

FROM CAIN TO NAHUM: SHIFTS AND CHANGES IN RADNÓTI'S POETIC VISION

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The impact of the scene in which the twelve-year-old Radnóti learned about the circumstances of his birth was hard and painful.¹ Magnifying its effect was another confrontation three years later, in which he discovered that, besides his mother, his twin brother died on that night as well. Jolted to the core, the boy searched for ways to reorient himself, to find a "rationale" for so much suffering, for so much "injustice," for the spell death cast on his life.

And he did so, eventually. Muting the factuality of those ghosts and blurring their shapes, he learned to manipulate them in his poetic imagination. In this way, he found the freedom to search for legends which would help him understand what happened in terms of ancient, magical beliefs in guilt and sacrifice. The story of Cain and Abel, with its powerful sweep of emotional and ritualistic elements, came to his aid. Embracing it, he generalized the dramatic narrative and came to view his life as marked by guilt and weighed down by the curse cast upon him for the murder of his mother and brother, a guilt and a curse through which he conceptualized, and by which he interpreted, the events of his birth. In this way, both became part of his identity. Out of them, his personal ethos and his moral struggles emerged, affecting, in turn, his experiential responses and his self-image, shaping his awareness and perceptions alike.²

The imbrication of this primal, symbolic tale with his own life determined, however, not only Radnóti's psychic processes and intellectual development, but also his poetry. It inspired his imaginative structures, and it interplayed with his other prominent themes. In certain poems only its fragments or inversions appear, arising in fleeting images or slivers of thought; but in others the legend emerges full-blown, manifesting the entire line of the rich mythic drama by which Radnóti stored and worked out the events that surrounded his birth.

He explored them one by one in his prose piece "Gemini", letting the *persona* repeat the words that had haunted him since his youth: "You killed them. You killed them, you kill-ed th-em, you killed them."³ The voice stutters

and breaks as it speaks, echoing the stammer of the speaker in the early poem "I Had No Mother": "My Mother has ...; execrated me... / In... deed, she ... has ... ex ... e ... crated me."⁴ The boundary between observed and imagined truth disappears in this perception: past events turn into myth and myth into lived experience.

The poem "And Cain Spoke Unto His Brother Abel," written in 1928, manifests one of Radnoti's first poetic attempts at formulating the legend. As the speaker says:

Abel, brother, yesterday the primal crime awoke me:
 I had murdered your snow-white dreams and damned I was urging myself
 endlessly on down the night-darkening avenues of vainendeavor,
 between rows of icy and dolorous trees toward the morning.

 .. . [O]n the ancient day of my being, the gravid sky
 bellowed aloud: with murderous weight I ripened my life
 like the first leaf from the bitter, the sighing, cursebearing tree.

 I am Cain, and yesterday the primal crime awoke me,
 I am Cain, and you my brother Abel!⁵

In the poem "Quiet Lines, Bowed Head," composed just one year after "Cain," Radnóti returns to the subject of his birth:

By midnight my mother bore me, by dawn
 she died, carried off by the fever;⁶

Eight years later, the birthday poem "Twenty-Eight Years," explores again that scene, presenting the speaker himself as wickedness incarnate:

Monster I was in my nativity,
 twin-bearing mother - and your murderer!
 Whether my brother breathed, or he
 came lifeless forth, I cannot say,
 but in the blood and groans of torment there
 they lifted me toward the day,
 the little brute who gained the victory,
 leaving a debt that others had to pay:
 two lives, the price of me.⁷

Out of the poem "The Dreadful Angel," written just a year before his death, the same dramatic apprehension emerges, demonstrating the shadow this event cast over Radnoti's life. But this time, the myth exhibits new patterns and new

elements. Rather than functioning as an invisible, impersonal force that works from *inside* the scene of birth, from the hearts of the "murdered mother and brother," cursing the living child, banishing him from the world of humans, now evil assumes a shape and threatens "the sinner." The guilt torturing the child bursts into a living form that seeks retribution, "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." The new iconography is the Angel of Death, a creature bold, vengeful, and frenzied. His struggle with the poem's *persona* is as powerful as it is violent:

The dreadful angel in me is invisible
today, his screeching almost still.
You startle at its whisper. Is it
someone come to pay a visit
or a grasshopper tapping at the sill?
It's he. . . .

