

EMMA RITOÓK'S NOVEL "SPIRITUAL ADVENTURERS" [A SZELLEM KALANDORAI]

AN INTELLECTUAL DOCUMENT OF THE FIN DE SIÈCLE

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Emma Ritoók's novel "Spiritual Adventurers" (*A szellem kalandorai*, 1921) is a chronicle of fin-de-siècle intellectual history. It was inspired by the author's participation in the "Sunday Circle" (*Vasárnapi Kör*) and its members and friends: Ervin Donáth's character was most likely modelled after Ernst Bloch. Of all the ideologies represented in the novel, those associated with the women's movement and the conflicts that the "new woman" had to face seem to be the most actual for today's readers. Ritoók's novel represents the "new woman" as torn between multiple and often conflicting discourses regarding female creativity and sexuality and the world around her as not ready yet for her to enter the stage. Whereas the novel ends with a destructive act, the shooting of Ervin, which can be read as a metaphor for the collapse of the old world order for which the revolution offered no real alternative, the "new woman" portrayed through Héva Bártoldy's character becomes the carrier of a message of hope for future generations to further what the previous ones had painstakingly initiated.

Keywords: fin de siècle, Sunday Circle, new woman, narcissism, race, genius, intersubjectivity

The name of Dr. Emma Ritoók (1868–1945) may sound fairly unfamiliar to today's readers even though she was one of the finest Hungarian intellectual women and a recognized writer of her time. She studied at several European universities (Budapest, Leipzig, Berlin, Paris) and obtained a doctorate in philosophy, which was something still rather exceptional for a woman of her generation. She was a close friend of many outstanding thinkers of the *fin de siècle*, among them Ernst Bloch. Ritoók was a prolific author; she wrote essays, short stories, and articles for Hungarian newspapers and magazines as well as several novels; she translated from French and Norwegian (e.g., Knut Hamsun), and worked as a chief librarian in Budapest (cf. Bozzay 798). She was also one of the founding members, along with György Lukács and Béla Balázs, of the philosophical society "The Sunday Circle" (*Vasárnapi Kör*), founded in 1915. Her novel "On a Straight Path Alone" (*Egyenes úton egyedül*, 1905) won the literary prize of the magazine "New Times" (*Új idők*) (cf. Fábri 183). Even though her writings were given appropriate con-

Hungarian Studies 16/2 (2002)

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sideration by literary critics in the first half of the 20th century (cf. Bánhegyi, Boross, Pintér), she has been virtually forgotten by post-war literary history – a fate she shares with many other women writers of her generation. Only in the past decade can we see some evidence of a renewed interest in her work; in 1993, in a series edited by György Bodnár, her novel “Spiritual Adventurers” (*A szellem kalandorai*), originally published in 1921, was republished.

“Spiritual Adventurers” presents a fascinating reading for anyone interested in the intellectual history of the *fin de siècle*. It is a true document not only of the author’s broad education and knowledge in matters of philosophy – Plato, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Bergson – are mentioned among several other philosophers and thinkers – but also a real chronicle of the turn of the century’s intellectual and social currents. There is virtually no topic left uncovered in the numerous discussions in which Ritoók’s characters engage: they range from social and political issues (revolution and anti-semitism), to Taoism, theosophy, the Bhagavad Gita, music (Wagner, Gustav Mahler), literature. This is what, despite its apparent formal and compositional weaknesses, for which the novel has been repeatedly criticized, makes this text still worth reading today. Jób Bánhegyi reproaches Ritoók’s novel its lack of coherence and finds the “many injected reflections tiresome and often uninteresting” (Bánhegyi 71). More recently, Anna Fábri has argued along similar lines: she comments that the novel loses itself in “descriptive, interpretative details and biased generalizations” (Fábri 184). However, István Boross is more positive; he acknowledges that the structure of the novel is complex, but that Ritoók is excellent in portraying her characters (Boross 29). Jenő Pintér also recognizes that she is a “deep observer and careful in her psychological depictions” (Pintér 128), an opinion diametrically opposed by Bodnár and Karádi/Vezér. The latter consider the novel “tendentious;” they both criticise Ritoók’s “characters from a roman-a-clef” (Karádi/Vezér 15) who “lack any inner laws” (Bodnár 514). Karádi/Vezér even argue that the theoretical discussions go in the direction of a caricature.

