

In Memoriam Miklós Radnóti (1909-1944)

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On June 23, 1946 a mass grave was reopened at Abda, a small village in Western Hungary. The event was by no means unique at this stage of Hungarian history. Hardly a day went by that the authorities of one region or another would not receive word that local people had come upon corpses or hastily covered graves in the fields. According to the findings of the preliminary investigations, approximately six hundred feet away from the Rábca, a small river running through the area, inmates of a forced labor camp had been executed. The ensuing exhumation proved to be a rather difficult job: the corpses were partially decomposed and the coroners had to identify the dead and the time and cause of death on the basis of shreds of clothing and disintegrated scraps of paper. On the corpse which they registered as number 12 the following items were found:

A visiting card with the name Dr. Miklós Radnóti printed on it. An ID card stating the mother's name as Ilona Gross. Father's name illegible. Born in Budapest, May 5, 1909. Cause of death: shot in the head. In the back pocket of the trousers a small notebook was found soaked in the juices of the body, and blackened by wet earth. This was cleaned and dried in the sun.¹

On the first page of the notebook there was a short text in Hungarian, Serbian, German, French and English. The latter reads "... contains the poems of the Hungarian poet Miklós Radnóti. . . to Mr. Gyula Ortutay, Budapest, University lecturer . . . Thank you in anticipation."² It is followed by his last poems with a final entry dated October 31, 1944:

I fell beside him; his body turned over
already taut as a string about to snap.
Shot in the back of the neck. That's how you too will end
I whispered to myself: just lie quietly.
Patience now flowers into death.

“Der springt noch auf,” a voice said above me.
On my ear, blood dried, mixed with filth.³

(Trans. by E. George)

The death described was not yet his own, it was the last moment of Miklós Lorsi, a fellow inmate, a formerly celebrated violinist, to which the tragic simile, comparing the dying body to a taut string, alludes.

Radnóti would have been seventy years old this year, but he was shot thirty-five years ago and buried at the mass grave at Abda. In 1959, commemorating his fiftieth birthday, Ortutay said that with his last words — meaning the German quotation — Radnóti acquitted his nation from the opprobrium of his murder.⁴

Miklós Radnóti, one of the most outstanding poets of twentieth-century Hungarian literature, lived merely thirty-five years but already his birth was darkened by tragedy. It cost the lives of his mother and twin brother as told in his only longer prose piece, *Gemini*. Grief and guilt feelings over the double tragedy accompanied Radnóti's entire creative life. In a poem written on his twenty-eighth birthday, he searches for his *raison d'être* by returning to the same event:

An ugly, obstinate infant was I,
my tiny, twin-bearing mother, your death!
Whether my brother was stillborn or had
five minutes of life, I do not know,
but there, amidst blood, pain and screams
I was lifted up toward the light, like
a victorious little beast
who has already shown its worth
by leaving two dead bodies behind.

.....
Little mother — you bleeding sacrifice,
I have reached the age of men.
The burning light is blinding me,
send me a signal with your gentle hand
that you know the truth, that it's all right,
that there is a meaning to my life!⁵

His family's early disintegration is the topic of the “Remembering Poem” (1933) in which he recalls the last minutes of his father.

Nothing would be easier than to show in his poetry that all through his life Radnóti was preparing himself for death. It was not the inevitability of passing that had occupied his mind, but the premonition that he would die a young man. This belief was, however, not the decadent pose

of the Symbolist of the fin-de-siècle, or of the post-Impressionists of the twenties, but the objective analysis of historical realities, their signals turning into a poetic scale of his life. Just as Kafka, Musil or Krleža presented us with a "preview" of alienation present in our world today, so did Radnóti progress in his poems on the road which ultimately came to an end at Abda.

Yet he was not a pessimistic poet; perhaps the most moving in his œuvre is the pride and satisfaction with which he had collected and shaped into poems the rare minutes of happiness, those few moments of carefree joy that were granted him during his short life.

Having finished high school, Radnóti followed his guardian's suggestion and spent a year in Liberec, Czechoslovakia, to learn a trade: textile technology. He tried to learn "something useful," but could not go on with it and finally, in 1930, he enrolled at the University of Szeged as a French and Hungarian major. Szeged had a great influence on Radnóti's literary activities. There he met the closest friends of his future years, among them Gyula Ortutay. At the same time his first volume of poetry was published: *Heathen Greeting Songs*, signaling his identification with the revolutionary young. A year later, his second volume, *Song of the New Shepherds*, was confiscated and the poet had to face a court trial, charged with subversion and with having committed blasphemy.

