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Samuel J. Wilson: Görgey, Lee, and Perceptions

Valéria Majoros: Berlin et Paris de Lajos Tihanyi

Kevin E. Kelly: Lugosi in Hollywood

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MIKLÓS RADNÓTI AND THE BIBLE

GEORGE GÖMÖRI

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The young Radnóti enters the field of Hungarian poetry with a rebellious stylization: the title of his first collection of verse in 1930 is *Pogány köszöntő* [A Pagan Salute]. Yet "paganism," fashionable in the 1920s, is merely a mask or posture, just as the quasi-religious terminology of Radnóti's first published poems has precious little in common with real religious faith. One of these early verse cycles is entitled "*Az áhítat zsoltára*" [The Psalms of Devotion] and in this one just as in the next one "*Sirálysikoly*" [Seagull Scream] Radnóti employs Christian terminology for pure poetic effect. For example, in the poem "*Sirálysikoly*" he talks of "the millions / in whose stead I dream my dream / and am resurrected Christlike / and blood-dye-red evil dawns / to sin and desire."¹ In another, socially challenging and rebellious poem "*Szegénység és gyűlölet verse*" [The Verse of Poverty and Hate] the young Socialist poet uses an elaborate and rather bad metaphor where he compares the black shadow under his own eyes to "a Golgotha" where "upon sweat-crucifixes... the coal-dust covered Christs of the nights were crucified in blue" ("Verejtékkeresztetől görnyedő ráncokkal terhes Golgotha volt a szememalja, ahol az éjek szénporos Krisztusai feszültek kéken.")² In yet another poem from the same period "*És szólt és beszélt vala Káin Ábel*" [Cain Said to Abel his Brother] an exact biblical quotation appears for the first time; it refers to Cain's words to his brother Abel, before he commits fratricide. Emeiy George in his 1986 book finds in this work support for the hypothesis that Radnóti read the Book of Genesis as a child.³ This may be so, but the way in which the young poet uses the Cain myth is, to say the least, curious. He takes upon himself Cain's role inasmuch as he interprets the circumstances of his own birth as "murder" or something close to murder, "murderously heavy I broke loose, / like a first leaf from the curse-groaning, bitter tree" ("... gyilkos nehezen szakadtam le mint első levél az átkotnyögő keserű fáról.")⁴ Radnóti

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also identifies with Cain's rebelliousness, he also seems to suffer from the burden of the "original sin". The poem's other allusions are far too cryptic to tell whether it also represents a challenge to his uncle (who was also his guardian) or it is mere play-acting in a biblical guise.

In Radnóti's next collection *Újmódi pásztorok éneke* [Song of Modern Shepherds] the religious and biblical mannerisms continue. References are made to various biblical figures in a variety of contexts. For example, in the poem "*Olasz Festő*" [Italian Painter]: "Yesterday he painted a Mary, a girl with / lovely eyes, and he sang. Now it's Christ / he sketches, under Judas's kiss" [Tegnap Máriát festett, szépszemű / lányt és énekelt. Most Krisztust / vázolja Júdás csókja alatt...] ⁵ or one could point to "*Két szentkép*" [Two Icons] where the Virgin Mary and St. John the Baptist are portrayed more or less as in religious paintings. Yet the main tendency of Radnóti's "biblical" poems of this period is a democratization or profanation of holy figures. Béla Pomogáts in his book on Radnóti points out that "the profanation of religious images was frequent in art at the turn of the century." ⁶ He also quotes what the young Radnóti wrote in his dissertation on Margit Kaffka relating to her poem "*Szüzanyánál*" [With the Holy Virgin] which in Radnóti's words is "frivolous and respectful at the same time." ⁷ Radnóti in his pre-university years and later at Szeged rebels against the sacralized rigidity characteristic of the representation of Christian saints and of Christ himself; he also tries to harness Christian mythology into the service of Socialist thought. (This combination of a kind of biblical Christianity and pacifist Socialism can be detected in the work of Henri Barbusse whose *Jésus* (1927) was not only read by the young Radnóti, but also quoted in the motto of his first book of poetry.) But the one short poem that caused trouble for the emotionally still unsettled student of Szeged University was his "*Arckép*" [Portrait]. Let us quote it in full in Emery George's version:

I am Iwenly-two years old. This is how
Christ must have looked in the fall
at that age; as yet he had no
beard; he was blond, and girls
dreamed about him at night! ⁸

Huszonkét éves vagyok. így
nézhetett ki ősszel Krisztus is
ennyi idősen; még nem volt
szakáll, szőke volt és lányok
álmodtak véle éjjelenként!

