The Hungarian Quarterly

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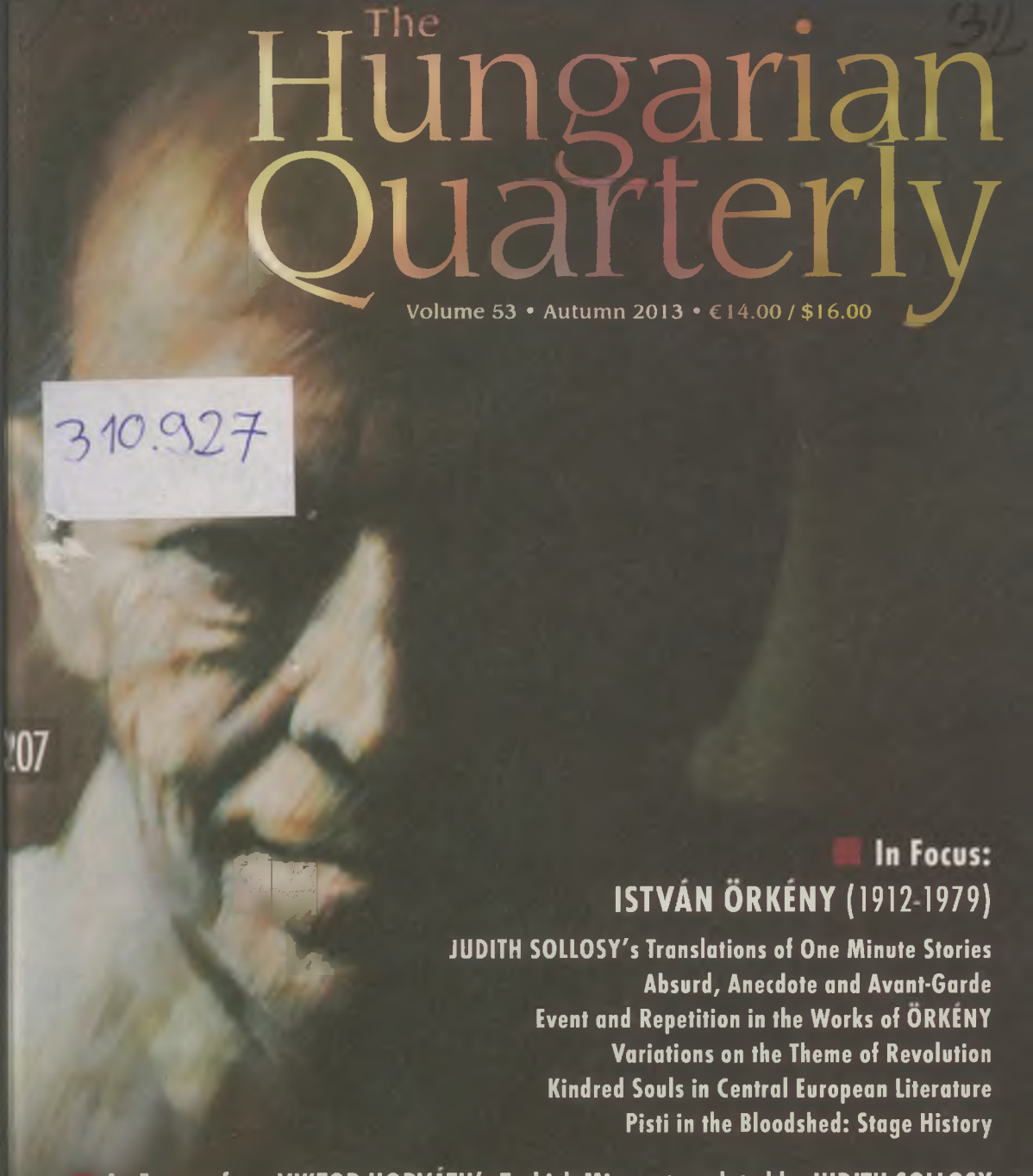

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MTA KÖNYVTÁR ÉS INFORMÁCIÓS KÖZPONT

VISUALITY AND LITERATURE

ART

INTERVIEW

***On the cover**: Éva Kárpáti.* István Örkény *(1999)*
Oil on canvas, 70×50 cm. Courtesy of the Artist

***On the back cover**: Péter Nádas.* Light Coming In *(1985 / 2011)*
With the generous permission of Péter Nádas

The telephone booth dedicated to István Örkény
Photograph by Ákos Tasi

Editor-in-Chief's Note

"Beyond the city limits, past the last houses of Hűvösvölgy but this side of the township of Nagykovácsi, there lies a meadow of wildflowers. Small enough for a child to run its length without even being out of breath, and hidden among the tall trees like a mountain pool. Too small for anyone to bother taking a scythe to it, so by midsummer the grass, weeds, and flowers have grown waist-deep. Here the phone booth made its roost." This excerpt is from a one-minute story by István Örkény (1912-1979) entitled "Ballad on the Magic of Poetry." In the story, a phone booth in downtown Budapest, all too accustomed to tedious conversations about daily errands, trysts, and petty jealousies, is moved by four lines of poetry read in haste by an ardent poet to a dismissive editor. Apparently unwilling to continue to subject itself to people's everyday chatter, the phone booth sets off, eventually settling in a meadow in the Buda hills. From time to time people on excursions in the hills stop to pick up the receiver and place a call, but instead of a dial tone they hear only the four lines of poetry, "as quiet as the strains of a muted violin... The phone does not give them back their coins, but so far no one has complained."

