

A Dilemma between Sense and Sensibility (Elena Maróthy-Šoltésová: *Moje deti*/My Children)

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"We require our children to be perfect, while we ourselves make mistakes" E. M. Šoltésová

E. M. Šoltésová's book *Moje deti*/My Children, subtitled *Two Lives from the Cradle to the Grave. Notes and Reflections*, might be regarded even today as unique in the context of Slovak literature. Its genesis reaches back as far as 1879, when its author started to take notes on her children, to the publication of an edited and completed version in 1923 and 1924 (published as the 3rd and 4th volumes of her collected works),¹ and it thus spans almost equally parts of the 19th as well as the 20th centuries. Although composed mostly in the 19th century, it was only later that the work gained cultural, historical and international recognition.

In the author's introduction to the text published in *Collected Works* Elena Maróthy Šoltésová says that her notes were "initially intended only for [her] family".² She rewrote and edited them for publication only after her children's death. She states the modesty of her ambition: "An ordinary mother tries to understand the character of her children in order to educate them successfully. She should not give orders, but rather understand how they handle emotions and the way they think."³ She also notes that some readers may consider her notes too "ordinary" and "boring" and that the second part written after the death of her daughter and dedicated exclusively to her son is composed rather "subjectively"; there are, however, many mothers overcome by the same grief. The author formulates the message of her book: "When I began to write, I thought it was just a sign of a pure maternal love; now I suddenly realise that those texts were not intended to be read at that time but today."⁴ In the end, the authorial intention is defined by the subtitle, which anticipates the premature death of her children.

E.M. Šoltésová perfected the form of literary notes, reflections, diary entries etc., which always complemented her published works. There are in her archives many notebooks and freestanding notes (edited and rewritten by the author) containing ideas and outlines for possible short stories or novels, reflections, descriptions of nature and animals, as well as diary entries concerning her children.⁵ In these notes can be found the themes that form the basis of her work, i.e. the search for a balance between sense and sensibility, important values such as wisdom, modesty, courageousness, generosity or

¹ *Sobrané spisy Eleny Maróthy Šoltésovej* Sväzok 3. Turčiansky Sv. Martin : Tatran, Nakladateľský účasinný spolok, 1923; Sväzok 4. Turčiansky Sv. Martin : Knižtlačiarsky účasinný spolok, 1924.

² Original quotations are from the later edition: MARÓTHY-ŠOLTÉSOVÁ, Elena: *Moje deti. Dva životy od kolisky po hrob. Zápisky a rozpravy*. Bratislava : Tatran, 1968, p. 7.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ For a complex analysis of these notes see: Marianna Mináriková v štúdií *Zápisníky Eleny Maróthy-Šoltésovej*. In: *Literárny archív*, Vol. 21, 1984, ed. M. Kocák. Martin : Matica Slovenská, 1985, pp. 7 – 39.

human relationships (whether romantic or those between parents and children). These writings trace Šoltésová's thinking on the theory and practice of literary realism. They prove her extraordinary talent for observation and detail and even though she made no use of them in her published works, they are an integral part of her perspective and thinking. They are the expression of her natural desire to capture reality, impressions, observations of nature, people and life itself. E.M. Šoltésová's writings lack subject matter, for she was able to reflect even unimportant details and integrate them into the narrative structure.

The genesis of the book *My Children* is interesting and important for close reading, mostly because the magazine serialisation of the part dedicated to the death of the author's daughter (and its critical reception as articulated by Vajanský) greatly influenced the form and tone of the whole work. The first volume consists of four parts. The last, concerning the death of author's daughter Elenka, is entitled *Why? Why?* The narrative of the second volume begins a year after Elenka's death and focuses on the author's son Ivan. It consists of four parts and an additional chapter of reflections on Ivan's letters, and essays on life and death entitled *Resonances* and a short anti-war pamphlet in its appendices. The narrative begins on the day of her daughter's third birthday, 28 September 1879. It is the only precise date given in the book; the other notes are given only month and year, and present events at monthly intervals. From the earliest pages one feels the joy of a mother observing her children at play and growing up. The happiness is present in the letters to the author's sister Izabela. The style of the letter sent in December 1880⁶ reflects the style of her notes: the mother is enjoying decorating a doll's pram; she describes in meticulous detail all the Christmas presents; she explains Ivan's baby language, listing all the expressions he cannot pronounce properly, and she is proud of how quickly her children learn to read and count. She enjoys observing differences in their character. Although there is no original draft of Šoltésová's notebook, it can be assumed that she edited and polished it before publication in the same way she treated the drafts found in her archives.

She first decided to publish an excerpt from her notebooks when her daughter Elenka died of tuberculosis at the age of eight. The part dedicated to her daughter's illness and her last days where was published under title *A Dying Child*.⁷ In this version she changed the children's names to Boženka and Janko. In his critical essay S. H. Vajanský takes the author to task for her inconsiderate descriptions of the dying child and notes that the text lacks artistic detachment.⁸

⁶ VALEHRACHOVÁ-MATULAYOVÁ, Margita: Z korešpondencie E. M. Šoltésovej. In: *Slovenská literatúra*, roč. 2, 1955, č. 3, p. 349

⁷ MARÓTHY-ŠOLTÉSOVÁ, Elena: Umierajúce dieťa. Úryvky z matkinho denníka. In: *Živena*. Národný almanach. Turčiansky Sv. Martin : Kníhtlačiarsky účastinársky spolok, 1885, p. 197 – 229.