Radnóti's early poetry was rebellious, but not in a clearcut political sense. He was rebelling against the taste of those critics for whom only conventional literature had an appeal. His poetry, abounding in surrealistic images and written in free verse, was meant to break through the barriers of tepid traditions. Young and open to everything new, Radnóti was deeply affected by the famous Exhibition of the Colonial Peoples which he visited during his first trip to Paris in 1931. The artistic achievements of 'primitive' cultures, so often reflected in the work of Picasso and many of his contemporaries, also found their way into Radnóti's poetry after his journey to France. Simultaneously, social themes, the topic of social protest, make their first appearance in his verse. Radnóti's brief involvement with the Populist Left at Szeged gave impetus to these pieces, which after 1945 were often quoted, their political significance disproportionately emphasized, not the least by his surviving friends.

By the end of the twenties and during the first years of the thirties, the young writers had formed a loose but genuine alliance, to which all on the Left, from the bourgeois liberals to the self-avowed communists, belonged, as long as they opposed traditional, 'academic literature.'

Eclectic as the group was, it was personal style and predilection, or often simply a matter of temperament rather than ideological sophistication, that made one or the other choose a certain political position within that broad spectrum. The year 1933, however, ended this relatively tolerant attitude, and the polarization of ideas began to take on a more serious and consequently dangerous shape. Many abandoned the Left as early as 1931–32, feeling that hopes for social change were futile, while after the takeover of Hitler and his party some moved closer and closer to the Right; by the end of the decade they turned into staunch supporters of National Socialism. Radnóti's withdrawal from open political commitment also began in 1933, with the fast spread of Fascist ideology. He did not take sides, but in his poetry the theme of Socialism disappears and is replaced by a search for a universal humanist ideal which permeates his later poetry and was to culminate in the great anti-fascist, pacifist poems of his last years. Engaged humanism was the only way in which the poet who could not fight otherwise undertook to safeguard the cherished human and cultural values which were suddenly endangered by the New Order. He did not participate in the Spanish Civil War but his poems unequivocally reflect his sympathies about the struggle "down South" in which to him right and wrong were clearly distinguishable. In his "First Eclogue" the fate of Garcia Lorca is related, but at the same time the fear of his own future is foretold in the imaginary conversation between the Shepherd and the Poet.

Shepherd:

He . . . Garcia Lorca is dead! that no one has told me.
News of war travels fast, so fast; and the men who are poets
vanish: like that! Didn't Europe have some memorial observance?

Poet:

No one as much as took note. It's good if the wind pokes the embers,
find some broken lines in the site of the pyre and learns them.
That's how much will be left of the *œuvre*, for the scholarly future.

(Trans. by E. George)

His deep concerns for the fate of the world notwithstanding, Radnóti was primarily the poet of the individual, and thus his private experience gained equal significance in his poetry. In 1935 he married the only love of his life, Fanni, to whom some of the most beautiful love poems of modern Hungarian literature are addressed. Their texture is interlaced with ingenious metaphors whose most generous source is nature. Nature's images are simultaneously the medium in which Radnóti's social

and moral messages are delivered. Colors, too, have a special role in his poetic world; their function, almost exclusively symbolic, is to separate feelings: the joyous from the sad, and ultimately to identify destruction and death. White and silver are Radnóti's colors for death, standing in significant opposition to gold, which consistently symbolizes life and happiness. Life's blessings are frequently portrayed in a 'golden synecdoche,' reducing them to Fanni's golden curls, or the sun's rays falling on her body. In lines, reminiscent of Mayakovsky's language, he writes:

. . . the sunshine yells merrily
down the braids of my lover,
swaying, my shadow grows to the sky,
and tonight, for supper, my brazen twenty-two years
will polish off at least three stars!⁷

Consequently, as the years turn darker, silver and white become his predominant colors, forcing gold into the outer fringes of his imagination, to his occasional description of a cherished but unattainable humane future. In addition to the ones he most frequently used, Radnóti assigned symbolic meanings to practically every color of the spectrum. In his recapitulation of the world, nature is broached and its images transferred into various social and ethnic concepts, appearing in metaphorical metonymies such as "the trees rebel crimson flowers,"⁸ or "two poppies demonstrate loyalty."⁹ Emblematic expressions showing the convertibility of images and issues are frequent in his political poetry of the early thirties. Similarly, in a synaesthetic perception, people and objects live, suffer, fear and rejoice together. Their differences washed away by intricately interwoven adjectives and predicates, man and things together create a magic world of pananimism in which their convergence alone is sufficient to prove them isomorphs, as in the "Naive Song to the Wife":

As she enters, the door greets her with a clink
and the flowerpots break into a pat,
a sleepy patch wakes in her blonde hair
like a startled sparrow, chirruping.

