

THE RISE OF THE HUNGARIAN DANDY: OSCAR WILDE'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE EXPERIENCE OF MODERNITY IN EARLY-TWENTIETH-CENTURY HUNGARY

Gabriella Vöö

The body of Górián, the young dandy, defies the ravages of time. His terrible exploits – ruining innocent virgins, associating with “sailors, murderers, journalists and other such democratic elements,”¹ striking old ladies dead in side streets, picking pockets, giving public speeches to propagate communism – never leave any blemish on his lotus-like face and statuesque body. All corrupting consequences of depravity and old age only affect his perfectly cut white satin waistcoat, studded with shiny mother-of-pearl buttons. With every hideous crime Górián commits, ugly creases, rents and bloody stains mar the smoothness of this once-splendid piece of clothing, the masterpiece of Snazil, his tailor. Thus is the life of Górián, spent in beauty, elegance, and ennui, heralded by the aphorisms of his mentor, Lord Para Dox (Karinthy 9-16). In a parody of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* entitled “Wilde Oszkár, a hedonista: Góri Andrej mellénye” [The Waistcoat of Góri Andrej by Oscar Wilde, the Hedonist], the writer and humourist Frigyes Karinthy retails Wilde’s novel into a veritable sartorial tragedy with the sparkling wit Wilde would have appreciated. In this concise masterpiece Karinthy serendipitously captures the dandy’s fascination with art and apparel, his aloofness, melancholia, and disdain for social conventions.

An author is fully integrated into literary culture when he is available for caricature. Karinthy’s sketch, published as the first piece of his popular collection of literary parodies *Így írtok ti* [This is How You Write] in 1912, attests that by this time Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) had been solidly integrated into the Hungarian canon of European literature. The rapidity of his rising fame is all the more striking as Wilde’s début on/in the Hungarian literary scene was only posthumous. The first critical articles on his work by the poet Géza Szilágyi and the critic and prose writer Gyula Szini were published in 1902 (Kurdi 245). The Hungarian translations of *Lady Windermere’s Fan* and *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* appeared in 1903 and 1904, respectively. Yet by 1910 most of Wilde’s major works had their first Hungarian translations, which were succeeded, within a couple of years, by new and generally even more proficient ones, and even his hostile critics acknowledged an “epidemic fashion of the Wilde cult” (Szász, “A ‘mozi’ felé” 333). Most importantly, however, his growing renown contributed to a radical change in the way the notions of ‘dandy’ and ‘dandyism’ were understood in Hungary. A new generation of artists emerged on the literary scene that, according to an evaluation made in 1937 by Gábor Tolnai, were “rough and superficial,

1 All translations from the Hungarian are mine.

like their end-of-the-century predecessors.” However, the critic adds, “their superficiality takes inspiration from European models, which alone distinguishes them from the dandy of the 1890s. Instead of repeating their fathers’ worn-out compliments, they now learn wit from the books of Oscar Wilde” (Tolnai 333). Tolnai rightly noted that the Irish writer became the initiator of a cultural paradigm shift that prompted an entire generation of intellectuals in early-twentieth-century Hungary to define themselves as urban, metropolitan, and modern.

The fact that Wilde’s reception – translations from his poetry, the staging of his plays – only occurred some years after the artist’s death is due to the belatedness of Hungarian Modernism. And yet, the *fin de siècle* in Hungary did not pass without a detectable influence of Wilde, which then continued unabated until the 1930s. My essay explores how the reception of Oscar Wilde in Hungary in the years preceding the First World War and in the interwar period contributed to a definitive change of the meaning of ‘dandy’ from insubstantial character-type of bourgeois society and salon life to ‘literary dandy.’ In Hungarian literary periodicals Wilde was regularly referred to as “dandy” or “hedonist” and was associated with George Brummell, Charles Baudelaire, Barbey D’Aurevilly, and Théophile Gautier. A steadily growing Wilde cult in this period triggered the irreversible processes of modernisation and the integration of new Western European literary and critical trends into Hungarian culture. Moreover, a novel understanding of the phenomenon of ‘dandyism’ created a cultural ambiance that acknowledged and accepted the modern notion of the self as an artefact, a carefully designed work of art. Also, in a case study of ‘dandyism,’ I wish to show that Wilde was not only an artistic inspiration and standard, but also a role model and a means of self-promotion for aspiring dandies in Hungary. In order to demonstrate all of this, I will highlight relevant moments in the process during which, in early-twentieth-century Hungary, the “novelist and playwright, London conversationalist, hedonist, convict and Paris bohemian” (Laczkó, “Oscar Wilde” 513) became common cultural property.

