fröcsenő — bátrabb, mint az én királyi férjem, Trisztán!'" (416).

5 Merimée's only historical novel is his anonymously published, Walter Scott-type *Chronique du règne de Charles IX* (1829).

her supposed former sexual affair with the "famous author" will be revealed. Kafka, when describing Mária's anguished state, anticipates psychoanalytic theory:

And again her life and every day activities became full of tension, she felt constantly tormented by the most improbable possibilities. Although she had lucid and peaceful moments when she seemed to see clearly that the whole thing is a pathological complex and does not really have such relevance at all. This message came from the free and sound part of her soul; but the other, utterly confused and contaminated part of her psyche was struggling like in some kind of dreadful trap. (417-18)⁷

The narration alternates between first person singular, as in letter and diary entries, and third person singular, where the narrator describes events and dialogues from — to a great extent — the heroine's point of view. This kind of varied and alternating narration seems to cater to the complexity of self enactment within the confines of the written word. It also accommodates Mária's adopted performance possibilities in society within the constraints imposed by regulatory practices for personal encounters.

Mária believes in the primary importance of the *word*. In one of her letters to the "famous author," who "authorizes" her confessions and thereby gains power over her, and towards whom she cultivates romantic feelings — she writes about the incidental nature of the deed as opposed to the word. She describes an experience where she — on the spur of the moment — dropped her purse into the river with all her money and house key in it when walking over a bridge. As motivation she considers only some playful acting out of an idea, or perhaps a strange pathological temptation, not consistent with her usual self (301). She also reflects on an ideal heterosexual love relationship and acknowledges the difference to the admired author's concepts of love in his "New Women"-novels. Mária's vision consists of an everlasting "conscious ecstasy."⁸ The author advises marriage keeping in line with the advocacy of marriage in his "New Woman"-novels, where marriage is presented as instrumental for coming to terms with most of the problems the "New Women" seem to have. Mária responds by

7 "És újra halálomban élt és járt-kelt, folyton kínlódva a legképtelenebb lehetőségeken. Holott voltak világos és nyugodt percei, mikor tisztán vélte látni, hogy beteges kényszer gondolat az egész csak és nincs a dolognak akkora jelentősége. Ezt a lelke különszakadt és ép része mondta; de a többi, egész összezsavart és megtámadott lelki világa, mint valami borzasztó kelepcében, úgy vergődött ebben" (417-18).

8 This "conscious ecstasy" is based on *askesis* in the poetry of the troubadours and in the Catharist Church, according to Denis de Rougemont. If one follows de Rougemont's findings, then the historical basis of the romantic literary discourse is conscious ecstasy as *askesis*. This makes the heroine of Kafka's novel a "pure" representative of the romantic literary discourse.

quoting Wagner's *Lohengrin* where the magic could not last: Lohengrin signifies here a romantic notion which is not only incompatible with the everyday practices of married life, but which stands for the original anti-marriage doctrines of courtly love and Catharist heresy, the sources of the Tristan myth (de Rougemont 75-82). It serves Mária as a latent "argument" against the images of domesticated "New Women" in her interlocutor's novels. But it also foreshadows Mária's disability for marriage.

Mária's preference for textual romantic discourse in contradistinction to the social practice of married life for women seems to be justified when, during her visit to her married sister in Budapest, she learns about the sexual freedom for husbands and the humiliating situation this puts wives into, their pain and the games they have to play. For Mária the interaction between the observed couple seems brutal in comparison to a sensuality which finds expression merely in speech, visual images, and atmosphere. The visit to her sister is juxtaposed with her meeting the receiver of her confessional letters, the idealised "famous author." At the latter encounter the romantic discourse remains intact. Mária is allowed to enjoy the magic of her own imagination, and the author assists her by responding gently to her admiration, and at the same time taking pleasure from the erotically charged atmosphere. He assists her indeed by accepting his role in a literary situation. As a producer of literature he gains the satisfaction of participating in *acting out* a scene motivated by works of his métier. While the young woman is elated by her discursively constructed but nonetheless keenly felt desire — the man delights in the effect of the male created discursivity of which Mária is a prisoner. Seregély, the writer and poet, is here a connoisseur. He is outside that cage formed by beautiful words in which Mária is captivated.

