

Ester Schmitt (Padova): The Other Esters¹

1. Introduction

The Fawn, the second of Magda Szabó's novels, is about a leading actress, Eszter Encsy, born of impoverished gentry and growing up under grim circumstances in rural Hungary. The story is told in the first person by Eszter, who desperately speaks to the man she loves, keen to show herself to him and make herself understood.

The protagonist relates her life in a series of interior monologues that range non-chronologically from the childhood—days of humiliation, poverty, and sacrifices up to the present day, when, adult and weary, she recalls her past, delving into it in order to unearth and comprehend the cause of her suffering. She has experienced both social and emotional exclusion, and has led a continuous and unrewarding struggle for existence and for love. Now a rich, famous, successful and beloved theatrical actress, Eszter recollects the dramatic events of her life, feigning a disturbing calmness and an indifferent detachment, like someone who has seen everything and is no longer surprised by anything. And, in fact, she has really had a chance to know the most cruel faces life can offer. But, even if outwardly she remains unperturbed and icy, every single word she says and her every gesture betray the only feeling she is capable of feeling: hatred. A composed, restrained hatred which is always with her but breaks out only on a few occasions; a hatred which Eszter chokes back inside herself, a hatred which contaminates her whole life like a deadly poison. Love, too, is obscured by it. Eszter does not let herself go, she does not put her trust in anyone, she never lowers her guard; she keeps silent or, even worse, she lies. "*When I was a child I kept quiet for so many years, and then it was too late to learn to speak; I can only lie or be silent*". "*Good people have always seemed suspicious*".

Her childhood of suffering, the lack of love from her parents, the shame of being poor, the wearing and stinging envy, relegate her to a life of loveless solitude. The fawn of the title, the pet of a sweet-natured but hated childhood friend, Angéla, stands as a metaphor for the inability to love. Rather than seeing Angéla with her fawn, one night Eszter went to set it free, unintentionally causing its death as well. Notwithstanding, there will be even more terrible examples of anger and envy which win over reason.

Eszter does not allow anybody to penetrate the wall of steel she has built around herself, not even her lover, from who she is always awaiting a dirty trick, a stab in the back, a horrible truth hidden behind his smiles, attention and gifts. "*When you started to care for me, and you tried to discover not my wishes, but just if I had any, I studied you and waited*".

The emotions and feelings inside Eszter are deformed. When she cries, it is for anger; when she laughs, she is hysteric. She is sincere only when she acts. Only when she interprets someone else is she truly herself. Here is the other Eszter. "*While I'm acting, I'm always convinced that the door I'm shaking cannot be opened,*

¹ The original title of the novel is *Az óz* (*The fawn*); but since it was translated into Italian as *The Other Ester*, I decided to give my work the title *The Other Esters*.

and it's terrible when they stab me, my hands start freezing, someone bumps into me, I die of fright, and every stone is a real stone". It is on the stage that she can release her emotions, because there she can be anyone except herself. But also in real life she acts, lying or hiding feelings. The real Eszter cannot find a place anywhere.

2. Eszter and Her Parents

"Eggs, I stole them once, we were so poor that I didn't know what to give my father for dinner".

"I loved my father dearly".

Eszter's father, a lawyer who lost his reason and any reliability in his work, becoming an object of scorn and pity, has been and will always remain worthy of the highest respect for his daughter.

"I used to tell a pack of lies for pride, because I was ashamed of telling the truth and because I loved my father above everything, I didn't want people to speak badly of him."

But the affection Eszter feels for her father is unidirectional; her parents certainly love her, but Eszter feels that this love in reality turns around the need of having deft hands and strong arms for doing the housework. *"How I would have loved to have a sister, and not have to do the chores by myself"*.

Eszter has a love-hate relationship with her parents, due to the strong feeling they have for each other, so deep that it excludes any other person. *"When my father died I just had a suspicion, but when my mother died too, I was sure that I had never been of importance to my parents, who lived for each other only."* *"Not being loved by anyone seemed to me the most natural and obvious thing, I've never felt any wonder about it, nor any sadness or displeasure"*.

It is obvious that in reality this makes her suffer and feel inadequate, like she's unwanted even in her family. This lack of love in childhood will be the first step of her inability to love and to be loved.

3. Eszter and Angéla

"Angéla loved me. ...She liked everything, even the lilac curtain in the kitchen and my shoes with the tips cut, one afternoon she asked to try them on. We, for Angéla, were something exotic. Her fondness for me was as instinctive as my repulsion for her. Sometimes I nearly had the impression she envied me".

There is an endless number of "abstract" other Eszters in which the real one hides herself; but there also exists a concrete other Eszter who has nothing to do with her, but who – just for this reason – becomes a sort of alter ego.

Angéla is loved, gorgeous, sweet, and sensitive. *"Even when I saw her all alone, I didn't have the sensation she was isolated, sheltered as she was in her*

perfect body.” Angéla owns a fawn, she has delicious cakes at lunch, beautiful dresses, she attracts all eyes, her parents and relatives are always kind with her.

Angéla comes into Eszter’s life by chance, she is exactly what Eszter has always dreamt of being, she has what Eszter has always wanted to have; she takes everything away from her just because she can have it without toiling. Angéla was given both protective love and a comfortable life – things unattainable for Eszter and therefore craved for with an ever-growing destructive passion. What Eszter should do is to grow away from Angéla, and start to live her own life; but, on one hand she will never learn to do so, and on the other hand both Eszter and Angéla will be compelled to go in and out of each other’s lives.

