THE UNCANNY SELF IN LOVE

Divorced Catholic Women Remember Abortion in Romania

Marc Roscoe Loustau

ABSTRACT

This essay presents an ethnographic account of two divorced Catholic women’s memories of praying to the Virgin Mary while seeking illegal abortions under the Romanian socialist regime. These women’s stories focused on troubling memories of being in love, reflections that were retrospectively shaped by divorce. Drawing on Sigmund Freud’s notion of the uncanny, I call these recollections uncanny memories of the self in love. Uncannily remembering one’s self in love combines experiential self-examination and ethical assessment of actions. The notion of the uncanny self in love thus helps bridge the divide between experience- and action-oriented approaches to lived ethics. I argue that the ethical significance of the Virgin Mary’s actions depended on my acquaintances’ approach to love. For one woman seeking to stay estranged from her ex-husband, the Virgin Mary’s actions accentuated his ethical immaturity. My other acquaintance harbored more ambivalent feelings toward her ex-husband; for her, talking about the Virgin Mary helped her relativize feelings of ethical indignation. As a core implication of this argument, I urge greater awareness of the problematic tendency to include the need for greater awareness of tendencies in theories of lived ethics to reify socially situated perspectives on love.

KEY WORDS: love, abortion, divorce, Catholicism, the uncanny, lived ethics

1. Remembering Being in Love: Nightmarish Visions and Fearful Hallucinations

During my fieldwork at the Csiksomlyó pilgrimage site, located in a Hungarian and Catholic enclave in central Romania, I came to know several divorced, middle-aged women who lived near this shrine dedicated to the Virgin Mary. We met during my frequent visits to Csiksomlyó, where they also participated in the mix of devotional and social activities that took place there. Among them was a woman in her early sixties named Rita, a willowy and impulsive teacher who had

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moved from the city of Miercurea Ciuc to a suburban village cottage where she lived with her adult daughter, Orsolya, and Orsolya’s family. During my time at Csíksomlyó, I spent many evenings drinking coffee and talking with Rita on her back porch. On one of these evenings, Rita shared a memory of praying to the Virgin Mary many years earlier, while trying to illegally terminate a pregnancy. The events she described took place in the late 1970s, a time when the Romanian socialist government strictly controlled access to abortion and all birth control.¹ Rita recalled being in love with her boyfriend, Domi, whom she later married. She said she had “trusted him completely” to arrange the abortion but became terrified as she got into the abortionist’s car: “I remember thinking, ‘I could die here.’ I thought, ‘Why am I doing this? We’re doing everything that is exactly the opposite of what I want.’” As she continued with her description of the procedure, which took place in an empty apartment on the city’s outskirts, she commented on the tone of her reflections: “It sounds like this is some kind of nightmarish vision. Maybe I just made this up because I was so afraid. Maybe none of this happened, and I just hallucinated it.”

While at Csíksomlyó, I had many opportunities to talk with friends and acquaintances about being in love as well as about times when their trust had been tried by others’ troubling actions. Over the last fifteen years, ethnographers working in a variety of settings have noted the increasing global prominence of a notion of love identified with affection, maturity, consent, understanding, and mutual desire, a change that has made romance, courtship, dating, and other such practices into markers of personal and generational differentiation.² In this essay, I reflect on conversations with middle-aged, divorced Transylvanian Hungarian Catholic women—Rita and another frequent visitor to Csíksomlyó named Veronika—concerning this type of romantic love. Although I focus on these two acquaintances who reflected on this topic in the distinctive context of memories about illegal abortions, our discussions shared a similarly troubled tenor with other divorced Transylvanian Catholic women’s talk about love. As Rita observed about her own story, my acquaintances looked back on themselves in love and recalled fearful scenes. Coming face to face with an unsettling memory of one’s past self is a hallmark of an “uncanny” experience, one of Sigmund Freud’s most influential psychoanalytical and aesthetic concepts. In the 1919 essay in which he first explored this concept, Freud notes that the uncanny in literature is often associated with representations of “doubles”: mechanical automatons, lifelike waxwork figures, or doppelgängers (1959, 8–9).

¹ See Kligman 1998; Băban and David 1994, 1996.
Readers, Freud notes, are supposed to identify with these characters, who are frequently presented returning from hiding or the dead. For Freud, doppelgängers are a crucial element of the uncanny insofar as they prompt readers to ponder memories of themselves that are at once familiar and strange (1959, 13). Doppelgängers act in ways that leave readers confused and ethically troubled, searching for reasons these figures are so menacing or commit assaults, thefts, and murders. Especially in the study of religion and some branches of literary theory, the uncanny has come to describe an experience evoked by gothic and horror literary genres during which subjects engage in self-examination and transformation in an atmosphere of disquieting dread and anxiety (Freud 1959, 1–2).

Where Freud associated doppelgängers with the uncanny, my acquaintances associated memories of themselves in love with this quality of feeling. For sure, the experience of divorce powerfully colored their reflections. When I met Rita, she was recently divorced from her ex-husband Domi. According to her description, he had suddenly asked for a divorce only to quickly remarry, leaving Rita betrayed and angry even as she still felt affection for him. Rita’s past self in love takes on aspects of this present, betrayed and angry post-divorce self. What she found so disturbing was the fact that she could have died during her abortion, even though she had loved Domi and trusted him with her well-being. At the same time, she refused to embrace an uncomplicated blame; her terrifying experience had not been entirely his fault. As in Rita’s case, the experience of observing themselves in love prompted the gothic qualities of feeling Freud attributed to the “uncanny,” which my acquaintances described with terms like anger, stress, bitterness, jealousy, and fear—feelings that lay on them like a burden. Remembering what it was like to be in love presented a vision of themselves that was at once familiar but also foreign and even frightening.