Reading this poem now it is hard to understand why Radnóti was accused of "defaming religion." In this poem the speaker does not identify himself with Christ, he only says: "this is how Jesus must have looked at my age" which is, after all, as good a piece of fantasy as any, especially if one accepts the Unitarian view according to which Jesus was not of "divine essence" at birth, but became Prophet and Redeemer when he reached maturity. Also, knowing of Mary Magdelene's later devotion to Jesus, it does not sound to me

defamatory that girls might dream of the "young, unbearded" Jesus who still had not started his teaching in Galilee.

Lábadozó szél [Convalescent Wind, 1933], Radnóti's third book of verse, was his ideologically most committed collection, the poet repeatedly referring to "the proletariat" and to himself as "the poet of the poor" - a role he wrongly assumed for a short period of time. There are no biblical references at all in this collection. They reappear in the next book *Újhold* [New Moon] published in 1935. Not all are direct; sometimes it is the tone of the poem that is evangelical, not its semantic entity. Marianna D. Birnbaum in her work on Radnóti claims that "investigating Radnóti's poetry from the standpoint of religious utterances, the evidence found is very meagre indeed."⁹ I rather disagree with this statement, but much depends on our interpretation of the term "religious utterance." Does it have to reflect the canon of an established religion or just a particular belief such as, say, the survival of the spirit? Also, admittedly, there is a qualitative difference between the religious imagery of the young Radnóti and the mature poet, and I may not be the only critic who defines the publication of *Újhold* as a turning point in Miklós Radnóti's poetry. It was around 1934-35 that the young rebel and agnostic Socialist (partly under the influence of the Catholic priest and poet, Sándor Sík, his teacher at Szeged University) began to appreciate and embrace Catholicism and, in all probability, to read the Bible regularly. The Old and New Testaments at first impressed him as literature, as poetry, but later became a source of faith and love, a source of hope in the survival of the spirit. While of the Christian religions Radnóti felt closest to Catholicism, the Bible he read regularly and cherished was the Protestant (Gáspár Károlyi) version of 1590, not one of the later Catholic versions.

This fact we know from a short article written by Radnóti in 1937 at the request of Béla Kőhalmi who edited an anthology *Könyvek Könyve* [Book of Books] which collected writers' utterances about their favourite reading matter. Here Radnóti first identifies himself with Hungarian cultural tradition ("I accept as my own the entire tradition of Hungarian literature...") and becomes more specific further on when he says: "Lately my permanent or rather recurring reading matter has been Károlyi's Old and New Testaments, Csokonai, János Arany, Kazinczy and Babits's *Amor Sanctus*."¹⁰ In other words, the Bible entered Radnóti's life some years before the outbreak of the Second World War, but probably at the time when his new awareness of death had already begun to take shape.

I think the year of change was 1934, although even earlier an indirect allusion to religious faith is made in "*Tört elégia*" [Broken Elegy] a poem dedicated to Sándor Sík. It is a lament for the hanging of two unnamed men,

probably Fürst and Sallai, two Communist organizers who had fallen victim to the summary courts system instituted in the summer of 1931 in response to an outrageous act of (non-Communist inspired) terrorism. This poem ends with a reference to the poet's beloved, who "sometimes, when she thinks / I don't notice, secretly believes in a God / and prays to Him for me" [De néha azért ő, ha azt hiszi / nem veszem észre, titkon hisz egy istent / és ahhoz imádkozik értem].¹¹ The point here is not only that the poet's beloved prays, but that he notices her praying and does not seem to object to it. Also during 1934, Radnóti more than once contrasts the peace he finds in love and the menace of a hostile world, which will eventually destroy him, will kill him "with its long knives." And only a year or maybe a year and a few months later in the poem "*Háborús napló*" [War Diary], which is mainly a reflection on the ongoing colonial wars in Africa and Asia, the following near-prophetic statement is made: "What may I speak of? / Winter and war are coming, / I'll lie broken, no one will notice; / worm-filled earth will fill my mouth and eyes / and my body will be shot through by roots."¹²

