

## Editor's Notes

<https://doi.org/10.30608/HJEAS/2021/27/2/1>

The question whether “art, literature might really be able to help the world today,” posed by Nobel Prize Laureate Alexandr Solzhenitsyn in his Nobel Lecture in 1970, has the same force in the early 2020s as it had more than half a century ago. Albeit under different socio-political circumstances, people nowadays are faced with similar challenges (threats to human dignity and nationhood, freedom of speech curtailed, pervasive violence and falsehood, and so forth). Solzhenitsyn’s writing, which he could not deliver in person as the Soviet government did not allow him to attend the ceremony in Stockholm, concludes with the belief that “we [artists] are able to help the world in its white-hot hour.” He highlights two properties of art and literature that are of primary importance in this mission. On the one hand, “a true work of art is completely irrefutable and it forces even an opposing heart to surrender,” and on the other hand, it has the ability to “convey the life experience of one whole nation to another.”

We believe that the contributions in the current issue of the *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies* may also help the world today since they encourage us to seek and reveal the truth, and to maintain a dialogue between nations and cultures. This volume contains insightful critical interpretations of masterpieces in American, British, Chicana, and Irish fiction; perceptive close readings of selected poems in American suburban female poetry and most recent Caribbean poetry as well as discerning investigations of artistic projects in contemporary American art and last but not least a comparative analysis of Irish and Hungarian literary works that share the superiority of art and a love of beauty.

Internationally recognized scholar of Irish literature and drama Mária Kurdi opens this issue with her tribute to Irish playwright, poet, and folklorist John Millington Synge (1871-1909) on the occasion of his 150<sup>th</sup> birth anniversary. Kurdi’s celebratory writing seeks to

explore the reasons for the unfailing vitality of Synge's plays on the Irish and international stages as well as for the continual scholarly interest in his theatrical legacy. She contends that Synge's "enduring popularity" is due not only to his "unique style and thematic complexity" informed by Irish revivalist values, but also to his modernist experimentation with form, language, genre, and style in his drama. Most importantly, in his oeuvre comprising poetry, essays, prose works, and seven plays, Synge voices and embodies the national spirit and Irish identity.

One of the historical figures in E. L. Doctorow's *Ragtime* (1975), a most popular entertainer, illusionist, and perhaps the most widely known escape artist of all times, is the Hungarian-born Harry Houdini (1874-1926). Usually considered merely a minor character in the narrative design of Doctorow's masterpiece, the stunt performer has been given scant attention in scholarly studies. Questioning this reductionist interpretation, in his essay "Hungarian Narrato-Rhetorheme in an American Novel: Harry Houdini in E. L. Doctorow's *Ragtime*," Zoltán Abádi-Nagy proposes that the magician features as a multifunctional agent who supports a "unifying structure of ideas," whereby his character contributes to the cohesion of the text. In a lucidly argued comprehensive narrato-rhetorical analysis, Abádi-Nagy reveals the narratological significance of the escapologist. He traces Houdini's multiple roles and functions in the novel using the concept of "narrato-rhetorheme"—"a narrative unit, which fulfills a rhetorical purpose"—introduced and developed by the author himself. Identified as a "cultural narrato-rhetorheme" and an "aspectual coordinate" in Doctorow's fiction, Houdini proves to be an iconic representative of the social-cultural spirit of the ragtime era.

Jiří Flajšar provides a nuanced view of the representation of female identity in twentieth-century American suburban poetry by women poets. Refreshingly, alongside the works of well-established poetic "radicals" excessively examined in scholarly studies—Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, and Adrienne Rich—Flajšar discusses the achievements of the "Poet Laureate of

Suburbia,” Phyllis McGuinley (1905-1978), and Mona Van Duyn (1921-2004), who celebrate the joys and bliss of life in suburban communities, find the domesticity of women pleasurable, perceive their families as an inspiring source of their poetry, and draw on their experience of being wives and mothers. Defending suburban life in her “Suburbia, Of Thee I Sing” (1950), McGuinley rejects the stereotypization of American suburbia “as a uniform, dull, and unbearable setting which precludes any chance of developing a woman’s identity.” Flajšar argues that the style of these women poets brings forth W. H. Auden’s reflections on a long tradition of public, popular poetry in English that goes back to Chaucer, Dryden, and Pope, “who were able to express themselves in an easy manner, to use the speaking voice, and to use as their properties the images of their everyday, that is, social life.” The author concludes that by the twenty-first century women poets “have made suburbia a viable setting for lyric explorations of the battle between the private and public self while maintaining their diverse identities as mothers, wives, and artists,” and their social status is “no longer defined by the gender-specific limitations of the suburban life.”