From the Social to the Literary Arena: Metamorphoses of the Dandy

A slim volume published in 1888 entitled *A dandy* [The Dandy] presents a figure sufficiently established in Hungarian society to be further popularised by a book, but extravagant enough to anticipate interest among the “charming lady readers” (Méry-Horváth 5) to whom it was dedicated. Written mainly to entertain, the book meant to draw the caricature of a social type² considered at once notable for his elegance, creative social skills, and artistic inclinations, but also for his superficiality. The author, Károly Méry-Horváth, poses, tongue in cheek, as a dandy himself by signing his

2 *A magyar nyelv történeti-etimológiai szótára* [The Historical and Etymological Dictionary of the Hungarian Language] traces the first occurrence of the word “dendi” [dandy] back to 1836, when it was defined as “a handsome, elegant [male] person.”

work as Cactus Mirliflor. This self-appointed expert with the botanical pseudonym³ explains that the appearance of the dandy is artfully crafted, is recognisable by the “smoothly waved hair” and “finely curled moustache” (15), the “smart tie [...], the monocle, the cufflinks and then the collar, and the gloves, and the handkerchief” (22). He finds pleasure in provocative gestures and mannerisms and displays a sort of wit that does not particularly serve any purpose and, moreover, verges on the absurd in its naiveté: “He concocts new languages, he devises, for instance, how witty, how lovely it would be to say ‘a’ instead of every ‘e’ and ‘e’ instead of every ‘a,’ no one would understand but the initiated, the ‘intime,’ the one who knows the code” (33). The dandy acts as a “dance partner, cavalier, wooer” of young women, he is the “butterfly of the salon, of soirées, tea parties and balls” (5-6), but represents only fleeting moments in the process of courting and marriage. This champion of fashion, good manners, and style raises the standing of eligible young ladies among prospective suitors. The latter are referred to as clumsy “cucumber-cavaliers” (46), but are solid in their manliness, social standing, and financial position. The ‘dandy’ is the hero of salons and cafés, a well-informed man of the world and veritable charmer who displays no particular interest in such mundane matters as work, politics, or marriage.

As so often happens, external characteristics like ‘dandyish’ clothing, gestures, and mannerisms outweighed other, more complex, aspects of the type regarding culture, sensibility, and intellectual attitude. As Endre Ady, the flamboyant, self-assertive poet and forerunner of Hungarian High Modernism, noted in 1906, there were more men of fashion in Budapest than in London or Paris. One “tiny detail,” though, was amiss: “these highly elegant gentlemen [were] rough, dull and obscure, like autumn days in London” (“Brummel” 114). Ady’s article, “Brummel és a budapesti dandyizmus” [Brummel and Budapest Dandyism] was a review of Roger Boutet de Monvel’s book *George Brummell et George IV* (1906), a biography of the quintessential English dandy of the Regency period. Residing in Paris at the time of the book’s publication, Ady was able to evaluate recent developments in Hungarian society and culture from a distance and from a perspective that immediately exposed the pathetic shortcomings of home-grown “lions.” “What strange [impersonators of] Alcibiades are these Budapest dandies,” he laments, expressing contempt for “these Budapest Brummels, these heroes of tailors’ workshops,” set characters of Hungarian “pseudo-culture” (“Brummel” 115).

