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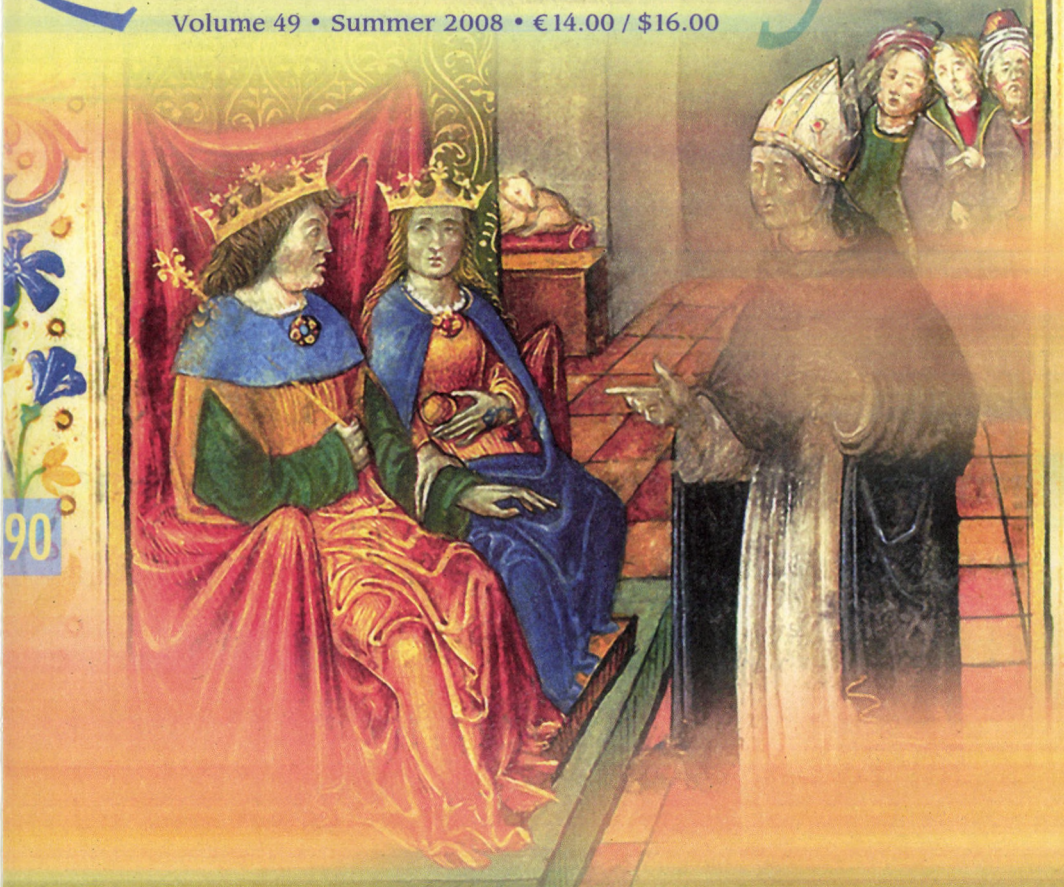

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Cover illustration: *Ransanus before King Matthias and Queen Beatrice. Miniature on fol. 17r of* Epithoma rerum Hungararum, *c. 1490, by Petrus Ransanus*

Mihály Szegedy-Maszák

Gyula Krúdy's Visions of Unexpected Death

The novelist, short-story writer, playwright and journalist Gyula Krúdy (1878–1933) is known to the majority of his readers as the most prolific Hungarian writer. No doubt many are familiar with his well-known works, such as the novels *A vörös postakocsi* (1913, translated as *The Crimson Coach* in 1967), *Napraforgó* (published in John Batki's translation as *Sunflower* in 1978 and reprinted in 1997), *Boldogult úrfikoromban* (In My Late Lamented Days As a Young Rake, 1930), or the short stories about Sindbad (a selection translated by George Szirtes is entitled *The Adventures of Sindbad,* 1998), but only the literati are likely to have recognised the vast quantity of his short narratives and journalism, works very largely of great brilliance, written from a deeply impassioned point of view. In 2005 the Bratislava publishing house Kalligram started a collected edition of his works (twelve volumes have appeared so far), but its editors, the literary scholar Gábor Bezeczky and the writer László Kelecsényi, are by no means certain that they will be able to find all the unpublished texts. There might be works still hidden in the newspapers of the early twentieth century.

The child of a successful lawyer from a gentry family, Krúdy attended school in Szatmár (today Satu Mare, in Romania), Nyíregyháza (in Eastern Hungary) and Podolin (today Podolinec, in Slovakia). His first writing was published when he was 14. From 1896 he lived in Budapest, spending much of his time in restaurants, inns and cafés. His first book, a collection of short stories, appeared in 1897, but it was preceded by numerous narratives of various lengths published in newspapers. During the next decades there were significant changes in his domestic circum-

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Mihály Szegedy-Maszák

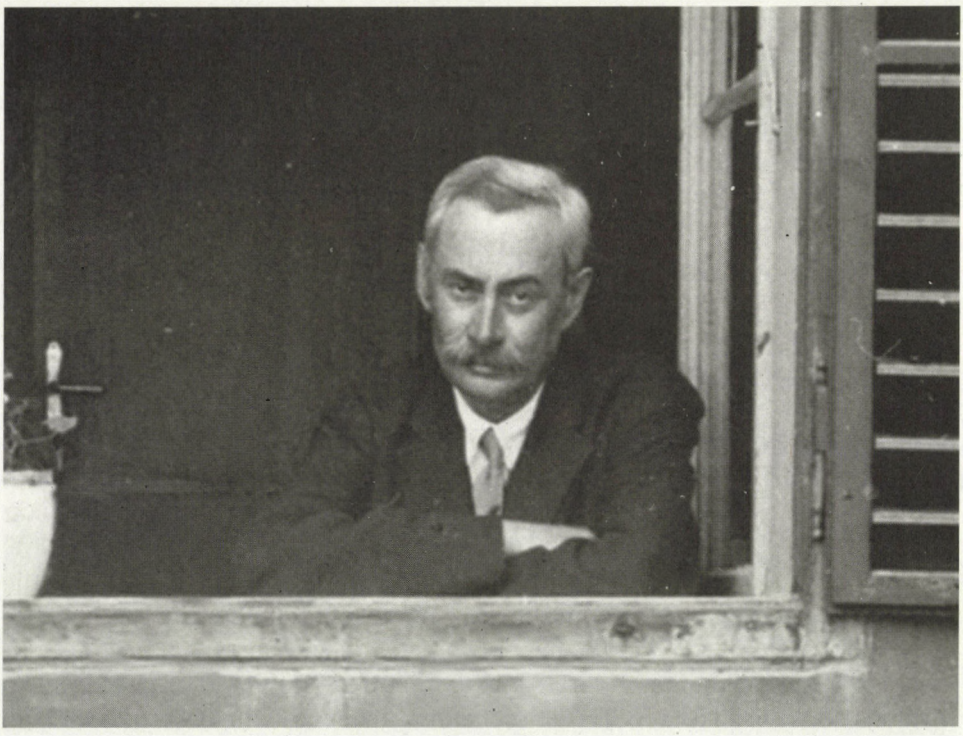
is Professor and Chair of Comparative Literature at Eötvös Loránd University and Professor of Central Eurasian Studies at Indiana University. He is the author of Literary Canons: National and International *(2001), twelve books in Hungarian (among them monographs on Zsigmond Kemény, Sándor Márai and Géza Ottlik) and editor-in-chief of a three-volume history of Hungarian literature (2007) and the journal* Hungarian Studies. *His most recent books are* Szó, kép, zene *(2007, on literature and the other arts) and* Megértés, fordítás, kánon *(2008, on cultural globalization).*

stances. His two marriages proved to be dismal failures, although several children had been born to him, and in the last fifteen years of his life he had serious drinking problems and financial difficulties. Journalism, necessitated by a need to make money, made taxing demands upon his energy, but it was also an end in itself; and in important respects it was a means, too, towards the ends of fiction.

Although he was never a systematic reader in any academic sense, he had been profoundly impressed by Russian works with heroes characterised as "superfluous men", works by Pushkin, Lermontov, Goncharov and Turgenev. Having drawn some inspiration from these texts, Krúdy became increasingly suspicious of the identity of human character and made his stories end without any point to them. Eduárd Alvinczy, modelled partly on the many-sided aristocrat Count István Széchenyi (1791–1860), is described as "an impossibility" by one of the characters in *The Crimson Coach,* a novel with several narrators and a motto taken from *Evgeny Onegin*. Krúdy was deeply suspicious of theory-mongering, yet he became familiar with some of Freud's ideas, and even composed a somewhat humorous *Álmoskönyv* (A Book of Dreams, 1919).

He already had a long list of publications to his credit when *Nyugat* (West), the most important Hungarian magazine of the twentieth century, began to appear in 1908, and he had shown he was a highly imaginative writer of short stories prior to the appearance of the collection *Szindbád ifjúsága* (Sindbad's Youth, 1911), a work that served as the basis for a very successful film, premiered in 1971 and directed by Zoltán Huszárik (1931–81). In the first half of his career the heavy emphasis on similes seemed to be the most obvious characteristic of his style. From the 1910s the same device served as a starting-point for his highly original experimentation with certain aspects of narrative space and time (the manipulation of chronology and duration, as well as shifts from singulative to iterative story-telling and vice versa). His characters often lapse into some other place or time (Kázmér Rezeda is conversing with the ghosts of 15th-century monarchs in *The Crimson Coach,* for instance) or wake up in another world. A change is accomplished and the inner life of the character obliterates the outward circumstances. Krúdy's imagination is that of a visionary; his genius is lyric, not dramatic.

For him the successive swings to left and right after the First World War caused no obvious break in his artistic activity. Unlike most of his contemporaries, he betrayed no obvious response to political changes, for even if the sway of neo-conservatism might have been a factor in his decision to write a historical trilogy built around the figures of two Habsburgs, Mary, the wife of King Louis II, and Ferdinand I, *Három király* (Three Kings, 1927–30) is hardly a typical work, nor is it one of his most successful. The retrospection that was an ingrained part of Krúdy's artistic nature was far removed from the pragmatic temper of the 1920s, which was part of the reason for the loss in popularity that he suffered. The rise of his reputation in recent years, on the other hand, may be at least partly a consequence of the more favourable interpretation of the legacy of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, the culture of which is inseparable from the evolution of Krúdy's art.



Gyula Krúdy, 1928. Photographer unknown. The Petőfi Museum of Literature.

What is far more significant about the fiction that he produced during this period is its direct continuity with the experimentation on which he had embarked earlier. Particularly remarkable are his short stories and novels about Sindbad, which constitute a whole by virtue of tonality rather than plot or character. Causality is often unclear or absent, the hero has no identity and the narrator no reliability; at some point the dead Sindbad decides to leave his tomb and return to the world. One of the main characters of *Sunflower* dies on a certain day every year. Both character and plot become fragmented in his later novels, which often have an extremely slow rhythm: action is more than delayed; it is almost denied. In retrospect he can now be seen as a tireless experimenter, a moderniser of narrative through the disruptions he introduced into building character and action.

In some cases Krúdy produced twin stories, two versions of the same sequence of events. "Utolsó szivar az Arabs Szürkénél" ("Last Cigar at the Gray Arabian") and "A hírlapíró és a halál" ("The Journalist and Death") may have been written at the same time, although the former appeared in 1927 and the latter in 1928. The culturally enormously successful, prestigious journal *Nyugat* was more than happy to print them. Both pieces became canonised over the next decades; and in 1972 one of them became the subject of a collection of essays on the methods of

narratology by the most distinguished Hungarian literary scholars. In both stories the credibility of the narrator is questioned and fictionality is stressed; it is suggested, for example, that the Colonel whose task is to kill the poor journalist in a duel drinks from the glass his opponent has just broken.

Just as some wines do not travel, even so Krúdy's prose is hardly translatable. Among the difficulties his translator has to face is the rendering of his imagery. A metaphorical style offers great prizes as well as great risks. Besides, the fine music in our ears depends largely on the syntax of the Hungarian language, and that cannot be easily transmitted into another medium without distortion. Both stories contain archaic verbal forms and fragments from forgotten sociolects and an ungrammatical German. In Krúdy's works the distinction between proper and common nouns becomes blurred. The journalist Széplaki (Finedwell in John Batki's version) is turning into Szép Street because on what he believes to be the last day of his life he would like to attain the position of being pointed out in public. In other words, his desire is to have the social prestige that belongs to his opponent, who is a "fine" gentleman (one of the meanings of *"szép"* is "fine"). The pun is especially meaningful if we remember that in the parallel story the Colonel's wish is to identify himself with the obscure and vulgar journalist of humble origin. Even some of the minor characters have names that have specific meanings, the nickname Ledéri, for example, denotes a person who leads a frivolous, loose life. Further difficulties that may deter even the best translators to cope with these texts are caused by Krúdy's frequent reliance on proverbs that have faded into oblivion and allusions to historical events. Ferenc Deák's Easter article paved the way for the compromise between the Austrian emperor Franz Joseph and the Hungarians that led to the establishment of the Dual Monarchy in 1867. János Vajda (1827–97) was an important poet who adamantly opposed that compromise. The fact that the first of these two historical facts is mentioned in "The Journalist and Death" and the second in "Last Cigar at the Gray Arabian" heightens the tension between the two narrative perspectives.

All these factors may remind us of the magnitude of the task of the translator. The English texts published here are superior to earlier versions and do justice to the merits of the originals. That both stories begin admirably few will deny. Without the waste of a word we find ourselves at once in the heart of the situation. We seem to be settling in for a fairly long and absorbing narrative, and then, the point is pressed home by a shock. The outcome of the duel is unexpected. Note how masterful the telling is, how each sentence is measured, each image filled, how the inner world of the Colonel and the journalist gains from the robustness of the outer, the atmosphere of the Gray Arabian, how beauty and horror twined together worm their way into the depths of the unconscious—still we must own that something remains unaccounted for. One has to admit that this author, writing swiftly and with spontaneity, has conquered. As the Colonel's fate suggests, death may find any of us unprepared. ❧

Gyula Krúdy

Last Cigar at the Gray Arabian

Short story

On this day the Colonel had to shoot someone, on behalf of the Casino's directors; the decision had been made in the English Room (so named after a visit by the Prince of Wales).

The duel was to take place in the barracks that afternoon, and the man who had insulted the Casino was not to leave there alive.—Very well, I'll shoot the journalist—the Colonel said with a shrug. But he was becoming devilishly hungry. This was the sum total of his nervousness on the day of the deadly duel. An abominable, never before felt hunger now overpowered him. His stomach hungered, and so did his mouth; still half asleep, his lolling tongue explored his mouth savoring comestibles he had never tried, never tasted before. He had been told that the journalist condemned to death in the Casino's English Room—the sentence to be executed by the Colonel, the deadliest shot in the land—this journalist was reputed to be such a pauper that he ate his evening meal of cracklings with his fingers, from a paper bag, the salt coming from a waistcoat pocket, the radishes and onions from a desk drawer until the cracklings were gone. Naturally the man could not afford decent wine, and so he would have to walk a long distance to find a cheap dive where he could slosh down some cold wine to quench the flames in his stomach.

The Colonel, who normally gave questions of life and death about as much thought as a rook does in a game of chess, was dreadfully hungry now and overcome by cravings usually attributed to women in a delicate condition. "I'll be eating quicklime before long!"—he brooded.

Today he wore civilian clothes under a roomy rain cape; his canary yellow shoes creaked; for this pre-duel stroll in the rainy city he carried an umbrella-cane, and kept glancing into closed hackney cabs, convinced that no one would recognize him wearing mufti. Since he would never speak of these hours to anyone, after a certain amount of hesitation and cautious reconnaissance he at last decided to enter a butcher's shop in an outlying district of the city. His graying mustache drew an unenthusiastic greeting from the butcher's wife—the perennial butcher's wife in her greasy white apron, sleeves rolled up to the elbows revealing sour-smelling forearms. The wedding band on her finger had long ago cut deeply into the flesh, attesting that here was a housewife of some experience, just as the rings of former

seasons recede into the trunk of a tree. Freshly fried cracklings steamed, fragrant and tempting, in front of her small nose. The Colonel pointed at the platter.

– I'll take a pound of that.

– That will be too much, sir – said the woman. The intelligence of her intonation startled the Colonel. – A few ounces of these cracklings will be plenty for a snack. Otherwise I can't take responsibility for your stomach. This isn't light food.

– Well, in that case give me twenty kreuzers' worth – growled the Colonel, who did not go in for too much chitchat. The butcher's wife reached for a volume of poems and tore out a few pages to form a paper cone. This reminded the Colonel of his journalist, who was rumored to write poems.

– Whose poems are these? – he inquired, as if his civilian disguise demanded that he disguise his profession, too, in front of the butcher's wife.

– We used to have a bearded old man come around here and he brought me poetry books. Perhaps you know him. His name was Vajda... János Vajda.

– I know him – said the Colonel, blushing to have to tell a lie. But no one could expect him to engage in a lengthy discussion with a butcher's wife way out on outer Üllői Road.

The butcher's wife picked a few choice green peppers from a basket and cut off a hefty hunk of rye bread. – Here, take these along – she said generously, as she handed over the packages wrapped in paper for the Colonel to tuck under his cape. The Colonel himself knew not why he was obeying this woman he had never seen before.

– Is there some tavern around here where I could eat this? – he inquired with a touch of condescension.

– There's a tavern nearby called the Gray Arabian. The signboard has a Gypsy with a peaked cap. They'll have salt and wine for you there – said the butcher's wife, and she was already gazing out through the open door as if expecting another customer.

The Colonel touched two fingers to his Tyrolean hunting hat and, swinging his umbrella-cane, left the butcher shop, and before he knew it he was already seated inside the small tavern known as the Gray Arabian. Once you take the first step on the road to depravity, the rest will soon follow. Our Colonel, a member of the Casino, had never dreamed that one day he would be a patron at the Gray Arabian. Back in the members' lounge at the Casino, that grand salon where not only the ornaments on the mantelpiece but even the leather armchairs appeared to be cast in bronze, he had heard rumors about the wild carousals of certain younger counts, who partied with cabdrivers at taverns in the outer districts where, to the music of a hurdy-gurdy, they gave the scullery maids a whirl; but he never thought he himself would be a patron at one of those out of the way dives. And here he was now, seated at a table with a red tablecloth, black-handled knife and fork, and a plain white china plate set in front of him by a young man with rolled-up shirtsleeves whose ambition in life was to lift a barrel of beer with one hand when the tavern was full of customers.

– What is your name, son? – asked the Colonel in a paternal voice.

– They call me János – the young man replied, noncommittal.

– Well then, János my son, I'll have you know that today I am going to shoot a man I don't even know and have never seen before, a man who'll be put in front of me like some target at the rifle range.

The young man called János may not even have heard the Colonel's words, because he had for some time now been expecting the attendants from the nearby clinic to arrive so he could tap a fresh keg of beer. The arrival of these uniformed men signaled the beginning of the customary ceremonies surrounding a fresh tap. The horse-traders, who were playing cards at a corner table presided over by the stout tavern-keeper, usually ordered glasses of wine spritzer, and set them down by their side, to fish the cigar and pipe ashes out at their leisure. The few patrons who dropped in on the run—coachmen and drivers of freight carts, cabs, and hearses, official messengers, mailmen, tram drivers whose business brought them this way—they would always order wine, for it packed more of a wallop than beer. Only the attendants from the clinic counted as serious beer drinkers, with time enough to savor their brews and hear out the conversations that customarily accompany beers – because across the street the day's autopsies will have been concluded, the world-weary professor washed his hands with finality, and tagged the cadavers that could at last be buried now, while others might need to be pulled out again tomorrow, the devil take their ways. As I was saying, the clinic attendants proved long-staying customers once their duties were done. And so János said nothing in response to the Colonel's comment.

But perhaps the Colonel did not expect a response, for without another word he spread out in front of himself the paper wrappers containing the cracklings and the cool green peppers; with great relish cut a slice of brown bread and was at the point of digging into his snack when János stepped forth from behind the bar.

– What will you have: wine or beer? – he asked brazenly.

– A nice mug of beer – replied the Colonel, even though an army doctor had forbidden him to drink beer on account of his heart murmur. János nodded, secure in the knowledge that he had a mug's worth of beer left in the keg that was tapped yesterday. He was on his way when he suddenly stopped. No, he could not give the Colonel yesterday's beer, because he had intended it for the janitor of a neighboring building who had stolen away a girl from him, but still sent his small son over every evening for beer.

– Why don't you drink wine instead – he called out, turning back toward the Colonel.

The Colonel flared up.

– Have you served in the army? Is this how they teach you in the army these days? I asked for beer, because I feel like drinking beer. Why, you...

The hearse drivers and other transient guests all looked up toward the Colonel's table, for in taprooms just as in drawing rooms people love to pay

attention to a raised voice. A man who dares speak in a loud voice cannot be an ordinary mortal.

– Let'im have it, János – said the owner, deeply immersed in his card game. – Let'im have it! – he shouted and slammed a card from his hand on top of another one that happened to lie on the blue tablecloth. After this stroke he sent an inquisitive look in the direction of the man who dared to raise his voice in this tavern. The owner had once been a cabdriver and as such had a good knowledge of all types, but even his knowing eye could not peg the gentleman wearing yellow shoes as a member of the Casino. – Therefore János, by repeatedly tilting the keg, managed to squeeze out a last mug of beer from yesterday's tap, then with a show of strength ripped the spigot out of the barrel and decanted the leftover liquid into a dish to be saved for his rival, the janitor. Next he kicked the keg away as if it had no further use in this life. After all the new barrel was already under the bar counter, to make the clinic attendants happy, so that they would keep the promise they made to János, and find a remedy for the long-standing rash his sister-in-law suffered from.

Meanwhile the Colonel was using all of his fingers to dispose of the cracklings. Some were crisp, some melted in his mouth. Just like life, thought the Colonel, and he recalled his youth when he had served in provincial garrisons where, toward the end of the month, he always had his orderly secretly bring him cracklings from the butcher's while he kept to his quarters, as if he, a young lieutenant, were already studying for his examinations to become a staff officer, instead of doing like his fellow officers who supped on credit at fancy restaurants and, ashamed of small debts, made sure to guzzle enough champagne to run up a tab that was respectably large. No one could raise objections to a bill garnished with plenty of champagne. He had learned to shave himself, and claimed it was only because he could not allow a stranger's hand near his face. He even drove the boot-trees into his boots himself, because his orderly was clumsy. And he locked away the expensive mustache wax because he once caught the orderly casting a covetous glance at the container. Ah, those old-time orderlies were willing to swallow the cod liver oil prescribed for their officers, but could not resist the temptation of a box of mustache wax.

As he ate, the Colonel raised the mug of beer toward the light and peered at it mistrustfully.

– Surely the fellow I'm about to dispatch to the other world is drinking stuff like this today, because he can't afford any better! – he reflected, closing his eyes while he drank from the mug as if in silent toast to the salvation of that fellow's soul.

The Colonel found the beer tasty. God only knows what makes flat beer taste so good. It was as if in it the hops flowered once more, to soothe, relieve and fill you up with flavor. Flat beer has its aficionados just the same as the freshly tapped. Why do people in certain regions drink beer out of a "boot", when nobody can empty one in a single gulp? And who can tell why real beer-drinkers, the common run of folk, do not down the freshly drawn beer straight away but wait

instead until it settles, all the while eyeing the mug meditatively? There is a mystery about beer that will never be fathomed by the mind of mere mortals. – Such were the Colonel's thoughts as he drank his bitter beer, finished up the last morsels of his cracklings, discovered a few fleshy bits near the stem of the green pepper, and cut them out one by one, what a pleasure. And that brown bread was almost as phenomenal as the army bread he had once enjoyed during some field exercise, bread that gave off the scent of the saddle and other horse accoutrements. In a friendlier mood now, he surveyed the scene in the little tavern on Üllői Road. He still had plenty of time left until the execution of that scribbler.

– Life can be strange – reflected the Colonel of the Casino, catching a glimpse of the tavern-keeper's wife who must have just risen from her afternoon nap, and waddled across the taproom to check on her husband before doing anything else. Would she catch him in some heinous act that she could seriously reproach him about tonight in the privacy of the bedroom?

– My little chickadee! – shouted the hefty tavern-keeper, noting his wife's stealthy approach in those silent and indestructible felt slippers. He snatched the red-tasseled skullcap off his head (a thing he never did for anyone else), and waved it in the air. – My little chickadee! – he shouted again, and slammed a card thunderously onto the table, as winners like to do. This slam was no doubt intended to set things right concerning his wife's afternoon dream, for these afternoon dreams of housewives may portend perils untold. At times they can dream the truth and once that happens no amount of kisses will restore their former good spirits. Usually it is jealousy that rouses these publicans' wives who nap in the afternoon, so that they leap out of bed with their sensible shoes half pulled on, hoping to catch the husband making love to the serving girl. No matter how respectable a tavern-keeper's past, he may boast of a father and mother who had instilled the best of family morals in him—all the same, the world has never known a tavern-keeper whose wife's jealousy was not justified. Although it is not easy for a publican to absent himself from his premises in order to pursue some shameful passion! It is most difficult for him to wander off to some other pub to carouse on credit, as a member of the trade, after the wife sequesters his wallet at night! And it's next to impossible, isn't it, for a well-known tavern-keeper to get entangled in amorous adventures in his own neighborhood, for this is bound to have a bad effect on his business! – And so tavern-keepers' wives the world over lay their heads to rest in the afternoon amidst great unease. – And that is why the proprietor of the Gray Arabian, sitting among his pals, slammed his card down so hard, upon seeing the approach of his wife.

The Colonel, too, sized up the tavern-keeper's wife.

She was a phenomenon indeed, whom every guest had the right to look over, entertaining notions mild or wild. The Colonel entertained the following thoughts regarding her:

– This woman no doubt has her points, although it would be folly to compare her to Countess Denise or any of my other acquaintances. Nonetheless, one would

like to see more specimens of her type among the women of common folk and the middle class...

As we can see, the Colonel was subject to the occasional onrush of arrogance, whenever he recalled his own destined role. After all this very afternoon he had to execute a man who in a newspaper article had insulted the Casino... But now a nerve stirred in the region of his waistcoat pocket, a nerve he had hitherto known precious little about, and once again he was seized by an abominable hunger. Had the Colonel been superstitious, he might have suspected some special warning at work. But he was not a superstitious man and therefore his eyes reverently followed each move made by the tavern-keeper's wife, movements that were becoming quite sprightly, once she had ascertained her husband was surrounded by his card cronies and not by a bevy of kitchen maids. No greater shame can befall a housewife than her husband deceiving her with her own serving girl. In this relieved mood of tolerance the tavern-keeper's wife deigned to take notice of the unfamiliar customer's nodding salutations.

– What can I do for you? – she asked, after the Colonel had nodded at her about ten times. The Colonel, as if speaking in a dream under the vaulted ceiling of the Gray Arabian, replied:

– Do not believe for a moment, my dear woman, that I am what my strange outfit indicates. I have quite a decent standing in society, but circumstances at the moment compel me to show myself in the apparel of an ordinary citizen. I repeat, my good woman, that's all there is to it: I simply do not want to be recognized prematurely, before I settle an affair with a certain gentleman at a certain location in this neighborhood.

And the Colonel pointed in a direction that the tavern-keeper's wife could hardly be expected to guess was the military barracks on Üllői Road. She reached into an apron pocket and rattled her keys impatiently.

– If there's something you want maybe you should speak to my husband – she replied in a matter of fact tone, and she was already on her way in her felt slippers. But the Colonel pressed on:

– This matter, my personal business, concerns solely you, madam – he announced, suddenly decisive. – I would like to eat something that in my opinion can only be found here at the Gray Arabian.

– And what would that be?

– I beg you not to laugh at my strange request. I feel like having a bit of stew left over from lunch, you know, from the bottom of the pot, with thick gravy. I don't mind if it is slightly burned. I happen to hold that each dish is best at the bottom of the pot, where it's cooked the longest. Don't worry, I've got the money.

– Our guests prefer to have their stew early in the day – said the tavern-keeper's wife, pronouncing the word as "stoo".

– You mean their stee-ew.

– Their stoo – countered the tavern-keeper's wife. – I'll see in the kitchen if we have any left over. We had beef stoo at noon.

The Colonel's eyes lit up, even though his bushy eyebrows had not experienced such a manifestation in years. After a short while the tavern-keeper's wife called from the kitchen:

– János, give this to the gentleman – and she slammed the window shut.

The plate served up by János's stubby fingers indeed contained some leftover stew. It came in gravy as thick as stewed tomatoes. The meat was burned and consisted mostly of bony pieces that the proprietress would not have served to one of her regulars. After all, most likely she would never see this peculiar gentleman again. The Colonel inspected these bits of meat with special delectation. He used his fork to turn over some, especially the pieces that were most charred, as if he took greatest delight in these. The barkeeper, with some condescension, lingered by the guest's side for a while. This kind of food would not have pleased even the cab drivers who happened to drop in here; they liked their food freshly prepared. The Colonel, after selecting a bony piece to his liking, shifted the meat about in his mouth, and just to be stylish, used his fingers to remove the bone sliver stuck between his teeth. Apparently he had made up his mind to degrade himself at all costs...

– You know, János – he said, sucking on another bone – I happen to love oysters, but today I have a strange craving to eat the kind of food consumed by a certain someone, somewhere, so that I could imagine myself in that fellow's place. That's right, I want to be just like that miserable nonentity who ought to be writing his last will and testament just about now, if he had any brains. Yes, I am eating this "stoo" as an act of penance. I'm asking for pardon in advance, I announce my intentions in advance, because I do not wish to be the cause of anything unexpected. A gentleman, before he slaps your face, gives warning that sooner or later you will receive a slap. Only a bandit strikes you treacherously from behind. I give the gentleman fair warning that this affair will end poorly for him. But now that his death is imminent I lower myself to his level to make peace with him and do joint penance together with him, even though I am quite innocent...

The barman was using a matchstick to delve into his ear; it seemed he had understood not a word of what the Colonel was saying.

– I wouldn't advise you to fight here. The boss can be very tough.

The Colonel smiled under his mustache, as if to acknowledge that his disguise was working – no one had spotted him as a member of the Casino. He dropped the remaining piece of bread into the gravy and speared it with his fork:

– I can see you know how to prepare the foundations of a stew here. I suspect you put tomatoes in the gravy, even though not everyone does that. The burned green peppers and potatoes are a nice touch. But the most intriguing part is that the dish tastes as if it had been waiting for quite some time for some cab driver or other customer who for some reason or another could not come back for it. He's probably standing around waiting on the sidewalk somewhere, under the eaves, staring at the faces of passersby, amusing himself by trying to guess who among those pedestrians will be the next fare, in case the cab is not reserved. But

fortunately the cab already has a customer, some chap who is courting a fair lady in an apartment upstairs, the number of which is none of the driver's business. Don't cab drivers come in here any more? – inquired the Colonel.

The barman had no idea why he kept listening to this stranger who under no circumstances would fit in among the regular customers. Nor could you say that he was here from the police to investigate something in the neighborhood, for one can easily tell a police officer, if not by his behavior then by his tone of voice.

The barman therefore had to condescend even more to answer the guest (who had finished the beer intended for the janitor).

– Would you be wanting to sell a horse? The cab owners generally show up here after six, on their way back from Franciscans Place, Gizella Place, or wherever their business takes them.

The Colonel almost burst out laughing. It was indeed worthwhile to don disguise every once in a while, just to get to know the "common folk". Crown Prince Rudolf had often been criticized at the Casino for not acting in a manner worthy of his title, but lo and behold, the Crown Prince was right, after all, to wear a disguise in order to mix among common folk. All he needed now was to be seen here at the Gray Arabian by Luczianovics, Wampetics, Muller, or any of the Casino's other cab drivers! There would be no end to the ribbing at the Club the next day! He laughed, but went on to wipe his plate clean of all traces of red gravy, using the last remnants of bread crust for this operation.

– They say magnates eat a lot – he said, winking at the barkeep. – I do not know if I am permitted to go into the kitchen for a visit with Madame, for I am not familiar with her moods. But in any case I would like to know, is there by any chance a bit of leftover pork out there? Of course I mean cold roast pork, just an end piece, the stump, or "butt" as we like to put it. Just a bite or two, some small piece that cannot be sold as a full portion, but most welcome for an afternoon guest such as myself. – I am sure that the rascal who's condemned to die is used to eating something like that when he wakes up after a night of debauchery in his tenement room or flop-house where people of his sort are likely to hang out. I am convinced that his stomach must be on fire, his head splitting, his eyes seeing double; perhaps even now he's heading for the pawnshop to retrieve the overcoat borrowed from a friend.

The guest of the Gray Arabian had undeniable good luck with everything that his untamable appetite conjured up on this day. The Colonel's stomach, which had the same identical gourd shape as most other stomachs, somehow did not feel right today, manifesting nervous symptoms that affected even the Colonel's disciplined mind. Why on earth did that stomach crave all sorts of comestibles the Colonel usually never noticed, save on this day, when the Colonel's good heart, pitying his impoverished opponent, made him lower himself, out of sheer chivalry, to imitate the other man's humble way of life? No one should say the poor fellow had been snuffed by some lord from on high in a plush box, but by someone who empathized with the trials of those less fortunate. The barman now returned bringing a piece of roast pork, an end part that was roasted to a turn, even singed

a bit, featuring bones that tasked the teeth. Some like the nice and tender and even parts of the pork chop, but the Colonel, eager to identify in every way with his miserable opponent, was convinced that the other man could not afford a better piece of meat. He even asked for radishes and onions on the side, although he usually refrained from these pungent items.

– I could have had elevenses at the Casino, perhaps some crayfish, they're best during these months – the Colonel explained to the barman, who was gradually falling under the spell of this odd patron. – I happen to know Miss Finkelstein, who provides the crayfish for the Casino's kitchen, and during my morning stroll at the market hall always tells me about the shellfish she delivered that day. Last week she informed me that in addition to the small crayfish caught in the river, that are best as stuffing or in soups, she had sent up to the Casino one unusually large specimen that had only one claw, sort of like a sword. And its tail was a veritable battle-axe. She advised me to keep tabs on this crayfish. I immediately proceeded to the Casino and laid claim on the single-clawed crayfish. Indeed it proved a nice mouthful, accompanied by three of his smaller cohorts. The three smaller crayfish must have been members of the same family for they were all outstanding specimens. But none of them could compete with their elder. Well, you just have to keep your eyes peeled if you want to eat well. Am I right, János?

The Colonel's torrent of words would have confused even a far more significant individual than the barman of the Gray Arabian. As it was, the Colonel kept sawing away at the cold pork, then gnawed at the bone, in order to resemble as closely as possible that miserable person who was perhaps presently feeding in the same manner at some low dive, if indeed he was able to afford a meal. The Colonel was a benevolent man and would have gladly invited to lunch the poor wretch whom, in consequence of the Casino's decision, he was scheduled to dispatch to the other world at six this afternoon; of course the man would have to sit at another table for not even the kindest heart may go against the rules in the code of chivalry. How often, for instance, must a gentleman in high society sit under the same roof with his deadly enemies... After all, one cannot create a scandal at every chance encounter. This leftover roast pork was truly well done, and the Colonel, while still eating, promised János that the next time he had business around here (and pointed over his shoulder) he would make sure to drop in at the Gray Arabian.

– Alas, I am unable to tell you exactly when that would be – said the Colonel, cutting open a radish and attentively examining its texture. One could tell by the radishes that the Gray Arabian's customers were connoisseurs, for every single radish he tried proved top grade. A light perspiration bedewed their ivory bellies that had not a trace of the brown worm that insidiously eats its way to a radish's heart, nor were there any spongy, decaying parts, the sight of which is so discouraging for the lover of radishes, making him imagine there were no decent folks, or radishes, left in the world, because looks are deceptive, and even the most honest looking fruit is rotten to the core. But the Colonel's radishes did not deceive. Their insides delivered what their outsides promised: good health.

The Colonel munched on these radishes, food of the poor, the consumption of which had given occasion for many an amusing remark at the Gray Arabian as well as other, higher-class hostelries.

– I like to eat oysters, too – remarked the Colonel during the ceremony of radish-eating, whereupon János began to eye this customer somewhat distrustfully: was the man trying to make a fool of him? – But today I feel compelled to abstain, and eat this penitential fare, because you must obey the voice of your conscience. Were I to shoot down that poor devil after a feast, high on French champagne, I might later reproach myself for having had an unfair advantage. In a carefree and reckless mood my victory would have to be a foregone conclusion, since luck is yours if you have pluck. As I was saying, I am quite in favor of oysters but I never eat more than a couple of dozen at a time. As a matter of fact a friend of mine died after putting away twenty-eight oysters. Yes, twenty-eight, although they were the smaller kind. Now, your octopus is quite something else. The fishermen have to use axes to kill the bigger ones! The tentacles of an octopus, pickled in a sour sauce with plenty of onions, pepper and spices makes as wholesome a dish as any eel. Say, would you happen to have a small piece of salami around? – the Colonel demanded rather anxiously, as if he had caught the scent of salami in the air. – I just want some end piece that's been put aside because it's too small to slice. A little end piece that's tied with a string. Not everyone can chew that, but thank God my teeth are still pretty good, I believe I could bite a copper penny in half.

By now the barman was completely in the Colonel's power, swayed by some kind of magic spell cast by the stranger's voice that he could have listened to all night. He only needed to check in the icebox. Yes, the icebox of a small tavern oftentimes contains these small sticks of salami, remnants that sometimes wait around for weeks until they find their connoisseur, while at other times they are taken right away by some cab driver in a hurry who will pull them out of his coat pocket while waiting for a fare somewhere.

Thus the Colonel's uncanny appetite led him all the way to a helping of sharp Liptauer cheese with a penetrating aroma, spread in thin slices on a salt roll; most cheeses are usually harder. He was about to conclude his meal when a hansom cab came to a spinning stop in front of the Gray Arabian and a pale-faced, lanky young man leaped out.

Had the Colonel possessed the least receptivity toward the way civilians dressed he would have surely noticed the recherché quality of the young man's outfit. He wore a black cloak with a high lapel befitting the hero of a nineteenth-century novel. He also sported a Byronic shirt collar and lacework cuffs. His blue necktie had white polka dots and was loosely knotted about his neck, and his waistcoat was an honest-to-goodness embroidered white vest. He seemed to have taken every item from the wardrobe of some theater. Possibly on permanent loan. His legs were as spindly as some comedian's. The tight black pants emphasized the thinness of these legs. His boots had effeminately high heels.

This ashen-faced young man burst into the premises as if looking for help. His

frenzied features betrayed an insurmountable fear, as if he were trying to run away from something. His long hair tumbled over his forehead and ears. The face was smooth-shaven, passionate, yearning... "Well, he might as well be a musician," thought the Colonel, whose attention had been instantly drawn to the young man the moment he leaped from the hired carriage, even though as a rule he was not in the habit of paying attention to fellow mortals. He felt a certain attraction to the strange young man; he would not have minded if for lack of a better place the young man had joined him at his table. But the newcomer, without looking left or right, headed straight for the bar, as in an emergency at a pharmacy. His writhing fingers fumbled at a coin and with the urgency of an alcoholic he tapped on the galvanized iron counter. The barman half turned from the Colonel to size up the young man.

– A glass of your strongest slivovitz, please – said the young man in an otherworldly voice. – That's right, plum brandy – he added, his acrid laughter seeming to mock himself for landing in a situation that demanded plum brandy.

The Colonel, although he had just ordered his second wine spritzer (perhaps intending to resemble in this respect, too, the dissolute journalist), quietly shook his head, wondering about the fate of a man so young wasting away in taverns.

But the young man had all this time ignored the challenging glances the Colonel cast his way. He stared goggle-eyed straight at the bartender's face as if that was where he expected to find reprieve from life's tribulations. However the bartender handed him the shot of brandy without the least sign of sympathy. The young man snatched up the glass, raised it to his lips and was about to toss it back when his glance unexpectedly fell on the Colonel's sardonic, scornful, arrogant face. Although the Colonel had probably not meant it, his expression was most insulting, as indeed it was most of the time. Alas, a life in the haut monde demands such expressions—they are nothing but masks. Some people show their true faces only when death removes the mask.

As soon as the young man glimpsed the Colonel his face was seized by such terror that one would have thought he had seen the devil, or death itself. The shot glass slipped from his hand and broke with a crash on the slanting floor, even though it was a thick and sturdy one. The young man's hands flew up to cover his eyes as if he could no longer stand to see what was in front of him. Blindly tottering, he turned and crashed ghost-like through the door. "Head for the barracks!" – he yelled in a hoarse voice to the driver, who cracked his whip at the horses, as sudden as death itself. (Indeed, subsequent discussions revealed that no one in the neighborhood knew this driver, even though every cab driver of any standing had been to the Arabian, even if it took him out of his way.)

– Hey! What about paying! – screamed János, and even the owner sprang up from his tranquil game of cards, for this sort of thing rarely happened in his tavern and must not be tolerated even if it was only a matter of a few kreuzers. The owner was about to tell János to run after that cab, even if he had to go all the way to the barracks, when the other stranger, the Colonel, now quiet and grave, motioned to him:

– I'll pay for that drink.

The Colonel's words, although he spoke very quietly, created a stir in the tavern. What secret connection linked these two strangers? What mystery were they hiding? At last a sagacious old cab driver (retired) resolved the problem with native common sense.

– Most likely he's the boy's uncle! – he opined, thumbing in the Colonel's direction. And the game resumed, since the attendants from the clinic still had not arrived. Some days there is no end of autopsies.

The Colonel by now sat in his place in silence as if a depressing presentiment had seized hold of him with the young man's entrance in the tavern. Although never accused of having an adventurous mind, the peculiar notion now flashed through the Colonel that the young man might have been the journalist he had to fight on this day in a duel to the death. After all, the Colonel had never seen the journalist; it was at the Casino's behest that he was to do his utmost to gain redress, even if it end in death. János, still worked up over the previous scene, stood behind the bar and addressed his complaint to the Colonel, seeing the owner was again absorbed in his card game.

– We'd be in a fine pickle if all our guests slammed their glasses to the floor and ran off without paying!

The Colonel merely nodded at these words while pulling out his pocket watch again. He still had more than a quarter of an hour before the duel; he planned to arrive exactly on time. (It was two minutes' walk from here to the barracks.) Truth to tell, the Colonel had no interest whatsoever in mingling with civilians, dueling seconds, and doctors any longer than was necessary, and anyway the duel was unavoidable, a done deal. His seconds (two other Colonels), and his doctor Emil Kosztka were sure to be in their places. No one has the right to suppose that he, a retired Colonel of Hussars, could possibly arrive late because of pusillanimity. He merely wished to avoid unnecessary chitchat. He would fire on command, then wait, hands in pocket, to see if his opponent was able to return fire. Most likely he would not be. Although he heard it said that once a dying man mustered his last remaining strength to fire a shot, and hit the mark. Stuff and nonsense; that sort of thing happens once in a hundred years.

If he were to find himself, in the riding ring inside the barracks, indeed facing that barmy-looking young man, with the white Byronic collar and long white shirt cuffs providing an ideal target, standing in front of his pistol – if indeed that paltry, irresponsible young man were to be his opponent, that would be most unpleasant, but would not change the situation at all. After all, the Colonel had nothing to do with the fellow personally, or with his kith and kin, his lover if he had one, or his father or mother. The Casino had decided in this matter, and against the Casino's decision there was no appeal.

– Let me have some of that brandy – the Colonel now spoke, as if against his own will, for by now he had come to feel somewhat ashamed of identifying himself to such an extent with his opponent, who could only be that journalist, wearing an embroidered white waistcoat for a duel with pistols.

János at first did not understand these words, for he was not a writer of short stories who anticipates the thoughts inside a Colonel's head, but slowly recovered his wits and poured brandy into a little shot glass, that could have been the one dropped by the young man a little earlier. After a quick sniff or two the Colonel tossed back the drink with a firm hand. Indeed it was unusually strong brandy—obviously a favorite with cab drivers who arrive here at the outskirts of town in a winter blizzard after spending the whole day driving around all sorts of worthless gadabouts. Or this brandy was the favorite of coachmen who transported cadavers to the post-mortem room of the neighboring clinic. But in fact the Gray Arabian's plum brandy was famous throughout the whole neighborhood—so why shouldn't a Colonel like it.

– Well, we might as well get going – announced the Colonel, after surreptitiously clearing his throat once or twice, for he wouldn't have let on for the whole world that the coachmen's brandy had slightly befuddled him. But he downed it in lieu of that wretched scribbler.

When he asked for the bill, it was the tavern keeper's wife who came out of the kitchen bringing a slate writing board and chalk, to the Colonel's keen amusement. He imagined what a capital prank it would be if Stettner, the headwaiter at the Casino, pulled out a writing slate to add up the bill, and gave change out of a skirt pocket instead of on a silver tray. To show his gratitude to the woman the Colonel fished in his wallet for the crispest banknote that was ironed as starchy smooth as if it were a leftover from last month's pension. Her head bowed, as always, respectful of money, the woman did her addition, earnestly, naively, as if she were performing the most important act entrusted to her in her life.

– I do hope everything was to your liking? – she asked after handing over the change and snapping the crisp banknote one last time before filing it away in her manly wallet. – But perhaps that stoo...

– The stee-ew... was most delicious – replied the Colonel testily, for he was starting to suspect the woman invented that pronunciation expressly to annoy him.

Next, he rummaged through his cigar case, inspecting one by one his treasures, the various cigars that he sometimes saved for weeks for the suitable and proper occasion to light them up. He quickly found a short cigar for the barman, and bestowed it as if it were some badge of honor, but he had considerable difficulty finding a cigar for himself. Finally his choice fell on a Havana shaped like a bludgeon, a cigar the like of which had never been lit here in the entire history of the Gray Arabian.

No, by now under no circumstances did the Colonel wish to resemble that worthless buffoon, now that he believed he had seen the man. He felt sure that the young man dropped the shot glass because he had recognized the Colonel. For the Colonel supposed that the whole city knew him – especially his opponents.

No, that preternatural terror could not have appeared on anyone but his opponent's face.

Gravely and ceremoniously the Colonel lit up his miniature bludgeon, after scornfully ripping off the red and gold paper band. How foolish of him to try to

forget, even if only for the duration of one afternoon, his rank, his social position, the circles he moved in and his customary way of life, just to "lower himself" to the level of an unknown person and his supposed habits, as if in atonement for shooting that man before the day was over, and thereby liberating him from the torments of earthly existence. – He who asks forgiveness is the biggest fool, for we cannot speak of true forgiveness – said the Colonel, as he lit his little club of a cigar. "Back off, if you fear for your life," ballooned the Colonel's first billow of smoke, which he proceeded to blow away and disperse about him, as if he had meant to obliterate everything that happened this afternoon.

The Havana indeed proved to be savory, proper and fitting for a last cigar.

With this tableau of the lit cigar we are just about done at the Gray Arabian, and the diverse gentlemen who were about to arrive there from all over the city, impelled by various inner motivations. We may be sure that the attendants from the clinic showed up at long last, because not even pathology labs conduct autopsies day and night. Hearse drivers from all over the city will have arrived, for even the transport of cadavers must pause at times. And as evening fell the gentlemen who own hansom cabs pulled up in front of the building, for their stables were nearby. The bar became busy, and every time the kitchen door opened a scent of fresh "stoo" wafted out. János and the tavern keeper's wife, as well as the others, had by then plenty of time to forget the Colonel who had rolled his goggle eyes so formidably around the premises that afternoon, but who turned out to be quite a sociable fellow, after all, and did not mind chatting with the barman. At some point in the evening a belated hearse driver showed up at the bar, and stood gruffly in front of the counter, as one who is disgruntled with his profession. Standing, he rubbed one foot against the other leg, and said not a word before he downed two shots of strong brandy.

– I had to haul some Colonel wearing civilian clothes – he announced, wiping his mustache with a filthy kerchief, and even János looked up to listen. – These gentlemen wear shiny uniforms all their lives and we never have any business with them because the military handles all that. That is, if they die in uniform. But my load went and dressed in civilian clothes before he died, just to give us some business. They said he was shot in a duel at the barracks, and no one knew what to do with him until now. But that's what we are here for, to take anyone. So he's at the morgue at last.

The barman did not respond to the hearse driver because an Inner City cabbie had just entered and the man had a lot of friends here, so you had to listen closely to his order, for this customer liked to make trouble at the drop of a hat.

Around midnight, when the patrons were beginning to thin out, János the barman at last had a chance to catch his breath and with his back against the cupboard reflected about the odd customer he had served that afternoon. And no, it never occurred to him that the cadaver so recently transported had been that same customer. The one who left that fancy cigar band lying in the corner. ❧

Translated by John Batki

Gyula Krúdy

The Journalist and Death

Short story

The journalist Titusz Finedwell was sentenced to death by the Casino's board of directors in the chamber where members held their confidential meetings, sessions of the court of honor, tribunals of the dueling code—the chamber where, once upon a time, at the festivities held in honor of Albert, Prince of Wales, gentlemen ended up going at each other with champagne bottles, and grabbed the Gypsy musicians' violins and wind instruments to beat on each other. After that dark event the chamber saw no further carousing, and became dedicated to the service of honor. The destinies of rooms can change just like those of their human occupants. Only women can be as shamelessly fickle as rooms.

In his newspaper Finedwell had published an article offensive to the Casino, and for this he had to die. To execute the sentence the Casino delegated from among its members a retired colonel of Hussars, P.E.G., known as the best shot in all of Hungary. With that, the fate of the journalist was sealed. He might as well start giving away his worldly belongings (if he possessed any), for soon he would no longer need anything.

This time Finedwell did not have to invent the usual family disaster to request an advance from his employer. An advance has a way of reconciling a journalist with both life and death.

Having received the advance, the journalist lost no time leaving Elderberry Street where for years he had struggled at a recalcitrant desk with cheap pens and watery ink, in ever more refractory attempts at producing copy that always refused to materialize just when Finedwell intended to write his finest articles. With the advance in his pocket Finedwell decided he would die like a gentleman. Let's see how Finedwell, facing imminent death, went about transforming himself into a gentleman.

First of all the journalist had to obtain a proper hat, for the one he wore throughout his nocturnal way of life (when no one sees your hat anyway) was getting to look like the hats left behind at coffee houses in lieu of payment. Long after the patron has fled, the hat is still waiting there, and grows a beard. Very few patrons actually return for a hat left behind when they stepped out pretending to "go next door". All of Finedwell's hats, umbrellas, and walking sticks had been acquired at a café—by no means fraudulently!—thanks to Olga, the lady at the

cash register of the café where Finedwell was a nightly regular. We must not presuppose anything improper about Olga and Finedwell's friendship. The journalist would simply stop and visit at the cash register—as so many other nighthawks who pass their lives in cafés. He stood chatting with Olga about all sorts of things heard at the editorial offices. From these disquisitions Olga could have learned all there was to know about the world of politics and literature. But Olga never showed any sign of special interest in anyone featured in Finedwell's lengthy narratives. Nor was she ever surprised when, in certain inevitable situations, she was asked to extend credit to one or another journalist (including Finedwell) for orders to be served by the head waiter, who had a "Franz Joseph-style" beard; orders such as scrambled eggs, ham on the bone, bologna with oil and vinegar, sardines, wieners with horseradish, sliced salami, bread and butter, pickled herring with onion, lean bacon, or smoked sausages—foodstuffs such as impecunious journalists generally like to consume.

And so Olga was not the least bit surprised when Finedwell, pale, spindly, and solemn as a martyr, announced, with hat clutched under his arm, that finally he could no longer evade his doom: he had to die young and full of promise, without being able to complete the great work that he, in the manner of old-style journalists, had always dreamed of in the midst of his tribulations and counted on for the betterment of his lot—a magnum opus he had not even begun, although he had spread rumors about working on it each day at dawn. There stood Finedwell by Olga's throne, his face unshaven, lips blue as plums, a glazed look in his eyes, expecting some miracle from her, a drowning man clutching at a straw. Olga however remained quite indifferent while she was sitting there with her paisley shawl, cape and hat as always within reach, in case she had to run from a drunken patron. Yet on other occasions, whenever some trivial sum was needed to get home or to buy cigarettes, she had been extraordinarily friendly! Still, after giving some thought to the situation, Titusz Finedwell's fatal situation, she was unable to suppress a wry little smile, which was at the same time a bitter comment on her own fate as well.

