

László Németh's *Revulsion*: Violence and Freedom

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The portrait of woman as victim of her own emotional and sexual nature lies within a well-known tradition that permeates Eastern and Western European literature, cutting across the boundaries of religion, ideology, and time. However, the contemporary Hungarian novel *Iszony* (*Revulsion*), written by László Németh between 1942 and 1947, manifests a fundamentally different approach which expands this traditional image.¹ Delineating the heroine with new and startling dimensions, *Revulsion* not only offers an unconventional feminine portrait, but also addresses major social and ethical issues, revealing the necessity of restructuring human relationships in general. It calls attention to the conflicts between individual need and social claim, and establishes parallels between the role of the wife in marriage and the role of the individual in society, suggesting that personal self-determination is the most basic human need and right, and, therefore, the most justified human demand. Indeed, in addition to furnishing an innovative vision of woman, *Revulsion* expounds a radical concept of human freedom.

Conventional in plot and structure, the novel is deceptive in its simplicity. Its form, first person narration, renders Nelli Kárász, her psychological structure and private feelings, central. Different from most young people of the village, she grows up to be a loner, shunning close relationships, avoiding social gatherings, dances, and parties. She has no emotional ties to anyone but her father. Together they share a life of loneliness, hard work, and poverty, a bleak present and a hopeless future.

As soon as she encounters her future husband and adversary, Sanyi Takaró, she fears and abhors him. But her parents disregard her feelings and pressure her beyond endurance: they see in Sanyi someone who will rescue Nelli from poverty, offer her long-absent security, and hence provide her with a good life. At first she defends herself against the pressure, but soon she loses ground; the death of her father, the illness of

her mother, and the encroaching force of Sanyi's pursuit break her will. She surrenders, and they marry: however, Nelli's revulsion to Sanyi prevails. The marriage deteriorates, and bitter hatred dominates her life. She becomes overwhelmed by fury and aggression. Her subsequent animosity grows to such an extent and generates such energy that it culminates in her murdering him.

This work provoked intense controversy among the critics in the Hungary of the late forties. Evaluating the novel from the Marxist point of view, official Hungarian criticism rejected the book because of its focus on the "private, psycho-sexual sphere." As early as 1946, I. Király said: "Németh's heroes are not the victims of objective circumstances, but of their own mistakes; their lot is not typical, but private and individual; they are damned to become lonely and isolated."² And György Lukács labeled Németh's individualistic approach not only as "dangerously" pessimistic, but even as "reactionary." As he claimed:

The radical emphasis on the *inner region* is not coincidental: as a matter of fact, it is a conscious artistic approach as well as a demonstration of the author's moral outlook [*italics added*]. The type of person *Revulsion* advocates is someone who silently carries out his chores, who bears disappointments even catastrophes without wincing, who perceives self-fulfillment solely in his pedantically-accurate every day work (e.g. the father or the mother-in-law of the heroine). What is then the underlying suggestion of this novel, as László Németh's first significant novel since the liberation of Hungary? A new type of silence. . . . This is, . . . the novel expounds nothing less than a silent objection against the new democracy.³

In spite of the dominant critical opinion, a few critics of the time defended *Revulsion* against these attacks on the grounds that the novel *does* manifest social concerns. Contradicting official Hungarian criticism, István Sötér, for example, said that underneath Németh's representation of psychological problems, themes reflecting class struggle emerge. "Not only does Diane's body break in this novel under the grip of Actaeon," he argued, "but the class of noblemen drowns in the hungry and violent arms of the peasants. And the deepest vibrations of these screams of horror have their roots in prevalent social conflicts; in fact, it would be a mistake not to hear them under the private overtones."⁴ Likewise, János Czibor and Imre Sarkadi saw social criticism as an integral part of the novel.⁵ In recent years, however, *Revulsion* has become less and less the center of controversial ideological encounters in Hungary; today, it is neither intensely attacked nor intensely defended from the Marxist point of view.⁶ Free from doctrinal constraints, the author himself uses personal aesthetic criteria to explain that the work

explores feminine psychological dilemmas and offers a new vision of humanity's sexual and spiritual realm.⁷