.....
Out of the soul's cave, in his hour
he rises to accuse me, shriekingly.
Mad again. Like poison, so he works in me,
sleeps but rarely, lives within me
and outside of me.⁸

The evil arising from the newborn, has now produced a full-blown, horrific ghost:

In the white cave
of moonlit night, in rustling sandal, he
runs through the fields to rummage in my mother's grave
Was it worth it then? - he whispers to her,
breaking her sleep; then in a choked, insistent breath:
you bore him, and it was your death!

Cunningly and forcefully, the unholy creature, much like Goethe's Erlkönig, moves to take possession of the victim. But Radnóti's Angel acts out of motivations different from those of Goethe's Ghost of Death: while the latter kills an innocent being, the former executes, thereby restores, the divine order. However horrific, there is nothing that would wash murder away but murder:

This is your mask of skin; here is the knife;
a sigh; a moment of no pain; the gates of life!
And on the table there awoke the gleaming knife.

The drama echoes the ancient words: "The voice of thy brother's blood crieth to me from the ground." The curse is not forgotten; it demands sacrifice.

"The angel" recurring again and again in Radnóti's work does not, however, always emerge as an executor of divine vengeance. Intermingled with him is an indifferent character, the creature who appears suddenly in the midst of Serbia's violated landscape. In the first of the "Razglednicas," composed in the early fall of 1944, on the death march Radnóti was forced to endure, this figure emerges as standing and watching the road on which the pain-struck, ghostly masses of Jews move. It is for the last time in his work that Radnóti summons Fanni, but he does so only in a flash. Then, he lets her merge with the creature, who stands quietly in the wasteland of Death:

And you're the only constant in the changing and the mess
you shine on eternal beneath my consciousness;
mute as an angel wondering at the catastrophe,
or the beetle of burial from his hole in a dead tree.⁹

Etching itself into his mental processes, Radnóti's consciousness of guilt and punishment molds his life into a dramatic, powerfully construed legend.

In some poems, rather than his mythical self-recriminations, the child's sense of abandonment and exile dominates. In fact, certain lyrics express a sense of shattered innocence, a theme that pervades also "Gemini," demonstrating the force of the blow that the knowledge of the circumstances of his birth had on Radnóti's life and poetry. As "Memory," the poem of the twenty-one year old expresses:

Oh! -
bare-legged child -
stood with my arms lifted high
under the sky;
white was the field
crowded with ladybirds, stars in the rye!

And then whatever god I beheld
bended away his eye!¹⁰

Orphaned, vulnerable, and forsaken, the boy cannot comprehend why he is singled out, why he is rejected. Yet incomprehension does not dissolve sin. Whether aware or unaware of what he had caused, he knows that evil must be expiated. It is this self-lacerating morality that Radnóti imposes upon himself, ignoring the reality of the incompetent medical treatment, responsible for the

deaths of his mother and infant brother. He regards the myth of guilt as an integral part of his own psychic identity, offering himself up for a ritualistic blood sacrifice, as if to redeem the world through that ancient reckoning of original sin.

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While the themes of sacrificial brotherhood and isolation maintain their prominent roles in the *oeuvre* of Radnóti, by the early thirties, they are joined by a number of new ones, among them that of global devastation. Emerging in the lyrics of "Like a Bull", images of destruction start to spread through Radnóti's landscapes, linking up with another major theme: the moral obligation of resisting violence. As "Like a Bull" shows:

but the bull snorts and doesn't flee as the deer are
fleeing; he fancies that when his hour comes round he'll fight
and fall, and the pack will scatter his bones all over the meadow-
and slowly, sadly, bellows into the buttery air.

Even so will I struggle and so will I die;
Still as a sign to posterity the fields will preserve my bones.¹¹

The poem, the first piece in his fourth volume of poetry *New Moon*, captures two beings, first the bull then the *persona*, both as being attacked by the wolf pack, murdered, and left unburied, their bones scattered around the fields. This is an image of premonitory significance, especially if seen from the perspective of "War Diary" and "A la recherche", not to mention the dam at Abda. But where did this image come from? Clearly, in Hungary, during the interwar period, the miscarriage of justice was hardly a rare occurrence; nor were the cruelties committed by the police in the prisons or by the gendarmerie in the countryside. But the vision emerging from the "bull poem" does not project injustice; nor does it recall the cruelties of the Hungarian "law-enforcement" officials. Rather it suggests the vulnerability of being, the desecration of the body, and the moral imperative of restoring human dignity. It also presages the coming disaster.