The next chapter consists of Mária's diary entries from her trip abroad. She follows the route the "famous author" took before her a few months earlier, and she is longing for his physical nearness. Again it is the literary discourse which inspires her desire. As she is standing one night at the balcony of her hotel room in Interlaken, delighting in the gushing of the Aar, she expresses her longing inspired by a work of literature: "I would want to stand here with him in an embrace until dawn, like Isolde in front of the tent on board ship" (337).⁹ And only through the imagined identification with the romantic construct of Isolde can she conceive of (hetero)sexuality as lived experience: "Yes ... and with Him nothing would be repulsive, and he could do it in a way that I would not even notice what may be strange and grotesque" (337).¹⁰

Mária's involvement with other men is channelled within established discursive parameters. She makes friends with a teacher colleague, Apostol, with

9 "Szeretnék itt állni vele egy ölekezésben hajnalig, mint Izolda a hajósátor előtt" (337).

10 "... és aztán Övele bizonyl semmim sem undorító, ő úgy tudná, hogy észre se venném azt, ami benne idegen lehet és groteszk" (337).

whom she shares a deep love for literature. They read poetry together, recent works by young (male) authors, and enjoy their mutual critical appreciation of poetry. It is during one of their evenings spent at Mária's room reading poems to each other that Mária notices the young man's desire for her. She does not like it. And when another man who visits her now and then and lightens the boredom of uneventful country town life by his sprightly critical attitude, tries to kiss her, she slaps his face. It takes him some time to realize that her response is not part of the expected social game.

Sexuality as physical experience is frightening to Mária. She knows little about it until she consults a medical book, and what she finds there fills her with disgust. For her also the likely immediate consequences for a woman would overshadow any lighthearted attempt to free herself of the social demands on her "innocence."¹¹ When Apostol finally asks Mária to marry him, she refuses by telling him that she had been the lover of the "famous author." Obviously, fear and desire make her invent the story. Her fear is a reaction to the external demand made upon her to commit herself to marriage; the desire is for the acting out of a cherished romantic vision. The quote of the passage explicating this is crucial because it is an example of sexuality remaining textuality and it is highlighted by the protagonist's later reflection upon it.

"Well, Sándor, I could not be anybody else's wife. I have been his."

"Mária! But ... what do you mean?"

"Two years ago, at summer ... we went together to Switzerland."

"Oh!"

"No, this was not an ugly or common thing ... it was the festival of my life. At least I have got something lasting until my death — I became his, whom I loved. We walked together in the garden of Schönbrunn at an evening of hundred colours and under a statue — the feet of a white-marble sculpture-girl — he read his ballads to me. And flamingoes walked by with high, pink-coloured necks, and golden dust floated among the multi-coloured trees. We dined together at a beautifully set little table in the hotel, decorated by the waiters to delight us with flowers. In Dresden we cruised on the Elbe, we walked the whole day in sunshine and laughed, and towards noon he suddenly drew me into the museum. 'Look at that! It is a picture of Cranach!' I still can see the feverishly red colours. Groups of priests behind bluish columns.... That is how we wanted it, interminably — but in Berlin there came a blessed dizziness, we felt exhausted — sadness pervaded us, everything felt weighty. But then the mountains came; mute, green feathered giants, distant snow — white waters played music and in Interlaken we watched together the night at the balcony of the chalet, the Aar surged down below, stars were hiding away behind the shoulders of the mountains and the slopes moved closer ... oh, it was beautiful.

