

György Kalmár

Breaking the Glass Ceiling: Nóra Séllei's Feminist Interventions

It is an honour and a pleasure to introduce this volume, dedicated to the career of Professor Nóra Séllei upon her well-earned retirement. It is an honour because of the distinguished career that we look back on, and it is a pleasure, as in the past thirty years she has not only been an inspiring mentor and a reliable colleague, but also a true friend to me. Her contributions to Hungarian academia have been nothing short of transformative, expanding the scope and methodology of literary scholarship in Hungary through feminist and gender-critical perspectives, enabling access to international theory, shaping curricula, and, as a charismatic and empowering teacher, nurturing generations of students. Her oeuvre is extensive, inspiring in its size as much as in its academic and historical importance: at the time of writing it consists of more than 160 items, among them 12 books, 47 journal articles, and 44 book chapters. It would be impossible to properly introduce this immense body of work in its complexity, depth, and breadth here. Nevertheless, I do wish to highlight some of the most important achievements of her work, her role in the history of the Hungarian academia and Hungarian feminism, from her early scholarly interventions to her role as an institutional pioneer, established scholar, and public intellectual, offering a portrait of a complex thinker whose legacy will no doubt remain foundational for Hungarian feminist literary studies.

Séllei Nóra's career began with her English-language book *Katherine Mansfield and Virginia Woolf: A Personal and Professional Bond* (1996), developed from her PhD thesis, an English-language study that examined the creative and personal connections between two central figures of modernism. By analysing their exchanges and the ways they influenced one another's artistic trajectories, she brought fresh insight to the comparative study of these writers, a feat which brought her international recognition. This was also one of the earliest contributions from a Hungarian scholar to global Woolf and Mansfield criticism, written at a time well before online libraries, digital archives, search engines, and AI-enhanced research tools made such work much quicker and easier. This was a time when Eastern European scholars had to travel abroad on a regular basis, so as to get close to precious library collections. Funding was scarce, and many of us economised on food and clothes so as to save money for books. We hunted for key books in the second-hand bookshops of Hull, Birmingham, Oxford and London, and we usually travelled everywhere with our cherished, hand-written reader's journals full of notes and citations. When at home, we relied on interlibrary loans that often took weeks to arrive, stood for long hours by copy machines, and kept hundreds of photocopied and hand-highlighted texts in our homes. These conditions of the pre-digital infrastructure of academic research (which may be easy to romanticise in retrospect, though they were often demanding and exhausting) further highlight the importance of Séllei's achievement in these early

years of her career. Her research at the University of Hull and the British Library provided the perfect academic background for building bridges between Hungarian and Anglophone academia, a project she was to continue in various ways throughout her distinguished career.

In the late 90s and early 2000s, this kind of cultural and intellectual mediation often took the form of Hungarian publications, books and articles in which academics who had access to libraries in Western Europe or America started transferring knowledge and employing the critical methods practiced there in their Hungarian publications. This may also explain why Séllei's next two books played such an important role, not only in terms of the academic study of literature, but also for the canonisation of women's literature and the introduction of feminist analytical frameworks in Hungary. In her next monograph, *Lánnyá válik, s írni kezd: 19. századi angol írónők* ('She Becomes a Girl and Starts to Write: 19th-Century English Women Writers', 1999), Séllei turned to the longer nineteenth century. This is a wide-ranging, 455-page study of nineteenth-century English women writers that maps the emergence of female authorship within the constraints and opportunities of the period's literary marketplace. The book examines how gendered expectations, publishing conditions, and critical reception shaped women's choices of genre and voice, and it traces the strategies by which they negotiated authority, visibility, and professionalism. By reconstructing this cultural ecology, Séllei not only expands the Hungarian canon of reference for Victorian and post-Victorian studies, but also lays the historical groundwork for her later inquiries into women's self-representation and modernist experimentation. It would be difficult to overestimate the significance of this volume for the visibility of gender-sensitive criticism in this country, which single-handedly transformed the Hungarian reception of canonical women writers including Jane Austen, George Eliot and the Brontë sisters. If it has continued to be inspirational for generations of Hungarian scholars, running to a second edition, an extraordinary thing in our profession, this is so because of its unique achievement: in *Lánnyá válik*, Séllei devised a mode of reading that succeeds in being 'political' as well as theoretical – in the kinds of questions it poses – without giving up the drive for close reading, displaying a rare sensitivity for textual detail and literary nuance, combining the insights of cultural critique and feminist theory with the best Anglo-Saxon traditions of close reading.