– We all have to die some day – she said.

– But not in a crummy hat like this! – remonstrated the man sentenced to death.

Olga possessed a southern temperament, capable of quick changes of mood. After inspecting Finedwell's hat her natural benevolence soon gained the upper hand. "You're right, this hat has seen better days! It's beyond redemption!" – she said, handling the hat delicately with a woman's touch. Then, descending from her throne she went to a small closet where the café staff stored a variety of objects.

Olga emerged from the closet with a green Tyrolean hunter's hat and a so-called "umbrella-cane". First she dusted off the hat. It was decorated with an eagle claw and a tuft of chamois-beard.

– This was left behind by a customer who swore he was going to jump in the Danube. Try it on!

Finedwell put on the hat and spent some time contemplating his image in the

mirror. He checked himself out from all angles. He liked the hat but hated to admit it in front of Olga, so he spoke as follows:

– Strange, how this hat reminds me of the small town where I lived for a while in my childhood. This kind of hat was worn by men in green pants, with all sorts of loops and wires and knives dangling from their belts. They usually worked in pairs. The sight and scent of these men made all the dogs bark like mad—they sensed the blood of animals on these men.

– Ah, the swinegelders! – exclaimed Olga, taking a more mirthful look at the hat, for as a country gal she was familiar with those itinerant men who professionally altered the sex of domestic animals. – Titusz, I guarantee that none of your colleagues has a hat like that. They'll be green with envy when they see you wearing it. The editor of *The Concord* had asked for it but I wouldn't give it to him. I have been saving it for some gifted new poet, but there are no gifted new poets nowadays.

Finedwell kept the hat on because he thought it made him look like one of the landed gentry. He stood there somewhat cheered, as if suddenly the pressure over his heart had vanished, a choking pressure he had been feeling for several hours.

Next, Olga thrust the umbrella-cane at him.

– Tell me, Titusz, is there a scribbler in Budapest who has an umbrella like this, an umbrella that's a cane at the same time?

Finedwell was indeed amazed by the strange walking stick that turned into an umbrella with a turn in the weather. He immediately opened the umbrella and held it over his hat.

– Veteran accountants used to receive things like this as souvenirs for their twenty-fifth jubilee...

– I wouldn't be surprised – said Olga.

– Or else those middle-class husbands who in the course of their long married lives have received just about every type of gift from their wives on their birthdays and name days and anniversaries until they have everything they could ever want, including tobacco pouches. My waistcoat pockets are of course full of tobacco shreds.

Titusz could not quite hide his excitement as he turned the rare object in his hands. Although his face was still overcast, a new hope glimmered in his eyes, for it occurred to him that he might accidentally survive the duel and live to rise in the world, as the owner of the umbrella-cane and the big green hat.

Olga is a fine woman, after all—thought Titusz as he exited from the Ferenci Café, without the least intention whatever of heading for the editorial offices in Elderberry Street, even though his new accessories would have created quite a sensation there. But that would have exposed him to the likelihood of a cantankerous editor assigning him, on the very eve of his death, the task of collating the latest news dispatches. He would rather die than see another news bulletin tonight! Lose his job, rather than work like a dog on the night he came

into possession of a new hat and umbrella-cane! How degrading it would be to sit even on this night in that ill-smelling editorial office, milling about in a swarm of reporters begging for work, for something to make himself useful at any cost! Leave that to ninnies and novices without the least experience of life, not to mention a duel fought with pistols. Which in their case would most likely take place somewhere around here on the Danube embankment, where the bullet would end up in the river, "in case the pistols were loaded"—as old-time dueling seconds like to say.

The clock struck ten at Franciscans Place when an irresistible impulse made Finedwell direct his steps toward the National Casino, whose court of honor had sentenced him to die.

At first he only dared to sneak a peek from the opposite side of Hatvani Street at the baronial castle-like two-story building through the wide open gates of which carriages drove in to pull up thunderously in front of the red velvet carpeted stairs leading to the entrance. After the gentlemen got out, and the attendant in cherry-red uniform slammed the carriage door to set the large lantern overhead in the archway swaying, the carriages drove through the courtyard, around the fountain, and exited through the side gate to Szép Street. The casino's windows were dim and shut tight, as if no one needed any air inside—although it was a balmy night in early autumn with the sky full of stardust.

Lurking in a doorway, Titusz surveyed with rapt attention the solemn structure where life and death were of no importance, as if the gentlemen frequenting this exclusive building had notions of living and dying that were different from ordinary mortals! For instance, what would happen if Finedwell were to cross the street and inquire from the cherry-red uniformed attendant after P.E.G., retired colonel of Hussars, so that he might at least have a word with the gentleman who was going to shoot him dead the next day? Most likely the doorman would refuse to have anything to do with him, or chase him away in case he recognized the journalist, for any old employee of the Casino would be familiar with the dueling code. The rules stipulate that opponents may not be in contact with each other prior to a duel, and Finedwell would only expose himself to a nasty humiliation. Before, when he still wore the decrepit old hat, he probably would have done it; but now his "swinegelder's hat", as he started to call it, imbued him with a certain amount of pride. Therefore he abandoned his hiding place, walked up to Kerepesi Road and crossed over to the Casino side of Hatvani Street. Presently he returned as a nonchalant stroller, without casting a glance at the baronial castle as he passed its open gate, swinging his umbrella-cane, for its crooked handle allowed it to dangle from his wrist. Yes, that umbrella-cane swung and tapped Finedwell's knee from time to time, as if to goad him on. In the possession of such an umbrella-cane who could conceive sinking so low as to beg mercy for one's wretched little life. And so Titusz turned into Szép Street as if he really had some business there, other than maintaining his dignity in front of the Casino's cherry-red doorman who, he suspected, was casting scornful, mocking glances from the

entrance after the journalist, as if the insolent servant had guessed the reason for this promenade in the neighborhood of the Casino... On Szép Street Titusz walked past those windows behind whose dim glow the gentlemen were probably seated at their dinner table, admiring the colonel as if he were some rare exotic lobster.

Meandering through the dark little byways of the Inner City Finedwell once more found himself on Franciscans Place, led there by years of habit. He had mulled it over, and concluded he would be an utter fool if, his upcoming deadly duel being the "talk of the town", he did not now proceed to some fancy restaurant to parade in front of the world, as long as "everyone" was discussing his case. If only to exhibit his dash, verve and sangfroid, which would be all the easier now that he had the proper hat and umbrella-cane for the occasion. Simply to enjoy to the very last drop the delights of being in the limelight, which must be considerable, since multitudes struggled ceaselessly to attain these delights. When would the obscure journalist T. F. ever again attain the position of being pointed out in public as the reporter who, in the line of professional duty, dared to face death?... When would he ever again command the attention of those circles that believed duels were impressive? When would those mocking, scornful, quarrelsome, nasty glances turn respectful around him if not tonight, his last night, when that advance in his pocket allowed him to have a carefree, hilarious time?

In his mind's eye Finedwell saw himself in the middle of a very exclusive restaurant where the Gypsy violinist was playing only for him, and the women, dressed for the theater, all kept turning their heads in his direction, their hearts a-flutter, for he was the most fascinating man about town, getting ready to face the lion—and certain death. And all for what? For the sake of honor.

– Treat yourself to a decent supper – advised the spendthrift Tyrolean hat. – Why not have a beefsteak at a first-rate restaurant where it appears with the correct English spelling on the menu and they also know the proper way to grill a steak.

– Served with a fried egg, sunny side up – added the umbrella-cane, tapping along by Finedwell's side.

– You've got the money and you still don't know how to be a gentleman – the hat accused, as Finedwell persisted in directing his steps toward a small tavern located in the building of the Athenaeum Press. – You'll never be a gentleman if you pass up this opportunity. You must show your face at the Bristol or the Hotel Hungaria if you want people to notice that you are still in this world, and preparing to die on the field of honor. If you don't like beefsteak, there are plenty of other comestibles on the menu the waiter hands you, with a bow. Maybe a bird of some sort... or perhaps a hare, it's been in season since the middle of August. A saddle of hare, with a piquant sauce full of bay leaves, and if you find buckshot in the meat that means you'll be lucky in your duel. You should avoid crayfish, which is cheap in the market this time of the year; and anyway your fingers lack the skills to eat crayfish in a stylish manner. But you could have a fresh roast, and enjoy the humble, apologetic glances the waiter sends toward you while it is being prepared. Just think, what if your editor faced a duel that's been spread all over the

newspapers for days! Why, he'd be cashing in on it for sure! And you don't even have the wits to get acquainted with some nosey society lady.

Finedwell was about to yield to the incessant goading sounded by the tap-tap of the umbrella-cane and the rustle of the chamois-beard in his hat: be a social lion, at least for a day, before you die!

His way led him past the stand of a nocturnal vendor selling—by lamplight—all sorts of fruit from a small cart. Since it was still early in the season, grapes and walnuts were too expensive for the daytime folk but the spendthrift nightbirds were only too happy to buy them. Finedwell, just to indulge in some extravagance on this extraordinary day, bought a paper bag full of grapes and walnuts, and paid without even trying to bargain.

*

– I wasn't born a gentleman, but tomorrow I'll have to die like one – reflected Finedwell glumly, as he entered the small all-night tavern, with the paper bag tucked under his arm. The place stayed open mostly for typesetters working the night shift and other characters of nocturnal but presumably sober habits, who came here to eat, not to carouse. Kerschantz was the name of the tavern keeper, and he rarely saw journalists who lived the café life, for passing the night away eating and drinking at Kerschantz's was a more expensive proposition than surviving on mochas and cappuccinos at a coffee house. At Kerschantz's you had to spend some money, and credit was extended only to printers, who settled their bills regularly every Saturday. No, not even an editor-in-chief would have received credit here—so we cannot say that Finedwell was not gratified to be spending his last evening at this night tavern with its solid middle-class reputation.

He sat down at a commodious corner table, as one who is absolutely sure of himself.

It did not escape his attention that Kerschantz, a taciturn, red-mustachio'd Schwabian, who measured out his wines at the counter as carefully as an apothecary his potions, this silent man now favored Finedwell's new hat and umbrella-cane with a decidedly appreciative glance. Could he have thought that some day this umbrella-cane was bound to end up in his possession? Who can read a tavern keeper's mind? Only customers who are broke imagine that the proprietor always has an eye on them lest they leave the premises without paying.

Finedwell asked for the bill of fare from the pint-size waiter whom the owner alerted to the arrival of a new guest with a softly spoken "János!" This, too, was a first in Titusz Finedwell's experience. There is no denying it: tavern keepers can see into the customer's pockets.

János crossed himself when he glimpsed Mr. Finedwell at the corner table. He approached hesitantly as if he had seen a ghost.

– Sir, I heard you were shot in a duel.

– Ah, 'tis but the music of the future – Titusz replied with a laugh, speaking in the manner that journalists in those days adopted toward waiters. – Yes, János, 'tis but the music of the future. Next time you should pay more attention when you're eavesdropping at Marich's table.

János's face, unable to keep a secret, now registered even greater consternation.

– Sure enough, last night the printers at Marich's table were saying your life, sir, wasn't worth a wooden nickel. That you were a goner...

In the inner sanctum of the arcaded tavern there stood a long table where the regulars, typesetters all, have placed a sign that read, in beautiful large lettering: MARICH'S TABLE. (Mr. Marich was a highly regarded typesetter of his day, who could boast of having set in type Ferenc Deák's famous "Easter article".) Mr. Marich, a tall, dignified and distinguished-looking gentleman showed up each night round about midnight to preside over his table.

Titusz was flattered by his affair being discussed even at the Marich table, frequented by the most respected typesetters, but he pretended not to notice the excitement of the waiter who stood there slapping his own knees with his napkin as if to rouse himself from a dream.

– We have sour lungs – he said at last, as if vaguely recalling that whenever Titusz appeared at the tavern he usually ordered this humble dish that belonged, along with tripes, in the least expensive category. Titusz always requested half a lemon with his meal, and never failed to praise the cook for taking the trouble to dice the lungs into small square pieces to make sure they were well done.

Titusz ignored the waiter's suggestion, merely muttering something about János planning to get him "pickled again"—as if his stomach, profession, and whole life weren't sour enough already.

– I feel like eating a rooster! – Titusz exclaimed, after noting that this was the most expensive item on the modest menu.

– A chicken fricassée, coming right up.

– I said rooster, didn't I, a cock that hasn't been gelded before his time, like certain incompetent editors, but remained a rooster all his life and lived to chase young serving girls and maybe even pecked at a nursemaid or two.

Who knows how long our hero would have gone on lauding the rooster he was about to consume tonight—calling out after the retreating waiter to make sure to serve the rooster's spurs, not to mention liver and gizzard—when a red mustache appeared at the tavern's threshold.

Now there are all sorts of red mustaches. Most of them are angry, malevolent, neglected emblems of manhood, unworthy of grooming, if for no other reason than their color. But this red mustache happened to be one out of a hundred, the red mustache that radiated good humor, cheer, satisfaction and joie de vivre, as if under that mustache the corners of the mouth were elevated into a permanent smile. This red mustache had earned the right to grow full, to be twirled to a point and often caressed like some faithful hound. Above the mustache the round eyeglasses with tortoise frames, balanced on the tip of the nose, and secured by a ribbon to the ears, belonged to that class of happy spectacles behind which the eyes always seem benevolent. Below the mustache the necktie drew attention, for although it was a hand-tied blue "lavalière" with white polka dots, it still had a tiepin in the form of a wild boar's head with ruby eyes.

Indeed the owner of the pin was a dealer in venison and game by the name of Andor Aureate, a name that dated back to his days as a journalist, before he entered the profession of dealer in venison and game.

– Glad to find you here, Titusz – said the former journalist, who frequently came to the tavern from his nearby house on Bastion Street, "just to catch a whiff of the printer's shop" as he put it. For not even as a dealer in venison and game could he forget the scent of fresh newsprint. – I read in the papers that you are in contact with the aristocracy, the counts, the National Casino. May I call to your attention my old Salon Almanach, which I edited back at a time when I tried to bring Hungarian writers together with members of the aristocracy. You know, one writer followed by one count—a poetess, followed by a countess... That was how I compiled my Almanach, alternating stories and poems with portraits.

– Not a bad concept – replied the journalist. – But right now I find myself sentenced to death.

But Aureate was not a man to be dissuaded so easily from the scheme that made him leave his house on Bastion Street so late at night.

– I don't like the path literature is taking these days. Lajos Czete, all he writes about is railway employees, ever since he created the character Adam Boor in his humor magazine. What can he see in conductors and switchmen? It makes more sense to write about counts and countesses. There will never be a Hungarian literature as long as the literary world and the world of magnates are not on a par.

– On a par, well put – replied Finedwell. – As I said, right now I stand sentenced to death. And I am drinking a "Czete-wayo".

– See, that's precisely what's wrong – said Aureate, editor of the quondam Salon Almanach, flashing his watch-chain that featured a wild boar's tusk, set in silver of course. – The tavern keepers named a spritzer after Lajos Czete, and not after Count Andrássy or Prince Festetics. That's why you modern writers will never get anywhere! We old-timers would have known how to steer literature in the right direction. But you have knocked the pen out of our hands, you've put us down, and here you are now, up against the Casino, up against the whole aristocracy!

Titusz answered cynically:

– This "Czete-wayo" is a fabulous concoction. One part wine, one part sulfurous Parádi mineral water, one part seltzer.

At such pig-headedness the literary venison dealer could only shake his head in disapproval.

– I for one have kept up my contacts with the aristocracy, and never regretted it. To this day I obtain my pheasants from Count Berchtold's game preserve.

– I never eat pheasant – replied Finedwell like a true anarchist.

– All the hares shot at Count Degenfeld's estate come my way for I have a contract with the estate.

– I've been doing just fine without roast hare.

The dealer in venison and game now noticed the Tyrolean hat bedecked with chamois-beard and eagle's claw, hanging on the rack, and instantly commented upon it:

– I don't know, brother, judging by your hat one would think you belonged to genteel society...

– I don't want to belong anywhere – replied Titusz, casting a scornful look at the telltale hat, and at the dealer in venison.

The red mustache suddenly without any transition revealed its true colors, all the insidious venom hidden in it, as in every red mustache.

– Well then consider this visit never happened. And I came here solely for your sake!

And the dealer in venison, fully aware of his importance, prestige, and munificence, took his leave wagging his head after seeing that his attempt at reconciling Hungarian literature and the aristocracy had failed. At home he probably told his wife all about the ingratitude of Hungarian writers toward people who want to help them.

Finedwell, too, felt a certain unease finding himself at the corner table alone with the waiter and the pullet fricassée. Perhaps he had missed his final opportunity of making peace with his opponent... Who can foretell the fickle ways of fate? Perhaps it would have been better to work as an editor for the Salon Almanach if it meant surviving tomorrow?

– I told you I wanted a rooster – Finedwell said to the solicitous waiter who, for lack of other customers, stood by the reporter's side and watched in apparent amazement as the dead man took one bite after another from the chicken drumstick.

János did not reply for he had nothing to say, so Finedwell went on, grumpily:

– You can't get good service even at Kerschantz's any more. Things being as they are, the only alternative is to stop going to restaurants. I, thank God, will have the best of reasons for staying away. Bang! – yelled Finedwell, raising a salt stick to his temple.

– Bang! – the little waiter repeated and sidled away from the customer as if he had misgivings about standing near him.

Finedwell, deprived of a conversational partner, was left alone with his depressing thoughts.

We shall not attempt to describe these thoughts but merely note that prominent among them was the image of a galloping bay mare ridden by a horseman wearing pin-checked trousers and a top hat; the inscription under the framed picture was: "Life Flies By". Wouldn't it be wiser for him, Finedwell, to be flying as well, instead of stepping in front of the deadly pistol barrel?

He had already kneaded a respectable number of pellets from breadcrumbs on the table when the door opened once more, again admitting visitors for Finedwell.

"I seem to bring business to this tavern," Finedwell reflected, recognizing the newcomers as the two gentlemen he had requested to be his seconds. They had nothing to do with journalism but were so-called gentlemen of leisure. Seeing them gave Finedwell such a painful spasm in the region of his diaphragm that it took a determined effort to hold down the food just consumed. Every single nerve

fiber seemed to be jangling, a deathly cold shiver ran over his whole body and his face froze at the sight of these two men who now greeted him cheerfully, announced they have looked for him "all over town", until told at the editorial office that if the journalist was not at this tavern then he must have fled the city.

– Who would say such a thing? – asked Finedwell somewhat absent-mindedly, as if beginning to think that skipping town were not such a bad idea.

– Aladár Szolyvai – replied one of the men.

This Aladár Szolyvai had been Finedwell's perennial rival "at the paper", who resented that the latter's name appeared in print more often than his own.

– Well, Szolyvai lied again, as so many times before! – exclaimed the journalist with a well-timed burst of outrage that restored his spirits for the moment.

– But others have voiced similar opinions – chimed in the other dueling second. – They say that Titusz Finedwell is not waiting out the hour of the duel but is running away from the capital. Alas, that would make no sense whatsoever, since the colonel's friends, all army officers, are obliged to hunt you down anywhere in the world and hack you into smithereens, according to their code of honor.

The man who said this was a lanky, pockmarked, big-nosed gentleman who spoke with a Slovakian accent. In civilian life he was a painter, but his name was cited more often in connection with dueling affairs than pictures at an exhibition. He spent the greater part of his life at various restaurant tables where he entertained the assembled company by telling horrifying tales of duels. For the past two decades he had something to do with just about every duel fought in Hungary.

The other second was a most dangerous manikin with a hunchback, whose pale face with its thin black beard, ever-present dinner jacket and tall top hat, pair of double-barreled pistols carried in his pockets, sword-cane, large hunting knife in a vest pocket, and provocative behavior were notorious all over the capital wherever affairs of honor were at stake.

The hunchback was a figure straight out of a novel. Noticing Finedwell's umbrella-cane in the corner he eyed it contemptuously:

– One slash of my sword-cane would crack that parson's stick in two. That sort of thing is only suitable for a mild-mannered parish priest – he announced and placed his own stick, clattering with steel, as far as possible from Finedwell's proud possession.

As regards his profession, the hunchback was a teacher of stenography, but he had little time for teaching because his friends all "dumped on him" their affairs of honor. His name was Steepletippy, and he boasted that this extraordinary name had been bestowed on the family by Queen Maria Theresa herself.

Steepletippy took up a position with his back to the wall after looking left and right to ascertain from which direction might some treacherous attack be expected, be it an assault by a drunk, the approach of a bully, some unexpected insult, or a slap in the face. This man was always prepared for the event that someplace, sometime, he would get a beating. After seating himself he pulled one of his pistols from a pocket, then the other one, and made sure they were loaded.

– We are dealing here with the National Casino, and we know that their arms are far-reaching – said the diminutive dueling second in a muffled voice, his eyes, those of a consumptive, flashing enigmatically. – I do not presume any unchivalrous behavior on your part my good sirs, but we can never be certain if some servitor, some lackey, some waiter or footman or coachman might not decide to take vengeance with his own hands, in his master's name? ...Hmm, what do you say, Lóczi, am I not right? The other day that fat editor who wrote all that unpleasantness about a count's mistress was badly beaten up by street porters who hang around in the neighborhood of the Casino.

The pockmarked gentleman named Lóczi nodded in assent, for he did not like to argue over inconsequential details—he loved discussing duels, not brawling coachmen. So Lóczi, in his Slovakian accent, went on with the story heard probably more than once by Steepletippy (with whom he was seen night and day in various restaurants), a story that he had begun to tell on the way here:

– As I was saying, the wound seemed lethal. Upon my word of honor, I wouldn't have given a plugged nickel for Count Pinchy's life, for Count Bimby's bullet had perforated the liver. The liver of a high-liver... Meanwhile those autumn flies never let up pestering me like mad, the stables were near the site of the duel... We had to go in search of a priest so Count Pinchy could die a good Catholic... You know I always cared about religion, my uncle was a dean in Rosemont... But I'm telling you those flies were unstoppable...

– Those flies can be devils – admitted Steepletippy, now that Lóczi spiced up the oft-told tale with this new motif of the flies. He had never mentioned flies before, did Mr. Lóczi, and flies do like to harrass duelers.

The gentlemen were soon done with their business at the tavern, as if they had come expressly to make sure that Finedwell had not fled from town. They were not true pub-crawlers, who are content to spend hour upon hour in slow tippling and silent reverie at a tavern. No, these two were merely visitors, who went to taverns only for the sake of daily arguments, and once there, cared not a whit about what they ate or drank, minding only what was said. They would have sat around in a tavern forever, if it were a matter of relating some heroic adventure, especially if they were able to weave themselves into the ramifications of the narrative.

The melancholy journalist did not seem to be a properly appreciative audience, for he was almost uncivilly inattentive during Lóczi's recital, likewise ignoring the signals sent his way by the little stenography professor's twitching, scary eyebrows. Titusz remained distracted even when Lóczi at last came to the conclusion that Count Pinchy's unexpected survival was in fact attributable to the intervention of his, Lóczi's, uncle, the parish priest of Rosemont, of whom it was said in the Uplands that none of those who received his extreme unction ever died.

(– By the way, what is your religion? – asked Steepletippy abruptly, not without a certain suggestiveness.

– Roman Catholic – replied the journalist apathetically.

– You could have told us earlier – said the dueling second, with an air of mystery.)

...But just as the two men were making serious preparations to leave their distracted listener, the journalist exclaimed:

– Allow me to accompany you, wherever you're going – said T.F., putting on his green Tyrolean hat and grabbing his umbrella-cane as if this equipment were meant to validate his appearance in high society.

The hat and the umbrella-cane must have had some effect on the dueling seconds, because after they exchanged glances Steepletippy announced:

– Very well, my good friend, I don't mind, you may come with us. We have a meeting at the Café Orfeum with some country squires who want to consult us about conducting an affair of honor somewhere in western Hungary. So don't hold it against us if we can't keep you company.

The city's finest hansom cab awaited them in front of the tavern, for in those days dueling seconds rode in two-horse cabs to conduct their business about town. Possibly some of the passersby crossed themselves seeing this splendid cab speed about with the solemn-looking passengers inside, and the better informed men about town right away started the guessing game about the identity of the man whose affair made Mano drive at such insane speed back and forth on Crown Prince and Váci Streets, with the pockmarked painter sending greetings to one side of the street and Steepletippy ceremoniously doffing his top hat toward the other, even if there were no acquaintances passing that way—he made sure just in case, because the gentleman in the cab must always be the first in greeting.

But it was night now, and the two dueling seconds did not mind that the humble journalist nimbly clambered up on the box next to the driver, not wanting to inconvenience the gentlemen seated inside the fiacre. The steeds of the carriage stopped at a barely perceptible tug of the reins in front of the night café bathed in mysterious lights as the portly doorman, clad in a hussar's uniform, rushed forth as one greeting long-awaited guests.

The air was fresh and mild even in the entrance hall, without any of the unpleasant smells associated with vulgar café-chantants—only a faint perfume lingered in the air as if some fashionable music-hall diva had just flitted across the hall, graciously lowering her swan's-down opera cloak to accommodate the attendants. The grey beard of the bandleader draped over his violin as if he were coaxing the soft, meditative French-style chansons out of his curly strands.

Formerly, as a "budding journalist" attending "the school of life", Finedwell had been a frequent visitor to this place, but ever since the Ferenci Café had opened, with its more relaxed and cheerful atmosphere—as Titusz "grew older" and placed less emphasis on his clothes—he was seen less often at this elegant establishment. Who would want to don a tail coat night after night and tell lies about all the fancy soirées he'd been to earlier in the evening? That was for greenhorns, not for an old hand such as himself, who was, moreover, about to die.

...For this reason Finedwell did not even enter the inner sanctum of the coffee house but sat down in the outer wing where he intended to pass the time with a bottle of beer until his friends were done with their business inside. This part of the café was where the music-hall actors played pool, and several of them were seated at one of the marble-topped tables with their hats on, as if out here the atmosphere was freer than inside in the plush world of red velvets where the band was playing.

– Well, well, although I wasn't born a gentleman I will have to die as one – reflected Finedwell for the second time this evening, as he sat at the corner table, letting his eyes rest on the game of billiards played by the music-hall comedy duo of Baumann and Gyárfás, and it occurred to him that these comics will keep on playing their game of billiards long after he was gone and buried with a bullet in his forehead or his heart – depending on which part the colonel preferred to aim at.

But his thoughts took a sudden turn for the better as he was greeted in rapid succession by the following individuals:

First, a tall horse dealer, whose mustache twirled to a point made him look like a supercilious person, but here he was, contented with passing the boredom of nocturnal hours by marking, on a blackboard, the score for the two comedians.—Next, an equally lanky waiter with a dyed mustache who emerged from the fairyland of the café's inner regions to greet Finedwell, about whose upcoming drama he had read in the papers.

Then came Karolin Turf, the flower seller, formerly mistress of aristocrats, who now in her old age said to the journalist: "Here, take this flower, it's my present to you."—The manager of the café, who had the look of a lieutenant in civilian clothes, bowed as deeply before the journalist as he would have for a millionaire.—And finally, the keeper of the coat room, with a pin between her lips and a hat-check ticket in her hand, ready to take charge of Titusz's appurtenances, but not daring to touch the umbrella-cane laid across the table...

Returning these greetings Finedwell realized that here he sat in the café with his hat still on, that swinegelder's hat which had thus far worked its magic everywhere he showed up with it. In the gilt-framed mirrors he was able to enjoy several views of the hat, with the chamois-beard fanning out in the back.

– Perhaps after all I will accomplish something in life yet – reflected Finedwell – although my life may not last another twenty-four hours, if we really think about it.

But now, just as Finedwell was tempted by glum thoughts, fate again intervened to make him forget his sorrows for another spell. It so happened that a blonde and well-made up female head appeared at the doorway that partitioned the haut monde from the everyday, and the flirtatious smile sent by this lady's head toward the melancholy journalist resembled those seen in the window displays of beauty parlors. On another occasion, seeing this made-up, expressionless doll's face would have brought a suitably grave expression on Finedwell's visage, but now, on this night, his fingers went to his hat and he saluted like an army officer. Seeing this, the lady stepped forth in the entirety of her splendor, as if some window display dummy at a fashionable Inner City couturier had set out,

still wearing the sign "Latest Parisian Style!" pinned on by a shop assistant. This was a fatuous and vicious female whom the journalist had known ever since the days when she had been called a scullery maid in the "night world". Since then she had become the kept mistress of a wealthy furniture maker, and thus it was as a lady of fashion that she inquired after the journalist who was to fight a duel on the morrow against the deadliest shot of the National Casino. It must have been the well-informed tall waiter who had betrayed to "Magnate" Elza the fact that the journalist thus condemned to die was here in the outer passage of the café, making the fashion-plate beauty stir from her peacock-like display stance.

The lady had for some time scrutinized Titusz's hat and umbrella-cane before making up her mind to approach the journalist's table. But Finedwell, befitting his genteel accessories, eager to assist the Grand Dame of the Orfeum in her role, stood up and stepped toward "Magnate" Elza, respectfully taking off his hat while adjusting his stride as if he were still a student at the small-town dancing school he had once attended—he approached the lady on tiptoe, but with the right amount of manliness.

– Would you honor me by joining me at my table? – the journalist asked, as if it were someone else speaking, someone who had been, unbeknownst to him, hiding inside him all along. Obviously this could only have been Kornél Ábrányi, Junior, whom the journalist had idolized in his youth. Or it could have been Gyula Déri, dubbed "LeDeri" by his colleagues, famous for his gallant adventures with the fair sex, even though the statuesque man of letters had carried only silver coins, and those in the upper pocket of his waitcoat to prevent theft.

– Let's have some bubbly, Mademoiselle! – exclaimed Titusz, escorting this paragon of beauty to his table where he used his hat to sweep cigarette ashes from the marble surface.

The champagne soon arrived, just as in old music-hall ditties, as the lady looked on with a waxen smile, since she was used to witnessing this ritual night after night. But Finedwell pressed his advantage:

– Tell me, my dear Elza, what do I need to do so that for once in your life you'll cheer up enough to give me a kiss?

The belle of the Orfeum answered clumsily:

– First of all, Mr. Editor, put your hat back on, before you catch a head cold. – Thus spake the swansdown-wrapped, silvery, silky, and supernaturally dumb angel of the Orfeum and helped to adjust the journalist's hat at a rakish tilt. Then, with hands that idleness made as white as the flesh of a walnut, she turned the brim down, as fashion dictated it that season.

The journalist and the star of the Orfeum Café appeared to be on most intimate terms by the time Steepletippy and company returned from the café's inner sanctum to join their friend in the outer tract. Egged on by Finedwell, "Magnate" Elza had already dropped one fragile champagne flute full of bubbly to the floor, so that the janitor had to be summoned. The stylish quality of their principal's

partying did not fail to impress the dueling seconds. A person carousing in the company of "Magnate" Elza could not be a nonentity. It began to dawn on them that their principal was a man of some stature, after all.

– So you are done with your business here? – inquired Titusz in a loud voice. – I trust it was a matter of life and death?

Hearing this, the stony-faced female idol smiled in acknowledgement at the two gentlemen, as if she had long known them for their indomitable courageousness and heroic acts. Having downed a few glasses of wine, the pockmarked painter once more felt like launching into one of his epic tales, but Steepletippy, the dwarf, cut him short.

– We had better instruct our friend Finedwell in how to behave himself at the duel tomorrow. If only to keep him from putting us to shame!

By now the outer tract of the café was quite empty. The actors, horse dealers, and various vendors had given up and wandered off. Only one old man, a one-time stockbroker called Uncle Blau, was still sitting in a corner, waiting for some well-heeled passerby whom he could initiate into the tricks of playing the market. Patti, the magician of card tricks who was said to be a hundred years old, had also ambled off, with his hairpiece and his pack of cards. This allowed the stenography professor, who was all worked up, to measure off thirty paces which he counted out leaning on his stiletto-bearing cane.

– One, two, three... thirteen, twenty-three... thirty; and now you advance five steps. Please, Lóczi, give the command – the hunchback shouted from the far corner of the café.

The pockmarked artist now rose from his chair and grabbed Finedwell by the shoulder.

– Come, take your place – he said and led Finedwell to a particular square of the parquet floor – you stand here and wait for the words of command. First command: Attention! Second command: Ready! Third, I will count to ten, during which interval you must fire your pistol, standing sideways facing your opponent so that you provide the smallest target. So, it is Attention, Ready, one, two, three...

At this point the crack of an actual pistol rent the curtain of softly playing music. The professor of stenography, standing at the far end of the café, had actually drawn his pistol and fired a shot. One lamp expired with a crash. "We must get this fellow used to the sound of firearms!"—said Steepletippy after a pause, for he had paled at the sound of the shot. No great harm was done. "Magnate" Elza caressed the hand of the journalist, who had returned to his seat. But then the head waiter arrived bearing a silver tray with the check, his look resembling a highway robber's, and our Titusz suddenly realized that after paying the bill he would have at the most ten kreuzers to his name, enough to pay the super for letting him into his building—and even that only if he stiffed the waiter on his tip. "Magnate" Elza glided off toward the ladies' room. The two gentlemen got into their cab and shouted to the journalist from the window:

– Four-thirty tomorrow afternoon at the Franz Joseph barracks!

Under the influence of the champagne he had consumed Finedwell was as yet unable to fully appreciate the fatal situation he had gotten mixed up in. Sauntering on Andrássy Avenue he searched through his pockets in the hope of coming across monetary units he was in the habit of hiding away, as it were, from himself. He thought it likely that he would find a five-forint coin in some pocket, hidden there when he received his advance, as he always did whenever the happy-go-lucky journalists would hold up a colleague in the office to shake him down for the contents of his pockets... "That's the life of a bohemian!"—they would shout, on occasion stripping Titusz to his "birthday suit". But now the quest proved fruitless; even if he did have some money left in a secret pocket, it was so well hidden from himself that it would be found only after his death by someone selling the trousers to a used-clothes dealer, when the silver coin falls out in the course of bargaining. Therefore he turned his steps toward the Café Ferenci where he hoped to find a large company who were sure to be still up on this night to discuss his life and death.

But to his great disappointment the Ferenci was empty, the journalists were gone from the round table by the cash register where they usually sat puffed up with a sense of their importance or else deflated by the shadow of their penuriousness. Only Olga sat in her place, in melancholy languor and utterly devoid of hope, as always, whenever dawn was breaking and another night was gone without anything happening. Sobered up, the journalist stopped by the cash register lady's throne and spoke:

– My dear little Olga, sweetheart, here is the dawn of the last day on which you may still agree to become my bride.

Olga, who had obviously heard this before from Finedwell, showed not the least surprise. Only her glance became more melancholy as the crocheting in her hands trembled.

– My dear little Olga – Titusz went on enthusiastically, as if wishing to forget his wasted night and squandered money, as well as his penniless present, with these gurgled words that seemed to amuse above all himself. – My dear little Olga, I would die with a far better conscience knowing that my name lived on, even if only through a widowed woman. The widow Finedwell! Olga, that doesn't sound half as bad as you think.

– The widow Mrs. Titusz Finedwell – said Olga and produced a pencil to write it on the edge of a cash register receipt: widow Mrs. Titusz Finedwell. She circled the name as if to remember it forever.

Titusz warbled on enthused, as those men do who seize a rare occasion to speak of themselves.

– Not even a cat will be left behind, after I'm dead... My name will be in the papers for a day or two, and then it will never be mentioned again in this land. Not even accidentally. But if there were to be a widowed Mrs. Finedwell to visit my grave once in a blue moon, I would feel ever so much better down below. People would say that Finedwell was not such a bad fellow, after all, before he died he honored the promise he'd made so often to the cash register lady at the Café

Ferenci. My memory would be shrouded by a certain aura, proving that I had not lived frivolously, from moment to moment, hand to mouth, but I had some purpose in this world, some goal that I had realized.

These sentimental words did indeed have their effect, for Olga reached up with one hand toward the brandy bottles while the other hand flashed a small glass that she made sure was clean.

– I believe this is the Passover plum brandy that orthodox Jews like to drink. The boss never drinks anything else.

With a weary smile of farewell Finedwell tossed back the drink. The brandy warmed his innards, and he would have liked to talk some more. But Olga gave him a serious look and sent him home before Finedwell had a chance to be carried away by another attack of sentimentality.—"We'll continue our talk tomorrow."—His voice hoarse with the brandy, Titusz replied: "Is that what you think?" –"Yes, I have a feeling we shall"—was Olga's answer. And she held out her hand to Finedwell.

Were the green Tyrolean hat and the umbrella-cane surprised when they arrived, after a lengthy hike, at Finedwell's quarters?

At daybreak Finedwell usually flung himself upon his bed as if he had returned from the world of the dead, to become an infant again, lying in the fetal position under an obituary in a black frame that hung on the wall right next to the sleeper's head. This obituary—or "funeral notice", as they said in those days—stated that Mrs. Robert Finedwell had passed away at age thirty-two after a prolonged illness. This Mrs. Robert Finedwell was Titusz's mother, and the obituary was his only possession. Not much of a fortune, but just enough for a sentimental man.

Shall we describe Finedwell's room? It was about the size of a hazelnut with a hole. But the keyhole, through which one might peek into the room, was always stuffed with a rag. On the outside of the door a slip of paper was kept in perpetual motion by the draft in the corridor of this ancient Inner City building. The sign said: "I'll be right back!", but the tenant never was.

The journalist, half-asleep, had a number of visitors. First, a shoemaker's apprentice lad, clutching a piece of paper that looked dirty enough to have been with him since birth. He stood in front of the door for a while, staring at its odd message as if seeing it for the first time, before his fevered glance was attracted toward the building's courtyard, where he presently joined the procession accompanying a blind street singer from house to house.—The journalist was well acquainted with the footfalls of his tailor who kept dropping in on him like some lovelorn admirer, and, if allowed to slip through the door, always began by saying that he just happened to chance this way, and he certainly wouldn't want to trouble Mr. Finedwell on account of a trifling sum. The tailor's sighs practically blew through the door as he squatted in front of the keyhole and yelled all sorts of terms of endearment at the journalist:

– I only wanted to see you, my good sir. Just to wish you luck. And to hear some reassurance, that sooner or later you'll get to me. Let me in, my dear Mr. Editor, I swear I didn't even bring a bill with me.

But Titusz burrowed all the deeper under his quilt, and failed to respond even to the craftiest cajoling. After all it was not for nothing that he had written "I'll be right back!" on the door. Let the tailor wait if he felt like it. The tailor went away, but suddenly returned and indignantly shouted through the keyhole:

– God help me I'll take you to court if you don't let me in this very instant!

The tailor waited. But Finedwell did not budge, even though he was beginning to regret putting that fatal sign on the door.

And Finedwell (who was, after all, a decent sort), suffered pangs of guilt hearing the tailor's dejected footfalls growing fainter, retreating from the door. He never intended to hurt the good man, but he could not make an exception of him.

But now the building started to quake with steps approaching on the spiral stairs that linked the ground floor of this ancient house to the first. Seeing these winding stairs Titusz had often wondered: how did they ever take a coffin out of here. The approaching footfalls heralded danger, a ferocious attack, charging toward Titusz's door as if at the very least announcing the bearer of a court summons. Merciless, feral steps, like those of a bailiff closing in on the victim.

The journalist knew the perpetrator of these steps: it was Mr. Munk, the instalment agent, whose manner of dealing with his customers was as rough as sandpaper. Mr. Munk was a heavy-set red-haired man whose aim in life was to have each resident of the capital pay instalments to him. Mr. Munk's laughter on seeing the sign on the door was scornful and highly audible.

– Very well, my dear Mr. Editor, very well indeed!

And he could be heard snorting and gnashing his teeth as he rubbed his sweating forehead with a large linen kerchief.

– This is scandalous! – he kept repeating, and having found a chair somewhere he planted himself in front of the door.

The journalist racked his brains trying to figure out which of his enemies could have given the chair to Munk. Possibly the building's super... or was it the midwife next door, who resented that she could hope for no business from Titusz? People are wicked and like to gloat at another's misfortune—Titusz thought gloomily, beneath the obituary, as if it had been his own. He felt not an ounce of strength left to take on Mr. Munk; he felt himself so helpless that it actually felt good, for at least he did not have to make the smallest effort, like a patient in critical condition yielding to his fate, at most hoping for a miracle. But no miracle would help against Mr. Munk, who had settled in front of this door, and all his wheezing, hawking and belching could be clearly heard inside the room, as if Mr. Munk used the time of waiting to rehearse the ways he could make himself even more repulsive. He rustled a newspaper; next he leafed through his pocket notebook, the squeaking of his pencil clearly audible as he corrected his notes. Every life has horrible moments such as these, when you are unable to shake off some exasperating burden that weighs over your heart. Mr. Munk was quite a sizeable burden.

Half dead with these torments, the journalist lay in bed not daring to move, hoping that at best Mr. Munk would believe that he was asleep and would not

sound off that terrifying, aggressive, unbearable voice of his that he employed to drive debtors to their graves.

At this moment our journalist would much rather have faced the colonel's pistol than Mr. Munk's custody. It took but a moment for the pistol to fire (as he had witnessed earlier that night), but Mr. Munk was capable of sitting around for hours in front of the door. Neither was Mr. Munk the least bit bored, as one would have imagined. He coughed. Softly, as city folks do. Then in the manner of a villager, who wants to find some enjoyment even in coughing. He scratched his itching parts. He scratched his palms, his head; he dug into his ears with a matchstick, an operation that made him groan with pleasure—then he rubbed his calves against each other. Some people are never bored, they always find something about their bodies to keep them busy. Munk, when he could no longer find anything else to do, kicked off his boots and sat in his socks.

Fortunately there are events that can shatter the resolve of even the most determined watchers. For Mr. Munk the ringing of a bell in a nearby church constituted such an event. It was the sound of the noontime bell, which evokes special thoughts in each man, not excepting even Mr. Munk. At first he started to swear sotto voce, then he began to bang on the door with hands and feet amidst loud curses, without any sign of letting up, as if he had decided to create a scandal at all costs on the journalist's "last day". But Finedwell was already sighing with relief, for he had calculated how long Mr. Munk would keep up the siege. True, Munk was able to sustain the banging for quite some time, since he had considerable practice at it. However Titusz, during his long hours of torment had had a chance to steel himself for the final assault, and knew it would be foolish to yield now, when the end of the battle was in sight. By the time Mr. Munk reached the stage of uttering curses, Finedwell was already sitting up on the edge of his bed, aware that Mr. Munk was close to deafening himself by his own thunderous barrage of oaths.

So Mr. Munk departed, having lost the battle, but kept stopping on his way out, as if still racking his brains about doing some damage, but in the end his final footfall died away like a memory that turns out to be quite pleasant in the end. Free of Mr. Munk, Finedwell now examined his hat and umbrella-cane in daylight. They were imposing objects even in daytime, although they had appeared more impressive at night. Now they revealed a certain amount of wear, for they had reposed a long time in the café's storage room. The journalist consoled himself with the thought that brand-new things are actually less valuable than used items, as witnessed by great lords having their new shoes broken in by their servants. For a while he was still lost in admiration of his accessories, until a strange and deadly anxiety enveloped his heart so unexpectedly that he tumbled back on his bed. He suddenly remembered the upcoming duel that he had not given his proper attention because of his visitors. In the face of other troubles one may at times forget about death.

Now the thought of death did not abandon him for a second while he dressed despondently, washed desultorily, and gargled at length. Fear practically made him double over, while no matter how much he would have liked to cry, he was unable to give way to the fit of weeping that lurked within him.

– If I could only cry, I would feel a lot better – Finedwell murmured to himself, sinking into a chair when he felt the redeeming tears near at hand. But the tears refused to materialize. Only women are lucky enough to cry at will. No, Finedwell's tears just wouldn't start falling, no matter how hard he coaxed them. He had to get dressed from top to toe and venture into the outside world without weeping.

But his luck still held, for as he entered the editorial offices he ran into the editor in chief, who had the reputation of being unable to refuse a request—out of vanity or whimsy, as if always trying to prove that matters of money made no difference to him—although just about every other week lawyers were procuring writs for auctioning off his belongings. Finedwell made a brave "frontal attack" by candidly confessing that he had spent yesterday's advance to the last penny and now did not even have enough for lunch. This "frontal attack" proved successful —or was it the magic of his hat and umbrella-cane that did the trick? The editor in chief was gratified seeing his associates acquitting themselves well on "the field of honor", and therefore he handed over ten forints to Finedwell who could now face the afternoon's events in better spirits. So he visited as many as three taverns before finding one where he found his favorite dish, boiled beef. Fortune continued to favor him when he was served a portion of "meat on the bone" that drew envious glances from nearby tables. Generally this is the kind of restaurant dish that even the most impassive souls follow with interest when a waiter passes by carrying it on a platter. The other patrons scrutinize, measure, appreciate, and all but taste it, envying the guest who ordered it. The journalist's portion of meat was a substantial one; it had been saved for the owner who eventually decided to renounce it in favor of the unknown guest with the Tyrolean hat and umbrella-cane. To show his gratitude Titusz ordered a double portion of sauce—which happened to be horseradish and vinegar.

As a matter of fact it was after the consumption of this auspicious plate of "meat on the bone" that Finedwell's fortunes changed for the better, so that he is still alive to this day unless he has died in the meantime. The colonel's bullet missed. On the other hand Finedwell's bullet found the colonel, who died of his wound like the brave soldier that he was. The cab fare for Titusz's ride back from the scene of the duel had to be paid for by the editorial office boy. There were no complaints. ❧

Translated by John Batki

Tamás Jónás

Poems

Translated by Clare Pollard

Ballad of the Tortured

A megkínzottak balladája

I knew Feco when he was strong and proud,
a falcon amongst sparrows round our home.
His dad was in the shithouse that he burnt.
He'd slumped asleep whilst he was on the throne.

If not that, someone would have had him killed.
If no one else, his liver would have done.
Up there he'll wait for mercy for his sins,
whilst down here prison bars weigh down his son.

Feco was very changed when he returned.
He barely spoke, or just made muttered sounds.
A handsome man, he wasn't spared in there,
and they who have been tortured are the damned.

And little Feri, in youth custody?
He's thirty and his writing's brought him fame,
but can't sleep now; is petrified of death.
Summer and light are horrible to him.

Tamás Jónás

writes poetry, short stories and plays. He was born in 1973 and has published six books of poems and three prose collections including his autobiographical Gypsy Times.
Some of the poems here were first introduced in a reading arranged by the Hungarian Cultural Centre, London.

He cannot look into a mirror's face.
His lover only gets held in the dark.
He writes and studies fairytales but finds
that every single beauty in them's fake.

Chloride from water, God from iron minds:
the scars and bruises vanish; they don't brand.
They're meaningless—they mean nothing at all—
but they who have been tortured are the damned.

My aunty Roza, chewed by cancer cells,
was married to a man whose leg was lost.
Mum suffocated and my brother's face
some crappy surgeon fudged into a mess.

Zoli's in prison, still has half a year.
His sisters borrowed money 'to buy food',
used his disabled card. But the poor man
can't even feel that angry he was conned.

The local beauty poisoned her love dead.
Now the priest threatens that he'll lend a hand—
says absolution lies between her thighs
and they who have been tortured are the damned.

Even a fool will quickly learn the rules:
torture's a sin, but being tortured worse.
The living dead are livelier dead again,
and all your life, the first will still come first.

See, Prince, the one who's written all these lines
can't write an ode to joy although he slams
every lament as just cheap scribbled trash!
He has been tortured, so he too is damned.

Experimentation

Kísérletezés

I'm going to smash someone into myself.
It terrifies me, how much I desire.
Someone loved me—they didn't dare for long.
And now they've left, although they are still here.

For vengeance, I'll smash them into myself,
and I'll crash too—lacking judgement and law.
Kindness is blackmail. Shouldn't I be harsh?
What if I win for just withstanding more?

In God's blind eye, the heroes are the wrong.
Enough is not enough for what we want.
Too late for me to know that the attempt
to make love last's just an experiment.

Master Raven

Holló uram

Come now, come now, Master Raven.
Don't you, don't you take my soul.
If you steal it, please don't pull—
didn't win it at a fairground,
there's someone expects it found,
perhaps a girl,
a boyish girl,
waits for it back.
Expects it back.

Come now, come now, Master Raven—
all you croak are accusations.
If I'm right then fate will happen,
why would you know any better?
Or the ones who laugh and titter?
Eyes and toes
they swell and bloat.
New road's prepared
beneath my feet.

Come now, come now, Master Raven!
Must you pluck both my eyes out?
Of course it hurts, though I won't fight—
pressed by wings, they're weighing down,
and if you don't mind now, I'll scream:
'the Demons, God!
You gave your word—
not this body
of a bird!'

The One

Egyetlen

Women are treacherous, and mothers most—
ovens who'll burn you out, or iron-hard,
or else deep-freezers chilling mute all words—
they lay love like the traps they lay for rats;
they crush your feet so you can't ever run.
You want your mother when you want to fuck:
her body and her soul. You'll have no luck
until you break out from this cage called home.

Leave me alone, mother! Go love my dad!
Let me go out where lovers wait for me.
Can't bear this stenching taint that's in my blood—
let me love other women, finally!
They'll know me as you, mother, never can.
You have to die so I can be a man.

Gábor Vida

Rise Up and Walk!

Short story

I sit out on the porch all day long doing nothing. It looks like I'm searching the sky or the hills, or waiting for something. I am dangling myself into the world from a fine armchair. This is the most I can do: to sit and wait. My father made my chair, he did not begrudge me the yellow Siberian pine, did not care that it was a protected species. He barked at me to be quiet, to shut my mouth, it was the best kind of timber in the area, and his crippled son deserved a good chair at least, seeing as he didn't have legs. Because with my two legs, it's like not having legs at all, it's knees I haven't got, my legs don't bend. They got broken once, a long time ago, I don't remember now. They say a bear broke my legs, there are lots of bears around here. And my father's hated me ever since, and that is harder to bear than my useless legs. This will kill me in the end. Otherwise, it's fine, sitting in the chair, he made it as comfortable as he could. In wintertime, like now, I wrap up warm in sheepskins, it's very cold out. I could freeze to death in minutes and no one would notice, few people come this way. My father is rarely home, almost never. He comes maybe once a week, sometimes cooks something, goes down to the village, buys this and that, drink, cigarettes always, then disappears into the woods again. No one knows where he goes. They say that he's a poacher, but they daren't say it to his face, only whisper behind his back. He is a big man. He hates me because he's saddled with me, a cripple, no use to him at all. Actually, I can stand up if I really want to, I can even walk a couple of steps, but only with my two dogwood sticks. Chopping wood is difficult for me, mostly because of the bending. But my arms are stronger than anyone would think. I don't complain. Whenever I can, I sit out on the porch, watching time pass, sometimes I can almost see it, or feel it in my bones, I can hardly wait for the next day, for spring, the following winter, I don't know what exactly. I also wait for Anyeska. She comes from the village, she lives about half an hour away. She visits me every week. She is a very beautiful girl. She

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Gábor Vida

is a literary editor of the Hungarian-language literary monthly Látó, *published in Marosvásárhely (Târgu Mureş). The short story published here appeared in the fourth collection of his short stories which is reviewed by Zsolt Láng on pp. 127–133 of this issue.*

always brings me cheese, bacon, bread, food she has cooked, I've never gone hungry. She comes in secret so no one will see. It is my father she especially tries to avoid, because he once gave her a good scolding, told her I'd fall in love with her, that's what it would come to, and hadn't I got enough worries, what did she want from me? But Anyeska is not afraid of my father, she just steers clear of him, and always comes whenever she can. She brings me potato soup, very tasty, and maize-meal porridge, we eat it with curds, that's how we like it best.