But where do these notions emerge from? After all, August 3, 1933, the date of the poem, lay remote from the time of the prewar atrocities perpetrated in Ethiopia and Spain. It was in chronology even further removed from the horrors of the death camps and the massacres committed during World War II. As a matter of fact, at this point of history, there was no indication of the rise of that extraordinary aggression that exploded a few years later on several

continents at once. Although motifs such as the collapse of values, failure, nightmare, and destruction had played major roles in the works of a number of artists even before World War I, and had become central to such movements as Dada and Surrealism later; although the pictorial images of this era presented men again and again as dying in the trenches or limping along on crutches, the iconography of the human body visited by an unprecedented devastation - corpse thrown upon corpse, tortured, desecrated, and unburied - was still quite unusual in the literature as well as in the visual arts of the early thirties.¹²

Of course, Radnóti was not the first one among the poets of the time to augur disaster. There were a number of artists in both the Hungarian and the international arena, who felt compelled to call attention to, and struggle against, what they defined as "the reactionary forces" of the world. But Brecht's hopes of keeping his "Virginia alight" "during the earthquakes" or his predictions of the "hurricanes destroying bourgeois society" captured something other than Radnóti's vista of the gathering danger. So had the programs and platforms of Breton, Paul Eluard, and Marcel Duchamp, advocating the destruction of Western society, or the propositions of Aragon, succinctly expressed in his remarkable line, "Shoot Leon Blum."¹³ In the "bull poem," the *persona* is attacked and killed by "a wolf pack," in fact, by the mob, an image essentially different from that exhibited by the activists of the left, projecting the world as involved in a mortal struggle against "the bourgeois order."

But if not the expectation of urgent social reforms or the pressures of the ideology of the "uninterrupted Revolution," if not the apocalyptic vision of "the battle of the righteous," what forces blew afflatus into Radnóti's images of devastation? And what made them conflate with his bent of connecting historical events with his own life, remolding them into shapes of myths? Placing his lyrics in the context of the time in which he lived, we may perhaps suggest some answers.

First of all, we must not forget that by the year of 1933, salvos of new political events started to resound in the European theatre. On January 30th, Hindenburg named Hitler Chancellor; on February 27, the Nazis set the Reichstag ablaze, and one day later, those sections of the Weimar constitution which guaranteed individual and civil liberties were suspended. On April 1, a statewide boycott was launched against Jewish business, and on May 10th, the books of Kafka, Heine, Freud, and Einstein burned to ashes at the stakes, set afire by the guards of the new, revolutionary millenarianism.

If these events were shocking to the enlightened Western mind and consciousness, not to speak of the Jews watching them, even more shocking had to be the fact that not even the great and powerful European heads of state

protested against them. Rather, they were eager to please, appease, even to court the German leadership. The first among them was the Hungarian premier Gömbös, one of the most prominent Magyar anti-Semites, whose slander of the Jews competed with those of Hitler, Streicher, or Goebbels. Now, he hurried to Germany before any other political leader, and expressed his admiration for and recognition of the Führer. (The second acknowledgment of the Nazi state came from the Vatican, signing a concordat with Hitler, suggesting the necessity of making peace with him, a suggestion, which, as a matter of fact, most nations would heed.)

Of course, the question that some critics would want to raise in response to these remarks cannot and should not be avoided: does it have any significance for a poem, a poetic theme, an image, or a meta-narration *what* stirred it into being? Can we know *which* factors, if any, were at work in the process? And, whatever the answer to these questions, can we either trace the *real* historical experience back to the poem, or discern through it the shapes of its author's inspiration?