In her next major work, *Tükröm, tükröm ...: Írónők önéletrajzai a 20. század elejéről* ('Mirror, Mirror... Autobiographies of Women Writers from the Early 20th Century,' 2001), Séllei returned to the first half of the 20th century, focusing on autobiographical writing by modernist women writers. This study revealed how female authors employed life-writing as a means of negotiating identity and authorship in a cultural environment that still limited their voices. Through her analysis of key texts by Virginia Woolf, Gertrude Stein, Jan Rhys, and Mary McCarthy, Séllei highlighted autobiography as a space of experimentation and self-assertion, while also showing the constraints imposed by social expectations. It was in this monograph that Séllei first embarked on the extensive analysis of a Hungarian text: her chapter on modernist writer Margit Kaffka's autobiography, which

remains a seminal interpretation of this work, was the first in what was to be a series of analytical essays on Hungarian women writers including Alaine Polcz.

Together, these early monographs established key themes that would remain central to her scholarship: the exploration of women's voices, the importance of historical and cultural contexts, the use of feminist theory as a critical perspective, and a continuing focus on the textual qualities of the works she analyses, whether literary or cinematic (she was to produce a number of insightful analyses of films, including Neo-Victorian adaptations like *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and *Morpho Eugenia*, as well as Hungarian movies like Ágnes Kocsis's *Friss levegő* (*Fresh Air*). Though in these volumes Séllei did not position herself explicitly as a feminist literary historian, she systematically focused on women writers and introduced feminist critical methods. The essential characteristics of her academic writing were also already present in these early books: professional preparedness and rigor, a complex and nuanced style of argumentation, keen sensitivity to textual and cultural problems, persistent questioning of entrenched hierarchies and biased cultural assumptions, sustained attention to the ethical and political implications of speaking/reading/writing from the position of the cultural other, and an occasional touch of irony when unveiling the short-sightedness of existing dogmas.

It is not by accident that these two books in Hungarian received so many scholarly references and became key texts for university classes on British literature or women's writings in Hungary: they transferred knowledge, offered original results, and popularised approaches little known and rarely practiced in the Hungarian academia. Understanding the importance of this kind of cultural and academic mediation is crucial for seeing the relevance of Séllei's Hungarian works in the 90s and early 2000s. For much of the twentieth century, Eastern European academia operated under limited contact with international networks. Critical movements that shaped Western universities, such as structuralism, poststructuralism, feminist theory, or cultural studies, often reached Hungary only belatedly, if at all. This reinforced the sense of intellectual belatedness that had been haunting Hungarian intellectual life since early modernity: conversations unfolding in the great intellectual centres of "the West" seemed distant, and Hungarian scholars lacked the resources and institutional support to engage with them directly. As a result, most academics in the humanities were out of sync with some of the global intellectual trends, especially Anglophone ones. This, of course, stems from the traditionally German (and, to a certain extent) French orientation of Hungarian intellectual and academic life, but, in the 1980s and 90s, several other factors contributed to the aversion towards more politicised critical tendencies. Thus, gender studies and feminist criticism, just like other theoretical and critical trends informed by the cultural turn, took much longer to reach Hungary than, say, hermeneutics or structuralism, and even when they did, they often encountered hostility. Yet, after the fall of communism, when universities redesigned curricula, and scholarly associations encouraged international exchanges, there was a strong demand for translations and contextualisations of recent theoretical developments. In this environment, cultural mediators played a decisive role. It is in this sense that Nóra Séllei's work

was crucial: instead of simply introducing these ideas, she adapted them to the Hungarian context, offering usable alternatives to existing approaches both in terms of theoretical frameworks and interpretative strategies.