The old electric cord utters a scream
hulking its lazy body toward hers, and
all is swirling, so fast, I cannot write it down.

She just arrived, absent the entire day,
a tall cornflower in her hand:
with that she'll drive my death away.¹⁰

For a while, added to marital bliss, professional success brightened his daily existence. Radnóti completed and published his doctoral dissertation in 1934. It was a monograph on Margit Kaffka, an excellent woman poet of the fin-de-siècle. Still, unable to get a teaching position, he was forced to tutoring at the stenography school of his father-in-law, while Fanni added to the common income whatever she earned by giving private lessons. But he began to make a name for himself, and *Nyugat*, the most prestigious literary journal of Hungary, was publishing and reviewing his poems. A year later, Radnóti's next volume, *New Moon*, appeared: poems already written in an atmosphere of foreboding. The quiet, content moments were growing rarer. The earlier carefree idyll became filled with new meaning, and fear was turning prophetic. His collection published in 1936 bore the title *Just Pace Up and Down, You Doomed!*, and while it still contained a few poems of playful charm, the prevailing tone was capsulized in the title poem:

Just pace up and down, you doomed!
Tomcat and wind are hiding in the bush,
the row of dark trees lie tumbled
at your feet — and humping its back
the road turned pale in fear.

Shrink autumn leaf!
Shrink, you horrible world!
Wild geese cast their shadows
on the stiffened, rusty grass . . .¹¹

The next one, *Precipitous Road* (1938), was the last volume of poems still compiled by the poet himself. Prior to it, his receiving the Baumgarten Prize, a coveted literary award, and a short trip with Fanni to France marked Radnóti's last peaceful experiences before his final calvary began. But even in the poems written in Paris his legitimate fear of the future overshadowed the happy discoveries made in museums and small French towns they had not visited before. The delightful "Cartes postales," a mini-genre à la Apollinaire which Radnóti had used so successfully, alternate with poems voicing pessimism and deep anxiety. The "Picture Postcards," will sadly return in the fatal "Razglednica"

series of the labor camp. From 1938 on Radnóti's preparation for death intensifies:

. . . Among my memories I lie prostrated,
a pupil, maturing speedily for death . . .¹²

He is, however, less afraid of biological death than of having to stop working. The fear that he would not be able to complete his poetic work, that he would die and be judged by a "torso" rather than the full *œuvre*, caused him the greatest pain. Writing his own 'epitaph,' he anxiously asks ". . . but tell me, will what I've written, survive? . . ."¹³ The poems focusing on death become more and more numerous, there are only a few pieces in which neither the word nor its symbolic colors appear. He turns to a new genre, the eclogue (a deliberate misnomer), which achieves its greatest evocative power by the sharp conflict between its form and its content. Radnóti soon abandons the bucolic voice and the traditional dialogue of shepherds: the streaming, pounding message demands a change in structure. His defiant rejection of form and rhyme of the earlier years is now replaced by the lucid language and style of neo-classicism. The rebellion of the Modernists had been directed against an overorganized universe, and in the face of a world gone mad, in Radnóti's poetry purified form, tightly composed lines have become the substitute for lost reason. His hexameters do not reach back to the Latin models. He turns to the Hungarian poets of the 18th and 19th centuries instead, to the verse of Dániel Berzsenyi and János Arany. Choosing them at that new juncture of his life, Radnóti sought out the only cultural community in which he could still feel at home.

Amazingly, some of his last are patriotic poems, although of a special kind. Of these the best example is, "I Cannot Know," in which he, the potential victim, identifies himself with his land, its nature, its history and its present guilt as well.