This *fin-de-siècle* avatar of the dandy was not yet a distinctively urban character type, but rather displayed the social mannerisms of the landed gentry. The protracted relevance of this class in Hungarian society and culture was due to the arrested development and slow transition of the country’s economy and culture from feudalism to capitalism. Typical representatives of the landed gentry, albeit impoverished, clung to aristocratic manners and social conservatism after the failed revolution and war of in-

3 The man behind the pen-name was Károly Méray-Horváth, a versatile young man who had studied art and photography in Paris, invented a new type-setter and became, later in his life, a sociologist and political essayist.

dependence of 1848-49. However, the Compromise of 1867 and the establishment of the Austro-Hungarian Dual Monarchy ensured a stable political atmosphere and economic prosperity that helped Hungary to overcome its backwardness both economically and socially and precipitated the development of urban centres. Budapest, the new metropolis, was created in 1873 by the unification of the loosely connected cities lying on opposite banks of the Danube, Pest, Buda, and Óbuda. By massive migration from the countryside, the aspiring Hungarian metropolis became, according to Zsuzsa L. Nagy, the competitor of Vienna by the end of the first decade of the new century (36, 40). The cultural elite of the city was made up by urbanised Hungarian landowners and the bourgeoisie as well as the assimilated bourgeoisie of foreign provenance. The German, Slovakian, and German-speaking Jewish population (Dányi 147-48) was transformed into a mainly Hungarian-speaking, well-educated, cosmopolitan middle class ready to absorb the literature and culture of the West. As a result of all these major economic and social transformations, the city of Budapest had to reinvent itself as a modern regional metropolis accommodating new attitudes and codes of behaviour while establishing new scenes of social and cultural interaction such as literary clubs and cafés (Sántha 37).

Championed as an icon of change in both art and social attitude, or reviled as a decadent and even degenerate sensation-monger, the literary dandy became a permanent character in the rising metropolis. The dandy, as Jessica R. Feldman claims, “practises, and even impersonates, the fascinating acts of self-creation and presentation. He is the figure of paradox created by many societies in order to express whatever it is that the culture feels it must, but cannot, synthesize” (3-4). Hungarian society, struggling towards modernisation throughout the nineteenth century but thrown back in its efforts by the semi-colonial situation within the Habsburg Empire, rushed to embrace novelty both in culture and in social behaviour. The dandy as a role model accommodated both the aristocratism of the landed gentry and the artistic sensibilities and cultural receptiveness of the urban intelligentsia. Wilde was generally credited with refreshing and updating the code of the dandy. “The pedigree of [...] literary dandies goes far back, and they have not died out. [...] Perhaps Oscar Wilde himself was oblivious of the social relevance of the type he represented,” Géza Laczkó claims in a review article about the French symbolist writer Barbey D’Aureville (387). In his review of Ernest La Jeunesse’s novel *Le Boulevard* (1906), Gyula Szini stresses the essentially urban character of the dandy. In the novel Wilde appears thinly disguised as the dandyish character “Odin Howes,” and Szini evaluates at length the relevance of the city’s public space in the new, “apocalyptic vision” of modern culture and Wilde’s instrumentality in creating one of its persisting types (179).

In *fin-de-siècle* and early-twentieth-century Hungary several young authors like Zoltán Ambrus, Sándor Bródy, Zsigmond Justh, and Elek Gozdsdu explored the connection between art and life and embraced the genre of the *Künstlerroman*, their

novels featuring characters inspired by the Wildean artist-dandy.⁴ However, as Magda Ajtay-Horváth points out, these heroes, unlike Wilde's Dorian Gray, do not fall prey to their own false philosophy. Rather, they become the victims of a trivial and hostile environment that drags them down to the reality of petty provincialism (185). These were obvious commentaries on Hungarian conditions: rejection and oblivion, based on the reading public's lack of understanding, was frequently the lot of innovative, experimentalist artists who could only find acceptance and acclaim among their fellow-authors. Turn-of-the-century Hungarian writers most frequently associated with, and compared to, Wilde were Gyula Szini and Gyula Török, essayists and prose writers as well as regular habitués of literary cafés. Szini, the first Hungarian translator of *Salome*, was one of the first representatives of the 'dandy' in the literary circles of Budapest. An enthusiastic advocate of new trends in literature and criticism, he made his début in the 1890s in the journal *Magyar Génius* [Hungarian Genius] with essays about French Symbolism, Impressionism, and the principle of *l'art pour l'art* in literature. Szini's own chiselled, lyrical prose was impressionistic and featured isolated characters, dreamers lost in fantasy worlds, secretly suffering or longing for the imaginary realities that engulfed them. In a retrospective evaluation of Szini's work after his death, the author Gábor Thurzó points out his likeness to the famous predecessor and literary role model: "The reigning prince of the fin-de-siècle is Oscar Wilde, and Gyula Szini was such a belated dandy," whose insightful, high-quality literary gossip brought the cultural life and celebrities of Paris, "the capital of the human spirit," to Hungarian readers (241). Szini was the quintessential artist in both his work and his life, which ended, like Wilde's, in tragic oblivion and poverty. The other dandy-author, Gyula Török, was a native of Nagyvárad, a city and cultural centre in West Transylvania, often playfully referred to as the Hungarian Paris. His friend, the Modernist poet Gyula Juhász, must have had Dorian Gray in mind when he sketched out the portrait of Török, who died, prematurely, in 1918. According to Juhász, Gyula Török, in the "cigarette smoke and din" of cafés, was an "aristocratic and singularly elegant, slender figure with demonically beautiful young features: a poor, Hungarian literary dandy, the haughty, scornful, pain-ridden grandson of Hungarian gentlemen" (Juhász). As artist-dandies painfully experienced, and their peers rightly noted, at the turn of the twentieth century the Hungarian social and intellectual milieu was not yet prepared for the change, in both attitude and literary expression, that innovative authors attempted to implement.