To commemorate the 100th anniversary of Örkény's birth, in April 2013 a phone booth was placed in the spot where the author had envisioned it. Also as Örkény had envisioned, there is no dial tone. Instead, if you pick up the receiver, you hear one-minute stories read aloud by well-known Hungarian actors.

With this issue, The Hungarian Quarterly *also pays tribute to István Örkény, one of the outstanding Hungarian literary figures of the twentieth century. We invite our readers to immerse themselves in the wit of several one-minute stories, published here for the first time in English translation by Judith Sollosy, and enjoy an array of articles by prominent Hungarian scholars on Örkény's place in the literature of Hungary and Central Europe.*

We also invite you to peruse articles on a variety of other subjects, including the photography of Péter Nádas, the art of János Thorma, and Sándor Szathmári's novel Voyage to Kazohinia, *as well excerpts from the English translation of Viktor Horváth's "Turkish Mirror," winner of the European Union Prize for Literature. In the name of the new Editorial Board, welcome, and we hope you enjoy the issue.*

Thomas Cooper

István Örkény

One-Minute Stories

Judith Sollosy's Translations of Six One-Minute Stories

Notices and Announcements

I hereby wish to express my infinite gratitude to all those who have graciously extended their good wishes to me on the occasion of my beloved husband's untimely death.

*

Has anyone seen my long-haired, house-trained, female mid-ear infection that answers to the name of Mary?

*

We do not serve dead drunks!

*

Comradely reunion

All those who had personally participated in beating me to a pulp in the back lot of City Park Diner ten years ago are herewith cordially invited to a comradely reunion at the same time, same place on the 20th of the month.

The deceased B. Ordódi

*

No littering the sidewalk with paper money!

*

Guests with male genitals kindly refrain from visiting the women's sun deck.

*

Why can't a Volkswagen find true happiness?

*

It is strictly against regulations to feed, bait, or in any way annoy the Hungarian flag!

*

Warning! The gate bites!

New Saying

People say that there are no new sayings born these days. But I can give an example to prove that they're wrong.

A man who forgot to die when his time came on 7 August, 1640 was recently found in B. township, Heves County. The man (Károly Rakasza, ditch digger) was absentminded to begin with; for instance, he never knew who the king was or, to be precise, ever since 1655 he'd been under the impression that it was King Leopold the First.

This must be the reason why he forgot all about his serious bowel obstruction. He just went on digging his ditch and didn't notice the terrible pains. He also forgot what part of him hurt, then the name of his illness, then the illness itself. For the past four hundred years he's been as sound as a bell.

He's lost count of how many great-great and great-great-great grandchildren he has, but he is still digging the soil with remarkable agility, and Heves County is now marked by a network of meandering ditches obstructing traffic.

It was this circumstance that brought the absent-minded ditch digger to people's attention. In B. (where his birth was registered), the town council convened and brought a ruling that any further digging of ditches was to stop; furthermore, that the forgetful old man was to be reminded that—though admittedly with some slight delay—it was time for him to die.

But it was to no avail. When the council secretary reached the spot, the nimble Rakasza was already digging his ditch at some distance and so did not hear him yell. (His advanced years had impaired his hearing, which may have also had something to do with it.) Ever since, the secretary continues visiting the outskirts, and Rakasza continues digging his meandering ditch. The secretary tries catching up, but Rakasza busies himself with the digging, and so he still can't hear him. Which is how the saying, "He's yelling his head off like the council secretary," was born.

Early Morning Phone Call

I was startled awake in the middle of a dream. First I had to feel my way to the phone in the dark, and then I had to find my voice in the depths of my body.

"Hello," I said, my voice still hoarse.

"Hello."

"Who is that?" I asked.

"Sándor Petőfi."*

I got back from Balatonalmádi late the previous night. I was really peeved.

"Look," I said, "I'm in no mood for jokes."

"Have you any idea," he asked, "how difficult it is to call from here? I need to consider very carefully who I should call. Do you want to talk to me or not?"

"Are you really Petőfi?"

"Yes. But let's not waste time, old man. My allowance is three minutes."

"I don't know what to say. I've never been called by a dead person before."

"Say anything. Ask me a question."

"You want me to ask you a question? You, the great national poet? I need time."

"Stop procrastinating. There must be something you'd like to ask me."

"Yes, of course. Except, it just slipped my mind."

"What slipped your mind?"

"I can't remember."

"That's strange, considering how highly you spoke about me at a recent poetry reading."

"I spoke highly of you at a number of readings. I've been a great fan of yours all my life."

"I'm glad to hear it."

"In fact, I even like your prose!"

"Great. In that case, let's talk."

"What about?"

"You still can't think of anything?"

"No."

"I expected more of you, you know."

"I'm sorry."