As a process that mixes aspects of psychotherapy-style experiential self-examination and critical ethical assessment, these uncanny observations of the self in love draw attention to an overlooked theoretical fracture in the study of lived ethics. Several recent “state of the discipline” review articles have partitioned this field into orientations emphasizing either “freedom” or “reproduction” (see Faubion 2001; 2011, 20, 85; Robbins 2007, 2009; Zigon 2007, 2008, 2009a, 2009b; and Das 2015). However, these articles have neglected a second theoretical divide between experience- and action-oriented approaches to lived ethics. This divide

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3 See also Fassin 2012; Hirschkind 2006; Laidlaw 2002, 2010, 2014; and Lambek 2010. This distinction remains in force in the field even in the face of attempts to point out its limitations (see Faubion 2011, 20, 85; Robbins 2007, 2009; Zigon 2009a, 2009b; and Das 2015).
has been represented in its starkest terms in discussions about love.\textsuperscript{4} For instance, Jarrett Zigon's 2013 article “On Love: Remaking Moral Subjectivity in Post-Rehabilitation Russia” exemplifies the former, experience-oriented approach by emphasizing the way love is singular and particular—founded on the event of an amorous encounter that sets a person out on a new life trajectory (2013, 201–4, 212). Zigon develops this account through a description of the way two young, unmarried, and HIV-positive acquaintances fell in love after meeting in a Russian drug rehabilitation center. Their friends judged their subsequent actions to be unethical, worrying that they could violate their public commitments to sobriety and family by returning to drug use or by infecting future children with HIV. For Zigon, this judgment illustrates the way action-oriented approaches end up being “beside the point”: “It is this fidelity to love that is the moral experience and not any particular act or behavior that might be labeled ‘good,’ ‘bad,’ ‘right,’ or ‘wrong’” (2013, 212).

In contrast, Michael Lambek's “Toward an Ethics of the Act,” an introductory chapter to the volume \textit{Ordinary Ethics: Anthropology, Language, and Action}, uses wedding rituals and their problematic relationship with romantic love to identify the study of lived ethics with acts of promise-making and trusting (2010, 39). For Lambek, lived ethics is primarily concerned with practicing judgment in evaluating one's statements and acts (2010, 62–63).\textsuperscript{5} What matters about wedding rituals, from the perspective of lived ethics, is the way they allow people to make public promises that can be assessed based on shared criteria (2010, 43–46). Lambek argues that subjectivity is irrelevant to ethical promise-making and trusting. People routinely fall in and out of romantic love; their actions as spouses are still judged to be ethical regardless of their feelings about each other (2010, 45).\textsuperscript{6} At other times, Lambek seems to suggest that subjectivity is not just irrelevant to promise-making, but also a threat to it. Ethical action \textit{qua} promising and trusting must be sequestered from subjectivity, he argues, allowing for the private ambiguity of

\textsuperscript{4} The first school of thought is exemplified by the work of phenomenologically and existentially oriented anthropologists like Jarrett Zigon, Jason Throop, and Michael Jackson, while the second has coalesced around the work of Michael Lambek, James Laidlaw, Webb Keane, and other contributors to the study of “ordinary ethics” (see Zigon and Throop 2014; Jackson 2013; Lambek 2010; Laidlaw 2002, 2014; and Keane 2015).

\textsuperscript{5} Drawing on J. L. Austin's speech-act theory and Hannah Arendt's writings on public ethics, Lambek describes speaking and acting as fundamentally similar phenomena (2010, 55).

\textsuperscript{6} Lambek develops this argument in a review of Roy Rappaport's theory of ritual: “The point of ritual is to substitute public clarity for private obscurity or ambiguity.... Definitive ethical commitments and criteria are thus produced publicly and irrespective of personal doubt” (2010, 45–46).
subjective feelings to be substituted by public clarity about the criteria for judging one’s promises (2010, 46). Romantic love makes experience- and action-oriented approaches to ethics look like mutually exclusive points of view. While this theoretical fissure might become less antagonistic if the opposing camps go their own way to elaborate their own perspectives, such a move would leave unexamined the groups’ initial efforts to define the field’s key terms and potentially rob scholars of opportunities to engage alternative perspectives.

Rita and Veronika’s uncanny memories of themselves in love offer an opportunity to bridge this divide among scholars of lived ethics. My acquaintances implicitly recognized that both affective experience and practices of assessing action were relevant to their ethical lives. Emotion and judgment helped them probe the relationship between love and respect, experiment with different ethical justifications, encourage independence, and keep familial peace. Where action-oriented approaches see affect either as irrelevant or a threat to promising and trusting, an account of Rita and Veronika’s uncanny memories draws attention to subjectivity’s *generative* role in allowing my acquaintances to sustain these various ethical projects. In addition, I point out the way equating ethics with speech and action obscures my acquaintances’ creative use of silence to both keep familial peace and foster their children’s independence (Derrida 1977; Searle 1977). At the same time, Rita and Veronika sought workable justifications against perceived accusations that they had not kept to their promises. They affirmed the value of trusting and perceived that love and trust could, in fact, conflict with each other to the detriment of one’s well-being. The uncanny self in love, then, poses two questions to the subject that combines features of experience- and action-orientations to lived ethics: what kind of ethical person was I becoming, then, that I acted in this way, and how do this self and its actions bear on my ethical becoming in the present?

Following this introduction, the second section of this essay provides essential context for understanding Rita and Veronika’s stories about praying to the Virgin Mary. I argue that for Transylvanian Hungarian Catholics’ stories about socialist-era abortions do not directly relate to the question of whether they are “good Catholics” (Miller 2014). Rather, for Rita and Veronika, talking about terminating pregnancies fell within

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7 With this formulation, I take a stance outside the dichotomous debate between speech-act theorists and deconstructionists. Derrida’s critique of Searle’s speech-act theory centered on the idea that speech acts are not only given meaning by a subject’s intentions but also by constraints—psychological, contextual, political—on the use of language. The identification of silence with constraint problematically overlooks the Rita and Veronika’s sense that silence could be *creative* and *generative* in their efforts to navigate ethically problematic situations.
a pattern of reflecting on love. Their experience of marital dissolution primarily shaped the combination of fear and guilt that characterized the uncanniness of these recollections. In the third section, I describe the way Rita treated her illegal abortion as exemplifying a conflict between love and respect. The fourth part features Veronika's memories about praying to the Virgin Mary under similar circumstances. Veronika had her ex-husband, Tibor, play a large role in this narrative, which allowed her to insert this recollection into a larger group of memories that reinforced their post-divorce estrangement. I argue that Veronika's effort to reinforce their alienation was a response to the uncannily guilt-inducing power of her memories of being in love. In the conclusion, I reflect on a core implication that follows from incorporating divorced women's perspectives into the study of lived ethics. Over the last several years, certain theoretical orientations in lived ethics have come to be seen as mutually exclusive. However, I argue that scholars in lived ethics tend to perceive their perspectives in this manner because they have recreated in their work the perspectives of people caught up in processes of generational distinction. Rather than acknowledging and exploring the socially and existentially situated nature of these viewpoints, scholars have treated them as theoretical apprehensions of objects in the world.