I cannot know what these parts could mean to someone else
to me it's home, this tiny land in the embrace
of flames, since childhood cradling from far-off, my world.
It's out of her I grew, as does from a trunk its tender shoot,
and I hope that one day my body will sink into this soil.
I am at home. And when a bush kneels, once in a while,
at my feet, I know its name and can name its blossom; . . .¹⁴

(Trans. by E. George)

The same sentiment is expressed in his diary,

. . . my nation does not scream at me from the bookshelf, saying, get out of here; the regions of my land open their treasures for me, the thorns on the bushes do not tear at me more than at others, the tree will not stand on tiptoes so that I cannot reach its fruit. Had I experienced this I would kill myself, because I cannot live any other way than the way I do, nor can I think and believe in any other manner. That's how I feel in 1942, after three months of forced labor camp, and a fortnight spent in the special punitive unit.¹⁵

His is not a naive patriotism: Radnóti does not close his eyes to reality, and he is filled with revulsion about the world surrounding him:

I lived on this earth in an age
when honor was to murder and betray,
and heroes were the killers and the thieves
and those who were silent, too lazy to rejoice
were hated as if they had caught the plague.

I lived on this earth in an age
when a man who spoke out was forced to hide
and could only bite his fists in utter shame
a land got drunk on filth and blood
and grinned madly at its horrible fate.¹⁶

And all along he was sharply aware of his own, unavoidable fall:

Inside myself I live through everything that is still to come.
I don't look back. I know, not even memory, no
magic will save me — there's evil in the sky.
Friend, if you see me, shrug your shoulders and turn away.
Where the angel with the sword stood before,
now, maybe no one's there.¹⁷

(Trans. by S. Polgar, S. Berg and S. J. Marks)

The draft notice came again and in the middle of his *Twelfth Night* translations Radnóti was called to forced labor duty for the third time. He was taken to "Lager Heidenau," to work in the copper mines of nearby Bor, in the German-occupied part of Yugoslavia. By mid-1944, a life spent in human dignity could only appear as an unreachable dream in his poems:

Where are the nights and the taverns, the tables set out under the lindens?
Where, where indeed is the night? that night which shall never return now,
for to whatever is past, death itself lends another perspective.
Here at the table they sit, take shelter in smiles of the women,
and will yet take sips from our glasses, those many unburied
sleeping in forests of foreign, in meadows of faraway places.¹⁸

(Trans. by E. George)

Longing for his wife, the uncertainty about her fate, caused him additional suffering:

When might I see you? I hardly know any longer
you, who were solid, were weighty as the psalter,
beautiful as shadow and beautiful as light,
to whom I would find my way whether deafmute or blind;
now hiding in the landscape from within my eyes . . .

If he had any wish to survive, it was for the sake of his work and for Fanni. The hope of seeing her again lent him courage and strength to go on:

. . . Despite them I am alive,
a prisoner: and all I hoped for, I have
sized up in breadth. I will find my way to you;
for you I have walked the spirit's full length as it grew,
and highways of the land. If need be, I will render
myself, a conjurer, past cardinal embers,
amid nose-diving flames, but I will come back,
if I must be, I shall be resilient as the bark
on trees . . .¹⁹

(Trans. E. George)

Then came the German retreat, the "Forced March" started, and led him within two months, to the mass grave of Abda.

Radnóti never wrote his "Ars poetica," but it is easy to gather from his poems that his work was his reason for living, ". . . For I am worth no more than the value of the word / in my poem . . .," he confessed to his wife in the "Hesitant Ode," in which he also wrote:

. . . And I still can't tell of the full extent
of what it means to me, while I'm working
to feel your protective gaze over my hand.²⁰

In his persistent concern with every detail of his poems, in his constant striving for the best, the most subtle expression of his true thoughts, Radnóti put his entire intellectual and moral responsibility into every word he left behind.

Even when facing immediate death, the paramount, gnawing question on his mind was not how to save himself but how to assure that his poems in the small notebook would not perish with him.

His poems survived and the following generations have been reading them ever since. They know them by heart, they teach them in the high schools and universities of Hungary. Scholars have been analyzing his verse and rediscovering each piece with each new reading. There is still a hitherto unnoticed fine metaphor, a particularly successful harmony between sound and meaning that may surface with another close reading of the text. Additional ties between his work and that of his contemporaries are discovered by scrutinizing his vocabulary and the micro-poetic components of his language. Like all great poets he is as inexhaustible for the interested reader as he is for the scholar. He perished young but he achieved what he had desired most — he has become an inalienable part of Hungarian literature. And as the years pass, he is more and more recognized on a European scale as a significant poetic witness to our time, ranking with the late Paul Celan and with the Polish poet, Zbigniew Herbert.