These questions might be worthy of consideration within the framework of the formalistic reading processes controlled by the dogmatic restrictions of the canon of "New Age criticism."¹⁴ But it would hardly make any sense to devote such processes to the large corpus of works by artists who languished for years under the threat of, and were physically exposed to, the brutal, totalistic, and indiscriminate annihilation process the Nazis designed for the Jews.¹⁵ Clearly, dilemmas such as whether or not all experience is "self-enclosed" or whether or not "meaning is communicable" involve ideas, concepts, and notions that are quite irrelevant to our discussion of Radnóti. To read his work and separate it from the context in which he wrote, from the frantic, xenophobic, and fanatically nationalistic cultural climate of Hungary in the interwar period and from the large chorus of literati who denied him the right to define himself as a Hungarian poet would be to fail to understand the blight of Radnóti's life. To see his visions of the rising catastrophe as merely the manifestations of a melancholic soul, which has a constitutional affinity to death and dying; without tying his poems to the political events that threatened his self-image, his life and being, the events that tortured him beyond measure and killed him in the end, is to fail to understand Radnóti as well as to misread his work. Merely to apply hermeneutical observations to his verses when he inscribed in them his own existential experience of fear of torture and death, the features of which he carefully circumscribed, would simply be to reject a meaningful discussion of his poetry and life.

Still, however significant, however threatening, however ominous, the German political developments of 1933 appear to our post-Holocaust understanding and however menacing they must have appeared to Radnóti at that time, they could hardly have brought about instant changes in the poet's psychic perceptions and his poetic imagination. Those events alone could not have simply caused jolts powerful enough to bring about the sudden crystallizing of Radnóti's image of Holocaustal violence and the channelling of his creative energies into an iconography of disaster. Usually, change needs more sustained time to evolve or more direct pressures to well up suddenly. As it usually happens, things turn slow at their center of gravity. Since the shifts in the German political power structure were still quite remote from the Hungarian theatre in 1933, they alone could not have made instantaneously a deep, and emotionally-stressed impact on Radnóti. This could only then have happened, according to the Freudian notions about the nature of trauma, had he already suffered one of a similar nature, which, while festering, interconnected with and was, in turn, reinforced and magnified by the political events taking place in Germany. Only then could the wrenching changes in Radnóti's poetic and psychic landscape have taken place that manifest themselves in the "bull poem." Only then could those ominous events of 1933 be recognized for what they were on the darkening horizon. But what kind of a trauma are we here talking about? What kind of an injury did he suffer? What blow did he conceal?

Looking around, we must note that the answer to these questions lies quite near at hand. Indeed, if we examine the history of every-day life in the Hungarian universities of the interwar period, we must note the ubiquity of a set of recurring violent scenes, launched to chase the Jews out from the institutes of higher learning: to make these places *judenrein*.¹⁶ Flaring up in the fall of 1930, just when Radnóti arrived in Szeged, at the country's campuses, among them at the Ferenc József University, such riots demonstrated both the rise of the right's political power and the unwillingness of the government to deal with the problem promptly and effectively. What took place on these occasions involved a group of eight to ten people (sometimes as many as twenty or twenty-five), calling for the removal of the Jews from the lecture halls, academic gatherings, or the corridors of the campus. Usually, the rioters thumped and screamed anti-Semitic slogans, throwing stink bombs in the midst of the crowd. Other times, they just grabbed one person whom they identified as a Jew and beat him up cruelly, leaving him on the ground, his bones broken, bleeding. Often, the mob did not go inside, but waited for their victims to enter or to leave the premises. The Jewish students were attacked then at the door or at the gates. There can be no doubts, Radnóti had an intimate knowledge of and must have been deeply perturbed by these riots,

which, as Csaplár explains, and the Jewish newspapers of the day demonstrate, were from the fall of 1930 part of the quotidian routine.¹⁷

But one could ask, why would these beatings have made such an enormous impression on Radnóti? Why would they have penetrated his psychic perceptions and his poetic imagination? Why would they have been that traumatic? After all, as we know, he considered his Jewish background hardly essential for his identity as a Hungarian poet. In fact, it was the image of the latter he embraced and idealized. Why should he have identified himself with the victims of these riots, when he found no particular reason to identify himself with them before or after the beatings?

To be sure, he did not identify with them. But by the early thirties, Radnóti must have understood that no matter how *he* defined himself, in the eyes of the *bullies* he was nothing but a Jew. However degrading this understanding appeared to him, he could hardly have escaped knowing the threat it implied. Ignoring the problem does not mean he did not know what went on, rather that he could not deal with the pressure.