2. Abortion and Divorce in Post-Socialist Romania

The late socialist period Rita and Veronika remembered in their stories was defined by the Romanian state's interventionist actions in setting pronatalist demographic and family policies. Historians of Romania's socialist period have argued that post-World War II economic factors drove Romania's policies concerning abortion, noting also that religious arguments were absent from the nationally and ethnically focused justifications legitimating the state's need for increased fertility. Following a period of rapid industrialization, spreading wage labor, and urbanization, population growth throughout Romania began to decline, presenting a significant problem for Romania's capital-poor and labor-dependent economy. Nicolae Ceaușescu, coming to preeminence in the Romanian Communist Party in late 1965, determined that changing abortion laws would, in part, remedy this population decline. Ceaușescu issued Decree 770, which determined that abortion in most cases became punishable by severe fines and time in jail. In the following years, as the state sought to justify and enforce this law through bureaucratic procedures, show trials, and

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8 A typical Romanian woman was eligible for an abortion only if she was above the age of 45 or had four living children. In 1985, a new decree raised that number to five living children and stipulated further that they all had to be "under her care" (Kligman 1998, 68).
propaganda, the state interpolated itself into the position of a “traditional” rural *pater familias*. In the socialist-era nationalist imaginary that sought to legitimate the state’s interventions in intimate dimensions of family life, Ceaușescu himself became a kind of idealized father figure who held decision-making authority over the distribution of familial resources and biological reproduction.

In the years following the collapse of socialism, actions undertaken by the first provisional post-socialist government linked political and social reconstruction to the liberalization of abortion laws. In early 1990, after the fall of Ceaușescu, the multiethnic and multi-confessional National Salvation Front eliminated restrictions on abortion, heralding this law as a sign that the post-socialist government was morally and politically distinct from the previous ruling elite. In the years since 1990, population growth has returned to the foreground in public debates; criticism of declining fertility rates and praise for large families now go unquestioned in public discourse, especially in the shrinking Transylvanian Hungarian minority community. While many of my acquaintances at the pilgrimage site would agree with these statements, memories of the suffering caused by socialist-era pronatalism would often prompt my friends to state that restricting abortion by law had exacted too high a cost. This conviction was so widely held that it also shaped the Transylvanian Catholic Church’s approach to public debates about abortion. In their contributions to public discourse, Catholic priests in the Ciuc Valley rarely if ever recommended legally restricting abortion. Catholic priests promoted moral and spiritual solutions to demographic decline rather than advocating socialist-style restrictive abortion policies and state interventions. In this atmosphere, to describe terminating a pregnancy under the Ceaușescu regime was not the kind of high-stakes public and political statement that American Catholic theologians and politicians make when they tell similar stories about the period before the liberalization of abortion laws in the United States (Miller 2014, 11).

Such narratives were public statements only insofar as they referred to post-socialist forms of political legitimacy that equated this value with

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9 For ethnic Hungarians in Transylvania, the fact that the socialist government has become associated with nationalizing efforts to assimilate the Hungarian minority through population management has also contributed to its perceived illegitimacy (see Brubaker et al. 2007).

10 This stands in contrast to the case of the pre-1970s US Catholic community, in which according to Miller, the absence of clerical commentary on abortion made this a “non-issue” (2014, 3).
limited state interventions in restricting access to abortion (Gal and Kligman 2000; Kligman 1998). 11

In part because Transylvanian Catholics’ stories about socialist-era abortions did not automatically address questions about their Catholic identity, my friends had some flexibility about how they could use these reflections. They had a measure of freedom to use these narratives to comment on other important issues in their lives, including the topics of romantic love and divorce. During my fieldwork, marital therapy was becoming increasingly popular among middle-class Transylvanian Catholics. Psychotherapeutic styles of imagining one’s emotional life were also encouraged by the growth of the transnational Catholic Charismatic Renewal in Transylvania, a movement heavily influenced by “the therapeutic habitus” that has long dominated emotional cultures in Western Europe and North America (Furedi 2004; Lerner 2015; Csordas 1994, 1997). While scholars have associated the therapeutic habitus with the “management” of emotions, Rita and Veronika spoke of emotional experience as a process of discovery and a sign of ethically significant personal “maturity” and “development” (Lerner 2015, 352). In the therapeutic habitus, love is a linchpin of subjectivity; it is the primary factor in the pleasure and pain that constitutes the self. A successful, mature, and developed life is defined by loving in a “healthy” way. While “traditionalist” Catholics expressed skepticism about the influence of psychotherapeutic methods on Catholic cultures by associating talk about feelings with “airing dirty laundry in public,” Rita and Veronika emphasized what they felt to be psychotherapy’s positive effects, adopting the language of development and maturity to speak about their own emotional experience.

Aware of the growing popularity of love, prominent Transylvanian Catholic clerical writers sought to embrace romance while making sure their readers understood its limitations. In an August 26, 2010 “Ethics and Spiritual Life” column for a weekly magazine published by the Transylvanian Archdiocese, Father Anklét, a Franciscan brother and priest stationed at the Transylvanian Franciscan Order’s Csíksomlyó house, strikes a skeptical tone in a piece about romantic love: “And what about love? Well, this sort of emotional manifestation is very pretty and nice, if it exists, but of course it depends on who is doing the talking here. Is the person speaking the truth? And how long will the love last anyway?”