⁸ S. H. Vajanský wrote: „Elena Šoltésová's *A Dying Child* is a truthful descriptions of the author's suffering. Its authenticity and strength of emotion are striking and not mitigated by the application of artistic technique. The task of an artist is not to make the reader suffer physically. The pain should not take over the work of art and the artist, though it is natural that such a pain overwhelms the mother. We treat the author, however, as an artist and not as a mother. Mrs Šoltésová's text is heart-breaking. The reader will cry while reading about her deep emotional suffering. The death of an innocent, charming child is so deeply emotional and painful that its description, provided by a God-fearing, truly feminine mind, speaks to the soul, and not only to the emotions of the reader. But a work of art should also refresh, elate and elevate the reader. Death as such provides neither refreshment, delight, nor greatness." *Slovenské pohľady* No. 1, 1886, p. 24.

In a 7 March 1886 letter to her friend Terézia Vansová, Šoltéssová thanks her for the “kind words” she sent her after the publication of *A Dying Child* and explains her intentions in publishing the text: “I wept as I wrote, and no wonder readers cry too. But as you can see in the first issue of *Slovenské Pohľady*, Vajanský did not spare me. I accept that he might be right, but I view things differently. First, it was not my ambition to create a great work of art: I was articulating the pain and suffering a mother who must watch helplessly as her child is dying. Such pain is too vivid and too authentic to be artistically mitigated. I showed the only way the mother can cope with such a loss, namely by turning to the genuine consolation provided only by our Christian religion. Vajanský might claim that the piece is heart-breaking and inflicts pain without offering relief and support, but I do not agree. The last three entries are dedicated to relief; my style is no longer emotional, and since it heals the soul slowly and imperceptibly, I still believe that my words ease the pain. For me, at least, they were rays of light in the greatest darkness, and thus it is impossible for them not to have the same effect on the reader. Vajanský just expected too much of my modest piece written for a woman’s almanac. All in all we shall be grateful for each and every word of criticism, for it helps us and our future work (should there ever be any).”⁹

The proof of the helpfulness of Vajanský’s criticism is the edited version of her writings concerning her children that were published in book form almost forty years later in 1923 and 1924. Naturally, the author herself changed a great deal over this long period. She became an acclaimed writer and editor, and her views of art and literature were rooted in a deeper context. The most important thing for her was to realise that her strength lay in “documentary realism” rather than in any attempt to follow Vajanský.¹⁰ This maturity is visible when one compares *A Dying Child* with writing from the same period dedicated to her daughter in the *Collected Works*. Perhaps under the influence of a new literary fashion, the author radically shortened, reformulated and toned down the parts concerning her daughter’s death, eliminating almost all the material referring to the desperate mother’s search for consolation in God. The text, originally intended for readers of a “women’s almanac”, developed into a concise artistic expression transcending the individual experience of pain that unsettled readers in the piece published immediately after the author’s daughter passed away. The maturity of the writer is manifest in several dimensions: the existential experienced of her children’s death immensely weakened her faith in any “reasonable” causality forming the philosophical background of realism (even of “idealistic” realism), and led her to cross the boundary between the logically explicable world and the realm of irrationality. In her moments of greatest sorrow the author-mother longs for a miracle and asks a higher power to overturn the development of events, or at least she wants to believe that the death of her child is part of a plan that mortals might not understand. In this sense her book *My Children* asserts the limits of literary realism. It was Šoltéssová who, unintentionally, through the death of her children, started to ponder this ontological dilemma. Even though she

⁹ VALEHRACHOVÁ-MATULAYOVÁ, Margita: loc. cit., pp. 357 – 358.

¹⁰ The widespread criticism that followed the publication of Šoltéssová’s novel *Against the Current* (1894), written in the style of “idealistic realism”, affected the author’s later works, making her turn towards documentary writing.

had rewritten the parts concerning death of her daughter and in the manuscript to be published in book form she focused above all on her pain and sorrow, it is still evident that the greatest support during the worst times came from the thought that she was handing her child over to "God". While in the first draft she took up writing as therapy, later she found the strength to polish her notes into a concise, artistic form. Šoltésová inclined toward literary realism (which greatly influenced Slovak literature at the time) and she realised that her writings might be important and helpful to others; she also believed that her experience as a mother extend beyond the purely personal sphere.

After the death of her son¹¹ but before the publication of *My Children* in her *Collected Works* Šoltésová had a long text entitled *My Son* serialised in the magazine *Živena*, which was published from 1913 to the end of 1917. She did not edit the text for publication in her *Collected Works*, but she used full names and geographical denominations instead of initials, and she incorporated the original parts referring to the nation and nationalism that were deleted from the magazine pieces by war censorship.

