

From Somogy to Cleveland: A Hungarian Emigrant's Heroic Odyssey

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In late November of 1944, the Russian armies advanced north-westward towards southern Hungary precipitating the flight of many Hungarians living in the Transdanubian region. Among the refugees was György István Gyékényesi, the twelve year old son of the educator-cantor of the village of Gyékényes in the county of Somogy, who together with his family would embark on a journey that would sweep them westward through Austria and Germany, and across the ocean to America. Almost thirty years later the odyssey would come to a tragic end in Cleveland, Ohio with the untimely death of the poet-emigrant.

An almost historical as well as a mythical account of the happenings during the poet's short life are recorded in his first published poetic anthology *Karikázó*.¹ The word *karikázó* has several connotations in the Hungarian language, two of which can be loosely translated into English as the forward roll of a circular object such as a ring, and as a name given to a type of Hungarian folkdance. In either case, the emphasis in our interpretation of the concept should lie on Gyékényesi's utilization of the word to represent the ever mobile, the ever-changing aspects of human existence with something immutable and whole at the core represented by the ring itself. The metaphor of the rolling ring describes the contents of the poems where the always different historical and personal circumstances and surroundings mold and mesh with mental processes, reactions, and emotions to be transformed by a poet's consciousness into an abstracted, timeless, harmonious reality.

We have often heard that the modern poet is a myth maker. Gyékényesi's poetry is the dynamic interfacing of the individual consciousness with the panorama of the second half of the twentieth century, a vision that is both European and American, both scientific and humanistic. Gyékényesi's quest is to arrive at a synthesis, at an integrated concept that will elucidate his

transplanted and thus displaced Hungarian heritage, as well as explain the reasons for his country's turbulent historical past and present. His identity is that of an emigrant, a posture that, as he tells us in his prologue, plucked him from history's rumbling chariot and hurled him to the edge of the road, free of any allegiance except to himself and possessed of the gift to observe and peruse all that those remaining in the chariot cannot possibly see. "Emigráns az, aki kívülről szemléli saját magát" (an emigrant is one who views himself from the outside) he states stoically in one of the poems.² This attitude enables him to abstract and conceptualize his Hungarian cultural identity, rather than sense it instinctively or live it experientially. His deliberate Hungarianness that evolved from a rather long and arduous process of self-development, finds expression in the theme as well as in the Hungarian folkish tenor of his imagery. Although the language of the poems is Hungarian, there is a digression from Hungarian literary tradition whose sources of influence principally lay on the European continent. In direct contrast, Gyékényesi found his sources of inspiration in the poets Yeats, Eliot and Pound. Gyékényesi, like Yeats with Irish folklore, employs many folk motifs (song, dance, customs, sayings) in order to enrich, colour, deepen and diversify his presentation of eternal, universal, and modern concerns, at the same time, communicating his belief in and admiration for the spirituality of the Hungarian peasant culture. Those poems treating the ethnic questions that arose from his own displacement and that of other fellow Hungarians from their homeland, find voice in expression that bridges the cultural gap between Budapest, London and New York. His masterwork *Napnyugati kantáta* (Occidental Cantata) is poignant, sweeping, challenging verse with a philosophical basis, poured into the newly sculpted form of Hungarian-American poetry. As an emigrant, Gyékényesi also looks to his adopted country, sharply analyzing the present American reality and either accepting it or repudiating it. Most surprising of all however, is not Gyékényesi's Hungarianness, his pro or contra Americanness, but that his humanistic preoccupations arise from the completely scientific milieu of the NASA space research laboratory, a fact that alone makes us sit up and listen, as we did to Wallace Stevens, who spoke to us from the plush offices of his insurance agency.³

In all great poetry things are happening on the surface and things are happening below the surface. Gyékényesi's travel is not merely physical displacement but multifaceted. Not only do we have the physical journey of the emigrant from Somogy to Cleveland and throughout Europe and America, not only do we have the explorations of the NASA scientist into the secrets of the universe but most complex and awesome of all, we have the ventures of the poet-traveler into the innermost recesses of the human consciousness.