11 Catholic bishops’ threats to deny the Eucharist to American Catholic theologians and politicians who tell such stories has indelibly linked reflections on terminating pregnancies to one’s status as a “good Catholic” and made such stories explicit critiques of the Catholic Church’s teachings. In the absence of such threats, Transylvanian Hungarians’ memories did not play the same role they did in the United States, where, for instance, lay Catholics use these stories to mark themselves off as ambivalent or progressive Catholics.
Other commentators echoed this dubious attitude toward romantic love, extolling the virtues of trust and forgiveness (Anaklét 2010). In a June 5, 2008 reprint of a talk given at the annual summer youth gathering at Csíksomlyó, Lajos Kerényi warns that “Love is in large part a lie because one who is in love will only say good things to you” (Kerényi 2008).

Still, Catholic authors felt pulled by the growing popularity of love and their flock’s interest in this topic. They found a way to address this topic by extolling God’s passionate love for individual believers. Father Anaklét used God’s voice to speak to his readers in a Sunday article titled, “Love Letters”: “You are so important to me, personally,” God confesses. “My every thought is about you. I will never forget you for a single moment ... I wrote you letters, love letters, in which I revealed myself, my love for you, and my mercy and goodness” (Anaklét 2009a). Often, such intimate and deep relationships with God are equated with ideas about personal “growth” and “maturity.” In a May 3, 2009 article titled “Deep and Intimate Life Relationships,” Father Anaklét chides his readers, saying, “I should be ashamed if I am still the same as what I was in the past. People who are incapable of growing in their spiritual lives are only superficial apostles of God.” Without this commitment to growth, he concludes, “we are immature” (Anaklét 2009b). In studies of post-socialist religious cultures, contemporary Russia has exemplified the growing influence of therapeutic discourses about love in these societies, but there are significant differences in the way post-socialist Catholic and Orthodox Christian moral commentators have referred to God’s love (Zigon 2013, 206; Lerner 2015). While the latter speak of God’s love for humans as the model for proper marital relations, the former send markedly mixed signals by striking a simultaneously approving and skeptical stance on the role of passion and romance in intimate bonds and religious experience.

The goal of preventing divorce was also important to Transylvanian Catholic leaders, whose messages discouraging marital dissolution steered clear of issues like the legal distribution of property in favor of commentaries about Catholic identity. In popular magazines and newspapers, clerics often spoke about divorce as defining a critical difference between Protestants and Catholics. Father Dénes Incze restated the Catholic magisterium’s position on divorce in a December 23, 2012 column:

12 This approach that emphasizes divorce, ethics, and identity as interrelated concerns—rather than divorce, law, and property—stands in stark contrast to treatments of divorce in the fields of romantic love and lived ethics, which begin from the assumption that divorce is primarily a legal and material phenomenon (see Boyd 2015).
Marital dissolutions are allowed in Protestant churches. . . . But if a Catholic gets divorced from a Protestant partner, and this marriage was validly performed, the Catholic cannot get remarried in a way that will be valid before God, because this person’s first marriage continues to be valid. The person can join themselves to another, but this isn’t a marriage, but rather cohabitation. (Incze 2012)

Incze seems to reluctantly recognize the increasingly fluid boundaries between Protestant and Catholic communities in the Ciuc Valley and the fact that such mixed marriages are a necessity in the shrinking Hungarian ethnic minority community. However, he insists on reaffirming the sinfulness of divorce as a defining aspect of Catholic life, divorce being an act that will thrust individuals outside the boundaries of the Catholic community.

For my acquaintances Rita and Veronika, divorce was also a high-stakes question, bringing together contradictory obligations to bolster their children’s faith while fostering their independence. When faced with such conundrums, my friends did not turn to speech or action, but rather to silence to navigate between conflicting obligations. 13 I once visited Veronika at her apartment on a Sunday afternoon after Mass during one of her daughter Laura’s occasional visits home. After sitting down at the kitchen table, I asked about the priest’s homily. Laura responded before Veronika could get a word out. “Oh, I really didn’t like the sermon,” she declared. “The priest was against divorce. This kind of message makes me want to become a feminist!” Laura’s comment about being a feminist was especially revealing. In the Transylvanian Hungarian community, to be a feminist was to stand outside the Church; Catholic feminist ideas were not widespread in the Transylvanian Archdiocese, and Transylvanian Hungarian feminist intellectuals were universally secular. For Laura, a stance that criticized Catholics for dissolving their marriages was a high-stakes affair that could lead her to abandon Catholicism altogether. That afternoon, I watched as Laura’s voice rose and she paced swiftly around the kitchen. Veronika, in contrast, stood at the sink and watched her daughter without speaking. For Veronika, at least on that day, the better option was to remain silent, even though she too had heard the priest’s homily.

There were also times when Laura did not give Veronika any room to remain silent about the topic of divorce. One afternoon I was sitting with Veronika and Laura in a café when I began praising a priest we all knew. Early on in my fieldwork, Veronika had heard me complain about unhelpful priests who were skeptical of my research. Now, in contrast,

13 Transylvanian Catholic women, much like American Catholic pilgrims to the Holy Land, feel that it is their responsibility to bolster their children’s faith (Kaell 2012; 2014, 181–82).
I was going on about my gratitude for this priest’s help. In the middle of this, I noticed a knowing look pass between mother and daughter. When I stopped to ask about it, Laura prompted Veronika to tell a story. “We don’t like him very much,” she said and nodded at her mother. Veronika continued by remembering how not long ago she had gone to this priest for confession. He asked her what her husband thought about something she had said, to which she replied, “I’m divorced.” He then chastised her. “Don’t you know that you will be tied together in eternity,” he asked. Veronika said, with a laugh, that she shot back a sarcastic retort: “Really? You can see into the future?”