"Well, then, God be with you."

"And with you, too."

* Sándor Petőfi (1823-1849) is one of Hungary's most acclaimed poets. He died on the battlefield fighting in the Revolution and War of Independence of 1848-1849.

Harem

P.V. had eight wives. He always obtained his marriage license in a different part of town, never held a big wedding, and so no one was any the wiser that in his humble home on the outskirts of town he was keeping a veritable harem.

The thing came to light when one of P.V.'s wives tried to scratch the eyes of the neighborhood cop out of his head when he tried to lecture her on the traffic rules.

When Mrs. P.V. was summoned to appear in front of the police judge, not one, but seven Mrs. P.V.s showed up, namely, Mrs. P.V., née Jolán Maurer, Mrs. P.V., née Franciska Titeli, and also Eleonóra Szabó, Marika Unyi, Olga Karolina Pipsó, and Júlia Ehrlich homemakers, as well as streetcar conductor Géza Soborkuti.

During the confrontation, the neighborhood cop recognized Jolán Maurer as the woman who had tried to scratch out his eyes. She was fined for the misdemeanor, with no room for appeal.

The judge stood up, ran his eyes over the line of women, then sat down again.

"I hope you don't mind me asking," he said to P.V., "but are all these women your wives?"

P.V. was standing in front of the women wielding a long whip, snapping it whenever the women whispered or chuckled among themselves, or offended the Bench in some other way. When he heard the question, P.V. turned around and counted them.

"Melinda is missing," he said to the judge. "But I have documents to prove that she's on maternity leave."

"No need," the judge said, "I am asking in my capacity as a private individual. I am curious to know what polygamy is like."

P.V. fell to thinking, then he said that it's got its good sides and it's got its bad sides.

"What do all these women do all day?" the judge asked.

"Oh, the usual thing," the polygamist said. "They bathe, apply makeup, gossip, bicker, and make peace again."

"Is it worth keeping so many wives for that?" the judge asked.

"There are some good things to be said for it, too," P.V. added, and as he ran his eyes over his wives, he started listing their good qualities. Lórika plays the balalaika. Olga Karolina can do a sword dance. Franci imitates the crashing of the waves on the shore; she just places a blade of grass between her lips. Each of his wives has a special gift that pleases him. Melinda (the one who is on maternity leave) exudes such a strong scent of strawberries, it fills the whole house and is especially refreshing on frosty winter afternoons.

"That doesn't sound half bad," the judge reflected. "And what is the downside of keeping so many wives?"

"The hungry mouths, the countless panties, shoes, dresses," P.V. said. "Not to mention discipline."

He looked around just then, because his words were interrupted by the soft, if not unpleasant sound of the lapping of the waves. He snapped his whip and pulled a blade of grass from between the lips of one of his wives.

"On the other hand," the judge said, addressing Géza Soborkuti, who'd been keeping to the back, "unless I'm much mistaken, you're a man, not a woman."

The streetcar conductor blushed to the roots of his hair. He was so embarrassed, he pulled out a book of tickets, and began tearing them out one by one, like the petals of a flower.

"You needn't be afraid to talk in front of me," the judge reassured him, "my authority does not extend beyond traffic violations."

"I'm neither a man or a woman," the streetcar conductor admitted. "I'm a eunuch."

"Besides, he's the only one who brings home his pay!" P.V. cried. "I don't know what we'd do without him."

"I don't understand," the judge said. "If you're tight for money, why keep so many wives?"

"Need you ask?" P.V. said. "I spend no more on women than anybody else."

"But all at the same time!" the judge said. "That's much tougher on your purse strings!"

"What can I do?" P.V. sighed as he gazed into the distance over the heads of his seven wives. "I love dance, I love string instruments and the rhythmic lapping of the waves. I love having life around me. I love a variety of faces, and when each moment is different from the last. As far as I'm concerned, monotony is worse than death."

"How beautifully put," the judge said, suppressing a sigh. "You're a true poet."

"Possibly," P.V. said and, snapping his long whip, he herded his wives down the stairs and onto the approaching streetcar.

Mathematics

They went to the Apostles. The outstanding physicist asked for a glass of vermouth. Szilágyi felt like some beer. But then things took a different turn. Needless to say, the outstanding physicist stayed with the vermouth because science is incompatible with caprice and improvisation. Szilágyi, however, being something of a glutton, knew no bounds when it came to food.

At first he ate just five scones, daydreaming over them, as it were. Then he spotted some walnut cream cake on a tray. He washed the cake down with beer when it occurred to him—not that he had high hopes in that regard—that the kitchen might have some marinated carp. After he ate the carp, though, his stomach was more or less full, he said. To be sure, he also ordered chicken soup with string noodles and a dish of lentils topped with smoked pork, but

basically, he just nibbled at it, pushing the lentils aside with his fork. After the lentils he ordered nothing more; there's a hot dinner waiting at home, he said. Let's ask for the bill, he said to the outstanding physicist, because mother is like clockwork and if he's so much as five minutes late for dinner, she watches for the bell and fidgets.