NOTES

1. Published by A. Kőszegi, *Töredék* (Budapest, 1972), pp. 68–69. Radnóti's final weeks were also investigated by Gábor Tolnai, "A meredek út végső szakasza," *Irodalomtörténet*, (New series) 2: 239–270; 3: 463–497, 763–792; and "Szerbia ormán . . . — Radnóti Miklós nyomában," *Kortárs* 16/1 (January 1972): 86–106; 16/2 (February 1972): 254–269; and 16/3 (March 1972): 416–473.
2. M. Radnóti, *Bori notesz*, facsim. ed. (Budapest, 1970), p. 13.
3. "Picture Postcards, 4," from M. Radnóti, *Subway Stops*, ed. and trans. by E. George (Ann Arbor, 1977), p. 90. Henceforth E. George.
4. *Radnóti Miklós, 1909–1944*, ed. D. Baróti, introd. by Gy. Ortutay (Budapest, 1959). Further inquiry into his final days, however, revealed that Radnóti had indeed been killed by Hungarian soldiers, who when unable to find a hospital that would take in the sick inmates in their custody, decided to get rid of their twenty-two prisoners. The men were forced to dig their own graves into which they all were shot — except for the last, who was first ordered to cover the bodies and was then killed with shovels.
5. From "Huszonnyolc év," M. Radnóti, *Összes versei és műfordításai* (Budapest, 1959), pp. 153–154. Henceforth Radnóti. Unless otherwise indicated, all further translations are mine. They will appear in a monograph on Radnóti to be

published in the Twayne World Authors Series. The page numbers refer to the above-quoted original publication.

6. From "First Eclogue," E. George, pp. 47-48.
7. From "1931 április 19," Radnóti, p. 66.
8. From "Tavaszi vers," *ibid.*, p. 42.
9. From "Pontos vers az alkonyatról," *ibid.*, p. 109.
10. From "Együgyű dal a feleségről," *ibid.*, p. 200.
11. From "Járkálj csak, halálraitélt!," *ibid.*, pp. 149-150.
12. From "Ez volna hát. . .," *ibid.*, p. 155.
13. From "Hajnaltól éjfélíg — S majd így tünődöm," *ibid.*, p. 166.
14. From "I Cannot Know . . .," E. George, p. 74.
15. Quoted from B. Pomogáts, *Radnóti Miklós* (Budapest, 1977), p. 191.
16. From "Töredék," Radnóti, pp. 259-260.
17. From "Not Even Memory, No Magic," M. Radnóti, *Clouded Sky*, tr. by S. Polgár, S. Berg, and S. J. Marks (New York, 1972), p. 83.
18. From "À la recherche . . .," E. George, pp. 84-85.
19. From "Letter to My Wife," *ibid.*, pp. 81-82.
20. From "Hesitant Ode," *ibid.*, p. 67.



BOOK REVIEWS

East Central European Perceptions of Early America. Edited by Béla K. Király and George Barany. Lisse: The Peter de Ridder Press, 1977. Pp. 144.

Since little scholarly attention has been paid in America so far to the East Central European image of the early United States, volume five of the Brooklyn College series: *Studies on Society in Change*, is a most welcome enterprise. It consists of six essays: one on Austria, one on Bohemia, two on Hungary and two on Poland, with a preface, an introduction and a concluding article. The present review will concentrate on the two essays dealing with Hungary: Alfred A. Reisch's "Sándor Bölöni Farkas's Reflections on American Political and Social Institutions" and Béla K. Király's "Béla Széchenyi's American Tour."

The first choice, that of Bölöni's *Utazás Észak-Amerikában*, is an obvious one; the Transylvanian wrote the first Hungarian travelogue ever on the United States. What Reisch does not mention is an equally important fact, namely that published in 1834, Bölöni's work preceded by one year Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*. Even its Hungarian translation by Gábor Fábán came out earlier than the second Hungarian travelogue, Ágoston Haraszthy's in 1844. In consequence, Bölöni's is the only Hungarian account of the young republic unaffected by the Frenchman's perceptive remarks. The second choice, Béla Széchenyi's *Amerikai útam*, 1863, is less obvious. Following Bölöni's and Haraszthy's, three travelogues appeared on the U.S. before 1863, two more with chapters on North America and two others belong to the same period though they were published later; some of these books are outstanding. Evidently, Király was prompted in his choice by the fact that Béla Széchenyi belonged to one of the most distinguished and worthiest aristocratic families in Hungary. His tour in America realized a dream that had been denied by Metternich to his father, István Széchenyi, who had so ardently wished to see "das werdende Land."

The radically different approach and emphasis in the two essays contribute an added interest to the whole volume. Király examines Széchenyi's travelogue in the Hungarian historical context, while Reisch's