As a matter of fact, the mark of the Jew insulted him and undermined his dignity as a human being; his exclusion from the community of the Magyars denied him the place among the Hungarian poets he so ardently desired. Small wonder that at first neither the scenes of beatings, the victim of which he could, of course, easily have become at any given minute, nor the terror of exile from all he valued, appeared as themes in his poetry.¹⁸ He rather turned to ideals and goals he found more dignified to appropriate, some through which he defined himself, some of which he shared with many of his closest friends and comrades. In this way, he became part of a passionately patriotic, universally sacralized struggle against the country's backwardness: the struggle for the economic, social, and cultural rise of the Hungarian countryside.

As soon as he arrived in Szeged and enrolled at the university, he became a member of the Gábor Bethlen Circle, a club that committed itself to the populist cause. Exploring the lives and culture of the hamlets, homesteads, and villages around the city, the members of the Circle dedicated themselves to the idea of social justice: to the goal of changing the lives of the down-trodden, poverty-stricken peasants, achieving thereby a moral transformation of Hungarian society. This dedication did not involve social work alone. It absorbed Radnóti's intellectual and psychic energies as well: it suffused his *ars poetica* and inspired his poetic imagination. Small wonder that many of his lyrics composed in the first three years of his sojourn in Szeged carry populist themes and socialist topics.

But "Like a Bull" reveals an experience that differs from that manifested in the rest of Radnóti's work after his arrival in Szeged. Breaking to the surface

from the deep, and cutting across his populist style, this experience foreshadows a vision that would become prominent in his later-day lyrics. Besides this poem, the rest of the lyrics of *New Moon*, also point toward changes. Most of them reflect Radnóti's waning political activism and anticipate new structures and new perceptions.

It is with the volume *Just Walk On, Condemned to Die*, however, that his work arrives at the point of transition. With Italy occupying Ethiopia and Franco leading the Falangists against the Spanish Republic, Radnóti's poetry registers the new circumstances. Suddenly, he foresees the destruction of human civilization. The beatings at the university, the scenes, which he forged once into a vision of violence in the "bull poem" but suppressed otherwise, coalesce now with vistas of global massacres. What he suddenly perceives is a universal curse, cast upon creation. The beast from the other world, standing at the gate between life and death, lifts up his face: it is war itself. New images start to appear to him. From the mid-thirties onward, Radnóti sees the horrific in the context of a new war: hence his premonitions, hence his visions of death. Many poems of the volume last mentioned allude to apocalypses and have war and atrocity as their structuring principle. In the lyrics of "A Garden of God's Hill," war and bombs appear, with the *persona* standing amid the lovely garden of the summer house, seeing the future which would destroy the idyll:

And you young man, what death is waiting now for you?
is that insectile buzz the bullet's sound
or will you, smashed and scattered by a bomb,
be ploughed into the dark beneath the ground?¹⁹

The image is clear and concrete. War arrives on the wings of bullets and bombs, raining death on millions of people. And there is no one who would stop it. As the voice says in "Guard and Protect Me":

And what's the word worth here between two wars?
Scholar of words, the rare and arduous,
what worth am I? - when bombs are everywhere
in hands most lunatic and fatuous?²⁰

The horrors of war emerge in the hexameters of the shepherd's voice in the "First Eclogue", projecting the collapse of civilization:

Is it true what I hear? - on the crest of the wild Pyrenees, that blazing
muzzles of cannon debate among corpses frozen in blood,

and bears and soldiers alike take flight from the place? That armies
of women, the child and the aged, run with their tightly-lid bundles
and throw themselves down on the earth when death comes circling over?
That corpses outnumber any who come there to clear them away?
Say, for you knew him, did he that they call Frederico survive?²¹

With his stare fixed on Spain (like that of so many of his contemporaries), Radnóti sees the heretofore unthinkable turning into an everyday reality: war rages, madness predominates, universal disaster threatens global survival. He responds intensely to the brutality of the Falangists and relives the death of Federico Garcia Lorca again and again, capturing the world as a battleground of the forces of a victorious Armageddon against the armies of the innocent.