Szilágyi dictated to the headwaiter what he had had to eat and drink; he remembered every bite he'd eaten for the past five years. After adding up the numbers, the headwaiter placed a slip on the corner of the table and announced:

"Eleven-twenty."

The outstanding physicist was about to reach inside his pocket when his hand stopped in mid-air.

"I don't wish to offend you," he said with an apologetic smile, "but the bill only comes to eleven-ten, I fear."

The headwaiter quickly withdrew the slip, he even blushed ever so slightly, then added up the column of numbers again on a fresh slip of paper. Then he looked at the outstanding physicist and said:

"A thousand pardons, but it's eleven-twenty."

And he placed this slip on the table as well.

Needless to say, the outstanding physicist didn't even have to look. What need had he of paper and pencil? Entire solar systems, Milky Ways and cosmoses swam around in his head, but precisely because of this all he said—humbly and softly—was that in his opinion the highly esteemed headwaiter's calculation is incorrect. The correct sum is eleven-ten. And with a gentle smile he added:

"Forgive me for being contrary. I am Albert Einstein."

"Good Lord," the headwaiter said barely audibly. He should have known! After all, this is a world famous, familiar face! Bowing profusely, he backed away to a nearby table, sharpened his pencil with trembling hands, then took out a larger slip and, taking pains over his calligraphy, he wrote the numbers down again in a column. He added them up. He added them up again. He added them up a third time. Drops of sweat appeared on his brow. He then got up and with his knees veritably giving way under him, went to the back. He called over another waiter and Fröhlich, the proprietor of the establishment. Somebody brought sheets of graph paper with big squares on them and they did the sums again, each of them separately. Then they leaned in close and engaged in a short whispered exchange.

"Greatly honored Professor," Fröhlich said, approaching the physicist. "I dare hardly say what weighs on my heart. According to our feeble calculations the bill comes to eleven-twenty. Please do not consider that we are petty minded. Nothing would please us more than to have a world celebrity of your stature as our guest. But our headwaiter has been in the business for

thirty years and is the father of four children besides. To him, these ten fillers are a matter of prestige."

Professor Einstein gave a sympathetic nod of the head. He briefly closed his eyes, quickly reviewed the column of numbers in his head, from the vermouth to the lentils, then heaved a sigh.

"My friends," he began. "We are sitting here like Galileo once sat in front of his inquisitors. But what can I do? Science does not acknowledge the prestige factor, and I—though I have no children—would be just as ashamed of my mistake as the honored headwaiter would be of his. In short, this contentious issue is in need of a solution."

Fröhlich nodded in agreement.

"The restaurant staff is of the same opinion," he concurred.

"Perhaps the problem," the outstanding physicist continued his line of thought, "is that we are all overburdened with numbers and this task is too small for us. Isn't there someone around, perhaps, who didn't go to college, doesn't even have a high school diploma, and can just barely add two and two together? Such a trifling matter can be decided only by dwarfs."

And what luck! The Apostles had a deaf and dumb bartender. They beckoned him over. They sat him down. They placed the column of numbers, from the vermouth to the lentils, in front of him. He wheezed. He moaned. He panted. He sweated. It took twenty minutes for him to finish adding up the numbers. When he finished, he then handed the result of his labors to Fröhlich.

Fröhlich said nothing. He glanced at the result and handed it to the first headwaiter, who handed it to the second, who placed it in front of the outstanding physicist without comment.

Albert Einstein stood up. He counted out the money, including a generous tip. And with the humblest smile in the world he announced:

"Gentlemen! Albert Einstein was wrong. Good bye."

Standing in line, the staff bowed low in front of the pioneer of modern physics as he and Szilágyi left the restaurant. Out on the street Albert Einstein, who was no longer smiling and, in fact, looked rather troubled, turned to Szilágyi and asked:

"What is your opinion of this affair, my friend?"

"I must hurry home for dinner," Szilágyi said. "But it seems to me that this world is beyond redemption."

We All Need a Bit of Warmth

When his morning visit was over and Dr. Gróh was about to leave the ward, he caught one of his patients waving to him.

He went over to the bed.

"I hope you won't mind me holding you up, Chief Physician, Sir," apologized the patient, whose hair, during his two weeks in hospital, had grown down to his shoulders. This made him look like the apostles, especially if we consider his reverential blue eyes and meek nose, the shape of a champagne cork. "I'm just wondering what kind of heating you have, Sir."

"You're a stove builder, aren't you, Uncle Kreibich?" the doctor asked.

"I sure am. Have you got a tile stove, Doctor?"

Doctor Gróh took his time replying. He needed time to consider. For one thing, it was summer, and in summer one doesn't concern oneself with stoves. For another, he was not inclined to put too much value on the blessings of civilization. A bit of discomfort didn't faze him. He was not averse to cold, ate whatever was on his plate, and spent no money on his apartment. There was nothing in it, neither a rug, nor a painting, not even a plain cactus. Typically, he had no favorite cigarettes either; he bought whatever caught his eye in the tobacco shop.

"I have a simple iron stove, Uncle Kreibich."

The stove maker had a glint in his eye.

"What would you say to a pre-war quality coke-burning stove, Sir?"

"I'm happy with the one I have," the doctor replied, smiled at his patient, and left the ward.