My father is a savage. He hates the world for me being the way I am. He is angry because I cannot walk the woods with him, I can't fell trees, or stalk deer. I can't even walk, at least not far, just around the house, and that isn't enough. My legs and my back start to ache very quickly. It hurts that I don't have knees, it hurts that my father has to walk the woods without me. The best poacher there is. The woodcutters worship the ground he walks on. Now in wintertime, he spends most of his time with them. They rarely go without meat. I've never seen my father hunt, or if I have, I don't remember. When he tells me stories, which he very rarely does, he always tells me about the time I was two years old, and he carried me around on his shoulders all day. We did not speak for hours, I would press myself against him as if he were a tree, or a rock. When he fired the gun I'd laugh out loud. A long time has passed since I last heard that story. Time passes. The best of poachers has a cripple for a son. He hates the whole world because of me. But I can't do anything about it. Perhaps I am waiting for a miracle, while my father grows old before my eyes. He's never been caught. No one dares follow him on the paths he takes. Foresters, policemen never come our way, this entrance to the valley belongs to us. It's only down in the village that people laugh at us behind our backs, the mills of God and all that, the best of poachers has a cripple for a son. They know very well that time is running out for my father too. There'll come a day when he'll be stuck in a snowdrift and freeze to death, mauled by a bear, bitten in the face by a viper. Then the foresters and the hunters will start coming up the valley. They'll pass in front of our house, mock me a bit, but will not come close, I have a big stick in my hand, then go on climbing upwards. Whenever he thinks of this, my father's look becomes like a lynx's. He'll kill someone if necessary.

I think it's not my father I am most anxious about, but Anyeska. She loves me, and she always comes whenever she can. In the evenings she heats up water in the big pot, takes off my clothes and washes me like a baby. She helps me stand in the tub and rubs me down with a rough rag, like you do with horses. It's her I worry about most. She has a long way to walk, and in the winter the wolves come down from the woods to the village fields. They've eaten human flesh and not just once. But Anyeska doesn't care about that. She sets off for the village whistling as she goes. I can hear her whistling until she reaches the torrent, and from there it's not far to the first house. It's in the mornings that I get anxious again, when I'm sitting out on the porch, lost in the passing of time, and I suddenly think of her. But she never comes to any harm. She says it's because she goes to church regularly, and cooks for the priest at his house. He's a lonely man too, like me.

Anyeska hasn't cut my hair for some time now, and she's asked me not to shave either. She'd like me to have long hair and a long beard, like priests and other holy men. She says it suits me. I let her have her way, I'm happy to please her at least, if I can't please my father. Our house isn't the right place to speak of priests and holy men, because one time my father chased the priest away from our house, and in return the priest cursed him. My father's a pagan, that's what they say in the village. The priest came to convert him, but got nowhere. My father threatened him, told him if he ever came our way again he'd strike him dead. I remember seeing the priest inching his way across the swinging bridge over the torrent, the wind tearing at his black robes. He clung tightly to the ropes that serve as rails, then my father gave a big shout, it sounded like a shot. The priest took such a fright he almost jumped into the river. That was the last time I saw my father laugh. It was a long time ago. Anyeska was a little girl then, and I sat in the house all day, I didn't have my chair yet, I didn't understand what the priest wanted. I heard my father shout, then laugh out loud. I've been afraid of him since, that laugh... Later he made me the chair so I could sit outside, a good, comfortable chair for outside, where I could watch time passing. Of course it's just me who thinks that. It's to no purpose, but it's important to me. My father once told me I'd better look out, if my brains were worth as little as my legs, he'd kill me with his own hands. I told him that time passes only within us, deep inside, in our hearts. Trees and animals simply grow old, but with us, time passes as well. How can that be? I don't see it, I just know. There have been times when I've wanted to die, but Anyeska made me promise that I would take care of myself, even if it's hard, even if I don't see the point. I must take care of myself, and besides, my father would take my loss hard. Even the priest said that I was to be looked after. It was a miracle that I was alive at all; God had had mercy on me once. It was because of some such words of wisdom that my father had grown so angry with him. What kind of priest can't tell the difference between a curse and absolution? And he chased him off. I don't know if that's the way it happened exactly, I don't think it really matters. It's a miracle that I'm alive, like I'm waiting for something. My mother perhaps, I really would like to see her. She left when I lost the use of my legs. She used to cook for the woodcutters, slept with them too, so the innkeeper said. Anyeska says I should love my mother even if I don't remember her. Perhaps I do love her, but what am I supposed to do about it? Of course with Anyeska it's different, she comes every week. I like it best when she washes me, she pours hot water over me out of a pot. Then she dries me off, slips in bed beside me, and strokes my legs for a long time, the place where they don't bend, where my knees should be. She says they'll get better one day, if she strokes them long enough. What she does is worth a lot more than what the doctors know. A lot of people have got better after someone stroked them for a long time, someone who loved them very much. The priest told her about a man called Jesus who healed a lot of people this way. And Jesus will return one day, some day soon according to the priest, to heal the sick and punish the wicked. I asked Anyeska whether he would

punish my mother too. Anyeska became quite confused and promised she would ask the priest, but she never did ask him. I did not press her, I don't want to make her angry, because I'm afraid she would not stroke me any more if I did.

Once my father found Anyeska at the house. He'd just brought a roebuck, I heard him sling it down on the porch. The antlers clattered as they struck the boards. He knew there were two of us in the house, he can always tell when someone's been, even three days later. He pushed the door open, roughly like he usually does. He took the hunting knife from his belt and stuck it into the door-jamb. "Skin it," that was all he said. I usually skin the animals behind the house. From the road you can't see behind the house even during the day. My father will take the innards with him, somewhere far into the woods. The wolves will tear at them. You have to take them quite a distance, or else they can be heard growling from the house, fighting over the food. I'm good at skinning. I never damage the hide, I like to do it. The blood never bothers me. The light from the small window is just enough to see by, and falls directly where my hands are busy. My hands never shake, not even that time when I heard Anyeska's voice, then my father's, then the slap of his hand against her face. That's all I heard. My knife slid smoothly along the skin, then through the stomach of the deer. I was in a hurry, my hands were freezing. It is a pity that Anyeska told the priest everything.

"The wrath of God will strike you down!" she said, turning back from the doorway, then took to her heels, because my father had grabbed a stick.

"There is no God!" my father said. "If my son does not get better, then there is no God. He'll die as he is, a cripple."

Anyeska came to see me just as often after that, but she was always careful, she sometimes even went outside and listened for a long time. Nothing ever happened. She always came back. She could always sense when my father was on his way home. She'd learned her lesson for life.

"We can do anything we like now," she said one night, when she'd washed me and I'd crawled into bed. She blew out the lamp, undressed and slipped in beside me. She stroked me for a long time and it felt very nice. I think I can love my mother even though I've never seen her. I don't care if the innkeeper says that in the summer, when there were hikers camping by the brook, she'd drive the cattle there, and go mushrooming there, even though there are no mushrooms growing by the brook. Once my father had to drag her out of a tent, she didn't have any clothes on. My father chased the hikers away, but he did not hurt my mother, just stared at her like a hungry dog. She was a very beautiful woman, my mother, even more beautiful than Anyeska, that's for sure.

I sometimes wonder what would happen if that man they call Jesus ever came this way, would he punish the bear that did this to me the same way that he'd punish a sinner? My father searched for that bear for years, walked the woods for it, but found no trace of it, no one ever saw that beast again. For years my father has carried a cartridge intended for that bear in his pocket. The copper casing has become quite shiny from all that carrying around. Somehow, I'm not really angry

with that bear, it's as if it all happened to someone else. As if it was a story that Anyeska might tell me one winter afternoon when it's too cold to sit out on the porch. If it wasn't for my two useless legs... I wish what she told me was true, that if someone strokes you for long enough, someone who loves you very much, you'll get well again. Then I'd have knees, and be able to walk properly. I asked her if she loved me, really loved me like that, but she did not answer, she caressed my face, my neck, slipped her hand down to my waist, then further down, so I could barely breathe, I wanted to tell her to stop, to talk to me instead, but she just smiled.

The innkeeper said she's not just a whore, she's a pervert too for sleeping with a cripple. I will kill that innkeeper if I get a chance. Anyeska told me not to listen to him, to do as Jesus did and turn a deaf ear to that kind of talk. She's always getting at me with that Jesus. I haven't told her that it annoys me, because she really believes in him, and can't wait for him to come back. Not all the time, just sometimes, when she thinks of it. She says he is a thin man with a beard and very long hair, and there is a kind of radiance about him which makes him instantly recognizable. He calls everyone by name. He'll come and perform miracles, and his face is as bright as the sun. I like listening to these stories, because I like listening to Anyeska. Maybe everything is the way she tells it, I don't know anything about the world, how could I?

In the summer my father comes home even more rarely than usual, and when he comes he always gets drunk. He swears he'll never set foot in this house again. Then he asks God to take his life that very night. It seems he only believes in God when he's drunk. This is my worst fear: what if one morning he'll really be lying there dead in the other room, what am I going to do then? I think he'll live for a long time. He's a very strong man, and he never hurts me, however drunk he is. He just hates the world, and life. I don't know what will happen to him if Jesus really comes back and everything will be the way Anyeska says. I think I'd like to see this man. Anyeska says my face resembles his a little now that my beard has grown long, and my hair. There are pictures in church of people with such faces. She promised to take me to church too, but I'm not going to go, because I'm ashamed that my father chased the priest away, and proud of him at the same time. I like the long, hard frosts best, when you don't see a cloud for days, and after the morning mist has lifted the sun shines dazzlingly bright. On days like this I always sit outside on the porch wrapped in my big, smelly sheepskins. Waiting for something. It's a habit of mine, even though no one ever comes this way in winter, only my father and Anyeska. Sometimes a woodcutter with his mountain pony. Even the dogs don't venture up this far. The human world ends at the swinging bridge over the torrent. From there you can still hear the clacking of the train, but further up you can't. The roar of the water rushing down filters it out of the air. I find it very difficult to cross the bridge on my own, it swings so much, even if I grip the ropes along the sides really tightly. It sometimes takes me half an hour to cross when I have to go down into the village, which isn't very often. It's a long way. I'd like to visit Anyeska one day, I know where she lives, but it's too

far for me. I don't know what she'd say if I suddenly turned up on her doorstep. The children have set the dogs on me several times. I've got my sticks, they can't hurt me. But still.

I don't know whether I'd die if I fell off the bridge, but everything that's still in one piece inside me would surely break. I never go that way in the winter. It's better for me to wait, to sit quietly in the icy sunshine. Waiting for the gutter to start dripping, for long icicles to grow. They measure time for me. When they grow too big, or when the time is ripe inside them, they fall with a loud clatter and crash. When this happens I know that something has come to an end again, something unnameable, and something else has come closer. In these hills, whenever something happens, you know about it at once, even in the most hidden ravine.

I am alone a lot, have nothing to do except to keep the fire burning. I eat something now and then, move little, I chop the firewood here at the other end of the porch. I used to read too, but I haven't got the patience for it these days, and I don't understand everything written in the books. My thinking is too slow. I'm a savage like my father, just crippled. I want the stories they tell me to be true, to be the way they are told, I want people to tell me things the way they really are. Anyeska doesn't always tell the truth either, but I love her, and forgive her for talking about the person called Jesus and other such nonsense. She is allowed to. My father never tells me stories, but I can read his gestures. I know what happened to him while he was away. I know about everything, I just haven't got the words. When I asked him if my mother was ever coming back, he did not answer, just turned away. I know what he thinks, he just hasn't got the words. Anyeska also says that there's some kind of curse on us, on me and my father, and that people in the village have begun to fear that the curse will spread to others, perhaps to the sheep or cattle as well. Since my father chased off the priest, laughed at him and threatened him, a lot of things have happened in the village that had never happened before, and it must be because of us. They urged the priest to come up as far as the bridge at least, and say a few exorcising prayers or any other thing that would stop the evil spirit from getting down into the valley, but he daren't even contemplate doing anything of the kind. The bridge is within gunshot range and he's afraid. Recently the grown-ups have started to set the dogs on Anyeska as well, but only from behind the fences. In any case she isn't afraid of dogs, and they are reluctant to bark at her because she loves them. People say she has cast a spell on the dogs too, since she's the only one who comes up here, she must have taken the curse down into the valley with her, it couldn't have got there by itself, after all, the priest did go round all the back gardens; true, not many people saw him, he did it at night. Recently, Anyeska has stopped going to church altogether. They also say that my father has started going to the old mine, over the other side of the hill. He is looking for gold, to get my legs operated on. He's finally sold his soul to the devil. Anyeska told me all this in the same breath, and she added that several times, after closing hour, people have trooped out of the tavern, all set to walk up the hill to question me, but in the end

were too frightened even drunk as they were, and in the cold air they usually sobered up, and when they had they believed—so the innkeeper said—that I had a gun and would shoot without hesitation, should things come to such a pass.

"It's true, isn't it?" she asked me, in a frightened voice full of hope. "Show me the gun!" she said finally, and kept on at me for a long time, I simply could not shake her off. I told her to find the gun, then, I might need it sometime. It was funny to see her searching our house. We don't own much, plank-beds, a table, a couple of chests. She stood in the room holding a flickering candle in her hand, walked round the table a couple of times, then walked over to the stove and pointed at a floorboard. She was excited, her hand seemed to shake a little, or perhaps it was just the candle flickering.

"Here it is," she said. She prised up the floorboard with the blade of the axe. She worked like a man. It was there, she'd looked in the right place. It lay, well-greased, in a wooden box, an old Mauser, a long-barrelled army rifle, not a hunting rifle. My gun. I was very pleased, I've never been so pleased about anything. I think this was what I had been waiting for. Anyeska wanted to put it back in its place, but I didn't let her. I walked over to her without using my sticks, as fast as I could. I grabbed her arm, tightened my hold on her: "Give it to me!" That was an order, I could hear the ring of my father's voice in mine, at least I recognized it, and I think she did too. We tussled for a while longer, but it was pointless, really. She loved me, she had to obey. The gun was loaded. Since then, things have changed. We are wilder and rougher with each other. She does not only caress me, but tears at me with her nails, she shudders differently, her voice has become deeper too. She likes to cause me pain, and she smokes with me. One time she even burned my shoulder. She sometimes brings drink, and drinks with me, like women do in summertime when they're making hay. It makes her face really interesting. Most times she talks about how we're going to get away from here. But I don't know where we could go. Now I know why my father gets drunk, because when he's drunk he isn't afraid that there may be a God after all. He wouldn't even be frightened if God were to suddenly come out of the woods. But he isn't going to come, and that's why my father is angry with him. Something happened up in the hills, I just haven't got the words for it. Anyeska doesn't talk about Jesus any more, nor does she say I will have knees sometime. She doesn't tell stories at all any more, but she still loves me. The best thing is when she runs around in the big snow naked, drops of water sparkle on her body, she throws a handful of snow up in the air, and stares into the sun, like someone who has the right to do so. I sit on the porch and feast my eyes. Sometimes I aim the gun at her, follow her movements with the front sight. When she notices me doing this she stops, turns to face me, takes her heavy breasts in her hands and pushes them up and together to make a deep cleavage. "Shoot here!" she shouts, "here!" and laughs out loud. Spring is coming, I think.

We play like this a lot, and time passes quickly. Anyeska sometimes stays with me even when my father comes home, she isn't afraid of him any more, she growls

and snarls at him like a dog. When she does this, and I go outside, I know what's going to happen. I am a lot like my father, if I had knees I would be exactly like him. He took the rifle in his hands, examined it, tried the bolt, the front sight. Good, that was all he said, but I understood his gestures. It'd tear game into pieces, he said later, next day or perhaps the following week. There was something peculiar in his voice. I think he could reconcile himself to the world if I could walk properly. I think he could even reconcile himself to there being a God.

I always work calmly outside. The sounds don't bother me, I don't look in through the window. By the time I finish work, Anyeska is already back in my bed. In the morning my father is long gone, high up in the hills. We can play to my heart's content.

I am sitting on the porch like I always do when the weather's right. I am wrapped up warm in sheepskins, the sunshine is cheerful, but it is still cold. Only the icicles know that spring is on its way. I am waiting for Anyeska, she should be here by now, but all I can hear from down below is the sound of the torrent, nothing else. The chaffinches are very lively and that's a good sign. The colours are nice, on the whole. There is something in the air. I would soonest be thinking about my mother, but what should I be thinking? I am feeling content with the world when the stranger suddenly appears. He was practically at the house by the time I noticed him. He was coming along the path, from higher up, walking in my father's frozen tracks. He was making a lot of noise, I don't know how I did not notice him sooner. He had a thin face, with a short beard, locks of hair hung from beneath his knitted cap. He was wearing sunglasses, I could not see the colour of his eyes, but I think they were grey. The skin was peeling on his nose, he was badly sunburned. He was wearing colourful clothes, strong, heavy boots, and he held a stick in his left hand. He greeted me when he got to the front of the house but he did not stop, not even for a moment, like someone who does not want to be jolted out of rhythm.

"Where do you come from, stranger?" I called after him.

"From up there," he said.

"Where are you going?" I continued. He pointed straight ahead with his stick.

"Do you know my father?" I asked, and as he shook his head I quickly added: "And Jesus, do you know him?"

"I don't know him either."

"What do you want in the village?"

"Nothing, the path leads that way, that's all."

"Take me with you!"

"Rise up then and come along!"

His voice was almost commanding, but he did not stop, and did not look back. I waited for a little while, then picked up the rifle. I stood up. I called after him to wait for me, but he did not hear me, just carried on walking steadily, as though he were walking above the ground, not on it. He did not stop on the swinging bridge either, did not even look back. I shot from the hip. The bullet hit his head. He tumbled off the bridge at once. When the echo of the shot had died away completely, and there was silence again, I staggered at the knees. I was off. ❧

Song on the Death of King Matthias

Emlékdal Mátyás király halálára

Good King Matthias, of memory blest!
Of many kingdoms once possessed,
Great was your fame through all the land;
Countless enemies did you withstand.

Your mighty power you once displayed
When to Vienna siege you laid;
Of your great host all men were afraid;
Your royal throne within it you made.

Then you desired Germany next
To the holy crown to be annexed.
Into many parts you split her lands
And gave them all into Magyar hands.

So precious to all men you became
That the Czechs in Prague desired your name
For their fair green bough had lost its fame
And its flower began to wither and wane.

Fine gifts to you did the Turks donate
Their lands no more to devastate,
Their pashas no more to macerate,
Their emperors not to castigate.

Your power extended to many lands,
To powerful cities on every hand,
To Venice that on the water stands,
And the wise Italians in her bounds.

An unknown poet composed these verses after the death of Matthias Corvinus (1490). Even at this early date it records all the qualities that were to live on in popular belief for several centuries as the particular attributes and principal merits of the great king.

Of Hungary the brilliant star
And fearless champion in war,
A beauteous refuge for the poor—
Greatness and glory had you in store.

You in our honour glory revealed,
Giver of boldness to all who yield;
You the Hungarian people's shield
But to the Poles a dread foe in the field.

Of all the powerful kings the best
In great affairs with victory blest,
Of your own people's trust possessed,
Now be with God for ever at rest.

Translated by G. F. Cushing

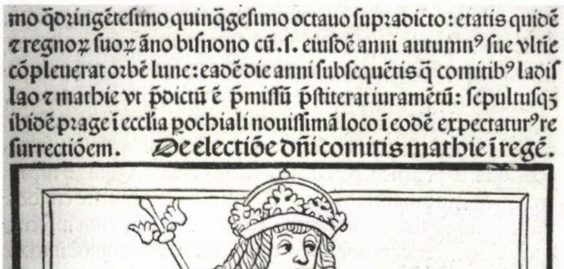

Image of King Matthias,
Johannes Thuróczy: Chronica Hungarorum,
Brünn, 1488. National Széchényi Library, Budapest.

King Matthias to King Ferdinand

To His Most Serene Sovereign Lord Ferdinand, King by the Grace of God of Sicily etc. etc. and our dear father and father-in-law, we Matthias, by the same Grace King of Hungary, Bohemia, etc. etc., send greetings and wishes for your every prosperity. Your Serenity has sent us a certain horse trainer, together with a letter in which you write that you understood that we were looking for someone with experience and skill in the rearing and management of those horses known as gynectes, and therefore dispatched this person to us out of Your Majesty's wish and desire to supply our need in this matter. To which we reply to Your Majesty that we have never expressed the least desire for such a person, nor have any wish to have him, while freely acknowledging Your Majesty's generous intentions and remaining most obliged that Your Majesty should wish to accommodate our every wish and desire. Yet, knowing Your Majesty to be most wise, and to weigh everything with great care, we can only marvel at what you must think of us, to imagine that we might need anyone who trains horses of this kind, when you must see that we would not have the slightest need of them in battle or even for purposes of amusement. If you were to consider for a moment who we are, the situation we find ourselves in, and against whom we are at war, we cannot believe you would have sent us such a man. You must surely know, as almost all the world does, that we have been handling weapons since boyhood and have waged many campaigns against many peoples and nations, both Turk and Christian, on horses of our own, trained by our own people, and always with success. If we were now to rely on foreign trainers, sent from abroad, we could not hope to prosper in our struggles against the Turks, Germans, Bohemians and Poles. It was with horses trained by ourselves that we vanquished the Getae, bent Serbia to our sway, and subdued all our neighbours; and all this we accomplished, with honour, on our own steeds. But for these gynectes, who are fit for nothing but leaping in

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Ferdinand I of Naples (1423–1494)
was the father of Beatrice of Naples, Queen Consort of Matthias Corvinus.
The letter survived only in a contemporary undated copy, so it could have been written at any time between 1476, the date of marriage, and 1490, Matthias's death.

the air in the Spanish manner, with their legs bunched together, we have never had, or have, the slightest desire. We would not wish to use them for the serious matters presently in hand or even for trivial ones. The sort of horses we need do not leap about with their shanks tucked under them, but will stand firm, when the need arises, with their legs spread wide. As for the man you sent, though he finds no favour with us, we return him well remunerated, as a mark of respect to Your Majesty, and, for love of Your Majesty, will do the same not just for this one man who earns his bread in this way but for as many you might wish to send, loading them with gifts and doing everything that we hope might be pleasing to Your Majesty. To whom we wish all happiness and prosperity etc. etc. ❧

Translated from the Latin by Len Rix

Marble relief portrait of Matthias Corvinus, c. 1485
Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum.

István Tringli

King Matthias and the Medieval Hungarian State

Matthias Corvinus's reign (1458–90) has long fascinated historians. Along with the prehistory of the Magyars (before they took possession of historical Hungary in 896) and the early Hungarian kingdom during the reign of the Árpád kings (1000–1301), this is the most extensively researched period in the country's history.[1] What follows will make no attempt to sum up the whole of Matthias's reign but will engage with a few of the more problematic aspects.

Matthias Corvinus came to the Hungarian throne 550 years ago, in 1458. The most illustrious of all the country's monarchs in the late Middle Ages, he reigned for thirty-two years, until 1490. He was not a member of a princely family: his father, John (1407–56), was the son of a Transylvanian lesser noble who, thanks to his outstanding talents as a warrior and statesman under Sigismund of Luxembourg[2], had risen to the position of Voivode of Transylvania (1441–56) and later Regent (1446–53) of Hungary. Incidentally, in Bohemia the estates had shortly before, in the same year of 1458, elected to the kingship George of Podiebrad (1420–71), another nobleman who was not of royal blood.

Matthias was elected to the throne at the age of fifteen, when he was a prisoner of George of Podiebrad in Prague, and he had to be ransomed by his mother, Erzsébet Szilágyi. By then Hungary had been in a state of almost unbroken civil war since 1440. Matthias temporarily put a halt to Ottoman expansion in Bosnia; the first ten years of his reign saw him engaged in bitter combat with the Turks, but he developed more peaceful relations with the Sultan, concluded with a treaty in the last decade of his reign.

Domestically, Matthias was able to strengthen his position against the magnates in 1464, the year in which the Hungarian crown was returned by the

1 ■ The two most up-to-date assessments of Matthias are: Jörg K. Hoensch, *Matthias Corvinus. Diplomat, Feldherr und Mäzen.* Graz, Vienna & Cologne, 1998; and András Kubinyi: *Mátyás király* [King Matthias], Budapest: Vince, 2001.

2 ■ On Sigismund, see the brief chronology supplied with Ernő Marosi's article "Sigismund's Moment in Art History," in *HQ* 182 (Summer 2006, pp. 6–20).

István Tringli
is a fellow of the Institute of History of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. He specialises in Late Medieval Hungarian history and legal and settlement history.

Holy Roman Emperor Frederick III. (It had been removed from Visegrád by a Lady in Waiting during the troubles following the death of King Albert, the first Habsburg king of Hungary.) Within a few years Matthias managed to completely overhaul the country's administrative apparatus. Since the fourteenth century Hungary's kings had reigned over large territories outside Hungary. Matthias continued with this policy of military expansion, attacking Bohemia in 1468 with the aim of deposing the Hussite George of Podiebrad. He never managed to control its core territory, but the Catholic dependencies of Moravia, Silesia and Lusatia (or Lausitz) did submit to him. In 1482, he attacked Frederick III and the Austrian hereditary lands and occupied Vienna, which is where he generally held court for most of the latter years of his reign.

Matthias was an enthusiastic supporter of the new humanism and a number of eminent Italians found places at his court. Thus, it was in Hungary under Matthias's aegis that Renaissance architecture first appeared north of the Alps, the royal palaces in Buda and Visegrád being partly reconstructed in the Renaissance style. Since Matthias died without legitimate issue, he did not found a dynasty. On his death, he was succeeded by Wladislas, eldest son of his former rival, King Casimir IV Jagiello of Poland.

Corvinus or Hunyadi?

King Matthias is referred to as "Matthias Corvinus" in all languages except Hungarian and Romanian, where he is called "Hunyadi" and "Huniade" respectively. Why? And which is the correct form?[3]

The Hunyadis were a family of Romanian origin, probably not Transylvanians but originating in Ungro-Vlachia (Wallachia). They were first mentioned in a 1409 deed showing that King Sigismund granted them the castle of Hunyad (Hunedoara) in Transylvania and all the estates belonging to it.[4] Male members of the family lived at the royal court and bore the title of court knight *(aulae miles)*, proper to the higher nobility. Although this office was the preserve of the wealthier nobility, we have no knowledge of even a single village owned by the family at any earlier date. The family members are referred to solely by their Christian names,

3 ■ Arisztid Oszvald, "Hunyadi János ifjúsága" [John Hunyadi's Youth], *Történeti Szemle* 5 (1916), pp. 354–365, pp. 490–507, and 6 (1917), pp. 36–77. Another paper of the same vintage is: Gyula Forster, "Hunyadi János származása és családja" [The Origin and Family of John Hunyadi], *Budapesti Szemle* 156 (1916), pp. 390–410, and 166 (1916). The latter reaches similar conclusions but is of note more for the help it provides in the overall interpretation of sources. Lajos Elekes, "A Hunyadi kérdés" [The Hunyadi Question], in *Mátyás király emlékkönyv* [King Matthias Memorial Volume], vol. 1. Budapest, 1940; Péter E. Kovács, "A Hunyadi-család" [The Hunyadi family], in *Hunyadi Mátyás. Emlékkönyv Mátyás király halálának 500. évfordulójára* [Matthias Corvinus: Memorial Volume for the Quincentenary of his Death]. Budapest: Zrínyi, 1990, pp. 29–52. This is also one of the subjects discussed at length by Radu Lupescu, "Hunyadi János alakja a magyar és román történetírásban" [The Figure of John Hunyadi in Hungarian and Romanian Historiography], *Századok* 139 (2005), pp. 385–420.

4 ■ Georgius Fejér, ed., *Codex diplomaticus Hungariae ecclesiasticus et civilis,* Buda 1825–1844, X, no. 8, p. 492.

which are consonant with the conventional Romanian and Hungarian given names of the period. A few years after 1409, individual members also took up the family name Hunyadi ("of/from Hunyad"), which is likewise fully consistent with the current conventions. (An adjective was created by adding an "-i" to the toponym of one of the family's early possessions.[5]) In medieval Hungary deeds were in Latin; the name included the Latin preposition *de* ("of" or "from") and therefore Matthias's father John Hunyadi appeared as Johannes de Hunyad.

John Hunyadi's Romanian origins were not forgotten. Quite apart from the "de Hunyad" name, foreign historical narratives often refer to him as "John the Romanian". Or rather, in the Latin usage of the day: Johannes Vlachus, where "vlachus" was current Latin for modern Romanian. In countries further afield this was not understood, so etymologies were invented. Thus, in the Latin narratives of the late Middle Ages "Vlach" is often interpreted as "Blancus" or "White"—a mistake that was facilitated by the fact that, owing to a consonant shift that occurred in medieval Latin, "vlachus" was pronounced "blachus". As a result, John Hunyadi became the *"chevalier blanc",* the "white knight", struggling against the heathen Turks.[6] As an adolescent John Hunyadi served in various baronial courts. It was in King Albert I of Hungary's time (1437–9) that he received his first important appointment, that of *ban* of Syrmia, overseeing the Lower Danube borderlands near Belgrade. The bans (lords) of Syrmia by then counted as barons in Hungary, but Hunyadi became a truly national figure during the civil war that broke out after the death of King Albert, when he supported the claims of Wladislas I (1440–1444). Hunyadi trounced Wladislas's opponents in a minor battle and in return was awarded the major post of Voivode of Transylvania. He commanded international attention with his three campaigns against the Ottoman empire (1443, 1444, 1448), all of them unsuccessful; despite that, his fame spread, particularly after his resounding victory at the siege of Belgrade, under attack from Sultan Mehmed II the Conqueror in 1456.[7]

The epithet "Corvinus" was bestowed on the family by the Italian humanist Petrus Ransanus. He followed the practice of humanist historians deriving the names of the living from names that feature in the works of Classical antiquity.[8] Ransanus was clearly still aware—in mid-fifteenth century—of a tradition recorded nowhere else that the Hunyadi family originally lived in a village (or perhaps an island) on the Lower Danube that in Latin was known as "Covinum".

5 ■ András Kubinyi, "Fragen der Familiennamengebung im mittelalterlichen Ungarn", in Reinhard Härtel, ed., *Personennamen und Identität. Namengebung und Namengebrauch als Anzeiger individueller Bestimmung und Gruppenbezogener Zuordnung.* Grazer Grundwissenschaftliche Forschungen no. 3 (Schriftenreihe der Akademie Friesach no. 2). Graz, 1997.

6 ■ Sándor Csernus, "Les Hunyadi vus par les historiens français du 15e siècle", in Tibor Klaniczay & J. Jankovics, eds., *Matthias Corvinus and the Humanism in Central Europe,* Budapest: Balassi, 1994.

7 ■ Pál Engel, *The Realm of St Stephen. A History of Medieval Hungary, 895–1526.* London & New York: I.B. Tauris, 2001, pp. 278–297.

8 ■ Péter Kulcsár, *Bonfini magyar történetének forrásai és keletkezése* (Humanizmus és reformáció 1) [Sources and Genesis of Bonfini's History of Hungary (Humanism and Reformation, vol. 1)]. Budapest: Akadémiai, 1973.

There indeed was a place of that name: an important fortification and town on the Hungarian–Serbian border that in Hungarian was called "Keve". (In the Middle Ages there was also a Keve County, which took its name from the town.) Ransanus and subsequently other humanists linked the word Covinum with Corvinus, a name that crops up repeatedly among the Valerii of ancient Rome. That presumption was backed by the humanists' belief that Romanians were descended from the Romans. The Hunyadis' arms included a raven, or *corvus* in Latin, which Ransanus regarded as further proof of relationship to the Valerii.[9] The humanists who were in contact with the royal court happily embraced this connection and refined it further. They began collecting reliquiae in the former Roman provinces of Dacia and Pannonia, and any inscriptions relating to the Valerii that were found on these were directly ascribed to Matthias's ancestors. (Even the eagles engraved on the antique cameos that were so highly prized in the fifteenth century were interpreted as ravens.)[10]

King Matthias never called himself Corvinus, nor do we come across the name anywhere in official documents of the age; it is solely found in the writings of the humanists.[11] Not being descended from a princely family posed a grave problem of legitimacy for him, and thus he could ill afford to reject this flattering proposition from humanists whom he patronised. (Not least, it should be said, because the same procedure was employed by ruling dynasties across Europe.) All the same, his family's true origins were too well known for him to contemplate introducing any changes in the Hungarian convention of name-giving, so he retained the name Hunyadi in his own domestic dealings.

The Corvinus name was needed by him for another reason. Matthias did not father a legitimate successor. He contracted a first marriage in 1461 with Catherine, daughter of George Podiebrad, the king of Bohemia, but the young queen died when giving birth to what would have been their first child (who was stillborn). After a prolonged search, Matthias's choice as his second consort eventually fell on Beatrice of Aragon, with whom he did not have any children[12] despite the pressing need for a male heir. In July 1463, Matthias ratified an agreement he had reached the previous year in Wiener-Neustadt, the residence of the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick III, under which, if he were to have no legitimate male issue, then the Hungarian throne would pass to Frederick or his descendants (i.e. the Habsburgs).[13] Matthias did have a

9 ■ Péter Kulcsár, "A Corvinus-legenda" [The Corvinus Legend], in Gábor Barta, ed, *Mátyás király 1458–1490* [King Matthias, 1458–90]. Budapest: Akadémiai, 1990.

10 ■ Ágnes Ritoók-Szalay, "A Corvinus-legenda és a régészeti emlékek", [The Corvinus Legend and Archaeological Monuments) in *Nympha super ripam Danubii. Tanulmányok a 15–16. századi magyarországi művelődés köréből* (Humanizmus és reformáció 28) [Bride Over the Banks of the Danube: Studies on the Culture of 15th–16th Century Hungary (Humanism and Reformation, no 28)]. Budapest: Balassi, 2002.

11 ■ Péter Kulcsár, "A Corvinus-legenda", p. 18.

12 ■ Péter E. Kovács, "A Hunyadi-család", p. 42.

13 ■ Karl Nehring, *Matthias Corvinus, Kaiser Friedrich III. und das Reich. Zum hunyadisch-habsburgischen Gegensatz im Donauraum* (Südosteuropäische Arbeiten 72). Munich: Oldenbourg, 1975.

bastard son called John, born to Barbara Edelpöck, the daughter of an Austrian burgher.[14] When it became clear that Beatrice was unable to conceive, the king was more of a mind to declare John as his successor. From 1482, the vast bulk of the lands that reverted to the crown were bestowed on John, and from the autumn of 1484 he came to be known as John Corvinus.[15] During the final years of his reign, Matthias made repeated but futile attempts approaching various foreign dynasties —primarily the Habsburgs—to gain recognition of John Corvinus's right to inherit his throne.[16] Matthias did indeed have the right to leave the family properties and royal estates to his illegitimate son, but the latter could have no claim to the Hunyadi name, given that he was born out of wedlock. It is possible that Matthias still hoped that Beatrice would provide him with an heir, in which case he would have need of the Hunyadi name. Under the circumstances, then, the decision for John to adopt the name dreamt up by the humanists—Corvinus—was an inspired one as it served both to tie him to, and distinguish him from, the Hunyadi family. The name Corvinus did not survive for long, being used for only two generations: those of John Corvinus and of his children, all of whom died young,[17] thereby bringing the Hunyadi-Corvinus line to a close.

Speculations about the origin of the Hunyadi-Corvinus family included a rumour that John Hunyadi may have been the illegitimate son of King Sigismund. The story was first recorded by Antonio Bonfini, humanist historian of King Matthias, in the part of his *Rerum Hungaricarum decades* written while the king was still alive. Well over eighty years later, Gáspár Heltai, a Transylvanian chronicler writing in Hungarian, told a highly embellished tale of King Sigismund's romance with a beautiful Transylvanian maiden, of which John Hunyadi was the very tangible outcome.[18] Fact or fiction?[19] What seems to be certain is that it was not mere chance that it was recorded in the final years of Matthias's reign, when the legitimation of John Corvinus was his paramount political concern.

14 ■ Vinzenz Oskar Ludwig & Franz Maschek, *Corvin János anyja* [John Corvinus's Mother]. Budapest: Turul, 56, 1942; idem: *Barbara Edelpöck, die Mutter des Johannes Corvinus*, Adler 1943; idem, "König Matthias Corvinus und Barbara Edelpöck," *Jahrbuch für Landeskunde von Niederösterreich* NF 32 (1955-56), pp. 74–93.

15 ■ Pál Engel, "A magyar világi nagybirtok megoszlása a 15.században" [The Distribution of Secular Large Estates in Hungary in the Fifteenth Century], in *Honor, vár, ispánság. Válogatott tanulmányok* (Magyar történeti életrajzok) [Honour, Castle, Countship: Selected Studies (Hungarian Historical Biographies)]. Budapest: Osiris, 2003, p. 46; Gyula Schönherr, *Hunyadi Corvin János 1473–1504*. Budapest, 1894.

16 ■ Hoensch, op. cit., p. 219.

17 ■ Christopher Corvinus died just half a year after his father, in 1505; Elizabeth Corvinus in 1508. A family tree is provided by Kubinyi, *Mátyás király* (see footnote 2).

18 ■ Gáspár Heltai: *Krónika a magyaroknak dolgairól* [Chronicle of the Affairs of the Magyars], edited by Margit Kulcsár, Budapest: Magyar Helikon, 1981, p. 97.

19 ■ Radu Lupescu, "Hunyadi Mátyás: az ősöktől a hatalom küszöbéig" [Matthias Corvinus—from his Ancestral Roots to the Threshold of Power], in *Hunyadi Mátyás, a király. Hagyomány és megújulás a királyi udvarban* [Matthias Corvinus, the King: Tradition and Renewal in the Royal Court], exhibition catalogue, Budapest: Budapest History Museum, 2008.

A saying already familiar back in sixteenth-century Hungary and that is still common now goes: "King Matthias is dead; that's justice done for!" Matthias's sense of justice attained an exalted place in the cult that had already arisen around his person by then.[20] This article is not going to examine how that cult emerged but will concentrate on some opinions, expressed during his lifetime, that were critical of his policies.

Such opinions as voiced by his contemporaries belong to the literature of political propaganda, introduced and widely practised in the Middle Ages and flourishing during these later decades. The public sphere widened in Matthias's lifetime. It was not just the magnates and delegates of the lesser nobility to the diet who needed to be persuaded of the correctness of royal policies but also a larger portion of society, even if they had no direct role in decision-making. Political manifestos were issued in multiple copies or even printed. The tone and subject of the propaganda depended upon whom it was addressed to; a different language was used when addressing those with a humanist education or burghers who were barely literate.[21]

A rebellion against the king broke out in Transylvania in 1467. The conspirators—representatives of the Magyars, Saxons and Szeklers, the three established Nations of Transylvania—concluded a treaty. It expressed the cause of their disaffection in exceedingly general terms: the oppression in Hungary and the abrogation of Transylvanian privileges.[22] We know from Bonfini what precisely they meant by that: the king had levied a new, previously unheard-of tax on the populace of Transylvania.[23] Matthias speedily stamped out the revolt, which was of purely local significance, but in 1471 he was obliged to face a much doughtier opponent. Some long-time supporters of his family, including János Vitéz, Archbishop of Esztergom and also chancellor, and Janus Pannonius, Bishop of Pécs, both famous humanists, organised a plot against the king. They sought to depose him and install on the throne Prince Casimir, the son of King Casimir IV of Poland. Prince Casimir set out for Hungary at the head of a large army; prior to doing so, in Cracow, he drew up a declaration of war. The document differs from the conventional wording of such texts by claiming that Matthias had acceded to the throne unlawfully, by violent

20 ■ Attila T. Szabó, "Meghalt Mátyás király..." [King Matthias Is Dead], in *A szó és az ember. Válogatott tanulmányok, cikkek* [Man and Word: Selected Essays and Articles]. Bucharest: Kriterion, 1971, vol. 2, p. 53; Ildikó Kriza: *A Mátyás-hagyomány évszázadai* [Centuries of the Matthias Tradition]. Budapest: Akadémiai, 2007.
21 ■ Klára Pajorin, "Humanista irodalmi művek Mátyás király dicsőítésére" [Humanist Literary Works Eulogising King Matthias], in *Hunyadi Mátyás. Emlékkönyv Mátyás király halálának 500. évfordulójára* [Memorial Volume for the Quincentenary of King Matthias's Death]. Budapest: Zrínyi, 1990.
22 ■ Gustav Gündisch, ed., *Urkundenbuch zur Geschichte der Deutschen in Siebenbürgen*. Bucharest, 1981, p. 293. For an explanation of the significance of the term "privilege", see István Tringli, "The Liberty of the Holy Kings. Saint Stephen and the Holy Kings in the Hungarian Legal Heritage," in Attila Zsoldos ed., *Saint Stephen and His Country. A Newborn Kingdom in Central Europe: Hungary*. Budapest: Lucidus, 2001.
23 ■ Antonius Bonfini: *Rerum Hungaricarum decades*, vols. 1–4, pt. 1. Edited by I. Fógel, B. Iványi & L. Juhász. Leipzig & Budapest, 1936–41 [1945], vol. 4, pt. 2 (Bibliotheca scriptorum medii recentisque aevorum) Margarita Kulcsár & Petrus Kulcsár (eds.). Budapest, 1976, p. 130.

means, and thus the crown was not rightfully his but belonged to the Jagiellonian dynasty; furthermore, Matthias was trampling on the country's laws, imposing unlawful taxes and not using these revenues for their intended purposes, and in the meantime the Turks were devastating the country.[24] The Archbishop of Esztergom had turned against the king, according to Bonfini, because Matthias had not listened to his advice, listing specifically the swinging taxation and the seizure of Church revenues.[25] Another view, this held by the Polish court historian, was that the conspirators turned against their ruler because he had plundered the country and committed many wrongs, while the Turks were wreaking devastation.[26]

After this attempt failed and a peace treaty was signed by Poland and Hungary in 1479 at Nagyvárad (Oradea, Romania), an account was put together about it that, since the nineteenth century, has been referred to as the *Dubnica Chronicle.* Unlike most works of Hungarian historiography, this was not produced at the royal court; indeed, its closing pages contain hard-hitting criticism of a reigning sovereign that is unparellelled in medieval history writing.[27] The chronicle complains that when Matthias was waging war with the Poles and Czechs in Silesia in 1474 the Turks irrupted into Hungary and laid waste to the city of Várad, that the people were impoverished by the heavy and frequent levies with which they were burdened, a practice the anonymous author compares to the plagues of locusts that were a feature of the 1470s.[28]

The harsh taxes and the neglect of defences against the Turks were recurrent charges against King Matthias up to the late 1470s. In the decade to follow newer grievances came to the fore when, after 1482, the bulk of the lands that reverted to the crown were given to John Corvinus. This was hardly unprecedented in Hungary as virtually every monarch, once he had acceded to the throne, strove to surround himself with his own people, which required him to grant them properties. Once the new élite was established, the king as a rule would refrain from further grants of land, and his efforts would then often switch to extending the crown lands. That is indeed what happened under King Sigismund, who early on counted as one of the most free-handed of all Hungary's monarchs, but in the latter part of his reign concentrated on enlarging the royal domains.[29] At least part of the property bestowed on John Corvinus, however, was of dubious provenance.

24 ■ Matthias Dogiel, ed., *Codex diplomaticus regni Poloniae et magni ducatus Litvaniae...*, vol. 1 Vilnae, 1758, p. 60.

25 ■ Bonfini, op. cit., vol. 4, pt. 2, p.15.

26 ■ Jan Dlugosz, *Historiae Polonicae liber XIII et ultimus,* vol. 2. Leipzig, 1712, p. 470.

27 ■ István Tringli, "A magyar történetírás alakulása Hunyadi Mátyás korában" [The Evolution of Hungarian Historiography in the Time of Matthias Corvinus], in *Hunyadi Mátyás, a király. Hagyomány és megújulás a magyar királyi udvarban* [Matthias Corvinus, the King: Tradition and Renewal in the Hungarian Royal Court], exhibition catalogue, Budapest: Budapest History Museum, 2008.

28 ■ "Chronicon Dubnicense," in Matthias Florianus [Mátyás Flórián], ed., *Historiae Hungaricae fontes domestici,* vol. 3. Pécs & Budapest, 1884.

29 ■ Pál Engel, "A magyarországi birtokszerkezet átalakulása a Zsigmond-korban" [The Transformation of the Property-holding Structure in Hungary during the Reign of Sigismund], in László Koszta, ed., *Kelet és Nyugat között. Történeti tanulmányok Kristó Gyula tiszteletére* [Between East and West: Historical Essays in Honour of Gyula Kristó]. Szeged, 1995.

In 1481, for his part in the rebellion ten years before, János Laki Thúz, the *magister tavarnicorum* (a high office in the administration) was arraigned, had his property confiscated and was exiled to Venice together with his family.[30] In 1483, the castles of a branch of the Perényis, one of the more spectacularly wealthy baronial families of Hungary, were occupied using force. While one member of the family had played a part in the 1471 conspiracy, his brother, the head of the family, had remained loyal to the king; nevertheless he also lost his properties.[31] In 1487, Miklós Bánfi, another baron, was imprisoned for a short period and a portion of his lands was confiscated. This time the king made no pretence of seeking a motive, but posterity characteristically concocted a love story around the whole affair.[32] John Corvinus was not the only beneficiary of the unlawfully seized properties. One of the many artists employed in Matthias's court was Giovanni Dalmata (also known as Giovanni di Traù for his work in what is now Trogir in Croatia), a leading sculptor of the early Renaissance era, to whom the king granted a castle and its associated demesne. After the king's death, and following partial restoration of the properties, the former owner repossessed the castle, leaving the sculptor unpaid.[33]

For all that, the king had no need to fear any new plots during the 1480s, adept as he was at playing the baronial families off against one another while taking care not to threaten any confiscations from his most faithful supporters. On Matthias's death, then, it is unlikely that Hungary's political élite considered him to be in any sense just, though admittedly they only dared say what they really thought of the heavy taxes and constant wars in the West *sotto voce*.[34] It was a few years after the king had died that one of the most important political thinkers of the age, the French chronicler Philippe de Commynes, wrote that people around Matthias lived in terror of him because of his cruelty.[35]

Three other critical views of Matthias are considered here in some detail: two of these concern conditions of election, the third springs from art history. The conditions of election were the written set of terms that the Estates delivered to a presumptive new king before he was crowned; the king would have to affirm these in a written coronation oath before he was crowned. With Matthias dead, there were several

30 ■ István Tringli, "Az 1481. évi szlavóniai közgyűlés" [The 1481 Diet in Slavonia], in Enikő Csukovits: *Tanulmányok Borsa Iván tiszteletére* [Essays in Honour of Iván Borsa]. Budapest: Hungarian National Archives (MOL), 1998, pp. 291–318.

31 ■ István Tringli, "Hunyadi Mátyás és a Perényiek" [Matthias Corvinus and the Perényis]. *Levéltári Közlemények* 63 (1992), pp. 175–192.

32 ■ The story survived in the posthumous papers of sixteenth-century author Pál Gregoriánci: "De serenissimo Mathia rege et Nicolao Banffy," in Mátyás Bél, *Apparatus ad historiam Hungariae, sive collectio miscellanea monumentorum ineditorum partim editorum sed fugentium,* vol. 2. Pozsony [Pressburg/Bratislava], 1746; Kubinyi: Mátyás király, p. 97.

33 ■ The story is told in a work by Ludovico Tubero who in other respects preserved a fairly positive memory of Matthias: "Commentariorum de rebus suo tempore," in *Scriptores rerum Hungaricarun, veteres et genuini partim primum ex tenebris eruti, partim ante hac editi,* vol. 2, Vienna, 1746.

34 ■ Bonfini, op. cit., vol. 4, chapt. 8, p. 275.

35 ■ Philippe de Commynes, *Mémoires.* Edited and translated by Joël Blanchard. New York: Pocket Books, 2004, p. 492.

claimants to the Hungarian throne. Maximilian of Habsburg, as King of the Romans, sent an address to the Hungarian Estates which contains the items of his coronation oath, while the conditions of election of Wladislas II, which were enshrined in law, have come down to us in several copies. Both texts contain the promise to restore to the country its privileges and to desist from harmful innovations.[36] Important as such promises might have been to the Estates, written coronation oaths also contained set turns of phrase, so they cannot be deemed unequivocal evidence of a break with Matthias's former policies. A Hungarian art historian in the 1960s advanced the hypothesis that one result of the earlier hostility to Matthias in the sixteenth century—well after the king's death in other words—was that there emerged a fashion for portraying Matthias in a way resembling the faun-like features of representations of Attila the Hun, a theory which has been convincingly refuted, however.[37]

What can be concluded, therefore, is that Matthias was not in any way regarded as just by his own age. It was his military and political successes which inspired posterity to attach the notion of the just king to Matthias. Indeed, as early as around 1490, an unknown poet recorded about him all the qualities that were to live on in popular belief as the particular attributes and merits of the great king.[38]

State building under Matthias

For many years Hungarian historians (including those of art and literature) have used the term "centralisation" to describe the reign of Matthias. Used as if self-explanatory, without being defined, the term has acquired a near-mystical significance. One interpretation has it that centralisation was a policy using the military and the state apparatus to reduce the power of the magnates who still posed a threat for the throne. It was a notion eventually implanted in the public consciousness by the lesser nobility, who went on to play such a dominant role in Hungarian public life up till 1945 and through which they managed to define their own role in the creation of the modern state. The argument ran that, for several centuries, the lesser nobility, for various reasons, regarded the magnates and Church prelates as political enemies. Those who argued so, however, did not consider this interpretation as valid in every age: for them, it was simply characteristic of the late Middle Ages and the early modern era.[39]

36 ■ Maximilian's address is in Friedrich Firnhaber, ed., *Beiträge zur Geschichte Ungarns unter der Regierung der Könige Wladislaus und Ludwig II. 1490–1526.* Archiv für Kunde österreichischer Geschichts-Quellen, vol. 2B (1849), pp. 399–401. For Wladislas II's conditions of election see János M. Bak: *Königtum und Stände in Ungarn im 14–16. Jahrhundert* (Quellen und Studien zur Geschichte des östlichen Europa 4). Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1973, p. 152.

37 ■ Lajos Vayer, "Vom Faunus Ficarius bis zum Matthias Corvinus (Beitrag zur Ikonologie des osteuropäischen Humanismus)," *Acta Historiae Artium* 13 (1967), pp. 191–196. This has been refuted by Edit Szentesi, "Mátyás király bécsújhelyi típusú arcképeiről" [The Wiener-Neustadt-type Portraits of King Matthias], in *Hunyadi Mátyás a király. Hagyomány és megújulás...,*" exhibition catalogue, Budapest: Budapest History Museum, 2008, p. 217.

38 ■ See "Song on the Death of King Matthias" on pp. 53–54 of this issue.

39 ■ Gyula Szekfű, *Magyar történet* [History of Hungary], vol 2, Budapest, 1936, p. 535; Elemér Mályusz, "Zsigmond király központosító törekvései Magyarországon" [King Sigismund's Attempts at Centralisation in Hungary], *Történelmi Szemle* 3 (1960), pp. 162–192.

After 1945, the Marxist interpretation was not unrelated to this version. Centralisation was seen as a typical form of government in the late Middle Ages and could be regarded as the precursor of absolutism. Centralised monarchies, with the support of the burgher classes in western Europe and the nobility in Central Europe, brought into being the bureaucracy through which they were able to run the state and keep "centrifugal forces" in check. In line with the political slogans of the day, this was generally taken to be a reference to the aristocracy.[40]

Matthias introduced many administrative reforms. He levied new taxes and custom tariffs, introduced new coinage, overhauled the royal treasury, placed the purview of crown lands under the control of a single individual, changed the responsibilities of his chancellors, employed numerous secretaries, enacted a reform of the judiciary and set up a new standing army of mercenaries.