In an unpublished essay Štefan Krčméry praises *My Children* for its uniqueness and not only in the context of the Slovak literature. He writes that "Šoltésová's work *My Children* is curiously authentic even when relocated from the small frame of the Slovak literature into the greater context of world literature. (...) This novel is a delight when its protagonists are delightful, and it follows their steps more closely than any other novel might, since it is a mother who is following the steps of her children. And the one responsible for our lives decides that these writings on children would become a novel (truly?) depicting the tragedy of several human beings and a mother's great heart... It created literature that is striking in its authenticity (...)"¹²

The book enjoyed great popularity on publication and was translated into Croatian¹³ and French.¹⁴ The book received many positive reviews. Jiří Mahen praised *My Children* claiming "there is nothing purer in all Czechoslovak literature".¹⁵ According to his review it is "an incredibly brave book, and it is hard to believe that it was written by a woman, (...) and if it had been published in England, there is no doubt it would have become a gem of world literature overnight." In his enthusiasm he recommends that "the Ministry of Education should send the first State Award of the year 1926 to Martin. The book *My Children* is a work representing the soul of the nation better than anything we might think of in Prague."¹⁶

At the time of its publication the book was reviewed in the magazine *Průdy* by L.N. Zvěřina¹⁷ who claimed that "it is one of the most valuable of all the works published in

¹¹ Ivan died on 17 February 1911, aged 32.

¹² Manuscript archived in the Literary and Arts Archive of the Slovak National Library. Cited from HAND-ZOVÁ, Želmíra: *Elena Maróthy-Šoltésová. Život a dielo v dokumentoch*. Bratislava : Osveta, 1989, p. 169.

¹³ Moja djeca, translation L. Maraković, Zagreb, 1925.

¹⁴ Mes enfants du berceau à la tombe, translation J. Cádra, Paris, 1925 (Vol. I).

¹⁵ MAHEN, Jiří: Nejkrásnější most na Slovensko. In: *Živena*, Vol. 14, 1924, No. 10 – 11, p. 218. (Article originally published in *Svoboda* [Brno]).

¹⁶ E. M. Šoltésová was awarded the Václav Pavlásek Foundation Prize by the Czech Academy of Sciences and Arts in February 1927.

¹⁷ ZVĚŘINA, Ladislav Narcis: Elena Maróthy-Šoltésová: Moje deti. In: *Průdy*, Vol. 8, 1924, No. 1, pp. 49 – 51.

Slovak,” pointing out its modernity and the homage it pays to childhood: “There are not many works in our literature that present a combination of education and beauty, wisdom and humour as naturally as does this book. The book is *a truly unique work of art* thanks to its philosophical foundation and its clearly stated values, but above all thanks to its beautiful artistic expression, which is authentic and woven into the fabric of its beautifully written Slovak prose.”

According to Andrej Mráz *My Children* is “the most independent of Šoltésová’s works” and “the author’s pure and worthy character expresses itself in the most spontaneous and authentic manner”.¹⁸ Comparing this work with Šoltésová’s novel *Against the Current* Ján Števček comes to the conclusion that “We might say that the book *My Children* is a personal novel, as opposed to the impersonality of the novel *Against the Flow*. It is a ‘psychological novel’ speaking to the truth of life that, as subjective prose, also became fiction”.¹⁹ Marianna Mináriková speaks of a “biographical diary” that “does not describe merely objective reality. The authorial subject, the artistic portrayal of characters, the author’s reflections on life and death are present in the prose. (...) *My Children* possesses the aesthetic qualities of a fictionalized biography. (...) The construction of the characters’ lives and the constant presence of the authorial subject are typical of the construction of a novel”.²⁰

Many reviewers noted the borderline character of Šoltésová’s novel. The text crosses the boundary between the more objective genres (diary, notes, memoir) and fiction, between the intense subjective experience of the author and objective reality. It is this quality that makes this “subjective documentary” such unsettling modern reading. This is all the more fascinating when we realize that Šoltésová reached this form intuitively and that it originated as a palimpsest in the process of rewriting, adding, omitting, refocusing, and changing its modality and proportions. The author herself matured in the process, as the pain of her personal trauma faded. Thus she was able to create a *reverse process*, detaching herself from intense personal feelings and coming close to an objectification, generalisation, and universalization of the facts, and conversely: the objectifying detachment from positive experience led to the artistic construction of the text and its aesthetic and poetic structure. That is why this work might be interpreted and viewed from various perspectives of literary history. Symbolically, we may return to the beginning and quote Oskár Čepan’s opinion, which echoes in some ways the above-mentioned judgement of S. H. Vajanský. He also notices the “non-literary qualities” of Šoltésová’s work and thinks that the baleful premonitions of “something that cannot be avoided” create, out of “the notes on the psychology of a little human being and on problems with his/her education”, “an artistically valuable work of fiction” that was “impeccably constructed”.²¹ Although Čepan, unlike Vajanský, is considering not the original magazine

¹⁸ MRÁZ, Andrej: Elena Maróthy-Šoltésová (Na storočnicu narodenia). In: *Slovenské pohľady*, Vol. 71, 1955, No. 1, p. 79.

¹⁹ ŠTEVČEK, Ján: Pravdepodobnosť románu a pravda života. In: *Dejiny slovenského románu*. Bratislava : Tatran, 1989, p. 196.