Eszter starts to foment a hatred, which will eat her for her whole life; Eszter cannot do anything but hate, envy, and make fun of Angéla. *“That time she cried, she was so ashamed, while I came back home singing, and going through the market I stole a bunch of garlic, just to give vent to my joy, we didn’t need it at all.”*

Eszter waits for the moment to redeem herself and take her revenge. She will achieve her goal, in some way or other. But she will not take any delight or satisfaction. It will be a useless victory: she will never be able to flee from herself. She is the victim of an eternal, bitter hoax, of which she is the – unintentional? – author.

4. Eszter and “He”

“I lay in your arms with my eyes open, still and in despair.”

“He” is Eszter’s first love, a university lecturer who, as she later learns, is Angéla’s husband. He is called Lőrinc, but his name occurs only twice in the entire novel; since Eszter talks to him, he appears as “you”. The book is in the form of a monologue which emerges as a kind of explanation to the man; by a cruel twist of fate, he was mortally injured in an accident all because of Eszter.

Jealousy rooted in childhood traumas is mingled with the love she desires but cannot attain even as an adult. This precipitates a fateful conflict in the actress’s mind: she cannot experience love since her jealousy (which she never admits to) and perennial exclusion are projected onto Angéla, till events are driven by Eszter herself to a tragically logical conclusion.

“If you were to come to me this way, then maybe I would have married you, but also in that case I would have woken up with a start in the dead of night, and I would have shaken you to ask you what were you dreaming, because I know even too well that nobody forgets anything.”

The inability of Eszter to love drives her to hide her feelings, revealing them only behind her man’s back; *“You had taken my little pillow and you’d screwed it up under your neck, I did not want to bother you, I can sleep anyhow.”* And this even in the extreme: *“I’ve cheated on you once only, during all these years. I’ve never loved you like I did that night”*.

Only when he cannot see it does she act lovingly towards him; otherwise, she makes fun of him, laughs at him, she feels joy and gets satisfaction out of his pain. It

is the hatred that comes out. It is the lack of trust that prevents her from believing in him, compelling her to maintain detachment. *“The house in which we lived was destroyed by a bomb during the war. I would have wanted you to see it, but just to show it to you, without letting you know I lived there.”*

“I’ve never told you anything about my father, because I never talk about anything which is not necessary, neither with you nor with anyone else.” Her father is anything but unnecessary for Eszter, but rather than allow anyone to look inside of her, she pretends that nothing has any importance. *“I would have liked you to guess everything about me without having to talk.”* But that is impossible.

Lőrinc really loves Eszter. But he doesn’t know anything about all the other Eszters, the shadows of her former self.

5. The other Esters

“One time we went to the fun fair, you bought me popcorn and candyfloss, we did a tour in a gondola, and in the haunted house you kissed me. Touching my face you noticed it was wet, and you could not know the reason why, and I wasn’t able to tell you it was too late, because now I saw what a stupid face Snow White has, and I don’t like candyfloss at all.”

Eszter’s portrait is built through memories and anecdotes; Eszter’s mind is explored in connection with the world around her, and her every emotion is linked with the social and historical context which she experiences: the war and the post-war period, the economic crisis and the recovery. The novel is a mass of images, atmospheres and crucial moments of Eszter’s past which come one after the other and influence her present, acting as a condemnation, becoming her inescapable fate.

Eszter is nothing more than the sum of all the girls and women she has been in her life; the conflict in Eszter is due to the impossible and inhuman coexistence of all those people in just one person.

“Nobody has ever taken into consideration the possibility of building me a future. All around me there’s the past only.”

Behind the star, there is a woman who eats herself sick because she still has to satisfy the hunger of when she was a child. In the rich woman there lives the one who hides all her money in boxes somewhere around the house, and who counts them like Uncle Scrooge. *“It was the most difficult thing for me, parting from my money.”* In the lady of the house with servants at her calling, there is still the poor child who knows the effort of hard work. Close to the lover there is the girl who uses sex as thanks or as an bartering good. *“At the time – I was 13 – if somebody had paid me to sleep with him, it would have certainly hurt me, but I would have done it without hesitation”.*

Lőrinc does not know Eszter, and perhaps he does not do enough to change things, but Eszter too, for her part, does not help him in any way. She prohibits any access to her heart, she builds a protecting wall around herself, but even in this way she does not resign herself. And, besides, she vents her anger on him.

6. Conclusions

I read this novel three times, and every time I discovered something new about the protagonist. There are surely many nuances which I have not yet noticed. Eszter Encsy is undoubtedly the most interesting and complex character I have ever found in a book; perhaps I have not read so many novels to be experienced in what I am going to say, but I think that the protagonist of “*The Fawn*” is the best example (or at least one of the best) of a female character, the best one to show the complexity of the female universe.

There is one sentence in particular which in my opinion is perfect to summarize the figure of Ester, and of any woman too, and I would like to close my presentation by quoting it:

If you had thought even once of watching me with more attention, of studying me in depth as you used to do with my body, which you knew even better than me, maybe you wouldn't have let out all the pain you caused me unconsciously.