He was used to sudden outbursts of gratitude. Following successful operations he'd been given fattened geese, throw pillows, coffee, tea, hand-knitted socks, and even a pair of homing pigeons once. A patient had even written him a poem. The starting letters of the lines, going from top to bottom, read as follows:

God bless Dr. Mihály Gróh!

Hospital physicians are modestly paid, so he didn't mind a well-off patient discretely slipping him an envelope. But he harbored such a strong aversion to "payment in kind" that when Uncle Kreibich renewed his offer, his reply was definitive.

"Thank you, Uncle Kreibich, but I don't need that coke-burning whatnot. Besides, I wouldn't want you to put yourself out on my account."

The stove maker sat up and poked his bunioned foot from under the blanket. He was very excited.

"You misunderstand, Doctor," he said. "A proper coke-burning stove comes to eight-thousand forints. I wasn't thinking of a present, Doctor. I thought I would build it at cost."

"Don't bother, Uncle Kreibich," smiled Gróh. "Basically, I go home only to sleep. What would I need such an expensive stove for?"

"Have you any idea what a coke-burning stove is capable of, Doctor?"

"Not in the least."

Uncle Kreibich's gnarled big toe went into spasms.

"Haven't you even seen a coke-burning stove?"

"No."

Uncle Kreibich, whose short intestine had been curtailed one-and-a-half meters by Dr. Gróh, remained in hospital for three more weeks. In that time he broke, or better yet, pulverized the doctor's resistance. But not through the application of reason. When Doctor Gróh ordered the stove, he was still convinced that he'd wasted his money on a useless extravagance. Uncle Kreibich triumphed not through reason, but passion. He was passionate about coke-burning stoves.

He kept count of how many coke-burning stoves he'd built for families in Budapest. He kept in touch with these families for years, like a father who marries off his daughter with a handsome dowry. He'd visit them now and then, stoke the fire, pat the stove, and give the lady of the house a conspiratorial wink. He was welcome wherever he went. Many of them—a postal clerk, a world champion, an opera singer—called Gróh at his request and congratulated him on the planned stove. They even invited him to come and take a look at theirs. The doctor felt that if he were to resist much longer, he'd bring the ire of esteemed individuals down upon his head—one more reason why he should have the stove built.

For two months, his apartment, located on the northern slope of Gellért Hill, was a shambles. Uncle Kreibich packed it full of tiles, iron parts, handcarts and the like, brick dust and debris. But Gróh didn't care. His home played a subordinate role in his life. He loved his profession. He often worked in the ward till dinnertime. He spent every other evening with his superior, Chief Assistant Warga, was himself a bachelor and lived in one of the doctors' quarters provided by the hospital. The evenings in between he either volunteered for the night shift or visited one of his women friends. He was no more particular in his choice of women than he was in anything else. He saw four or five of them at a time, first and foremost because they were all considerate and he didn't have the heart to break with them. Typically, he couldn't even remember their names, so he called each "old gal."

It was well into the heating season when the first signs of change began to appear on Doctor Gróh. One night Chief Assistant Warga caught his friend repeatedly glancing at his watch.

"What is it? You have a date?" he asked.

"No," Gróh said with a wave of the hand. "The stove needs feeding."

The Chief Assistant couldn't believe his ears. Meanwhile, Gróh hurried off to make a phone call, and when he returned, his cheeks burning the color of paprika, he began to malign his neighbor, a slovenly witch if ever there was

one, a scourge of God he's been paying a regular monthly fee for putting half a bucket of coke in the stove every night.

"If I hadn't thought of calling," he said huffing and puffing, "that old frump would have forgotten it again."

"So what?" Warga said. "Don't you sleep in the hospital anyway?"

"You don't understand," Doctor Gróh said, flashing a superior smile. "This is a real coke-burning stove."

He was hardly heeding his friend, though. With time his visits fell few and far between, then stopped altogether. In surgery they noticed that Gróh started to take home the embroidered throw pillows his patients had given him. He also bought etchings, and under the counter, even gold hold of a rug. By then he spent nearly all of his evenings at home. He sat around, read, listened to the radio, or pressed his back against the stove to warm up.

He started to neglect his women friends. One of them, more persistent than the rest, he invited to his home. When they entered, the woman shouted for joy.

"It's so nice and warm here!"

"Isn't it," Gróh said with pride. "Just look, old gal. This is no ordinary stove!"

He wrapped his arm around the woman and led her to the stove. He explained to her that the fire is started up in autumn, and it burns till spring.

"And do you know," he asked, "how much this stove consumes? Eighteen quintals all winter!"

"Is that good?" his guest asked.

Gróh let go of the woman. He was standoffish with her the rest of the night. She was pretty and she was smart, but he lost interest. He never called her again. After a couple of miscarried attempts, he decided to break up with the others as well. He turned into a couch potato. A misanthrope.

He gave away his season ticket to the opera. Given a chance, he refused the night shift. He headed straight home from the hospital. During his lunch break he'd sometimes call a cab, go home, throw his back against the stove, then mind at ease, go back to work.