While the survival of the spirit seems to be a problem often considered and confirmed by the poet in these years (see Part 2, Tuesday Evening in "War Diary"), from 1936 onwards one can detect some New Testament imagery in Radnóti's poems. It does not appear dramatically, but in the context of the poet's contemplation of his destiny; for example in the title-poem of "*Járkálj csak, halálraítélt!*" [Keep Walking, You, the Death-Condemed!] Here Radnóti bids himself to live a blameless life in times of great tribulation:

O Poet, now live a pure life -
As dwellers on the snowcapped, tall
Mountains the wind sweeps; innocent
As the Christ child - made flesh in paint
On pious old pictures - frail and small.

The last two lines (in Hungarian: "mint jámbor, régi képeken / pöttömnyi gyermek Jézusok")¹³ are then contrasted with an admonition in the opposite emotional direction:

And be tough as the big wolves who bleed
From many wounds, yet live indeed.
[S oly keményen is, mint a sok / sebtől vérző, nagy farkasok]¹⁴

The "painted baby Jesus" imagery is linked in the poet's mind with the nativity scene, which appeals to Radnóti in its unpretentious simplicity. This is reflected in the short and in some ways "naive" poeni "*Lapszéli jegyzet*

Lukácshoz" [Marginal Note to Luke], which was written in 1937. Radnóti's fascination with this particular scene can also be detected in his *Diary* where we find impressions of a visit to the studio of sculptor and potter Margit Kovács's in mid-1939. Radnóti mentions here that she has just finished a nativity with "a wonderful Mary and magic Three Kings."¹⁵

The next poem where we find evidence of Radnóti's preoccupation not only with death but with the afterlife (a crucial teaching of Christianity) is the majestic "*Ének a halálról*" [Song about Death] written after Dezső Kosztolányi's funeral. In this poem, while not referring to any particular passage in the Bible, Radnóti stresses both the human fear of death and the terror at the separation of soul from body, "what was one world now revolves in two" [mi egy világ volt, kétfelé kering], and he ends the poem with a short prayer: "Guard, oh Lord, the pathways of the soul" [Őrizd Uram, a lélek útjait].¹⁶

The date for this, in my view, very spiritual and Christian poem is November 1936, Soon afterwards a new tone enters Radnóti's poetry; something that has its source in the Old Testament though it is apparent in the New Testament as well, especially in its final book - the prophetic tradition. The context in which this (for Hungarians not at all new) tradition appears is the whirlwind of aggressive nationalism and Fascism inexorably pushing Europe toward the Second World War. The dress rehearsal for it is undoubtedly the Spanish Civil War - and one can well understand why this event caught Radnóti's attention to such an extent. I assume that Radnóti's first poem of this "prophetic" kind, "*Lapszéli jegyzet Habakkuk prófétához*" [Marginal Note to the Prophet Habakkuk] was written after the German-Francoist terror-bombing of the Basque town of Guernica in April 1937. In the collection *Meredek út* [Steep Road] the Habakkuk poem just precedes the poem "*Aludj*" [Go to Sleep] with its pointed reference to "Shanghai and Guernica." Also, the poem's opening lines: "Cities / stood in flames, / villages / erupted" [Városok lángoltak / robbantak faluk]¹⁷ is also a clear enough allusion to bombing raids against the Spanish Republic. This short, "marginally structured" poem is in fact an invocation of anger, of a kind of righteous prophetic anger, which until then had not been part of the poet's disposition, a request for "black rage" against those who take innocent lives in wars of conquest. Why was Radnóti particularly impressed by this somewhat obscure Old Testament prophet? Maybe because in the first chapter of his book Habakkuk is reproachful towards God. "Why dost thou make me see wrongs and look upon trouble? Destruction and violence are before me." (Habakkuk, 1:3) Then the prophet continues with a description of the Chaldeans, this "dread and terrible nation" who are used by God to punish the sinful people of Judea, though eventually they are defeated and annihilated. I think the element of moral indignation is

of the utmost importance: Radnóti cannot gauge God's intentions but, seeing the massacre of the innocents, doubts for a moment the Lord's fairness and tries to confront the victory of Evil with the single-minded fury and fiery rhetoric of a Jewish prophet.