Outside of Hungary, critical opinion diverges sharply regarding this novel and Németh's works in general. Whereas Lothar Sträter sees the author not only as a moralist and a social critic of the first rank, but also as an outstanding European novelist, many English and American reviewers consider Németh to be a traditional writer and perceive *Revulsion* as an old-fashioned Hungarian curiosity rather than a book of universal significance.⁸ Károly Kerényi, on the other hand, regards Németh's style and characterization, even the gloomy and bleak atmosphere of his novels, as having supreme literary value. "Such novels," he writes in his essay on *Revulsion*, "pessimistic as they are, refute real pessimism through their sublime standards."⁹ In fact, Kerényi believes Németh to be one of the greatest writers of European literature. As he says: "His [Németh's] women put him on a par with the creators of Electra, Anna Karenina, and Nora."¹⁰

Whereas the Marxist outlook clearly fails to elucidate the central issues of *Revulsion*, a psychological interpretation, common in Western criticism, initially suggests itself as a more relevant approach. Indeed, Nelli seems to be motivated solely by a pathologically passionate revulsion to Sanyi. As she says: "Do you know what 'love' is, Aunt Szeréna? It's nothing but the vulgar man's desire to cover his wife with his wetness before he devours her. And that is murderous. It left me without a single healthy thought" (II, 154).

However, in spite of the attention put on her feminine psychological nature, a close reading of the text reveals intricate layers of perspectives with ascending orders of concern: a national focus, a broader and more universal point of view, and finally Németh's own metaphysical perception. Indeed, Nelli only superficially resembles the conventionally drawn, emotionally-torn woman: when seen in a broader context, she illustrates a diversity of social and moral conflicts such as the relation between the individual and society, between isolation and community, between freedom and oppression. By dealing with Nelli's frustrated needs, Németh exposes both the frustration of Hungarian peasants and that of the individual in society; by pointing to her isolation, he discloses the isolation of the Hungarian village and stresses the moral and spiritual superiority of suffering. By insisting on Nelli's right to self-determination, Németh not only affirms the necessity for alternative patterns of life but advocates an extreme vision of human freedom, which justifies even violence, if necessary, for its realization.

In order to explore the underlying themes of the book, we must

examine Nelli and the characters surrounding her on all the levels previously mentioned. First of all, in spite of her authenticity as a particular character, Nelli reflects the expectations, patterns of life, and the socio-economic condition of her milieu as well. Therefore, in order to understand her reactions, we have to start our investigation by projecting her figure against the background of Hungarian village life between the two World Wars. Living in unendurable poverty and every day waging a hopeless struggle for life, the majority of Hungarian peasants hardly had any option to improve their lot.¹¹ Hence, the fact that Nelli does not attempt to better her life nor even become independent, and that she marries Sanyi and remains married to him against her will, is more significantly tied to the economic conditions of the time and the feudal, oppressive social structure of the country than to her emotional problems or to her feminine passivity. Without marriage, she has no realistic chance for survival. That is to say, rather than being a victim of her sexual determination, Nelli is a victim of the poverty and the slowly changing economic and social processes prevalent in the Hungary of her time. In fact, none of *Revulsion's* characters seems to be able to rise above the general level of poverty and degradation. None but Sanyi hopes or plans for a better future, nor even tries to mend his life. Each of them accepts the hardship and the hopelessness of his condition. And even Sanyi's optimism is based on nothing but empty hopes: his endeavors are pointless in the long run; he moves in circles and fails in the end on every count. As Nelli describes his frame of mind:

Instead of working on the farm, he thought of nothing but making deals. Although our cellar was empty, some days his breath smelt of wine. He spent his time with Uncle Kertész and other relatives, explaining the word-economy to them and drinking their wine. (11, 198)

Indeed, lethargy and weariness permeate the atmosphere of the village, restricting ambitions and lowering the expectations of people. Thus, to conceive of Nelli's dependence on men as a manifestation of her emotional instability, or as a traditionally feminine feature present in a male-oriented society, obscures the inherent social criticism of the book and ignores the reality of the conditions.