The concept of parallel quest and sometimes discovery in Gyékényesi's poetry may be seen in the light of a series of spacial and chronological journeys. The former encompasses his movement from East to West, from Hungary to the United States, from the village (Gyékényes) to a metropolis (Cleveland), and finally within the confines of the NASA space laboratory, from the earth out into the universe. All of the journeys take the poet from the known into the unknown. Chronologically, Gyékényesi travels from the past through the present and into the future. On a personal level, the journey through time also touches upon the poet's own development from early childhood to maturity, and ultimately to the only known aspect of his future — his death. The inner journey for identity, integrity and truth is symbiotically dependent on the spacial and chronological journeys of the poet-emigrant. Both the departure and the arrival points are scrutinized, while each serpentine segment of the road tries to reconcile the world of science and the world of the humanities in a fiercely felt Christian humanism that emphasizes the whole, integrated, individual consciousness. The unifying element in all the peregrinations is the traveling, questing poet. Gyékényesi's universe is man-centered and it is neither the beginning nor the end that holds the greatest import but the effect of the quest upon the traveler.

Structurally, the anthology intentionally follows the unfolding of Gyékényesi's experiences in a circular fashion. Like Borges and other contemporary writers, Gyékényesi plays with the idea of chronology and rejects it in favor of a unified time. All moments within the individual are past, present and future. Thus, the first poem entitled *Vándorének* (Wanderer's Song) is a backward glance from the present at the origin of the exodus from Hungary. The last poem describes the flight from the perspective of that present. Entitled *Karikázó* (the rolling ring

metaphor), it recreates the atmosphere, the changing seasons, the uncertainty and loneliness of the homeless *kis katona* (little soldier) who fearfully questions his fate: “*Istenem, jó Istenem, hol lesz a halálom?*” (My God, good God, where will I die?). Both poems treat the same theme of exile in order to emphasize the permanence of that feeling in the poet.

Following the initial poem are several written in the imagist tradition that capture moments of time, impressions, along his journey. Among these we can cite *Párvers* (Couplet) that through a series of simple descriptions capsulizes the trip from Hungary, through Austria, Italy, Germany, to New York. Each couplet of the five in the poem contains the one or two essential images that comprise the stages along the way. It is truly naked, exactly worded verse, free of adornment and in concentrated form embodies the spirit of each place: for Hungary, the whitewashed housefronts with horse chestnut trees, for Austria, the evergreens, the mountaintops, and church cemeteries, for Italy, the rapid chatter, the donkey, the fountain, for Germany, the steeple and horn blowing ships, and finally, New York, the ebullient port, the New World, the new challenge for trembling knees (p. 6). *Tirol* (p. 8), *Bresciai emlék* (Reminiscence of Brescia) (p. 9), *Zápor* (Shower) (p. 10), *Reggel Clevelandból Akron felé* (Morning Drive from Cleveland towards Akron) (p. 11), *Ének az úton* (Song of the Road) (p. 12), *Anchorage felé* (Towards Anchorage) (p. 13), *Tájék* (Landscape) (p. 14), are other poems that evoke memories and moments of his past life. In *Tirol* the young girls make the sign of the cross in front of the tin-bodied holy image, while the fir trees sun themselves and the snow sparkles. The grass is as tufted as the sheep that bleats near the forest as it drives away the flies. From Italy and his *Bresciai emlék* the troop of Magyar boys is awed on the one hand by the bare walled monasteries with hooded friars, on the other by the swaying, full-breasted signorinas. *Zápor* shifts the poet’s perspective from the objective to the inner world, from the present to the past and back again to the present. In this interplay of moments and impressions the poet describes the thundering black steeds, the puddles, the fly on the mosquito net, the thundering bombs in Carinthia, his father’s dogged search for bread, his mother’s hair prematurely white from anxiety, and his little brother overjoyed by a homemade pair of wooden soled shoes. In the final

moment he asks rhetorically “*hát mire vársz még?*” (so for what are you waiting yet?) “*nézz ki ablakodon/zápor*” (look out your window/shower). In the poem *Reggel Clevelandből Akron felé*, Gyékényesi acknowledges his love and appreciation for Ohio, his adopted home. Just as time meshed in the poet’s consciousness, spaces unify as well. Although living in the city, he is drawn to nature, the tame hills, the yellow earth, and the ragged mist, that he encounters during his drive. Subconsciously he becomes unified with the Hungarian land where he was born. The duality of the abstracted Hungarian landscape versus the real American landscape also appears in the poem *Tájék*. In this poem the writer equates Moose Creek and Gyékényes, which become one and same abstracted reality. Gyékényesi’s love of the land stems from his youth in which he says that his mother breathed into him the soul of the Somogy landscape.⁴ For him the land symbolizes the eternal, the traditional peasant spirituality, the Hungarian essence in its purest form. On another level we might say that the land, the earth of a particular region is the exteriorization of the poet’s internal avowal of allegiance to himself and hearkening back to the ring metaphor, the representation of the changelessness, the wholeness of the ring itself.