This type of statecraft, the organisation of the state around the sovereign, was no novelty in Matthias's era: it was a process that had been going on for centuries all over Europe. The new element was the emergence, towards the end of the Middle Ages, of the idea that the state had a monopoly on force. Previously, the exercise of force was the legal right—its limits being set by customary law—not just of the nobility but also of burghers and even, albeit to a much smaller degree, peasants. Now the scope for lawful force began to be restricted, and resorting to force began to be treated as a criminal act. The state, then, centralised the use of force; thenceforth only the king—or, strictly speaking, the state as an abstract power—had the right to resort to force, and even then only under circumstances specified by law. That process did not start in Hungary, and not during Matthias's reign either, but it did evolve considerably under him. Like elsewhere in Europe, millennia-old customs of using force were slowly rolled back by the rulings of courts.[41] In 1486, near the very end of his reign, Matthias signed an important law code which regulated in great detail the laws governing the administration of justice, but its implementation continued for centuries to come.[42] All this was part of what historical research prefers to examine as the process of state building, discarding the term "centralisation".

Did Matthias's state founder under his successors?

A long-standing topos in writing about Hungarian history is that the state Matthias had created came to grief under the two rulers who succeeded him, both from the house of Jagiello, Wladislas II (1490–1516) and Louis II (1516–26).

40 ■ The principal Hungarian exponent of this thesis was Lajos Elekes, who set out the links between Matthias Corvinus and centralisation in *Mátyás és kora* [Matthias and His Age]. Budapest: Művelt Nép, 1956.
41 ■ István Tringli, "Fehde und Gewalttätigkeit. Vergleich eines germanischen und ungarischen Rechtsinstituts," in Elemér Balogh et al., *Legal Transitions. Development of Law in Formerly Socialist States and the Challenges of the European Union.* Szeged: Library of the Elemér Pólay Foundation, 2007, pp. 281–286.
42 ■ Georgius Bónis, Franciscus Döry, Geisa Érszegi and Susanna Teke eds., *Decreta regni Hungariae. Gesetze und Verordnungen Ungarns 1458–1490.* (Publicationes Archivi Nationalis Fontes 19). Budapest: Akadémiai, 1989, p. 260.

Matthias and Wladislas II were rulers of utterly different stamp. Wladislas promptly put an end to Matthias's military campaigns in the West; barring a singularly brief war against Austria that lasted no more than a couple of weeks the next generation of Hungarians fought no battles with their Christian neighbours. The other principle on which Wladislas's government rested was that of obeying the rule of law, which meant paying increasing respect to the customs of the nation and the prerogatives of the Estates.

In many respects, nevertheless, the Jagiellonian kings represented continuity with the reign of Matthias Corvinus. The codification of laws carried on until 1507. Apart from a few minor modifications, Wladislas confirmed and expanded Matthias's law code; the administrative and judicial systems that were inherited from Matthias were in no way altered, nor was there any change in the coinage until 1521. The Estates extracted from Wladislas a promise that he would never exact any extraordinary taxes, though he carried on collecting these just as regularly as Matthias had done. Wladislas made immediate changes at court. His first chancellor, Thomas Bakócz had been a royal secretary during the last decade of Matthias's reign and had been one of his closest supporters. The most important secular dignity was that of *nádor,* or Palatine. Wladislas's first Palatine was John Szapolyai, the nephew of Matthias's last Palatine, Emeric Szapolyai. Stephen Bátori, who simultaneously filled the offices of both judge royal and Voivode of Transylvania, retained his position, as did the commander of the most vital sector in the Ottoman defence line against the Ottomans, Pál Kinizsi, captain general in Lower Hungary.

In keeping with Wladislas's largely peaceable stance, there were also continuities in foreign policy. In 1483, Matthias had concluded an armistice with the Ottoman Turks, and the Jagiellonians maintained this, with minor interruptions, up till 1520. Like Matthias, they launched no attacks on Turkish-held territories, following much the same defensive strategy, centred on border fortresses, that Matthias had pursued. Jagiellonian Hungary, just as under Matthias, continued to play a part in the swiftly shifting European alliances that were a feature of the struggles waged primarily for mastery of Italy, though—as under Matthias—Hungary's part was a passive one. In 1491, Wladislas concluded the Peace of Pozsony with Maximilian, under which he confirmed the agreement that Matthias had reached with Frederick III in 1463. With his accession to the throne, Wladislas was able to achieve by peaceful means something that Matthias had never managed by force of arms: the Jagiellonian kings thereafter governed both Hungary and Bohemia in a personal union. The two countries thus co-existed within a common empire right up to the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy at the end of 1918. In short, the Age of the Jagiellonian kings showed much greater continuity with the reign of Matthias than historians have generally been willing to concede. ❧

Árpád Mikó

A Lasting Legacy

Renaissance Art in Hungary (15th–17th Centuries)

The arrival and presence of the Italian Renaissance in Hungary is, to this day, associated in the popular mind with King Matthias. Scholars, whether Hungarian or not, are also in agreement. Yet the Italian Renaissance did not come to the royal court in Buda entirely without precursors. Here we should advert to less well-known art objects rather than the early emergence of humanism in Hungary through Matthias Corvinus's tutor, Bishop János Vitéz, and his nephew, Janus Pannonius, the latter being an important poet writing in Latin, who had received much of his schooling in Italy. Vitéz was not just a passionate reader of the writers of antiquity: he also commissioned splendid manuscripts from Florence. The Livy codices now in the Bavarian Staatsbibliothek, Munich, are among the finest extant examples of the kind of decoration with white interlaces called "bianchi girari". Vitéz initiated much construction in Esztergom, his archiepiscopal seat (although not a trace of the Renaissance style is to be found in his own palace). There are, however, early traces of the Renaissance in the environs of other cultivated Hungarian prelates. It was certainly not mere chance that the first clearly carved roman lettering (otherwise known as Humanist capitals) known to us are in Veszprém, and specifically in the Gothic chapel built by Bishop Albert Vetési, in 1467. Prelates who had visited Italy there acquired objects of art and books and invited master craftsmen to Hungary, independently of Matthias and the royal court.

All the same, there can be no doubt that the decisive presence of the Renaissance in Hungary was very much tied to the royal court. Our view today is that Matthias favoured this return to antiquity and a style then utterly unfamiliar to lands north of the Alps for political reasons. A Renaissance palace backing the fictive Roman genealogy of the Corvinus family must have helped assuage Matthias's own concerns about the legitimacy of his claim to the throne. In 1476, his second wife, Beatrice of Aragon, arrived in Buda. The daughter of Ferdinand I of Aragon, King of Naples, she was in a position to help create an ambience evoking the splendour of the Neapolitan court in which she had grown up.

Árpád Mikó
is Curator of the Old Hungarian Department of the Hungarian National Gallery.

King Matthias Corvinus's renowned Royal Castle in Buda was an expanded version of the complex that he inherited from his predecessors. The previous large extension of the medieval palace was linked to the reign of Sigismund of Luxembourg (King of Hungary and Holy Roman Emperor) in the 1410s; indeed, the rebuilding under Matthias did not overstep the limits that were set by Sigismund's architects. The archaeological explorations that followed the devastation wrought on Buda Castle by the Second World War have provided clear evidence that both Gothic and Renaissance elements were added under Matthias. The use of Late-Gothic elements was accepted practice in the courts of that time in East Central Europe but the presence of an Italian-inspired Renaissance style was certainly not. The monumental coats of arms, inscriptions and enormous architectural carvings leave not the slightest room for doubt that at the time Matthias's Buda Castle must have incorporated some spectacular Renaissance—or, to use the terminology of that era: *all'antica*—parts. Written sources, too, have preserved the names of several Italian (and Dalmatian) master craftsmen, among whom the most important was probably the Florentine Chimenti Camicia, who rose to the position of chief architect and stayed longest in Buda.

The royal summer residence at Visegrád was also substantially rebuilt. Here too the Gothic predominated. Thus, a huge closed loggia (in fact a heraldic tower) which was added after the arrival of Queen Beatrice, and the covered corridor of the palace's inner courtyard, constructed in 1484, were both Gothic in style. It is not yet clear exactly how the fragments of *all'antica* sections that excavations have unearthed were joined to these.

Alongside architecture, sculpture was also accorded a pre-eminent role in royal representation. A bronze warrior stood on a plinth decorated with military trophies on both sides of the outer gate of Buda Castle. A statue of Hercules, which, according to its inscription, depicted the hero slaying monsters (conceivably a symbol for Matthias vanquishing his political foes) stood in front of the castle. A fountain splashed in the inner courtyard, at the pinnacle of which—so the humanist Bonfini informs us—stood a statue of Pallas Athene. The Royal Palace at Visegrád boasted two fountains, one of which was crowned by the red marble figure of the infant Hercules wrestling with the nine-headed Hydra, the other by depictions of the muses. As far as we can tell, the statues were all smaller than life-size and some, at least, were in the *all'antica* style. The red marble fountain figure at Visegrád was most probably carved by Giovanni Dalmata, a master from Rome, whom the king raised to nobility, endowing him with a castle. Other statues—the famous Madonna of Visegrád, for example—may have been the work of Gregorio di Lorenzo, who came to Hungary in 1475 and who has been lately identified as the Master of the Marble Madonnas.

The third, and very important, device whereby Matthias engaged in display, was his library, the famed Bibliotheca Corviniana. Initially Matthias's collection had no political purpose; however, as manuscripts flooded in from Florence and sumptuous bindings were added to some of the manuscripts already at Buda (around the latter half of the 1480s), the library grew into one of princely proportions. We can no

longer determine when the two halls that made up the library were given their lavish decoration and furnishings; what we do know is that these must have existed by the time Naldo Naldi wrote his panegyric to the library around 1488. The illuminated manuscripts there were on a par with any in the great libraries of the Italian princes, with the volumes commissioned by King Matthias considered as the finest of the extant Florentine illuminated manuscripts.

As was already suggested, Queen Beatrice played an important part in cultivating the *all'antica* style, fully aware of its significance as a vehicle of royal power. She was fitted to do so not just by her upbringing as daughter of the King of Naples, but also—of no little consequence—by the revenues she disposed of as Queen of Hungary. She brought a considerable retinue to Buda when she arrived in 1476; of its members one was Francesco Bandini da Baroncelli, who had good contacts amongst Florentine artists and humanists. It was he who commissioned Bonfini, the court chronicler, to translate into Latin an Italian tract on architecture by Filarete so that the king should also be able to study it. In 1486 Beatrice had Ippolito d'Este, her nephew and still a minor, installed as Archbishop of Esztergom and thus head of the hierarchy, thereby placing the archiepiscopal revenues at her disposal. In 1490, after Matthias's death, it was to Esztergom that she retired, with the power she desired so fervently almost within her grasp. Matthias's successor, Wladislas II Jagiello, even went through a form of marriage with her, deliberately fake as it turned out, thwarting her plans.

It is conventional to regard 1490, the year of Matthias's death and the accession of the Jagiellonian kings, as marking a watershed in the history of Renaissance art in Hungary. So it was, but first and foremost in regard to the royal court. The Italian artists and craftsmen soon departed from Buda, and the Florentine humanists no longer maintained contacts with Wladislas II. We have no data pointing to Giovanni Dalmata, Gregorio di Lorenzo or Chimenti Camicia's employment in Buda after this date (admittedly, the data concerning their earlier activity is also sparse). The fate of the royal library is telling: the frontispiece of one of the most splendidly illuminated of the Corvinus manuscripts produced in Buda, the *Cassianus Codex,* was planned in its entirety for use by Wladislas II. The inside pages, however, still feature Matthias's crests and other emblems, or inscriptions that refer to him, along with the armorial bearings of Wladislas II that were apparently added subsequently. The master of the gilded leather bindings of the Corvinus manuscripts was another who vanished after Matthias's death, despite the copying of—or at least attempts to copy—his personal stamps and compositional devices. Wladislas was only initially drawn to *all'antica,* and for just a short period; later, while his interest may not have subsided entirely, he gave very little sign of this. The strong Italian presence that was its hallmark under Matthias was never again to be seen at the royal court in Buda.

The former members of that court, however, continued to show interest in what was being produced in Italy. The dowager Queen Beatrice herself stayed in

Esztergom, at the archiepiscopal seat, for another ten years. Her retinue, though no doubt of more modest dimensions than in Buda, still included many Italians, and not just courtiers or retainers but also master craftsmen. A red marble balustrade, parts of which have come to light in Esztergom, stems from this period and it seems possible that these were counterparts of pieces originating from a local stonemason's workshop in Esztergom which ended up further down the Danube, in Vác, or perhaps Buda (bearing Wladislas's armorials). The Renaissance frescoes in Esztergom—among them the celebrated murals of *The Four Cardinal Virtues*—that we know only from a few fragments are also likely to have been painted during that period. Cardinal Thomas Bakócz, Archbishop of Esztergom and the greatest of all the Hungarian patrons of the arts in the Jagiellonian period (and also Beatrice's implacable enemy), may well have had contacts with her court given that he was, so to speak, a co-tenant with the dowager queen for three years from 1497.

Bakócz was the only patron of the arts in Hungary who could be compared to his Italian counterparts. The foundation stone for his sepulchral chapel appended to St Adalbert's Cathedral in Esztergom was laid in 1506. By 1507, the building had reached the cornice, and the whole structure was soon roofed over, making it the first *all'antica* church building with a central axis outside Italy. The interior walls throughout were of red marble, as befitted a man of lowly, serf origin who had risen to the highest Church dignity in Hungary (he even had a burning ambition to be elected to the pontificate after the death of Julius II in 1513) and wished to be buried in purple. The white marble altar was carved by Andrea Ferrucci da Fiesole and was transported to Hungary when finished. All that is left of Bakócz's remodelling of the archbishop's palace are some large fragments. Another figure of stature was George Szatmári, Bishop of Pécs, Archbishop of Esztergom after Bakócz's death in 1521. It is him that we owe a profusely embellished *Breviary* that was illuminated by Boccardino il Vecchio, the only Jagiellonian-era manuscript extant today and produced in Florence on commission from Hungary. Szatmári's monumental red marble tabernacle in Pécs Cathedral is the work of a master craftsman who is likely to have been one of the Italians employed on the Bakócz Chapel.

By that time, producing manuscripts illuminated in the new style was an entirely domestic affair—and practised to a very high standard. The hand responsible for the exquisitely fine tracery of the *Buda Psaltery* in the first decade of the sixteenth century (now in the Cathedral Library, Esztergom) or an incomplete *Antiphonal* (National Széchényi Library, Budapest) also illuminated several patents of nobility that were issued in Buda. Armorial bearings also help us to date and pinpoint the Bakócz Monogrammist, who was active somewhat later, between 1514 and 1525. Among the products of that workshop in Buda are a number of large devotional tomes, including a two-volume (incomplete) *Gradual* for St Adalbert's Cathedral (Cathedral Library, Esztergom) and a *Missal* for Máté Tolnai, Abbot of Pannonhalma (a fragment of which is held there).

It is also in a milieu patronised by Bakócz that we find the sole major stonemason of the period who is known to us by name, Ioannes Fiorentinus (or

Giovanni Fiorentino), a Florentine master craftsman, who in 1515 delivered a number of red marble tombstones from Esztergom to far off Gniezno and Włoclawek in Poland under commission from the Primate of Poland, Jan Łaski. It was also he who carved the red marble western gate and a font with armorial bearings for a church built in 1514–15 by István Désházy, Governor of Esztergom, at Menyő (Mineu, Romania). He also supplied a tombstone for Gergely Forgách in the village of Felsőelefánt in Upper Hungary (Horné Lefantovce, Slovakia), and more than likely a sepulchral monument for Bishop Lukács Szegedi in Zagreb (who died in 1510). His name is not recorded anywhere except as the signature he set on his work, as an artist aware of his standing: *"Ioannes Fiorentinus me fecit."*

The works commissioned by Archbishop Łaski show that one route whereby *all'antica* reached Poland was from Hungary in the Jagiellonian era, but Ioannes Fiorentinus's pieces were travelling along well trodden paths. King Sigismund I the Old of Poland encountered Italian products during his several visits to Hungary at the very end of the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, when he spent a total of about two and a half years at the court of his elder brother, Wladislas II, in Buda. Surviving account books tell us that in Buda he even purchased an architectural plan from Italian traders. When he acceded to the throne a number of Italian masons went to Cracow from Hungary (on the bidding of Francesco Fiorentino in 1507), and red marble was also taken from there to the Polish royal seat.

Ioannes Fiorentinus was just one of the Italian masons and architects who were active in Hungary during the Jagiellonian era. Though they may be known to us from written sources, their names mean little as we are unable to link them with any specific works. Nevertheless there are a great number of *all'antica* stone carvings of a quality that only Italians could have produced. These stone carvings have mostly come to light in the course of excavations and restoration work on historic buildings such as those at Ötvöskónyi or Koroknya in Somogy County, from where an almost entirely intact crown of an arch derives, and all are closely akin to the crowns of pilasters in the Bakócz Chapel. The Perényi family carried out extensive construction work on Siklós Castle, as a fair number of reused carved stones testify. Some—a recently discovered acanthus-leaf console, for example—show craftsmanship of an extraordinarily high standard. They are all of marl quarried in the Buda area. Generally central workshops supplied the trickiest pieces for constructions in the provinces.

Fragments of architectural stone-carvings from Buda, first quarter of the 16th century

One can also assume that Buda craftsmen were responsible for the uniform quality and style of the marl carvings used for the *sedilia,* or seat for the clergy, tabernacle and double portal found in the church at the ancient seat of the Báthory family in Nyírbátor. The inlaid and richly carved wooden choir stalls from 1511, justly well known, are clearly Italian work and thus provide eloquent testimony to the art of Italian woodworkers, present in Buda, too, in the early sixteenth century.

All these examples testify to direct Italian influence. By the Jagiellonian period, however, the Renaissance coming from the North—Italian inspired as it was—had also reached Hungary. This is suggested by the Town Hall that was under construction from 1505 in Bártfa (Bardejov, Slovakia), as well as by various tabernacles and church portals in other locations in what were Szepes and Sáros counties in the same area and also by remains found at sites in Sopron, Pannonhalma or Bajna in Transdanubia in western Hungary. A chapel that János Lázói had built in 1512 for the cathedral at Gyulafehérvár (Alba Iulia, Romania) is the earliest Renaissance construction in Transylvania. The craftsmen adapted their skills in Gothic architecture to the new forms.

There is a sudden increase in sources and data about the culture of the royal court in Buda towards the end of the Jagiellonian era. As the young Louis II (1506–26) and, above all, his ambitious consort, Queen Mary of Habsburg (1505–58), grew to adulthood, they brought a new sparkle to life within the walls from 1521 onwards. In addition to Italian artists, they also gave employment as court painter at Buda to Hans Krell, who later went on to have a splendid career in the Low Countries. The battle of Mohács, however, and the concomitant advance put an end to this apparent idyll at one fell swoop.

The Hungarian defeat at Mohács in 1526 only put cracks into a well-established framework of art and culture that went back to late medieval times, but the fall of Buda in 1541 totally destroyed it. Over the course of a decade and a half, a string of what used to be ecclesiastical and secular centres became *places d'armes* or fell into Ottoman hands for shorter or longer periods, and dwindled into insignificance. Of the eleven archbishoprics and bishoprics, those of Esztergom and

Kalocsa were soon lost, to be followed by the bishoprics of Vác and Pécs, along with the less significant Csanád (Cenade, Romania) and, later, Veszprém, Győr, Eger, Nyitra (Nitra, Slovakia) and finally Nagyvárad (Oradea, Romania). Gyulafehérvár, the seat of the Bishop of Transylvania, fell victim to Ottoman Turkish or Tartar devastation on several occasions. Only Zagreb was left untouched by the onslaught. Even Székesfehérvár, since 1000 the coronation and burial place of the kings of Hungary, was captured by the Turks, as were the Abbey of Pannonhalma, which had been founded by Prince Géza in 996 and completed by his son, King (St) Stephen, and the Pauline monastery of Budaszentlőrinc. The destruction was almost total, with little but the shells of buildings left standing, if that. Pushing into the heart of the kingdom, the Ottoman conquerors settled themselves for a century and a half. Of equal significance was the fact that after the accession of Ferdinand I (1526–64) Habsburg and the death of the rival King John I of Szapolya (1526–40), the royal court vanished from the country. The Habsburgs resided in Vienna or (under Rudolf II from 1576 to 1608) in Prague, and any influence that the princes of Transylvania and their court in Gyulafehérvár may have had was severely limited by their status as nominal vassals of the sultan.

In tandem with this more or less constant war footing, inroads were being made by the Reformation. Initially this was, naturally enough, in the form of Lutheranism, but in time more radical forms such as Calvinism and Unitarianism (Antitrinitarians) appeared. By the end of the sixteenth century, a substantial portion of the country—above all Upper Hungary and Transylvania—was Protestant. In many instances the adherents to the reformed faiths were intolerant of the artistic riches of the late medieval Catholic Church. A contentious issue was the veneration of images; ultimately, the Lutherans spared triptychs of the Late-Gothic era—thus, at St James' Church in Lőcse (Levoča, Slovakia) or St Aegidius' Church in Bártfa—but the Calvinists banished all figural representations with the exception of a few symbols.

The fate of devotional tomes testifies to the changes hostility towards the arts coupled with the conditions of warfare had brought about. In the late Middle Ages huge hymnals were produced as compendia of a centuries-old tradition. These would be richly illuminated multivolume sets of music parts. With the secularisation of cathedrals and in conjunction with the Tridentine decrees standardizing the liturgy, these giant tomes were no longer used, some ending up being taken apart for use as bindings for books or surviving as single leaves in the archives. All the same, even in the seventeenth century manuscripts were still produced for those who stuck to their liturgical distinctiveness—the Pauline fathers, for example, who as members of the only religious order founded in Hungary, preserved their own liturgical practices. Scribes still continued faithfully to copy the medieval manuscripts even in their embellishment. A comparable phenomenon is also to be seen in the Lutheran and Calvinist Churches: Protestant hymnals not only perpetuated the musical tradition, *mutatis mutandis,* but tried to imitate medieval codices in their outward appearance as well. The plant decorations on Calvinist hymnals such as the

Béllyei and *Ráday Graduals* not infrequently resemble what we can see on the borders of early manuscripts. The tradition did not disappear without trace.

Artistic representation for the Roman Catholic Church in the mid-sixteenth century was determined, quite naturally, by the medieval heritage: existing old church furnishings, vestments, etc. continued to be used, while there was little opportunity for new replacements to be made, given the condition of almost permanent warfare and the defensive tactics that the Church had been obliged to fall back on. It was the appearance of the Jesuits which brought about major changes. With the full backing of the Habsburg dynasty, by the middle of the seventeenth century they had won back the adherence of a substantial section of Hungary's aristocracy (and with them, of course, their feudal retainers and serfs) to Rome. The Jesuits took very deliberate advantage of the opportunities that art offered and propagated the cults of the Virgin Mary as Patrona Hungariae and of the Hungarian saints. The title pages of the two editions of Archbishop Péter Pázmány's *Isteni igazságra vezérlő kalauz* (Guide to Divine Truth) published at Pozsony (Pressburg or Bratislava, Slovakia) in 1613, a Catholic apologia, or of György Káldi's Hungarian translation of the Bible (Vienna, 1626) and of other devotional books, reflected this endeavour. We can date the appearance of the Baroque on Hungarian soil to the building of the Jesuit church in Nagyszombat (Trnava, Slovakia) in 1626. The elements of Baroque spread fitfully over a long period, however in many places Late-Renaissance traditions clung on. Among artefacts that have come down to us, a seventeenth-century embroidered chasuble, an infula and other vestments clearly show earlier conventions than the then-contemporary Baroque.

The Lutheran Church not only preserved the bulk of medieval paintings but allowed new ones to be made. Probably the best known of these was one produced for the chapel of Árva Castle (Oravský hrad, Slovakia), which sought to express a complex theological meaning, that of justification by faith (*speculum iustificationis),* in pictorial form. This painting, like much else at the time, had various visual prototypes on which to base itself. An equally complex iconography was employed on the painted triptych (c. in 1600) created as the memorial to Job Zmeskal and his wife, Petronella Gelethfy, at Berzevice (Brezovica, Slovakia). Besides the traditional figures (a crucified Christ with the deceased and the members of their family), the centrepiece of the enormous triptych shows the triumphal procession of the resurrected Christ. Large carved and painted funeral monuments of this kind were particularly fashionable among the Lutherans of Upper Hungary during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Painterly devices—engraving—were also used for figural ornaments on altar vessels, the best-known example being a tankard commissioned by Pastor Stefan Pilarik for the Lutheran congregation in his native town of Selmecbánya (Banská Štiavnica, Slovakia) towards the end of the seventeenth century. The whole body of the tankard is covered by engraved figural representations of the agony of Christ

and the concept of Salvation. In the centre is an iconographic curiosity that dates back to the Middle Ages: Christ in "the mystic wine-press". Its source was the profusely illustrated *Kurfürstenbibel* of 1643, containing Luther's Bible translation. Another tankard, the work of Erasmus Bergman of Besztercebánya (Banská Bystrica, Slovakia), is likewise decorated with scenes inspired by engravings: in this case the birth of Jesus, the supper at Emmaus and Jesus calming the waves.

The Calvinist Church primarily had recourse to the goldsmiths' craft. The bulk of the finest pieces of Late-Renaissance goldsmiths' work were intended for church use. One example is a baptismal ewer that was made by Bálint Miskolci at Debrecen in 1622 for the church in the small town of Szikszó. The lines of the elegant, slim ewer with blister decorations on its base evoke the forms of sixteenth-century chalices. The craftsmanship of Debrecen goldsmiths was particularly prized during this period; a number of huge tankards that were procured for ritual use by the city's Calvinist congregations in the seventeenth century are still in use. Thus, in 1631, Dávid Zólyomi, the Szekler captain-general of Prince George I Rákóczi and commander of the *hajdú* forces that supported the Protestant cause against the Catholic Habsburgs, had two almost identical tankards made by Márton Ötvös of Szeged. The bodies of both are decorated by rows of stylised columns—the members of a virtual colonnade—possibly as a reference to the Jerusalem Temple. That columnar decorative motif, which on occasion also appeared on beakers, is peculiar to goldsmithery objects produced in Debrecen and still persisted on altar vessels into the eighteenth century.

Prince George I Rákóczi himself presented such vessels as gifts to a number of congregations in Transylvania and adjoining parts of Hungary east of the River Tisza. Most famous among these is a pure gold communion cup made by a local goldsmith, István Brózer, for the Calvinist Church on Farkas Street in Kolozsvár-Cluj (see also *HQ* 184). This large cup in point of fact is an imitation of a medieval chalice except that both its foot and its stem are covered by pierced and coloured enamelwork. The base cup, on the other hand, setting aside the Calvinist ban on images, is covered by minute gold reliefs depicting the Passion of Christ. We know that the Church on Farkas Street was particularly close to the Prince's heart. He had its Gothic nave rebuilt by master craftsmen from the far north (Courland) who excelled in erecting large spans of vaulting, and he commissioned an imposing new pulpit from the leading mason of the age, Elias Nicolai of Nagyszeben (Hermannstadt, Sibiu, Romania), the gilded and painted canopy of which was made by Polish woodworkers then active in the east Hungarian town of Sárospatak.

Prince George also made gifts of liturgical vessels to places outside Transylvania, including Mád, Tolcsva and Sátoraljaújhely. The inscriptions incised on the ribbed bodies of these sizeable tankards record the Prince's name, with Biblical quotations in Latin referring to the vessel's function. The Prince's consort, Susanna Lorántffy, donated Renaissance-style embroidered altar cloths to various congregations, one of several surviving examples of which, belonging to the church at Váradolaszi, carries armorial bearings and dedication in Hungarian denoting the gift.

Lombard sculptor (?): Likenesses of King Matthias and Queen Beatrice, 1485–90
Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest, Inv. Nos. 6711 & 6712

White marble relief with a green jasper background. The best-known portraits of the reigning couple. Nothing can be determined for certain about the artist or the place where they were produced. They first came to light in 1572 in Upper Hungary, when Emperor Maximilian II requested that they be added to the imperial collections in Vienna.

View of Buda in Hartmann Schedel's *Chronicle of the World,* 1493
Budapest History Museum, Budapest, Municipal Picture Gallery,
Print Collection, Lanfranconi I. A.

The earliest representation of Buda based—at least partly—on local observation. The picture of the walled Royal Palace corresponds at several points with archeological findings.

Image of John Hunyadi in the Augsburg edition of the *Thuróczy Chronicle,* 1488
National Széchényi Library, Budapest, Inc. 1143b

As a portrait it is no more authentic than other pictures in the *Thuróczy Chronicle.* It is a sign of Hunyadi's personal importance that he is included alongside rulers, whether leaders of the Hungarian tribes or kings.

Letter patent issued by King Ladislas V granting armorial bearings to John Hunyadi, Count of Beszterce, 1453
Hungarian National Archives, Budapest, DL 24762

The king confirmed Hunyadi in his perpetual title to the county of Beszterce (Bistriţa, Romania) and also extended the family's old armorial bearings by approving, alongside the raven holding a ring in its beak, a lion holding the crown of Beszterce in its forepaws.

Vajdahunyad, the reconstructed castle viewed from the west, c. 1900
National Office of Cultural Heritage, Budapest, Photo Archives

Restoration of the Castle of Vajdahunyad (Hunedoara) in southern Transylvania was one of the major early triumphs in the efforts to protect historic monuments in Hungary. After its destruction by fire in 1853, it was reconstructed in several phases, with accurate plans being prepared as the work progressed.

Livy: *Ab urbe condita*, I. Decas, 1469–1470
Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Munich, Clm 15731 (fol. 1v)

Councillor to Regent John Hunyadi and tutor to Matthias, János Vitéz was Bishop of Várad, later Archbishop of Esztergom. He established the first Humanist library in Hungary and purchased many manuscripts from Florence.

Double seal of King Matthias, 1464 (obverse and reverse)
Hungarian National Archives, Budapest, DL 15.222

Produced after Matthias's coronation in 1463. The king is seated on a canopied Gothic throne, with busts of the canonised members of the Árpádian dynasty—Stephen I, Ladislas I and Emeric—appearing on the hem of the canopy. On the two sides of the throne structure (and on the reverse of the seal) the armorial bearings of claimed provinces feature on small shields.

Golden seal of King Matthias, 1464–1465 (obverse and reverse)
Sopron Archives of Győr-Sopron County, Sopron, DL 1938

The obverse of the golden seal features the figure of the king; the reverse, the slashed arms of the Kingdom of Hungary; the legend is written in Humanist capitals.

Throne hanging of King Matthias,
Florence, 1470–90
Hungarian National Museum, Budapest,
Textile Collection, Inv. No. 1960.190

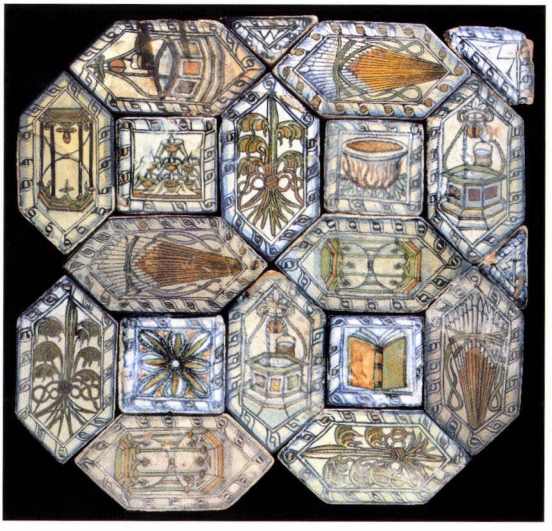
It is not possible to determine the date of manufacture more closely. Later in the possession of Thomas Bakócz, Archbishop of Esztergom, who had the king's arms covered with his own.

Philostratus III: *Heroica, Imagines;* Philostratus II: *De vitis sophistarum, Epistolae,*
1487–1490 *(fol. Iv–1r)*
National Széchényi Library, Budapest, Cod. Lat. 417

A manuscript of outstanding importance in the Bibliotheca Corviniana. On the orders of Matthias, the Greek works of Philostratus were translated into Latin by the Italian humanist historiographer Antonio Bonfini and were illuminated in Florence by Boccardino il Vecchio before 1490. The gilt leather binding was made after the death of Matthias for his successor, Wladislas II.

Dish with the armorial bearings of King Matthias and Queen Beatrice, Pesaro (?), after 1476
Metropolitan Museum, New York

Majolica dishes counted as luxury articles in Italy and were also highly prized in Buda. Three large and one small dishes bearing the arms of Matthias and Beatrice have remained intact, with a substantial number of fragments of similar dishes being unearthed during excavations on Buda Castle.



Reconstructed fragment of a majolica pavement with the arms of Matthias Corvinus and the House of Aragon from the Royal Palace of Buda, 1480–1490
Budapest History Museum, Budapest

Majolica work was also employed in construction, with several floor tiles being located as decorated with the arms of Matthias and Beatrice.

Petrus Ransanus: *Epithoma rerum Hungararum*, c. 1490
National Széchényi Library, Budapest, Cod. Lat. 249.
(fol 17r: miniature, Ransanus before the royal couple)

Pietro Ransano, Bishop of Lucera (in Apulia), came to Buda as the envoy of Ferdinand I of Aragon, King of Naples, Beatrice's father. This illuminated text of history of Hungary written in the Humanist spirit was only completed after Matthias's death and was brought to Hungary from Rome by Thomas Bakócz.

Saint Jerome's commentary to the Epistles of Saint Paul, 1488–1490
National Széchényi Library, Budapest, Cod. Lat. 347 (title page)

The miniatures of a substantial proportion of the manuscripts in the Bibliotheca Corviniana were lavishly decorated. The *Hieronymus Codex* was illuminated by the brothers Gherardo and Monte di Giovanni, two of the very best Florentine miniaturists of the period.

Xenophon: *De republica Lacedaemoniorum*,
1485–1490
National Széchényi Library, Budapest,
Cod. Lat. 422 (back cover)

Many of the Corvinas were given splendid, lavishly gilded Renaissance leather bindings at a later date in Buda.

Gregorio di Lorenzo (?): *Madonna with Child,* from the Royal Palace in Visegrád, 1480–1490
King Matthias Museum, Visegrád, deposited by the Christian Museum, Esztergom, 81.11.55

The "Visegrád Madonna" is one of the finest of the marble reliefs from the age of Matthias. The name of its maker was not established for some time and so he was referred to as the "Master of the Marble Madonnas". On the basis of archival documents that came to light not long ago, the artist is thought to have been Gregorio di Lorenzo.

Giovanni Dalmata: *"Diósgyőr Madonna"*. Two fragments of an altarpiece, 1485–1490
Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest, 55.981
(the upper part deposited by the Herman Ottó Museum, Miskolc, 59.38)

A still more renowned master stonemason who worked at the court in Buda was Giovanni Dalmata (also known as Ivan Duknović or Giovanni di Traù, from Trogir, Croatia), to whom the king may have wished to entrust the planning of his sepulchral monument.

Breviary of Domonkos Kálmáncsehi,
Provost of Székesfehérvár, c. 1481
National Széchényi Library, Budapest,
Cod. Lat. 446 (fol. 7r)

During the 1480s works by Lombard miniaturists were often commissioned by Hungarian prelates. The name of one of them is known: Francesco Castello Ithallico de Mediolano signed his name in this breviary that belonged to Domonkos Kálmáncsehi. Perhaps he was not sufficiently well known to work for the royal court.

Psalter of Orbán Nagylucsei, Bishop of Eger,
around 1490
National Széchényi Library, Budapest,
Cod. Lat. 369 (fol 1r)

A Lombard miniaturist known as "Master Cassianus" illuminated the psalter of Orbán Nagylucsei around 1490, which was given a gilded leather binding.

Fragment of a terracotta relief.
Florentine workshop, c. 1485–1500
Tragor Ignác Museum, Vác

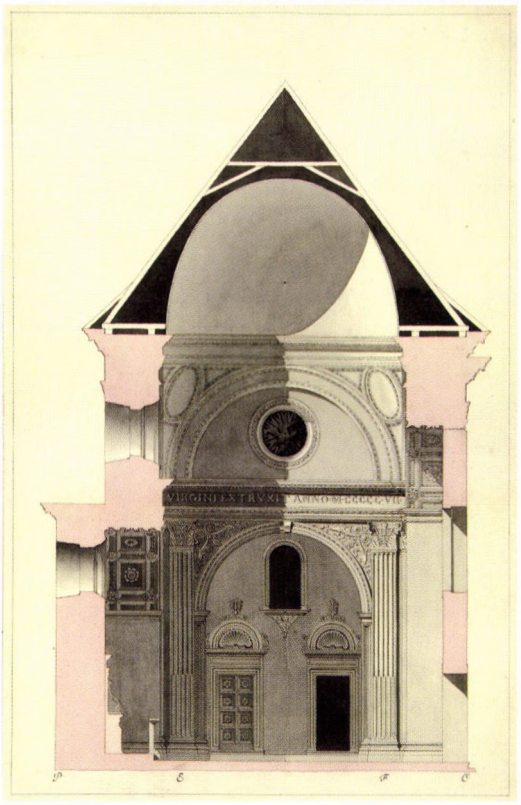
A fine example of the patronage of Miklós Báthory, Bishop of Vác, discovered and identified recently.

Fragment of a relief with heads of cherubs from Nagyvázsony, c. 1490
Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest
(deposited by the
Lackó Dezső Museum, Veszprém)

Italian stonemasons also worked outside the royal court. This fragment of a finely carved relief of the Madonna came to light in Nagyvázsony, the centre of the estate of Pál Kinizsi, a commander in the Turkish wars. There were Italian stonemasons working in Esztergom, at the courts of Queen Beatrice and Ippolito d'Este, Archbishop of Esztergom.

András Báthory's Madonna,
first quarter of the sixteenth century
Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest,
Inv. No. 55.982

A splendid example of Renaissance sculpture in Hungary. The stone is marl, quarried in the Buda area, which means that this master was working in the centre of the country, with Italian models to hand to copy from.



Johann Baptist Packh (1796-1839):
Cross-section of the Bakócz Chapel of Esztergom Cathedral before being moved, 1823
Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest, Department of Prints and Drawings,
Inv. No. 3207/1937

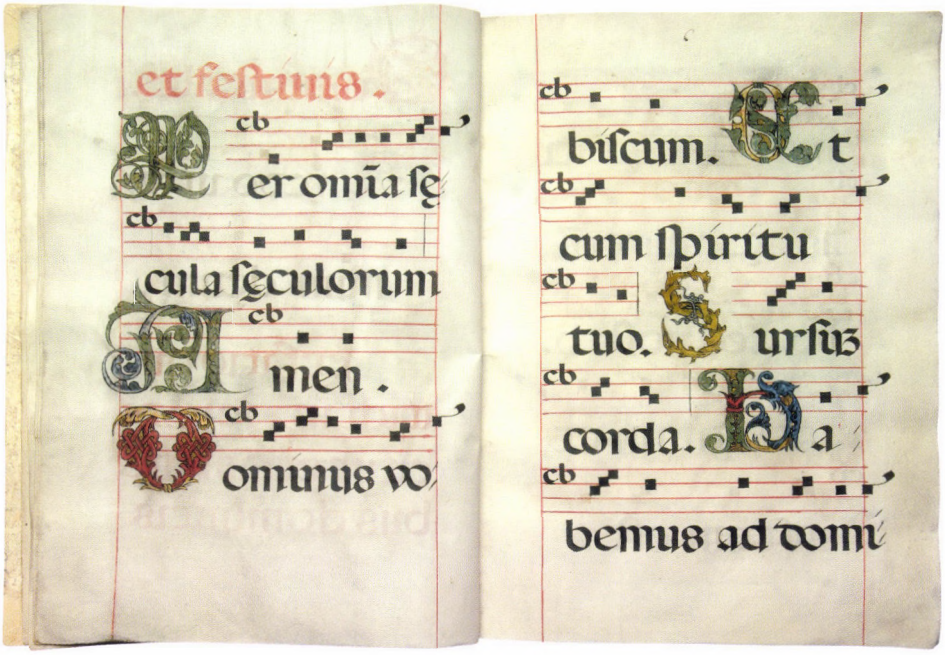
The Bakócz Chapel of Esztergom Cathedral was the first chapel with a central axis to be built north of the Alps. In 1823 this was dismantled to be reconstructed as a side chapel of the new Neo-Classical basilica, the opportunity also being taken to record the plans of the original building.

Kassa Gradual, 1518 (initial A)
National Széchényi Library, Budapest,
Cod. Lat. 452

Miniature paintings in the two-volume *Gradual* blended elements of the northern Renaissance style with embellishments from Italian sources. The decoration is the work of several hands and so must have been produced in one of the larger workshops for book illumination.

Kriza Codex, 1532
Library of the Hungarian Academy of
Sciences, Budapest, K 47

This prayer book for Dominican nuns, produced only a few years later than the *Kassa Gradual,* is a major linguistic record for written Hungarian; its pages are decorated with delicate plant ornaments.



Antonius Verantius (Antun Vrančić, Antal Verancsics): *Praefacionale,* 1563
Diocesan Library, Eger, N. III.1

Antonius Verantius (1504–73), Archbishop of Esztergom (from 1569), was one of the most important patrons of the arts in mid-sixteenth century Hungary. For many years prior to that he had been a diplomat in the service of kings of Hungary, whether of Transylvanian roots (John I Szapolya) or Habsburgs (Ferdinand I). The *Praefacionale* was ordered for representational purposes; in 1563 he had not yet been consecrated as bishop.

Martino Rota (c. 1520–1583):
Portrait of Antonius Verantius, 1571
Hungarian National Museum,
Budapest, Historical Picture Gallery,
Inv. No. 4552

We know of three profiles of Verantius, two of which were by Martino Rota, who was also born in Verantius's native town of Sebenico (Šibenik, Croatia) and was invited by the latter to the royal court.

Reliquary Cross
of Márton Hetési Pethe,
Archbishop of Kalocsa, 1603
Diocesan Museum,
Győr, Inv. No. 75.87

Artistic ostentation by the Roman Catholic Church was at its heyday during the latter half of the sixteenth century. The Archbishop of Kalocsa's monumental altar cross and the mitre of Pál Bornemisza are among the most important objects of the period. What is unusual about the mitre is that in 1550 the bishop restored an Angevin-era mitre; the clusters of gemstones nestling among the beadwork are of fourteenth-century origin.

Mitre of Pál Bornemisza (Abstemius)
(incorporating Angevin-era parts)
Diocesan Museum, Győr, Inv. No. 77.50

Communion Cup from the Calvinist Church on Farkas Street, Kolozsvár (Cluj, Romania)
István Brózer, Kolozsvár
Hungarian National Museum, Budapest, Inv. No. 1926.90.

The Calvinist Church on Farkas Street, Kolozsvár was given much support by Prince George I Rákóczi of Transylvania. He arranged for the rebuilding of the Gothic nave and for an imposing new pulpit. He also donated items of church plate. A local Kolozsvár goldsmith, István Brózer, made the enamelled gold cup, with tiny depictions showing the Passion of Christ. It is unique among altar vessels used by the Calvinist Church given their strict avoidance of all figural representations, whereas such images of Christ and of Salvation are quite common subjects on liturgical vessels of the Lutheran Church.

Tankard
Erasmus Bergmann, Besztercebánya (Banská Bystrica), 1643–47
National Museum of the Lutheran Church, Budapest (deposited by the Congregation of the Lutheran Church at Deák Square in the Fifth District of Pest)

Dávid Zólyomi's tankard
Márton Szegedi Ötvös, Debrecen, 1631
Calvinist Great Church, Debrecen

Debrecen-made tankards, with their trademark columnar decorative motif, were among the masterpieces of seventeenth-century goldsmiths' work. The town being on the margins of Turkish-occupied Hungary, its goldsmithery was extremely important, catering as it did for the needs of a much wider region. The history of goldsmithing in seventeenth-century Kecskemét was even more fascinating in that the town came under Ottoman rule and yet this was when the art flourished there.

The Anabaptists, or Hutterers, had fled persecution in the West to the Kingdom of Hungary and continued onward into Transylvania. In the seventeenth century their handicraft work, above all in pottery, known in Hungary as *Habán* work, met the demands of the nobility and wealthy burghers for luxury articles. Their tableware, the bulk of it basically white with at most discreetly coloured floral motifs, counted as highly desirable merchandise. Less well known, but also among their products, were illuminated manuscripts, whether liturgical codices or, in some cases, historical works with splendid plates bordered by coloured decorative motifs in much the same style as on their pottery.

The pre-eminent task for architects in early modern Hungary was undoubtedly that of fortification. Only up-to-date defences were capable of withstanding the Ottoman onslaught. These were designed by military engineers—most of them Italian, employed by the Habsburgs' War Council in Vienna—along the most advanced principles, as set out in profusely illustrated printed tracts on military engineering. Enormous castles and fortresses shaped as regular octagons and hexagons were being built from the middle third of the sixteenth century onwards, the first of them (from 1537) at Győr, a strategic point on the route to Vienna. The castle at Komárom (Komarno, Slovakia) was built on the other bank of the Danube and, further north still, that of Érsekújvár (Nové Zámky, Slovakia), another of hexagonal shape. The princes of Transylvania replaced the medieval bishop's castle of Nagyvárad with a huge pentagonal fortress, work on which started under Prince John Sigismund (1558–71) and was only completed during the reign of Prince Gabriel Bethlen (1613–29). Apart from on the gatehouses, there were generally no decorative features on any of these fortifications, and to this day they are hardly attractive sights with their low walls, seemingly endless plain brick surfaces, carved stone cornices and plinths. Aesthetic pleasure is afforded at most by the carefully regular construction of their ground plans.

There was, of course, more to the architecture of the age than these bare and dour fortresses. Other castles also arose behind the frontier forts, which, although fortified (as their regular ground plans indicate), and with Doric-order gateways, both indicating their function, nevertheless had richly ornamented façades with parapets rising on the cornices and walls covered with sgraffito decoration. The finest example is the Berthóty family's castle at Frics (Fričovce, Slovakia), its main façade enclosed on either side by a forward-projecting corner turret. A blind arcade runs around the cornice with a crenellated moulding above it, both with elegant sgraffito finishes. Figures representing kings, leaders, the Muses and so on, stand in each arch of the arcade, with floral and vegetal ornaments on the mouldings. The names of both the architect and the painter have come down to us: inscriptions state that Michael Sorger built it and Martin Vaxmann painted it in 1630. Battlements were present not only on castles but also on bell towers and town houses. Thus, the appearance of the houses round the main squares in Eperjes (Prešov, Slovakia) and Lőcse (Levoča, Slovakia) is to this day dominated by tightly packed battlemented houses. Up till a century ago,

Hungarian scholars believed that this was a distinct Hungarian feature, but we now know that this was the general pattern all over Central and Eastern Europe, having most probably reached Hungary via Poland and Moravia from its ultimate beginnings in northern Italy.

The use of the parapet most certainly reached Transylvania via Upper Hungary. It appeared first on the palaces of that great builder, Prince Gabriel Bethlen at Gyulafehérvár and Nagyvárad before being taken up by courtiers and others in his immediate circle. János Szalárdi, a contemporary historian, was one who saw clearly how imposing edifices contributed to representation and authority. In outward appearance alone they were a marked departure from what had been conventional in Transylvania and did not catch on: no good way was found to overcome the poor drainage off low-pitched roofs behind tall parapets. Eventually, George I Rákóczi, Bethlen's practical-minded successor, had the battlements demolished.

The most important sculpture of Late Renaissance art in the Kingdom of Hungary and Transylvania was funerary. This was a fairly sensitive register of the non-uniform development of the arts in the different parts of a once-united country now undergoing troubled times, subject to a complex set of foreign contacts and exposed to a wide variety of influences. Gravestones engraved with armorial bearings and inscriptions, which had become the fashion by the late Middle Ages, persisted everywhere. However, only some of the tombstones displaying the figure of the deceased replicated the medieval type, since imposing sepulchral monuments for important figures were, in most cases, imported from abroad. One of the finest is a red marble funeral monument produced in the mid-sixteenth century in the workshop of Hieronymus Canavesi in Cracow for György Serédy in Bártfa. The more elaborate monuments for prelates in centres of what was left of royal Hungary—Pozsony and Nagyszombat—during the second half of the sixteenth century were also imported. The most illustrious and wealthiest aristocrats, those who cultivated especially close relations with the Habsburg court and were able to adapt to the changed political order, erected wall memorials in an architectural frame, the fashion being set by the monument for Miklós Pálffy commissioned by his widow, Maria Fugger, from the Augsburg workshop of Paul Mayr and Caspar Menneler in 1601.

For their contacts, the princes of Transylvania were otherwise oriented. Stephen Báthory, who was King of Poland as well as Prince of Transylvania, had a sepulchral memorial brought from unimaginably remote Gdańsk for his younger brother, Kristóf (†1581). In doing so, he seems to have started a fashion: Gabriel Bethlen ordered a huge marble monument from Cracow first for his first wife, Susanna Károlyi, and then later for Prince George I Rákóczi and his son, Sigismund Rákóczi, who died young. We know that these were produced by the workshop of two Italian master masons, Sebastiano Sala and Bartolommeo Ronchi. Thus we come to a complete reversal of the situation at the start of the sixteenth century when the most imposing and stylish funerary monuments were those supplied by Italian craftsmen working in Esztergom to Polish customers. ❧

Terézia Kerny

The Renaissance—Four Times Over

Exhibitions Commemorating Matthias's Accession to the Throne

The three Hunyadis, John Hunyadi and his sons László and Matthias, rose from the anonymous lesser nobility to become the most significant political figures of Hungary in the second half of the 15th century. The past two years have abounded in anniversaries connected to their lives. June 6, 2006 was 560 years to the day that the Diet meeting in Pest elected John Hunyadi, Voivode of Transylvania, to act as regent for the boy king Ladislas V (1440–1457).

On July 22, 1456, John Hunyadi won a decisive victory at Belgrade over the armies of Sultan Mehmed II. Hunyadi's feat—carried out with a small standing army combined with peasants rallied to fight the infidel by the Franciscan friar St John of Capistrano—had the effect of putting an end to Ottoman attempts on Hungary and Western Europe for the next seventy years, and is considered to have been one of the most momentous victories in Hungarian military history. The bells ringing at noon throughout Christendom are, to this day, a daily commemoration of John Hunyadi's victory. The year 2006 saw historians observe the 550th anniversary of that event as well with an international conference and an exhibition.

The round anniversary of the tragic execution of Hunyadi's elder son, László, was commemorated more modestly: a memorial plaque was placed on the wall of the erstwhile royal castle in Buda (today, Building A of the Hungarian National Gallery) near the spot in Szent György Square where he was executed on March 16, 1457.

We might regard the above commemorations as preliminaries to the events of the year 2008 which the Hungarian Ministry of Culture and Education has dubbed "Renaissance Year", in honour of the 550th anniversary of the election of John Hunyadi's younger son, Matthias Corvinus, to the throne.

Except for one small exhibition (in the Castle Museum, in 1958), there have been no celebrations of this event in the past 550 years. The lack has been made up for by the spectacular commemoration now being mounted. Though there have been a few literary and art works devoted to the event, these works have, until now, been considered to be marginal. No one has ever dealt with either the history of their reception, or their historiography. There were, of course, weighty reasons for this neglect. Hungarian constitutional theory

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Terézia Kerny

is a researcher for the Institute of Art History of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, in charge of the Archaeological Archives. Her main fields are Medieval and Baroque iconography, art historiography and the topography of art monuments.

holds that Matthias's kingship derived its legitimacy not from his election, *in absentia,* by the assembled nobility, but from his being crowned, six years later, with the Crown of St Stephen (March 29, 1464). Another reason for the past non-observance is that practically every centenary of the event had been overshadowed by some ominous turn of events in Hungarian politics.

The year 2008, thus, is the first occasion that much has been made of the anniversary, also as a matter of government policy. The Ministry of Culture and Education has set up a special bureau to coordinate a splendid series of programmes (concerts, exhibitions, conferences, etc.) introducing the music, art and culture of "the age of Matthias", in the broadest sense of the term. Besides the cultural events, several "Renaissance-related" reconstruction and renovation projects have also been undertaken. One such is the completion of work on the *studiolo* of János Vitéz, Archbishop of Esztergom (1465–1472). Located near the Gothic chapel on the first floor of the late-12th-century tower of the Royal Palace in Esztergom, it was decorated, in Vitéz's time, with frescoes of the Four Virtues and has been under renovation since the year 2000. Another—joint Romanian–Hungarian—project is to restore János Fadrusz's monumental equestrian statue of Matthias (and four subordinate figures) erected in Kolozsvár (Cluj) in 1902. Funds have been made available also for the preservation of Renaissance collections in Church museums and libraries, and the financing of special exhibitions related to the age of King Matthias.