Scholars such as Nóra Séllei were essential in this period: they acted as conduits, introducing new discourses, translating key works, and contextualizing them for local audiences. Such mediation was not simply about knowledge transfer; it was about opening a space where Hungarian academia could join global conversations and re-situate itself within a shared intellectual landscape after a long period of cultural seclusion. Through her books, articles, edited volumes, and translations, Séllei introduced feminist literary criticism and gender theory into Hungarian scholarship. Equally importantly, she embedded these frameworks within Hungary's own intellectual traditions, ensuring that her students and colleagues could not only absorb international theory, but also contribute to it. In this way, she helped bring Hungarian literary studies into closer alignment with the intellectual currents of the wider world.

As Séllei also notes in her 2007 book *Mért félünk a farkastól*, introducing feminist criticism into Hungarian academia in this regard was made especially complex and challenging by the fact that, by the time feminist criticism began to gain a foothold in Hungary in the 1990s, Western feminist thought had already entered a new, more plural and fragmented phase. While Hungarian scholars and students were only just becoming acquainted with the foundational texts of second-wave feminism (works that focused on the recovery of women writers, the critique of patriarchy, and the politics of representation), feminism in the West had already shifted toward third-wave, poststructuralist and postfeminist orientations. These newer approaches emphasised diversity, intersectionality, poststructuralist critiques of identity, and advocated a politics of difference, often questioning the very categories that earlier feminism had used to mobilise women as a collective subject. This temporal disjunction posed significant challenges: Learning and teaching about the “classical” phases of feminist theory, Hungarian scholars were confronted with the more complex, self-critical, and globally diverse landscape of third-wave feminism(s). This created a twofold task of reception: to integrate the canon of second-wave feminist texts in order to build a common foundation, and simultaneously to engage with the ongoing debates of third-wave feminism(s) so as not to remain permanently behind. Mediators like Nóra Séllei often had to employ complex strategies in order to sustain this difficult balance, presenting feminism's earlier achievements and critical perspectives in classrooms, interviews, advisory boards and translation projects, while also introducing its newer trajectories.

It is in this historical context that one can fully appreciate the importance of Nóra Séllei's commitment to editorial and translational projects that functioned as bridges between Hungary and the broader international academic world. Her edited volume *A feminizmus találkozásai a (poszt)modernnel* ('Encounters between Feminism and (Post)modernism,' 2006) was groundbreaking in that it introduced Hungarian readers to key essays by figures

such as Toril Moi, Susan Bordo, or Elizabeth Grosz. These translations were more than simple transfers of text: they were carefully framed, annotated, and contextualised, allowing readers unfamiliar with the cultural debates of the West to grasp their relevance in a Hungarian setting. In doing so, Séllei provided a critical toolkit for non-English-speaking students and scholars eager to join international discussions but lacking direct access to them. The Hungarian translation and publication of these texts – as well as the bibliography of feminist and gender-sensitive criticism in Hungary which concludes the volume – was instrumental in reinventing feminist criticism in Hungary by pushing it beyond the earlier focus on canon revision and representation toward complex theoretical questions about subjectivity, embodiment, discourse, and power. This anthology helped ensure that feminism did not become static, uninspiring or “passé,” but remained responsive to broader intellectual movements in philosophy, psychoanalysis, and cultural theory.

The task of overcoming prejudices against feminist criticism and demonstrating its productivity is even clearer in Séllei's book of the following year, *Mért félünk a farkastól? Feminista irodalomszemlélet itt és most* ('Why Are We Afraid of the Wolf? Feminist Criticism Here and Now,' 2007). Against the backdrop of Hungarian academia's resurgent conservatism, persistent provinciality, and wilful ignorance of certain international trends, this was a timely and much-needed intervention, offering a comprehensive introduction to the main theoretical questions, social issues and critical trends present in Anglophone feminist criticism while also addressing the situation (or plight) of feminist criticism in Hungary. As Séllei observed in *Mért félünk a farkastól*, “the fossilised division of sciences at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, which still reflects a nineteenth-century outlook, is not even capable of ‘noticing’ these new disciplines, let alone engaging in fruitful dialogue with them” (34). The Hungarian case studies in the later chapters of the book, including the memorable analysis of the reception of British and Hungarian chick lit, effectively indicated some ways in which more awareness of gender-conscious attitudes could be beneficial both culturally and intellectually. This volume is also an important point in Séllei's oeuvre in the sense that it is perhaps in this book that she first positioned herself consciously and openly as a public intellectual and social critic at odds with the patriarchal cultural context of Hungarian society and academia. Mid-career academics at that time, as today, often found themselves kept back by an old guard and old boys' network whose members occupied prominent positions at universities, editorial boards, or the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, and acted as self-appointed gatekeepers, while unwilling or unable to engage with many of the intellectual tendencies that inform contemporary international academic inquiry.