Since all journeys are chronological as well as spacial, and even though all moments of time meet in the poet’s abstracted chronology of events, the happenings themselves are accepted by the poet as occurring in some order and with some form. Thus time and metamorphosis are two interrelated ideas observed and analyzed in Gyékényesi’s poetry. He told us initially in his prefacing notes that he does not sit in history’s chariot, yet as a human he cannot liberate himself completely from his own temporality. In the poem *Ének az úton*, the poet explores the sweep of events and the quickness of his life through the utilization of both literal and figurative vehicles that carry him over glass meadows, cresty waves, bustling roads and tracks. They gallop with him as the horse in the Hungarian folktale to the ends of the earth where fate slides around on ice and the world has run out from under him. The only thing left to do he says is to wait and watch time, nineteen hundred and sixty years after the birth of Christ. The rush, the flight, the impetus have slowed for the moment and the poet pauses to reassess what he has undergone as man and what awaits him. Stasis is unusual in Gyékényesi’s poetry since all the poems are

imbued with constant motion, with changing imagery, with the enumeration of verbs, embodying his inner restlessness, his inner quest. Here again we might pause and on another level interject the metaphor of the rolling ring, this time, with emphasis on the rolling.

The poems *Anchorage felé*, *Illusztráció* (p. 17), *Nanette* (p. 16) and *Idő* (Time) (p. 18) represent the more traditional themes associated with time — time as equalizer, fleeting time, and the *carpe diem* motif. Time as equalizer is seen in the poem *Anchorage felé*:

de mért is játszanának a szelek
mikor a meredek úgy is elsimul
és a laposban mint a végítélet
a hegy lábára kúszik a jég.

(But why should the winds whirl/ when the steep levels itself anyway/ and in the flatland as final judgement/ the ice creeps onto the foot of the mountain.) (p. 13)

In *Idő* life is but a moment, a tiny snail shell that gets lost while you are finding it: “*Szép volt — mondd — és menj tovább/ jön utánad az unokád.*” (It is pretty—say—and go on/ your grandchild follows you.) Journeying and time also mean changes as Gyékényesi points out in *Metamorfózis* (Metamorphosis) (p. 19). Experience humanizes man he believes, therefore change is creative. Fate is a series of alterations and like the autumn leaf, man is tossed about and whoever can, will withstand it and survive.

Gyékényesi's journey ended in America and the poems dealing with his adjustment to life in the New World form the central and most meaningful part of the anthology. The themes of East meeting West, materialism and spirituality, the individual versus the *hombre-masa* (mass-man) of Ortega y Gasset, love and alienation, past and present, tradition and cultural void, artificiality and authenticity, the aged and the new generations, dreams and disillusionment, reality versus illusion, abortion and birth, life and death, war and peace, technology and the humanities are all fitted together with amazing dexterity and beauty, like pieces of a puzzle, to form a great canvas of American civilization at a moment of cultural shift. Technical and scientific imagery stemming from the poet's educational formation and profession as a space research engineer pervades his intellectual and emotional response to

the technocratic fever to which America has succumbed. Yet the poet in Gyékényesi rejects the scientific simplicity of our age, for he knows that the pulse of the life force can be felt and measured but never fully and satisfactorily explained by scientific principles and methodical procedures. Our futile space explorations ultimately lead to more and greater unanswerable queries:

értsd meg tehát
valószínű világom templomai
a felül és aluljárók csarnokai
és kakasos tornyom
a Cape-en a fémrácsos obelisk
ahonnan dübörögve küldjük a holdra
a kísérletező embert.

s itt megtorpanok
hogyan aztán...

Understand then/ that my real world's temples/ are the over-
passes and the underpasses/ and my crowned steeple/ is the
metal- grated obelisk at the Cape/ from where we send to the
moon with great rumbling/ man the experimenter. and here I
rear/ then what...

(*Funkcionális torzó* p. 25)
(Functional Torso)

In order to emphasize the insignificance and ridiculousness of man's spacial toying, he employs the diminutive *emberkém* (little man), castigating him as if he were a child for his thoughtless and dangerous experimentations.