The characters of *Revulsion* should also be viewed against the background of the Hungarian populist literary tradition.¹² Focusing on the "Hungarian heritage" and the "Hungarian plight," this tradition highlights the isolation and hardship of the oppressed peasantry, and demands social and political reform. Peasants are often represented in the works of the populist writers as lonely and desperate individuals who either resign themselves to their fate or become single-handed rebels,

driven by their destitute circumstances and violent nature to the extreme edges of human tolerance.¹³ Sharing the scope and vision of the movement, Németh recreates these characteristics not only in Nelli, but in her father, Sanyi's mother, and Aunt Szeréna, pointing to their common nature as well as to their common background and roots. Each of these four figures is portrayed as a silent and lonely person, suffering under overwhelming physical and existential deprivation. (There is, however, a difference in their reactions to extreme pressures: whereas Aunt Szeréna, Mrs. Takaró, and Mr. Kárász turn their despair inward, dying at the end in sudden heart-attacks, Nelli acts upon her feelings and becomes a murderess.) Németh does not use descriptions nor does he accumulate psychological arguments to explain his characters' most salient features, their need for separation and inner independence. Rather, he lovingly and sympathetically depicts these traits as parts of the figures' immutable essences. Yet, in spite of the similarities between this presentation and those of the populist writers, neither the characters depicted nor the issues raised in *Revulsion* simply follow the orbit of national views and traditions. Quite to the contrary, the traditional perspectives appear in this work in a novel form, imposing a revolutionary ethic of extreme consequences.

Both processes, the reevaluation and reformulation of the traditional populist approach and the development of a new vision, characterize Németh's treatment of the novel's central theme, Nelli's alienation. Reflecting more than a pattern of a literary tradition, more than a representation of an innate mystical quality of the mind, loneliness emerges in *Revulsion* as a necessary condition for man's sensibility, responsibility, strength, inner independence, and love. In spite of the obvious conflicts caused by their alienation, the four silent, lonely, more philosophically-minded characters of the novel demonstrate not only high moral standards, but also the ability to create human relationships of considerable depth. (For example, there is an intense emotional bond between Nelli, her father, Mrs. Takaró, and Aunt Szeréna, between Mrs. Takaró and her sons, between Aunt Szeréna and her relatives.) In contrast, worldliness and sociability appear as negative aspects of human nature, as masks for the emptiness, banality, and moral shallowness of life. Sanyi as well as his friends illustrate these qualities. Slenkai, "his breath smelling of tobacco," Dányi, "brutal, with watery eyes, and red face," the new head notary, "a walking advertisement for drug-stores," and the little tax commissioner, "with his violet eyes and long thin face," appear as mediocre figures that demonstrate neither heart nor intellect but grotesquely oversized sexual needs. Likewise, the gre-

gamous woman characters of the village are portrayed as chatty, gossipy, oversexed, vulgar, and ignorant. The farmer's wife, the "love-sick dove," as well as Rózsa, the little "red-ball of woman," seem to be interested in nothing but sex; and Marcsa's most important feature is stupidity. "She stares as if compelled to think of something very difficult that she cannot recall" (II, 65). Social gatherings (e.g., the visits of relatives or the company on every third Friday at the Takarós') emerge as useless and senseless occasions, demonstrating people's inability to communicate with each other. Indeed, in Nelli's view, guests just "invade the house with a broad smile and gaiety ready to be released; they eat and drink, fill up your day, and depart with illicit information gained from their spying" (II, 56). This contemptuous view of human nature and behavior, this unsympathetic portrayal of crowds and superficial social contacts in general, questions Nelli's assertion that her need for loneliness created the problem. Although she repeatedly identifies her isolation as the source of her conflicts, the novel reveals this state to be neither negative nor pathological but *essential* to achieving such human qualities as morality and understanding. A contradiction thus emerges between the first person narrator and the inner textual perspective, disclosing two distinctly different levels of perceptions: Nelli's personal account, which concentrates on her sexual revulsion toward Sanyi and an outside objective viewpoint, which focuses on the existential background of her alienation. In fact, societal and moral issues are investigated within the framework of the personal account; and *vice versa*, Nelli's personal feelings are explained and analyzed from the perspective of moral and social concerns. It is the interplay between these two perceptions, Nelli's own point of view and the broader and more general vision, that discloses the complexities of the book.