Wilde's Name on the Banner: The Battle for the Modern

Wilde was not only a relevant literary influence and role model for Hungarian writers but a powerful symbol of the wronged artist, a victim of philistine obtuseness. Hungarian authors' admiration of, and familiarity with, Wilde was part of their rebellion

4 Sándor Bródy, *Színészvér* [Actor's Blood] (1891); *A nap lovagja* [The Cavalier of the Sun] (1902); Zoltán Ambrus, *Midás király* [King Midas] (1906); *Solus eris* (1907).

against the conservative, nationalistic trends in literary criticism that saw the historical legacy of rural Hungary as the fountainhead of national culture. The new generation of writers envisioned for themselves a social and cultural ambiance that was modern and compatible with Western European social and cultural models. The cult of beauty and wit, excess of stylishness, both in life and art, and an attitude of extreme individualism were those characteristics attributed to Wilde that were eagerly embraced by early Modernist authors in Hungary. However, in the first decade of the twentieth century, as his witticisms and paradoxes started to gain popularity, Wilde also became the target of attacks by conservative critics and authors. Details of his life, his trial, and imprisonment had a divisive effect on readers and commentators alike, and statements regarding his work verged on the extreme.

In 1907, the publication of several of Wilde's aphorisms by the political daily *Pesti Hírlap* [Courier of Pest], in a rudimentary translation from the German, prompted the critic Béla Tóth to wage an attack on the Irish author and dismiss his work as worthless humbug. This short but vitriolic commentary provided an excuse and impetus for the poet Endre Ady to attack the critic and the conservative critical establishment he was associated with. Ady was residing in Paris at the time and was familiar with, but left unnoticed, Tóth's hostile criticism of his own poetry. However, reading what he considered to be a flawed and biased review of Wilde's work, he lost his temper and in the March 12 issue of *Budapesti Napló* [Budapest Journal] he published a powerful counterargument entitled "Válasz Tóth Bélának" [An Answer to Béla Tóth]. Besides effectively arguing Wilde's greatness, Ady also exposes the backwardness of Hungarian culture and the lacking willingness, on the part of influential critics and shapers of public opinion, to notice the winds of change: "How splendid, how saintly and tattered, but how munificent are, in Hungary, those with novelty in their intentions and their souls. Out of nothing, they must concoct the Hungarian [version of] Europe. These people are no cowards, however, they huddle together in dread when they hear, at twilight, the roar of barbarous beasts in the Hungarian wasteland" (225). The barbarians, Ady explains, are those who ignore not only Wilde but all harbingers of modernity in world-view and art: Baudelaire, Verlaine, Maeterlinck, Dehmel, D'Annunzio, Shaw, Andreev, and Gorki. "'There,' they say to each other, 'how fortunate we never read. The entire world literature is nonsense, Béla Tóth says so.'" Ruthless as this remark may seem, Ady adds, he owed it to "the unjustly insulted, melancholy shadow of Oscar Wilde" (232-33).