For the longest time, the novel was thought to represent a distorted image of the avant-garde literary magazine, *Nyugat* (“West”) where Ritoók also occasionally published. However, we know today that the author was inspired by the “Sunday Circle” and its members and friends: the model for Ervin Donáth’s character was most likely Ernst Bloch (cf. Karádi/Vezér 15). However, Karádi/Vezér’s argument that Bloch’s portrayal in Donáth as a weakling could be justified by Ritoók’s hurt femininity following the breakup with Bloch is from a literary point of view simply ridiculous; it only reaffirms stereotypes in judging women writers based on their personal, preferably love life rather than the quality of the text. Why not consider then Béla Balázs’s reaction to the first draft of the novel which Ritoók presented to him in 1916 an expression of hurt vanity rather than valid literary criticism? Along with his devastating characterization of the novel’s draft

as "talentless" and "bad," which has neither a vision nor an atmosphere (qt. in Karádi/Vezér 75), Balázs acknowledges that he was disappointed by Ritoók's disillusionment with their generation. I believe that the latter point offers a good ground from which to understand why Ritoók may have portrayed the "Sunday Circle," in spite of belonging to it, in a deeply critical if not caricatured way. The author's ideological position, as pointed out by Karádi/Vezér, could certainly have been one point of divergence between Ritoók and the other members of the circle: whereas most members of the "Sunday Circle" were strongly inspired by György Lukács and espoused a leftist and internationalist way of thinking, Ritoók's ideological position can be labelled neo-conservative with a nationalist and anti-semitic touch (cf. Karádi/Vezér 14). Unlike other members of the circle who went into exile following the collapse of the Hungarian Soviet Republic (Tanácsköztársaság), Ritoók remained in Hungary and active within the new regime. One could assume that her ideological distance from the "Sunday Circle" would have even increased in this period and led to her reworking the novel's final draft into a critical portrayal of a generation of thinkers of whose ideas she fundamentally disapproved.

For this critical portrayal of the turn of the century's ideological contents and intellectual and moral crisis, Ritoók's novel can be called a Hungarian *Zeitroman*. Although it may not be competing with other great novels in its genre about the last days of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, such as Robert Musil's *The Man Without Qualities* (*Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*), Ritoók's principal male character, Ervin Donáth, has a lot in common with Musil's Ulrich: he wants to become a "great man" in the domain of philosophy and uses the love (and the money) of several women to help him reach that goal. However, what makes Ritoók's novel different from Musil's or other *Zeitromans* of the same period is that it is told mainly from a woman's perspective, through Héva Bártoldy, the principal female character in the novel. Therefore it not only implies a criticism of the male character's selfish and self-centred behaviour and lifestyle but also offers an insight into some important issues the *fin-de-siècle* women's movement was concerned with: the "new woman's" struggles to find her way toward an expression of her creativity and her sexuality. It is this aspect of "The Intellectual Adventurers" that makes it unique in its genre.

From its very beginning, the novel testifies to Ritoók's familiarity with contemporary intellectual matters such as Freud's theories: the shaping of Ervin's character reveals a narcissistic disorder which can be traced in his rejection by both parents during childhood and their lack of understanding for the boy's rich fantasy. Ervin therefore evolves into a selfish dreamer who is unable to love another human being and whose only way of relating to others is by seeking their undivided attention and exploiting their affection. His only childhood friend becomes Gyula Wéber, a servile soul who admires Ervin and follows him into his

dreamland unconditionally. Already in this relationship, Ritoók brings in the topic of class and race which plays a very significant part in the novel: Gyula Wéber comes from a poorer, lower middle-class Jewish background, which becomes the reason for Ervin's initial rejection. The love-hatred aspect of this friendship keeps re-emerging later throughout the novel and becomes evident in the scene where little Gyula, after realizing that he has been rejected by his friend, picks up a stone and wants to throw it at Ervin. However, he does not have the strength to hurt his tormenter at this point: it will take him two additional attempts to go that far, much later in their adulthood: one where he attacks Ervin with a knife and the final one, when he shoots him at the end of the novel. The topic of class struggle clearly shows through the outcome of this "friendship:" whereas during their childhood, Gyula is still a typical representative of the subservient attitude of the lower classes, at the end of the novel he has acquired enough courage to take revenge on Ervin for his betrayal during the revolution.