11 It may be interesting to note in this context that many *fin-de-siècle* "New Woman" novels and short stories written by women authors in English and German such as Sarah Grand or George Egerton construct at times sexuality as undesirable and unpleasant for women due to men's lack of sensitivity and careless taking possession of women as sex objects.

Uniquely beautiful! And everything became symbolic of my love and for what had happened! He could have taken my life. Then I got to know evil, horror, breaking to pieces, and I had to come back. That is what you will find when you look into my eyes. Sándor." (375-76)¹²

Mária later feels ashamed of the "nervous ecstasy of lying," and wonders why she had done it. She contemplates the possibility of being mad, wicked, or ill, and searches for an explanation of her invention which must have cruelly affected the man who wants to marry her. And then she suddenly realizes that she was acting out the part of a fictional woman in one of Seregély's novels. Except that the heroine of that novel indeed had a love affair, so that her blunder was "real," and "the hero marries her despite it or rather because of it" (377).¹³ For Mária then follows the painful recognition that she had been simulating "a written figure, literature!"

While the narrator creates for Mária (and her former college friends) the awareness — even if only momentary — of having been appropriated by a literary discourse to the detriment of encountering the social practices of her life on their terms, there is an added dimension within the narration offered to a critical reader. It is the exaggeratedly imitative nature of the romantic literary discourse, in which Mária performs her act of defiance. The kitschiness of her vivid monologue about her assumedly consummated love affair with the "famous author" reveals the contradictions contained in the heroine's fantasy confession. Her fear of sexuality has been overcome by her textually lived out desire. But the socially valuable virginity of the unmarried woman which is sacrificed textually to deal with her panic of having to confront sexuality if accepting the marriage proposal — is becoming from this point on within the narrative the

12 "Hát én, Sándor, senki másnak nem lehetnék a felesége. Az övé voltam. 'Mária! De ... hogy érte?' 'Most két éve, nyáron ... együtt utaztunk Svájcban.' 'Ó!' 'Nem, ez nem volt csúnya, vagy közönséges dolog ... az életem ünnepe volt. Van valamilyen legalább a halálig — mégis azé voltam, akit szerettem. A schönbrunni kertben jártunk együtt egy százzsinű estén és egy szobor alatt — egy féhérmárvány szoborleány lábainál olvasta nekem a balladákat. És flamingók sétáltak magas, rózsaszín nyakkal és aranypor szállt a tarka fák között. Együtt vacsoráztunk szépen terített kis asztalnál a hotelben és a pincérek virággal díszítették kedvezésből. Dezdában az Elbén hajóközútkunk, egész nap a napfényen jártunk és nevetünk és délfelé hirtelen betért velem a múzeumba. 'Nézd meg ezt! Cranach egy képe!' Most is látom a lázpiros színeket, papok csoportját kékes oszlopok között.... Így akarunk mindvégig — de Berlinben jött valami szent szédület, éreztük, hogy belefáradtunk — szomorúság fogott el, minden ránknehezült. De jöttek a hegyek; zöldtollas óriások, messze hó — fehér vizek muzsikáltak és Interlakenben együtt lestük az éjszakát a chalet erkélyén, az Aar tájékozott alattunk, csillagok bujtak meg a hegyek válla mögött és összehajoltak a lejtők ... ó, nagyon szép volt. Egyetlen szép! És minden szimbóluma volt annak, hogy szerettem és az is, ami történt! Az életemet is akarhatta volna. Aztán megismertem a rosszat is, a borzalmat, az ösztetőséget, és vissza kellett jönnöm. Így kell a szemembe néznie, Sándor" (375-76).

13 "de a hős azért feleségül veszi mégis, sőt annál inkább" (377).

cause for anxiety: "If somebody knew the truth, they would simply ... laugh about her!"¹⁴ The narrative explores further possible consequences for Mária's difficulties which then lead eventually to her suicide.