There were among Ady's contemporaries, as he contends in the article cited above, those who "dream[t] of a new Hungary and the new Hungarian soul, of the coming of a brilliant European culture in Hungary" (234). He did not have to wait long: in 1908, the circle of Budapest literati that Ady felt akin to in intellectual orientation, if not in temperament, established the literary journal *Nyugat* [The West]. As its name signaled, the new periodical intended to overcome the cultural backwardness of Hungary by promoting Western European literary standards and became a major forum for the literary output by three generations of writers. The journal remained a central and

prestigious forum for modernist authors until its cessation in 1938. Translations and critical reflections on Wilde's work as well as on his private life and public attitudes contributed to his Hungarian reception as an iconic figure of modernity. In addition, Wilde was the most extensively translated Irish author in the first decades of the twentieth century. For the first generation of authors grouped around *Nyugat*, translating his poetry into Hungarian was not only a technical *tour de force*, part of their formative experience as poets, but also an opportunity to put their own poetic experiments into an international context. Those young authors, who would later become his major translators, Mihály Babits and Dezső Kosztolányi, were poets, prose writers, and critics who started their respective careers under the influence of aestheticism and shared an enthusiasm for Wilde's works. Although they veered away from Wilde's influence later, they remained loyal to him as translators. Babits translated almost two dozens of his poems, which were published in a separate volume, *Wilde Oszkár verseiből* [From the Poetry of Oscar Wilde], in 1922. Kosztolányi rendered into Hungarian *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, "The Ballad of Reading Gaol," and the plays *The Duchess of Padua* and *Salome*.⁵

As is often the case with artists who perceive and embody essential change in their culture, Wilde's influence quickly transcended the realm of literature and became the subject of criticism and controversy. Not only his works but also his life came under scrutiny by authors who claimed a more intimate knowledge of his career than Béla Tóth. There appeared, even in the pages of the journal *Nyugat*, famous for its progressive principles and tolerance, grumbling attacks on Wilde's notoriously provocative conduct. Zoltán Szász, for example, repeatedly expressed disdain for Wilde's dandyism, his "bizarre way of life and shocking apparel" ("Tűnj fel!" 502), his "morbid desire to attract attention, sensation- and curiosity-hunting taken to extremes" ("Wilde Oszkár" 652). Szász attributed Wilde's provocative social conduct and flamboyance to biological causes, pinning down his extravagancy and homosexuality as symptoms of a degeneracy deriving from his parents, "an alcoholic sensualist and hysterical blue-stocking playing politics." The critic blames Wilde's Irish descent, the "curse" of the Celtic race, for "an inclination to show off," as well as for "a lack of restraint, voluptuousness and frivolousness" ("Wilde Oszkár" 651). Discourses on Wilde ranged from the seriously critical to the chatty and frivolous. The definitive evaluation of Wilde the artist and the person was, however, made by those sympathetic commentators who attributed his flamboyance to the Irish national character and "the spiritual milieu that gave Swift and Sheridan to the World, and of which [Chesteron], Wilde and Shaw were born" (Földi 709).⁶ Géza Laczkó, for example, fondly claimed that "Oscar's mind is over-refined, omniscient, shifting, and suffering from a veritable

5 *Dorian Gray arcképe* [*The Picture of Dorian Gray*] (1910); "A readingi fegyház balladája" ["The Ballad of Reading Gaol"] (1926); *Pádua hercegnője* [*The Duchess of Padua*] (1922); *Salome* (1923).

6 For a discussion of Hungarian reflections on Irish literature and national character, see Vő 149-155.

nymphomania of artistic and linguistic creativity” (“Oscar Wilde” 515). Writing about Wilde’s trial, Márta Gyulai compassionately noted: “Oscar Wilde, who sought and even provoked other people’s admiration and wonder, Oscar Wilde, writer of wit, virtuoso of story-telling, gentleman, aesthete, supercilious disdainer of society, hero of salons, prodigal dandy: now he was exposed to public loathing” (52).

Life Imitates Life: A Case Study in Dandyism

A barely visible, nevertheless relevant change in views and attitudes in early-twentieth-century and interwar Hungary concerned the shifting nature of gender identity and sexuality. Many artists refused to be shocked by Wilde’s scandal and trial and expressed compassion for his ordeal. It was the Wilde advocate Kálmán Rozsnyay, an amiable dilettante rather than outstanding artist, who by his mediocre writing and titillating personal life made the type of the dandy popular in Hungary.