The first major Renaissance Year 2008 event opened at the Budapest Museum of Fine Arts on January 22, the day traditionally earmarked to celebrate Hungarian culture, and the eve of the day when, 550 years earlier, the fifteen-year-old Matthias Corvinus—held captive in Prague, at the time, by the King of Bohemia, George of Podiebrad (1457–1471)—was elected king by the Hungarian lesser nobility assembled, according to popular legend, on the frozen Danube below Buda castle.

The exhibition *The Splendour of the Medici: Art and Life in Renaissance Florence* was curated by Contemporanea Progetti of Florence, who are specialists in the organization of travelling art exhibitions. The over 200 works put on display testified to the rising power and prestige of the Medici, not least as patrons and collectors of art. The Florentine *Quattrocento* and *Cinquecento* came to life through the works of Renaissance and Mannerist masters such as Fra Angelico, Andrea del Castagno, Benvenuto Cellini, Domenico Ghirlandaio, Filippino Lippi, Sandro Botticelli, Andrea Mantegna, Jacopo Pontormo, Agnolo Bronzino, Andrea della Robbia, Giorgio Vasari, Leonardo da Vinci, Raffaello Santi, and artists associated with Andrea Verrocchio's workshops.

The spring months have seen the opening, in succession, of a series of exhibitions sharing the umbrella title *The Renaissance —Four Times Over* at four different venues: the National Széchényi Library, the Budapest History Museum, the Museum of Applied Arts and the Hungarian National Gallery.

Star in the Raven's Shadow: János Vitéz and the Beginnings of Humanism in Hungary, the exhibition at the National Széchényi Library commemorating the 600th birthday of this Archbishop of Esztergom, was the opening event of the Budapest Spring Festival. The History Museum exhibition came next, with the title *Matthias Corvinus, the King: Tradition and Renewal in the Hungarian Royal Court 1458–1490.* These were followed by *The Dowry of Beatrice and The Legacy of King Matthias: Late Renaissance Art in Hungary.* The latter, at the Hungarian National Gallery, opened on the eve of the anniversary of Matthias's coronation in 1464, and can be considered the sequel to the Gallery's splendid 1982 exhibition in the castle of Schallaburg, in

Lower Austria *(Matthias Corvinus und die Renaissance in Ungarn)* which showed King Matthias as a Renaissance man and his court as a centre of Renaissance art.

The Renaissance Year 2008 website lists 66 further museums and conference centres which are hosting events connected with Matthias Corvinus and the Hungarian Renaissance. The Museum of Military History, for example, opened its *A Renaissance Monarch: King Matthias as Statesman, Commander and Patron of the Arts* on January 24. Focusing primarily on weaponry, the exhibition's most spectacular piece is the perfect replica of King Matthias's funerary shield *(pavise)*; the original is in the Arsenal in Paris.

The rare 15th- and 16th-century Greek books and manuscripts on display in the great hall of the Eötvös Loránd University Library in Budapest *(Greeks and Greek Culture in the Carpathian Basin)* present another aspect of the Corvinian Renaissance. Likewise tied to the theme of the year is the special exhibition at the Vác Cathedral Treasury, *Churches and Church Treasures in the Diocese of Vác from the Age of the Árpáds through the Renaissance to This Day.* The Museum of Ethnography, in its turn, is presenting a collection of 18th- and 19th-century objects and artifacts decorated with dragons, unicorns, floral baskets and other Renaissance motifs. Due to open in November, the exhibition entitled *Fantastic Fauna, Fabulous Flora: the Renaissance Popularised* will be open to visitors for the better part of a year.

Star in the Raven's Shadow: János Vitéz and the Beginnings of Humanism in Hungary.
National Széchényi Library,
March 14 to June 15, 2008.

János Vitéz (1408–1472), born Johannes de Zredna in Slavonia, was among the most erudite and cultured of Hungary's churchmen, a man who—we learn from a contemporary book dedication—his fellows were wont to refer to as "Lux Pannoniae". Diplomat, statesman, bibliophile collector and patron of the arts, Vitéz was a bridge between the age of Sigismund of Luxembourg and the age of Matthias Corvinus and managed, on the whole, to retain his prestige and his influence on both Church affairs and affairs of state throughout his career. He was councillor and confidante to Regent John Hunyadi, conducting his correspondence with insight and consummate diplomacy; was tutor to the young Ladislas V; and was the most influential of King Matthias's councillors in the early years of his reign.

A member of the circle of Pier Paolo Vergerio (who arrived in Buda in 1417 at the behest of Sigismund of Luxembourg and lived there until his death in 1444), Vitéz belonged to the first great generation of Italian Humanists. Though he had never attended any of the Italian universities, he thoroughly identified with the cultural ideals of classical Humanism, and managed to transform Várad (Oradea, Romania) and Esztergom, the most important stations of his ecclesiastical career, into centres of Humanist learning.

Despite the limited space at the National Széchényi Library (three rooms), the curators (Ferenc Földesi and Edit Madas) have managed to provide a rounded picture of Vitéz as churchman, man of letters and patron of the arts.

The first room gives us the setting: Hungary's intellectual heritage and cultural milieu at the time of the Renaissance as represented by medieval books. The cross-section on display shows what types of manuscript books were available in the early 15th century, and serves as a foil—the curators tell us—to János Vitéz's own splendid Humanist library (on display in the second room). In the first room, then, we see school books, daily-used devotional and historical works.

Among the manuscripts on display, we find the early-14th-century *Pontificale* used by Bishop Meskó of Veszprém, and the *Missal* (adorned with figural initials) used by

György Pálóczi, Archbishop of Esztergom (1423–1439). By way of allusion to the years Vitéz spent as Bishop of Várad, the curators have put on display three parchment pages of the enormous *Antiphonal* that Bishop János Filipecz of Várad, a Moravian, had commissioned, sometime—scholars today think—between 1485 and 1490. A collection of the Gregorian chants sung in the cathedral of Várad at the end of the 15th century, its extant pages were bound in 1872 at the order of János Zalka, Bishop of Győr, and since then bear his name.

Of the scriptorums operating in Renaissance Hungary, the one in Buda is perhaps the best known. One of the most beautiful of its products is on display in the first room: the richly-illuminated *Breviary* of Domonkos Kálmáncsehi, Provost of Székesfehérvár (1464–1495). There are also two manuscript school primers, commissioned by the archdiocese of Esztergom.

Among the secular manuscripts shown, the 14th-century compendium of world history by the Franciscan Johannes de Utino deserves special mention. Between 1459 and 1460, it was augmented by the lives and times of Pope Pius II and the Emperor Frederick III, and then was enlarged again to include the chronicle of Hungary from Prince Géza to the coronation of King Matthias Corvinus. This compilation enjoyed great popularity throughout Europe, and countless variants have come down to us. Its rapidly-gained success doubtless owed much to the terseness of the text, and to the portrait-like busts next to the accounts of each of the principal characters.

Another noteworthy historical work is the *Dubnica Chronicle (Chronicon Dubnicense)* originating from Várad. This is the chronicle which also tells of András Lackfi's battle against the Tartars in 1345 when Saint Ladislas, a patron saint of Hungary and of Várad, rose from his grave and led the Szeklers to victory. Another unusual thing about the *Dubnica Chronicle* is that it was meant to have been illuminated. Unfortunately, none of the projected illustrations were ever painted, but the precisely traced empty spaces allow us to infer where pictures were planned, and what points they were meant to make.

Of the extant items in Hungarian, the curators have included the *Jókai Codex* (c. 1440), which contains legends of St Francis, the *Vienna Codex* and the *Festetics Codex* (compiled for Benigna Magyar, c. 1494). The illuminations in these —like the exhibited St Ladislas statue from Transdanubia—are references to the most important patron saint of the Diocese of Várad. They also tell us much about the cult of saints of the times, and the heated theological debates of the 15th century, which focused, among other subjects, on the Immaculate Conception.

The exhibits in the next room are from János Vitéz's library, the first Humanist collection in Hungary, and the one on which King Matthias Corvinus modelled his Bibliotheca Corviniana. Vitéz started to collect books systematically when he was Bishop of Várad; there was a room, presumably in the Bishop's Palace, specifically built to be the library, which Vitéz's nephew, Janus Pannonius, speaks of in his poem, *"Farewell to Várad"*.

Vitéz's library is estimated to have consisted of about 500 volumes. Thirty-six of these are extant today, and we know of 28 lost works. Vitéz purchased most of his manuscripts from Italy, but his library included some produced in Hungary. The subject matter extended to every field of scholarship of his day, including a conspicuous number of secular texts. The tomes were bound in embossed Florentine leather, most of them displaying a rare symbol, the eight-pointed star. Vitéz, himself a scholar, would regularly add corrections and handwritten glosses in his books. His impressive collection enjoyed an international reputation, and churchmen of the

like of Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini (the future Pope Pius II) and the Polish Cardinal, Zbigniev Olesnicki, borrowed volumes and had them copied. Of the codices on display, the sumptuous three-volume Livy deserves special mention: it is the first time the volumes have been returned to Hungary since Johann Beckensloer, Vitéz's successor as Archbishop of Esztergom, appropriated them and took them with him to his new see, Salzburg.

Vitéz's political acumen and the significance of his role as patron of the arts and of Humanist learning was already clear to his contemporaries. He was also appreciated as a man of letters, and attempts were made to preserve his works and extensive correspondence for posterity. The *Epistolarium,* a collection of the letters Vitéz wrote between 1445 and 1451 compiled by Pál Ivanich—Vitéz's court priest at Várad and fellow Humanist and friend—is a perfect mirror of his literary style and erudition.

The third room presents an overview of Vitéz's attempts to create an institutional framework for Humanism in Hungary. As patron of the arts, he sponsored building projects, gave commissions to well-known Hungarian and Italian artists, and helped to found a university and a press.

Very little physical evidence of all this activity has survived for us to see. What was once the bishopric of Várad, for instance, has been totally destroyed. What archaeologists have been able to retrieve after decades of painstaking excavation is the outlines of the construction work that he commissioned on the palace in Esztergom immediately upon his appointment as archbishop (1458). This massive building project involved the reconstruction of St Adalbert's Cathedral, and major renovations to the Archbishop's Palace. In the south wing, for instance, a red-marble loggia was erected, decorated with murals showing the Magyar chieftains and the kings of Hungary. The murals have been destroyed, but judging by contemporary accounts, the portrait series seems to have been an instance of *uomini famosi*, a popular Italian iconographic type.

The last items in the third room are documents relating to the two other known building projects that Vitéz was involved in: the short-lived Universitas Istropolitana in Pozsony (Bratislava) and the press established by András Hess, who came to Hungary at Vitéz's behest.

Matthias Corvinus, the King: Tradition and Renewal in the Hungarian Royal Court 1458–1490.
Budapest History Museum,
March 19 to June 30, 2008.

This spectacular exhibition—chronologically a sequel, and in size and scope a worthy successor to the 2006 Sigismund of Luxembourg exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts *(Sigismundus rex et imperator: Art and Culture in the Age of Sigismund of Luxembourg)*—is a chronological presentation of life at King Matthias's court organized around fourteen separate themes. It is the only exhibition of the Renaissance Year 2008 series which centres specifically on the person of Matthias Corvinus, as well as his court, which, receptive as it was to the new intellectual trends coming from Italy, was just as focused on medieval tradition. This twofold focus allows visitors to trace how Late Gothic art continued to flourish side by side with the nascent new style, that of the Renaissance. One can only applaud this approach, in view of the fact that practically all earlier exhibitions—like most art historians—have presented Matthias Corvinus solely as a Humanist patron of Renaissance art, and have totally ignored the flourishing Late Gothic stylistic elements in works born under his patronage.

It is these two parallel but very different worlds that the curators (Péter Farbaky, Enikő Spekner and András Végh) sought to illustrate through their assembly of such an impressive number of outstanding works of

art. Besides items from Hungarian private and public collections, there are 65 works on loan from prestigious museums in Austria (the Kunsthistorisches Museum; the Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv; the Wien Museum; the Dom und Diözesanmuseum and the Wiener Stadt- und Landesarchiv) and Italy (the Uffizi; the Bargello; the Biblioteca Medici; the Biblioteca Vaticana; the Museo e Gallerie Nazionali di Capodimonte in Naples and the Biblioteca Estense in Modena). There are also items from collections in Germany, the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Several of the works shown have never before been exhibited in Hungary.

As we follow the various stages of Matthias Hunyadi's career, we can trace the legitimation struggles which were to continue to dog this low-born king as he tried, incontrovertibly, to establish his power and prestige.

The second section, dealing with the genealogy of the Hunyadi family, introduces the most famous of the family's members; the letter patent and coat of arms conferred on the family by Ladislas V is also on display. The third section deals with Matthias's election as king (the actual occasion of the 2008 celebration) and his coronation several years later.

The fourth unit is devoted to the contemporary portraits of Matthias Corvinus, including a white marble profile relief (c. 1485) and the memorable bearded portraits that have been the occasion of so many diverse interpretations over the centuries.

There follow the exhibits dealing with King Matthias's second wife, the Neapolitan princess, Beatrice of Aragon (m. 1476), and her home, the royal court of Naples. A bronze portrait of her father, Ferdinand (Ferrante) of Aragon, shows him wearing the Order of the Ferret (which he himself had instituted) around his neck.

The next section centres on Matthias Corvinus's foreign policy and on his contributions as patron of the arts. Warring was like art patronage in that they both absorbed enormous sums. King Matthias introduced monetary reforms which radically transformed the economy. Three kinds of coins were issued in the course of his reign. In keeping with the growing cult of Mary in the country, his golden florins were stamped on the reverse with the image of the Virgin as "Patrona Hungariae". It was an innovation that would determine the form of the Hungarian florin for well-nigh five hundred years.

Matthias's standing Black Army is given a section of its own, reasonably enough, in light of the fact that King Matthias was at war with one neighbour or another for most of his reign. We see a whole array of weapons, the most memorable being the grand *pavise* collection on loan from Vienna: dozens of huge painted infantry shields resting on the ground and bearing the image of the owner's patron saint or coat of arms.

The peaceful everydays of the king and his entourage are the theme of the next set of exhibits, which conjure up the places where the court resided, with special focus on the ongoing construction work in Visegrád and Buda and the workshop of the Florentine woodworker-architect, Chimenti Camicia, and his role in the royal building works in Buda.

Historians and art historians subscribing to the majority—i.e. Humanism-oriented—interpretation of Matthias's times take it to be something of an axiom that Matthias Corvinus did not foster the cults of Hungary's national saints as intensely as had his predecessors, the Hungarian Anjous or Sigismund of Luxembourg. A closer look at the evidence, however, shows that exactly the opposite was the case. The Humanists visiting the court of Matthias Corvinus regularly highlighted the king's deep personal devotion and his strong support for the Franciscan Order and the Order of St Paul the Hermit (Paulines). He took pains to acquire the relics of St John the Almoner. He fostered the cult of St Martin of Tours, and venerated his relics, a

gift from the King of France. Repeatedly, he petitioned the Pope to hasten the canonisation proceedings of Margaret of the House of Árpád, John of Capistrano and Leopold of Babenberg. Like many a contemporary ruler, he, too established an order, the Order of Suffering, whose purpose it was to safeguard the Holy Eucharist and to fight heretics and the infidel. The section entitled The Personal Devotion of King Matthias marshalls religious works of art to prove its point, and is tantamount to a complete refutation of the stereotype majority view.

Humanists in and on Hungary is the room where we learn, from contemporary accounts, how the royal court became a centre of Humanist learning and ambitions. Sculpture in the age of Matthias is the theme of the adjacent room, with special focus on Giovanni Dalmata and the "Master of the Marble Madonnas" (Gregorio di Lorenzo).

Naturally, the Bibliotheca Corviniana, on which Lorenzo de Medici would model his own library, the Laurenziana, was given a room of its own. King Matthias's library is estimated to have consisted of between 2000 and 2500 volumes, most of them secular texts, on subjects as diverse as philosophy, history, rhetoric, poetry, astronomy, natural science, theology, military engineering, architecture and geography. Many of the works were in Greek, or were Latin translations of the Greek originals. The books had been copied and illuminated in Florentine (then later, Buda) workshops; many of them had been rebound in gilded velvet and embossed with Matthias's coat of arms in colour. The library had been located on the first floor of the eastern front of the palace, overlooking the Danube, immediately south of the royal chapel. Today, 216 extant manuscripts are authenticated as Corviniana.

The last room of the exhibition shows King Matthias's struggle to have his natural son, John Corvinus, recognised as his successor, and traces the wars of succession that followed upon his death. Developments in Hungary are placed in their European context, an approach taken by the exhibition as a whole. As a result, we come away from this survey of Matthias Corvinus's life with some idea of the intellectual life in the Europe of his time, and see his foreign policy in the context of his Italian ties, and particularly his relationship to the other kingdoms of Central Europe.

The Dowry of Beatrice: The Art of Italian Majolica and the Court of King Matthias Corvinus.

Museum of Applied Arts,
March 26 to June 30, 2008.

The exhibits assembled (from the majolica collections of the Museum of Fine Arts itself, the Museo Internazionale delle Ceramiche, Faenza and the Musei Civici, Pesaro) are worthy samples of the art of majolica, preeminent amongst Italian luxury goods of the late 15th century. Iridescence and a unique set of colours and patterns hallmark lustreware, which owes its extraordinary beauty to the technique of applying a tin glaze of rich colours that European potteries adopted in the course of the Renaissance.

Majolica, in the 15th century, was made primarily to satisfy the ruling class's need for display of wealth. It was the item of choice when it came to the exchange of diplomatic and other gift-giving dictated by protocol. Its value vied with that of gold, and certainly with that of jewelry, tapestry, carved ivory figures and the superb items produced by goldsmiths—luxury items, one and all. Kings coveted it: majolica was not just hollowware to grace royal tables, but a collector's item that princes treasured.

Matthias Corvinus came to know majolica ware in 1476 when Beatrice of Aragon, his second wife, brought her cherished pieces with her from her home in Naples. Soon these delicate platters, bowls, jugs, decanters, cruets, bottles, apothecary jars, albarellos, inkhorns and tiles occupied pride of place in the Hungarian court, too. Sump-

tuous and fragile as they were, they were, nevertheless, items in everyday use. Not one of them has survived intact; but the fragments that have been unearthed in the course of excavating the royal residences, tiny as they are, can still conjure up their beauty. Stylistically similar intact vessels on loan from Italian collections thus complete the exhibit, in part to illustrate the close contacts that existed between the majolica workshops of the Kingdom of Hungary and the Italian centres of production.

The curator of the exhibition, Gabriella Balla, took a twofold approach to her subject. One was to exhibit items illustrating the history of the technique of tin-glazed earthenware and its adoption by European potters from the late 13th, early 14th century on. The other was to trace the origin of the lustreware that once graced the tables of the Corvinian and Jagiellonian courts.

The exhibition is divided into three major units. The first one traces the route taken by tin-glazed earthenware from its beginnings in the Middle East to Italy. Here, Hispano-Moorish lustreware fragments, Iberian floor tiles and early Italian semi-majolica from Orvieto and Florence are on display, along with some outstanding items from the major centres of majolica production.

The next unit presents the Hungarian archaeological finds, evidences of a multitude of richly decorated products. Comparing them to the juxtaposed Italian exhibits (on loan from museums in Faenza and Pesaro, and an exceptional Pesaro private collection), one is struck by the excellent quality of the Buda, Kőszeg, Vác, Visegrád, Ozora, Pécsvárad, Pécs and Bajcsa finds. The fragments also show that the court in Buda didn't solely have to rely on imported ware as Italians set up their workshops in Hungary. A great many of their products, particularly building ceramics and floor tiles, have come down to us.

One of the highlights of the exhibition is the set of over 500 hexagonal and triangular ceramic tiles found in 1909 in a caved-in underground store room in Farkashida, Upper Hungary. Judging by the pattern that emerges when the tiles are laid side by side, they probably formed a majolica pavement in an elegant building. Recent findings indicate that the tiles were manufactured by Italian- and German-speaking artisans. The plans for the pavement, made in Florence, are now at Christ Church College, in Oxford. Dated c. 1515, they have been attributed to Leonardo da Vinci, or at least someone of his school.

The last room strengthens the Renaissance atmosphere with four of the Medici Tapestries, Baroque copies of what was originally planned to be a 20-piece series entitled *Children Engaged in Play*. Though the original Renaissance tapestries have been lost, what we see perfectly illustrates the salient features of 15th-16th-century textiles. On every tapestry of the series, there are putti playing in front of a beribboned fruit garland. The designs for the series were commissioned by Pope Leo X (de Medici), and were worked out by two students of Raphael, after his sketches. The Pope asked Pieter van Aelst, master weaver of Brussels, to weave the tapestries.

That art historians have so much information about these textiles is due to the fact that they had already received considerable attention at the time they were made. Besides several contemporary descriptions, we know of numerous pen and ink drawings, *intaglio* prints and brass engravings of the Medici Tapestries, as well as of the cartoons used in making them. Indeed, some of the tapestries of the series were copied in Rome in the first half of the 17th century.

In the 1930s, a Hungarian private collector acquired a few of the Medici Tapestries, which were then bought by the Museum of Fine Arts in 1946. Except for one in a New York collection, the four on exhibit are the only extant pieces of the series.

The Legacy of King Matthias:
Late Renaissance Art in Hungary
(16th–17th Centuries).
Hungarian National Gallery,
March 28 to July 27, 2008.

The exhibition continues the story of the Corvinian Renaissance where the Matthias items on show at the Budapest History Museum leaves off. The oldest item on show dates to 1490, the year of Matthias Corvinus's death, the newest to the last third of the 17th century. The curator, Árpád Mikó, has bridged a serious hiatus: Hungarian art historians have more or less ignored this period, and the public knows next to nothing about it.

Chronologically arranged like the other exhibitions, the collection tells the story of the Late Renaissance in Hungary through a variety of objects and genres—triptychs, ordinaries, illuminated manuscripts, printed books, intaglio prints, drawings, paintings, textiles, gold and silver jewellery, platters and goblets, decorative architectural elements, as well as gravestones and sepulchral effigies, the genre *par excellence* of the sculptors of the period—and in doing so places the roughly 200-year period in a whole new light.

The exhibition opens with the Jagiellonian era. A wide array of cultural currents were aswirl in Hungary in the decades of Wladislas's rule (1490–1526): the direct influence of the Italian Renaissance was still palpable, but an artist was as likely to adopt one of the many Central European variants of the Late-Gothic style or the idiom of the Northern Renaissance. Works originating from this early period are still close enough to the Corvinian era to be familiar to museum-goers; accordingly, the displays in the first room show either recently discovered works of art, or such as have not yet been exhibited in this particular context.

An example is the stone tablet fragment engraved with Humanist capitals which unexpectedly turned up in 2007 in Székesfehérvár, and whose inscription was first recorded in 1774 by the renowned Jesuit historian, György Pray. The fragmentary inscription mentions three names: a Provost Domonkos, St Stephen, and St Emeric (Imre). On the basis of the evidence available today, scholars think that it was Domonkos Kálmáncsehi—collector of Renaissance manuscripts and one of Matthias Corvinus's diplomats—who had had the memorial tablet placed on a building dedicated to St Emeric, sometime in the years when he was Provost of Esztergom Cathedral (1474–1495). Just what this building was and where, we do not know.

Likewise on display are two archaeological finds, terracotta fragments of a building found under the ruins of a house in the Castle District, and some terracotta statue fragments from the Víziváros (Watertown) at the foot of Castle Hill; placed side by side, they are a fine illustration of the coexistence of the *all'antica* and the Late-Gothic styles in Jagiellonian Buda.

The better-known works of art include *András Báthory's Madonna* (1526) and the panels of several triptychs. *The Crowning of the Blessed Virgin Mary*—the centrepiece of the main altar of the parish church in Csíksomlyó—is the first exhibit that meets the eye as one enters. It is, in fact, the most important and most spectacular Hungarian relic of the Late Middle Ages; however, it (like the fragmented side-panel painting of the Immaculate Conception, likewise from Transylvania) also reminds us of the "Patrona Hungariae" ("Woman Clothed with the Sun") cult, adumbrating, as it were, the "Regnum Marianum" idea of the Baroque period.

The differences in the liturgy used in various centres—which the Council of Trent would put an end to—is what comes to mind at the sight of the enormous choir books on display. Impressively large (each book needed to be seen by a large number of singers), choir books—such as the splendidly illuminated *Kassa Gradual* (1518) and the *Tolnai Máté Gradual,* named after an

Abbot of Pannonhalma (1515–1525)—they were typical of the time. Illuminated manuscripts were rarely made in the 16th century. One of the few exceptions is the *Kriza Codex* (1531), which was illuminated in Hungary; another is Chancellor János Listhius's *Breviary,* made sometime after 1573. Choir books, on the other hand, were being copied as late as the 17th century: the *Béllyei Gradual,* for instance, and the *Vágsellyei Antiphonal.*

The principal mediator of culture by the 16th century, however, was the printed book, which was much less expensive to produce than manuscripts. Gutenberg's invention gave an enormous impetus to the spread of Hungarian Humanism. Centres gathering key personalities formed throughout the Kingdom: in Pozsony (Bratislava), Nicasius Ellebodius and Georg Purkircher were the leading lights; in Eger, it was at the home of Bishop István Radéczy that a small group of Humanists (Zakariás Mossóczy, Miklós Istvánffy and János Zsámboky) regularly met. In Transylvania, it was the Prince himself who turned his court into a centre of Humanist learning. The men who gathered at these centres were not only noted scholars, but also great collectors of books. Though their fine libraries have been dispersed over the centuries, the odd volumes that have come down to us leave no doubt as to their erstwhile importance.

Of the great many books printed in Hungary during the 200 years under consideration, the books exhibited fall into two categories in respect of subject matter. The first is that of the sources of law, the pillars, as it were, of Hungarian feudal society, books like the various editions of István Werbőczy's *Tripartitum.* A common law collection that was never in fact enacted as a statute, the *Tripartitum* influenced the Hungarian nobility's legal thinking and practice for centuries.

Books dealing with Hungarian history and their illustrations comprise the second category. The earliest printed history of Hungary was János Thuróczy's *Chronica Hungarorum* published first in Brünn (Brno) in 1488, and then in Augsburg. After that, for all practical purposes, no new illustrated history of Hungary was published for the next two hundred years. True, at the beginning of the 17th century, Lőrinc Ferenczffy (1577–1640), Secretary to the Royal Hungarian Chancery, joined forces with the court historian, Elias Berger, to publish a modern history complete with battle scenes and royal portraits, but the book never went to press. They did, however, complete the woodcuts for the illustrations. It was these printed portraits of the kings of Hungary that served as the prototype for the anonymous contemporary court painter who painted the large portraits of St Stephen, St Emeric and St Ladislas on wood, and it was the same set of royal portraits that appeared in Chief Justice Ferenc Nádasdy's Mausoleum, printed in 1664, which, like Thuróczy's *Chronica,* would determine for centuries how the kings of Hungary were portrayed.

The "Patrona Hungariae" cult was one great organizing principle of the age; the other was the Holy Crown Doctrine, which we see expounded in the works of Péter Révay, Keeper of the Crown, and Kristóf Lackner. (The Crown of St Stephen is seen as the symbolic source of political authority, independent of the king himself; it is the crown and not the king who stands for the historic Hungarian Constitution.) The Holy Crown Doctrine is likely to have been the message of the four tableaux from the 1670s depicting the Crown of St Stephen and the arms of the provinces of the Kingdom of Hungary.

Another lively tradition of the period was the cult of Matthias Corvinus, represented at the exhibition by two well-known works of art: the white marble high reliefs of Matthias and Beatrice, and the Esterházy Treasury's "Matthias ring" (second half of the 16th century).

The 16th and 17th centuries were also years of religious revival in the Kingdom of Hungary. It was a time of relentless

religious argument and conflict, and the conflicting dogmas of the various denominations did not fail to make an impact on the art of the times. Of the Catholic polemical literature, the most influential work was Péter Pázmány's *Isteni igazságra vezérlő kalauz* (Guide to Divine Truth). Its rich and forceful rhetoric, and the brass engraving on its title page, were both emulated for generations in a whole range of art forms. We can identify Pázmány's impact on György Káldi's Hungarian translation of the Bible; on the title pages of a whole series of books; on patents of nobility; and on statues made to grace the façade of buildings.

This was the era when the other Hungarian translations of the Bible, too, appeared: the *Jordánszky Codex,* the Károli translation and the Káldi translation. Copies of all four translations are on exhibit, as are a Hebrew Bible used in Hungary at the end of the 16th century and the edition of Martin Luther's translation of the Psalms which Anabaptists *(Habáns)* driven from their homeland brought with them when they settled in Hungary.

Given the inauspicious financial position of religious institutions, it was not often that a church would order a piece of art work from a master craftsman abroad, but it did happen. For instance, Márton Hetesi Pethe, Archbishop of Kalocsa, commissioned a goldsmith in Ulm to make the monumental reliquary cross for the cathedral in Győr, and Pál Bornemisza had an Angevin mitre belonging to the Treasury of Veszprém Cathedral sent to Vienna for restyling (1550).

A Lutheran contribution to the exhibit is Péter Perényi's book of biblical parallels in couplet form, written while a prisoner of Ferdinand I in Vienna. The book was printed with Augustin Hirschvogel's illustrations (1545–1547). The Zmeskál funeral monument (Berzevice, 1600) is a fine example of artistic self-expression through allegory that was favoured throughout the period.

The Calvinists, the strictest Protestant denomination at the time, had a total ban on pictures in their churches. The only art form allowed in church were liturgical vessels. Their goldsmiths soon developed a special style of their own, which would characterise the vessels made in and around Kecskemét and Debrecen, two major Calvinist centres. Much of the generous donation of gold plate made by the Protestant princes of Transylvania—Gabriel Bethlen, and then George I Rákóczi and her wife, Susanna Lorántffy—to congregations in Transylvania and the region beyond the Tisza originated from here.

Funeral monuments were the most significant genre of the sculptors of the period. Except for the tombstone of Hans Rueber von Püchsendorf, Captain of Upper Hungary, which is itself on display, the funerary art of the period is presented through drawings, photographs and plaster casts. There is a cast of the monument to Elek Thurzó, the most beautiful memorial in stone of the mid-16th century (Lőcse [Levoca], 1543), and one of Queen Isabella's tombstone in Gyulafehérvár (Alba Iulia).

By its very nature, the architecture of the period is as difficult to put on display as funeral monuments and mausoleums. The organizers have illustrated the coexistence of the Early Renaissance with the Late Gothic art of the Jagiellonian era with less well-known fragments from the cathedral of Eger, and have made use of measurements and plaster casts to give visitors a sense of the two most beautiful buildings of the Hungarian Early Renaissance: the Bakócz Chapel in Esztergom (1506–1507) and the Lázói Chapel in Gyulafehérvár (1512). Chateaux and the town houses of wealthy burghers represent the secular architecture of the period. They seem insignificant, however, compared to the more modern Italian towered fortress architecture introduced by—mostly Italian—military engineers in the service of the Viennese War

Chancery, as exemplified by the rough blueprint of Deregnyő (Drahňov) castle.

The aristocracy's penchant for prestigious displays of wealth was manifest in art of every kind. Two specifically Hungarian forms of textile art deserve mention in the applied art collection on display: *recehímzés* and *úrihímzés*. Both kinds of needlework were used on secular textiles (pillows, bedspreads, saddle blankets, tablecloths) as well as on ornamental ecclesiastical hangings and vestments (altar cloths and antependia—altar, lectern and pulpit frontals). The other luxury textile were the so-called "Transylvanian rugs", an Ottoman Turkish rug imported from Anatolia, which owe their name to the circumstance that they are found primarily in the churches and castles of Transylvania.

Of the art works in everyday use, the pottery made by Anabaptist potters who had fled to Hungary is particularly worthy of attention. Called *Habán* pottery in Hungary, these elegant ceramics are easy to date, and were the theme of a major exhibition in 2006 at the Museum of Applied Arts.

The next section of the exhibition continues the theme of the ruling class's displays of wealth through exhibits of paintings and intaglio prints. Portraits were, without a doubt, the most important genre of painting in the 17th century. Most of the pictures on display are from ancestor galleries in aristocratic homes. Of royal portraits, there are only the miniatures of Ferdinand III and of Maria Kristierna, Sigismund Báthory's wife. A special type of portrait, popular at the time, was the "wake portrait", a kind of funerary ostentation. Examples are the exhibited funeral portraits of the town justice, the Protestant Kristóf Lackner, and György Zichy, a Roman Catholic parish priest of Sopron. An example of printed portraits using the brass engraving technique is the series by Elias Wideman of 100 Hungarian noblemen.

The section on art as aristocratic ostentation is rounded off with some masterpieces of the goldsmiths' art. We see that forms, motifs and ornamentation preserved and handed down in pattern books are as vigorous at the end of the roughly 200-year period as at its beginning, and have come to be used by book binders and armourers as well.

The exhibition at the Hungarian National Gallery, like the one at the Budapest History Museum, has relied substantially on the drawings and photographs preserved in the archives of the National Office of Cultural Heritage, the Ethnological Data Bank of the Museum of Ethnography and the Department of Prints and Drawings of the Hungarian National Gallery. The various sketches made by surveyors, the copies of frescoes, architects' sketches and plans have all been exhibited as works in their own right. They not only complement and interpret what is on display, and act as substitute for lost works of art, but are important from the point of view of scholarship. They are documentary evidence of the state of monument preservation in Hungary, and testify to the circumstances and goals of its earliest beginnings. The papers of the National Committee for Monuments make it clear that the primary goal of that body in the closing decades of the 19th century was to preserve the architecture and works of art related to Matthias Corvinus and his age.

The wealth of events projected for Hungary's Renaissance Year 2008 centre on what was undoubtedly one of the most successful eras of Hungarian history, an age of genuine economic and legislative reforms, and of outstanding cultural and artistic achievements. They are still impressive and exemplary today. This, presumably, is one reason we are celebrating this not-exactly-round anniversary, on a budget which has allowed the exhibition of some peerless works of art, many of them being seen for the first time ever in Hungary. ❧

Elemér Hankiss

Doom and Gloom

I've often wondered what would happen were Hungary to slip off the face of the Earth from one day to the next. Would anyone care? Who'd mourn, who'd rejoice? What would the world stand to lose or gain from such an odd cataclysm?

In Brueghel's famous painting, *The Fall of Icarus,* Icarus has fallen from high above and only his feet are popping out of the sea. Yet no one on the shore notices. Blithely, fishermen continue to fish, the shepherd drives his flock, the farmer ploughs his land. Many would take note of Hungary's fall, but what would they think?

Poland might feel stunned for an instant, shedding a few tears in memory of the supposed ancient Polish–Hungarian friendship. Russia would build a huge gas storage facility in Austria and swiftly rename their new airline acquisition Malév. France? Their politicians, at a stretch, might feel a speck of dust roll off their chest, if only for the injustice of Trianon. Some intellectuals would no doubt talk about Fifty-Six for a while. Winemakers would label their wines "Tokay" again, and Sarkozy would no longer have to feel uncomfortable when questioned about his ancestors.

Germany would open a museum of remembrance to their fellow countrymen who had migrated to Hungary only to be kicked out after 1945. They'd publish a complete series of Márai's works; Helmut Kohl et al. would fondly remember József Antall, Hungary's first freely-elected prime minister after her return to democracy; and Herder, who in 1791 had already presaged the disappearance of the Hungarian nation—or at least its language—would stretch out in his grave with great relish.

England could rest easy: any complacent smirking at 6:3 would be a thing of the past. The Spaniards could declare Ferenc Puskás, who played for Real Madrid for long years, a son of theirs once and for all. The CIA, World Bank and IMF,

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Elemér Hankiss

is Senior Fellow at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Institute of Political Science, and professor at the College of Europe, Bruges. His most recent publication in English is The Toothpaste of Immortality. Self-Construction in the Consumer Age, *Baltimore–Washington DC: The Johns Hopkins University Press–Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2006.*

Norbert Izsák

is on the staff of the business weekly HVG.

Table 1

Let us presume Hungary were to disappear without trace. Which nations would notice ? Which would be sorry ? Which would be glad ? (%)

Romanians	57	15	40
Slovaks	53	10	32
Austrians	52	27	5
Russians	35	16	6
Serbians	35	5	27
Croats	34	16	5
Czechs	32	7	9
Germans	31	21	3
Poles	28	21	1
Italians	17	9	1
French	15	6	3
Britons	14	8	1
Americans	10	9	2
Others	14	7	6
No one	11	18	16

peremptorily assessing the situation, would conclude that from geopolitical, security, economic and financial standpoints the black hole in Eastern Europe was of no importance whatsoever and close their files. Many would remember Kossuth, still more Zsazsa Gabor, Leo Szilard or Edward Teller, though most of them wouldn't know from which sunken country they had emerged. Brussels, with some relief, would acknowledge the quiet and civilised demise of that awkward and problematic country and would calculate how much money they would save as a result.

Yes, the examples are silly but I hoped to startle the reader into the realisation that today's Hungary should put itself on the world map. Opportunities abound, but it seems that rather than take advantage of the situation, citizens of this adolescent democracy quarrel, fret, dither and complain incessantly. That's not the path to success.

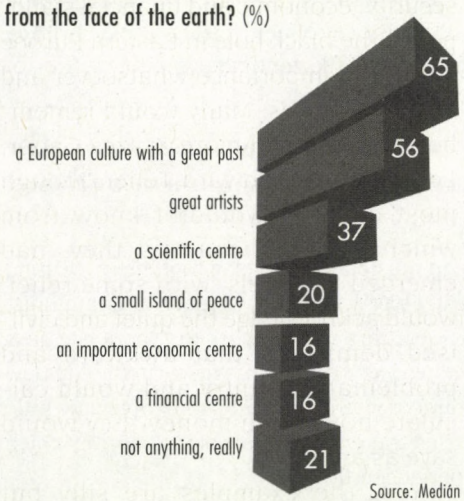
There's no shortage of small countries which have seized opportunity by the scruff of the neck and left their mark on the world. If, say, the Netherlands were wiped off by the rising sea, shipping would be paralysed, banking and insurance would be disrupted, Shell stations would shut down and fewer chrysanthemums would be available to place on graves. Should Finland sink into the snow, there'd be a serious shortage on the mobile handset market, and the most convincing evidence of how a society can succeed if it takes education seriously would disappear with it. Austria, its mountains, murmuring rivers and Baroque cities—an ever-idyllic, harmonious lifestyle—would vanish along with its sparkling capital, one of the radiant centres of European culture.

A recent survey by the pollster Medián put the above questions (Table 1) and a few other unusual ones to Hungarians. Optimism was not entirely absent: a mere tenth of respondents said Hungary's disappearance would go unnoticed. But almost a fifth said nobody would care, and a similar proportion was adamant that the world stood to lose nothing were Hungary to go up in smoke. (Table 2) This indicates a serious identity problem: these respondents are sure that their country has nothing to show to the world.

Hungarians are known either to overestimate (a glorious history, state-forming nation, the country of Nobel-prize winners and Olympic champions)

Table 2

What would the world lose if Hungary disappeared from the face of the earth? (%)



Source: Medián

or to bitterly excoriate themselves (isolated, traumatised, perpetual losers, just look at the Austrians!). Instead of vacillating between these two extremes, Hungary would be well advised to get a grip on itself and indulge in some cool, sober self-reflection. It should get over its bitterness over the past—history has been no bloodier in Hungary than in most European countries. Besides, a small or medium-sized country can produce great things. But great things do not come from flag-waving or forced patriotism: they reside in the national consciousness and the dignity of a community which realises its own worth.

It is extremely difficult—though not impossible—to rebuild a society's broken and confused self-awareness. We only need to think of the slow but consistent reshaping of the German mindset since the Sixties, or the much quicker (and not just economic) renaissance of the Irish and Finnish in the Eighties and Nineties.

Hungarians gave rather gloomy answers to the question of how they see their country ten years from now. (Table 3) Some 53 per cent of survey respondents said the country "will be famous for its sporting successes", and a mere fifth believed it would boast economic achievements. It is a sad sign—as is often the case with poor and helpless countries—when they show off their shiny medals and try to hide the miseries of society behind their glory.

Hungary will be a backward, poor country ten years from now. This is how nearly half of those polled see the future. Only a third are hopeful that it will become a successful European country. This sounds dire. An awful lot of people, it seems, don't believe in themselves or in the future of their country. It's as if they decided to bet on a loser.

Table 3

How likely do you think that Hungary in ten years time will be... (averages on a scale of 0–100)

Source: Medián

Flow

Hungarians must immerse themselves in enjoyable work if they are ever to overcome their famed gloom, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi told the weekly *HVG*. A psychology professor at Claremont Graduate University, California, Csikszentmihalyi is the author of *Flow,* which has been translated into 30 languages.

N. I.: *Former British prime minister Tony Blair told members of his cabinet to read* Flow, *which describes the elation people experience when immersing themselves in an activity they love. Can an entire country reach such a state?*

M. Cs.: That's a tough question. Sports teams and musicians who play together for a long time can experience flow, but a country is different. Flow was harder to reach in Communist Hungary because life was too boring: challenges were rare and chances to experience bliss in the workplace were limited, to say the least. People were not all that motivated to try new things. More importantly, totalitarian regimes rarely reward creativity so people saw little point in working harder. When the system collapsed there was a short period during which people felt optimistic—they might well have experienced flow.

Yet Hungarian sociologists have endlessly pointed out over the past decade that most Hungarians have an unrealistically dark view of the world.

Surveys show that the happiest people are Danes, Swedes and New Zealanders—inhabitants of small but free countries. Hungary could in theory be among them. It's worth noting that those countries' internal value systems are basically the same. We often mention a happiness survey of 26 European cities: people were asked how many sunny days there had been during the past week. Hungarians estimated half the number of

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Hungary's political elite, its intellectuals and its media bear enormous responsibility for this negativity. Since the fall of the Iron Curtain too many of them have been unable to formulate a comprehensive and attractive image of the future—the image of a prospering and successful Hungary. They have created, for the vast majority of people, the impression that they have failed to work out steps to lift Hungary from the status of a troubled post-Communist state to the ranks of Western European countries, that they are not in control of the situation and are unable to deliver the envisaged reforms. Neither have intellectuals done their jobs well; they still don't. It is their job to help people understand what has happened to them and the country in the past two decades and what changes are inevitable. The media is finally making cautious forays into the thorny business of identifying problems. But it still has its work cut out to animate communities and foster civic responsibility.

I'm sceptical about the view of those polled who think Hungary will be "a Russian bridgehead in Europe" or "the European bridgehead of China" ten years from now. Hungary has had bridgehead dreams before: in the Eighties it wanted to be the European bridgehead for Toyota (that didn't happen), and in the

actual sunny days while residents of Copenhagen and Stockholm thought there had been twice as many.

Why are Hungarians so pessimistic?

We mustn't forget residents of happy countries live in places where war seldom happens and freedom has lasted for centuries. It also helps if people occupy themselves with the present rather than the wounds of the past. It's better to organise life so as to make others happy as well as oneself. Maybe it sounds simplistic but it is true nonetheless: selfish people are always unhappier. If a society teaches solidarity and cohesion rather than exclusion and selfishness the most important changes can begin. Unless we take the first step of wanting to change there is little hope we will.

You said that if a challenge is too small or too big, flow cannot happen. Hungarians cannot be accused of living stress-free lives—is it possible that the challenges are too big?

The problem is people don't feel secure enough to do what they really desire. Everyone tries to keep lots of irons in the fire given the anxiety about losing your job and financial status. Apparently old reflexes haven't disappeared either. Surely it would help if people were able to secure a calm environment for creative work rather than being forced to take on three short-term jobs. One thing is certain: it is important to believe in something. You don't have to believe in anything in order to earn money, you just go to work. But if you want to create value, and if you realise that creating value is a worthwhile activity, then you must believe in something.

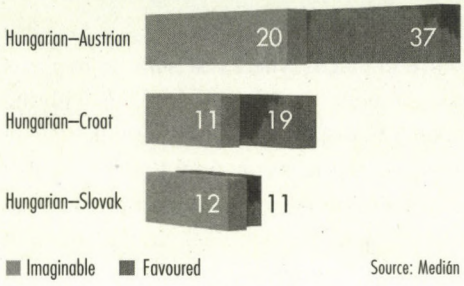
Norbert Izsák

early Nineties it wanted to become a Western bridgehead in south-eastern Europe (it missed that not-so-grand opportunity). The desire to repaint the bridgehead is not a problem in itself—it was indeed one of the sources of Ireland's success that it became America's bridgehead in Europe—but it is not an end in itself. Norway, Sweden, Finland, the Netherlands, Spain are bridgeheads in themselves, by producing values which can make them an important part of the global economy in their own right.

The survey included a question about how people might feel about a possible federation between Hungary and its three neighbours within the next ten years. (Table 4) It seems that Hungarian respondents have kept a vivid memory of the post-World War I anti-Hungarian alliance, the Little Entente (the Yugoslavia to be, Czechoslovakia, Romania). This is understandable but unfortunate, as being trapped in a spiral of animosity with one's neighbours all but prevents adaptation to the spirit of European co-operation among countries in the Central and Eastern European region. (In fact, by now most of those countries are members of the European Union!) Hungary's neighbours are not solely to blame: Hungarians have not done enough in this respect in the past decade and a half.

Table 4

Opinions concerning federal alliances between states within the next ten years (%)



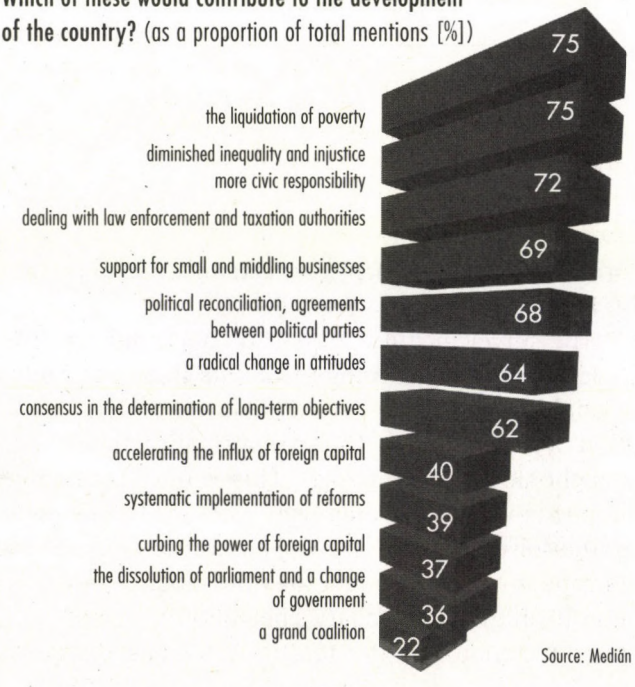
Only 20 per cent believed a federal alliance between Austria and Hungary was conceivable. I do not know if that relatively low response rate was fuelled by shrewd political considerations and a sense of reality, or a lack of imagination: people simply cannot imagine such a significant realignment in the European Union, or in the world in general. It is interesting to note, however, that nearly twice as many people thought that, if there were to be such an alliance, it would be beneficial. What is more, almost half of young people aged 18–34 would vote for such an alliance. If that is the case, then there is food for thought: the idea might sound far-fetched, but nevertheless what changes would we need to make for it to be attractive to the potential partner?

Although just a few of those polled view a Croat–Hungarian or a Slovak–Hungarian federation as possible and beneficial, a different set of questions revealed that 36 percent of respondents believed Hungary could be part of a federation of Central European states within the European Union ten years from now. But what would Croats, Slovaks, or Austrians think of such an alliance? It would not hurt to start a wide-ranging discussion about the possibilities of creating a Central Europe without emotional borders and what must be done to bring this about.

Two social ailments are Hungary's most pressing, according to the majority of those polled. (Table 5) Most identified the alleviation of poverty or social inequality and injustice as the most urgent tasks. This is surprising, perhaps, since Hungary's media and politicians are telling us 24 hours a day that everything depends

Table 4

Which of these would contribute to the development of the country? (as a proportion of total mentions [%])

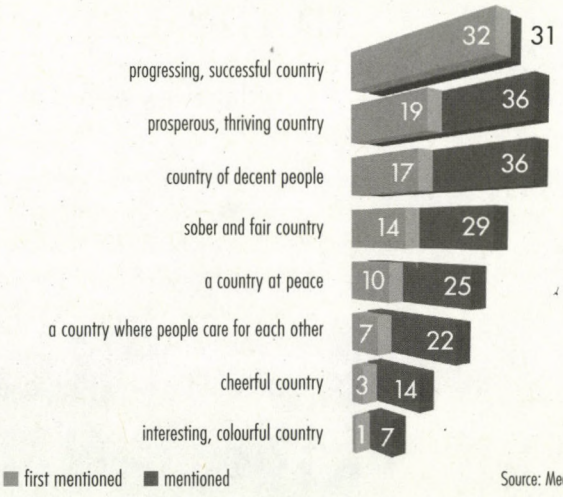


on economic growth. It is not sufficiently stressed that without reducing social inequality, injustice and poverty the economy's development is bound to falter.

It is no less surprising to see that—for most people—party politics has much less of an influence on any potential positive changes than politicians and the media like to suggest. Only a fifth of respondents see the key to a solution in a grand coalition and a third of them in a change of government—although responding to a more generally-phrased question, two thirds said they could see potential good in some kind of a political reconciliation.

Table 6

What kind of Hungary do you favour ten years from now? (%)



Source: Medán

The survey reveals that for the majority, the most important thing would be to see Hungary as a "progressing, successful country" ten years from now. (Table 6) Many also have the dream that by then they could live in a "country of decent people". In contrast, only 7 per cent said it would be important for them to be a citizen of "a country where people care for each other". This is worrying, as a fragmented society, almost entirely lacking social solidarity, is the main obstacle these days to the advancement of a country. If that attitude does not change in the next ten years, then, no matter how much we yearn for it, there is little chance that in ten years' time we'll be living in a "progressing, successful country", in a "prosperous, thriving country" or a "country at peace".

Personally, I am not too cheered by the fact that only three per cent of respondents claimed their top priority was to live in a "cheerful country" ten years from now, while one per cent said the same about an "interesting, colourful country". I personally would vote for that. Because, were Hungary to be that ten years from now, this would indicate that the majority of its most burning problems were already behind it. ❧

Putting the Manuscript in the Lap of God

An Interview with Magda Szabó

MTI PHOTO

Magda Szabó (1917–2007)

studied Classics at university and expected to pursue an academic career. One of the writers associated with the Újhold *literary review in the late 1940s, she first came to public notice with her poetry. During the first half of the Fifties she taught in secondary school, writing novels for her desk drawer. After 1956, novels, plays, books for children and the young and volumes of essays came out in quick succession.*

Csaba Károlyi

edits the review section of the literary weekly Élet és Irodalom.