From Nelli's point of view, sexual revulsion toward Sanyi creates the marital blight; underlying themes, however, point to her spiritual and existential deprivation as the cause of the conflicts. In Nelli's perception the marriage represents sexual defeat and humiliation. As she says: "It is forbidden to squeeze the rolls in the bakery, but I am not protected in the same way. Can you imagine what it's like, Aunt Szeréna, to be at the mercy of ten fleshy fingers that are entitled to lay hold of you wherever they feel like it?" (II, 153). Ill-feelings and rejection overcome her with Sanyi's first visit, as she perceives his push "towards the house across a virgin snowfield" (I, 7). Coming uninvited, demanding time, attention, and space, he overwhelms her at first sight. Hoping to escape him, she flees to the kitchen to prepare a meal, but "by the time I'd finished peeling the first potatoes," she says, "he stuck his brown smile through

the crack of the kitchen door. . . . Obviously he attributed my sudden departure to some sort of virginal alarm that he liked immensely" (I, 23). As the house and field, her pride and joy, became suddenly soiled under his muddy boots, so too the kitchen is soiled by his "brown smile." She notices his "hard stubby fingers," and "those warm, chestnut eyes that looked at you as if trying to remind you of some mischief you had both committed" (I, 8). She is repulsed by his "gypsy" look, by his boisterous behavior, and by the pleasure he obviously takes in her. The development of their future relationship is marked by this first visit. She looks upon him with abhorrence and disgust, and the more they meet, the more intense her revulsion grows. Believing he desires nothing but to "assault and strip the amazon" from her so that "he could clutch the panting chick within," she sees him as dirty and brutal (I, 70). When confronted with the certainty of the marriage, she is overcome by horror. "I had seen animals;" she says, "but even the idea of doing the same with a man was too terrible" (I, 209). Indeed, she detests every minute spent with him. Her thoughts focus unceasingly on his "oily skin," his "sweaty hands," and his "cunning eyes" staring into the night. Obsessed by hatred for his physicality, Nelli extends her aversion later toward their only child. She sees in her "Sanyi's fingers, Sanyi's hair and Sanyi's selfish gaiety" (II, 291). Feeling overcome by this ever increasing revulsion, she kills him. Even after the murder, she remains besieged by repugnance: "My revulsion in bed," she says "the smell of sweat — not even Sanyi's smell but the smell of our whole marriage — were still so much alive in me that there was no room left for guilt" (II, 242). As a matter of fact, at this point, Nelli is free of "ordinary" moral considerations; perceiving the events from her own point of view, she holds the murder to be a direct outcome of her sexual violation, an inevitable rebellion of her misused virginity. "You brought this thing upon yourself," she says, standing by his corpse, "Why did you bring me back from Cenc? I had fled and I even told Aunt Szeréna that if I hadn't done so I would have jabbed a knife into you!" (II, 242).

In the context of the novel as a whole, however, the marriage represents more an arena of struggle between individual need and societal tradition, between personal freedom and external oppression, than an unfortunate conglomeration of contrasting sexual needs. This perspective is created by the appearance of multifarious themes, suggesting other than sexual interpretations of the events. First of all, by pointing to Nelli's romantic feelings toward other men, her portrayal indicates that the aversion toward Sanyi does not stem necessarily from pathological problems, but from the difference between their personalities.