More than a decade after Wilde’s death, Adolf Tevan, a new but ambitious publisher in Békéscsaba, a town in Eastern Hungary, published 300 numbered copies of a booklet entitled *Jegyzetek Oscar Wilderól* [Notes about Oscar Wilde] by a certain Sydney Carton. The author meant to commemorate his “noble friend and great artist,” dedicating the book to Wilde’s son, “Vyvyan Wilde [sic]” (n. p.). “Sydney Carton,” a name with Dickensian associations, was the pseudonym of the young journalist, actor, and *artiste manqué* Kálmán Rozsnyay, born Kálmán Van der Hoske, who claimed to have been Wilde’s secretary during his last years. The “Preface,” signed by Stuart Mason, warmly recommended the work as a worthy piece advancing the reputation of Oscar Wilde (n. p.). The book, however, fell short of either novelty or reliability. We cannot even be sure whether the opening words were Stuart Mason’s or, if they were, whether he knew what he was promoting. Containing little original material, *Jegyzetek Oscar Wilderól* was a compilation of letters, journal articles, fragments of literary texts by Wilde and others, excerpts from hostile criticism of his works and Wilde’s answers to these, as well as fragments of the transcript of his trial. It must be conceded that much of the borrowed material rang new for the average Hungarian reader, and certain excerpts from Wilde’s works, such as “Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young” and “La Sainte Courtisane,” were first translations by Rozsnyay.⁷ However, the anecdotal episodes and conversations between the author and “poor Oscar” (1), as well as Rozsnyay’s claim that he was in possession of Wilde’s writing-table (Balogh), added up, most likely, to a grand hoax.

Kálmán Rozsnyay’s book, despite its obvious flaws and shortcomings, was, in essence, a well-meaning work, a benevolent gesture on the part of a peripheral participant in the literary culture of Hungary before the First World War. Rozsnyay meant to pay homage to the writer he so much admired and was determined to defend him

⁷ Rozsnyay was also the first translator of *Vera, or: The Nihilists* [*Vera: a nihilista lány*], published in 1911, by Tevan.

from the philistine disdain voiced by some Hungarian critics. For this purpose and without Ady's permission, he incorporated the full text of his previously quoted defence of Wilde against the attacks by Béla Tóth. Rozsnyay briefly expressed his hope that "Endre Ady would not mind" (109). Wilde's early biographers were probably also expected not to mind being used as sources of information, as he did not credit any of these either. Proficient in both English and French, he had probably read André Gide's *Oscar Wilde: A Study*, translated into English by Stuart Mason (1905), as well as Robert H. Sherard's *Oscar Wilde: The Story of an Unhappy Friendship* (1908). Having visited England and France between 1898 and 1901 (Gálos 114-116), Rozsnyay had most probably heard about Wilde's trial and his last years in Paris, but there is no evidence in any of Wilde's biographies that the two ever met. The anecdotal references to Wilde in his book were inventions inspired by the existing biographies: they were essentially fabulations almost endearing in their sentimental naiveté, as in the following passage:

The last time I met him was three months before his death. I invited him to dinner at the Grand Café. At the time he was in perfect health and full of wonderful wit. [...] Later, when we parted and I took my farewell, he became dejected. He told me he had a strong presentiment that he would not live for long. [...] "Somehow," he said, I feel I will not live to see the new century." He made a pause. "If I were alive when the new century kicked off, it would be more than what the English can bear." Thus did we part, not to see each other ever again. (Rozsnyay 17)