My reading of the function of discourses in the construction of subjectivity offers an understanding of Kafka's text and this makes a comparison to Richardson's *Pilgrimage* meaningful.¹⁵ In the first chapter of Kafka's novel the significance of the romantic literary discourse for the heroine and her room-mates in college is thematised. In the conclusive discussion among the graduated young teachers, they realize the necessity of giving up this crucial determinant in conducting their emotional affairs — if they are to survive the social practices awaiting them. Mária is *not* present at this discussion. Her absence can be understood in retrospect as defiance of an awareness the others share. In other words: she is not willing/able to admit to the struggle of competing and contradictory discourses informing her subjectivity. She submits instead to one particular discourse which in its historical specificity is un-timely. The romantic literary discourse gains for Mária universal meaning, and is not recognized as being the discursive construct of not only former centuries but also representing the interest of a specific class and gender, and Mária belongs to neither. The incongruity between her social reality and the textual one into which she escapes from the former — is revealed as *textual lie* in the passage cited above. As Mária constructs her fantasy she is using merely clichés. The critically aware reader is made to experience displeasure by being submitted to this series of clichés. The displeasure draws attention, indeed, to the textual constructedness of its source: the passage is exposed as contrasting on the one hand with the predominantly realist narration, and on the other with the socio-historical specificity of its models, e.g., Tristan and Isolde. What is being exposed then is a doubly unauthentic speaking: not only is the central female figure trying to situate herself into a discourse as subject where she must fail since the construction of femininity in the literary romantic discourse allows her only the position of object. But when she attempts to *speak* the language of that discourse — the "falseness," that is, the impossibility of her claim to occupy the position of subject of discourse becomes evident. The contextual "lie" appears as a textual one.

The literary discourse — including the Bible¹⁶ — contains/reflects at any

historical time a number of other discourses: social, political, religious etc. It is operative in constructing modes of subjectivities for its readers. Its potential power is based upon its offer of identification with its fictional realities. Michel de Certeau elaborates on the changed function of *writing* in Western culture since the Bible and suggests that while belief in God's word prevailed, people established their identity by deciphering the "statements" of the "First Speaker":

When the speaker's identity was certain ("God speaks in the world"), attention was directed toward the deciphering of his statements, the "mysteries" of the world. But when this certitude is disturbed along with the political and religious institutions that guaranteed it, the questioning is directed toward the possibility of finding substitutes for the unique speaker: who is going to speak? and to whom? The disappearance of the First Speaker creates the problem of communication, that is, of a language that has to be *made* and not just *heard and understood*. (138)

For Certeau the writing process itself creates the subject. This subject who lost — according to de Certeau — his position as individual assigned to him, and this void "drives the subject to make himself the master of a space and to set himself up as a producer of writing" (138). Certeau's subject is male. Generically so. It is exactly this male subject with its generic claims which creates the literary discourse Kafka's heroine submits to. She is not able to write in the way Certeau means it: to *make* language. Her letters and diary entries are written in the language of the male master subjects. She is spoken by them instead of speaking for herself. This is one of the crucial differences to Richardson's heroine who eventually learns to speak herself in a language she *makes*, that is, Richardson construes for her. Such a mastering of language/thought is shown to have as precondition a critical attitude towards the "man made world," its discursive and practical implications/realities.

Richardson's central female character and narrator, Miriam, critiques the Bible and language relatively early on in her "pilgrimage":

All that has been said and known in the world is in *language*, in words; all we know of Christ is in Jewish words; all the dogmas of religion are words; the meaning of words change with people's thoughts. Then no one *knows* anything for certain. Everything depends upon the way a thing is put, and that is a question of some particular civilization. Culture comes through literature, which is a half truth. People who are not cultured are

14 "Ha valaki tudná az igazságot, egyszerűen csak ... nevetne őrajta!" (377).

15 My comparison of aspects in Kafka's and Richardson's writing has been inspired by Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek's articles (1993; 1994).