Her interest in both Ernő and Imre allows for the possibility that under other circumstances, and with another man, she could have developed a better relationship. She falls in love with Ernő, and is crushed by their separation; then she feels attracted to Imre, daydreaming about a marriage with him. It is important, however, that both men are different from Sanyi; both are gentle, silent, and withdrawn; neither wants to own her; neither wants to overwhelm her. If she had married either of them, it appears, Nelli could have lived a better life. "Lonely walks with the dogs and silent work alongside another," she says, "this was what I longed for, what would give me happiness" (I, 192). It is thus because Sanyi's character and life style represent the opposite of this ideal, because his forceful and overwhelming personality contrasts with Nelli's basic needs, and because she is forced to marry and accept him, that she feels frustrated in her right to live the life of her choice. Secondly, by investigating the nature of these contrasting needs, the presentation establishes links between power and humiliation, between force and weakness, transforming those connections into implicit moral comment. Indeed, thematic and structural parallels inherent in the novel underline this pattern of Nelli's decreasing and Sanyi's increasing strength. They focus on her plight in the face of merciless circumstances that force her to submit and that lead Sanyi to "victory" at her cost. By periodic references to the past, the reader is constantly reminded that it is Sanyi who pushes himself to Nelli's side when her father dies, takes over the land bit by bit, and makes himself indispensable to her sick and helpless mother. Simultaneously, recurring motifs point to the anguish that befalls Nelli and to the pressure put on her by friends and relatives. Thus, intrinsic in the text is the intention to demonstrate that the marriage is built on an abomination, on the violation of Nelli's free will. As she says, "I was transformed from rebellion to surrender. I was exactly like a horse whipped into submission. Father's death, Mother's helplessness and Sanyi's siege were not arguments capable of rational assessment but forces which had broken me" (I, 191-92). In addition, newly developing situations and events unceasingly demonstrate that the couple's initial pattern of inequality never changes. Analyzing the textual evidence not only elucidates issues more universal in nature than Nelli's personal conflicts, but reveals by implication the metaphysical position of the novel. Since the heroine's sexual dilemma represents more the *consequence* than the *cause* of her lack of autonomy, Nelli's struggle for sexual freedom may be seen as a paradigm of the human struggle for self-determination. "I might have endured it," she says, "if my husband had also been a lonely soul, but Sanyi doesn't even give me

room to breathe" (II, 154). Feeling pursued, invaded, and finally consumed by Sanyi, Nelli has no life of her own. If she is to survive, she must regain her own independence: she must escape her husband. Getting away from him for just a few days, she appears to be liberated: "As if I had emerged at last from a long dark tunnel, as if I were gradually learning — like a patient after an eye operation — what leaves and flowers actually are" (I, 157). Her description of the newly gained sexual independence not only discloses relief from the tension crippling her life, but a metaphysical encounter with freedom as well. "Poetic words," she says, "such as 'freedom' and 'a new life,' jump up and down in my heart and in my mouth" (II, 157). By pointing to the intensity of this experience, Németh emphasizes the essential role of freedom for human life and dignity, and conversely, the grave consequences of its absence. When taken back to Fencs by Sanyi, Nelli feels sentenced to death. "The world," she says, "remains one unbroken dream; like a coffin pushed into the grave, people passively glide toward their fate" (II, 190). This vision of freedom as the ultimate necessity of man's existence suggests additional perspectives from which Nelli's personality, her coldness, emotional detachment, chastity, and her need for isolation have to be understood. Because these characteristics appear as parts of her essence — the novel never examines whether acquired or innate — they are expressions of her freedom of choice. When they are violated, her freedom to choose herself is violated. In this light, Nelli's virginity not only represents a basic choice of her being, a state apart from the "muddy waters of humanity," but also a consequence of her right to "remain enveloped in a layer of cool air." Hence, those who force her to surrender this right obstruct the fulfillment of a higher order. As she says:

Where virginity defends itself with intense revulsion, there is a higher force that forbids its violation. And if it should be violated, it will revenge itself like an outraged angel, tearing at its bondage and murdering if it must to set itself free (II, 189).

Inherent in this vision is the idea of personal freedom as the supreme metaphysical criterion of human existence. Because it is Nelli's *right* to choose to withdraw from the world and to remain untouched, in Németh's conception, no other consideration may supersede the imperative of this choice.

Using this metaphysical criterion to illuminate practical situations, Németh demonstrates that human relationships built on the obstruction of either partner's freedom bring about destruction for both. Actually, Sanyi is not guilty of anything worse than ignorance and insensitivity, yet his disregard for Nelli's freedom destroys her and brings about his

own death. Although at first he appears to be the “winner,” in the end he becomes as much the victim of their relationship as Nelli. Actually, Németh not only criticizes the institution of marriage that tolerates, even fosters, the economic and emotional dependency of woman, but he also points to the disastrous consequences of oppression. It is certainly no coincidence that Nelli gets away with Sanyi’s murder. From the metaphysical perspective of the novel not murder but the obstruction of freedom emerges as the worst crime one human being can commit against another; elimination of those who violate this principle thus becomes a necessity for re-establishing justice and order in the world.