This interview took place in 1993 after Magda Szabó won the Prix Fémina Étranger, the most prestigious French literary award alongside the Goncourt, for her novel The Door.[1] *The grande dame of Hungarian letters died on November 19, 2007 at the age of ninety while—as no obituary failed to emphasise—reading in her favourite armchair. She was writing up to the end, working on the sequel of* Für Elise, *her hugely popular autobiographical novel of her childhood and youth. Magda Szabó is the most translated of Hungarian writers. While her works have appeared in 42 languages, only four of her novels have been translated into English.*

*

Csaba Károlyi: *You started writing in 1946. Like others in the* Újhold *circle—János Pilinszky, Ágnes Nemes Nagy, Miklós Mészöly, Iván Mándy, to name but a few—you suffered a decade of imposed silence after the journal had been banned in 1949.*

Magda Szabó: In the Fifties we were writing for our desk drawers. We'd hide our manuscripts in other people's homes because you had to be prepared for house searches. At dawn we'd hear these noises and never know whether it was the milk cans clanking or the secret police coming for us. One of these hidden manuscripts, the novel *Fresco,* somehow got into the hands of Mirza von Schüching[2], who suggested smuggling it out of the country. She was aware of the literary underground; manuscripts of exciting young writers had come into her hands. If I was prepared to risk my neck, she'd put me in touch with someone. "My neck is at risk anyway," I thought. My husband, Tibor Szobotka, had been thrown out of the radio because he'd refused to join the party. Then the Ministry of Education, where I'd been working since the war, was "liberated" from bourgeois vermin, so we were both out of jobs. With my degree in Hungarian, Latin and history and my doctorate, I was later allowed to teach geography at a secondary school. For a good while, Szobotka wasn't even allowed to teach. In short, von Schüching told me she had the means to get the manuscript to a childhood friend, an expert. "May I ask what makes your friend an expert?" I enquired. "Does he have a good knowledge of literature?" "Well, some," she replied. "You may have heard of him: his name is Herman Hesse." Hesse was a publisher's reader at Fischer's. "Fine," I told her, "so we'll put the manuscript in the lap of God and see what happens." Hesse told the publisher Insel that if they were prepared to buy Mrs Szabó, they should buy her lock, stock and barrel, including her unwritten books. And that is what happened. It was unusual for a book from a socialist country to let fly at the class struggle, the peace priests and the denounced Calvinist church—not to mention portraying the party secretary of a theatre as an idiot. So the German

1 ■ The English translation, for which Len Rix won the prestigious Oxford–Weidenfeld Translation Prize, came out in 2005. *The Times Literary Supplement* and *The London Review of Books* praised the novel's intelligence and intensity of style and it was shortlisted for the Independent Foreign Fiction Prize the following year—alongside Imre Kertész's *Fatelessness,* translated by Tim Wilkinson.
2 ■ German baroness Mirza von Schüching was the wife of Géza Engl, a German translator at the Hungarian Corvina Publishing House.

publishers said: "this woman was made for us; she's as daring as the devil and incredibly impertinent."

Between 1962 and 1974 the French publishing house Editions du Seuil published five of your novels. Then there was a long break before they brought out The Door *which you wrote in 1987.*

Seuil began to show interest in my books in the early Sixties after the German versions came out. I now know the way things go with the big publishers—they keep an eye on what each other is doing. They published Miklós Mészöly, Iván Mándy, Géza Ottlik as well as several of my books. Over time they became disappointed in us all. They had been expecting something different, something we could not give them—I cannot say what exactly. And after the French market slumped so did the German. This really surprised me as you would have expected it to pick up after the appearance of György Konrád and other dissident writers. When Chantal Philippe finished translating *The Door,* she went to several publishers to see if anyone was interested, but no one was. I don't think they even looked at it. Then news arrives of the Prix Fémina, and the next morning I get a fax from my old German publisher, Suhrkamp. They wanted to carry on as though nothing had happened—as though they had not stopped publishing my books in Germany as they had in France. I'd lost two big publishers, and now both popped up again.

How did you feel about winning the Prix Fémina for The Door?

It was totally unexpected. I was the ninety-ninth writer to be awarded it; Romain Rolland was one of the first. I believe there are twelve on the jury and eleven of them voted for me—critics, writers, university professors. They say that the vote is usually not so unanimous. What worries me is that whenever I am given a prize I usually have to make amends for it in some way. Then again, it is obvious that God has a great sense of humour. I mean, why have I been given this prize now? Why now? I should have got it twenty-five years ago. Now I have to worry whether I can find a way to surpass this.

Do you like being called a woman writer?

All my life I've hated women who were simply women. Besides, literature is literature. And there are writers who are born men and writers who are born women, beginning with those learned nuns who copied manuscripts in the age of the Arpadian dynasty. A good writer is a good writer; a bad writer is a bad writer. If my deadliest enemy were to write something really good, I'd say it was brilliant and I'd thank him in the name of Hungarian literature. Let me ask you: When did Tolstoy have a child? When did he watch his wife give birth? Because I don't think he did watch her. But he still knew what it was like. Or could you tell me when I was King Béla? Because that's what actors say to me: how come you're an actor, a man and a woman, an old widow and a child, all at the same time? No one who has only been a woman writer can ever be a good writer. Actually, I heard that a

lot of people think the Prix Fémina is a prize for militant women. In fact it has nothing to do with them, and certainly nothing to do with feminism!

You began with a volume of poems, and you won the Baumgarten Prize in 1949 for your poetry. Your last book of poetry came out a decade later. Why did you stop writing poems?

I started writing as a child—not just poems; all sorts of things. One minute I decided to be an actress, the next I was writing plays. Then I was writing stories for children. Why did I stop writing poetry? In 1949 the cultural dictator József Révai withdrew the Baumgarten Prize that had been awarded to me that morning, and gave it to the party poet Péter Kuczka at noon. That was one reason. Another was that at the time you could only write poems about sad, bitter things, and that is what I tried to do. But after a while I'd had enough of everybody writing poems about how terrible things were for them. This isn't right, I thought—the periodicals are full of all these sad poems. Then in 1953 something happened to me at my aunt Piroska's funeral. Everyone was busy with something at that funeral and no one seemed to care about the deceased. This really pained me: I loved my Aunt Piroska very much. And I thought this is what I should write about. The funeral was a turning point in my life as a writer. I decided to record that experience, not in verse, but in a novel. I was a schoolteacher. But when would I have the time to write? My husband said, "I'll cook on Sundays; you sit down and write—you need time to write novels." I had written short stories all through my university years. But at the time I thought I was going to become an academic, a Classics scholar, a specialist on old Hungarian literature. That is all I know, nothing else. It's no good asking me about Kafka, I know nothing about him. I don't even like him.

Ten years after the Baumgarten, you won the József Attila Prize just after the first novels came out.

That was a very sad day for me, coming as it did two weeks after my father's death. I'd just got home from the funeral. I was all in black and couldn't understand a word people were saying to me. I'd lost my father, whom I loved in a special way—not like children usually love their parents; it was more as if I were his sister-in-arms rather than his child. The things he never dared tell my mother, he told me.

Ókút (The Ancient Well) *is a truly excellent recreation of childhood—effortless, natural, precise and playful. Why should the foreign market be deprived of this book?*

Thank you for the encouraging remark! I was recounting memories of the first ten years of my life in that book. And described what we were like, we Szabós. There were times in the Szabó household when we had nothing to eat, but there was always the *Encyclopaedia Britannica,* and the child could speak Latin from the age of three.

There seems to be a real-life model for almost every character in the novels. How does that make you feel when the readers believe that the events in the novels are taken from real life?

The strangest thing about that is when the Szabós start saying: how did you have the heart to speak ill of poor old Auntie Emma, where's your sense of honour? You know very well there are things we never tell strangers. And you've written about them in a novel! How could you stoop so low? I'm a member of the Szabó clan, too, so I am denouncing myself as well, but we are not like others; this is what we are like. They should thank me for not writing about one of our cousins, who never left the house because her eyes always felt cold. That is quite peculiar, isn't it? I did not write about that. I didn't tell the world everything, only the stories that could be told.

Did everything really happen as described in The Door*?*

Yes, literally. The model for Emerenc was my housekeeper, Juliska. Everything is true, including the dog Viola, who died here in my flat at the age of fourteen. And the story about the Kossuth Prize is also true: when I was awarded the prize in 1978, I was asked to appear on television for the first time in my life. I couldn't refuse. And meanwhile Emerenc was dying. I despised television and did not want to appear on screen with the other Kossuth prize winners. Then, when I came home that night, Szobotka said: you're a brilliant speaker, what happened to you? That was truly dreadful. Never mind that you looked ghastly—that's because they shot you badly. Your face was quite distorted with terror and remorse. But you said such stupid things, it was a disgrace.

What did the French critics have to say about this scene in the novel?

I was called to account for attending the writers' congress in Greece while Emerenc in the novel lay dying. In the end I cried out in despair: Don't you understand? Even if it had been my father who lay dying, I would still have had to go—what else could I have done? I'd been chosen to represent Hungary at that congress! The more soft-hearted among the journalists burst into tears at that. And I repeated in the words of the novel: I did not kill Emerenc; I wanted to save her. My public was strict but fair—it all ended with a shower of kisses. I suddenly became everybody's Magda instead of Mme Szabó. They finally accepted the explanation that I had had to go, that I couldn't be beside Emerenc every second of the day, but they said I had not emphasised this enough in the book and instead had dwelled on how happy I was to appear on television. They had not understood the significance of this at first. Imagine, there were eighty journalists present, and they were all celebrating my book. And later they wrote that I was a star of France! Has anyone ever written something like that about me in Hungary? That I'm a star? Me? That is the only thing that's still missing. I daren't show the French reviews to anyone at home! ❧

Magda Szabó

The Ancient Well

Excerpt from the Chapter "Self-portrait"

My skinny body housed a host of uncommonly intense emotions, and my inexorably analytical mind was often pulled in strange directions by sudden transports of passion. As I had been surrounded with extraordinary tenderness and affection from my birth, I reacted to every less than friendly expression in an elementary way, with primitive ferocity, ready for immediate revenge. We had a foolish relative who was forever boasting about her plump, fattened offspring. Once, after presenting me with a ball which I'd been hankering after for some time, she blurted out in my presence what a plain, unattractive little creature I was, every rib showing, so sickly I might never live to see adulthood; for here I was, laid up in bed yet again. I understood what she meant. She was implying that I too would end up in the cemetery, where I always felt fierce anger mixed with perplexity at the sight of the graves of relatives. For a while I just blinked at our fat relative with measles-stricken, inflamed eyes, then, like a diminitive awe-struck Caesar at Pompey's Pillar, I pulled my coverlet over my face, and lowered the ball to the floor. What would an ugly thing condemned to die want with a toy? The ball was picked up and placed beside me again, they thought I had dropped it. I flung it away from me then, that couldn't be misunderstood. "She's feverish, poor child", my mother said, trying to excuse my behaviour, "she's not well." "Even so," said the relative, "what kind of child would do such a thing, she can't be that feverish, throwing her toys about like that!" She picked the ball up again, and wiped it. Later, my mother often recounted to me how my face, finally surfacing from beneath my quilted coverlet, looked wizened, blotchy from fever, and full of undisguised, uncurbed hatred, like a savage's, preparing to take revenge.

By the time I was well again, our relative had got over the episode, and when she did speak of it, she just laughed and made a dismissive gesture. And after some time had passed she came up with the idea that she would take me to visit her. She lived in the country, in much more comfortable circumstances than we did, and she promised she would fatten me up, make me stronger; out there in the country I would get to eat all sorts of food that we, in town, in our circumstances, at the beginning of the twenties, never could. My parents consented immediately, they knew I needed a change of air and better food; I screamed and fought, tried pleading to be allowed to stay, but nothing helped. When I saw them packing my

belongings I stopped wailing, realizing that it would get me nowhere, and the fat relative felt so alien to me that I was ashamed to cry in front of her. "You see, she's a good girl!" my mother said, commending me. "I should hope so!" said the relative as we left. "I wouldn't have her otherwise."

I was taken away by train, travelling first class no less; in other circumstances this would have been thrilling, but in this case, at that time, it was just an amplification of the horror that accompanied the fact of being taken to a strange place. With the sharp edge of logic I tried to cut the invisible cord with which they had bound me to this relative. She would take only good girls, wasn't that what she said? Which obviously meant she wouldn't take naughty girls. Then I must be a naughty girl, and she would throw me out of her house. I wouldn't want to eat her food in any case, because she had said I was plain and sickly, and if I am thin, then I am thin for myself and for my parents, at home I am fine the way I am, at home no one sees me as plain, even if we never speak of my looks. I don't want anything from these people. The relative was surprised at how quiet I was, I never even looked at the picture-book I was given for the journey, I just sat beside her, did not even look out of the window, just sat staring into my lap and did not speak a word. She could not have known how hard, with what desperate concentration I was trying to think. I could feel her looking at me, but I did not look back at her. I knew her face well, it was round, actually quite kindly, not a clever face. I had felt an aversion to her even before the episode with the ball, because of something unforgettable, utterly disgusting, that I connected with her. She had breastfed one of her children for an abnormally long time, the child had been old enough to run about and she was still breastfeeding her, and once, as I stared stunned at the girl who was barely younger than me standing suckling at her mother's breast, she noticed me watching them. She laughed out loud, grabbed her breast and pointed it at me as if it were a water-pistol, and squirted her milk between my eyes. I ran from her, screaming dementedly, and by the time I reached the edge of the backyard I was throwing up.

When we arrived, the relative's family members all kissed me in turn, put food before me, everyone was very kind. I ate just enough to be seen eating, I did not cry, was not defiant, did not even complain, they all praised me, told me what a quiet little girl I was, pondered how long it would take me to build up a healthy appetite. They left me to my own devices, to acquaint myself with my surroundings, I wandered all over the house, went into every room. They were particularly proud of the drawing room, and told me a little uneasily to treat everything in there with special care, in fact not to spend any time in there at all, as it was all brand new. But otherwise, I was to behave exactly as if I were one of their own children, and by the time they took me back I would be a beautiful, plump little girl. When would they be taking me back? Oh, not for a long time. When I'd put on some weight. Two or three months at least.

I was home by next evening.

Scissors, those forbidding tools, lived in the bedside-table drawer in our house as well, that was where I found them, and later sneaked into the drawing room

with them, and slashed the covers of the six chairs and sofa to ribbons with infinite patience and application. When I had finished with the stabbing and the slashing, I forced my hand into the holes wherever I could and tugged out tufts of horsehair so it curled darkly from the gaping wounds. Like curls of smoke signalling some terrible conflagration, so the black coils of horsehair snaked over the dead furniture. When I had finished, I went out into the backyard where the relation's children were eating; this is the only memory I have of them, huge platters, and the children stuffing food into their mouths with spoons. I could hardly wait for them to find out what a bad girl I'd been and send me home in disgrace, tried to guess how quickly I could go back to my parents.

When my deed was discovered, the outrage was somehow greater, but at the same time quieter, more dignified than I had expected. The relative had one of her turns and had to lie down with a wet cloth over her heart, but later on she got up, and as if nothing had happened, fed me herself as if I were one of her own children, methodically, giving me the tastiest morsels, except that she did not speak a word, and when we had finished, she shut me in the drawing room, no doubt to stop me from wreaking more havoc; there really was nothing else I could do damage to in there. It was summer, the windows were open, I could hear the children shouting mean, fat words in the backyard, everyone knew what I had done, they were singing some kind of mocking song, the essence of which was that I was ugly, dark, and no one loved me, not even my mother. "Oh yes she does," I thought as I sat on the couch and tugged at the horsehair, "oh yes she does love me. What does anyone here know about it." A bed was made up for me in the drawing room, I was not allowed to sleep in the children's bedroom; I did not really mind though it was the first time I had slept alone.

The relative accompanied me on the journey home. Strangely, I did not feel the slightest bit angry with her, somehow I imagined that we were now quits, that I had got even with her for the squirting and the insults. My mother was in the backyard when we opened the gate, she was standing in front of the bushes, staring at us as the relative walked in. I had not cried until that moment, that was when I began to sob, I threw myself into my mother's arms, my mother knew I was crying with joy, because she was familiar with every sound I made. The relative walked in much more slowly, she was carrying the suitcase, she flung it down beside the frame on which the carpets were beaten. As she spoke, as the accusations and complaints poured out of her, I buried my nose in my mother's dress so I wouldn't see anything, just feel that I was home again, in our house, where, if my parents so desired, the stars could stroll into the room, my mother could talk to the elements, and if something came off unexpectedly well, my father would take a deep bow, as they do in the circus, and pull an imaginary ribbon from his mouth. The relative did not sit down even for a minute, she left immediately, no one tried to detain her. My mother quietly apologised on my behalf.

When we were alone again, she peeled my arms off her waist and looked me straight in the eye, as if she wanted to see through my pupils into my thoughts.

She did not speak, she did not tell me off, just shook her head silently. "I'm home," I thought to myself, and suddenly shuddered, like when I was being bathed and the unexpectedly hot water made my body shudder. My father came out of his room, he'd obviously heard every word because he did not ask any questions. His face looked clouded, as did my mother's, I found this hard to bear. I felt I had to explain. To them, not the relative.

"She did not like me," I whispered. "She said I was ugly, and sickly, and that I would die. She did not like me."

"Oh my goodness", my mother said, "of course she liked you. She wouldn't have taken you with her if she did not like you, she wouldn't have wanted to fatten you up. You really are very thin. And very vain! You obviously killed the couch because someone once told you that you were ugly."

That hurt, because until then I had not actually thought this through, that I really had killed the poor chairs, the poor couch. I stared at the floor, and desperately tried to find some kind of argument with which I could redeem myself. They knew very well that I didn't like to be anywhere else, only with them. What else could I say? How could I defend myself?

"She breastfed standing up, and squirted her milk at me," I whispered.

For a while no one spoke, then I heard my father chuckle, and knew that everything was all right. Before I could react I heard my mother's voice:

"If you're not going to punish her, at least don't laugh. It's terrible, the way we're bringing her up. And would you please tell me how we are going to pay for re-upholstering the furniture?"

My heart missed a beat. I had not thought this through either, this part of my escape plan, had not thought of what would happen after I'd destroyed the drawing room. Well, of course, we would have to put it to rights, however well-off they were, however poor we were. How would we be able to afford it?

My father wore a ring on his little finger, the only piece of jewellery he ever wore apart from his wedding ring. Now he slipped it off his finger, did not even glance at it by way of farewell as he put it down on the windowsill in front of my mother. He did not say that she should sell it, and use the money to pay the upholsterer, he did not say a word. I knew that he loved that ring, liked to play with it, talked about it, showed it off to people. I squatted on my heels and covered my eyes with my hands. The couch and the six chairs were there, deep within my closed eyes, but they were being taken to be buried, trundling along in a hearse with windows, and they all had a pair of scissors sticking out of their hearts, one blade sticking up stiffly, like a knife. They were burying the ring as well, I could see it clearly, my father's last, cherished ring.

"I don't like your relatives," my father said.

I thought the sky had come crashing down on me. A storm must have been brewing, a summer storm, the swallows were flying low. ❧

Translated by Eszter Molnár

Sándor András Agócs

The World As We Knew It

Recollections of Peasant Life During the War

The buildings we lived in were one story high, the lofts used for storage. The walls were made of bricks and plastered over for insulation inside and out, then white-washed. Earthen—dirt—floor. The stable for the oxen was the most imposing building, reflecting with its high cathedral ceiling the economic importance of those animals.

The individual oxen certainly had more space for themselves than people did. Families, sometimes extended families of several generations, had about 200 square feet of kitchen space shared with another family, about the same for a pantry and a single room, about 20 x 20 feet, a total of about 800 square feet. In this living space marriages were consumated, and often in the presence of the whole family; children were conceived, born and raised while dying old grandparents struggled to catch a few more breaths.

I did not notice it then, and do not recall anybody complaining about it, but looking back, the incredible overcrowding is the most striking characteristic of that lifestyle. The living space was taken over by beds: they were all along the walls in the bedroom, and even in the kitchen. As for other furniture, I recall a cupboard here and there, and a table in the kitchen with some simple stools to sit on. Beds, beds all over the place. And still not enough beds: an average of two to each bed, two grown-ups, that is, and in addition children sleeping crosswise, by the foot. Unless married, males shared beds with other males and females with females, and as a rule all the males who worked with animals slept out in the stables on makeshift beds, probably because of the lack of space inside. But now that I think about it, this was also a form of birth control, reducing the chances of pregnancy somewhat.

Women emerge in my recollection as figures towering over their families. They not only ran the lives of their offspring, but pushed their husbands around as well.

Sándor András Agócs

is Associate Professor Emeritus of History and Sociology at Wayne State University in Detroit. He is the author of The Troubled Origin of the Italian Catholic Labor Movement, 1878–1914 *(Detroit: Wayne University Press, 1988).*

The dominant and domineering role played by women began at an early age. Rozika, the daughter of our neighbour, the head carter, who adopted me as her boyfriend at about the age of four, chose me. I did not choose her. She remained my constant companion, my steady girl, until I went away to boarding school when I was eleven. And the playmates of all the little boys, just like Rozika, fought off any competition fiercely and monopolised their males. Very soon there developed an alliance between my mother and Rozika, an unwritten pact: Rozika had the right and duty to protect and generally push me around since they both considered me to be the inept and fumbling male. The little girl also came to be adopted into my family, spending more time in our place than in her own.

Reflecting the dominant role played by the female in that society, a couple of explanations come to my mind: their servitude emasculated the males, who were used to being told every day in their lives what to do, when and how. Women were less exposed to the arbitrary will of the bosses, they were more on their own. And they were the ones who ruled over the household, because they were the ones who spent time there: the males only came to eat. And often not even that was the case, since the meals would be carried out to them when they worked in the fields.

Work began at four in the morning. The night-watchman would beat the ploughshare hanging from a tree branch. The carters were the first up: they threw feed to the animals, swept up and mucked out, cleaned and scrubbed down the animals, then drove them out to the long troughs for watering. While they pulled up the water from the well bucket by bucket, the men might rest the pail on the rim of the well, scoop some water out, wash their faces and take a deep draught. A hunk of bread with a piece of bacon—if we had any—was hurriedly swallowed while the oxen waited in the corral to be yoked. At six o'clock sharp, the head carter cracked his long whip and the caravan of forty oxen, ten carts and ten men was on its way, amidst dust and the creaking of the wheels. By then the sheep and pigs were moving, too, raising dust on other roads. The ox teams might be going to plough or to cart the wheat cut by scythe and tied into bundles. The bundles were loaded into carts and moved to the threshing place. Or hay might be piled on the carts and forked into veritable mountains near the stables. The carters also moved in the maize that day-labourers had ripped off ear by ear. Corn stalks were cut one by one and tied into bundles—fodder for the oxen. The remaining hard stalks became fuel, free for the taking.

At precisely eleven, the procession of women met the carters wherever they happened to be working in the fields. The women arrived in Indian file, like a primeval religious procession, walking upright and carrying on their heads identical woven baskets with the men's lunch in it. The oxen were unyoked, some feed was thrown to them. Then the couples found a shady place away from other couples and a ceremony began—a ritual that could not have been much more elaborate at the kings' tables, when Hungary had kings. Course after course, the wife would serve her "lord" (in Hungarian the same word, *uram* is used for lord and husband). First

the soup, ladled out into a plate from an earthenware container that kept it warm, and then *főzelék,* vegetables cooked in water and thickened with a roux. This was occasionally topped with some meat, cooked in a style that foreigners mistakenly call goulash. Very little meat was eaten as I was growing up. Smoked pork maybe, while it lasted, but it was usually gone by April. Chickens during the summer, but, scarce as they were, they usually came to be set aside for Sunday dinners. Fattened ducks in the autumn, but again, mostly eaten on Sundays. During the week and throughout the year it was soup and vegetables. Noodles, if no vegetables were available for the second course. Or biscuits, plain or filled with jam, if there was any. There was a hoary old phrase that was the staple constituent of my mother's recipes and characterised the culinary art among peasants: "add some jam, if you have any"; "beat a couple of eggs into it, if you have any".

And bread. Bread eaten with soup. Bread eaten with vegetables. Bread to be eaten with everything. Bread spread with lard—if you have any, for snacks for us kids, who were always hungry. Or just a thick slice of plain bread. Then we kids would climb up the mulberry trees. Mulberries planted along the road were about the only kind of fruit available to us apart from some wild berries. Of course, for a proper meal, those too had to be eaten with bread. Forty years after and ten thousand miles away, living in the United States, I still had to have bread with every meal. I would ask for bread in a Chinese restaurant. It's conditioning I'll never shake off. The Lord's Prayer, with its reference to "our daily bread" was real for us. You were not hungry so long as there was bread. Not really poor either. The trouble began when we ran out of bread.

After lunch the women headed home and the men tried to catch a brief nap. Then back to the old grindstone until sunset. It was getting dark when the teams of oxen and herders wended their way home, raising clouds of dust on the roads leading into the community. The animals were watered and fed by lamplight. And the wicks had already burned down a good bit by the time the men washed up and went into the house for their meal. For dinner they ate what they ate for lunch: for the evening meal everybody ate leftovers. And after a quick meal, the men silently filed out to the dark stables and the whole community quickly lapsed into absolute silence. After a few, tentative barks even the dogs quietened down. No wonder: only the foreman's son kept a dog as a pet. The rest of them were working dogs: they disciplined and chased the herds of sheep and pigs all day long. Like the rest of us, they were dog-tired.

Whoever was out after nine would be challenged by our fearless watchman, Uncle Balog. Sure, he occasionally neglected to call out a challenge. He always looked the other way if he saw young lovers lurking in the dark. And there was good reason. At that late hour only steady couples—already engaged and soon to be married—would be out in the dark. But other happenings also went unchallenged. His father-in-law Uncle Tót was a case in point. Uncle Tót, the shepherd who lorded it over the Count's 1,800 sheep, was the only fat man in the

community. He kept fat by occasionally slaughtering a newly born lamb at twilight. Everybody knew, of course, and Uncle Tót knew that everybody knew. But who could keep account of which of the ewes were in lamb among 1,800 sex-crazy animals? So Uncle Tót stayed fat and his son-in-law, the night-watchman, duly expanded around the waist, too.

And Uncle Tót was not the only one who pinched. We all did, and, what is more, it never occurred to us that we were stealing. The age-old wisdom backed us up: you cannot tie up the mouth of a threshing horse. How can you prevent a horse from grabbing a mouthful of the roadside grass? The trouble was there was little to grab. The only things edible were wheat and maize. But wheat was kept under seven locks and keys after threshing, and the granary had iron bars on its window. As for the maize, the crop was guarded with a less beady eye, probably because nobody wanted to eat it. But we fattened our pig on it. So we stole it while it was on the stalk and stole some more as we harvested it. And the pile became smaller and smaller in the loft of the tool shed where it was stored during the autumn. It diminished until pig-killing time, which came around Christmas. Then only a bit of maize was stolen for the chickens. And there was the coke—the fanciest and best coal to be had outside Manchester, England—in the form of bricks. We stole that to warm ourselves in winter. Carefully guarded by our fearless night-watchman, the coke was kept in a secluded place for the use of the two steam-tractors. Uncle Balog was, of course, the best man available for the task, a man of unquestionable integrity. Uncle Balog was a man of God, who, alone among us, took Holy Communion whenever he could, which was every second Sunday. And he quoted the Bible as if he had just left the seminary.

What we in my family couldn't figure out was why he insisted on visiting us during the winter evenings after we moved into the community and after my father became the foreman. He said we had the only radio around and he was interested in the news. But if that was the case why did he doze off right after arrival every evening? It became a problem because we all wanted to get into bed, but somebody had to stay up evening after evening to keep him company. One day the reason became apparent. My father happened to walk by the coal pile and noticed that it had shrunk to virtually nothing, though the steam-tractors were standing idle. Next evening I overheard my father talking to Uncle Balog. "I just ordered some coal. It looks like we are using it up faster than we thought we would be." "Ah-ha", the night-watchman answered, "It's an unusually cold winter." And with that the night-watchman's visits ceased. Oh, he came by to drop off a sackful of coal, now and then, but he did not stay. There was no need to: he understood that my father had no intention of prowling outside in the dark where he might run into somebody scurrying away with a sack of coal.

An unwritten agreement observed by everyone in the community held that whatever was useful and could be taken would be taken. I think even our good Count knew this, and what we took for our own use—not to sell, mind you—he considered, as we did, as part of our pay. Servants were paid seldom and mostly

in kind: so many kilos of wheat to be taken to the mill and ground into flour, a small amount of firewood, an acre of land to grow vegetables, maize for your chickens, ducks and pig, a litre of milk a day. But I should add that most families did not take delivery of the milk and the firewood: they asked for the market price of these items in cash in order to supplement the pitiful cash portion of their pay. Money was needed for clothes, shoes, salt and spices, cooking utensils, thread and buttons, ribbons, which the girls wore in their hair. Since money was always scarce and often missing altogether, some of these items came to be purchased from pedlars by trading wheat in return. But this meant that some of the families ran out of bread toward the end of the quarter—pay was doled out quarterly in our neck of the woods.

I recall my mother occasionally treating me and dozen or so of my playmates to thick slices of bread when I marched in for an afternoon snack. She did this because she knew that the other lads' families lacked it. She knew that well, if not for other reasons, because several of the kids' mothers were already at our house to borrow a measure of flour for a meagre soup "until pay day". We knew and they knew that whatever they "borrowed" would not be returned. It was a way of taxing us, a way of letting the rich pay: we had more than the other families. My father's pay was higher. We had a surplus also because our family was smaller than my playmates'.

Speaking of playmates and marketing: when I was about seven years old, I launched my one and only attempt to become a capitalist with the aid of my playmates, or to put it more succinctly, by exploiting them. It all began when my father built me a swing, the only one in the community. Since it was a fantastic success with my playmates, I saw no reason why I could not charge them for rides, especially since the charge was rather modest—a button for a ride, the size of the button determining its length. Soon I had hundreds of buttons of all shapes and sizes, and it was not discovered until months later as winter approached that my wealth represented all the buttons on the community's winter clothes. My mother refused to talk to me for several days, and, considering her shame, the punishment was modest. The foreman's wife had to go around with an apron full of buttons and grin and bear it as everybody sorted and picked out theirs.

The revenge of the community came that same winter. The War was raging and the American Army Air Force managed to score a direct hit on the country's only match factory. The results were spectacular: we enjoyed fantastic fireworks forty miles away. But the enjoyment was rather short lived because soon there were no matches to be had. Not at the regular market at regular prices, that is, because the commodity was available at very high prices on the black market. By mid-winter the women guarded their fires like the holy Vestal virgins of ancient Rome, and if they ever went out, they just came to us to ask for a match. My mother, you see, had laid aside a couple of years' supply by trading fat ducks. And life went on as before. Deep snow outside, the school closed, and the men in the stable resting and playing cards. As I hung out, watching them, they drew me into the card game,

suggesting innocently that we might play for a single match. That I did not have matches on me was not a problem: like any honest gambler with good credit I'd settle my losses later. The game went on for weeks. Or to be precise until it was discovered in my home that only a few boxes of matches were left of my mother's precious hoard. The men would light up with a grin in my father's presence. The fact that he did not raise hell with them for playing dirty tricks on me reflected a tacit acknowledgement that our hoarding, when others had shortages, was wrong to begin with.

The community was not set up on the basis of sharing: mine and thine were clearly distinguished; when it came to family property, private property was clearly recognised. But the property consisted of a meagre few belongings: a few clothes, beat-up old beds, a cupboard, a table and a few stools. The most important property was food. And one was not supposed to stuff one's face while someone else looked on hungry. And everybody knew very well who was going without. The closeness of the community—the utter and complete lack of privacy—had a bearing. Whatever went on in a household became public knowledge within hours.

Labour was strictly divided. Ox-drivers did things different from shepherds. This entailed a rudimentary social stratification. For some unfathomable reason the pig herd was the lowest on the social totem pole, followed by the shepherd and the night-watchman; then came the ox-drivers, headed by the chief carter, who ranked with the gamekeeper. The foreman, my father, outranked them all and this was expressed by the honorific *tés* added by people to both my father's and mother's name. *Tés* was on the lowest level of the honorific title system then in existence in Hungary. The highest was *méltóságos* (rough equivalent of the English "excellency") which was to be added to the names of high aristocrats, like our Count, generals in the armed forces and university professors. The next, and lower, title was *nagyságos* attached to the names of medium landowners, officers in the armed forces and professionals, like doctors, architects and high-school teachers. *Tés* was an abbreviation, a diminutive of the lowest honorific title *tekintetes*. No real *tekintetes* would be called *tés*; this would have been an insult to my father's boss, who was a full *tekintetes*.

In spite of a degree of social stratification, the community was a very close one, in part because of the physical closeness, but also because those of higher social status did not receive substantially higher incomes. My father's pay was not much higher than that of an ox-driver. Neither were our living quarters much better. My father's compensation for being on the top of the social hierarchy was that he did not have to do manual labour. He did it occasionally, but he did not have to.

Thus the standard of living was, by and large, the same across the board and this made for a close-knit community as did the physical closeness and the lack of privacy. This closeness was also reinforced through marriage—local girls to

local boys—but also through the institution of god-parenthood. My parents were especially frequently chosen as godparents: becoming the boss's relative was a way of gaining his favour. But it was also another way of taxing our higher income, because gifts were expected for the godchild; gifts that began to flow on the day of baptism and continued until he or she got married, with the godfather as the best man. My parents took invitations to be godparents somewhat grudgingly, but never refused, and every year they held more than one child over the baptismal font. We were fast becoming related to everybody else in the community like everybody else was.

The fact that everybody was related to everybody did not mean there were no conflicts. But interestingly enough, most of the conflicts occurred within the families: between husbands and wives, and between grown-up sons and fathers. There tended to be occasional shouting matches between members of different families, most often among those sharing the same kitchen. But conflicts almost never came to bloodshed and physical violence. When the men reached for the axes and pig-killing knives with the long, sharp blades, one of the women present would throw a hard object through the window. The shattering of the glass and the thought of having to replace it with money, God only knew from where, cooled the tempers. By the time my father appeared on the scene, as his office required him to, everything was back to normal and he would be offered a seat and treated to small talk, as if nothing had happened.

Occasionally simmering hatreds remained, however, like hot coals burning under ashes. Everyone knew about them and they were watched over carefully by young and old—especially by wives, because they threatened to explode into bloody violence if drink found its way into the community after pay day. In fact the few people who got the sack almost inevitably represented one or the other side of such buried but still simmering conflicts. It was my father's job to be the arbiter and decide who'd get the axe. He must have felt like King Solomon passing judgment. Curiously, the firing would be justified by incompetence on the job, but we all knew so-and-so had to leave because "he could not get along with the others." Why they had to be declared incompetent though, I cannot fathom, especially since my father would write them glowing references, "just to get them off my back," he'd say. Those who were to leave, packed their paltry belongings onto a cart that came to fetch them from their new place of work, and away they went, amidst very few farewells. Away they went on a cold early January morning, never to be seen again. They may have only moved twenty miles away, but as far as we were concerned, they could have gone off to America. We never even heard of them again. They might have been the butt of jokes while they stayed with us, but nobody talked about them after they left. Every time I hear the French proverb *"partir, c'est mourir un peu,"* I think about them; those who departed on those cold January mornings became our dead. All ties with them were cut by their departure. And now that I think about it, there were few ties to cut because those who left were not the stable, old families, but relative newcomers, who had settled amidst

us a year or a few years earlier. They made a try at it, but could not, apparently, fit into the community and had to leave.

That they could not fit into the community was not necessarily due to their troublesome character. It may have been. But it could have been caused by the closeness of the community, one slow to accept a new member, if not making it altogether impossible to adapt, like hens rushing over and pecking at a new one that wanders amongst them. And they relax after they chase her away, and go back to what they were doing before. Things are back to normal.

Aside from winter days, Sundays were the time of real relaxation: the ultimate of relaxation because there was no work to do—at least most Sundays. The individual plots allotted to the families had to be cultivated and Sunday was the time to do that. Then there was harvest time, when work went on, as if God had not leant back and rested on the seventh day. Still, some Sundays meant time off from work even during the work season.

By 7 o'clock, after the animals were fed and watered, the straight razorblades glinted in the sunshine as the men gave themselves the once-a-week shave, and after that the once-a-week wash from head to toe, standing in washbasins on the kitchen floor. They put on clean underwear and shined their high-boots by spreading spittle on them with a rag.

Every second Sunday mass would be said in a little chapel three miles away. After I had left the community to study in a Catholic high school, the good Fathers had trouble explaining to me why I had to go to church every Sunday, whereas before, in our well-ordered universe on the Count's estate, God only used to require our presence every second week.

That little church on the estate in which the angels on the fresco held the Count's ornate coat-of-arms firmly in hand, leaving the Virgin Mary precariously standing on a tiny cloud, holding Baby Jesus in her arms: as a young kid I used to worry that the Virgin and her Son might fall down, and wish that the angels would let the Count's coat of arms fall and give her a helping hand. And the priest! He was huge. He must have weighed 300 pounds. Over and over we heard his favourite sermon about how sinful it was to waste food. Like good Christians, we all said Amen to the sermons and went home. And nobody mentioned the irony: the fat priest talking about wasting food to people in whose lives a good meal remained a major event, and whose biggest preoccupation throughout their lives was hunger.

Maybe it was because of the silliness of the sermon that the men rarely came to church. More precisely, once a year, on Good Friday, when work would be suspended and the men ordered to stand in line so that the priest could hear their confession. I recall vaguely seeing Protestants as well among the men patiently listing their sins in the confessional. Historians will tell you that once upon a time, during feudalism, the landlords determined the religion of their serfs: *Cuius regio, eius religio.* This imposition is supposed to have ceased in modern times and probably it did in most places. Enlightened as he was, our Count probably would

not have minded if we turned Muslim and worshipped Allah, the merciful, instead of his God, the God Catholics honoured. But the trouble was there was only a Catholic church near us, with a Catholic priest offering the service, so we all patiently turned into Catholics if we wanted to worship.

But those in the church rarely included married women. On Sundays they were bustling in the baking house which released billowing smoke as the ovens were heated to bake pastries and roast chickens and ducks, after these gentle animals met their end in a somewhat pagan ritual to our Lord God whose name we honoured on Sunday. The blood of the ducks and chickens, like that of the sacrificial animals in pagan Roman times, was collected in a vessel, not to be spread on an altar, as in Roman times, but to be fried in fat with onions and eaten as the first course, a preview of the splendour that Sunday dinner was. Women put on their ceremonial black dresses to serve it. Smells filled the air and laughter of anticipation that turned into low tones of excited conversation and finally silence as the dinner came to be eaten.

And soon after it was over the people collected into what I later learned social scientists call peer groups. The men together in a shady place, Uncle Szalai taking the lead as usual with tales about his exploits as a corporal during the First World War. His tales were becoming more heroic with every telling, his exploits grander and grander. During the nineteen hundred and forty-first year of Our Lord, he already had colonels jumping when he walked in and asking for his advice and an enemy battalion hastily retreating when he appeared on the front facing them. But then he had a drawer full of medals to prove that he was more soldier than coward.

The women collected in another group after cleaning up the kitchens. The bachelors, the marriageable young men, were in yet another group, not too far from a group of marriageable girls, and we kids drifted from one group to another. A game started among bachelors, who drew a line in the dust, threw pennies toward it from a distance, and whoever got the nearest mark collected the dusty coppers, shook them in his cupped hand before throwing them in the air and picking his winnings. The game ended as quickly as it started: there were not too many pennies to go around. Besides all the beribboned girls, in their Sunday best, had already gathered and the boys and girls took off together "to look for the berries". Well, berries could really be found. They were rather hard to find, but that was not the object of the game anyway. Harassed somewhat by us kids, who were encouraged by our mothers to follow them, lovers could be alone for a minute here and a minute there, for a quick embrace and a hurried kiss.

The young people would be back by sunset. Uncle Lukács would get out his zither, a stringed instrument, and dust was kicked up by dancing young feet. And after the dances, songs were sung. Usually sad and slow songs—quite a change after the fast rhythm of the dance which was a *csárdás*. Jóska Balog, who everybody said had the finest voice but also something of a reputation as drinker and troublemaker, would strike up a song, as people old and young hung around him in a circle:

Oh, I am an ox-driver, I am
Six forints is my pay
The New Year's come, the cart is here
To carry me away.

The melody was long drawn out, and full of pain, like the whining of a dog. The song of the homeless continued:

I am sad to leave my oxen,
My iron yoke pin here
I will miss my carved cart
And have to leave my good lass here

But suddenly the tone would change from a slow, sad groan, into a fast crisp song of defiance:

My horses in the meadow
My cows in the grass
My gallant steed is at the door
And I am with my lass

"My gallant steed"? The ox-driver never once will sit on a horse! "My cows", "my horses"? He will never own much more than the rags on his back! The song, the singer, and the audience, too, escaped into a world of dreams for a magic moment. It was a defiance of reality. And there was more to come:

I spit on my boots and shine them shiny,
I am an ox-driver, I am
I climb on my cart, piled high with manure
And spit on the foreman's daughter from where I am.

I threw a quick glance at my eighteen-year-old sister. Was he after her? No, he could not be after the foreman's daughter. The song was not addressed to her. I looked for my father. He had already left, gone home for dinner. If the defiance was directed at him, the authority figure, he did not hear it. Still, the party was over. Was it because it was getting dark? An embarrassing silence settled and people moved away. Ten minutes later everything was quiet. Then a voice cut into the night, shrill and irritated, and very loud: "Kati". Aha: Kati Szalkai, who had the reputation of an "easy" girl, was still lurking out in the dark with one of the young men. Her voice came from a distance away, from under a group of trees: "Coming, Mother". Then silence again. Silence, like on any other evening. Sunday was over.

So what? Sundays were not our biggest holidays anyway. The real parties were occasioned by weddings. Marriages were in fact the most important events in our lives: they were the occasions for preparing the finest food and mountains of it. The families of both the groom and bride went broke in order to throw a proper wedding party: they borrowed against their incomes far into the future and often

starved for months after the party was over. But for a magic single occasion there was a party, a feast that left the Count's party a pale imitation.

On the morning of the wedding the tables were carried outdoors—the weddings usually took place in September—pushed together into a long single table covered with immaculately white linen, and loaded with roasts of all kinds and pastries and bottles of wine, virtually never seen in the community except at weddings. Even outsiders, passing through, would be cornered and forced to eat and drink, and bottles were thrust into their hands when they finally begged off.

Talking of outsiders, most of the people who would come from the outside were not really outsiders: they were visiting relatives who came to celebrate the patron saint's day. Workers came from the outside, too, to supplement the labour force at harvest time. But like the relatives, they were the same people appearing and reappearing year after year: their arrival was like a reunion. I was waiting every year for the return of a man on the threshing team who always came loaded with pears, a fruit I never ate on any other occasion: I still have the taste of those pears in my mouth.

Pedlars came too, and what an event it was! They came on carts, bicycles, and some on foot, carrying their wares on their backs. But they, too, like the visiting relatives and the harvesters, became personal acquaintances, arriving according to a regular schedule, always at the same time of year. Usually not much was bought from them: some sweets for the kids, a piece of ribbon, a spool of thread, a drinking glass or two. Shopping was increasingly done at the shops in a nearby village. One of the women would walk the three miles to the village, and, before she left, she'd make the rounds to find out who needed what. Shopping could also be done in a nearby town, about eight miles away. The trip there would be by train—rarely, not more than once or twice a year. When somebody travelled there, it became a major event in the whole community. It was always the women who went, returning loaded with goodies, shoes, clothes, sweets for the children, cooking utensils. Everything would be spread out for inspection and admired by all.

Of those who came from outside, even the beggars who visited us were regulars. They made regular rounds, and when they stopped coming, we knew they had died somewhere. God rest his soul. We kids missed one old gent in particular, an obviously déclassé intellectual whose trademark was a fancy silk tie worn under a rag of a jacket *sans chemise*. When he came for a day, like the other beggars, he would sleep in one of the stables where beds were kept for the purpose. On the evening of their arrival, food would find its way out to them, with the families informally taking a turn in feeding them. It would be a child who would take the food out; hence the fondness we had for the old gent with the silk tie. In return for the food, he'd regale us with tales, tales about faraway cities. He even claimed to have travelled abroad, to cities forty miles away, cities most of us never hoped to see, something we strained our imaginations to believe.

Another group of outsiders, the nomadic Gypsies, gave us the jitters. When they appeared, mothers would nervously call in their offspring and lock their doors and

the gamekeeper would come running with his gun over his shoulder. Why? Everyone knew they would give us all kinds of trouble. They'd cast spells making us sick; not to speak of the fact that they would steal our chickens. (Of course they would: how else were they to feed themselves if all access to food was denied to them?)

Looking back from here and now, it occurs to me that we resented them most probably because of their unpredictable behaviour. Their arrival was unexpected, not like the beggars who made regular rounds and became part of the yearly circle of events in our lives. The Gypsies were real outsiders to us; strangers, mistrusted and carefully watched over while they were in our midst, like the gendarmes, who ironically enough, often came chasing after the Gypsies. When the policemen came, usually about once a month—as with the arrival of Gypsies nobody could predict when exactly—tension ran through the community, a tension that would remain until they left. It was the outside world which had invaded our little social microcosm.

AFTERWORD

This essay grew out of a lecture assignment at Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan. When I first contemplated the topic, I searched high and low, but could not locate a copy of Gyula Illyés' *Puszták népe (People of the Puszta)*, first published in 1936, which described a community similar to the one in which I grew up, located not far from mine. Thus I proceeded to write the lecture on my own. Years later, when I managed to get a copy of Illyés' book, as I expected, some overlap between my essay and his became apparent, in spite of the fact that he describes a peasant community during the First World War and after, and my recollections cover the years of the Second World War. This overlap, I believe, reflects more than just the fact that I read Illyés' book during my youth in Hungary. It also bespeaks the tenacity of a lifestyle, in this case not only because of traditional peasant resistance to change, but also because of the conservative, reactionary nature of the political regime in Hungary. The folk song I have quoted appears in Illyés' volume with only three stanzas, while my memory dredged up an additional stanza, rebellious and defiant. A sign of times to come.

"Uncle Gyula", the best-loved poet and spiritual father to my generation of Hungarian peasant intellectuals, closed his essay with a dedication to those who will continue reporting the fate of our people, the people of the *puszta*. And I dedicate this update to his memory. His essay, by the way, has appeared in French, German, Chinese and English translations, the latter in 1967, from Corvina Press of Budapest. ❧

Liszt's Life after Death

An Interview with Alan Walker

Judit Rácz: *You are here again in Hungary for the Hungarian publication of* The Death of Franz Liszt Based on the Unpublished Diary of His Pupil Lina Schmalhausen. *The diary recounts the last ten days of Liszt's life and tells a very different story than the accepted version of a well-cosseted Liszt dying peacefully with the word "Tristan" on his lips.*

Alan Walker: The diary, for which I wrote a long preface and epilogue putting it into its proper biographical context, corrects the sanitized version of Liszt's death put about by the Bayreuth publicity machine. When he died, he was in Bayreuth, right in the middle of the 1886 Festival. After Wagner's death in 1883, Cosima was left in sole charge of the Festival, and she had asked her father to attend it in order to drum up some badly needed publicity, because the event was suffering a deficit. The premier performance of *Tristan und Isolde* was scheduled to take place, and there was a performance of *Parsifal* too. Liszt attended both, but he was already seriously ill. The fact that he passed away in Bayreuth enabled Cosima to put out a number of stories picked up by the early biographers about how Liszt died, allegedly surrounded by a loving family, and, worst of all, with the dying word "Tristan" on his lips. We know now that these stories were completely false. And we know this because Lina Schmalhausen produced an 84-page document relating, in graphic detail, the last ten days of Liszt's life. I used the diary to round out the story of Liszt's death in the third volume of my biography, and it did attract

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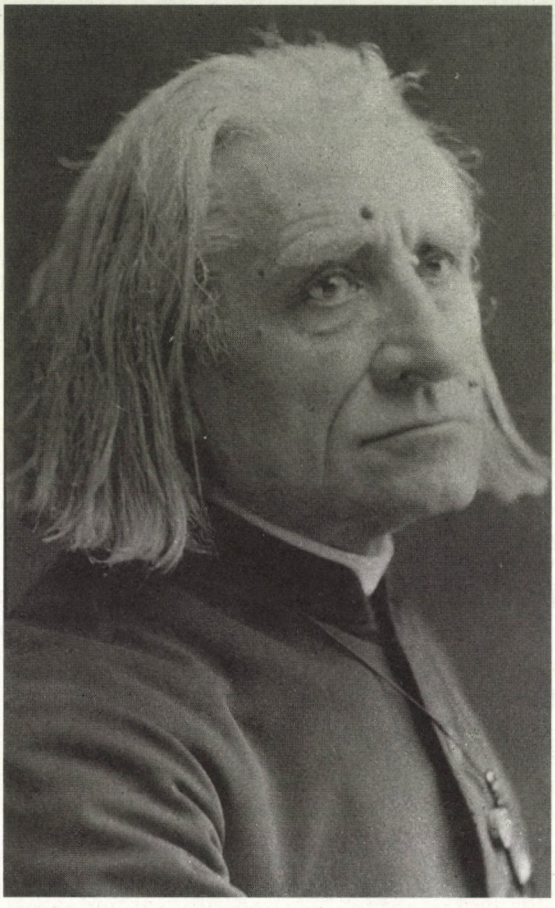
Alan Walker

is Professor Emeritus of Music at McMaster University, Canada and author of numerous books, including Reflections of Liszt; The Death of Franz Liszt Based on the Unpublished Diary of His Pupil Lina Schmalhausen; Franz Liszt: The Virtuoso Years 1811–1847; The Weimar Years 1848–1861; The Final Years 1861–1886.

He is currently at work on a biography of Hans von Bülow scheduled for publication by Oxford University Press in 2008–9.

Judit Rácz,

a translator and journalist, was the translator of volumes 1–2 of Alan Walker's Liszt biography.



Franz Liszt, a photograph taken in Hungary, 1876.

some attention from readers. A copy of it has been in my possession since as early as 1977. It is a riveting story: it tells a tale of family neglect, of medical malpractice, and of behaviour bordering on cruelty. We have a saying in English: "Bad things can happen to good people." I often think of that in connection with the way Liszt died.

Who was with Liszt during those last days?

Aside from Cosima, there were two of her daughters (Daniela and Eva), various functionaries, acquaintances, pupils and his manservant Miska. Lina Schmalhausen arrived at Bayreuth at Liszt's invitation, and was allowed proximity to Liszt in the first days. Cosima hated her, and the feeling was reciprocated. Lina was also highly unpopular with the other pupils who were present at Bayreuth at that time, expecting some free lessons from Liszt. He was a kind of Pied Piper of Hamelin—wherever he travelled a coterie of students and followers and hangers-on just trailed behind him. If Liszt had not gone to Bayreuth, they would not have been

there either. When it became evident to Cosima that her father's illness was life-threatening, she banished the students from his sickroom. Most of them, much to Lina's disgust, had a lot of fun in the local pubs in nearby hamlets. Cosima gave strict orders to Miska, instructing who was to be admitted to her father and who wasn't. Lina somehow got the better of Cosima because she simply stayed in the garden and was able to look into Liszt's room from the stairs of the veranda. That's how she was able to witness Liszt's last days and hours, the bodily symptoms, the injections given by the doctors, the care—or the lack of it—he was given. The diary of Lina Schmalhausen was in fact produced by default: Lina Ramann, Liszt's official biographer, was ill at the time. When she heard that Liszt had died in Bayreuth, she wanted a full account from someone who had been there throughout and whom she could trust—so she asked Fräulein Schmalhausen to write it. Shortly after Liszt's death Lina dipped her pen in vitriol and let fly. She had old scores to settle against Cosima as well as some of the students she actively disliked, and who disliked her. So you have to treat this highly personal document as you treat any other similar document: you crosscheck it for accuracy by comparing it with evidence from other sources. There were enough people in Bayreuth who at the time also kept diaries and wrote letters. All the major factual assertions that Lina articulates can be proved to be accurate. As for her opinions, they are a matter of interpretation.

You note that she did all sorts of things for Liszt—housekeeping and taking care of him when he was ill—and they also allowed themselves intimate gestures in public, all of which implies they were physically close. Does it matter whether they were lovers or not?

It matters in the sense that if they were lovers, we have to say so. And there is no evidence that they were. They were certainly very alive to the perception that they might create. It is my conviction that on Liszt's side, it was a father-daughter relationship. As for Lina, I have no doubt that she was in love with Liszt, but then so were many of his students. She, however, had the great advantage of having crossed Liszt's path when he needed a woman's touch in his life.

The Diary provides some fascinating psychological insights into the portrait of Liszt and his times, and of the people surrounding him.

