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THE HUNGARIAN RECEPTION OF FELIX AUSTRIA
BY SOFIA ANDRUKHOVYCH

Felix Austria, the novel by Sofia Andrukhovych, the winner of the 2016 Visegrad Eastern Partnership Literary Award, was translated into German, Polish, Czech, and Hungarian. Thus, we can study the reception of the book in Hungarian milieu and create the material for comparison of readers' reception in individual countries. Hungarian reviewers of the novel have emphasized familiar traits of the world portrayed: of the idyllic and terrifying atmosphere of small towns in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. The book made Hungarians recognise their common cultural heritage with Western Ukraine. It is also interesting to revisit, in the Ukrainian novel, the golden age so familiar to Hungarians from literature and history. In spite of this, the commentators do not consider the novel nostalgic, as is illustrated by the title of one of the reviews: *We Believe Calmness before the Storm to be the Blissful Peacetime*.¹

On the other hand, reviewers compared the novel to the best traditions of the Hungarian psychological novels. They highlight the two contrasting female characters and their fatal interdependence – almost lesbian close relation. As Katalin Gyürky put it in one of the most influential Hungarian weeklies,² men in their environment try “to burst and replace it with healthy eroticism”. The reviews are appreciative; one blogger notes the book reminds of the Chekhov plays³ and

¹ Grozdits, H., A vihar előtti csendről hisszük, hogy boldog békeidő, *Typotex Kiadó*, 21. 3. 2017. [online: <http://www.typotex.hu/review/8915/3016/a_vihar_elotti_csendrol_hisszuk_hogy_boldog_bekeido>, cit. 2018-06-20].

² Gyürky, K., Félreértett végakarát, *Élet és Irodalom*, 10. 11. 2017. [online: <<http://www.es.hu/cikk/2017-11-10/gyurky-katalin/felreertett-vegakarata.html>>, cit. 2018-06-20].

³ Nemere, Szofija Andruhovics: Felix Austria (Kritikák), *Olvasóterem.com*, 25. 7. 2017. [online: <<http://olvasoterem.com/blog/2017/07/25/szofija-andruhovics-felix-austria/>>, cit. 2018-06-22]

calls it “a nice and sad book”; the blogger of Katherine’s Bookstore⁴ ranked it eighth on the list of their top books in 2017.

The phenomenon identified as spatial turn has taken place in Hungarian literary history as well. In her monograph *The Poetics of Space – Space for Poetics* (*A tér poétikája – a poétika tere*) Klára Ágnes Papp examined literary representations of small towns in the late 19th and early 20th century. Characteristically, at the time, the towns had not at all been portrayed in novels in favourable light. Papp argues that literary characters perceived the towns as quite unbearable and worthless environment, as opposed to metropolises. Therefore, in works such as *Madame Bovary* by Gustave Flaubert, it was the peripheries that appeared as a counter-myth to metropolitan lifestyle. Contemporary individual characters experienced there feelings of isolation and depression. It is due in part to this experience that the *topos* of small towns also became a representative of modern lifestyle and attitudes.

We would not automatically reckon how miserable provincial life is in comparison with that of the metropolitan *flâneurs* when we, having experienced the historical events of the 20th century, look back at the depiction of these towns and their residents. Instead, we tend to subconsciously look for values in their world that have been lost by now. The rich and prosperous cultural, religious and linguistic world of the bygone Stanisławów and the pre-war civilisation of the last decades of the Austro-Hungarian Empire would undoubtedly be among such values. Nevertheless, we must not indulge in nostalgia, since the title *Felix Austria* not only emphasizes all this, but also ironically undercuts it at the same time. Thus, the novel cannot be regarded as an organic part of the cult of West Ukrainian Galicia. All the more so, because we get to observe this world from the perspective of Ukrainian maid Stephanie. By growing up together with Adela, a daughter of local physician, she gets clear insight into higher social milieus. Yet she still retains her down-to-earth perspective and principles. By doing so, she constantly exposes the illusions and mentality of provincial community life.

These characters do not at all feel that they have got stuck in the periphery. What would be the centre for them anyways: Vienna? No, it is Stanisławów. For them, the latter is not only a bustling place, but also one where everything that they consider necessary is readily available. At the same time, in quite a few of the melancholic parts of the novel, we may sense imminent disaster. Andrukhovych does not only tune in to the Monarchy’s myth, but also plays with the literary codes that made it great in Central Europe during the last decades of the 20th century to be then re-interpreted in the independent Ukraine. According to

⁴ Két nő a Monarchia peremén – Szofija Andruhovics: Felix Austria, *Katherine’s Bookstore*, 13. 7. 2017. [online: <<http://katherines-bookstore.blogspot.com/search?q=felix+austria>>, cit. 2018-06-22].

Anna Zagórska, interpretation possibilities of the novel expand, if we also take into consideration key texts such as *Homo Poeticus* by Danilo Kiš and *The Troubles of Central Europe: Anecdotes and History* by Josef Kroutvor.

However, what Andrukhovych seems to be really concerned about is her prime theme: female identity. The storyline is narrated by Stephania in first person singular. She maintains a special symbiotic relationship with her lady, Adela. Even though she can see everything as an omniscient narrator, she still seems to be an outsider. Their relationship hardly fits any social pattern. Instead of relative inferiority and superiority, it is characterized by interdependence, and mutual defencelessness and vulnerability.

This may vaguely resemble of Gombrowicz's *A Kind of Testament*, where the author portrays the intricate games between a young master and peasant children. The difference between the two works lies in the perspective. *Testament* emphasizes the young master's point of view, reflecting how he cannot come to terms with his own system of cultural codes, while Andrukhovych focuses on the maid's perspective and position. Adela cannot even get dressed without Stephania's assistance, who, in turn, is unable to exist without her lady. Hence, she must remain part and parcel of Adela's life. Stephania thus accompanies her even on her honeymoon in Budapest and Vienna.

Stephania attempts to explain this interdependence by saying: "We are neither friends nor sisters" but she cannot find the right words to describe their relationship properly. Since she cannot define her position within the family, she struggles with severe self-assessment disorder and suffers from monomania. She only accepts her own perspective. It seems as if everything had been decided at the very beginning when Stephanie misinterpreted her foster-father's will. His last words were not meant to ask Stephanie to serve Adela in perpetuity, but to encourage her to live her own life. This tragedy seems to serve as a unique frame for the entire story.

The novel enjoyed major international success. Still, it seems to have been better received in countries that used to be part of the former Monarchy. It is quite remarkable that the translator changed the original title (*Der Papierjunge*, 2016) when the novel was published in Austria. Apparently, because there are no such nostalgic feelings towards the Monarchy in Austria as are in the neighbouring countries which, during the Soviet occupation re-assessed this chapter of their history. By all appearances, the myth is more vivid on the peripheries. Hopefully, screen adaptation of the book will also come out soon. Hence, even more people will have a chance to become acquainted with both the story and the former Stanisławów.