Introducing gender-sensitive critical approaches into Hungary's academic and cultural environment was an uphill struggle, and it usually took courageous and resilient people like Nóra Séllei to make a difference. Though the collapse of state socialism opened the doors for new intellectual currents, the local cultural milieu was marked by ambivalence. While there was enthusiasm for Western theory in some circles, particularly among young

and mid-career scholars, there was also widespread suspicion toward feminism and theory in general, which were often caricatured as a foreign ideological import or a passing intellectual fashion. Literature departments had long been dominated by philological traditions and historical-literary paradigms that valued textual positivism over theory-driven analysis, and these established frameworks proved resistant to approaches that foregrounded gender, subjectivity, and power.

This institutional context of the Hungarian academia after 1989 posed serious challenges to the acceptance of feminist and gender-based approaches. Universities and research centres were often dominated by tightly knit, tribe-like intellectual circles, in which advancement depended less on the quality of academic output than on personal loyalty to gatekeeping patriarchs and alignment with entrenched hierarchies. These circles frequently resisted perspectives that questioned traditional authority structures, particularly those that challenged patriarchal assumptions about authorship, culture, and scholarship itself. Within this environment, feminist scholarship could easily be dismissed as peripheral, foreign-inspired, ideological, or disruptive to institutional stability. The patriarchal underpinnings of cultural institutions also meant that women scholars had to negotiate not only intellectual scepticism but also systemic bias in career progression and recognition. Figures like Nóra Séllei confronted these barriers with persistence, creating spaces (through conferences, publications, and teaching) where feminist criticism could gain legitimacy despite institutional inertia. Her ability to build networks and foster collaboration offered a crucial alternative to the insular structures that otherwise governed Hungarian cultural and academic life.

This cultural and institutional context is crucial if one is to appreciate all that Séllei and others accomplished in the two decades after the 1989 regime change. Her next published volume, *A nő mint szubjektum, a női szubjektum* ('Woman as Subject, the Subject as Woman,' 2007) was an edited volume based on the lectures given by various feminist scholars at a conference of the same title, organised by Nóra Séllei, in the spring of 2006. The conference and the edited volume were logical follow-ups to the previous book: in this volume, she brought together Hungarian scholars in dialogue with international frameworks, creating an intellectual space in which local research could enter into conversation with global feminist theory, facilitating a two-way exchange rather than a one-sided reception. One of her notable projects was the editing of the book series *Artemisz Könyvek* ('Artemis Books') from 1999 through the early years of the new millennium, bringing key texts like Madonna Kolbenschlag's *Kiss Sleeping Beauty Goodbye*, Naomi Wolf's *The Beauty Myth* or Elisabeth Badinter's *The Myth of Motherhood*, let alone Séllei's own translation of Woolf's autobiographical writings (and it is here that one should mention her inspired translation of Woolf's book-length essay *Three Guineas*, published in Hungarian in 2006). Through these projects, Séllei demonstrated that conference-organisation, translation and editing are not merely auxiliary scholarly activities but essential forms of cultural mediation. An important part of her bridge-building was her work on the Hungarian reception of major British or Anglophone women writers like Austen, Mansfield and

Woolf. By curating, contextualizing, and transmitting critical ideas, she was among those trailblazers who enabled the Hungarian academia to catch up with (and ultimately contribute to) the major theoretical currents of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Today's young and mid-career Hungarian academics, for whom it is natural to attend international conferences and publish their work in established international journals, enjoy the results of the efforts of scholars like Séllei, who not only popularised feminist critical approaches, but also promoted international academic standards in Hungary. She established professional contacts with leading Hungarian academics working in gender studies, sociologists and social scientists as well as critics. She generously promoted similar initiatives and unselfishly helped young scholars, often reviewing their works in various venues, while she also reviewed contemporary Hungarian women writers like Krisztina Tóth, Zsófia Bán, Kriszta Bódis, Agáta Gordon, and Noémi Kiss.