16 In both books, Kafka's *Mária évei* and Richardson's *Pilgrimage*, there is a very definite feminist critique as to the *male* authorship of the Bible and its ramifications for women. One of the former college inmates, Vica, who eventually becomes a writer, and therefore potentially able to forge herself actively a subject position (through authorship becoming a

subject) says: "How much the order of the world reveals that even god is male! — The Bible, the Koran, all holy scriptures are full with lies of misogyny" ("Mennyire megálszik a világ rendjén, hogy a jóisten is férfi! A nőmegvetés hazugságaival tele van a biblia, a korán, minden szent könyv" (386). And in *Pilgrimage* Miriam says: "But this old chap was describing, at awful length, without knowing it, the secret of his own surface misery, the fact that he had never got beyond the angry, jealous, selfish, male God of the patriarchate" (3 328).

isolated in barbaric darkness. The Greeks were cultured; but they are barbarians ... why? Whether you agree or not, language is the only way of expressing anything and it dims everything. So the Bible is not true; it is a culture. Religion is wrong in making word-dogmas out of it. Christ was something. But Christianity which calls him divine and so on, is false. It clings to words which get more and more wrong. (*The Tunnel* 138)

It is exactly the narrator/protagonist's ability to question and critique the written word which gradually will lead her to search for different and more gender-appropriate ways of discursivity. This gender-appropriateness does not supersede the heroine's ethnic and class prejudices. In fact her negative attitude towards the alien Jewishness and her feeling of class-displacement¹⁷ in the earlier novels draw attention to the ethical and political contradictions inherent in a white, English, middle class budding feminist's understanding of the world. Because these contradictions and inconsistencies are not hidden and not minimized, a present day feminist reader may discover the complexity of Western male bourgeois discourses into which men and women are interpolated.

Miriam, the narrator/protagonist of *Pilgrimage*, is understood by the "collaborative reader"¹⁸ as trying to come to terms with the diverse discourses she is situated in. It is this growing awareness of being positioned socially and culturally which brings Miriam to question the validity of these discourses for herself and gradually attempt to extend or deny their especially gendered implications. Jean Radford summarizes Miriam's "pilgrimage" succinctly:

In the early novel-chapters of *Pilgrimage*, the quest is a search for knowledge, revelation for nothing less than "truth" and like Bunyan's pilgrim she sets out on her voyage of discovery book in hand. She assumes that in some text or other she will find a key to the secrets of the self and universe; the text is supposed to know what she, Miriam, wants (to know). ... Miriam has been using the text as a "mirror," looking into it to discover the truth about herself and the world. Here (in the quote on the Bible) she looks again, and what she recognises is not an image of self or a reflection of the world, but *the mirror and its frame*: "language" and "words." Having looked *through* the words in her search for the beyond, she now begins to look *at* the words, the medium itself. Realising for the first time here that there may be no truth, no reality which is not framed in the discourse

17 As Radford puts it: "Miriam Henderson looks at class divisions 'with the eyes of a stranger': with hatred and longing at the forms of class life she has left, with shame and anxiety at the shifts and deprivations of the lower middle-class world she has joined" (21).

18 Radford uses the term in referring to Barthes and Richardson: "The 'text' Barthes claims, is that kind of writing which does not allow its reader to consume it, but asks for the practical collaboration of the reader. ... Without the 'practical collaboration' and skills of the reader, the 'text' remains inert. In Barthes words: The reduction of reading to a consumption is clearly responsible for the 'boredom' experienced by many in the face of the modern ('unreadable') text, the avant-garde film or painting: to be bored means that one cannot produce the text, open it out, *set it going*" (4).

of "some particular civilisation," her quest shifts from an absolute to a relative one and she becomes a modern pilgrim. The recognition of the materiality of language brings about an epistemological shift. (13)

Miriam becomes a writer. Her desire to take hold of life — means giving it shape in language. This process is *written* into the narrative of the thirteen volumes of *Pilgrimage*, it is the narrative itself, the non-linear encounter with and dissection of all the discourses Miriam as narrator acknowledges. Because, as Radford says, there is "no narrator voice telling the reader what to admire or deplore" (14), there is only the alternation between "she" and "I," both representing stages in Miriam's consciousness, and a shift from the third to the first person can occur within the same passage of the text. In the last volumes of *Pilgrimage* the first person narration becomes the dominant one, symbolizing the discursive assertiveness of the speaking "I," her *making* of language, her appropriation of a gendered discourse.