Emberkém megvillant agyad
s hopp az űr szélén kacarászol
aszteroiddal dobálóznál máris
míg hidegen csillog Szirius
küzdesz rendezel kutatsz
de miért — kérdőjel ténykedésed.

Little man your mind lit up/ and whoops you giggle at the edge
of the universe/ you would even play ball with asteroids/ while
Sirius still shines coldly/ you struggle, arrange, investigate/
but why — your activities are still a question mark.

(*Párvers mai témára*, p. 27)
(*Couplet for Today's Theme*)

Ironically, the poet-scientist views man's trial journeys into space as an endangerment of the real issues and as a detraction from the ultimate questions.

The artificiality, the plastic quality and loss of identity

characteristic of the American way of life are sharply criticized and repudiated in a series of poems beginning with *American Gothic*:

Nyelvünk hegyéről fröccsen felém
a lepárolt szó.
számok adatok
ó szénaforgató fakó gótika
Amerika
Amerika

From the tips of their tongues splatter toward me/ the distilled word/ numbers statistics/ oh hay throwing faded gothic/ America/ America

(*American Gothic*, p. 23)

Face, fate, and being are molded and faceless, naked and fateless, photographed and personless respectively. Gyékényesi's fear of man's total dehumanization, of his becoming a naked pattern, a non-person governed by the laws of probability, heralding the death of imagination, or as García Lorca so well described it-*angel*, is acutely felt in the poem *Immár eljött a Gyermek* (Behold the Child Has Come).

immár eljött a Gyermek
kit többé nem csap meg a lélek szele
a Senkifia
meztelen szabvány
törvénye a történet valószínűsége
s valósága a társadalom
mert nincs Ember
csak emberke
piciny szegecs
egy óriás izzó kazánon

Behold the Child has come/ whom the soul's wind will never stir/ the No-Man's Son the No-God's Son/ the Son of Nobody/ a naked pattern/ whose law is the law of probability/ and whose reality is society/ because Man does not exist/ only little man/ a tiny rivet/ on a gigantic red hot furnace/ (p. 60).

Karácsonyi történet helyett (Instead of the Christmas Legend) (p. 53) is a portrayal of the birth of a new paganism with the coming of a sulphur eyed, metal vertebrated, baby caesar, around whom stood wombless virgins and the soothsayers read the numberlessness of his years from plastic intestines. In brief, nothing that detracts and robs man of his humanness is left undetected and unanatomized.

As an ethnic poet, Gyékényesi possesses a great historical awareness, hence, the Hungarian homeland, the Hungarian-

Americans, their past, present and future are scrutinized, empathized with, and loved. The unique situation of being a poet/pariah affords him the luxury of standing on the bridge as an observer while the waters swirl and change course beneath him. In his masterwork *Napnyugati kantáta* (Occidental Cantata), Gyékényesi summons forth all his creative powers in handling a tremendous amount of historical and philosophical material with great beauty and dexterity. On the whole, the poem offers a panoramic as well as a sectionalized vision of the Hungarian historical process, transporting the reader into time and space, and into the most private enclosures of the Hungarian soul. In the tradition of Eliot's application of musical form to literature (*The Four Quartets*), the Cantata is divided into four parts with each segment founded upon an image that gives meaning and cohesiveness. Through contrapuntal allusions ranging from Thomas Aquinas, Augustine, Ignatius of Loyola, Rilke, Hesse, Lorca, Dvořák, Hunyadi, Bartók, to John Henry, the poet expands the scope of subject and leaves behind an endless series of interpretations and meaning, like the ripples in the water after a stone has been tossed into it. The thematic content of the first half encompasses the pagan and Christian Hungarian past, the role of Hungary in the defense and development of Western Civilization; the second half treats the godless Hungarian present and the future of the Hungarian emigrant in America. Throughout the poem the feeling of survival, the tenacious Hungarian's strong will to endure and overcome whatever fate casts his way is emphasized. History and governments may change, the Hungarian map may change, the Hungarians may be driven out of their homeland, they may be murdered, but the land remains, the Hungarian character, the Hungarian soul will overcome and surpass whatever challenges time and destiny may bring.