Laura and I understood that Veronika had not actually spoken back to the priest. By that point in my fieldwork, I was familiar with the genre of humor that Veronika had used, which I had come to call “the tall tale.” The tall tale is a type of joke that Hungarian-speaking sociologists and folklorists have referred to as “the János Háry story,” after a nineteenth-century Hungarian literary character. János Háry was a plebeian soldier prone to pratfalls who was portrayed talking back to the authority figures who frequently humiliated him. Veronika found the tall tale genre useful in the café, in part, because it helped her respond to her daughter’s prompt. Laura implicitly expected Veronika to express agreement with her stance against the Catholic Church’s approach to divorce. Veronika’s response constituted an improvisational act of practical ethical judgment, which Lambek compares to styles of practice Aristotle called *phronēsis* (2010, 62). Veronika’s creative ethical assessment relies on notions of promise-making, as Lambek’s action-oriented approach to ethics predicts. When the priest reminded her of the promise that she had made in her wedding vows, Veronika accepted his premise. She differed by questioning the priest’s ability to discern how far into the future she should be bound to that promise. Veronika demonstrated her creativity by accepting the notion of marriage as a promise while also keeping the peace with Laura, who, during our post-Mass conversation in their kitchen, had made it clear that she was willing to forgo her identity as a Catholic were she to be forced to take a stand on this question.

However, the action-oriented approach does not give a full accounting of this interaction insofar as it situates affect solely as a threat to promise-making, something to be neutralized via creative ethical phronesis. To the contrary, Veronika’s tall tale allowed her to navigate between conflicting ethical imperatives because it made use of our shared experience of humiliation. Veronika was very familiar with my own humiliating encounters with unhelpful clergy. Laura had already made it clear that priests’ judgments could provoke her frustration and anger.

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14 See Julianna Bodó’s (2008, 78–79) treatment of this genre.
Veronika’s story relied on this knowledge that we had all lived through the same situation of being humiliated without any effective avenue for recourse. The effectiveness of the story was determined by Veronika’s sensitive ability to predict that we would imagine ourselves in her position in the confessional and empathize with her. Much more than the stories they told about socialist-era pronatalism, the issue of divorce had the ability to affect Veronika and Laura’s sense of being “good Catholics.” Indeed, divorce forced Laura and Veronika to face difficult ethical contradictions that Veronika navigated using tall tales and an intuitive sense that we could empathize with her experience.

3. Love, Trust, and Respect

Rita felt that her pregnancy had confronted Domi with a conflict between romantic love and respect. Although she was angry about Domi’s disappointing attempt to navigate these conflicting obligations, she also tried to convince herself that he had done all that he could to deserve her trust. Rita began her story by recalling how she became pregnant in 1979. She said she had been Domi’s unmarried “lover” (szerető) during this period. Domi arranged the abortion through his father who lived in a city several hours away. They traveled there by train and met the man whom Domi’s father had arranged to perform the abortion. At a prearranged time, Rita waited on the street for a car to arrive. Rita remembered becoming frightened as she got in. Until that point, she had not asked any questions. She described trusting both Domi and her future father-in-law to arrange this procedure: “Both he and I totally trusted his father. For sure, his father had chosen a very trustworthy person who had done this before. I thought that surely this person must be a doctor, even though I had no way of knowing this.” She had heard many stories about “charlatans” who performed illegal abortions for money, often leaving women injured or worse. “I hoped he was a doctor, but I knew that, you know, non-experts did these things, too.” When she got into the man’s car, she recalled having doubts about whether this man was a professional: “I thought, ‘Is this person a doctor? Does he know what he’s doing?’ I wondered, ‘Who is this person?’ It was all so suspicious. They could have taken me and done anything to me. I remember thinking, ‘I could die here.’” Rita wanted to believe that Domi had done what he could to prioritize her well-being, but she still had misgivings about the abortionist. Her repeated assertions of hope that this man had been a professional had the feel of attempts to force away these doubts and convince herself that, in the end, she had been right to trust Domi.

Rita believed that a conflict between love and respect lay at the heart of Domi’s disregard. Her most vivid memory of the events surrounding the abortion was an interaction that took place while they were traveling back
home from the city. “I reached the end of this whole horrible thing, and I said, ‘You should say to your mother that you have a really lucky mother that you love her this much.’ It came from a sense of bitterness. Or jealousy.” To clarify the social roles involved in this conflict: it pitted Rita in her role as lover against Domi’s mother. “I was his lover and she was his mother,” she responded. At first glance, this comment about the conflict between love and respect is reminiscent of the psychosocial dynamics of patrilocal and patriarchal marriage systems found in many areas of rural Eastern Europe. Anthropologists working in these regions have long argued that marriage practices uniting distinct household lineages produce distinctive psychosocial dynamics between in-marrying daughters and their mothers-in-law (Kligman 1988, 74–76; Simić 1983). For Kligman (1988, 74–76, 90–92), writing about a rural Greek Catholic community in Romania in the 1970s, newly married women struggle under their mothers-in-law’s oversight and tend to be resentful of their husbands’ doting bonds with these women. However, the research that generated these accounts took place during a time when divorce was either rare or nonexistent, thus leading anthropologists to focus on the psychosocial dynamics involved in joining and reproducing families. In contrast, Rita’s anger about Domi’s response to the conflict between respect and romantic love were shaped by the dissolution of her marriage. Although Rita was angry about the lack of respect he had shown her, she still empathized with her mother-in-law. Rita then explained that Domi’s mother had demanded his respect because her own husband had left her some years before. Domi’s mother had raised him alone, an unfortunate situation Rita compared with her own circumstances. “She was in as unlucky a situation as I am now. That’s how I saw it. She raised her son alone and in the end he left her, too.” Despite her statement that Domi’s greater fidelity to respect than love had led her to be “jealous” and “angry,” she now clarified that her comment had expressed “more like a feeling of pity.”