The topic of race gains its full momentum when Ervin, after his mother's death, finds out about his own Jewish heritage as he discovers that his biological father was not the stern man whom he never loved and always feared but his mother's extra-marital affair, a Jewish musician. Thus his initial rejection of Gyula turns out to be a self-rejection, much at the model of Otto Weininger, that self-proclaimed Viennese genius who, in his ultimate rejection of his own Jewishness spilled his venom against Jews and women in his (in)famous book *Sex and Character* (*Geschlecht und Character*, 1903), whereupon he committed suicide. Ervin, given his narcissism, does not commit suicide but places this chore of self-destruction into the hand of his rejected alter-ego, Gyula.

The topic of the genius was a very popular one around the *fin-de-siècle*. In Weininger's theory, the genius "is simply itself universal comprehension [...] he is everything... he constructs from everything his ego that holds the universe [...] the universe and the ego have become one in him" (Le Rider 56). In Weininger's theory is reflected Georg Simmel's (whose student Ritoók was) "principle of modernity" which consists in the "law of the individual:" "The subject, reaching the peak of individuality, becomes endowed with the universal" (Le Rider 56). Based on these theories, Ervin Donáth seems rather a parody of a genius than a real one; for all he does, for years, is walking around with his conviction about his higher calling and acting like a big thinker whose grandiose work is still to be written – which is so attractive particularly to women whose careful listening and admiring glitter in the eye his narcissistic self enjoys as a reflection of his power. The only time Ervin appears to feel an emotion that reaches beyond his ego and to sense a deeper connection with another human being is during the brief period he spends in WWI. But even then, the reader is left wondering whether it is genuine connection or only one that is inspired by his utter loneliness and fear of dying. However, the war does have a profound influence on Ervin's intellectual develop-

ment: after he is dismissed from military service, he moves to a small town in Germany where he finally writes his first book about which he had fantasized so much. During the process of writing, Ervin does, for moments, seem to be connected to the universe. Yet Ritoók relates his huge success, which he enjoys following his return to Hungary, more to the young audience's need and thirst for a new rapture beyond the horrors of the war than to Ervin's originality:

Everything was love, life in its eternal renewal and miracle, everything from chaos to God, brotherhood from the stones to thought – how could the community not have absorbed thirstily his philosophical credo, and the youth which had seen the terrible battles of hatred and the bloody wounds of separation the word promising new redemption. (Ritoók 2, 125)¹

The only person who sees through Ervin's false prophethood is his once-upon-a-time friend Héva Bártoldy whom he had badly hurt in the past whereupon she broke up every contact with him. Her visit to his lecture is the first time she sees him after years and it will also be the last time before history separates them forever.

Héva Bártoldy's name is mentioned for the first time during one of those soirees where the young men are absorbed in their philosophical discussions and the women in their company "occasionally [...] threw in a comment into the debate" (Ritoók 1, 79). Knowing about the participation of several women in the "Sunday Circle" – most of them wives of the male members –, this may be read as a rather ironic remark. Héva, at this point already a published writer, seems to be the only woman whom the young philosophers respect for her intellectual abilities. Still, while recognizing her creative potential, Ervin paints the image this generation still carried about women with all the essentialist concepts involved: "But it must be a woman who would write about the aesthetics of tragedy – continued Ervin –, with that purest receptivity for thoughts which can only be the quality of a woman who is endowed with the creative gift of understanding everything" (78).² A woman was still expected to be the receptacle and unconditional listener for everything a man's mind would conceptualize. And she was also considered to be susceptible for tragedy, all of which we see illustrated through the stories of the female characters.