Joakim Wrethed’s article discusses the interrelatedness of history, ethics, the alethic, and *mise en abîme* in the fiction of celebrated Irish writer John Banville (1945-). Classified as “historiographic metafiction,” Banville’s novels deal with universal and philosophical topics, yet Irish traits are also traceable in them, mostly in eccentric and unreliable narrator-protagonist narratives, as Wrethed suggests. He states that the indirect and direct allusions to Irish history are essential to understand the complex Banvillean ethics since these references always comment on the fictional world. At the same time, they create a *mise en abîme* structure that appears in the process of telling. The author points out that the alethic and the creative dimensions—essential components in Banvillean novels—are always woven together. According to his view, “in terms of ethic and moral behavior, the historical dimension needs to

be endowed with a surplus of imaginative meaning to fully connect to what we recognize as a humane response.”

Babett Rubóczki offers a novel approach, an econarratological reading of Chicana writer Helene Maria Viramontes’s *Their Dogs Came With Them* (2007) and suggests a close connection between the narrative design and the social, cultural, and historical contexts of the physical environments as represented in the novel. The freeway construction in East Los Angeles in the 1960s and 1970s serves as a central spatial image that highlights the environmental harm as well as the social injustice against Mexican American people living in those areas. Reflecting the architectural structures of the freeways, the book chapters move along four main narrative threads that shift horizontally between different locations of the city, while the reader submerges vertically in the psyche of the respective female protagonists to follow their recollections. Rubóczki concludes that violence against marginalized communities is mediated through the disruption of the land, be it naturally-induced (earthquakes) or socially-produced forms of displacement (urban expansion).

The next three articles center on interartistic dialogues between literature and artworks, thus forming a small cluster of essays. Gabriela Moise’s essay “Unpacked Cases: Migratory Aesthetics as a Mode of Participation and Agency” provides an in-depth analysis of the multimedia installation *UNPACKED: Refugee Baggage* (2017-2020) produced by Syrian-American sculptor Mohamed Hafez and Iraqi-American writer Ahmed Badr. The applied conceptual framework of migratory aesthetics allows the author to explore the artwork from a variety of perspectives. In addition to commenting on the politically charged content, the trauma of displacement, and forced migration the artwork represents, Moise reveals the complexity of the work in its entirety emphasizing, for instance, the performative element, its theatricality. She argues that the use of multimedia in the twenty-first-century artwork—the combination of spatial and temporal, audio and visual elements—expands the technical potentials of modernist

collage (Picasso and Braque), nevertheless, the role of art to embody life rather than document it remains, which enables the viewer to engage perceptively with the work of art. Inevitably, the artistic rendition of destroyed homes and war-torn territories in open suitcases is a most powerful way to induce empathy and call for action in viewers.

Patricia A. Lobo's article details how Chicana visual artists emerging in the 1970s in the US play a significant role in raising awareness to the triple oppression of Chicanas (race, sex, class) as well as contribute to shaping and re-building their cultural identity. Lobo uses Gloria Anzaldúa's concepts of "borderlands" and "the new mestiza" as interpretative tools for the discussion of fourteen artworks selected from five major Chicana artists: Yolanda Lopez (1942-), Ester Hernández (1944-), Judith Baca (1946-), Santa Barraza (1951-), and Alma Lopez (1966-). The author establishes an interartistic dialogue between Anzaldúa's concepts and the visual images through the three main themes of reclaiming the indigenous past, retelling of female myths, and constructing a new female identity. She maintains that this exchange between sister arts fosters an alliance among women for co-operation and aims to transform conditions of marginality and exploitation into individual and collective empowerment of Chicanas.