Mass media representations of Romanian socialist-era pronatalism offered a foil for Rita’s uncanny memories of being in love. A few months after hearing Rita’s story, I visited her again to listen to the recording we had made. While taking a break from the recordings, I asked her if she had seen the 2007 Romanian film 4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days by Cristian Mungiu, which was well known after receiving awards at international film festivals. In the film, a college student helps a friend terminate a pregnancy in the late ’80s. Rita said she had seen it, but she had been disappointed by the filmmaker’s portrayal. “It didn’t convey that same kind of stress that I felt,” she protested. “At least for me, as someone who experienced this kind of thing, it didn’t convey that horrible fear, and I’m sure that those girls in the film were under the same kind of stress.” Anthropologists and scholars in the field of memory studies have developed the notion of “memory markers” or “signposts” to describe the way a
media product like a filmic account can become a reference point that individuals use to aid the recovery of personal memories (Neiger, Meyers, and Zandberg 2011; Niemeyer 2014). In post-socialist contexts, scholars have noted how films, television documentaries, and books purporting to unveil the “hidden histories of the [socialist] past” provide events and themes that appear in remembered accounts of personal experiences (Kligman and Verdery 2011, 29; Khanenko-Friesen and Grinchenko 2015; Witeska-Młynarczyk 2014, 50). If this film had served as a marker or signpost for Rita, she had used it to turn around and head in the opposite direction. In her retelling of her experience, the film served as an experiential, affective foil that prompted her to invoke into the present the fear she experienced as well as her conflicted anger at Domi. The profundity of the uncanniness of her being in love—her feelings of fear and bitterness that emerged as she considered this version of herself—took shape in the space opened up by her desire to correct the filmic version she felt to be too pallid.

In turn, Rita probed the contours of her relationship with the Virgin Mary in a context shaped by the strength of her uncanny experiences. During our conversations, Rita sometimes sought to downplay the danger she had been in; she occasionally tried adopting a playful or inventive attitude toward her memories. Imagining her experience from the Virgin Mary’s perspective helped:

I’ve thought many times that maybe they didn’t actually do anything to me. They were just play acting. Maybe I wasn’t even pregnant. They just pretended to do the whole thing. I said this to Domi, I remember. Maybe they just squeezed us for some money. All kinds of silly thoughts went through my head. Maybe Mary helped me to make it so that I wasn’t pregnant.

Rita laughed wryly as she offered these comments. Such imaginative flights of fancy allowed Rita to see this event from a different angle—the position from which the Virgin Mary approached it as a powerful divine being capable of performing miracles. In the process, Rita gained access to a series of memories in which these terrifying events were only unserious games, rendered into mere playacting because the Virgin Mary had already removed her pregnancy. Deepening her engagement with this divine figure by putting herself in the Virgin Mary’s position allowed Rita to step back a bit from the uncanny experience of terror, a style of feeling that she had cultivated in relation to this memory as part of her critique of filmic portrayals of Romania’s late socialist period.

Rita’s misgivings about the trust she had placed in Domi reinforced a broader pattern of questioning her decision to marry him. In contrast, Rita was certain that the Virgin Mary had helped her by allowing her to become a mother, preserving her ability to bear children: “I asked for Mary’s help
in surviving this with my health so I could still have children,” she explained in response to my question about the results of her prayers. These definitive statements affirming the value of her relationship with her children contrasted with Rita’s prevarications about Domi. She once said that she thought perhaps she had asked the Virgin Mary to keep her relationship with Domi intact so that Domi would marry her. However, she later denied asking for this. “I didn’t pray for that,” she insisted. Her doubts about whether the Virgin Mary helped her in this way mirrored a broader interest in taking stock of her marriage. On several occasions, Rita wondered whether it had been wise to stay with Domi. If she had been “more conscious,” she once commented, “then I would have said, ‘See you later! Goodbye!’” Rita used the therapeutic language of development to probe the way love and trust had come into conflict during the events surrounding her abortion. From her perspective on the far side of her divorce, she also sought an explanation for why she had not fully assessed the significance of his lack of concern for her wellbeing.

If these memories of herself in love had opened Rita to feelings of anger and bitterness, she also sought to shield her relationship with Domi from these feelings. When I asked her why Domi had played such a large role in terminating this pregnancy, given the risks involved, she hesitated: “I don’t want to say. It’s a really mean idea. If the man wants to be freed from the woman, he will take care of it.” In fact, her expressions of anger at Domi’s callousness could quickly turn into expressions of care towards her ex-husband. A few months after I first interviewed Rita, she suggested I should interview Domi, too. She set up this meeting and then, the day after he and I met, she called to invite me over. She proceeded to pump me for information about his health. “Has he started drinking again?” she asked. “My God, I hope not.” The most poignant question she asked conveyed a powerful sense of longing: “Did he pray for me that night, while they were operating on me?” Rita still wanted to know that her husband cared for her as she cared for him. However, she immediately renounced this desire. “Don’t tell me,” she interjected before I could answer.

4. “I Certainly Wasn’t the One Who Solved This Problem!”

Veronika’s memories of illegally terminating a pregnancy were intertwined with descriptions of late-in-life experiments in romantic love with her ex-husband, Tibor. Rather than renounce romantic love after Tibor and their daughter, Laura, violently argued during one of these experimental periods, Veronika cut herself off from him and used her memory of terminating a pregnancy to reaffirm this social distance. According to Veronika’s recollections, she prayed to the Virgin Mary in a desperate moment after unsuccessfully trying to induce an abortion
using an improvised "medical device." Although the fetus died, she
told me, the tissue did not pass from her body. That evening, she
recalled, "I felt like my body was becoming infected." As the pain grew
worse, Veronika thought to herself, "This is the end of the road." Before
she collapsed, "I prayed very deeply. And the next day the answer came
to me." Veronika remembered that her husband said that he knew a doc-
tor who could help. They used to play soccer together in high school.
Her husband knew that he had helped other women in this situation.
He was a "good person," in Veronika's words. Still, in Veronika's recollec-
tion, she was frightened about having to "lie" to the doctor about her
condition. She would need to make him understand what was wrong,
but without allowing the doctor's nurses or assistants to grasp that she
was asking him to aid her in her attempt to illegally terminate this
pregnancy. She was at a loss about how to speak in such a "duplicitous"
way—in a style of speech she called "the language of thieves [tol-
vajnyelv]"—but suddenly found herself able to do so in doctor's office
(Kligman 1998). After speaking with the doctor, he admitted her to the
hospital and performed the procedure under the "cover story" that Vero-
nika had suffered a miscarriage. She finished with a summary comment,
referring both to Tibor's unexpected help and her surprising ability to
speak in the language of thieves: "I certainly wasn't the one who solved
this problem!"