One of the most significant achievements of Nóra Séllei's career was her successful defense of her DSc thesis at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (MTA) – this is the highest academic rank recognised in Hungary. Her dissertation, *Kulturális (ön)reflexivitás Virginia Woolf harmincas évekbeli regényeiben* examined Virginia Woolf's writings of the 1930s. In this study, which was later also published as a monograph (*A másik Woolf: Kulturális (ön)reflexivitás Virginia Woolf harmincas évekbeli szövegeiben* [‘The Other Woolf: Cultural (Self-)Reflexivity in the 1930s texts of Virginia Woolf’, 2012]), she repositioned works that had often been overlooked, and demonstrated the intellectual depth and the engagement with cultural self-awareness of texts that used to be relegated to the margins of the kind of mainstream Woolf-scholarship that celebrated Woolf mainly as a modernist author. In the conservative and patriarchal environment of Hungarian academic life, this accomplishment carried weight far beyond the personal milestone it represented. While the MTA was regarded as the pinnacle of scholarly authority in the country, it had few women in it, its committees were often dominated by conservative voices sceptical of theoretical innovation and dismissive of feminist approaches, and most of its members never really engaged with the ‘new’ approaches represented by scholars like Nóra Séllei. No wonder that the conspicuous scarcity of women in the MTA, at least in literary studies, was coupled with an equally telling scarcity of scholars with international visibility. For a woman scholar to hand in a dissertation explicitly informed by feminist literary criticism was thus a courageous act subverting existing discursive and power positions in the academia. The dissertation was also a conscious intervention in existing Woolf criticism, calling attention to the importance of Woolf's later writings, shifting focus points, and offering alternative modes of reading to the ones previously published by some of the powerful men sitting in the committee. The doctorate thus brought not only recognition of Séllei's intellectual excellence but also a symbolic victory for feminist scholarship in Hungary. As Séllei has noted in her article on women professors, for a woman in Hungary to become the doctor of the MTA and being appointed as a full professor at her university amounted to breaking through the glass ceiling (“Professzornők” 271). Successes like hers also showed that gender-sensitive approaches, rather than marginal curiosities, are serious contributions to academic knowledge. In this sense, Séllei's

achievements helped open the door for future generations of scholars, many of them women, who would go on to pursue research in feminist and cultural studies with greater confidence that their work, too, could achieve institutional legitimacy.¹

Though Nóra Séllei's Hungarian language publications have played a particularly important role in the Hungarian reception of feminist perspectives and women's literature, she continued to publish articles, books, edited volumes and book chapters in English throughout her career. Her English-language publications chart a remarkable intellectual trajectory, beginning in the 1990s with detailed analyses of canonical women modernists and extending into the 2000s and 2010s with wide-ranging reflections on feminist theory, women's autobiography, and cultural mediation – while not abandoning the textual analysis of canonical figures, from Mary Wollstonecraft, Anne Brontë, Elizabeth Gaskell and Sarah Perkins Gilman through Woolf's short fiction, Sylvia Plath, Rosamond Lehmann and Doris Lessing to contemporary writers like A. S. Byatt, Helen Fielding, Janice Galloway and Victoria Mackenzie. Her early articles, published in journals such as the *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies* and *British and American Studies*, focused on figures like Virginia Woolf, Katherine Mansfield, George Eliot, and Jean Rhys, interrogating questions of gendered authorship, narrative form, and the politics of memory. From the 2000s onward, her scholarship increasingly engaged with feminist literary theory and cultural criticism, situating Hungarian debates within transnational contexts. She wrote on the reception of feminist theory in Hungary, on the complexities of women's autobiography in the 20th century, and on the challenges of teaching gender studies in a conservative academic environment. Her English-language articles and book chapters from this period often carried a double purpose: to communicate Hungarian perspectives to the international scholarly community and to bring global feminist discourses into dialogue with local traditions. In later work, she examined the intersections of women's writing, trauma, and identity formation, and reflected on the role of feminist criticism in reshaping canons and curricula. Taken together, her English-language oeuvre exemplifies her role as a cultural mediator, bridging disciplinary, linguistic, and national divides, and ensuring that Hungarian feminist scholarship became part of international conversations.