The stove worked beautifully. It gave off steady heat. The fire inside it never died out. In short, it was perfect. It was so perfect that Doctor Gróh began to entertain strange thoughts; for instance, that no living creature—and that included him—could ever be as perfect as a coke-burning stove.

He gradually came to know all its secrets. If he upped the draft, he knew which line of tiles would warm up first. From time to time he'd peek inside the shaft where, precariously packed, the glowing paprika-red coke came crunching down, emitting soft, ticking woodworm sounds.

"How wonderful," Gróh thought at such times. "On the inside it is as hot as an iron forge, while on the outside it is as reassuring as a woman's body." And at such times he felt tempted to kiss the stove.

In late February he called in sick, and from then on, he'd sometimes show

up for work, sometimes not. There was nothing wrong with him, he just didn't feel like leaving his nice, warm room. On one such occasion he wired Uncle Kreibich and asked him to call on him the following night.

The stove builder entered. He stoked the fire, knocked on the sides of the stove and even put his ear to it, like a doctor checking a patient's lungs.

"Is it up to par, Chief Physician, Sir?" he asked.

"It's perfect," Gróh said. "But that's not why I called you. I've been thinking, Uncle Kreibich."

The stove builder shot Gróh an expectant look. Gróh leaned against the stove. He waited for the warmth to spread through his limbs.

"Up until now," he said, "people have been building big houses and they put a stove in each room. Can't it be done the other way around, Uncle Kreibich?"

"The other way around?" the stove builder echoed.

"We should build big stoves," Gróh said dreamy-eyed, "and inside the big stoves, small houses. What do you think, Uncle Kreibich?"

"Upon first hearing, it sounds a bit odd," offered the stove builder, and though the doctor asked him to stay, he soon took his leave and went home.

The next day, Doctor Gróh was inconspicuously removed from surgery and taken to the psychiatric ward. He's been living there ever since. He harms no one, and nothing harms him either. He presses his back against the wall and, with a meek smile, stares into space. ❧

István Örkény *(no date)*
Photograph by Ottó Vahl. Courtesy of Petőfi Literary Museum

Zsuzsa Hetényi

Absurd, Anecdote, and Avant-Garde

Thoughts on the Genre of Örkény's One-Minute Stories

The one-minute stories of István Örkény represent not only playful innovations in genre that reflect shifts in the nature and place of literature, but also subtle masterpieces of the sometimes not overly subtle styles of the Grotesque and the Absurd. Örkény is often regarded more as a master of the Grotesque than the Absurd, and the study of his works may offer perspectives from which to consider both the differences between these two very similar approaches and the contexts in which they flourish. In the Central European world, both the Grotesque and the Absurd can arguably be seen as more than responses to existential questions. They were also comments on the immediate circumstances of societies in seemingly perpetual upheaval. In his 1997 book *Örkény*, Hungarian literary historian István Szabó B. makes the contention that "one of the distinctive aspects of Örkény's irony, and in this he differs from existential philosophy and contemporary literary masters of the Absurd, was his faith in the redemptive potential of acts."[1] According to Szabó, "Örkény was not interested in the tragedy of man sentenced to hopeless and purposeless struggle against implacable fate, [...] but rather the tragedy of someone who, in a given time and under given circumstances, is bold enough to act." It may be interesting, in order to explore these subtle differences between the Grotesque and the Absurd, to compare Örkény's one-minute stories with works from other literary traditions, particularly those of Central Europe, and uncover affinities in both style and outlook.

1 ■ István Szabó B. *Örkény*. Budapest: Balassi, 1997, 45.

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As distinctive as they may have seemed in their time, Örkény's one-minute stories could also be situated in a larger international context. One might think of Anton Chekhov's and Isaak Babel's miniatures. The following passage from Nikolai Gogol's *Dead Souls*, for instance, seems as if it might well have been written by Örkény:

> ... everything quieted down, and the inn was enveloped in deep sleep; only in one little window was there still light, where lived some lieutenant, come from Ryazan, a great lover of boots by the look of it, because he had already ordered four pairs made and was ceaselessly trying on a fifth. Several times he had gone over to his bed with the intention of flinging them off and lying down, but he simply could not: the boots were indeed well made, and for a long time still he kept raising his foot and examining the smart and admirable turn of the heel.[2]

But one could equally cite Chekhov's "Elements Most Often Encountered in Novels, Novellas, Etc.," a vignette in which the Russian author enumerates the clichés often found in contemporary narratives, from the wealthy uncle and the crafty servant to the whispered secrets, capital offences, and weddings at the end. Chekhov's "The Complaints Book," a short story of sorts (simply the purported list of comments written in a complaint book), would be another example, as would "Questions Posed by a Mad Mathematician," in which the protagonist asks the following question: "I was chased by 30 dogs, 7 of which were white, 8 gray, and the rest black. Which of my legs was bitten, the right or the left?"[3] And one could also think of Babel's "Konkin," a short story in the collection entitled *Red Cavalry* (first published in the 1920s), not to mention some of the works of Mikhail Bulgakov.