The picture of the "ideal woman" is given in the character of Judit Gábel, the wife of a sculptor, for whom Ervin will develop one of those fancies he has for several women throughout his young life. She is all but an intellectual woman, quite the opposite of Héva. She is not in the least interested in philosophy but gives a meaning to her life by supporting her husband's work: "For now, she made herself her husband's talent; but unlike the women of old times whose every third sentence consisted of: my husband said, my husband did..., she organized

her personality in a way so that everybody would bow in front of the man who had chosen that woman”(82).³ In Judit’s character, Ritoók offers a parody of the “new woman:” she is only seemingly emancipated with the sole purpose in life not to obey her husband blindly any more but rather to melt into the work of that man and shine through his work – instead of realizing her own. Two other female characters stand as her opposite: Vera Martin and Héva.

Vera is the girlfriend and later common-law wife of László Szilveszter, a friend of Ervin’s and also Héva’s. Before she gives birth to their daughter and has to struggle to make ends meet while she tries to continue with her studies, she is full of intellectual ambition for herself and dreams of a “room of her own” (Virginia Woolf) where she could fully unfold her own creative potential: “A room that is completely – but completely mine... my books, my work – and to be alone! Not that I don’t like my colleagues in the residence, but – to be independent, dispose freely of my time, freely... freely” (86).⁴ Instead, Vera’s life will become completely absorbed by her relationship with László and by motherhood which will eventually lead to her tragic death during her second pregnancy thus turning her, in a very traditional vein, into a “martyr of woman’s destiny” (153).⁵

Héva, on the other hand, lives an independent life and is an accomplished writer: “She lived of her small fortune, travelled and studied; she knew her intellectual value, she was capable of working and her faith in her independent creative abilities was strong and sure” (127).⁶ Héva was married once, but her husband had to be institutionalized and eventually died in the institution; the marriage was never consummated. This is the secret Héva eventually shares with one friend of hers who later betrays it. Interestingly, Héva’s relatives fault *her* for her husband’s madness, a situation comparable to a similar case from the life of Ritoók’s contemporary, Rosa Mayreder, great Austrian feminist, artist, and prolific writer. During most of her marriage, Mayreder’s husband was mentally ill and in therapy with Dr. Freud in Vienna who at some point during the therapy faulted Rosa and her intellectual superiority for the husband’s mental condition. I am using this real-life case as an example of how frightening the intellectual woman still was, despite – or maybe because of – the strength of the women’s movement at the time, both in Austria and in Hungary.

Ritoók puts these interiorized doubts and the double standard about women’s authorship into Héva’s words after she has completed the text of her drama:

Often I believe that a woman cannot be a writer; music, colour, drawing is much more suited for her. Perhaps a man also feels how shameless the uttering of thoughts and feelings through words is in front of indifferent, unknown, foreign people. In a woman it conflicts with her womanly essence... every writing is poetry and woman’s poetry, the music of her body and soul can only belong to one man. (220)⁷

German literary scholar Sigrud Weigel argues in much less essentialist terms and sees the fear of the intellectual woman deeply rooted in Western culture. She argues about the difficulty of linking womanhood and authorship and follows up on one of Walter Benjamin's "Denkbilder" which applies the metaphor of birthing to the genesis of a literary text and art in general, as the creation of art implies the myth of creation connotated to a male, omnipotent God. Consequently, throughout history, artistic production has necessarily led to the exclusion of women as authors since the concept of the authoress "would jeopardize or thwart the whole concept of men's self-creation as an overcoming of their own origins, which is but an expression of the fear of female omnipotence and the desire for its embankment respectively" (Weigel 238, transl. A.S.) On the other hand, women authors had themselves interiorized this "anxiety of authorship" as defined by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar. Since women traditionally were not considered the creators of culture and literature but rather an "artifact within culture" (Gubar 77), the courage of taking up the male-defined pen created especially for 19th and early 20th century women writers a situation where they not only had to cope with society's prejudice against the intellectual woman as something unfeminine, not to say monstrous, but also overcome these barriers against their own writing within themselves, as Héva's case illustrates.