So far I have discussed only the obvious links that exist between the Bible and Miklós Radnóti's poetic vision, indicating those parts of the Scriptures which inspired him in various ways. There is, however, evidence of a powerful inspiration that never yielded a poem, or if it did, the poem was promptly destroyed. In July 1939, as Radnóti relates in his *Diary*, he and his wife travelled to Paris and interrupted their journey in Vienna. At the Westbahnhof they were confronted with a rushing crowd of people, which included uniformed Nazi storm troopers. This experience suddenly evoked in Radnóti's mind an image from *The Book of Revelation* (12:1-6) about the woman "clothed in the sun" and the great red dragon that is ready to devour the child whom the woman is about to bear.¹⁸ This apocalyptic image had been living in Radnóti's subconscious ever since his childhood when a maidservant's tales told to the ten year old boy seem to have revolved around this particular image from *Revelation*. After the crowd scene in Vienna, Radnóti intended to write a poem about the Apocalypse (perhaps using some of its imagery in the modern context) but was dissuaded by his wife Fanni, who implored him not to add anything to the original text of St. John's, for as Chapter 22 verse 18/19 says "If any one adds to them, [the words of the prophecy in this book], God will add to him the plagues described in this book."¹⁹

As a matter of fact Radnóti was not the only Hungarian poet whose imagination was touched by the visions of John. In Endre Ady's posthumous book *A halottak élén*, 1918 [Leading the Dead] there is a poem written during the First World War "A Titok Arat" [The Secret is Harvesting], in which "the woman arrayed in purple and scarlet," the whore of Babylon appears; she is the monster who drinks the blood of Jesus and of the martyrs. In this poem Ady claims, "And the soul has died / And this is worse than to be dead in the mud / It is a worse death than life" [S meghalt a lélek / S így rosszabb, mint holtan a sárban / S ez rosszabb halál, mint az élet].²⁰ In this collection of Ady's there are no less than seven poems with mottos taken from the Bible, amongst them yet another poem referring to the Revelation "A Csodák Föntjén" [On the Plateau of Miracles]. And, interestingly, one also comes across a prose poem entitled "Ésaiás könyvének margójára" [In the Margins of the Book of Isaiah] which asks questions about the inscrutability of God's will and human nature: "Would therefore the shining light of man's divine mind be so much of a vanity that a mere breeze can turn it into night?"²¹

I am quoting Ady here because there is an easily discernible connection between his shock at man's degradation in the senseless massacre of the First

World War and Radnóti's increasing helplessness and horror at Hungary's embroilment in the Second World War on the side of the Third Reich. There can be no doubt while Radnóti personally refused to accept the racist Nazi-style classification of Jewishness even after the Hungarian parliament passed one anti-Jewish law after another, he became resentful and embittered about the treatment of "Jews" (whether professing Judaism or Christianity) during the war years. I do not want to discuss some of the truly distressing experiences that Radnóti underwent during his service in the forced labour unit to which he was assigned. As for his resentment, it remained normally unvoiced and was expressed only on rare occasions, as for instance in these lines of the *"Negyedik ecloga"* [Fourth Eclogue]: "I always wanted to be free, and guards / Have always marched beside me on my way" [Szabad szerettem volna lenni mindig / s örök kísértek végig az úton].²² Even when talking about a friend who had disappeared in the Ukraine (as in the *"Ötödik ecloga"* [Fifth Eclogue]) Radnóti does not denounce the murderers in a tirade of righteous indignation. He maintains the sad, elegiac tone and seems to be psychologically unable to complete the poem, intended as a lament. Anger, however justified under the circumstances, appears in his poems infrequently and, on the whole, indirectly. Radnóti gives the impression of a person who desperately believes in sanity even when temporarily confined to a lunatic asylum. Behind his poetry lies the firm conviction that European culture built on the twin foundations of Judeo-Christian tradition and Greek Humanism will somehow sustain the spirit even when a tidal wave of hatred and irrationality threatens to sweep it away.