Nóra Séllei's work in the 21st century reveals the understanding that bringing about change in the complex systems of Hungarian academic and cultural life was only achievable through the cumulative effect of a variety of related activities. This is why her work extends far beyond her scholarly publications. She published translations of key theoretical texts, translated literary texts by Virginia Woolf and Jean Rhys, established the Gender Studies Centre at Debrecen University, wrote pieces for the general public for educational purposes, introduced new university courses, organised conferences, built

¹ For more details about the state of feminism and gender studies in contemporary Hungary, see the interview with Ágnes Pető reprinted in the present volume.

international networks, wrote book reviews about new publications significant for women's studies, and gave interviews.

At the University of Debrecen, Séllei has been a pioneer in curriculum development, designing some of the earliest courses in Hungary dedicated to feminist and gender studies. Her teaching covered a wide range of topics, from women's writing and subjectivity to gender and film, and her carefully developed course materials provided students with resources that were otherwise unavailable. As head of the Gender Studies Centre and as twice-elected president of the Hungarian Society for the Study of English, she worked to create institutional frameworks that could support feminist research and teaching on a long-term basis. As a board member of ESSE, the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, and the University of Debrecen, as well as a guarantor at the University of Ružomberok in Slovakia, she introduced new standards, formal procedures, and norms of transparency and gender equality, thereby raising the overall level of professionalism.

Nóra Séllei's interviews, public lectures and educational texts written for general readership also played an important role in bringing feminist perspectives into Hungarian cultural discourse. She often stressed that feminism is not simply a political movement but a theoretical framework and a methodological toolkit through which literature and culture can be reread in more nuanced and inclusive ways. In these conversations, she highlighted the slow and sometimes resistant reception of feminist works in Hungary, reflecting on how reviews and cultural responses to anthologies of women's writing revealed both growing interest and lingering prejudice. She also underlined the importance of conducting feminist dialogue in Hungarian rather than relying solely on English-language discourse, insisting that only by rooting feminist theory in the local idiom could it become culturally resonant. At the same time, she challenged nationalist and patriarchal assumptions embedded in Hungarian cultural narratives, pointing out how concepts of national identity are too often imagined in masculine terms. Through her role as co-editor of a feminist book series, she further advocated for moving from the narrower framework of "Women's Studies" toward a broader "Gender Studies," which would also address masculinity and gender structures as a whole. Perhaps such wider cultural interventions have gained even more significance since the 2010s: in the wake of Hungary's illiberal turn – when "gender" became a vilified term in state media, some gender studies programmes were banned, and LGBTQ rights were systematically curtailed – the work of people like Nóra Séllei assumed a distinctly political and cultural urgency.² In this context, her persistent engagement with feminist issues, and her use of gender-sensitive critical perspectives represent a form of intellectual dissent, safeguarding the freedom of critical inquiry and the pursuit of equality in an increasingly hostile and authoritarian environment. Thus, taken together, these interviews, public lectures, and educational texts carry significant cultural weight: they not only explain feminist ideas to a wider audience but also model how feminist theory can reshape both academic practice and public debates in

² See Svégel Fanni's interview with Pető Andrea in the present volume.

post-communist Hungary (see Virginás Andrea's interview with her, originally published in *Korunk*, reprinted in the present volume).

This volume celebrates Nóra Séllei's achievements and pays tribute to the profound ways in which she has shaped Hungary's intellectual life. At the same time, it represents a modest contribution to the ongoing feminist intervention in academic and cultural discourse. True to her vision, I have sought to honour her life's work by assembling a collection with a distinctly feminist academic focus, inviting colleagues whose writings engage with and extend the intervention of feminism and gender studies in Eastern Europe. I imagine that Nóra, if consulted, would have opted for such a volume, one more centred on thematic coherence than on personal recollection, one that actively carries forward the legacy of feminist thought. The essays gathered here reflect the breadth of feminism's influence in contemporary scholarship, spanning literature, theory, and cultural critique. Together, they affirm that feminism's legacy will endure, continuing to inspire new forms of academic engagement and broader cultural transformation.

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