Ervin is attracted to Héva's personality and they become very close friends. Ervin is taken not only by Héva's ability to listen but also by her intellectual responsiveness to his ideas, something he had not encountered in any other woman before. However, when he wants their friendship to become an intimate relationship, Héva steps back. Ervin's masculinity and narcissism are hurt by this rejection which he cannot comprehend. All he knows is that he wants the woman in Héva to confirm his male desire: "Not that he hasn't had until now that average-male feeling to possess the woman in her, but now he wanted that she want it too. He wanted to receive from the woman that fearful, expecting, perhaps unconscious invitation which cannot be expressed in words and which, all at once, gives the man complete security" (Ritoók 1, 162).⁸ Yet he is completely unaware of Héva's emotional needs and incapable of responding to her sensitivity. Héva senses Ervin's selfishness and does not get the feeling of oneness when he once kisses her. She attributes his insistence on making their love physical to their racial difference – Héva being the offspring of an old Hungarian family – thereby corroborating the old prejudice, very much alive at the turn of the century, regarding the greater sensuality in Jews.⁹ I would also see here an ambiguity on Héva's part regarding sexuality, which can be explained by a split between the internalized moral double standard – whereby women but not men had to stay "pure" until they married – and the wish to be a modern woman, a "new woman" who freely disposes of her sexual desires, regardless whether they may be expressed within marriage or outside of it.

However, this is by far not the only reason for Héva's lack of responsiveness to Ervin's sexual advances. She feels in him the same forceful sexual desire that had estranged her from her half-mad husband during her wedding night: "But when she saw Ervin's face, which had completely changed from desire and forceful self-control, that pale forehead and those burning eyes with that male look waiting and wanting – she knew that it wasn't possible; as if she had already seen this expression which was unbearably foreign, forceful and self-assured"(228).¹⁰ What Héva, despite their love and friendship, feels repulsed by is the raw, animal desire in the man who wants to possess the female. Héva yearns for a different kind of sexuality, one that would be based not on an subject-object relationship but on a relationship between two subjects where none of them has to play the role of the conqueror nor the conquered, a relationship based on *intersubjectivity* as defined by Jessica Benjamin: "the intersubjective mode, where two subjects meet, where both woman and man can be subject, may point to a locus for woman's independent desire, a relationship to desire that is not represented by the phallus" (Benjamin 93). Héva feels that this "heightened awareness of both self and other, the reciprocal recognition that intensifies the self's freedom of expression" (*ibidem*) would not be realized in an erotic encounter with Ervin who is interested in the conquest of the woman in her, a conquest which he could add as yet another chapter to his philosophy of Eros.

This conflict between the "new woman's" new values about sexuality and a still traditional view about gender relations both on the part of contemporary men as well as within the women themselves was expressed by several other women writers in turn-of-the-century Hungary and other countries as well.¹¹ Thus, in her novel, Ritoók has thematized, along with the problematic of women's authorship, one of the major difficulties *fin-de-siècle* women writers saw that women of their generation who aspired to a life as complete and fulfilled human beings had to face. Ritoók felt that everything in the "new woman's" life was of an equal importance and not replaceable by anything else, as it is expressed by Vera in one of her conversations with Héva: "you know that nothing can replace anything; love is everything, the child is everything, knowledge, work is everything, Paris is everything – and neither can replace the other" (128).¹² She thereby formulates the same ideal for the "new woman" that another great contemporary Hungarian writer, Margit Kaffka expressed in an article published in 1913:

She must be able to leave – grow beyond, stand tall – and place her point of balance and value system in herself, not only in the appreciation by men. She must learn solidarity but not only with men and not only against other women. And above all, she must try to become herself more and dig out and unveil those great, buried values which have been lying dormant for a long time, which she owes the world and without which this world would certainly be poorer and uglier.

More possibilities – toward professions, work, love, creation, fight, action and learning! (Kafka, no page)¹³

Héva does find the strength to leave after Ervin badly insults her apparent lack of femininity, and, after a deep personal crisis and a suicide attempt, finds the way back to her own writing and leaves the country during the communist terror for Switzerland where she settles with her cousin.

Of all the ideologies¹⁴ represented in the novel, those associated with the women's movement and the conflicts that the "new woman" had to face seem to be the most actual and interesting for today's readers. Ritoók's novel represents the "new woman" as torn between multiple and often conflicting discourses regarding female creativity and sexuality and the world around her as not ready yet for her to enter the stage. Whereas the novel ends with a destructive act (Gyula shooting Ervin), which can be read as a metaphor for the collapse of the old world order for which the revolution offered no real alternative, the "new woman" portrayed through Héva's character becomes the carrier of a message of hope for future generations to further what the previous ones had painstakingly initiated.