This conviction seems to break down in March 1944 when German troops occupy Hungary, and a crackdown takes place on the last vestiges of parliamentarianism and Hungarian independence. In this respect I find the short poem *"Ó, régi börtönök..."* [Oh Peace of Ancient Prisons...] important. It demonstrates the change from the rule of reason (however shaky) to that of terror. Its immediate consequence is to reinforce and activate the prophetic apocalyptic trend in Radnóti's poetry. In a situation when "Reality, like a cracked flowerpot / no longer holds form, and just waits / to fling to the winds its useless shards" [A valóság, mint megrepedt cserép / nem tart már formát és csak arra vár, / hogy szétdobhassa rossz szilánkjait],²³ the rational Humanist approach to the world no longer makes sense. A world in chaos and lawlessness requires a different model of evaluation; it is time to turn to the more ancient, biblical mode of the prophet.

The poem *"Töredék"* [Fragment] is a summary of the horrors characterizing the year 1944 in German-occupied Europe. It consists of five stanzas each beginning with the line "I lived on this earth in an age..." [Oly korban éltem

én e földön...]²⁴ and followed by a list of violations of the moral law. All biblical commandments are ignored: man is not only killed but killing is done with pleasure and voluntarily; the heroes of the age are traitors and common criminals; the average citizen has turned into an amoral beast. People who are still alive envy the peace of the decomposing dead. It is an age (or rather "it was," for the poet speaks in the past tense) in which "even the poet was silent" hoping for the return of the Prophet Isaiah for only he could voice "a fit curse" upon what was happening. So although the poet tells of the iniquities of the age, he still feels incapable of passing judgement - the appropriate curse can be uttered only by a prophet of Old Testament stature, like Isaiah...

Although the tone of the poem is that of an ancient chronicle, the structure of "Fragment" resembles a poem by Dezső Kosztolányi, written in the early Thirties. This is "*Litánia*" [Litany] with its two-line stanzas, each line beginning with the words: "In my age..." [Az én koromban]. The opening lines of Kosztolányi's piece reflect the general disorientation of European industrial society between the two world wars: "In my age / steely machines were rattling in the heavens / In my age / mankind had lost its aim forever" [Az én koromban / zörgött az egekben a gépek acélja / Az én koromban / nem tudta az emberiség, mi a célja].²⁵ In "*Fragment*" Radnóti changes the emphasis of the first line by indicating the baseness of the age in the very first word: "in such an age I lived..." [*Oly korban éltem én...*] and blames for mankind's degradation not so much technological civilization as man's complete loss of moral principles. The prophetic tone of Radnóti's poem is further enhanced by a deliberately archaic vocabulary (e.g. *balhitek* in the first stanza, *az élő irigy lé a férges, síri holtat* [the living...would envy the grave-dweller the worms eat] and *a rettentő szavak tudósa* in the final stanza).²⁶

If in "*Fragment*" the poet is still tentative about the reappearance of the Prophet, he is passionately affirmative in one of his last and most accomplished poems, the "*Nyolcadik Ecloga*" [Eighth Eclogue]. Here the dialogue of the Poet with a prophet of the Old Testament takes place on a mountain top - on a "rugged mountain walk" leading to Lager Heidenau where Radnóti and his fellow-labourers are languishing behind barbed wire. The prophet-like person identifies himself as Nahum, a Jewish prophet who thundered against Nineveh - not unlike Jonah whose *persona* was borrowed by Radnóti's poetic mentor Mihály Babits, in his "*Jónás könyve*" [The Book of Jonah], but different from him inasmuch as his prophecies about the destruction of the sinful city were actually fulfilled. The Poet clearly is familiar with Nahum's (rather short) book. Indeed, in describing the destruction of Nineveh he almost quotes verbatim from Nahum's book: "Whole nations scramble to the