Of course, this was hardly the first time that Radnóti associated harsh reality with mythical occurrences. Now again, like long ago, he needed explanations, new ways of seeing history. His own heroic self-recriminations failed to account for the enormous events playing themselves out before his eyes. What he envisioned was the destruction of millions. He groped for answers.²²

And again, he found them in his own poetic imagination, shifting his focus from the specific story of Cain and Abel to the vista of permanent violence. Now he discerned chaos everywhere: the world was blighted; calamity, intrinsic to life, wreaking havoc on its own, challenging the divine. One might ask whether such a shift in the interpretation of the myth of Cain - that evil is *not* caused by guilt, but by the wrath of forces raging unchecked - would undermine its own original symbolic content. But in fact, this alternative also resides within the Western literary tradition. As Quinones explains in his analysis of *Beowulf*, "... by having a progeny, Cain has come to provide the mythical basis for the *continuity* of evil" (emphasis mine).²³ And he maintains that one feature this myth represents in culture is that of "reciprocal violence," that "[t]he monster, the feud, and the particular nexus of relationships suggested by the Cain-Abel theme exist in the context where Creation is undone..."²⁴ Where evil is so widespread that it suffocates creation, violence prevails.

Also, there had always been inconsistencies and ambivalences in Radnóti's vision of the myth. Cain was, but the infant Miklós *was not*, guilty of murder. While this fact alone did not destroy the fabric of Radnóti's poetic self-definition, his new concept of *universal* guilt did create some shifts. First of all, his beliefs clashed with the concept of "original sin," a concept well known in the realm of the fundamentalist Christian metaphysics, but foreign to the ethos he embraced. For him, *sin* could not have explained the destruction of millions. *Everybody* could not have been guilty. If it were the case, the real issue lay not

so much in the evil of Cain but more in the fact that Abel had no place to hide. With this re-interpretation of the myth of Cain and Abel, Radnóti shifts his focus from individual guilt to that of universal violence.

If before 1933 he saw guilt as the cause for suffering, hereafter he believed that evil runs havoc, destroying the innocent. In this state of the world, there are only two tasks left to the poet: to pursue the good and to battle against evil. And Radnóti hears the call to save his country - as generations of Hungarian poets have heard before. Now his poems start to make use of oracular power and prophetic language both to evoke the horrors of war and make manifest his destiny as the speaker of the divine. So the speaker emerges in the poem "Annotations to the Prophet Habakkuk":

Cities blazed,
thunderstruck;
villages
burst in fire!
Come to me
thou severe
Habakkuk!

Though the black
cinders cool,
still the fire
in my soul
will not slack,
and its pangs
tear like fangs.

And my food
and my drink
turn to gall.
Head to foot
black as soot
rage make me all.²³

Radnóti's poetic imagination is driven now by the moral imperative to warn against, and save the world from, the impending disaster. He perceives his calling as crucial for his country's redemption: he hears the voices of ancestor poets and feels the measure of the public heartbeat. His style becomes more and more striking, more like those of the Biblical prophets. He uses two voices, his own and that of the divine whom he evokes, for whom he speaks. With the passion the Romantics infused in their progeny, with the patriotic obsession of Petőfi and his poetic legacy, with the urgency of the Old Testament prophet

who sees what others have not yet perceived, Radnóti feels compelled to speak and warn of the imminent catastrophe, compelled to be true to the mission he has chosen to embrace.

His voice resounds with mesmerizing intensity in "Fragment", in the poem he wrote in, and had then smuggled out from, the barracks, just before he was taken on his last trip by cattle car to Yugoslavia in May 1944:

In such an age I dwelt on earth
when men had fallen so beneath their nature
that they, unbidden, for their lust would kill,
and foaming stagger in the tangles of confusion,
possessed by tainted creeds, bewildered by delusion.