The American soil, the second home of the Hungarian immigrant is described by Gyékényesi in all its glory, through musical and geographical allusions — the Carolinas, New Orleans and "When the Saints Go Marchin' in," the "Yellow Rose of Texas," the steel mills of Pittsburgh, "John Henry," old Boston that sleeps in New England, and California, that world of the never has been's tomorrow, when your past remains behind and the present offers its sweet delight (pp. 81, 82, 83 respectively).

The individual emigrant-questor-poet steeped in the traditions of his Hungarian inheritance struggles to find meaning in the transplantation of his self from European soil to America, from the Old World to the New. Who is he? What is he? Can he find meaning in that limbo of non-identity in which he finds himself as a "Hungarian-American?" For his generation and for himself as a poet-creator the answer becomes obvious. What appears as an irreconcilable antithesis has already been resolved within the framework of art, within the elements of his poetry, where the concerns and queries addressed, and the tools of expression are Hungarian-American. While Gyékényesi's Hungarianness as we have seen was deliberated, so was his Americanness. Thus the expression of man's creative spirit, his consciousness, is the mysterious process whereby the Hungarian self finds meaning with American culture to produce the new voice of Hungarian-American letters in the chorus of Western Literature.

The final message of the poem is of acceptance and resignation:

prések dohognak Detroitban
 elrobogtak a busa bölények
 a prairien hullámszik a búza
 írhat száz éneket Európáról,
 de a fiadban kísért ez az ország
 mikor az első szó száján kiperdül
 idegenül
 ó Európa
 otthagytunk a keleti parton
 ott az óriás fáklyás asszony
 kőtyúkszemes lábainál.

The presses rumble in Detroit/ the somber headed buffalo thundered away/ the wheat waves on the prairie/ you can write a hundred songs about Europe/ but this country tempts you in your son/ when he utters his first word/ in an alien tongue/ O Europe/ we left you on the eastern shore/ there by the gigantic torch-bearing woman's stone corned feet (p. 84).

All quest has a philosophical basis. Gyékényesi's turmoil of experiences had led him to interpret existence as a series of metamorphoses, the eternal and immutable element being the faithfulness to oneself. As a scientist, he rejects the fragmentation, stratification, and the anesthetization of the consciousness that the modern scientific world upholds and seeks to assert the integrity that the term humanistic offers. His odyssey as

we have witnessed through flashbacks and an interplay of spacial, chronological and metaphysical spheres was comprised of physical struggle and spiritual questioning. The former culminated in his death from cancer in Cleveland in 1973, but the latter will continue as long as there are men and women to read and co-create with him. His visions, sounds, and insights, as the ring in the *karikázó* metaphor will keep on rolling in the imaginative and mythos making faculty of the reader.

NOTES

1. All the poems mentioned in the text are taken from this edition. With the publication of the anthology, reviews of the book appeared in many leading newspapers of the exiled Hungarian community both in Europe and America, all of them favorable. The most important of them were: Kocsis Gábor, "De emberi a szám-adásom," *Nemzetőr* (Munich, West Germany) (1972). "Könyvismertetés," *Magyar-ság* (Pittsburgh, PA) (1973). Scheer István, "Gyékényesi György: *Karikázó*," *Itt-Ott* (Ada, Ohio) (1973). The outstanding Transylvanian writer and dramatist András Sütő, also reviewed this volume, under the title: "A kéklábú madár nyomában." Sütő personally met with Gyékényesi in Transylvania upon the poet's visit there in the summer of 1972, and was present at his funeral in Cleveland. In addition to these reviews, Gyékényesi's poetry had appeared previously in many journals and newspapers of the Hungarian diaspora in the West.

2. *Jegyzetek egy témakörre*, (Notes on a Group of Themes) p. 54. All the translations that appear in the text are my own.

3. Sütő András (See Note 1.) writes in his critique of Gyékényesi's poetry that as a poet he can be compared to James Cook, Columbus, and Kelemen Mikes, in that his poetic world is a new found land, so rich and unusual that it would be difficult for the European Hungarian to follow him there even in the imagination.

4. This is a figurative expression for the cultural heritage embodied in the language, folksongs, sayings, customs, rituals and dances that belong to Somogy county and were passed onto him by his mother. All the information pertaining to the poet's life and any insights into his creative personality were furnished by the parents of the deceased poet, Mr. & Mrs. Gy. László Gyékényesi in a personal interview (October, 1980, Cleveland, Ohio).



György Gyékényesi