Let's examine the story: since Wagner's death, and for the rest of her life, Liszt's daughter Cosima was a professional widow. By now she hardly talked to her father and she did not even answer his letters. There is a famous episode that characterises the declining relationship between the pair. Liszt attended the 1884 Bayreuth festival which was, for the first time, directed by the widow. Late one night, Liszt lingered in the Festspielhaus after the performance was over, the lights were dimmed, the curtains lowered, the theatre was empty. He was walking along the dimly-lit corridors towards the exit, and suddenly he saw Cosima walking towards him, and he called out, "Cosette!". She just walked right past him, like a

ghost, ignoring him. The story comes from Liszt himself. By the early summer of 1886, when the future of the Festival was in jeopardy, Cosima came to him with the unvarnished request that he should visit Bayreuth and help; she knew that his presence would stimulate the ticket sales. Liszt naturally obliged, referring to himself cynically as "Bayreuth's Poodle". It illustrates the golden thread that ran through Liszt's life. His watchword was *génie oblige:* "Genius carries obligations." If you have a world profile, and the world recognises you as a genius, why waste your celebrity by staying at home and doing nothing with it? Liszt was a great believer in using his celebrity and placing it in the service of worthy causes, and he thought Wagner's art was such a cause. He made a clear and interesting distinction between Wagner the man and Wagner the musician, and was probably the first to do so—we may call it Liszt's posthumous "gift" to Wagner. Ever since, this is how we have viewed Wagner, as we do with no other composer really (being moved to tears by his music while saying, "Oh, but the man was pretty awful!"). In 1886, Liszt was approaching his 75th birthday, and he received many special invitations to honour this anniversary, most of which he accepted. By the time he got to Bayreuth he was exhausted and ill, having contracted pneumonia a short time earlier in Munkácsy's château in Luxemburg. But he went simply because Cosima had asked him to do so.

How did Lina's account affect you? A friend of mine called it an endlessly sad story.

That is probably one of the best ways to put it. It contributes to the idea of Liszt as a kind of King Lear, being caused endless grief by his nearest and dearest. The story had to be told, because what had been said in the earlier biographies about his death was preposterous and absurd—and we all believed it for much too long. I, too, grew up with the Hollywood version of Liszt's life and death.

What does the story add to the portrait of Cosima?

It does explain much of Cosima's ambivalence towards her father, the roots of this ambivalence going back to her childhood when she felt intense loneliness and neglect. Her father hardly ever saw her and the other children. If we stand back and look at the story of Liszt's last years and last days from a distance, it can almost seem like payback time: "Because you neglected me when I was a child, I shall neglect you when you are an old man and need my services as you are about to die." Of course, I am not suggesting that this was a deliberately malicious way of handling the situation on her side, but it is an intriguing way to interpret what happened. The circle, so to say, was closed.

You write extensively about the Liszt–Wagner "competition". Wagner seems to have been the winner.

In Liszt and Wagner circles the topic may be still alive, but for the general public this "competition" has long since died. It is like comparing apples and oranges. If you ask who was the greater composer of piano music, transcriptions and songs—there is no contest, it was Liszt. If you ask who was the greater opera composer, it

was Wagner. But if you stand back and look at these two giants complete, and ask who was the greater, I can only say that musical criticism has enough difficulties distinguishing between a Beethoven and a Boccherini. To compare and contrast a Liszt and a Wagner—we simply do not have the right criteria to do this.

People also used to argue about who was the greater innovator.

Innovation and quality are not necessarily connected. Liszt was no doubt a great innovator. There are many well-established proofs of the fact that Wagner got some of his better ideas from Liszt. But the idea itself is never the important element—what is important is what is done with it. And what Wagner did with some of those ideas is quite miraculous. For the rest, Wagner today obviously has a greater following in the world than Liszt does.

How can you describe the nature of their influence on one another?

Wagner was upset for instance when it was made public that he recognised the influence of Liszt's symphonic poems on his own harmonic language... I would simply say that the influence was mutual.

Do you think Liszt has become more popular and more understood compared to thirty years ago?

The answer is yes to both questions. Though we are several generations away from Liszt, the following analogy may be accurate: children often have a happier relationship with their grandparents than with their parents, who are too close. To apply this psychological model to music: we had to wait till the death of Stravinsky, Bartók and Schoenberg before we could see the 19th century in a better perspective. When I was young, growing up in England, one did not readily confess one's love of Tchaikovsky—or Chopin, for that matter: they were much too popular for a musicologist to take them seriously. But later in the 20th century, and certainly now, in the 21st, the 19th century suddenly becomes respectable enough to be put into university courses. And once the Romantic period is revived, Liszt is inevitably revived with it, because he was central to his time. This has not necessarily to do with the quality of his music, but if you were to remove Liszt from the 19th century, you would have great difficulty in imagining how things could have developed in the way that they did. He was a great historical force and the greatest source of influence of his time—but that does not mean he was also the greatest composer.

Do you think the kind of misgivings that surrounded him because of his weaker compositions still prevail?

He did write weak compositions. But we don't remember composers because of their weak compositions. Nobody remembers Beethoven because he wrote the "Battle" Symphony. If you look at the complete catalogue of Liszt's works, you'll find about 1,400 items, ranging from works like the *Christus* oratorio of three and

a half hours, to the shortest song of about one minute. To answer your question: If we find fifty undeniable masterworks among them—and clearly we find more—that is surely enough for Liszt to gain entry into the Pantheon.

Your biography sets you firmly among those who have revived music biographical writing. What tendencies do you see in that genre?

One thing that I have noticed is that biography tends to fall into the hands of musicologists who are wonderful at collecting information but not so wonderful at presenting them in an accessible form. Biography is obviously a branch of literature, but certain techniques developed in musicology are being transplanted into musical biographies. There is an incessant thirst for "where does this fact or piece of information come from". No longer can we say: "Look, take my word for it." But here lies a danger. Modern biographies are stuffed with citations, and sometimes read like telephone directories. Of course, I also use footnotes and citations—but if you'll allow me a rare note of self-congratulation, I do try to make them as interesting and gripping as possible. Musical biography seems to be losing its literary roots, and I am rather sad about that. The typical biographer-musicologist today tends to think that the reader owes him his time—whereas he owes him nothing. I've often said, perhaps a little too brazenly, that if I can't hold the reader's attention to the bottom of the first page, and encourage him to turn to the next one, I don't deserve to have a reader.

The "fourth volume" as it were of your Liszt biography, Reflections on Liszt, *was published in 2005; an "open letter" to Liszt forms the Epilogue—why the letter?*

The very idea of addressing someone who has been dead for more than 120 years, and in whose company I have spent so much of my own life, appealed to me. But I wrote the Open Letter mainly to answer the criticisms expressed in some of the nearly one hundred reviews about my Liszt biography. Some critics accused me of having fallen in love with my subject, leading me to write hagiography. This Letter gave me the opportunity to put some distance between myself and Liszt. I'm very respectful to Liszt, of course. But let me mention here two issues from among the many that I raised in my Letter. I told him that in my opinion he spent far too much time writing to the press, particularly in his twenties and thirties—defending a point of view, promoting an idea, and generally writing about things that in retrospect seem to be trivial. I am also critical of the way Liszt treated his children, because it does amount to neglect. I can understand why it happened. As Peter Raabe put it many years ago: would we really have wanted the world-famous virtuoso and composer to stay at home and be a father and a husband to Marie d'Agoult? In the deepest sense that would have been negligent, and a criminal waste of his gifts, which had to be shared with the rest of the world. But his children certainly missed him, and suffered accordingly.

He had all those pupils in tow. I'm curious about the master-class, which Liszt invented.

The concept of the master-class emerged in the 1850s in Weimar and was social in origin. Every Sunday afternoon Liszt would have a soirée. He would listen to, or take part in, musical performances. His housekeeper, Pauline Apel, would then serve cookies and wine. Sometimes Liszt would send one of his students to the piano, and occasionally would make a comment on the interpretation, or retail some anecdotes about his connections to the composer in question. That is how it all started.

Was there actual teaching going on?

Yes of course. Later on the classes were held three times a week and followed a kind of structure. The class would assemble at a prearranged hour. If the students had a piece of music they wanted to play, they placed it on the piano. Then Liszt would emerge from his bedroom after having taken a siesta (he had often been up since four o'clock in the morning) and advance toward the piano, greeting everybody, going down the aisle like royalty. He would then rifle through the music placed on the piano, and pick out a piece that he wanted to hear, saying, "Well, who plays this?" And the music-making would begin. Liszt would sometimes sit at the second piano or shuffle around silently in his slippers. Then he'd make a comment on a specific interpretation, the tempo, the pedalling, the adjustment of the fingering, or just tell an anecdote ("I well remember when Chopin..." etc.). By and large he avoided technical instruction. He had a famous saying: "Wash your dirty linen at home!" He also said in a spirit of self-sarcasm, and in criticism of the very profession of which we now consider him to have been a central part: "I am no piano professor!". He himself would also play the pieces, often from memory, and treat the student to mighty conceptions of Beethoven especially, and sometimes of Bach, Chopin and Schumann. Many of the students kept diaries. They later recalled such moments after they had returned to their respective countries, and often said: "Liszt played like this!" But sometimes he didn't...

Do you think some of them just exploited his name?

Of course. To be known as a student of Liszt gave one genuine capital. Sometimes Hans von Bülow was brought in to substitute for Liszt if the latter felt indisposed, and one of the first things he did was "to clean out the Augean stables", as he put it. He often gave the students a rough time, accusing them of taking advantage of the master's kindness: "Most of you are not destined for the musical profession at all, and you shouldn't be here." He drew attention to the paradox that "in the best pianist's house you can hear the worst pianists playing."

Does this not discredit Liszt's master-classes and the students in general?

No. The same master-classes also produced Tausig, Siloti, Rosenthal, Friedheim, Reisenauer, Bülow—some of the outstanding pianists of the second half of the 19th century. Don't forget that these classes were free. If the greatest living pianist is offering classes for free, who would not cross oceans to get some? Many

arrived, played, but did not stay. Liszt called them "one-day flies". He only referred to the best ones as his students. He even called them "my children".

For the general reader—how would you describe the book you're currently working on, the one about Hans von Bülow?

Hans von Bülow was the first virtuoso conductor—a role which commands attention—and so far there has been no biography of him in English. He seems to have been airbrushed out of music history after his divorce from Cosima, though he continued to play a central part in both Liszt's and Wagner's lives. His artistic career is very interesting. Aside from his conducting, he had a parallel career as a virtuoso concert pianist—for Liszt, he was *the* concert pianist (with the possible exception of Karl Tausig). After having recovered from the nervous breakdown occasioned by his divorce, he got his concert fingers back in shape and, with some encouragement from Liszt, he embarked on his world tours. He gave more than 3000 recitals in the course of his career. During the first tour of America, in 1875-76, he played 139 recitals and performed more than 1,000 works from memory. Later on he brought the Meiningen Court Orchestra to fame, took them on tour across Europe, demanding that they play everything from memory—Beethoven, Brahms, Mendelssohn, Schubert—everything. Nothing like the perfection of this ensemble had ever been heard before. Imagine an orchestra today—even the best—playing everything from memory! Bülow then became the first artistic director of the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra and in the five years before he died, he conducted 55 concerts with them. He was simultaneously the conductor of the Hamburg Philharmonic Orchestra and the Bremen Philharmonic. For a time he spent his life on trains, commuting from one city to another in an endless circle. And while all this was going on, he continued with his piano tours, presenting the last five sonatas of Beethoven in one recital, and eventually an entire "Beethoven Cycle" spread across four consecutive evenings, which unfolded a chronological sequence of all the main sonatas and variations from the earliest to the latest. The last recital of this Cycle, incidentally, contained not only the *Hammerklavier* Sonata, but also the hugely demanding *Diabelli* Variations. And of course, Bülow was a personality. He had the gift of instant retort. Let me give you just two examples. When he was conducting the Meiningen orchestra, he had daily difficulties with two musicians; one was called Schmidt and the other one Schulz. One morning, the orchestra manager comes up to Bülow with the sad news that Herr Schmidt has died the previous night. There is a pause, then Bülow enquires, "and Schulz?" On another occasion, after a piano recital, he arrives back in his hotel quite late, and has to climb the staircase in the dark. Another character was rushing down the stairs at high speed. They collide in the dark. After picking themselves up and brushing off the dust, the other fellow says angrily: "Donkey!" Bülow bows and replies: "Hans von Bülow!" As you can see, he is a biographer's dream. ❧

Zsolt Láng

Homing In

Endre Karátson: *Otthonok* (Homes), 2 vols. Jelenkor Kiadó, Pécs, 2007, 312 & 329 pp. • Gábor Vida: *Nem szabad és nem királyi* (Unfree and Unroyal). Budapest, Magvető, 2007, 316 pp. • Dezső Tandori: *A komplett tandori—komplett eZ?* (A complete tandori—completely nutZ?). Budapest, Palatinus Kiadó, 202 pp.

Where is a writer at home? Among memories? In the language? In the story? It is customary to think of Count Miklós Bethlen's memoirs, written exactly three hundred years ago, as a precursor to the Hungarian novel:

> With me Venus is not mad, lustful and persistent, but moderate yet fervent, profuse and regular, which through God-given moderation and strength has not diminished greatly even today in my dotage.

In language antique in flavour though readily understood today, he speaks of himself and of the ways of the world in a poetically soulful manner and with a chronicler's fidelity. It is no accident that his work served as a model for those who followed him. To the question that he poses himself as to how posterity would read his work, he answers: "they should seek solace in it and laugh at the deceitful world."

Endre Karátson was born in 1933 and thus witnessed both the Second World War and the 1956 Revolution. His two volumes of memoirs, however, are first and foremost personal history and only secondarily a historical chronicle. He was one of the roughly one-quarter of a million Hungarians, mostly young, who tasted freedom during the Revolution and had no wish to live any longer in a dictatorship. He has been in Paris ever since. He taught comparative literature before his retirement, published several collections of essays in French and some collections of short stories in his Hungarian. These were put out by émigré publishers in the West before 1990 and in Hungary itself since then. He never considered himself to be an émigré writer, totally rejecting any classification of literature by national borders. (The Hungarian Diaspora has scattered to virtually every corner of the globe; contemporary Hungarian literature now speaks in as many accents: the Parisian, for example, and that in several varieties, not to speak of a Dutch, London, Dublin, Stockholm, Australian, Canadian, Costa Rican and even Andorran—almost as a colonial literature in its own right.)

The opening of the book is Proustian, not with the taste of the *petites madeleines* dunked in tea, but with the welling tears that elicit the process of remembrance.

Zsolt Láng

is a native of Transylvania. He works as an editor at the Hungarian-language literary journal Látó *in Marosvásárhely (Târgu Mureş), Romania. His books include four volumes of fiction and collections of essays and autobiographical pieces.*

The tears are shed for the loss of Nicole, his companion of so many years. Remembrance releases heartfelt pain into the sparkling dazzle of the world of memory.

In search of lost lamentations. Finding their sources may lead to the father-complex postulated by Freud or even to the specific sources of Karátson's oeuvre. A memoir, which may be read either as a story of personal development or it may be styled a *"roman des origines du roman"*—a novel about the roots of the novel. An example of the metamorphosis of writing. What makes a story? Why and how? How do the events in life become literature? Not just responses, not a documentary record, but a story. Telling the *how* of it rather than the what. A story in which there is more than what is tellable.

The personal and family lamentations (his younger brother's tragic death, the loss of other family members and friends) are joined with those caused by historical cataclysms, harrowing incidents of war and revolution. "I was racked by sobbing, and I didn't care that people were watching. Others were also weeping. It was a joyfully painful experience that made one forget all else" (that was in late October 1956, at the height of the Revolution). Mournful weeping mixes with happiness, the angry with lethargy, the anguished with liberation, the justified with the inexplicable. And again and again we return to a lament for Nicole from 1967: "It self-evidently stands to reason that I love her; the two of us belong together, and the turmoil of the last five years have only confirmed that."

Nicole embodies the lost younger brother, who had to be protected and who it was not permissible to hurt, but Nicole also embodies the mother to whom one's successes had to be displayed, from whom warmth and solace could be sought. It is Nicole with whom the most complete, the most intense and the most primeval love can be experienced behind which hides Thebes, the city of unconscious sins. "It is possible, indeed quite natural, to revolt against her; but hard to live without her."

A subtle psychological background makes itself felt at every turn. Down in the depths the undisclosable takes a hundred different forms. The evocation of Albert Gyergyai, Karátson's legendary professor of French during his university studies in Budapest, is a literary and psychological masterstroke; the chapter about him would not be out of place in a Gide novel. Gyergyai, one of the contributors to the great literary magazine *Nyugat,* translator into Hungarian of Proust, Gide, Camus, Mauriac and many more, smoothed the path for the nineteen-year-old Karátson with affection. It is a mark of that love that once he had disclosed that it was not purely paternal and was rejected, he accepted the role of father with resignation:

> If I fall head over heals in love with a woman and I'm turned down, I make myself scarce fairly promptly. I lick my wounds and try to soothe the pangs, to vanquish the masochism that aspires to overwhelm me. And what joy when indifference comes to power, the sense of loss is soaked up. He behaved in exactly the opposite manner. His pious temperament sought relief on high; he idealised me and preferred to find fulfilment in my company, to derive satisfaction from cultivating the contact rather than breaking with it. At least that is what he affected, but as to what in truth was going on inside him, what conflicts were tormenting him, I could not really tell; nor indeed did I make much effort to find out. Our friendship was built on this tactful arrangement: he idealised and restrained himself; I behaved as if I noticed nothing.

That which Miklós Bethlen urges his successors to do, namely to learn from what he had recorded, but at the same time also laugh at the world, can also be with a clear conscience be urged on readers of Karátson. For his is a book that helps us

orientate ourselves in love and literature, in linguistics and astrology—while being vivid and entertaining. (We learn, for example, why the poet Sándor Weöres wished to flee to Paris, and from whom.)

Karátson has discussed the difference between life and literature more than once in his collections of essays. His recognition of that distinction is what this memoir is based on. A characteristic *impassibilité* of the Karátson style, the dispassionateness with which he views his own life, may also be traced to his insistence on the inexpungible separateness of life and literature. Equally, though, the tears betray the true depth and inexpressibility of involvement, the *impossibilité*, the hopelessness of telling stories. A person is walled up within himself. But that is not home, because captivity cannot be a home. What then? An answer comes in the closing lines of the book. A memory-trace. A stormy seashore. The narrator is in the heaving water, while a frantic Nicole is on the beach. "She shouted out my name, almost screamed, the one that she had dreamed up when I christened her Pip, and there, in that cry, I truly and enduringly felt myself to be at home."

There is a short story by Borges, "St Mark's Gospel", in which the protagonist reads from the Bible to his visitors, simple villagers who in the end call him Christ and, to fulfil his fate, nail him to a cross. The first in this collection of short stories by Gábor Vida, "Rise Up and Walk!", likewise settles the fate of a figure who turns up by chance and is obliged to play a part (and die) in a role that others have assigned to him. (See pp. 45–52 of this issue.) That reference to Borges is not accidental; nor is that to García Márquez in another context. The pace of the story-telling, the magical link between cause and effect, the exoticism rooted in that magical connection, the attraction to a more archaic language and a slower-moving tempo—all offer parallels. Perhaps also Transylvania's more private locations, its own Macondo so to speak. But can literature be dependent on locale? Is it profitable to speak about a specific Transylvanian Hungarian literature? Hardly, the answer must be: any kind of typology is going to be forced. Critiques of Ádám Bodor's chains of interlinked short stories almost always acknowledge their geographically-specific exoticism, the distinct otherness of subjects, the archaic turns of phrase, identifying in these a Transylvanian Hungarian literature; in the meantime they barely notice Bodor's masterly handling of his material. Bodor has a genius for minimalism and invests the emotional mood of his stories with a polyphony structured by the laws of poetry. (Literature is, after all, a function of language and not landscape, even though language can preserve an aspect of place.)

The story "King of the Shepherds" concerns a mysterious helicopter wreck and a triangular stone. No one speaks about the latter because "first comes silence, then knowledge, and only after that comes talk," but talking is subject to strict conditions and riddled with mistakes. How would it be possible to talk about something that cannot be talked about, since who would believe it anyway, since it's a secret anyway, because its very existence is a secret? Vida's stories deal with the untellable: they beat about the bush, obliquely hint, essentially keep quiet about what has happened, indeed leave it ambiguous whether anything happened at all.

The locality of the stories is almost inaccessible mountain country (just as in Bodor) and, from another angle, an "unfree and unroyal" town (Gábor Vida lives in the Transylvanian city of Marosvásárhely (Târgu Mureş), which is where, in the Seventies, the poet Attila Vári, born in 1946, wrote his "slow-motion" city tales). Localities that the characters in the book claim to be eternal truly are so, in the sense that should they

happen to be no longer there, their name and their legend will live on. The mysterious stone in question is one on which the shepherds elected their king, then the Communists arrived and banned the right of assembly. The legend has remained, and the custom lives on, like an underground stream, because it is eternal. In Corporal Radu's dream, Radu is led to the stone by the prophet Elijah so that he will be the king taking the place of the shepherds who no longer dare to go there because a high-ranking Party functionary has forbidden it. Radu returns to the barracks and is promptly locked up. However, when his year of rule has elapsed he blindly obeys the commands of the story: he escapes, not even the colonel and all his crack shots are able to stop him from returning to the stone and relinquishing the kingship to someone, through which very act a new king is proclaimed.

While it is unclear that any of the stories actually happen as told, there is always something, most often in the form of an object left behind, that testifies to their reality. The physics teacher in the town's high school invents a *graviton,* a device that is able to change an object weighing five pounds into one of five hundredweight. The secret services are taking a close interest in the invention, but there is no way of knowing what became of it. Mr Venyige goes on and on about it, and then there is his briefcase, which must tip the scales at five hundredweight... In another story, an American, a Corporal Jack Daniels (not his real name but that attached to him later in the story) has his parachute blown by a gust of wind onto power lines near the town, to be found and rescued by a Gypsy woman, Katie Kara, who is mushroom gathering. Whether or not this actually happened is moot, but Katie Kara has the proof in the shape of a whiskey flask labelled Jack Daniels.

In Transylvania's Romanian-language literature the term "first-generation" is applied to the kind of writing deriving from the enchantment of finding oneself at home. These stories are written in order to convert an unfamiliar house, a strange town, into something more homelike. A sense of home can be found even in the wild world of the mountains if there is a certain stone, or a helicopter wreck one has never seen, around which stories are woven. A town immediately feels more like a home if there is a story about the tower that everyone refers to, and even an evil-smelling beggar accounted for by some story helps to create this feeling. This is not the same thing as a chronicle. The town of these short stories has had no chronicler.

> This is how it happened, a chronicler would say, but in this case it was never given to our town to have a real chronicler, though if there had been, just as any decent, self-respecting place that had a castle would have, then we would know exactly what happened as every free and royal town does.

If we knew exactly what had happened, we would need no stories. And if we had no stories, our homelessness, in its restless imagination, would invent them.

The last story, "Death of a Photographer", can also be read as a parable about the mystery of creativity, the unfathomable relationship between creator and work. While trying to make out the outlines on his Master's photos, the Photographer finally catches a glimpse of his own face on the developed glass plate. The coming into existence, the origin, the birth and death—each of them is girt by a secret. Myths tell of a deed about the motives of which we are ignorant. Myths of that nature circulate in unfree and non-royal towns; they also do so up in the hills, and in homeless souls. A tale about absence. A story about the true story that there used to be, once upon a time. Just as in that well-known Hassidic tale about the king who practises healing though he no longer has knowledge of the art of healing, not even of

where he must light the fire for the spell to work, but he has his knowledge of the story about healing. Still the patient is cured simply by hearing the story.

Vida's tales, too, are curative stories.

Fragment for Hamlet, the collection of poems that Dezső Tandori came out with in 1968, was a turning point, or rather it later became one of the key reference points marking change. So what was new in Tandori? The wholeness and responsiveness with which he looked on the trinity of life, literature and work. He stripped this three-way relationship down to basics, analysed those elements and put them back together again: the world's poetic unity is restored even if there can be no ultimate answer.

For a good part of the 1970s, Tandori hardly stirred outside the four walls of his home, spending his time looking after his birds, injured, broken-winged sparrows that had been picked up from the street—fourteen of them at one point. It was about them that the poems and novels spoke, while his apartment was also the abode for a collection of teddy bears who would take part in card tournaments, swap ideas with one another and the narrator, or table football would be played, tennis matches watched on TV and so on and so forth. Then came horse racing, years of travelling, visiting many of the most famous race courses in Europe; hotel rooms, streets, parks and benches in London, Paris and Vienna. Tandori as a narrative observer assumed various guises while, in an incredibly prolific oeuvre—poetry, novels and thrillers, essays, articles or art works—essentially writing the same story. Wherever one sets off from, we behold the same life. One may start with *Nagy gombfocikönyv* (Big Tablefootball Book), a boys' novel from 1980, go on to the 1988 *Meghalni késő, élni túl korán* (Too Late to Die, Too Soon to Live), the first of a trilogy, to the string of nine crime stories that he published over 20 years from 1980 under the name of Nat Roid, mull over the assessments of musical, literary and art works culminating in the 1979 *A zsalu sarokvasa* (The Window Shutter Hinges), muse on the question raised by the 1977 novel *Miért élnél örökké?* (Why Would You Live for Ever?): if we exist, why do we eventually have to cease to be? Tandori's huge oeuvre is so permeated with life's great riddle, the secret of existence, that we only notice its presence when it ceases to be a riddle: "we reach a level whereby sheer completeness of the sheer brooding renders a response superfluous."

Tandori's linguistic virtuosity has not just created a home for Tandori himself. Writers now write in a language that has been worked on via Tandori. (I don't know if he himself would use the word "via"—*"által"*——: he might, but he would not leave it untouched)—they write and translate. Were it not for this Tandoriesque prose language, many works would be untranslatable. Tandori, the translator of Musil, Kafka, Karl Kraus, Virginia Woolf and dozens of other authors, brought about some major new translation projects of the Eighties. Instances would be the way that, thanks to Tandori's manner of using co-ordinate clauses, the different articulation and rubato of his sentences, the Kleist available to Hungarian readers today (though not translated by Tandori himself) is much nearer to Kleist himself.

Meanwhile to translate Tandori must be a superhuman task, with the stratification of his plays on words calling for extreme ingenuity (*"elder-felhársága"*, for instance, is derived through straightforward metathesis from *"felderít-elhárít"*, and a rough English equivalent might be something like "internoitre-reconcept" for "reconnoitre-intercept"). The hazard of translations of his works is that it is precisely the written material mined from the stuff of his life, the mystery of metamorphosis, that gets lost. Some word plays (e.g. *szekíroz/szekírtolók,* or

very approximately "pester/pesterminators") almost defy translation, and even the more straightforward *jeux d'esprit* pose difficulties: *"csípem a szerzőt"*, or "I peck the author," says a bird at one point, which from the bird's perspective may denote not just "eat" but also, through slang usage, "give a perfunctory kiss on the cheek" and even "to trip or [make] stumble"—to say nothing of the even wider connotations of "pecker".

Translating Tandori, therefore, is probably an endeavour comparable to producing an exact replica of an oil painting: the brush strokes, the texture of the pigments, the tactile effect—these are not strictly reproducible. Photographic duplicates are not enough: one is driven to forgery! It is no accident that appraisals of Tandori are fed by other fields of art. Painters or sculptors or musicians may present themselves as parallels; pianist Glenn Gould, to take just one example, on account of his artistic dedication and concentration. And Tandori calls such artists to mind not just in his way of life (like Gould, Tandori, a recluse with his headgear and other eccentricities, avoids organised literary events but at the same time loves "slumming it" among ordinary people), but more on account of his artistic demeanour in which uncomplicated ardour goes hand in hand with a search for scholarly links. Even the mishits, the slips of the pen, have their place; nothing is concealed. *To plough one's way into the plot*—that's Tandori. Accuracy, crystal-clear metrics, a steady thematic pulse, careful build-up; in short, the deep structure of the texts is compact and structured. Tandori is the sort of pianist who does not dazzle the audience with the special relationship he has with the piano (though he could); he is not a mesmerising virtuoso (though he could be); above all, he is not a pianist bent on setting records. He is the sort of piano artist who cultivates a direct relationship with the music—a short-circuit that may cut out the piano. Yet in just the same way as Gould was able to coax violin tones out of the piano through his extraordinary artistry in touching the keys, so too does Tandori have an astounding "manual" flair.

Seventy books, each complete in itself, now speak about the "complete" life. No other way would be worthwhile. The validity of completeness—writing as a mode of existence.

It is difficult to catch Protean Tandori in the act; one reads a paragraph, and suddenly one is overcome by a sense of delight, and one looks for why but is unable to hit upon it. It is impossible to cite where it comes from because the light is blazing from somewhere beyond any specified sentence. The beauty somehow resides within the book as a "whole", or even "outside the book". And yet there are still sentences where it explodes, breaks through. "Just because we have not ruined something—not put it into practice—that does not make it truer." That is what he says, but then he adds something that stirs that sentence onto a different plane: "We then make it an object; most likely an object of fallacy." The grace of philosophy flares out. In-between, so to say. Tandori analyses poems by Ernő Szép (1884–1953), to whom he declares himself to be a kindred spirit. He dissects poems by others, signalling in a fragmented confession what poetry means to him, how it expands attitudes towards human life, how his own life has become intertwined in it. Something is always left, even when its form is remodelled; it is left through the very fact of changing. But now even the quotes cannot be exact because what is true will become true in a different way. Rationality is to be found in everything, and mystery too. But it is very hard to write about that. What is man? Axiom: a man cannot kill someone who looks at him, looking him straight in the eyes. But he does not write about that; he holds himself back. He does not write about slaughterhouses, he argues that people don't like reading about

them. He rambles, he digresses, barely touches on the subject, yet as in a musical rondo he remains coherent and compact.

Life cannot be imitated, which is why novels do not adhere to life: they are made of different matter, obey different laws. They adhere to the laws of telling a story, not those of life: "a novel should not be a repetition of life but a one-off structure." "I am not writing a novel with my life in which everything has to be in its proper place, etc."

The novel is somewhere other than where life is. Which is precisely why it can be complete, from A to Z: *A complete tandori—completely nutZ,* as far as the Hungarian title can be translated. The completeness is dependent on the level: what is incomplete at a certain level will be complete somewhere else and vice versa, as set theory shows. But as for how he brings together the theorems of Gödel and Cantor with the fractals of the heart—that is only ascribable to Tandori's ingenuity. He produces a flat plane from the intersecting straight lines of these connections, and from it suddenly arises the beauty of philosophy and poetry in all its three-dimensional wonder. Or a simple gesture raises a wave, and in that wave, or wave-form, the formless material examines itself.

The same subject keeps returning, time and time again. Over and over again, he tackles it, varies, lets it go, takes it up. And the main subject is "Tandori as phenomenon", with no false modesty. And false modesty is not justified if only because "Tandori as phenomenon" signifies writing, but that is an exaggeration that does not become the book. Were it to be put down in musical notation, the subject consists of just a few tones, and leads one through variations on the theme, by audacious construction, which are built into a multistorey edifice. A comparably close interweaving of writing and life might perhaps be found with Peter Handke or Virginia Woolf (both of whom Tandori has translated into Hungarian), but with Tandori the writing is not so much an intertwining with life as life itself, in its plenitude: that is how it is able to leave a trace. As if the oeuvre would be the vindication and inspiration of a new awareness of life, a new cult. He continually refers to writers of the past (Géza Ottlik or Ernő Szép or Ágnes Nemes Nagy or Dezső Kosztolányi) but ventures into uncharted and unchartable plateaux beyond the post-modern. Still, it is hard to pin him down to any particular stylistic experiment as he is fundamentally classic: he erases any hint of blurring. Precise and breathtakingly alert, a rationalist who interprets chance errors as elements of equivalent value (thus, he leaves his typos in the text and either inserts the correct form after it, with the mark "corr.", or not, as the case may be: "if he misses, does not rub his eyes").

Beyond the Scyllas and Charybdises of intranslatability there are, all the same, more peaceful waters, translatable games. The structure itself, for example, is quite airy: 151 printed pages that make up the bulk of the material (the typography retains the character of jottings), then comes an appendix, an appendix to the appendix and so on as a signal that the very aspiration to completeness is bound to be a failure. The builder immures himself within the completeness. Yet no-one is immured in the "complete tandori". Or rather one is, but he is not a captive. Or is it not possible even to raise the question of freedom? "Fever of solitude" exists, but not freedom? Heart-beating? Does the book heartbeat? Does it beat together ("...better with the hearts of birds than with subjects")?

> On the whole... I can't fit in myself. Does that mean I don't completely fall out, and I am even stuck in my totality even while all sorts of parts fall out?

There are some writers who come across a home in memoirs, others in stories, and others still in language. Naturally, there is no such thing as exclusivity. There is no one home—there are homes. ❧

W.L. Webb

The Magical Gone Wrong

Gyula Krúdy: *Ladies Day* (Asszonyságok díja), translated by John Batki. Budapest, Corvina Press, 2007, 190 pp.

Hungary's conflicted history—its shifting frontiers, drastic amputations of territory and population—has produced, George Szirtes suggests, a particular reaction in Hungarian writing—"an interest in the grotesque, the black joke, *the magical gone wrong* [my italics]". That last thought might have been written—perhaps was written—with Gyula Krúdy's extraordinary fictions especially in mind. Even more than *Sunflower,* the novel which immediately preceded it, *Ladies Day,* now available in John Batki's American-English translation, is shot through with a queer magic, a disturbed energy of language, character and situation for which it's hard to think of a parallel, in the Anglo-Saxon literatures, at least. One can perhaps find echoes of that disturbed magic in some of the writing of near-contemporary writers in parts of East Central Europe that had been subjected to the same sort of historical tribulations. Think, for instance, of the less robust, more painfully haunted imaginative world of Bruno Schulz, disclosed in *The Street of Crocodiles,* his bewitched, obsessional drawings, and the strangely-lit stories of *Cinnamon Shops.* Schulz and Krúdy have other things in common, too: the shaman's gift of metamorphosis, and some interest in fetishistic humiliation, got from the work of Leopold Sacher-Masoch, so fashionably influential in Austro-Hungarian cultural milieux of the early twentieth century. (Hungarian may be the 'orphan language' John Lukacs calls it, but its writers were not, after all, excluded from the cultural family of the Empire and Central Europe generally.)

Memory tells me that *Sunflower,* first published in 1918, a year earlier than *Ladies Day,* is the more shapely of the two novels. *Ladies Day* too has its lyrical pastoral passages, but these are visitations in reverie; the backward-looking Hungarian countryside of the late nineteenth century is not where it lives and breathes. This is a city novel, full of urban rough and tumble, its people—and its author—still nostalgic for the byways and habits of an older town, but aware that the Budapest in which it was written was now a city in the new world of the twentieth century.

W. L. Webb
wrote about literature and politics for the Guardian *for more than 30 years, and was subsequently a research fellow at Nuffield College, Oxford. He has edited* An Embarrassment of Tyrannies *(Gollancz, 1997) from the work of the magazine* Index on Censorship.

Krúdy, we are told, was a compulsive, even incontinent writer, partly because that was his nature, partly because he was poor and improvident, quickly spent what he got, and needed to earn more as quickly as possible. He seems hardly ever to have revised or bothered much with proofs, and at times *Ladies Day* can seem even more wayward than the other things of his we can read in English.

Structuring plot events are minimal, though dramatic enough. Demon, the devil himself arrives in the very first sentence, uninvited, at the house of János Czifra, a respectable Budapest undertaker, announcing himself only in a score of small but ominous disturbances:

> He merely sensed a sudden shadow fall over the room, the white tablecloth, the lamp, and the plate in front of him. This shadow had nothing in common with the shadow of the lace curtain in the afternoon. Nor was it anything like the peculiar shadow cast by the dead, motionless, misshapen and mysterious upon the funeral shroud or the silk cushion supporting the head

all familiar enough to 'Death's deputy'. But this shadow was different, "...elusive as the dream that brings the departed husband's body heat back into the widow's bed... terrifying." Still, the sanguine undertaker doesn't allow himself to be intimidated, showing only the odd change in habit and address that might almost be characterised as—shall we say?—a touch of diablerie... Otherwise, a little oddly, Demon then fades from the story.

There is arrangement of a troublesome funeral or two. (Mr Czifra specializes in the military, and here is yet another fat military man. After the long years of peace, "Generals weighed in at a ton apiece by the time they came to the undertaker." This whopper, he muses, would have to be bled to fit into even the largest coffin.) But first, he must attend a tremendously described wedding, the first of many set-piece productions of differing displays of the city's bürgerlich social life, at which the undertaker dances the *csárdás* as never before.

So far, the narration has been in a vein of rich but comparatively straightforward realism. But when Czifra returns to duty, riding the hearse to collect the body of the latest suicide from a street of strange name and lurid reputation, we reach the second turn of the plot, equally dramatic and otherworldly if not this time so specifically netherworldly.

A voice calls his name, and suddenly the undertaker recognises... himself standing in the shadows. But "the autumnal man standing in front of him, whose face was the colour of withered leaves" is another self—Dream, the self of Czifra's nightmind, whose features reveal those aspects of life he has suppressed in the successful bourgeois self he has so carefully ordered with such discipline and pride. Dream takes him into a particularly notorious house in this Street of Jeremias Frank and Spouse, and a gaslit tour from room to room and scene to scene of the harsh miseries and marvels of Budapest's nighttown. And with this we leave the daily world behind and embark on another of those drifting, dream-like, riverine voyages that are the characteristic shape of Krúdy's fiction, eddying back and forth in time and space, from one character's consciousness to another's, between drifting reverie and the insistent distractions of the life of the street and its carnivalesque "magic gone wrong".

Is there any sense in which he could properly be called a realist? Reading a forgotten book made me pause over this familiar question of Krúdy criticism. Ten years after the publication of *Ladies Day,* Walter Starkie, professor of Spanish literature at my own University of Dublin and a natural scholar-gypsy with a passion for folk music, took his violin and walked

through Hungary and Romania, meeting musicians and sometimes playing for his supper. In *Raggle-taggle Gypsies* he describes his first night in a poor suburb of Budapest, drinking with Gypsy musicians in a street of "queer little inns and shops" and dark courtyards, and eventually staying the night in the house of one of them who had a disturbingly beautiful Russian wife. A confirmed somnambulist since childhood, Starkie tells how he woke in the middle of the night to find himself by their bed, then seized around the neck by the iron hands of his host, clearly filled with the darkest suspicions.

It is an episode which could have slotted easily into the nocturnal ramblings of Czifra and his alter ego, who are also followed by scraps of Gypsy music. On the other hand, to think of no more than two artists Krúdy here calls to mind, one could no doubt find similar striking accounts of the contemporary actuality of the Dublin brothel district in which the Circe episode of Joyce's *Ulysses* is largely set, or of the night streets of Berlin in which Kirchner found inspiration for the women he painted like human *fleurs du mal.*

It seems more to the point to see Krúdy's vivid registration of people and scenes as something close to the almost expressionist force that Dickens brings to scenes and characters that particularly excite him. And it is true that, more than other writers with such a gift of dynamic description, there are also fluid and lyrical aspects of his writing that can lead one to think of it in musical terms, or as a great sequence of paintings—say, Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* as orchestrated by Ravel, to incorporate both notions.

Is he one of the great or even among the greatest European writers, as has been claimed? He seems somehow the wrong man for such a question. He is... well, he is Krúdy, a writer of extraordinary imaginative gifts, sometimes an impatient, careless writer—there are pages where the focus relaxes, we are temporarily on autopilot—but also a writer who is capable on the next page of passages of almost Shakespearean power and gleam. Walter Benjamin, who thought that a map connecting one's own particular Stations of the Cross and lesser personal sites might be the best way of doing autobiography, also suggested that with some writers a review should perhaps consist entirely of quotation, and I will no longer resist the temptation to think Krúdy the ideal candidate for such a procedure.

> The lights shone like white cadavers in the still dark street. Periodically one of the two milky globes would fade, sputter, and grumpily resume duty, like a night watchman woken from a nap; the roaring sounds of the last dance thundered underground.

Here close by is

> the Orpheum café where women sat as still and majestic as the glass-eyed birds on their hats... Nor did I find unattractive the midnight-eyed, fleshy-calved Jewish ladies with egret feathers in their splendid hair who, glimpsed from afar, always appeared so sensuous at the Café Hungaria or at the Kiosk, just like the heroines of novels who earnestly love, suffer and die... whereas up close they are as ordinary, boring and ignorant as the Pest promenade on which they stake their lives, just like the dusty, world-weary oleanders there.

Somewhere in the Sindbad stories, Krúdy describes his ancient hero as having "a genius for observing women", an especially well-developed part of this author's obsessive gift of observation. It is everywhere evident in *Ladies Day,* the observation not merely of a lover of women, but as much an empathiser as a sympathiser, for all that they receive rough handling from most of the men in the story, particularly the tender-hearted, pregnant, abandoned

Natalia, whose own tragedy brings Czifra's odyssey and the novel to their close.

Here he is at his most empathetic and remarkable, observing the miracle of birth, of all births: the eternally astonishing arrival of new life in the world. Natalia's fate winds to its end, in the maternity hospital in Bakáts Square, which

> does nonstop business twenty-four hours of the day. Never before glimpsed tiny hands, faces and eyes crop up from the unknown, enter this world making swimming movements, red in the face, bathed in sweat and blood after the labors endured, the keening of their thin voices causing much excitement, tears and suffering—each and every one a miraculous surprise. They fight their way into the open air and emerge drenched, heads flattened, nearly swooning; they don't care what time it is, night or day they arrive when their time has come, not a minute sooner or later. They are so outrageously forceful that the whole world seems to stop upon their arrival and their cries, their very presence is enough to fill the whole horizon from the west down to the east. At this baby factory a great sieve is shaken all through the day and night sifting the fresh flour of new life all over the land...women alert as archangels watch over other women; the whole building is redolent with the scent of milk and mothers' bodies, the plumbing works nonstop...

So the novel ends with a death, Natalia's death, and a birth. Though it must have been complete before the signatures were put to the treaties that literally tore Hungary's land and people apart, the writing must already have been on the wall saying clearly that Krúdy's world had come to an end (though he himself would survive until Hitler's rise to power). Not a happy ending, but not without a hint of redemption either. Czifra's humanity asserts itself to adopt the little girl, so there is new life, there is a future:

> out of the unknown, through that enormous sieve, endless life pours down... The ones born now... will walk the streets of another Budapest, one that we shall not get to see. They will be able to read what happened next in the ongoing novel of life that we'll have to leave off at the most interesting part—for it's always at its most interesting when we have to die... ❧

CORRECTION

In *HQ* 189, the following sentence in János Kirz's article, "Major Players" (p. 131) should have read:

"Teller, who would be 100 years old on January 15 of this year, and who is best known for his role in the design of the American hydrogen bomb, made his name in the world of science through his important contributions to chemical and nuclear physics."

We apologise for the error.

Nicholas T. Parsons

A City Telling Its Own Story

Bob Dent: *Budapest: A Cultural and Literary History.* Cities of the Imagination series. Foreword by George Szirtes, with thirty black and white drawings. Signal Books, Oxford, 2007, 237 pp.

Since the author of this excellent work complains twice (once in the text and again in the bibliography) that analytical articles in the *Hungarian Quarterly* tend to be "over-academic" and "dry", it behoves the present reviewer to frame his remarks with some circumspection. At the very least he must obviously try to follow the example of the composer Christoph Willibald Gluck and avoid "parading difficulties at the expense of clarity". A similar intention has obviously informed Bob Dent's own approach to his task, which is painstaking, sober and dispassionate. Not that he avoids difficulties and complexities, but he is good at clarifying and demystifying, enabling the reader to grasp the ground rules and historical precedents that have bred controversy, paradox or worse. With so many ideological and other elephant traps lying in wait for the unwary chronicler of Hungarian culture, this is indeed an achievement for someone who is not a born Hungarian, but whose sure grasp of Hungarian culture, society and politics is the consequence of having made Budapest his home.

His book appears in a series produced by an entrepreneurial publisher based in Oxford, whose Cities of the Imagination fills a gap that conventional guidebook series tend to shy away from. It bravely assumes that there is a travelling public which is prepared to dig deeper into the social history and culture of the places covered, rather than be satisfied with a listing of "must see" sights treated discretely. That well-worn method, though convenient for the makers of guidebooks, tends to obscure the *relative* significance of sights within the culture concerned. Furthermore, the publisher commissions only authors with long experience of the cities they write about and allows them, or even encourages them, to offer the reader a personal response. This is the exact opposite of the formulaic compendia put out by the large publishing houses, where increasingly the job of the author is to tick boxes and fill in the spaces between pictures. I, therefore, regard such a project as entirely praiseworthy, but in fairness to *Hungarian Quarterly* readers, I must declare an interest, as I am myself engaged in writing a volume on Vienna in the same series.

At first blush, the subtitle *A Cultural and Literary History* implies a weighty tome aimed at an intellectual audience, but this impression is misleading. Rather, it is

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Nicholas T. Parsons'
history of the guidebook, Worth the Detour, *was published in 2007. His volume* Vienna. A Cultural and Literary History *in the Cities of the Imagination series is at press.*

meant to convey the idea that cultural artefacts—architecture, painting, literature, poetry—are parts of a mosaic which can only be apprehended properly when placed in an appropriate historical context. Divorced from that, they may still have inherent beauty or rhetorical power, but the under-informed viewer or reader is less able to comprehend their most profound aspects, namely what they mean for the society that created them. This is an area where Bob Dent's book scores well, whether he is explaining why Neo-Gothic was the dominant style chosen for Imre Steindl's Parliament, or why the Communist regime replaced the existing statue of Kossuth on Kossuth Lajos Square (a work conceived in elegiac mode) with their own heroic representation done in the manner of Socialist Realism. Consideration of propaganda through style inevitably leads him into political matters and one of the best chapters in the book ("Hearts and Minds") deals *inter alia* with the art produced during the short-lived Republic of Councils in 1919. Initially (as in Russia) it seemed a genuine expression of the liberated human spirit, but soon became subject to purely political requirements. Here, one is forcibly reminded of Orwell's famous dictum that "all art is propaganda, but not all propaganda is art."

So "cultural history" and "politics" (broadly interpreted) are inevitably intertwined. At the risk of arousing Dent's ire for being analytical and boring, I will venture a remark as to what this inescapable fact has implied for the writing of cultural history. As a concept, the latter hardly exists before Winckelman, though perhaps one could argue that the description of the customs of the Egyptians in Herodotus constitutes an early example of the genre. John Burrow in his fascinating *A History of Histories*[1] covers almost every conceivable genre, but has no section on "cultural history" as such. However, he treats Winckelmann as the *fons et origo* of the tendency of some "cultural" or "art" historians "to regard the character of an artistic or architectural style as the product of a whole people, and to discern from this their inner character and aspiration." Even this notion shares the Germanic tendency to see things in terms of an overarching *Zeitgeist*, with Hegel's World Spirit, "whose moments form the moral and intellectual history of mankind", hovering impatiently in the background. The more modest endeavour is that of identifying the way in which specific architecture or art (in this case that of Budapest) reflected a particular aesthetic, moral or political culture at a given time.

The strength of the Cities of the Imagination series in general, and Bob Dent's book in particular, is that they eschew a formally aesthetic analysis of culture and its artefacts in favour of one that is firmly based on historical events. To talk about the Hungarian National Style in architecture, or the poems of Petőfi, or the paintings of Csontváry, purely in terms of connoisseurial, literary or aesthetic judgements renders them all but meaningless to non-Hungarians previously unfamiliar with them. Actually, in many cases, it would render them all but meaningless to the Hungarians themselves, for whom the political symbolism of (for example) Viktor Madarász's picture of *The Mourning of László Hunyadi* (1859) in the National Gallery must constitute the major part of the work's cultural significance. As Dent puts it: "Hunyadi was beheaded by the Habsburg Ladislas V in 1457, but the allusion to the execution of many Hungarians following the failed 1848–49 War of Independence was clear to all." That gives us one level of historical explanation. Yet László

1 ■ John Burrow, *A History of Histories. Epics, Chronicles, Romances and Inquiries from Herodotus and Thucydides to the Twentieth Century* (London, 2007), p. 415.

Hunyadi had caused Ladislas's Captain-General, Ulrich Cillei, to be murdered during a visit to Belgrade, where László was the governor.[2] He was therefore not quite, or not only, the blameless victim of an injustice, as the 19th-century Hungarian patriots found it convenient to portray him, but more a casualty of power politics and clan warfare. Nevertheless he had become an icon of the "victim narrative", a powerful psychological weapon in the assertion of national identity and political rights. It is a moot point as to whether a guidebook to "cultural history" for the uninitiated should include the "history behind the history", or simply deliver an aestheticised discourse in the terms on which it is offered.

The issue of the "Hungarianness" of Hungarian culture is arguably only applicable to artefacts produced after the age of nationalism had dawned. "Universal" styles like Baroque, Renaissance or Gothic lacked ethnic specificity, although as manifestations of religious or secular power they were, of course, not lacking in ideological content. This point is worth remarking because Dent has (quite logically) chosen to interpret Hungarian culture primarily in a modern time frame. As he puts it in his *Preface:*

> In line with the aim of the series, this book introduces Budapest's present-day identity and its links with the past. The historical parts accordingly concentrate on the past two centuries, since it is the events and developments of the past two hundred years which have most firmly contributed to the city's character. Indeed Budapest as a unified capital city emerged only as recently as 1873.

While this might unkindly be described as the "out of sight, out of mind" school of history, it does not seem unreasonable in a cultural history that is also a guidebook, and which is therefore obliged to concentrate on objects that can actually be seen. In practice we are also treated to brief reminders of earlier ages—the Romans naturally crop up in the chapter entitled "City of Baths", which is very handy also for disposing of the Turkish contribution to the city. The penultimate and slightly half-hearted chapter ("Above the City..."), which is devoted to Castle Hill, offers a couple of pages on Matthias Corvinus. King St Stephen and Béla IV get the occasional mention, as do (even more fleetingly) the two Angevin kings and Sigismund of Luxembourg. For the book's aspirations to "Literary History", this is scarcely a problem, but incorrigible history buffs may feel it is something of a *pis aller* in respect of "Cultural History".

Unlike Dent, the author of another recent attempt to tackle the "cultural and literary history" of Budapest rigidly separates his historical survey and chatty commentary from the guide element in his book. In *Budapest: A Cultural Guide* (OUP, 1998), Michael Jacobs begins with a chapter on Matthias Corvinus, moves on to "Turkish Baths", then to the "Ghost of Gyula Krúdy" (mostly about cuisine and coffee-houses), and the final two chapters are an historical and cultural survey from the 18th century to the present. Part II of his book offers a conventional tour of the sights in six walks. While the two books, Dent's and Jacobs', obviously overlap quite considerably in the material they handle, Dent's integrated approach makes for a better read. Jacobs is an assiduous researcher who spices his findings with personal anecdote and observation. Dent has a way of letting the city tell its own story and is a far more self-effacing author. One notices this right away because of the stark contrast of his

2 ■ For a characteristically clear-eyed account of this incident, see: Bryan Cartledge, *The Will to Survive: A History of Hungary* (London, 2006), p. 62.

approach with that of George Szirtes's almost entirely personalised Foreword. The latter (as one would expect of a poet) is lyrical and allusive, truly evoking the "imagined city". In less than four pages, we get a tantalising glimpse of Szirtes's Budapest, a city whose modern assertiveness conceals (not always) old scars and ancient loss; a city, as he says, still "in post-traumatic condition, half elated, half terrified". The poet is not the cultural historian, whose diligent labours he (curiously) does not even mention; as a returning exile he is himself one of Budapest's awkward ghosts, the expatriate local patriot, the past in the present. We encounter him, like Cavafy in his beloved Alexandria, standing at a slight angle to the universe.