The affinities between these works and Örkény's one-minute stories lie not only in their genre (frequently short narratives which often have punch-line endings) or their inclinations towards the Absurd, but also in their themes. Örkény's "Az ember melegségre vágyik" ("We All Need a Bit of Warmth"),[4] for instance, can be read as a rephrasing of Chekhov's *Ward No. 6* (1892). Chekhov's tale, arguably something of a parable, explores the hypocrisies of nihilism. Dr. Rabin, the head of a provincial hospital, takes refuge from the sufferings of his patients in philosophical musings on the futility of human endeavors. He becomes increasingly disaffected and eventually his colleagues have him committed. In Örkény's story a doctor quite content to spend the better part of his days in the ward is given a tile stove by a patient eager to

2 ■ Nikolai Gogol. *Dead Souls*. Translated by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky. New York: Pantheon Books, 1996, 154.

3 ■ The story is included in a collection of Chekhov's short stories translated by Peter Constantine entitled *The Undiscovered Chekhov: Forty-Three New Stories*. New York: Seven Stories Press, 2000.

4 ■ See the translation of this story by Judith Sollosy in this issue.

express his gratitude. The doctor becomes so enamored of the contraption, which seems miraculously efficient, that he avoids the company of others and gradually becomes a recluse, even neglecting his professional responsibilities. His colleagues, distressed by the change that has come over him, have him committed. The ponderous social, psychological, and philosophical message of Chekhov's story is replaced with an absurd bagatelle, and the title adds another twist, for it implies that it is the burden of someone else's gratitude that drives the doctor to insanity. The tragic and the comic blend in a pithy tale even the frivolity of which is ambivalent.

In "Arról, hogy mi a groteszk" ("The Grotesque [A Practical Approach]"), itself a one-minute story, Örkény offers a characterization of the Grotesque that has become well-known among readers in Hungary:

> Stand with your legs apart. Bend forward all the way. Look back between your legs. Thank you. Now look around you and take stock of what you see. The world has been stood on its head. The gentlemen's feet beat about in the air while the ladies, see how they grab for their skirts? The cars, too: their four tires are spinning in the air, looking for all the world like a dog trying to scratch its stomach. Then there's the chrysanthemum, its thin jack-in-the-box stem reaching for the sky as it balances precariously on its head—and the express train speeding along on top of its trail of smoke.[5]

This description bears a striking resemblance to a passage from Vladimir Nabokov: "If you have ever tried to stand and bend your head so as to look back between your knees, with your face turned upside down, you will see the world in a totally different light. Try it on the beach: it is very funny to see people walking when you look at them upside down. They seem to be, with each step, disengaging their feet from the glue of gravitation."[6] Nabokov wrote this in one of his university lectures on James Joyce. According to Nabokov, "this trick of changing the vista, of changing the prism and the viewpoint, can be compared to Joyce's new literary technique, to the new kind of twist through which you see a greener grass, a fresher world."[7]

Örkény does not simply invert the "high" and the "low," he brings the tragic and the jovial into direct collision. "Let us look for a merrier spectacle," he invites his reader. "Ah there! a funeral!"[8] This irony, the immediate juxtaposition of mirth and grief, is a typically Eastern European topos. Tevye, the narrator of

5 ■ István Örkény. "Arról, hogy mi a groteszk" ["The Grotesque (A Practical Approach)"]. *One Minute Stories*. Selected and translated by Judith Sollosy. Budapest: Corvina, 2013, 12-13. Unless otherwise indicated all translations of Örkény's one-minute stories are by the translator of this article.
6 ■ Vladimir Nabokov. *Lectures on Literature*. New York: Harcourt-Brace Jovanovich, 1980, 288–289.
7 ■ Vladimir Nabokov. *Lectures on Literature*, 288-289.
8 ■ István Örkény. "Arról, hogy mi a groteszk" ["The Grotesque (A Practical Approach)"]. *One Minute Stories*, 12-13.

Sholem Aleichem's "Hodel" (also commonly known as "Tevye the Dairyman," the tale on which the 1964 musical *Fiddler on the Roof* is based), recounts the calamities of his life, in particular his daughter's departure for Siberia, and concludes by addressing his author: "You know what, Mister Sholem Aleichem? Let's talk about something happier: what's doing with the cholera in Odessa?"[9] Bohumil Hrabal's "The Funeral" offers similar juxtapositions of the trivial and the tragic. Like Aleichem and Hrabal, Örkény makes light of tragedy, transforming a funeral into a merry and in the end bluntly recounted event, much like the carnival as described by Mikhail Bakhtin in his theory of the carnivalesque and in particular his book *Rabelais and His World* (1965).