This was not the first time Veronika had described Tibor's expertise
in manipulating connections and friendships to evade socialist-era laws
and to gain advantages. Veronika was often ready with such anecdotes,
including one story about an instance early in her marriage when Tibor
had arranged to skip ahead in the government's waiting list for new
apartments. They had been able to move out of his parents' apartment
after he had done a favor for a friend in the housing bureau. When
Veronika offered this memory, she made sure I knew that Tibor had
made these arrangements; she had played no role in this informal
exchange. She accomplished the same goal by portraying herself as
unskilled in the duplicitous language of thieves. Veronika followed this
same pattern in her description of the Virgin Mary's response to her
prayer: she said that the Virgin Mary had helped her by providing
"support" when she felt her body failing after she tried to terminate
the pregnancy. Veronika was very clear that her sudden ability to

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15 Veronika explained that she had obtained the device from a female acquaintance who
also described how to use it. Her approach to socialist-era duplicity seemed shaped by the
players involved. She felt more flexibility involving herself in such stories when her hus-
band was not involved. As soon as the story directly involved some aspect of her relation-
ship with Tibor, she painted this effort to evade socialist-era laws with an ethically
negative brush.
speak the language of thieves had not been the Virgin Mary's work, even though she said that she had not been the one to solve the problem of negotiating with the doctor. The two were "completely unconnected," she insisted during subsequent conversations about her story. In this statement, Veronika was applying practices of drawing clear ethical lines between the "duplicitous" socialist past and the "transparent" capitalist present to her intimate life. Drawing such boundaries has become a commonplace strategy of public discourse in the new member states of the European Union. Where accession into the European Union has been seen as a successful sign that, on a society-wide level, socialism has been left in the past, the European Union's insistence that new member-states embrace anticorruption measures as part of the accession process has inextricably linked "transition" to the implementation of economic and political transparency measures. For Veronika, the association of socialism, duplicity, and unethical behavior was not only a public matter involving business practices and the distribution of state funds but also an intimate matter involving her relationship with her husband. Drawing clear ethical lines was also a strategy she used selectively: she seemed to criticize duplicitous manipulations if Tibor had been involved, while avoiding such judgments in descriptions of other past efforts to get ahead in which he had played no role. Veronika insisted on negatively judging her husband's acts, and she described the Virgin Mary's role in the events surrounding the abortion in such a way as to reinforce this assessment. Her broader message was that their current social distance was also a reflection of their ethical distance.

As I got to know Veronika, I came to sense a deep anxiety in her that the social distance she maintained from her ex-husband was more vulnerable than it at first appeared. Veronika was so concerned to reaffirm her alienation from Tibor in part because she had a history of unsuccessfully doing so. She remembered their post-divorce efforts to experiment with romance and "dating," and these uncanny memories brought on a profound sense of guilt as she pictured herself in love. Although Veronika recalled frequent tension in her marriage during the 1990s, she also remembered good times. She called it "a cycle" in which her husband initially treated Laura and her well but would soon turn angry. "When this good period came, the period of him being a good boy, then life was good. At night, he waited on me." He helped with the cleaning, Veronika continued, bought her flowers, and spoke respectfully to Laura. But these periods were often followed by bad ones, when Tibor was angry, bitter, and constantly finding fault.

Veronika never gave me a precise date on which her marriage was dissolved. In her recollections, her divorce seemed never quite over

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16 See, for instance, references to "successful integration of European Union funds" and citations of corruption indices produced by Transparency International (Anderson and Gray 2006; and Swain 2011).
and done with. She sometimes spoke of being divorced at times she had been married and married at times when I thought she had already divorced. If Veronika’s timeline folded back on itself in ways that left me confused, I sensed this was because she was still struggling with the effects of her marriage even as she asserted that she had “grown” beyond Tibor. Veronika recalled repeated attempts to cut her ties to Tibor, efforts that were eventually foiled. After they divorced, she remembered worrying that he would be unable to support himself, so she proposed dividing ownership of their assets. They had begun two small businesses, and she proposed he take one of them while she retained control of the other. “I wasn’t sure that he was going to land on his feet. I would very much have liked that. So I said, ‘Okay, now, we’re divorced, let’s divide everything in half.’” Tibor became owner of the second company, but the division was in name only; Veronika still did all the work. Veronika claimed that, despite her efforts to extricate herself from contact with Tibor, she was swayed to start seeing him regularly again when he began sending letters “begging” for another chance. “The divorce is just a piece of paper,” she recalled him writing. “It doesn’t matter. We’re still married.” Veronika responded by proposing that they “date.” “I’ll be your girlfriend. We can be like we were before,” she said to him. “Oh my, we partied so much that year!”

They spent a year this way, until, according to Veronika, “he started to be displeased with this, that, and the other thing.” He proposed leaving the area to work abroad in Hungary. He had family members working there and they offered to get him a job. After the eight months away, he returned home for the Christmas holiday and moved back in with Veronika. Laura was at home from university as well. Veronika recalled that Laura was preparing to fly to Paris and then on to Taizé, a pilgrimage site in France. In contrast to her father’s childish dependence on her, Veronika described Laura’s visit to Taizé as evidence of her interest in “developing herself.” “She had become independent,” Veronika recalled, and this independence bothered her father.

He was jealous because he had never achieved the same maturity.17 As she was preparing to leave for this trip, “His fatherly attitude got

17 Veronika’s emphasis on maturity and development made use of Catholic commentators’ deployment of therapeutic discourses that praised “deep” and “personal” relationships with Jesus. Father Anaklét’s column for Sunday on “Deep and Intimate Life Relationships” bears the marks of this discourse. Maturity, he writes, defines the Christian life: “Remaining in [Christ] and with [Christ], that is to say a deep and intimate relationship, is a sign of a mature Christian lifestyle” (Anaklét 2009b). A 2010 conference at Babeș–Bolyai University in Cluj brought together Catholic psychologists and clergy for the purpose of exploring how they might use the distinctive tools of psychology to help Catholics. Dr. János Vik asked in his lecture: “Is the psychologist different or enhanced if Christian? A nature personality is the key to a nature Christianity. [Más-e, több-e a pszichológus, ha keresztény? Érett személyiség–érett kereszténység,]”
going and he wanted to give her permission.” Veronika recalled her husband saying, “Why do I need to find out from someone else that you’re going to Paris?” Laura responded in a way that precipitated an altercation. Soon after, she cut off all contact with her father and was still refusing to speak with him at the end of my fieldwork.