²⁰ MINÁRIKOVÁ, Marianna: Moje deti Eleny Maróthy-Šoltésovej. In: *Elena Maróthy-Šoltésová*. Zborník z vedeckej konferencie. Zostavila Terézia Kašayová. Martin : Matica slovenská, 1987, p. 113.

²¹ ČEPAN, Oskár: Dva typy Šoltésovej prózy. In: *Próza slovenského realizmu*. Edične pripravila Marcela Mikulová. Bratislava : Veda, vydavateľstvo SAV, 2001, p. 90, 91.

piece but rather the edited version of the text that bears the undeniable qualities of a work of art, he thinks that “the authentic moment of the decisive correction of the reflexive parts of the text under the pressure of reality makes Šoltésová’s *My Children* a work of documentary fiction of ‘a naturalistic kind’”²² and thus he considers it to be a work of ‘naturalism’ of a specific kind.” In the light of these individual opinions we may concur with R. Grebeníčková, who writes that biographical documents, archives, notebooks or diaries -- in other words everything that was not originally conceived as a work of art -- might, within a specific context, be seen as an aesthetic text revelatory of its poetic power: “the elementary background for the analysis of the new form of a literary genre is a basic reversal in the perception of literature and literary works of art, a reversal that might be characterized as a shift from the semantics of literature to its semiology.”²³

Although the first volume of the book should be naturally dedicated to the author’s daughter Elenka, Šoltésová unconsciously focuses on Ivan, who was two years younger and had just started to walk, which is why his parents are paying more attention to him. Oddly, Elenka lives in his shadow, perhaps because she is mature for her age, sensible, too serious, and thus less interesting plot-wise. Ivan is warm-hearted, showing his happy and sunny character, and his mother comes to the conclusion that “*my two children very different in almost all respects*”.²⁴ Writing about Ivan’s exploits, creativity and typical nursery language is evidently irresistible for the mother/writer, and she often yields to this temptation: “*You call me Mommy, out of some of your gentle impulse, my dearest boy*” (p. 63). “*When I glimpse his little head with hair cut short, I have to run to him and cover it with kisses – I cannot help myself*” (p. 58). She tries to overcome her impulses to tenderness and be more rational, for she knows that “*in the education of my children I cannot succumb to emotions, and I try to avoid doing so*” (p. 59). The moments of joy she experiences in her children’s company lead to ask: “*Where does this love to them come from – I did not experience this before I had them. There are girls (...) made to be mothers. But I was not one of them. I didn’t understand children’s ways. (...) Now I see them differently – my own children taught me*” (pp. 56 – 57). However, the intense experience of being a mother is always overshadowed by certain worries. The children reveal their nature, and the mother becomes anxious, because “*I can see those faults, mostly in Elenka. She is undeniably an intelligent girl, too intelligent sometimes, and I am more amazed than delighted, but this intelligence does not wipe out her faults; maybe later she will get rid of them (...) – she shows signs of stubbornness, selfishness; she does not admit it when she makes a mistake and she is offended when someone disagrees with her. (...) I don’t understand some aspects of her character, so I do not have the key to her feelings, and therefore it is very difficult for me to influence her. Ivan is completely different. I understand every single move of his simple soul and sincere heart. (...) Impulsiveness and anger are so far his only faults. The rest is still hidden in his indescribable childlike charm and innocent*

²² Ibid., p. 92.

²³ GREBENÍČKOVÁ, Růžena: Literatura faktu a teorie románu. In: *Literatura a fiktivní světy (I)*. Praha : Český spisovatel, 1995, p. 82.

²⁴ MARÓTHY-ŠOLTÉSOVÁ, Elena: *Moje deti. Dva životy od kolisky po hrob. Zápisky a rozprawy*. Bratislava : Tatran, 1968, p. 43.

simplicity that kindle love not only in his parents, but in everyone who has the chance to observe him” (pp. 57 – 58). When celebrating Ivan’s second birthday in November 1880, his mother notes her as yet unjustified concerns, which are the dark side of maternal love: “If only I had someone to assure me that these two children of mine will be good and I will succeed in bringing them up to become mature people, that neither of them will die, and that I won’t leave them either. Orphans have difficult lives and on the other hand I cannot imagine the pain a parent must feel when she loses a child. Spare us, Lord! I have a presentiment – perhaps because Elenka is so weak” (pp. 55 – 56). In January 1881 the author wrote: “my children are not getting along well and I am coming to realise that bringing them up is a difficult task. (...) Often I am clueless and not sure how to treat them. It is not possible to keep explaining patiently, and love them unconditionally and not to punish them when they are stubborn. In spite of everything, every parent wants to raise her children in a loving atmosphere. There are very few children who can be raised without punishment” (p. 60).