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Notes

1. "Szeretet, örök megújuló élet és csoda volt minden, a káosztól Istenig, testvériség a kövektől a gondolatig; – hogye vette volna fel szomjasan a közösség filozófiai vallását, az új megváltást ígérő ígét az a fiatalság, mely a gyűlöletnek rettenetes harcait, a különválás véres sebeit látta."
2. "De a tragikumnak ezt az esztétikáját asszonyoknak kellene megírni, – folytatta Ervin, – azzal a legtisztább elfogadó-képességgel a gondolatok iránt, mely csak asszony tulajdonsága lehet, akinek az az alkotó tehetsége, hogy minden megért."
3. "Egyelőre saját magát tette a férj tehetségévé; de nem úgy, mint a régi asszonyok, akiknek minden harmadik szava: az uram mondta, az uram tette... hanem a saját egyéniségét állította úgy be, hogy mindenki meghajoljon az előtt a férfi előtt, aki ezt az asszonyt választotta."
4. "Egy szoba, ami egészen – de egészen az enyém... A magam könyvei, a magam munkája – és egyedül lenni! Nem mintha nem szeretném a kollégiumi társaimat, de – függetlennek lenni, az időmmel szabadon rendelkezni, szabadon... szabadon."
5. "mártírja az asszonyi létnek."
6. "kis vagyónából élt, utazott és tanult; tudta, hogy szellemileg mit ért, tudott dolgozni és önálló alkotó képességében való hite erős és biztos volt."
7. "Sőt sokszor azt hiszem, asszonyoknak nem is szabadna írónak lenni; a zene, a szín, a rajz inkább neki való. Talán a férfi is érezheti mint ember, hogy milyen szemérmertlenség a gondolatatainak és érzelmeinek szavakban kimondása közönyös, ismeretlen, idegen emberek előtt. Asszonynál egyenesen asszonyi mivoltába ütközik... minden írás líra és az asszony lírája, teste és a lelke muzsikája csak egy emberé lehet."
8. "Nem mintha eddig is meg nem lett volna benne az az átlag-férfi-ézés, hogy a magáévá szerette volna tenni az asszonyt benne, de most azt kívánta volna, hogy a másik akarja, hogy az asszonytól kapja azt a felős, várakozó, talán öntudatlan, szóval ki nem fejezhető felhívást, ami egyszerre teljes biztonságot ad a férfinak."
9. See for instance Miklós Konrád, "A pesti zsidó nő mint allegória: A zsidó nő ábrázolása a századforduló magyar irodalmában." *Café Babel* 24 (1997.2): 81–92.
10. "De mikor az Ervin arcán meglátta, mely a vágytól és erőszakos önmagán uralkodástól teljesen megváltozott, azt az elsápadt homlokot és égő szemet, a várakozó, akaró férfi-tekintetet – egyszerre tudta, hogy nem lehet; mintha már látta volna valamikor ezt az elviselhetetlenül idegen, erőszakos, magabiztos kifejezést."
11. Another example in Hungarian literature would be Renée Erdős and her novel "The Big Scream" (A nagy sikoly, published in 1923).
12. "tudod, hogy semmi sem pótol semmit; a szerelem minden, a gyermek minden, a tudás, a munka minden, Páris minden – és egyik sem lehet a másik helyett."
13. "Tudjon elmenni – túlnőni, felegyenesedni – súlypontját és értékmérőjét önmagába helyezni, nemcsak a férfi tetszésébe. Tanuljon szolidáris lenni; de nemcsak férfiakkal és nemcsak a többi nők ellen. És mindenekfelett próbáljon közeledni önmagához és kibányászni, felhozni magából azokat a nagy, eltemetett, rég pihenő teremtő értékeket, amelyekkel adós a világnak, s amelyek nélkül bizonyosan hiányosabb és csúnyább ez a világ. Több lehetőséget – pályák, munkák, szerelem, alkotás, harc, cselekvés és tanulás irányában!"
14. I am using here "ideology" in Bakhtin's terms for whom it does not necessarily carry a political meaning, but stands for the speaker's point of view on any issue.