The *literary discourse* has a different function in *Pilgrimage* for the heroine than it has in *Mária évei*. When I attempt a comparison between Kafka's novel and Richardson's novel sequence, I have to bear in mind that the former deals with about seven years in its protagonist's life, and the other with thirty. But I am looking at the construction of the heroines' attitude toward literature and its significance. The crucial difference is that Mária absorbs a certain kind of literature uncritically, and becomes *appropriated* by it, as I have tried to argue above. Whereas Miriam learns to read critically by becoming aware of ideologies operating within literary discourses which tend to situate her as a gendered being into a fixed position. Jean Radford writes: "If most of what Miriam reads in the years between 1891 and 1912 disagrees with her, this is chiefly because she discovers the problems of reading as a woman" (9). Therefore she cannot agree with one of her intellectual mentors who tells her that Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* is a "most masterly study of a certain type of woman" (*Deadlock* 61). Instead, as Radford interprets it with insight:

Miriam as a reader now appears to know that the *Anna Karenina* she reads will be different from the one that Shatov reads or that Tolstoy wrote. Tolstoy has become a "scriptor" in Barthes' sense, the originator of the text but not of its meaning. She is free to construct her own reading of Tolstoy's narrative, since as she argues, it is "the story of a woman told by a man with a man's ideas about people. (11)

But Miriam's awareness concerning her reading literature goes a step further. She discovers that she could occupy a man's position when reading. Most texts are constructed that way, namely to fix the reader into the acceptance of a masculinist view of the world. Radford argues that Miriam

begins to read as a woman, not because she is repeating an identity or experience that is given (natural) but by constructing a role in which *she is reading as a woman*. That role is constructed in relation to her identity as a woman, but that too is a construct, and one which is made only in relation to the construction of 'man' at a given period. (12)

There is a link, I believe, between Miriam's gradual understanding that literary discourses as well as scientific, religious, philosophical, political, or social discourses and practices are constructs which have to allow for change. Her critical attitude and her need to find out *with* and *against* all the discourses and practices she becomes aware of, what life is about, makes her not only *write* but also remain unfixed in her sexual desire and love. Without separating the spiritual from the sensual in desire, she relates to men and women, and without apology. There is no attempt in Richardson's narrative, as far as I am aware, to *explain* either her heroine's hetero- or homosexual desire or her disclaim of the romantic notion of love's immortality. It is the narration's effect, which — according to Certeau — does not limit itself telling about a movement, but makes it: "One understands it, if one enters into this movement oneself" (81). My understanding then of Miriam's many encounters of intensity and relevance, whether with men or women, is, that they all are part of her quest for life's meaning and herself. Within the narrated thirty years many changes take place, signified equally by a diversity of relationships (not only erotic ones) and books (which cover a vast range from romantic English novels through Emerson, Darwin and Fabian socialism to Bunyan and Fox), and there is no closure only a new beginning for Miriam, *the writer*. Kafka's Mária is merely longing to be able to *write* but she remains only *acting out* what others wrote. Mária's very early wish to become an actress comes true, although in different ways from what she imagined. She is acting instead of living. Miriam's very early wish to "write a book" comes also true, although the novel-sequence is about her living leading up to her writing.

Death as closure for Kafka's novel is appropriate. The self-alienation of the protagonist is enhanced by a gendered discursive and sexual fixity. Richardson's open-ended novel-sequence makes the textual and sexual movements of the heroine plausible.

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