These randomly selected passages support L. N. Zvěřina’s claims that the book should be considered from “three perspectives: the pedagogical or paedo-psychological perspective, the philosophical perspective, and the perspective of fiction. (As far as the first perspective is concerned, we are astonished that the book, written forty years ago, speaks more clearly about the relationship of a child and his/her education than any other published today. In our literature there is nothing comparable).”²⁵ The leitmotiv of all the dilemmas that form part of the narrative plan of the work is the claim: “Bringing children up is a difficult task.” When she realises that a parent has a great responsibility for educating his/her children, the author tries to keep in mind at all times that it is necessary to have a sense of humour and detachment, which make things easier and neutralise tension and anger. After a period of disillusion, disappointment and worries, there comes a time for intimacy, when love and care are returned to the mother as a reward for her efforts. She believes that the trial-and-error method is very often used in childrearing: “*In general we are just human beings, however well educated, who are not ready to raise children in the right way. We try, and those who know might guess the right answer. I feel my lack of experience; many times I am lost, not knowing how to deal with certain situations. My children are intelligent and gifted, one might say “good material”, and yet I feel that educating them is a difficult and almost impossible task*” (p. 127). The book owes its universal popularity to the fact that, in contrast to pedagogical texts instructing parents what to do, the book shares the doubts and helplessness of parents and thus fulfils the anthropocentric dimension that is immanent to literary fiction. The subject-matter of childrearing is connected to personal growth and its dramas. This motif transcends the pedagogical dimension and becomes unintentionally part of the most popular themes of contemporary literary fiction. The reader follows the growth of the personality of Šoltésová’s son, because Elenka dies too soon, even though she achieves a maturity in her dying. The mother communicates with her dying daughter almost exclusively by empathy and looks,

²⁵ Zvěřina, loc.cit., p. 50. As the book *My Children* was analysed and evaluated from the pedagogical perspective at the time of its publication and there are many studies on the subject, we will not consider this aspect of the work here.

and her daughter “*amazes her by her questions that are no longer those of a child*”, when “*her soul matures through illness*” (p. 223). These passages are evidence of Šoltésová’s mastery of language and form.

Šoltésová’s reflections upon problems of children and parents include virtually all of the dimensions mentioned by Zvěřina, and are sometimes of an existential nature. Some of these thoughts are prompted by questions posed by children concerning cemeteries, graves and death. There are a mother’s reflections as she watches her children sleeping, herself relaxing after a busy day. Then “*comes the time to think about their future, but those thoughts cannot be free of some irrational worries. (...) Life lies ahead of them, and I know that many difficulties, problems, disappointments and sorrows await them just around the corner, and it is not in my power to warn them, to clear all these troubles from their path*” (p. 81). Šoltésová sums up in just a few words the real and universal problems of parenthood. It spoke to parents’ worries about the future of their children and at the same time their inability to do anything about it, pointing out the human limitations to educating one’s children, while at the time of the book’s publication it was even “enlightened” and brave, free of pedagogical “knowing-it-all”. This is why this book might not be considered “pedagogical”. Šoltésová depicts actual situations and episodes from life and points out the possibilities and limitations of bringing up children. Moreover, she links them with the child’s personality. That is why she agrees that a child is above all the product of genetics and might be only partially influenced by education. The growth of a child’s personality is presented as a mixture of hereditary factors, social custom and moral imperatives. The process is difficult not only for a parent but also for a child, thus Šoltésová understands education as a two-way street and understands that her child is not simply a passive recipient. The author stresses the interaction between children and parents and she calls the potential of the educator to grow personally a very valuable gift. The protagonists of the book develop individually (ontogenesis) and at the same time they become part of society (phylogenesis). Despite the mother’s scepticism towards conventional pedagogy, she does not, in her worries about the future of her children, deny her children’s qualities: “*All I can do is to bring them up well, educate them and prepare them for the difficulties the life may have in store. Will I succeed? There are not many parents who might say that they fulfilled the task to their own satisfaction*” (pp. 81 – 82). When the author expresses her doubts, admitting that education has its limitations and that she is virtually helpless, the reader can feel the authenticity and universality of Šoltésová’s writing.

Doubts, worries, hesitations, mistakes and unanswered questions concerning the process of an individual growing up: these form much of the subject matter of *fin-de-siècle* literature. Other topics include illness, dying, death and mourning. In this case the book *My Children* unintentionally belongs to the emerging tradition of modernism. During the long period between the publication of Šoltésová’s original notes in the magazine and its appearance in its finally edited form, the codes sending various messages and the complex final structure of the work changed under objective and subjective circumstances. The experience of the author writing about her own children is both individual and universal. She spices it with joy, but she is not ashamed to admit she failed many times.

The tragedy that closes the initial notes about her children suggests the formal finality of the work. Their mother's editorial work on notes in their preparation for publication (consciously and unconsciously) alters the discourse: the simple act of taking notes becomes a confession, a philosophical reflection, and a rhetorical question. The rupture in the author's revelation that she lost her children for good (in both cases individually, in a different period of her life and theirs), and the fact that initially in the documentary genre of a diary, translates the direct experience of the author's notes into a specific and particular syncretic genre. In Šoltésová's notes the idiosyncrasies of the diary form, with its typical focus on detail and the everyday, meld with literary fiction, where tragedy leads to the pondering of the end an individual, to reflections on the moment of death, which is almost impossible to grasp rationally.