In such an age I dwelt on earth
when the dumb poet must wait and hold his peace,
hope for the day when he might find a Voice-
for none could here pronounce the dark, demanded, verse
but that Isaiah, master of the fitting curse.²⁶

In others, his voice turns lyrical, insisting on the necessity of remaining "pure" while struggling against overwhelming evil. In the poem "Just Walk On, Condemned to Die", while discerning the presence of the uncanny on the road, in the bushes and the trees, including the omen in the sky, the *persona* affirms his task of living an exemplary life:

O poet, live as clean as those
hilldwellers in their windblown snows,
O live as free of sin
as baby Jesus in
an ikon where the candle glows,
as hard as the great wolf who goes
wounded and bleeding through the snows.²⁷

Using striking language, replete with dramatic effects, the speaker of "Guard and Protect Me" pleads for strength:

Guard and protect me, salt and whitening pain,
you snow-white consciousness, abide with me:
let not the brownly-burning smoke of fear
soil or besoot my word's white purity!²⁸

This heroic cadence and this tragic, prophetic voice characterize Radnóti's poetry from the mid-thirties onward. Through them, he could express his

awareness of the specter of war and his fear of global annihilation. Through them, he could also convey his psychic need to conflate both his personal life and global history with myth. This mode of seeing the world and composing poetry define his work during his repeated call-ups as a Jewish slave laborer, even in Bor. As a matter of fact, more intense than ever before, in "The Eighth Eclogue," he still molds his words into the amazing beat of the classical hexameter and suffuses them with the stories of two books: that of the Law and that of the Miracles. And despite his pain and vulnerability, he still makes sense of the world through myths, juxtaposing the Poet and the Prophet, both of whom would find the "solution" in the light kindled by "the /rabbi who came to fulfill the Law."²⁹

Radnóti's hold on myths weakens only during the last few weeks of the death march. The idyll appears for the last time in his second "Razglednica," projecting "a lake ruffled only by the step/ of a tiny shepherdess,/ where a white cloud is what the ruffled sheep/ drink in their lowliness."³⁰ But this image is elusive and distant, more a miniature that can hardly be seen as contrasting with the burning countryside, and, as we know, the corpses of more than a thousand Jews murdered at Cservenka.³¹ The voice of the prophet is mute in the third and the fourth of these "Picture Postcards"; but that of the poet is not yet. On the edge of life and death, heart-wrenchingly near the mass grave, the stinking mountain of the dead, he still uses classical measures, rhymes, and the ancient art of alliteration to express the power of myth in poetry.

Notes

1. See his recall of the scene in "Ikrek hava: napló a gyerekkorról" [Gemini: A Diary about Childhood] in *Radnóti Miklós Művei [The Works of Miklós Radnóti]* (Budapest: Szépirodalmi Könyvkiadó, 1978), 536-542 (cited hereafter as "Gemini," and the volume as *Works* and page numbers).
2. In another context, see the universal significance of the Cain-Abel theme in the Western cultural tradition: Ricardo J. Quinones, *The Changes of Cain: Violence and the Lost Brother in Cain and Abel Literature* (Princeton: UP, 1991) (cited hereafter as *Cain* and page numbers).
3. "Gemini," *Works*, 541.
4. Miklós Radnóti, "Nem volt anyám" (I had No Mother), in "Kék füzet" (Blue Book), unpublished.
5. "És szólt és beszélt vala Káin Ábellel," *Works*, 18-19 ['And Cain Spoke unto Abel His Brother'] *Foamy Sky*, trans. Zsuzsanna Ozsváth and Frederich Turner (Princeton: University Press, 1992), 8-10 (volume cited hereafter as *FS* and page numbers).
6. "Csöndes sorok lehajtott fejjel," *Works*, 26, *FS*, 10.
7. "Huszonyolc év," *Works*, 119, *FS*, 25-6.