Dent remarks in his Preface that the chapters of his book can be read in any order, and this turns out to be one of its major strengths. His method is immediately apparent in the first Chapter entitled "By the Danube". It begins, as it must, with a quote from Attila József's great poem of the same title and then pursues a meandering route of cultural association. From the river itself, we move to consideration of its bridges, which leads to Széchenyi and the Reform Age; an account of the Margaret Island leads back to the Margaret Bridge, which in turn prompts a discussion of suicide and the unexplained Magyar penchant for same. Which of course brings us to Rezső Seress's evergreen song *Gloomy Sunday*. We move on to the Elisabeth Bridge and the supposed role of Franz Joseph's wife in furthering the Magyar interest; then to Petőfi Square and an account of Hungary's "national poet"; and we finish up at Lágymányos Bridge, which means the National Theatre and its long history of hopes postponed. Along the way we are treated to a literary commentary on places and events that begins with Attila József, continues with Sándor Márai, Gyula Krúdy, Antal Szerb's *Martian's Guide to Budapest*, Mór Jókai (on the Margaret Island), János Arany (likewise), László Jávor (the lyricist for *Gloomy Sunday*), Petőfi and Imre Madách. These quotations are woven into the story of the architects, the bridge-builders, the painters (Miklós Barabás) and others who are associated with the objects and places described.

This is an excellent formula, producing a cornucopia of good things. It is also peculiarly suitable for Budapest (imagine trying the same technique with the Thames, or the Tiber, and you will see the problem). Dent pursues it in Chapter 2 on Andrássy út (the "Avenue of Dreams", as he calls it), in Chapter 3 on the coffee-houses, in Chapter 4 on Heroes' Square and the City Park, in Chapter 6 on the "spa city", in Chapter 7 on the Parliament, Kossuth Lajos Square and Szabadság Square, in Chapter 8 on the Budapest markets, in Chapter 10 ("Jews and Gentiles") on the Jewish region of the city and in Chapter 11 on Castle Hill. A different approach is taken in the previously mentioned Chapter 5 which is basically the story of oppressive regimes from 1919 to 1989, starting with the Republic of Councils and ending with the renaming of streets after the change of regime. Chapter 9 ("Music Fusion") is a stimulating and informative account of everything from Liszt, Bartók and Kodály to the *Táncház* (Dance House) movement, Gypsy music and jazz. A final chapter (12) brings us back to Attila József, who is in a sense the muse of the whole book, and we conclude with a discussion of the Budapest cultural scene today.

Dent is remarkably even-handed in his treatment of potentially contentious issues, historical or contemporary. He constantly keeps before the reader the complexities of Hungarian identity, the ebb and flow of what Benedict Anderson has described as an "imagined community". Of Liszt's various misconceptions about "Hungarian" music, he writes that it "rattled Magyar

chauvinists as well as disturbing serious music scholars like Béla Bartók", whose poor opinion of the Hungarian Rhapsodies he quotes. Then he cites Kálmán Tisza's remark ("perhaps displaying a degree of prejudice") that "at the very time when Hungary had lost almost everything but her music, Liszt chose to proclaim to the world that it was not Magyar music at all, but Gypsy music." "A distinction between the two can certainly be made on musicological grounds," writes Dent, "but cannot Gypsies simultaneously be Hungarians? This type of question has plagued Hungarian history for many years, and not only in relation to Gypsies." This passage, regardless of the extent to which one agrees or disagrees with the sentiments expressed by any of the parties cited or indeed Dent himself, has the virtue of simultaneously posing and questioning stereotypes, thereby weakening the power of cliché and perhaps encouraging the reader to think more laterally than he or she would otherwise do.

It is even harder to be even-handed about more topical issues. On the whole Dent carries this off equally well, the one exception being his account of the controversial House of Terror, which is treated almost entirely in terms defined by left-liberal critics. Indeed, he rounds off his account with the condemnation of it by a Budapest intellectual, who compares it with Mussolini's Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution in Rome and calls it a "total propaganda space, where death and victims are used as rhetorical devices". Apart from the fact that *all* memorials to the dead are rhetorical devices and can hardly be anything else, such an extreme characterisation unfortunately tells us more about this particular commentator's politics than it tells us about the House of Terror. Although Mária Schmidt, the curator of the museum, is a hate figure for left-wing intellectuals, Dent would have done his readers a service if he had allowed a quotation from her articulate defence of it. That way they would be able to see that there is another view of the matter, and it is not enough simply to smear all who adhere to it as Fascist sympathisers. Having said that, no author could produce an account of the House of Terror that satisfied all parties to the dispute, since the intellectual quoted is at least right in his implication that it has become a symbol of the polarisation of present-day Hungary. Memorials to the dead ought to unite the living, rather than divide them. Allowing space to both sides of this controversy would have given readers a deeper insight into the ongoing struggle in Hungary for possession of the "victim narrative".

Such reservations about one particular item should not be allowed to obscure the overall success of Dent's "mission to inform" in this remarkably readable, empathetic and fair-minded account of Budapest's culture and the literature associated with it. I have only two complaints about omissions, both of which seem rather important to me in respect of the development of the city. Firstly, I miss any description of the development of Neo-Classical Pest, of which after all significant fragments remain. In particular there is nothing about the significant achievement of Palatine Joseph in initiating systematic town planning for Pest, nor of his calling into life the Embellishment Commission for the city established in 1808. All we get is a fleeting reference to some buildings by József Hild (p. 144), the prolific Neo-Classical architect, and son of the (not mentioned) city planner, on whose work the Embellishment Commission based its deliberations. Indeed the Palatine was one of the very few Habsburgs to be genuinely popular in Hungary and he used his influence for the good of the city. He gets only two sentences in the whole book: on p. 14 we are told he took over the Margaret Island in 1795 and planted trees and vines

there, while on p. 196 we are told his tomb is in the crypt accessed from the National Gallery. Republican sentiment is all very well, but such neglect seems to be carrying it rather far!

A second omission is possibly a little more serious. Nowhere in the Index appears the name of István Bárczy, Lord Mayor of Budapest between 1906 and 1919. Yet Bárczy is a key figure in the period when Budapest was becoming one of the great European metropolises. True, he is an irritation to Marxist historians,[3] representing the apogee of paternalistic Liberal government based on an extremely limited franchise; but his contribution *inter alia* to infrastructure, public health, education (fifty-five new schools) and municipal housing was remarkable for his time. Moreover he is a far more sympathetic figure than his near-contemporary in Vienna, the anti-Semitic Karl Lueger, the irony being that Bárczy's popular municipalisation of utilities and strategic functions mirrors similar policies pursued by Lueger's "Christian Social" party. There is something very piquant about this, since Bárczy's political base was the Democratic Party, whose constituency was mainly the V, VI, VII and VIII districts. Its leaders, and indeed its members, were primarily Jewish. Their professions (shopkeepers, clerks, artisans etc.) were very similar to those of the anti-Semitic *Kleinbürger* of Vienna, the core of Lueger's support.[4]

A further irony is that Bárczy ruled with the old (and substantially Jewish) financial and property-owning elite under the system of *"virilism"*, where influence in the City Council was based on property and tax contributions. The liberal elite had become very corrupt in Vienna, one of the factors that increased Lueger's appeal, eventually to be translated into political power when the franchise was widened to include those who paid 5 *Gulden* in tax; yet in Budapest, Bárczy's far less democratic rule was minimally corrupt by the standards of the day and he achieved a great deal for the whole city, not only for its privileged inhabitants. In fact he opposed *virilism,* and latterly promoted a Land Value Tax based on the ideas of the radical American political economist Henry George. Connoisseurs of irony will no doubt savour the fact that the system of electing Aldermen to the Budapest City Council was first democratised under the Horthy regime, though this was followed immediately by the first restrictions on Jews holding office. Bárczy has rightly been reassessed by scholars since the change and his remarkable contribution to the city has been recognised in many cases, so it seems a pity he does not feature in Dent's survey.

Notwithstanding these complaints, Bob Dent's book can be recommended both to newcomers to the city and to those who are already familiar with it. Its great merit is that it poses as many questions as it answers and provokes thought rather than laying down the law. His final sentence reads: "Traditions and discontinuities, progress and paradoxes—these are the characteristics of Hungary and, often in complicated and diverse ways, of its capital, Budapest." We owe the author a debt of gratitude for guiding us through these complexities with such aplomb, and for providing us with a sure compass with which to navigate the oft disputed and confusing terrain of Budapest's history and culture. ❧

3 ■ For instance, the *Historische Enzyklopädie von Budapest* edited by Elisabeth Tóth-Epstein and published by Corvina in 1974 has made an unperson of Bárczy, who appears nowhere in its 464 pages.
4 ■ For an excellent account of Bárczy and his power base see: Zsuzsa L. Nagy, "Transformations in the City Politics of Budapest: 1873–1941" in: *Budapest & New York. Studies in Metropolitan Transformation 1870–1930,* ed. Thomas Bender and Carl E. Schorske (New York, 1994), pp. 35–54, particularly p. 43.

Ivan Sanders

The Stuff of Memory

Anna Porter: *The Storyteller—A Memoir of Secrets, Magic and Lies.* Vancouver/Toronto, Douglas & McIntyre, 2006, 385 pp.

The most intriguing, and also troubling, word in the title of Anna Porter's book is "lies". The Hungarian-born Canadian writer's novelistic family history is above all a tribute to her grandfather Vili (short for Vilmos, i.e., William) Rácz, who taught her the importance of family, class and history, and endowed her with a strong Hungarian identity which has not faded with the passing years, even though she left her native country over fifty years ago, at age thirteen. The figure of the grandfather and the stories he told her have clearly contributed to her desire to become a writer.

Vilmos Rácz was a Hungarian gentleman of the old school, fiercely proud of his noble lineage. A one-time Olympic athlete, a former publisher of theatre magazines and author of the definitive duelists' handbook, he was also a *bon vivant,* an incorrigible womanizer and man about town who ended his life in New Zealand, of all places, where he managed to become a champion bowler. To Anna, the child, he was indeed a larger-than-life figure, wise, colourful, altogether extraordinary, a man who at the drop of a hat could dip into his treasure trove of endlessly fascinating stories. Is Vili, then, the swashbuckling storyteller and fabulist the author and her publisher prepare us for? Are the *lies,* and the *secrets,* and the *magic,* all his? Actually, the Vili Rácz of the book is rather more ordinary. And the more one knows about the world he lived in, the more ordinary and typical he seems. But even if one doesn't know that world, the promised magnetism and charisma doesn't come through. Maybe the problem is not with Vili's seductive character but with the author's ability to conjure it up.

The stories he told his granddaughter about the Hungarian past are part of Magyar mythology. Sure, he placed an illustrious Rácz ancestor alongside a number of legendary Hungarian greats—ancestors who were fearless and magnanimous themselves. But the stories are the usual blend of fact and fancy about Hungarian tragedies that have a way of turning into triumphs. One can imagine many Hungarian grandfathers regaling their grandchildren with similar stories. In a way it's surprising how conventional his views were on Hungarian history and culture. Anna Porter tells us that when she first read Shelley as an adult, she immediately

Ivan Sanders

is Adjunct Professor at Columbia University's East Central European Center. He has translated several major Hungarian contemporary writers, including Milán Füst, György Konrád and Péter Nádas, into English.

thought of the Hungarian poet Sándor Petőfi and noted with some sadness that Shelley had no noble cause to die for. "How much more fitting for a lyric poet to die a heroic death." She clearly absorbed this notion from her grandfather who had told her years before that "Petőfi... is the greatest poet of the nineteenth century. Had he written his poems in English, he'd be the most famous poet in the world... Our only hope of survival as a nation is our language... And it's our greatest tragedy. No one but Hungarians will ever know the greatness of Ady or Jókai, or Madách, Arany or Vörösmarty."

Like other upper-class Hungarians of his generation, Vilmos Rácz, born in 1889, was fiercely anti-Austrian, anti-Communist and intensely patriotic, though his brand of patriotism implied a sense of superiority; he looked upon the non-Hungarian nationalities of historical Hungary with paternalistic forbearance at best and in general with a degree of disdain. These attitudes rubbed off on his granddaughter and can be sensed in her descriptions of the "Wallachs" of Transylvania. Vili cherished the ideals and slogans of the 1848 Revolution but in reality was staunchly conservative. At the same time, he despised the Nazis and according to the author he actively helped persecuted Jews during the war. The Hungarian statesman Vili admired most was Pál Teleki, a fellow Transylvanian and a friend. Vili considered Teleki the tragic hero of modern Hungarian history who would rather take his own life than see his country dishonoured. (In 1941 Teleki couldn't prevent German forces from moving across Hungary with the purpose of invading and occupying Yugoslavia, a country with which Teleki's government had signed a treaty of friendship several months earlier.) Anna Porter is apparently innocent of the fact that it was under Pál Teleki's premiership that exclusionist anti-Jewish laws were passed by the Hungarian Parliament.

What makes *The Storyteller* different from other memoirs of a Hungarian childhood is not only that the author sees the Hungarian past and present through her grandfather's eyes, but that in recalling the dramatic moments of her early life, the behaviour and reactions she describes, the words she puts in the mouth of her child self, are the reactions and words of a North American rather than a Hungarian child growing up in the early nineteen-fifties. This type of transposition can be refreshing, but also jarring. During the early years of communism the remaining aristocracy, as is well known, was vilified and persecuted, its historical role denigrated and distorted. Later on, former aristocrats were "forgiven" and rehabilitated; in more recent years rehabilitation has often turned into a kind of glorification. Anna Porter, living in Canada, is blissfully ignorant of the ins and outs of this process, is unconstrained by local taboos, and can therefore write about the post-war ordeal of her family unself-consciously, even with a certain insouciance. What's more, writing, as she did, for a non-Hungarian readership that knows very little about the country's history can be liberating. Yet the story *is* grim, especially that of her beloved Vili. It began with the confiscation of his property, continued with frequent harassment, and culminated in deportation and imprisonment. In telling such a story, in telling any story, precision, verisimilitude, and imagination of course, cannot be dispensed with—ignorance is not always bliss; even lies must be made credible.

The problem with Anna Porter's book is that, more often than not, it's too easy to tell which episode from her childhood is invented or imagined and which is remembered as it happened. She would have us believe, for instance, that thirteen-year-old Anna personally witnessed most of the important events of the 1956 Revolution,

including the bloodiest. But then she comes up with some strange details. It's not very likely that during those first heady days people on the street kept shouting "Down with Rákosi!", as she mentions more than once, since the Hungarian dictator had been relieved of his post as First Party Secretary and whisked out of the country several months before the outbreak of the revolution. It is also common knowledge that during the night of October 23, the statue of Stalin in the City Park was toppled and then dragged away. So what Porter describes—people kicking and spitting on the hated effigy and then hacking it to pieces—occurred at a major intersection in the center, not in the City Park, as she implies. Generally speaking, it would have been a good idea if before writing the chapters on '56, Ms Porter had consulted a book on the Hungarian Revolution, just to get the basic facts straight—although when it comes to some of her howlers, not even that would have helped. Ms Porter seems to be under the impression that Petőfi's *"National Song" ("Nemzeti dal")* is actually sung. "The people in front [of the Petőfi statue]," she writes, "began to sing the first lines of Petőfi's poem... Some knew the tune, everyone seemed to know the words." (A Hungarian version of *The Storyteller* was recently published in Budapest. Porter's Hungarian translator, Petra Novák, has tried valiantly to keep the factual errors and slips to a minimum, by correcting most of them and by tactfully omitting passages, like the one cited above, which are beyond remedy.)

Carelessness and sloppy research are not the only shortcomings of *The Storyteller.* The memoir is so obviously focused on Vili (though even his portrait could be more vivid) that some of the other characters—the various husbands and lovers of Anna's mother and two aunts, for example—are mere shadows. At the same time, descriptions of minor figures and scenes are often unnecessarily and pointlessly detailed. To her credit, Anna Porter doesn't indulge in facile psychologizing, and is not interested in connecting the dots between her grandfather's philandering ways and his three daughters' troubled relationships with men. In this respect she is more European than Canadian.

The word "lies" in the title, as mentioned at the outset, is both enticing and problematic. Porter talks about real lies in her book—the falsity and hypocrisy of the Communist regime. Then there are Vili's predictable legends and tall tales. And also necessary exaggerations and fictions that somehow compensate a people for the evil portion meted out to their country. These are not only Vili's stories but those of men like Vili, whose voice—because they were members of the discredited and dispossessed former elite—could not be heard after 1945.

Porter recounts a curious, improbable wartime meeting between Vili and his old friend Colonel-General Iván Hindy, defender of Buda. The meeting took place in a bunker under the ruined Royal Castle at the height of the siege. At one point Vili turned to his friend: "Have you been above ground, Iván? Have you seen our beautiful city? It would break your heart. Pest is a ruin. Even the Russians say it looks worse than Stalingrad. Our women are raped. Our homes are wrecked. Have you seen the Russians? They can't be beaten. They can't be kept out. Why don't you let it go? Save Buda at least. Let's save the little we have left." Hindy responded by saying "Buda would be defended stone by stone".

> "And if everyone dies?"
>
> "Even if not one person is left alive."
>
> "But Iván, don't you remember...?"
>
> "I have no memory of peacetime," Hindy said.

Is this made up? Is it a fictionalized and embellished account of a meeting that did take place? Perhaps it doesn't matter. What has to be noted is that tribute is

paid here to a man who in 1946 was executed as a war criminal.

Historian Krisztián Ungváry in his justly acclaimed book *The Siege of Budapest* also sees something tragic in Iván Hindy's character and fate. But his overall assessment of his conduct is critical: "Hindy embodies the failure of the right-wing Hungarian officer. Although as a private individual he rejected the excesses and the bloodbaths, he nevertheless became responsible for them. As a commander he lent his name to the Arrow Cross militia, instead of resigning when he saw that he could do nothing to stop them."

Of course the meeting with Hindy may be considered yet another Vili story, one of many, some of which are more successfully rendered than others. For despite the allure of the title, *The Storyteller* is not captivating enough. To which we should add that there is material here aplenty for a finer, more enduring book. ❧

Emir O. Filipović

Between the Ottoman Hammer and the Hungarian Anvil

Dubravko Lovrenović: *Na klizištu povijesti (sveta kruna ugarska i sveta kruna bosanska 1387–1463)* (The Landslide of History: The Holy Crown of Hungary and the Holy Crown of Bosnia 1387–1463). Zagreb-Sarajevo, Synopsis, 2006, 808 pp.

Dubravko Lovrenović, professor of medieval European history at the University of Sarajevo, has chosen to entitle his new study *The Landslide of History*. The landside in question is a result and reflection of the relations between Hungary and Bosnia from the accession of Sigismund of Luxembourg to the Hungarian throne in 1387 to the fall of the Bosnian medieval kingdom in 1463. Using already published sources, but also his own research in the archives and libraries of Dubrovnik, Zadar, Zagreb, Belgrade, Berlin and Budapest, Lovrenović closely examines the nature of these relations, offering an original and fresh approach to the history of Bosnia in the Middle Ages.

The book is divided into eight chronologically arranged chapters in which Lovrenović concentrates on the political, economic and cultural influence of Hungary on the Bosnian state. His overarching argument is that Hungarian–Bosnian relations fit in one of several feudal-dynastic models of Medieval Europe, best compared to the history of Anglo–French relations. He also argues that it is necessary to draw a line between the legal claims of Hungarian rulers and the factual state. If this is done, the long-argued thesis concerning Hungarian sovereignty over Bosnia would lose much of its persuasive power.

For a long time it was thought that the Bosnian kingdom was a vassal of the Hungarian Crown of St Stephen, which, on the basis of its patronage rights, laid claim on Bosnia. Lovrenović dismisses this theory. He gives a detailed overview of the military campaigns of King Sigismund in Bosnia in the first decade of the 15th century, emphasising that religious disputes were not the moving force behind these campaigns. He argues instead that Sigismund's objective was to win the Bosnian Crown. In order to conceal his true intentions, Sigismund used a rhetoric which branded the Bosnians as heretics and infidels.

Although he was successful militarily, the high point being his victory at Dobor in 1408, Sigismund failed politically in Bosnia. This meant that he had to accept the will of the Bosnian magnates, who kept their right to decide who would and could be king of Bosnia. They did not elect Sigismund, who already held many Crowns in Europe. And since the Bosnian Crown eluded Sigismund, Lovrenović concludes that it was much sought after by Europe's potentates.

After finally giving up his aspirations to the Bosnian throne, Sigismund shifted

Emir O. Filipović
is teaching assistant at the Department of Philosophy, University of Sarajevo.

from military to diplomatic methods in his dealings with Bosnia. The tournament held in Buda in 1412 was a sure sign of his reconciliation with the most powerful of the Bosnian nobles, including the Bosnian king Ostoja. They were all present at this magnificent and splendid event, but the period of peace and harmony did not last. In 1415, Hungarian forces encountered the allied army of Bosnians and Ottoman Turks in the valley of the river Lašva in central Bosnia and were utterly defeated. This brought a significant change to the relations between Bosnia and Hungary, as Hungarian political pressure on Bosnia weakened afterwards, while Bosnia entered the much more powerful sphere of Ottoman control. Lovrenović characterises Bosnia's plight in the years that followed (1416–1443) as being caught between the Ottoman hammer and the Hungarian anvil.

Although Lovrenović claims the territories of the Hungarian and Bosnian Crowns were separate feudal entities in all legal, ecclesiastical-political and financial aspects, he does not ignore Hungary's direct spiritual and cultural influence on Bosnia. This is evident in the many institutions that Bosnia adopted from her powerful neighbour, such as the political concept of the Holy Crown, a Christo-centric ruling ideology, sepulchral architecture, chivalry and heraldry. Bosnia was firmly linked via Hungary to the culture of the Western and Central European royal courts. But Hungary did not only act as a conduit bringing a Western and Central European model to Bosnia. She also served as an independent role model for the Bosnian medieval kingdom in her own right. As Lovrenović shows, it has become impossible to research Bosnian medieval history without situating it into this wider political and cultural region, and contextualising it with contemporary European history.

Among the many other points he discusses, the most important is his theory on the coronation of the Bosnian King Tvrtko Kotromanić in 1377. Historians had previously identified the town of Mileševo in Serbia, the burial place of the Serbian Saint Sava, as the place where Tvrtko was crowned King of Serbs and Bosnia, but Professor Lovrenović offers a new opinion, siting the coronation in the Bosnian town of Mile (today the village of Arnautovići near Visoko). In doing so, he takes up a trail left by the Benedictine historian Mauro Orbinni in *Il Regno degli Slavi,* which was published in Pesaro in 1601. Historians were misled by Orbinni's obvious confusion of the Serbian Milesevo with the Bosnian Mile. Even though the coronation does not fit into the proposed chronological limits of his book (1387–1463), Lovrenović clarifies a picture distorted by a mistaken interpretation of the sources. He believes that this event had an enormous influence on later relations between Hungary and Bosnia. Apart from this, he also recognizes the exceptional importance of the move of the seat of the Bosnian bishopric to territory under Hungarian control in the mid-13th century. It was that which gave rise to the Bosnian Church. According to Lovrenović, this institution was a fully organized state Church which performed all the usual political rituals and, through its sacralisation of the ruling ideology, made possible the factual independence of the Bosnian Crown from the *Archiregnum Hungaricum.*

Lovrenović's is a thoroughly documented study which opens up new perspectives and explains the complex situation Bosnia found itself in during the 15th century, situated as it was in the Bermuda triangle between the Holy See, the Hungarian Crown and the Ottoman Turks. There is little doubt that it will prove to be an attractive, highly readable and informative study for those who can read Croatian and are interested not only in medieval Bosnia, but also in the history of the wider region of East-Central Europe in the Middle Ages. ❧

Tamás Koltai

Blood, Myth, Metaphysics

Richard Strauss: *Elektra* • Shakespeare: *Macbeth* •
Péter Esterházy: *Rubens és a nemeuklideszi asszonyok*
(Rubens and Non-Euclidean Women)

Theatre has worked with myths from the start, at first making use of those it found, later creating its own. Some of the figures thus created took on a life of their own. Invented figures became mythical and historical personages acquired a mythological status. Several important recent productions have provided examples for some modern variants.

Elektra is one of the archetypes of classical mythology. Since the time of Greek tragedy, her story has been retold countless times across the spectrum of literary genres. Hugo von Hofmannsthal's *Elektra* was turned into a libretto for Richard Strauss by the author. The opera was first performed in 1911. The recent Hungarian State Opera House production, one of the most noteworthy of recent years—and hopefully a sign of regeneration under its new management—featured on its opening night and for two further performances two leading divas, Nadine Secunde and Agnes Baltsa no less.

Whether *Elektra* is seen and heard as a Secessionist *fin-de-siècle* masterpiece, a culmination of the harmonics of post-Wagnerian late romanticism, or as a work on the threshold of the atonality that was ushered in a year later with Schoenberg's monodrama *Erwartung,* is a matter best left to musicologists. What is clear, however, is that we are dealing with a tragedy of extreme passions employing the insight of Freudian psychoanalysis. A drama of fate, of hysteria and horror took shape in a single long outpouring in which rich melody and tender lyricism are welded to stabs of sound colossi, kept in firm control by the baton of János Kovács. Balázs Kovalik's production alluded more to the opera's turn-of-the-century roots than to the tragedy's origins in ancient Greece. Emotional embroilment and sensual turmoil rather than grim loathing, vengefulness, scorn or supremacy were expressed through the portrayal of the characters. Klytemnestra, generally played as a monster, and Elektra, generally played as a barbarian run wild, were here presented as frustrated victims with their own intrinsic truth.

The set—not for the first time in the staging of the opera—was the baths in which Agamemnon was murdered. A huge stepped and tiled luxury bath with yellow plastic sacks of potting compost in the foreground, which might also be the king's grave. Beside it straggles a lonely sapling packed in a clump of earth and tended, lugged around or made to dance by Elektra. As the piece starts she seems to rise from

Tamás Koltai
editor of Színház, *a theatre monthly, is* The Hungarian Quarterly*'s regular theatre critic.*

the grave: a symbol of her relationship to her father, a sort of Oedipus complex or, indeed, an Elektra complex. Her adoration of her father is a substitute for her own fulfilment as a woman. Always in black mourning, she contrasts with her sister, Chrysothemis, always in bridal white, as if in waiting for the groom who will fulfil her being. The clothes are no more than stylised evening gowns, leaving the shoulders and arms bare, thereby allowing sensuality an interplay—through the putting on and ripping off of veil, stole and gloves—in the relationship between the sisters and in that between mother and daughter as well. All this is motivated by fury and tenderness, jealousy in the face of femininity and motherhood, with a subtle admixture of eroticism. Éva Bátori, the Hungarian soprano who sang Chrysothemis, sketched a superb portrait of the daughter on the cusp between childhood and womanhood, longing for a full life, while the mezzo Agnes Baltsa's elegantly fur-coated Klytemnestra was haughty and yet fallible. The vengefulness of Secunde's Elektra, imbued with self-assurance and passion, is replete with the jealousy of a woman whose femininity has failed her. All this is portrayed in the vestibule to a glitteringly mirrored bathing chamber, lit in green, red and blue, where servile attendants scurry nervously.

The true surprise was left to the end. Orestes—if it is him—was a figure in a black suit hiding his identity behind dark glasses. His big recognition scene with Elektra was much more one of thwarted sexual union. The wall that crashes down at the time of the murders is reopened, and we see Chrysothemis has attached herself to the victor as she sips drinks with her household before taking up her place in her mother's snow-white matrimonial bed.

Elektra, clothed in bridal white, drags her dead father's sapling into the same bed. The gesture may be interpreted as a perversion of an autonomous personality who will brook no compromise but has been frustrated. This is an Elektra whom—again not for the first time in the staging of the opera—the new order does not need, since she will only spread confusion. The sacrificial dance and ritual death are omitted. Orestes, or whoever it may be who appears in his place, guns down Elektra, thereby consummating her fate, and her sister's as well. The advent of a new terrorist power is familiar in an Eastern Europe that misappropriates and manipulates its opportunities for salvation.

Shakespeare's *Macbeth* presents a blood-filled myth of irrational lust for power. The new production by the Budapest Katona József Theatre does not make a bloodbath of the play nor use it as a comment on the current political situation, approaches that would be too obvious and banal. Nor, however, does it seek to eschew metaphysical horror as it portrays the mechanism of power and the practical realities of the mundane world. The director, Gábor Zsámbéki, tries to match Shakespeare's universality by showing human nature in all its extremes and contradictions.

Two faintly smiling men greet each other in the opening scene: Duncan, the king, and Macbeth, the man who has gained victory for him on the battlefield. They stand close, face to face, their intimacy plain to see. The king is ill and requires physical support; he holds power with resigned pain. He does not command the head of his fallen foe to be removed from the sack it has been brought in: he averts his gaze, his disillusionment with the carnage and with ruling reflected in his despairing eyes. Macbeth is no grim-faced warrior either: he appears sensitive, refined, radiating a sort of Gothic spirituality. Except that just beforehand the weird sisters have foretold his accession to the throne. This he has hardly taken in, he nervously

stares towards the spot from where the witches have vanished. While the first of their predictions is fulfilled almost straight away when the title of Thane of Cawdor is conferred on him, he becomes so immersed in thought that he is slow to kneel before his King. He conceals himself awkwardly in Duncan's embrace, whom he will soon murder; he will later clasp Banquo just as limply, unexpectedly and apologetically, shortly before he unleashes his killers upon him.

This is a Macbeth who might be you or I, anyone in whom the idea has been planted that fate has destined him for great things. Especially if he is incited by his wife. This Lady Macbeth is no demonic monster or her husband's evil spirit, goading him to crimes; she merely has no hesitation and no scruples about these things. It is she who acts first in Macbeth's stead, taking the decision off his shoulders just as she eases off his coat to slip into it momentarily; theirs is a shared elation, and their embraces are imbued with the sexuality that drives and sustains her. From then on, they take turns in anticipating each other in deed and in their ability (or lack of it) to control themselves. On the night of the regicide, it is Macbeth who goes to pieces and Lady Macbeth who takes control; on the following day it is she who hysterically overdoes the grieving (she goes so far as to faint) while her husband cynically expresses his condolences to the fatherless children in a Christ-like pose. (True, he too is nervous: he is too quick and tense in enquiring about the reason for all the fuss and upheaval that morning.) Lady Macbeth is visibly disconcerted when Macbeth calmly reports to her that Banquo has been murdered, but it is she who calms her husband when he is tormented by the appearance of Banquo's ghost. They may not be synchronous, but they follow and support one another in wrestling with their crimes—or at least as long as they are still capable of that.

Malcolm and Donalbain, Duncan's sons, are paralysed by their father's murder. At that point they are helpless children, but in exile they become young playboys, and on hearing Malcolm's self-depreciation, which may be a deliberate ruse, a crude soul like Macduff is unable to decide what he should believe, whether he should see the heir to the throne as a moralist or a villain. It is hard for the spectator as well. Banquo's impassive face shows the wily smile of someone who thinks (and says) that it will be his descendants who will be kings, for the witches have foretold that Macbeth will lose out in the long run. The poker faces of Macbeth's attendant Seyton and of the nobleman Lennox give away nothing of their real thoughts about the proceedings; the Doctor swallows the piece of paper on which he set down the mad Lady Macbeth's self-incriminating disclosures. Lady Macbeth does not perform a banal hand-washing aria, sleepwalking she creates a physical contact with the Doctor and her Gentlewoman as there is no crowd, the guests being no more than statue-like shades. The Porter is the only one who feels no need to disguise his opinions; after he has opened the gates to Macduff and Lennox, he remains to watch the mummery of mourning for the king, not seeming to pay much attention, yet reacting visibly to the false notes and producing impish asides that make it clear he knows exactly what is going on.

The theatrical space is nondescript, broken up by sheets of rusty steel revolving around a few vertical axes. Graves are opened up by removing flooring panels from the sloping surface, allowing corpses to be either buried or pulled out as necessary. A half-buried Banquo thus can sit up as a ghost and later jump out of the grave to jerk about like a puppet to accompany Macbeth. This is not the customary dark, irrational terrain of blood and muck and swirling fog but a dull

landscape, with clumsy hired assassins and bungled ambitions. The witches are not supernatural wraiths but at one moment excited females out of some sexual fantasy, at others low-rent whores who present their prophecies as, literally, pictures of the future by stripping off layers of posters pasted on the wall of a house. Transcendence is represented by a campanile-like girder from which hang small bells that can be sounded and lumps of unpolished crystal that are lowered from time to time. At each murder a sheet of steel that is suspended from the frame of a raised stage area is lowered. The metaphysical and real, verbalism and physicality, classicism and modernism are smoothly blended. In the final clash, two "shadows"—"good" and "evil"—club one another with cudgels half in the grave, rather as in a Goya painting, and meanwhile the choral passage of a Baroque oratorio is heard. In a horrified voice Macbeth urges onward the fate into which he has driven himself.

The new regime dishes out honours, promising a new era and new privileges. A single corpse is carried on in a sack at the back of the stage. That has more impact than a whole pile of bodies. In a peaceful heap lie the dread couple, who were not so dread after all. The whole adds up to a polished and intelligent production.

Péter Esterházy's latest play, *Rubens and Non-Euclidean Women,* offers intellectual fodder first and foremost. Although best known for his many postmodern novels that have been widely translated, Esterházy has previously written a number of stage works, or in some cases "texts" that were offered for theatre performance. This, however, counts as the most considerable piece he has given so far to the stage. (It was commissioned in Germany where it received its first performance as part of the Rhineland Triennale.) It is not a work composed with a traditional dramaturgical apparatus, more a text set up as verse. In form and rhetoric it is somewhat reminiscent of the works of the Austrian playwright (and novelist) Thomas Bernhard. Here, in its first performance in Hungary, at the Pest Theatre, its impact is above all verbal. In other words, even when staged the text is what counts. Its wittiness, its paradoxicality, deftness, frivolity, its artful rationalism, a deep philosophy made to hit home along the devious by-ways of apparently not taking itself seriously.

At its heart lie certain ontological and metaphysical questions, such as creation, God, existence, death, immortality, art and science (the question which of the two latter disciplines, if either, is capable of describing and recreating the world generates further questions). Two characters, or better: two ideals or world views, or archetypal ways of living, are contrasted: one is Rubens, workaholic painter genius, the other Kurt Gödel, twentieth-century mathematician and philosopher of science. Rubens sees light everywhere (light even emanates from him), and he personally has to paint every bum (the haunches of mares too). He is the eye specialist, wallowing in the joys of living, in female flesh, in everything of the world that lends itself to being painted, that is in whatever can be grasped and reproduced. (That immediately raises the question of what is more real: the world or the picture that is formed of it.) He feels no need to invest his paintings with transcendence, so he experiences the paradox that right at the opening of the play he has to die repeatedly as a personal tragedy, even an absurdity. He is unable to die properly even once (death is "too much" for him, the English expression is spelled the Hungarian way—*tú maccs*—the slang of intellectuals). The counterpoint is provided by logical, scientific Gödel, the brain specialist, who on account of his constant questioning was nicknamed

Mr Why when a child. He is an ascetic who thinks in terms of mathematical formulae and would only accept food from his wife or Einstein (in fact he died of complications resulting from the fact that, for different reasons, neither of those could feed him). On the one hand, he is convinced that there are limits to the possibility of interpreting the world by thinking alone, on the other, he firmly believes that through thought a new world can be created out of nothing. After all, it is him, Gödel who discovered the Incompleteness Theorem—a proposition that (like Euclidean geometry) is totally incomprehensible to the mathematically illiterate. One may, however, just about gather from the Theorem's epistemological drift that the most axiomatic and seemingly consistent true propositions can be proved to be untrue.

One might well think that pitting the sensual artist against the desiccated scientist would result in no contest. That would be too easy. Esterházy weighs up both sides of the argument and open-mindedly evens things up thereby, as it were, creating a "philosophy of being" of his own: the Completeness Theorem. Indeed, just to complicate things further, he draws into the discussion representatives of other viewpoints: Rubens' young wife Helène, his son Albert, his assistant, two figures from his paintings: Bacchus and the Angel. He takes the deconstruction further by interlarding the text with the customary array of imported quotations, some of historical importance, from Goethe to Chekhov and beyond, others just banal commonplaces, with references to TV programmes, the football world championship and the "theatre of anxiety", or more specifically the issue of whether the questions posed in a broadcast programme are answerable, or indeed if the questions that may be intuited from the answers may be posed at all. There are guest appearances for the gout which plagued the artist's final months, the son's problem of living in his father's shade; the (second) wife being a sexy young woman and model; the soul of a painter's assistant, and so on. Some of Esterházy's literary ideas come attached to a specific figure, others are purely textual, that is what makes the play so postmodern.

János Szikora directed an agreeable production. What there was in the way of spectacle was restrained and discreet. Transparent Plexiglass screens were tugged around the stage bearing various faintly coloured paintings by Rubens. Thus, when the live actors in similar clothes (or lack of them) stood behind the screens, the paintings appeared in double focus, which left an impression that the figures were hovering between the painted and the theatrical realities. That visual element did not add any depth to the text, but it did serve as a distraction to those for whom the relentless intellectualism was "too much"—they could delight in all the bare flesh that was on display. Rubens painted a great many naked women, so that if his *The Three Graces* decorates the Plexiglass, there must also be living duplicates. A painting entitled *The Furlet* also made a live appearance, with the ominous garment draped around Helène, his wife, (insofar as it was draped). The actress who played the part was undoubtedly attractive; indeed, she was much closer to current ideals of female beauty than the fleshy women of Rubens' canvases. In sum, the metaphysical questions that the author posed were thereby in a sense transformed into something that was essentially physical. ❧

Erzsébet Bori

Alive, Alive-Oh

György Szomjas: *Vagabond* • Csaba Bereczki: *Életek éneke* (The Song of Lives) • András Péterffy: *Brassói pályaudvar* (Braşov Railway Station)

In the early years of the last century, Bartók and Kodály (and later Béla Vikár) explored the musical treasures of the peoples of the Carpathian Basin. Yet, it was not enough to raise folk music into high culture and base a pedagogical method on it. In vain were Bartók's folk song arrangements and works of his that draw on folk-music motifs played all over the world; in vain had the Kodály method spread widely in schools and in the choirs, for that same folk-music tradition has been given up for dead more than once since it was discovered. The twentieth century saw two political systems in Hungary that ignored Bartók. The increasingly right-wing Horthy régime left him no honourable choice but to emigrate, while his triumphant post-war (posthumous) "return" was soon cut short by Stalinist cultural policies. Socialist Realism (or schematism, as its critics would have it) was in principle the great friend of the people and the people's arts, but, in practice, the dictatorship and censorship led to a pitifully hollow and oversimplified "fakelorism". The modernism that made itself felt even in East Europe went on to reject a folk culture that had by then been vitiated and corralled into the museum and archive.

With all this in the background, what was called the "dance-house movement" hit Hungary in the Seventies like a bolt from the blue. It started with a small group of young musicians performing musical settings of verse, chiefly the work of classic living poets, in amateur forums, youth clubs and camps. From this "folk song" emerged as a new metropolitan genre with the performers starting to research and delve ever deeper for the melodic treasures that they could use.

There were a diverse set of motives at work. It should not be forgotten that travel to the West at the time was still severely restricted, whereas it was relatively easy to visit most countries in the Soviet bloc. There was also a desire on the part of the young to seek their roots, coupled with a growing nostalgia of a nationalistic, and even frankly irredentist, hue and a firming of national feeling as a form of opposition to the régime. The resurgent interest was linked to spending time in Transylvania; it spread and functioned superficially as a fashion. All the same plumping for folk music and making trips to Transylvania would not have turned into a movement had it not been able to harness the driving

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Erzsébet Bori
is The Hungarian Quarterly*'s regular film critic.*

force of youth culture. The generation gap, with the young emerging as a quite distinct social group, as had already emerged in America back in the Fifties, was now beginning to assert itself in both Western and Eastern Europe; even repressive Communist states showed themselves powerless against it.

Dance-house music is an archaic form of entertainment for peasants. Still very much alive in Transylvania, as it was rekindled in the early Seventies it became a part of the youth culture of Budapest. It combined the features of a music club with the characteristics of grassroots initiative. Learning the dance steps had an important communal role, too. Alongside listening and dancing to music, authentic folk dances were studied on collecting trips, ethnographical camps were set up, and people went off to seek out peasant musicians and invite them to share their songs, instrumental techniques and dance steps. That movement seemed to have lost its impetus sometime around Hungary's shift from a socialist to a democratic political system in 1989–90; in fact, it was to assume a new form, in a world-music guise. By the late Nineties the Muzsikás ensemble, which emerged from the early dance-house movement in 1972, along with the singer Márta Sebestyén, became international stars, and in the West there are now countless ensembles playing folk music from the Carpathian Basin in concert halls, at festivals or, for that matter, at camp parties in Hollywood.

The most important recent development has been the discovery of authentic Gypsy folk music. It was not just a matter of musicians or the wider public discovering it, but it also involved collecting in an area that only twenty years ago was still the province of a few lone wolves. The interest in the music has proved fortunate in another respect: it has played a considerable role in creating awareness of the appalling conditions of Roma life in the countryside.

Several recent films have dealt with this folk-music renaissance. This is not the place to make a list of documentaries about individual performers or ensembles, but over and above these "obligatory homages" a number of more exacting undertakings have also emerged. György Szomjas has a series of popular full-length feature films to his credit that deal with the heroes of popular culture, or urban folklore. For a while, he deserted fiction to make documentaries about folk music, dance and folk musicians before returning to features employing dance and music to provide a new dimension to his story. *Vagabond* (2003) is about a fictitious young man named Karesz, a child care case who is living between two worlds. A wide road leads from truancy, minor and not so minor misdemeanours, drink, drugs and crime towards prison, but he meets a girl, joins a dance house, and options of a quite different nature open up.

By that time, Karesz has already learned something of the basics of the music from his fellow Roma inmates in the institution. They are always ready for any spot of spontaneous music-making, so he does not find it at all odd that there are people who do not spend their time drinking and playing billiards but dancing and singing together, with the odd glass on the side, of course. Those who attend the dance houses come from all social backgrounds, they include refugees from the Voivodina in Serbia and economic refugees from Transylvania; a young couple who trail with their skimpy possessions from one lodging to another; and the offspring of a nouveau riche Buda family. Differences vanish, or are bridged, for the time that they are together; indeed, friendships formed there may provide tangible assistance (an evening meal, a roof over the head, work) in quotidian life,

though of course they do little to radically change the situation of the assorted vagabonds, fugitives and men selling their illegal labour, or that of ethnic Hungarians from across the border queuing up for residence and work permits, or the runaways from institutions who wash windscreens at traffic lights or sell tabloids; or that of lads serving the "entrepreneurs" of the gangster underworld on the look-out for cheap labour. Karesz chooses another life in vain, as he is pulled back by a hundred ties into the old life. He becomes involved in a break-in with some of his pals from the home, and by the time the budding love between him and Zsófi is set to bloom he is in prison. The next time he will be able to see her is at visiting time, when he will swear that if he manages to get out of there, he will become a musician just to show them.

Instead of the cruder bitter humour that one had become accustomed to in his work, Szomjas here mostly opts for a subtler irony, only allowing his taste for gags free rein in a couple of scenes. It was clever to give a sense of the passage of time by showing a succession of sensational headlines shrieked by the tabloids. He even quotes from Carlos Saura's 1983 film *Carmen* when the members of a company rehearsing for the ballet *Sobri* carry the conflicts in their private lives over into the production. The weakness that *Vagabond* shows as fiction is precisely its strength as a document: the dance and song are not just intercut and in the background; they are not simply incidental music or mood intensifier but have a role on the same footing and of the same weight as the story line and the characters themselves. However, the constant switching between the fictional story and "reality" (the documentary-style recording of dance scenes and musical numbers) is not entirely smooth. The invented twists of the plot are diametrically opposed to the humdrum lives of the flesh-and-blood characters and the authentic dance-house atmosphere. I would be happy to go on watching the dances and listening to the wonderful songs and their accompanying sections of foot-tapping rhythms, but I would be equally happy to get to know the characters rather better, both in the present and in the past. When *Vagabond* ends, one gets up from the seat rather dissatisfied, not in irritation or disappointment, but simply because one has the feeling of having been given only an appetiser of the two worlds—an enticing outline of a story and a taste of the world of the dance house and its music.

Szomjas committed himself to featuring a parade of the broad range of the folk-music repertoire of the wider Hungarian community, indeed the Carpathian Basin as a whole, featuring top performers. Thus, there are appearances by the likes of Ferenc Sebő and Béla Halmos, who can take the credit for sparking the dance-house movement in Hungary and the desire to rediscover its folk-music heritage, with Halmos still active nowadays with his group Kalamajka. We also get cameo performances from Márta Sebestyén and Muzsikás, and from the southern Slav music of Söndörgő and the Vujisics ensemble. Alongside the Hungarian musicians and professional performers from present-day Hungary there are also some major exponents of authentic and still living, but fast vanishing, folk music from beyond the country's borders, such as the Szászcsávás Gypsy band and János Zerkula and his wife Regina from the Gyimes (Ghimeş), or István Pál, an 85-year-old piper from Nógrád. Gráci Benke from the Hungarian-speaking Csángós from Moldavia, now settled in Hungary, contributed to the film not only his drumming but several motifs from his own life as well.

Nowadays issuing a soundtrack recording of a film is an integral part of the marketing of movies that are not

specifically music pictures. Given the particular care that was taken with every aspect of its making, *Vagabond* also seeks to break new ground here, too, through the quality of the recordings—necessarily of live performances, in accordance with the dance-house music ethic. The 24-track recording gave each instrument its own individual track, and that included micro-phoning the dancers' feet and so treating them as rhythm-beating instruments in their own right.

Csaba Bereczki likewise made his start by tracking down living folk music in documentaries—in his case a nine-part series for Duna TV—in which he had the editorial assistance of László Kelemen, an acknowledged expert, to sketch a comprehensive picture of the Transylvanian heritage. That series aroused such interest both in Hungary and abroad that it has (so far) been re-broadcast twice in the home market, and the featured musicians have been able to put on highly acclaimed "all-star" concerts both in Hungary and abroad. It was from recut material from that series that *The Song of Lives* was put together as a 100-minute version for the cinema screen. (See also *HQ* 176 for a review of Bereczki's first [2002] film, *Song of Fools*.)

The salient virtue of Bereczki's venture is its brainchild of essaying a sort of "Transylvanist" approach. The bulk of the featured ensembles and musicians were already known to people who had an interest in folk music, but these seem to consist of two only partially overlapping sets of enthusiasts with one lot attending concerts of Hungarian folk music and the dance houses, another enthusiastic about the music of the Gypsies. The film sweeps across these dividing lines by featuring not only Hungarian and Gypsy but also Romanian musicians, and, to complicate matters still more, the Roma include some who are Hungarian and others who are Romanian in language, culture and commitment. As a result the film is trilingual, and one does not have to be particularly perceptive to notice that it is the Transylvanian Gypsies who speak all three languages as if that were the most natural thing in the world, and who also feel completely at home playing not just in their own but also in the other musical traditions; indeed, they play a vital role in preserving the traditions of those—the Saxons, the Jews—who have been moved from their native land. And yet another observation that may be made is that ever since a substantial majority of the nations that once formed the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy have now again been reunited within a Europe without borders, the wish to see those historical regions as entities has also returned. In the film one can literally apprehend by ear the cultural borderline between the fiddle tradition that dominates in the western parts of the region and the brass tradition that comes to the fore as one moves south-eastwards into the Balkans.

It is quite plausible to suppose that Bereczki obtained his inspiration from a live performance which he recorded as the film *Brąsov Railway Station*. The performance was based on the brilliant idea of showing up what has been Transylvania in song and dance at a natural venue for bringing alive the life and soul of the jumble of nations that inhabited, nurtured and built the region. When the railway station in Braşov was filmed by a number of camera-men under the direction of András Péterffy, the genre of the film was given as "socio-dance", but László Diószegi, who arranged and choreographed the performance, preferred to call it a "happening". The Braşov Railway Station of the film's title was the actual waiting room of the Budapest-Kelenföld Railway Station, and that gave the whole a pleasingly rough-and-ready, unorganised edge, with people

wandering in from the railway refreshment room with beer bottles in hand, with some waiting to board a train and others waiting for relatives to arrive and becoming mixed up with those appearing in the film, some in traditional peasant costume, others in their ordinary clothes, with only an occasional straw hat or headscarf to distinguish the dancers in their jeans and pullovers from onlookers.

The aim of the performance, as the director put it, was "to show the multicultural miracle that is Transylvania, a universal cultural heritage that has been fast vanishing in recent years." Braşov Railway Station was a meeting-point where

> it was possible to behold simultaneously, alongside each other and complementing each other, the marvellous relics of multinational Transylvania: Hungarians and Romanians; ethnic German 'Saxons' heading for Schässburg (Segesvár-Sighişoara), natives of the Ţara Oaşulni (Avas) in their perky straw hats; Jews and Hutsuls travelling to Bukovina. But also Armenians from Gheorgheni sharing a bench with Csángós from Moldavia aiming for Csíksomlyó (Şumuleu), Gagauz waiting for the Bucharest Express from where they would then spend a whole day on the onward journey to their villages in the Tulcea district. Swabian women from the Timişoara area were betrayed by their distinctive bonnets. And not least the Gypsies, of course, forever en route to somewhere and seemingly spending their entire happy and extravagant lives in train stations.

But does the Braşov Railway Station still survive? Did it ever exist? Maybe it did at the time of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. The Armenian merchants have long since disappeared; overgrown cemeteries are all there is to remind one of the Jews; the remaining Transylvanian Saxons left during the Nineties, turning their back on centuries of tradition, while Sighişoara is now being transmuted into a centre for tourism. Kaleidoscopic multinational regions always become objects of aching nostalgia once history has managed to liquidate their "intolerable" ethnic tangle by sword and fire. It was only a few years ago that the Balkans were turned into a collection of rancorous, ethnically cleansed small nation-states before our very eyes. But it seems those who put on the performance had something quite different in mind. As long as the music is playing and the dancing goes on, Braşov Railway Station at least survives.

Bereczki's film also has a similarly positive message that not everything has been lost, since the Hungarians, Romanians and Gypsies of Transylvania and the Csángós of Ghimeş and Moldavia are still around, because their culture and music live on, with the emphasis being placed on the verb "live". What exists is an intrinsic part of feast days and workdays, and for that reason there is no point in expecting sterile impeccability or purity—those are only to be encountered in theme parks for extinct peoples and vanished ways of life.

One film often mentioned à propos *The Song of Lives,* not without reason, is *Buena Vista Social Club,* Wim Wenders' 1999 documentary, but one might equally mention *Crossing the Bridge: The Sound of Istanbul* by the Turkish director Fatih Akin, which came out in 2005. Though the music in the latter was nothing like as sparkling, Akin's approach to editing was more helpful in the guidance that it gave to orient the viewer. Bereczki presumably aimed his film at a wider audience, but even Hungarians may have trouble in working out where exactly they are and who are the musicians or speakers featured at any given point. The TV series was structured in terms of regions, towns and villages but that crutch has been thrown away in this film. That snag can be remedied if the promise to put out a DVD of the series is realised, which

will provide the basic background information one needs. Then one can relax and enjoy in comfort what one might call a kind of creative documentary.

Much of the credit for that belongs to cinematographer Tibor Nemes and the editing by Réka Lemhényi. *The Song of Lives* contains not one clip showing the obligatory beauty spot or a sociological shot of poverty; every shot has its place, and every detail serves the whole, which testifies to the discerning eyes of those concerned. The film contains some priceless self-reflective sequences—notably those on a trip to Paris, with many of the peasant musicians presumably never before having been given the chance to travel to the West, and maybe not even outside their own country; the scenes in central Paris are intercut with those of a rather meagre Romanian kermesse that, at first, one might not quite register. What cannot be gainsaid, of course, is that these exceptionally talented musicians all learned how to make music from their ancestors, the great predecessors, like Sándor "Neti" Fodor, around whose grave they all gather. A middle generation now occupies his position, with youngsters coming to learn from them, and grandchildren enthusiastically thronging around them to dance, listen and watch. One such is the tot in the opening shots who cannot yet talk but already has the sound of the music in his ear and starts to saw away at a snapped-off branch or maize stalk as he sings in a squeaky voice in accurate imitation of a violin. ❧

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On this day the Colonel had to shoot someone, on behalf of the Casino's directors; the decision had been made in the English Room (so named after a visit by the Prince of Wales).

The duel was to take place in the barracks that afternoon, and the man who had insulted the Casino was not to leave there alive. – Very well, I'll shoot the journalist – the Colonel said with a shrug. But he was becoming devilishly hungry.

From **Last Cigar at the Gray Arabian** *by Gyula Krú*

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