The death of the children forms the tragic climax for the reader, as well as for the author herself. Thanks to this climax, the objective text shifts to the realm of indefinable fatefulness. Reality, life with all its everyday joys, happy and humorous situations, are relativized, so that even the happy and jolly matters become a necessary part of the finality of human existence. Searching for answers to existential questions, which is the disturbing feature of the literary fiction, here becomes a legitimate part of objective literature and at the same time serves as a source of the universality of the work. The story of children growing up should have led towards fulfilment found in a happy adult life (as every mother hopes), but just the opposite happened, and they grew up and died unexpectedly soon. At that very moment the discourse itself transforms from an objective description of reality to metaphysical reflections on life and death. Šoltésová's maturity is evident in the way she handles the transformational maturity, which was virtually absent in the published text *A Dying Child*. The mature author was able to rewrite the text composed immediately after her daughter died. The original text was an emphatic howl of anguish from a hurt and hopeless mother, even though this intimacy, authenticity and effect are still present in the text published in 1923-24. She was capable of transforming the terrible experience into a story of universal value. Through the aesthetic attitude of the author the text created its own reality. The text of *My Children* can be interpreted from the point of view of a relationship between referential and aesthetic functions, which coexist in the independent ontological structure of the work of art.

In spite of the features mentioned, that could label *My Children* a work of modernism, short, humorous descriptions and narratives of terrifying premonitions define the modality of the text. Such a technique is typical for literary realism that reflects both sides of life. The diary form and memoirs are mostly written in a style that hovers between subjectivity and objectivity, monologues and dialogues.²⁶ Even though Šoltésová's notes fall within the category of a diary, thanks to their chronology and thanks to the fact that they are written immediately or soon after the events described, they lack authenticity, be it immediate or subsequently stylized. The text of *My Children* develops from initially intimate notes written solely for the author's purposes into stylistically magnificent, captivating reading matter that is well balanced with regard to its various parts: descriptions,

²⁶ For further details see: HOFFMANNOVÁ, Jana: Paradoxy deníkové a memoárové literatury. In: *TVAR*, Vol. 5, 1995, No. 20, pp. 1, 4.

childlike dialogues, stories and reflections on problems of upbringing. A proto-literary form was transformed into a literary text. The internal dynamics are preserved, however, by an oscillation between the text's referential character (objectivity, matter-of-factness) and its reflexive character. It might not be claimed that the aesthetic effect of *My Children* is based exclusively on the experience of its complexity, or on the unexpected tragic climax. Its effect lies in the intensity of its micro-composition, in the details. R. Grebeníčková agrees with this proposition in the field of non-fiction when she claims that the documentary and utilitarian character of documents is not an end in itself; on the contrary: "documentation and pure utility are ways of evoking the maximal aesthetic effect. Raw, natural experience, facts, news, appreciation of the factual nature of the described event, etc. enable a pure aisthesis, a pure apprehension of the object: in its pure form devoid of additions, illusory deformations, artistic ornaments and artificial perspectives. This is a return to true aesthetic reality."²⁷

The text, initially unintentional from the point of view of an artistic ambition, was born out of personal experience, becomes intentional and valid from the perspective of literary figures: "External situations co-create the text, they form its context and they are its judge, its body and the epilogue; they may lead to the story, give meaning to the diary, complement, validate or refute the authenticity of the notes", writes Sylvie Richterová on the aesthetics and ethics of the literary diary.²⁸ She claims that the artist does not realise death is approaching but "can sense it", while she calls the contrast between the fact and intuition an "internal factor".²⁹ She points out the difference between rational knowledge and its emotional apprehension. In spite of authorial intention, the work of art outgrows its intentions and is enriched by a new level of significance. In *My Children* this dimension is generated by the insertion of new, independent parts into the original text and the author's re-interpretation of the events. Even though reality initially serves as a guide, later it surprisingly transforms into a deceitful, inscrutable and unpredictable force, ultimately becoming an agent of fate.

As far as Šoltésová's style is concerned, the first part of *My Children* is more typical of her proclivities as a writer. While in the second volume, she *re-constructs* Ivan's life, in the first part she *structures* the lives of both children in the present tense. An extraordinary talent for detail predestined her for taking notes of her observations of life, and in this case life creates a plot that is a typical feature of the diary form. The descriptions of her children are not merely static but dynamic as well. She describes their various activities, their expressions, their animals, and so forth. Descriptions of the reactions of the small children, of the surprisingly mature Elenka and later the depiction of her illness, turn out at a certain point to be a quest for the miracle of life and the mystery of death. Previously everyday situations, taken for granted, become mysterious via illness. The fact that the writer herself does not know the outcome only intensifies their expression. The external dynamics of the children's activities turn inwards to the intimate life of their mother. The focus shifts from descriptions of growing up to the more important and dra-

²⁷ Grebeníčková, loc.cit, p. 81.

²⁸ RICHTEROVÁ, Sylvie: Etika a estetika literárního deníku. In: *Kritický sborník*, roč. 12, 1992, No. 2, p. 14.

²⁹ Ibid.

matic outcome of the illness, which might be positive (as everyone hopes), but might equally bring an end to all hopes.