slaughter..." [Gyors nemzetek öldösik egymást...].²⁷ The Poet then inquires what has brought Nahum back to earth and is told that it was "wrath" and a wish to see the downfall of Evil ("the strongholds of sin fall"). It seems as if God's dispensation to preach was timeless - in similar historical situations the response to sin and iniquities can be remarkably alike. The Poet is in awe of the Prophet's vigour and determination to follow his mission, but in the concluding passage of the poem Nahum assures the Poet that he knows his work, which is also feeding on "wrath," and that he can see a connection between the poet's and the prophet's wrath. It is "food and drink to the people. Whoever would may live on it until / The coming of the Kingdom..." [...étek a népnek, / s innivaló! Élhetne belőle, ki élni akar, míg / eljön az ország...]. What kingdom? The one promised by the young disciple, "The young Rabbi whose life fulfilled our words and the Law" [rabbi, ki betöltötte a törvényt és szavainkat].²⁸ Here the speaker is still Nahum, but he becomes a composite character, for already earlier there is a reference to Isaiah,²⁹ and in the last passage of the poem Radnóti in fact turns to the Book of Zechariah. It is in the concluding two chapters of the latter that the Old Testament clearly foretells the appearance of the Lord in Jerusalem on the Mount of Olives. And it is exactly this to which Radnóti's Prophet alludes to in the "Eighth Eclogue"; his words link the Old Testament with the New. The "young disciple" is Jesus and the country toward which the Prophet leads the march, asking the Poet to follow him is the Kingdom of God and of love.

Whether Radnóti at this stage was still a Socialist or not, is immaterial. The Prophet and Poet will set out together toward the country of God. For as the Prophet says, "What I asked before / Is the Lord's end? Lo, it is that Kingdom" [Hogy mi a célja az Úrnak, / - kérdem? lásd az az ország].³⁰ It is a country foretold by the Bible, not by earthly powers. In truth, we know to what place the last march led Radnóti: to the meadow and hastily dug mass-grave at Abda. But the final lines of the "Eighth Eclogue" give a clear message: in the midst of a cruel war and universal cataclysm the poet stresses the primary Christian values of love, peace and universal brotherhood. And even the awareness of the forced march that follows cannot make one forget that in those terrible days the true spirit of the Bible was captured most impressively in the poetry of this Jewish-born Catholic, this innocently killed young follower of Christ, Miklós Radnóti.

Notes

1. Miklós Radnóti, *The Complete Poetry*, transi. Emery George (Ann Arbor, 1980), 58. (Hence: CP).
2. *Radnóti Miklós összes művei* (Budapest, 1976), 18. (Hence: RMöm), (My translation).
3. Emery George, *Miklós Radnóti, A Biography* (New York, 1986).
4. Radnóti, CP, 60.
5. *Ibid.*, 87; RMöm, 47.
6. Béla Pomogáts, *Radnóti Miklós* (Budapest, 1977), 33.
7. *Ibid.*, For the original text see RMöm, 661.
8. Radnóti, CP, 88.
9. Marianna D. Birnbaum, *Miklós Radnóti, A Biography of His Poetry* (Munich, 1983), 139.
10. RMöm, 605.
11. Radnóti, CP, 126; RMöm, 87.
12. Radnóti, CP, 159. Emery George's translation.
13. Miklós Radnóti, *Forced March. Selected Poems*, transi. George Gömöri and Clive Wilmer (Manchester, 1979) 18, and RMöm, 133.
14. *Ibid.*
15. Radnóti Miklós, *Napló* (Budapest, 1989), 52.
16. Radnóti, CP, 189; RMöm, 153.
17. Radnóti, CP, 192; RMöm, 156.
18. *The Holy Bible. Revised Version* (London, 1952), 975.
19. Radnóti, *Napló*, 25.
20. *Ady Endre Összes Versei*, vol. 2 (Budapest, 1955), 272.
21. *Ibid.*, 265.
22. Radnóti, *Forced March*, 39; RMöm, 213.
23. Radnóti, CP, 262; RMöm, 227. Emery George's translation.
24. RMöm, 231.
25. Kosztolányi Dezső, *Válogatott versei* (Budapest, 1956), 275.
26. RMöm, 232.
27. *Forced March*, 52; RMöm, 238.
28. *Ibid.*; RMöm, 239.
29. *Ibid.*, "Majdan az én torz számat is érintette, akárcsak / bölcs Izaiasét, szénél az Űr..."
30. *Ibid.*