Although *Revulsion* deals extensively with the sexual problems of an individual woman, analysis reveals the work to be a criticism of not only Hungarian society and the institution of marriage, but of general societal structures which restrict freedom. By depicting Nelli’s isolation as a traditional state of her milieu, Németh points to the tragic conditions prevailing in the Hungary of that time; by depicting isolation as a necessary state for gaining insight and dignity, Németh points to the tragic condition of humanity. The author’s insistence on Nelli’s right to be different suggests the possibility of a world where men *and* women are equally free, and thus have the inviolable right to self-determination. Indeed, Németh reveals freedom as a metaphysical force that when restricted, will assert itself regardless of the sacrifice required.

NOTES

1. László Németh, *Iszony*, 2nd ed. (1947; reprint ed., Budapest: Szépirodalmi Könyvkiadó, 1975). All further references to this book will be in my own translation and cited in the text with volume and page numbers. The novel has been translated into English [*Revulsion*, trans. Kathleen Szasz (New York: Grove Press Inc., 1965)].
2. Taken from László Vekerdi, *Németh László: alkotásai és vallomásai tükrében*, Arcok és Vallomások (Budapest: Szépirodalmi Zsebkönyvtár, 1970), p. 252, my own translation.
3. Vekerdi, pp. 252-53.
4. Vekerdi, p. 248.
5. Vekerdi, p. 248.
6. Although official Hungarian criticism still blames Németh for his involvement in the “third road” concept, his creative output is not rejected anymore. Cf. Tibor Klaniczay, József Szauder, and Miklós Szabolcsi, *History of Hungarian Literature*, trans. József Hatvany and István Farkas, ed. Miklós Szabolcsi (Budapest: Corvina Press, 1964), pp. 257-61. It is even possible to analyze Németh from the psychological perspective. Cf. László Fülöp, “Lélekrajz és létértelmezés: (Jegyzetek az *Iszony*ról),” *Studia Litteraria* 12 (1974): 97-117.
7. Taken from the jacket of *Iszony* 1975 edition.

8. Lothar Sträter, "László Németh: Lehrer seiner Nation," *Frankfurter Hefte* 27 (1972): 363-70; cf. H. T. Anderson, "Németh, László: *Revulsion*," *Bestseller*, 15 March 1966, pp. 464-65; A. Homer, "László Németh: *Revulsion*," *Books and Bookmen*, December 1965, pp. 43-44; Robert L. Stilwell, "Grounds for Despair," *Saturday Review*, 12 March 1966, p. 36. The reason for the lack of enthusiasm among the English-speaking critics probably springs from the shortcomings of the English translation.
9. Károly Kerényi, "On László Németh," *The Hungarian Quarterly* 3, no. 1-2 (1962): 36.
10. Kerényi, p. 38.
11. Various sociological studies written on the life of Hungarian peasants and farm workers between the two world wars point to both the hardship and isolation of these people and to the economic conditions and chronic ailments of Hungarian society. One of the best known of this genre is Gyula Illyés' book *Puszták népe* (1936; reprint ed., Budapest: Szépirodalmi Könyvkiadó, 1972), which offers a realistic picture of the ordeal and frustration of the people in the *puszta*.
12. Initiated by musicians and writers before the First World War, the populist movement rose to stir interest in folk culture and tradition. Later, historians, sociologists, and economists joined the ranks of the artists to demand social and political reform. Although the members of both groups represent complex and intricate political and aesthetic viewpoints, their interest in peasant themes and problems, their nationalist concept of the "special Hungarian road," their focus on the *corpus hungaricum*, point to a common style, to common concerns, perspectives and goals. It is customary to list Zsigmond Móricz, Dezső Szabó, József Erdélyi, Gyula Illyés, and László Németh among the populists. Cf. "Hungary's Populist Writers," *East Europe* 8, no. 2 (1959): 32-41; Joseph Remenyi, *Hungarian Writers and Literature: Modern Novelists, Critics, and Poets*, ed. J. Molnar (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1964), pp. 33-34; Szabolcsi, pp. 149-266.
13. Both extremes, the stoic peasant figures who resign themselves to melancholy and those who violently rebel against their oppressed position, appear in the works of Móricz as well as in the works of Ferenc Móra, Dezső Szabó, József Erdélyi, Gyula Illyés, and László Németh.