This is why Šoltésová's style changes when she starts to describe Ivan's life after Elenka's death a year after the tragedy. She tries to come to terms with the death of her talented daughter. She still has him, fortunately. She expects a lot from him. Ivan's situation becomes uneasy: he must deal with his own growing up and the expectations of his parents simultaneously. It is only natural that he comes into conflict with them, disappoints them, a process natural in every case of childrearing. Šoltésová tries consciously to moderate her expectations of her son: she mitigates the father's strictness, which results mostly from his worries about the problems awaiting his son in adulthood. Finally, after they have all overcome many difficulties and problems, Ivan graduates from law school. Šoltésová's writing, however, is still imbued with thoughts of dying and death. Then Ivan's health is weakened by tuberculosis and at the age of 32, he dies. The tragedy she tried to overcome before by writing about her son strikes her once more, and again she compensates for the loss by writing a memoir entitled *My Son*, which appeared in the magazine *Živena*. Efforts to rationalize and objectify the personal experience, which E. Staiger calls the hermeneutic circle,³⁰ do not help the author in writing about her sorrows universally in a metaphysical dimension, a feature already present in the text about her daughter. From a psychological perspective L. S. Vygotsky considers this phenomenon natural: "Mourning is transcendent, it brings pain, inflicts the illness of life, the illness of our finality, we are made smaller by sorrow... The author is born to life from death; it is the process of dying itself that brings her into life, the reflection of death in life. That is why mourning is mystical."³¹

Some of the reviewers of *My Children* naturally assumed that the first volume of the book would be dedicated "mostly to Elenka's life, but no, even in this part the author is more interested in her son, whom she loves dearly".³² The author was aware of this disproportion, though not in the volumes dedicated to each of her children, but in the feelings she had for them: "*The second part of the text, written after my daughter's death is focused solely on my son, his development, illness and death. I wrote it too subjectively and that is why it will not attract as much attention as the first, even though it is no less true to life and so has its rightful place in the book.*"³³ A year after publication of *My Children* in her *Collected Works*, and fourteen years after Ivan's death, she wrote to the writer Timrava about her feelings: "Well, for many years after the death of my son, I carried out my duties only reluctantly, forcing myself into them without seeing any sense in doing so. Nevertheless, it was after he died that I took over editorial duties in *Živena*, and they kept me so busy that I had no time for my personal sorrows and pains. The loss of my son is a wound that will not heal, but the conscientious carrying out of my duties at the magazine taught me to appreciate other aspects of life, those not connected to family

³⁰ STAIGER, Emil: *Poetika, interpretace, styl*. Praha : Triáda, 2008.

³¹ VYGOTSKIJ, Lev Semjonovič: *Psychologie umění*. Praha : Odeon, 1981, p. 353.

³² Zvěřina, loc. cit., p. 50.

³³ MARÓTHY-ŠOLTÉSOVÁ, Elena: *Moje deti. Dva životy od kolisky po hrob. Zápisky a rozpravy*. Bratislava : Tatran, 1968, p. 7.

life. Thus, especially since the political situation has changed, I finally feel that there's something in this world for me and I am not so eager to go where my beloved ones went all too soon..."³⁴ The state of reversal might be the state defined in Aristotle's *Poetics* as anagnorisis, and Šoltésová indeed turns away from the personal tragedy to the universal transcendence of her work in order to "preserve the notes about my children, which gained significance after their death".³⁵

The dimension of reality, which would have been dominant in Šoltésová's notes, shifts after death of her children to a new, unexplored field of art, where according to Lotman the role of beginnings and ends prevails: "The beginning, as well as the end and death are connected inseparably to the possibility of understanding lived reality as something filled with sense."³⁶ Lotman realises the importance of death in the linear creation of culture, and he considers religion and belief to be a way to overcome death. "In order to understand the role of death in culture, it is necessary to give it meaning. This means one needs to include it in a pattern of meaning."³⁷ With the passage of time the author mentally translated reality to the realm of artistic artifice, which she assests formally in the subtitle of her book.

E. M. Šoltésová exploits her writing habit and careful *in vivo* observation of the development of her children (mainly the development of their mental and language skills), and it leads her to reflect on topics she had not even considered thinking about. Even though in the first volume she recollects and summarizes the events of a whole month in a single entry (she had been very busy), the writing is significantly marked by her amazement at the most mysterious part of development i.e. the formation of a balance between genetic heritage and education. In the editorial process the author changed the form of her notes from monologues written in moments of great sorrow into a dialogue with the reader, with whom she wants to share her experience. The dialogue and writing *ex post facto* is present mostly in the second volume, and it differs formally from that in the first. There are wider time gaps, the regularity is interrupted, even the authenticity of experience vanishes, because Ivan is at university in a different city and the mother relies on his letters and occasional visits to his hometown. The second volume bears the formal features of a memoir: it is "a specific projection of reality by the author"³⁸ and the mother/writer expresses her inner life more artistically. Despite direct quotes from her son's letters, the text is a narration following the external and internal autobiography of a young student and lawyer. Šoltésová selects and hierarchizes the facts; she eliminates the previously typical metonyms of details and focuses rather on the most important moments of her son's life: his studies, the development of his character, health problems. The text turns into an autonomous entity, in which the authenti-

³⁴ *Korešpondencia Timravy a Šoltésovej*. Zostavil I. Kusý. Bratislava : SAVU, 1952, p. 164. Letter of 11 October 1925.

³⁵ ŠOLTÉSOVÁ-MARÓTHY, Elena: *Moje deti. Dva životy od kolísky po hrob. Zápisky a rozpravy*. Bratislava : Tatran, 1968, p. 8.