8. "A félelmetes angyal," *Works*, 192-93, *FS*, 87-«.
9. "Razglednicák," 1, *Works*, 214, *FS*, 117.
10. "Emlék," *Works*, 44, *FS*, 13.
11. "Mint a bika," *Works*, 73, *FS*, 16.
12. See the discussion of Rudolph Binion, though, who observed a fomenting aggression in German society during the interwar period: "Ketzerisches zur Kriegsfrage" [Heretical Thoughts on the Problem of War], in *"So ist der Mensch...": 80 Jahre Erster Weltkrieg ["Such is Man...": 80 Years after World War I]*, 195 Sonderausstellung (Vienna: Historisches Museum der Stadt Wien, 1994), 122.
13. Louis Aragon, "Front Rouge" [Red Front] in Maurice Nadeau, *The History of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1965), 288.
14. See David H. Hirsch's seminal work, *Deconstruction of Literature: Criticism after Auschwitz* (Hanover-London: Brown UP, 1991) (cited hereafter as *Deconstruction* and page numbers), elaborating on the futility of applying the "new critical approaches" to the works written by authors who lived under the pressure of endless humiliation and the threat of slaughter posed by the Holocaust.
15. See on this topic the discussions of such scholars as Alvin H. Rosenfeld, *A Double Dying: Reflections on Holocaust Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), 19; Lawrence Langer, *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination* (New Haven: UP, 1975), 1-30; Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi, *By Words Alone: The Holocaust in Literature* (Chicago: UP, 1980), 1-23; and, of course, David H. Hirsch's outstanding treatment of the topic: *Deconstruction*, 23-68.
16. E.g. Raphael Patai, *Apprentice in Budapest: Memories of a World That Is No More* (Salt Lake City: Bigham Young UP, 1988), 256-64.
17. E.g. Ferenc Csaplár, *A Szegedi Fiatalok Művészeti Kollégiuma* [The Art Forum of Szeged Youth], *Irodalomtörténeti Füzetek* [Notes on Literary History], 52 (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1967), 123-25. To understand the extent and the impact of these beatings, one must study the weekly issues of *Egyenlőség* [Quality], which give detailed account on the ongoing atrocities.
18. Later, when he learns to transform the experience of violence and humiliation into mythical ideations and visions that allow him to identify with "all of humanity," he can write about these things. See the poems "A *Meredek út* egyik példányára" *Works*, 158, *FS*, 43; "Dal" *Works*, 159-60, *FS*, 44; "Talán", *Works*, 165-66, *FS*, 52-53; "Ó, régi börtönök," *Works*, 202, *FS*, 98; "Zsivalygó pálmafán," *Works*, 203, *FS*, 99, etc.
19. "Istenhegyi kert," *Works*, 93, *FS*, 17.
20. "Órizz és védj," *Works*, 138-39, *FS*, 33.
21. "Első ekloga," *Works*, 141, *FS*, 34-35.
22. Anguish for the suffering of the innocent is a dominant theme in Radnóti's work. See the "First Eclogue," in which "armies/ of women, the child and the aged, run with their tightly-tied/ bundles," (see Endnote 21), or "Thursday," (Csütörtök), *Works*, 157, *FS*, 42, capturing blood as running "... from the lamb's white teeth," and "... the raw flesh [that] feeds the snow-white turtledove"; or "The Third Eclogue," (Harmadik Ecloga), *Works*, 175, *FS*, 60-61, with its speaker's lament: "... this age must murder its poets" or the poem of 1944 January "I Know Not What..." (Nem tudhatom...), *Works*, 196-97, *FS*, 96-97, with its images of the "old granny" weeping "in the graveyard," the "trembling laborers," the "innocent poets," and the "breast-feeding infants," all of whom emerge as juxtaposed to the "Robot-Pilot" on mission.
23. *Cain*, 44.

24. *Cain*, 45.
25. "Lapszéli jegyzet Habakkuk prófétához," *Works*, 136, *FS*, 31.
26. "Töredék," *Works*, 206, *Ff*, 104-5.
27. "Járkálj csak, halálraítélt!" Dorfes, 115, *FS*, 24.
28. "Őrizz és védj," *Works*, 138, *fS*, 33.
29. "Nyolcadik ecloga," *Works*, 213, *FS*, 115.
30. "Razglednicák (2)," *Works*, 214, *PS*, 117.
31. See Randolph L. Braham, *The Politics of Genocide: The Holocaust in Hungary*, rev. enlarged ed. I (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 350; Nathan Eck, "The March of Death from Serbia to Hungary (September 1944) and the Slaughter of Cservenka: Story of a Survivor of the Death Pit," ed. Shaul Esh, *Yad Vashem 2* (Jerusalem: Publishing Department of the Jewish Agency, 1958), 272-281; Also see other eyewitness accounts of the murders at Cservenka at YIVO Institute for Jewish Research in New York: the statements of Tibor Groner, Max Singer, Alexander Naumann, George Engel, Eugene Klein, Nicholas Derera, L. Benedek, Ladislav Fischer, and R. Rosenthal.