Although *Jegyzetek Oscar Wilderól* represents a notable, if notorious, moment in the reception of Wilde in Hungary, the self-fashioning of its author as the representative Hungarian dandy is just as relevant. Kálmán Rozsnyay worked steadily on designing his own public self as a literary dandy, his efforts adding up to a well-orchestrated concert in which the book on Wilde was only one of many musical phrases. His life was a series of failures, hoaxes, and scandals from which he emerged with his public image almost unscathed. He started his career as an artist, but when it turned out that he was colour-blind he became an actor. Failing again, he travelled to London, where he wrote, by correspondence, articles for various Hungarian journals. On one occasion he substituted for a British actor in J.M. Harvey's stage adaptation of Dickens's *Tale of Two Cities* (Gálos 111-114). This episode provided him with the remarkable pseudonym of "Sydney Carton." Returning to Hungary in 1901, his most significant and daring exploit was his courtship and marriage, in 1905, with the famous actress Kornélia Prielle, a national celebrity. At the time of their wedding, in 1905, she was 79 years old, 46 years her intended's senior (Gálos 121-122; Balogh). The marriage provoked a national scandal: Rozsnyay was accused of marrying Kornélia for the sake of her literary memorabilia, such as the love letters the actress received in 1846 from the great national poet Sándor Petőfi. A few months later, after the grande dame's death, the bereft husband was indeed in possession of the Petőfi letters and Kornélia's wheelchair, which joined Oscar Wilde's writing-table in the collection Rozsnyay carried to Szeghalom, a small, picturesque town on the Hungarian Plain. Later in his life he married a poetess, and the two kept a modest literary salon

in whichever town they happened to reside (Gálos 123-125). By befriending authors and artists, collecting literary relics and, occasionally, writing, this artful dandy remained inside, albeit close to the periphery of, the Hungarian cultural scene until his death in 1948.

His obvious hoaxes, fabrications, and selfish motives notwithstanding, Kálmán Rozsnyay was essentially a harmless character. Moreover, his cultural significance reached beyond his expectations or intentions. Never openly contesting the rigid moral standards of his time, he fended off criticism and hostility by steadily persisting in his opinions and plans. True, there was obvious calculation in marrying Kornélia Prielle as well as in writing a book about Wilde and also, years later, about Kornélia herself. However, he expressed genuine admiration for both of them and was never offensive in his views or style. Although he lacked the talent to create outstanding work himself, Rozsnyai had the sensibility to recognise the literary value of Wilde's work at a time when only a handful of Hungarian authors appreciated him. His appreciation of Wilde was welcomed and shared by the most talented and innovative writers and literary critics of his time: Endre Ady, Mihály Babits, Dezső Kosztolányi, Gyula Szini, and Géza Laczkó. Meanwhile, Rozsnyai was carefully building his public image and came as near as he could to being an artist, if not in his work, then through his flamboyant lifestyle. He had the gift of elegantly ignoring provocative remarks and displayed almost Wildean promptness even when taken by surprise. For instance, Aladár Schöpflin, editor-in-chief of *Nyugat*, once accosted the Hungarian dandy with the question of whether Oscar Wilde had "had him, in passing." Rozsnyay is reported to have answered: "By all means, Ali, if he had, I would have printed it on my name card" (qtd. in Balogh). With this remark Rozsnyay joined those Hungarian authors and critics who appreciated the element of invention, experimentation, and play in matters of gender and sexuality, ready to loosen rigid systems that delimited the boundaries of identity.

Conclusion

Early in 1909, Oscar Wilde was allegedly sighted in Turin as he was turning a corner: at least so the writer and journalist Hugó Ignóty informed his readers in a brief article in the Hungarian literary weekly *A Hét* [The Week]. This prominent writer and critic expressed no surprise at this spectral evidence of Wilde's immortality and regarded the rumour as a wishful fantasy rather than a hoax. "Legend-makers are honest people, they do not lie, they believe. Today Wilde lives in the minds of us all," Ignóty concluded, adding that he would not be surprised if, walking the boulevards of Budapest, he ran into the artist-dandy who would treat him to "Egyptian cigarettes from his diamond inlay cigarette case" (136). The teasing, spectacular, flamboyant figure of Wilde had become, during the first decade of the twentieth century, a cultic icon of the modern artist in the emerging metropolitan literary scene of the Hungarian capital. His versatile identity as playwright, poet, and representative dandy was in-

strumental in reinforcing those trends in early-twentieth-century Hungarian culture that assimilated *fin-de-siècle* aestheticism and subsequent European versions of high modernist literary expression. Wilde's provocative and divisive attitudes also helped Hungarian artists and readers to accommodate modern conceptions regarding identity, such as the instability of the self, its artificiality, and fictionality as well as the shifting nature of gender identity.

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