³⁶ LOTMAN, Jurij Michajlovič: Smrt jako problém syžetu. In: *Exotika*. Výbor z prací Tartuské školy. Brno : Host, 2003, p. 258.

³⁷ Lotman, loc. cit., p. 260.

³⁸ BAGIN, Albín: Pokus o charakteristiku memoárovej literatúry. In: *Slovenská literatúra*, Vol. 24, 1977, No. 2, p. 171.

city is significantly weakened. We talk about “the attributes of the reader’s situation” i.e. the author’s perceived need to explain facts that s/he knows very well.³⁹ The stressed discrepancy between the time that the events took place and the time of their recording (writing) is another feature of memoir prose. Anachrony in the form of analepsis, i.e. the recording of events *ex post facto*, is one of the main features of the second part of the book. The memoir genre allows only limited use of literary fiction, but Šoltésová succeeded in slipping meditations and reflections into texts factually describing her son’s terminal illness and death. While Elenka’s death may be considered in the more general context of nature’s merciless (“unfair”) killing of young people who have not had time to grow to adulthood, the notes about Ivan are written in a different mode. Ivan’s adolescence is very traumatic for both mother and son. It is a drama of Ivan’s difficulty of finding himself watched by his parents, who, after his graduation from high school, are reduced to being passive observers of his life. The reader is presented through the mother’s point of view with Ivan’s struggles, learning problems, difficulties at school and problems caused by his naïve and generous nature. The second volume of *My Children*, edited after Ivan’s death, is therefore also a *Bildungsroman*. D. Hodrová considers this genre a specific type of a *Bildungsroman*: “(...) in a traditional *Bildungsroman* the protagonist experiences the adventure of exploring the world, while in this specific type of a *Bildungsroman* the protagonist comes back to his roots.”⁴⁰ The second part does not fit into this realistic pattern since Ivan, thanks to his upbringing, refuses to break under the pressure of others (e.g. pressure to reject his Slovak identity), but on the other hand shows great weakness with regard to his own failings, for example constantly racking up debt. His death is significantly marked by his awareness that he has a lot of debt that his parents need to repay.

Šoltésová says in the text that she considers Ivan’s upbringing to be a very difficult test: on one hand she loves him dearly, but on the other she needs to think about punishment for his failings. She very often asks herself: “*Why must a human being be human when experiencing such pain?*” (p. 252). After this difficult period, when Ivan finally grows up and his character matures and takes shape, his mother “*finds he is stronger than me*” (p. 325). When he finally graduates from law school, he falls ill. His mother asks him if he wants to marry his fiancée Olga just before he dies, for she knows it is his wish: “*we were all ready for the ceremony – how sad. A wedding on a deathbed! What good subject matter for a novel. God save us all from this! Fate has us play in such a sad and painful drama*” (p. 352). Šoltésová as a writer inclining to realism was surprised by reality, because she found herself in the middle of a scene from a romantic penny-dreadful, so popular at the time. The paradox of life made her prefer a documentary genre more than literary fiction. The book’s final chapter is entitled *The finishing line...* The end of Ivan’s pain is death, described in one of the “most impressive, most moving chapters in Slovak literature”.⁴¹ Everything was wrong; the mother who gave him life was dressing him for

³⁹ KUBÍČEK, Tomáš: Obrana paměti. Čas a skutečnost v české literatuře sedmdesátých let, jejich povaha a důsledky aneb Co způsobuje narativ. In: *Česká literatura*, Vol. 52, 2004, No. 3, p. 348.

⁴⁰ HODROVÁ Daniela: *Hledání románu*. Praha : Československý spisovatel, 1989, p. 179.

⁴¹ VONGREJ, Pavol: Dcéra a otec (Daniel Maróthy). In: *Elena Maróthy-Šoltésová*. Zostavila Terézia Kaššayová. Martin : Matica Slovenská, 1987, p. 69.

his coffin when she should have been the one lying there. Even this part is described very factually and objectively in its profoundness and symbolism: "(...) *I stand here turning my back to you as if I were ashamed, looking right into the eyes of my readers after they read the story of his upbringing and my efforts to prepare him for a life, and I have to end the story like this*" (p. 357). She consciously hides and moderates her sorrow, and that is why it is so striking. Mourning is the motif of the part entitled *Resonances* describing her feelings after Ivan's death: first after several weeks, then after two years, and finally after seven years. He becomes real in her writing, and she realises that her love for him became more profound. She realises that those thirty-two years she spent with him were a gift, because "*there is no greater happiness than to have a person you can love so dearly*" (p. 386). These passages are lyrical, emotional analyses, melancholic memories that constituted the author's writing therapy.

The process of private, unsentimental mourning, and the transformation of melancholy into art, made *My Children* into a model for such self-therapy, a model for dealing with similar painful situations and through its universal values the text transcended the frame of Slovak literature and the period in which was created. Through the editorial process the author created out of self-centred notes a personal narrative and a reflexive body of text entitled *My Children* as a project of mediated identification, a self-reflection born out of the pain of her loved ones. The complex, functionally layered and protracted genesis of the work allows both author and reader catharsis.

Translated by Aňa Ostrihoňová

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