Veronika’s recollections of dating Tibor were uncanny memories; they prompted powerful feelings of guilt against which she defended herself with elaborate justifications and refusals. Looking back on her decision to reconcile temporarily with her husband, Veronika called it a “mistake”: “I bore the burden alone, this mistake. This was my doing, that I did not get out of the marriage earlier.” She recalled that Laura was “so angry with me” for becoming involved again with Tibor: “Laura didn’t understand this, and she never has. She is still angry, very much so. She said, ‘He came back again!’ She didn’t want him. She had cut herself off from her father and couldn’t understand any of my reasons for taking him back. She wouldn’t listen to me.” Veronika tried to explain her inability to part ways with Tibor as a matter of necessity; she had had no other choice: “It’s not easy to divide two companies. I couldn’t do everything all at the same time. I was falling apart. I needed time.” She seemed to be defending her demand for a salary from her husband for her work on behalf of his company, a decision that had strengthened their ties at a time when she felt she should have been severing them. She also claimed that she continued to see her husband out of concern for Laura’s reputation: “I didn’t want any gossip because that might have blemished Laura, as well.” Finally, she justified her inability to prevent the conflict that had left Laura alienated from her father as a sign of her concern for her daughter’s independence and her own “growth”: “Laura had been used to the idea that I would defend her against her father. I had grown a lot, too, which meant that I wasn’t involved in their relationship anymore. I thought, well, Laura is an adult now, too. She should defend herself against her father.” Veronika’s memories of being in love reverberated with fears and anxieties about putting her daughter at risk and the possibility that she may do so again. In the face of this uncanny experience, she experimented with ways to justify her actions, mingling references to necessity, parental obligations, independence, and maturity over the course of our conversations.

5. Implications for Research on Lived Ethics and Catholic Debates about Abortion

I have presented an analysis of two women’s narratives about illegally terminating pregnancies during Romania’s socialist period. I mixed an account of Rita and Veronika’s stories with observations drawn from ethnographic research with middle-aged and divorced Catholic women at
the Csíksomlyó shrine in Transylvania. More than stories about terminating pregnancies, divorce shaped Rita and Veronika’s sense of being “good Catholics” (Miller 2014). In her reflections on her relationship with her ex-husband Domi, Rita described a conflict between love and respect that emerged in the course of terminating her pregnancy. An argument that had put her daughter’s health at risk led Veronika to feel threatened by her abiding affection for her husband and her pleasurable memories of being in love with him. She used her memory of terminating a pregnancy to renounce her husband as morally immature, unsuitable for her in her current state of independence. Scholars who study debates about reproductive rights among Catholics routinely note that when Catholics talk about abortion their real concern is with the status of women and sexual desire (Miller 2014, 8–9, 257–58). Without refuting this claim, my argument in this essay uses the growing ethnographic literature on romantic love outside the West to suggest that love is an equally powerful ethical concept driving contemporary reflections on abortion (Kalbian 2014, 4). Rita and Veronika’s stories about abortion take shape in the unstable space opened up by their experience of being in love and their assessments of their actions.

Framing divergent experience- and action-oriented approaches to lived ethics as a debate about romantic love reveals a social backdrop to this theoretical fissure in the study of lived ethics. Zigon’s defense of experience is based on his fieldwork with young, unmarried couples living in urban Russia. In the anthropological literature about the globalization of love, people fitting a similar social profile are portrayed as the foremost proponents of this ideal. As Lydia Boyd observes in her study of romantic love among unmarried Ugandan Pentecostal college students, embracing love advances young Ugandans’ project of fashioning a modern subjectivity, which stands in contrast to their parents and grandparents who affirm marriage as a relationship of social and biological reproduction (2015, 151). Lambek’s treatment of ethical action does not refer to ethnographic research with any specific social group. However, his suspicious attitude toward subjectivity reproduces the perspective on love that Boyd and others have attributed to the parents and grandparents of the younger generations who have embraced the ideal of romantic love. The theoretical partition dividing the ethics of experience from the ethics of action is equally stark perhaps because the former reflects the

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18 At the same time, I am also aware that Western discourses often link sexual activity solely to desire and love, obscuring the local and global circumstances that shape sex and, by extension, abortion (Boyd 2015, 48).

19 Wardlow and Hirsch state, “Around the world, young people are talking about the importance of affective bonds in creating marital ties, deliberately positioning themselves in contrast to their parents and grandparents” (2006, 1; see also Padilla et al. 2007).
perspective of young people trying to distinguish themselves from their parents, whereas the latter gives voice to the opinions of parents who, in light of their children’s emerging attitudes, come to defend their own orientation with clarity and vigor. One reason that the theoretical partition dividing an ethics of experience from an ethics of action is so impermeable might be tied to the fact that the chief proponents of these approaches, including anthropologists like Zigon and Lambek, seem to be recreating their informants’ perspectives on love. Although scholars have represented their theoretical perspectives as mutually exclusive by virtue of their reference to wholly distinct objects in the study of ethics, in reality these positions appear to be so divisive because ethical experience and action are useful for processes of shared individuation.

Divorced Catholic women in Romania stand in between this generational divide and see the virtues of embracing both experience and action perspectives. As I joined Rita and Veronika in trying to navigate between conflicting ethical imperatives, I came to see uncanniness as a concept sensitive to the ambivalent attitudes toward love I observed among the divorced Catholic women I came to know during my fieldwork in Transylvania. Indeed, Veronika identified with the ideals of romantic love, including independence, consent, pleasure, and emotional intimacy. She did not renounce her desire for this aspect of romantic love even as she grappled with feelings of guilt associated with the dangerous confrontations between Laura and Tibor. Like Veronika, Rita’s reflections suggest that divorced Catholic women in contemporary Transylvania understand both the generative force of the experience of romantic love as well as the virtue of looking back on past actions in an attitude of evaluative assessment. As such, divorced Transylvanian Catholic women’s ambivalent reflections on love, divorce, and abortion illustrate the dangers of reifying our acquaintances’ emergent ethical perspectives as theoretical apprehensions of objects in the world.

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