Éva Péteri's essay moves from the social artistry dealt with in the former two writings and takes the reader on a fascinating journey to explore correspondences between the aesthetic views of the renowned Hungarian painter, Lajos Gulácsy (1882-1932) and the outstanding Irish poet and playwright, Oscar Wilde (1882-1900). The aim of this apparently unconventional venture is to attempt to define and characterize Gulácsy's art, which resists easy classification. Most often he is labeled as a Hungarian Pre-Raphaelite, a follower of Art Nouveau, or a precursor of symbolism. The literary works in his oeuvre, however, provide a key to his perception of art and, according to Péteri, his views show parallels with the aesthetic ideas of Wilde. In her comparative analysis of the structural, thematic, and conceptual similarities in

Gulácsy's *Pauline Holseel* (1910) and Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), Péteri identifies their understanding of the essence and function of art as manifested in their escapism and fleeing from vulgar and dull reality into the world of beauty. The elaborate textual investigation carried out in the essay contributes to situating Gulácsy's art both in Hungarian and international art history.

British seaside resort towns constitute an integral part of British culture in many different ways. On account of their liminality, littoral spaces prove to be appropriate locations for brooding over life, facing past traumas as well as attaining self-discovery. Through a close reading of three novels, namely Stanley Middleton's *Holiday* (1974), Iris Murdoch's *The Sea, The Sea* (1978), and Ian McEwan's *On Chesil Beach* (2007), all set on the British seaside, Eszter Mohácsi aims to show the transformative power of the locations. Integrating relevant theories of littoral spaces, she explores the respective protagonists' inner struggle in the social-cultural context of decaying English seaside resort towns in the 1960s-1970s. (For further essays on British seaside resorts see the special thematic block in the spring issue of *HJEAS*, 2021.)

The literary works discussed in the last two contributions in the essay section—the poetry of West Indian poet Mervin Morris (1937-) and Kurt Vonnegut's *Slapstick, or Lonesome no More!* (1976)—both share a deep concern for genuine human values like love and humanity. Pavlina Flajšarova's examination of Morris's poems as well as the critical analysis of Kurt Vonnegut's novel by Meryem Mengouchi and Wassila Hamza Reguig Mouro lay emphasis on the need for human kinship and love. In her overarching description of Morris's poetic achievements Flajšarova underlines that for Morris the use of his national language (Creole) and the creation of a national literature (Caribbean) is just as important as the integration of the European poetic heritage. She argues that only a deep awareness of different aspects of West Indian and British culture the poet draws inspiration from can shape and build national

literature. Through a perceptive exploration of Morris's selected poems on domesticity, nature, human emotions, collective and individual (post)-colonial identity, the author points out that "eternal values like love and humanity" are celebrated in his poems. Mengouchi and Mouro make use of the concept of minor literature as developed by philosopher Gilles Deleuze and psychiatrist Félix Guattari, and suggest that Vonnegut's novel qualifies as minority literature. This approach makes it possible for the authors to demonstrate that by reconstructing family, love, and human relationships, "the novel defies the alienating practices of the American society" it presents.

The essay section closes with Judit Szathmári's review essay "After the 'Post,' in the Present: New Perspectives on Nationhood." It investigates two recently published books—*Unsettling Truths: The Ongoing, Dehumanizing Legacy of the Doctrine of Discovery* (2019) by Mark Charles and Soong-Chan Rah, and *After American Studies: Rethinking the Legacies of Transnational Exceptionalism* (2018) by Herlihy-Mera. In her carefully structured writing Szathmári provides a Native American Studies reading of the two publications, highlighting their main statements pertaining to the racial, colonial, and imperial rootedness of American exceptionalism. She discusses the continuously challenged concepts like nation and nationhood as closely related to the contested notion of exceptionalism, and looks at how the authors of the reviewed publications suggest they should be re-shaped and re-conceptualized.

The review section covers a variety of topics including Shakespeare's domestic tragedies, Kurt Vonnegut's fiction in the postmodern world, women trying to balance their dual roles as mothers and writers, the function of animals in creating literature, as well as contemporary poetry after crisis. On a subjective note, I must warn readers who, like myself, have faith in the sacredness of life that they might—and possibly will—find Patricia MacCormack's views on human beings put forward in *The Ahuman Manifesto: Activism for the*

*End of the Anthropocene*, the last but one book reviewed in this issue, most shocking, even abhorrent.

The editor wishes to acknowledge the invaluable contribution of all the blind reviewers, and wishes to thank review editor Gabriella Moise, copy editor Mariann Buday, language editor Jared Griffin, and technical editor Balázs Venkovits, who have been instrumental in bringing out this issue. Special thanks are due to editor-in-chief Donald E. Morse for his continual professional advice.

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#### **Works Cited**

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