Food and the rituals surrounding it also play a prominent role in Örkény's works, but in his world food often figures as a kind of inimical force. This represents a good example of one of the differences between the Grotesque and the Absurd. In contrast with the grotesque gluttony of, say, François Rabelais, in Örkény food seems to have become almost a foe. As he writes in "Fasírt" ("Meatball"), "Attention! For us mammals it is of no minor importance to ask whether we are grinding the meat or the meat is grinding us." Örkény also uses the chain tale, one of the narrative devices of the folktale. In "A végzet" ("Fate"), for instance, a mother eager to please her family by baking biscuits (more precisely *pogácsa*, an unsweetened round-cake that is a staple of Hungarian cuisine) accidentally puts pesticide in her dough instead of flour. First the mother, father, and two children die, then relatives and neighbors who come for the funeral and eat some of the left-over biscuits, then the ambulance personnel, the stretcher-bearers, and the doctor. Only the chauffeur survives, because he does not like biscuits, but he packs up the remaining ones and takes them with him to give to someone, lest they go to waste. In "Választék" ("Selection") the customer is given a choice between three different hats, but it turns out that in fact they are all the same hat. One is tempted to read the story simply as a satire of the socialist economy of shortage. It is reminiscent, in any event, of the joke about the butcher shops in Poland under communism. How do you know butchers are more honest today than they used to be, the joke begins. Because the sign outside the shop used to say butcher and the shop contained meat, whereas now the sign says butcher and the shop contains the butcher.

In the Absurd, reality is a matter of perception. Objectivity is quite impossible, since the source of all perception is the subjective self and thus even the logic of perception remains unfathomable. In "Optikai csalódás" ("Optical Illusion"), a mother mistakes polka-dots from her bed-linen for a

9 ■ The story, in English translation by Michael Wex, is included in the collection *Classic Yiddish Stories of S.Y. Abramovitsh, Sholem Aleichem, and I.L. Peretz.* Syracuse, NY: Syracuse U P, 2004, 73.

baby and raises them. They go on to have a career as an eminent professor of physics who is always teased by the students for insisting on wearing suits with polka-dots. The world only learns of its mistake after the professor's death. Örkény presents misperception as a kind of contagion, where one person's mistaken discernment can lead to a kind of epidemic. "Reality" becomes a matter of consensus, but consensus may rest on misperception.

Often Örkény's style in his one-minute stories inclines—quite poignantly—towards the style of the documentary report. In "Havas tájban két hagymakupola" ("Two Onion-Domes in a Snowy Landscape"), a little girl who laughs after having scurried under a parked truck while her mother is being hanged is shooed away by the German soldier because her presence is interfering with the physician's attempt to photograph the body. The girl does not budge, but rather remains, staring with wide open eyes. "Perhaps she had never seen a camera," the narrator concludes. "1949" is a simple account of the sentencing of László Rajk (a prominent member of the Hungarian Communist Party who was executed as part of the show trials held by Communist Party leader Mátyás Rákosi): "Foreign Minister László Rajk, an old soldier of the party, was sentenced to death at his own request. The execution was conducted in the spirit of mutual understanding and trust in front of a small group of invited guests." The mix of linguistic formulas from different stylistic registers lays bare the actual workings of power through the appropriation of rhetoric (and language) and reveals how words are robbed of their semantic functions. Here the very border between the rhetorical and the absurd is blurred as the mechanisms of everyday language are exposed as potentially absurd, meaningless rituals. Similarly, in "Kivégzési szabályzat" ("Execution Code") the various prescriptions have the tone of, for instance, an instructions manual for a consumer product:

> Capital punishment by hanging should be effectuated within the walls of the state penitentiary or some other closed space, while execution by firing squad should be effectuated in an appropriate space closed off to the extent possible to anyone not belonging to the official apparatus, and both should be completed in the early morning hours without attracting unnecessary attention.

The instructions for executions by firing squad conclude with the stipulation, "if the executed continues to give signs of life, he or she should be shot once more, or as many times as is necessary." The incongruity of style and subject is aptly expressive of the brutality of the act.

Another one of the distinctive aspects of the Absurd is repetition and the disruption of the implied teleology of linear narrative. In "Trilla" ("Rondo"), Örkény uses repetition to great expressive effect to evoke monotony:

She pulls a slip of paper from the carriage of her typewriter.
She takes two new slips of paper.
She slides a sheet of carbon paper between them.
She types.

She pulls a slip of paper from the carriage of her typewriter.
She takes two new slips of paper.
She slides a sheet of carbon paper between them.
She types.

She pulls a slip of paper from the carriage of her typewriter.
She takes two new slips of paper.
She slides a sheet of carbon paper between them.
She types.

She pulls a slip of paper from the carriage of her typewriter.
She has been working for the same firm for twenty-five years.
She eats a cold sandwich for lunch.
She lives alone.

Her name is Mrs. Wolf. Remember the name:
Mrs. Wolf. Mrs. Wolf. Mrs. Wolf.[10]

One could contend that the repetition resembles repetition in folk tales, or possibly is intended to have some kind of rhythmic or even melodic effect, but perhaps more persuasive is simply the idea that Örkény is creating a portrayal of a life that resembles a phonographic record with a scratch. Repetition is the clatter of meaningless and futility, whether we are speaking of Mrs. Wolf's typewriter or the changes of word order on a sign warning us to keep off the grass in "Változatok" ("Versions"). The story is given here in the original and in translation, to show the repetition of individual words in Hungarian:

A fűre lépni tilos	Do not walk on the grass
tilos a fűre lépni	on the grass do not walk
lépni tilos lépni	walk do not walk
lépni lépni lépni	walk walk walk
lépni tilos tilos	walk do not do not
tilos tilos tilos.	do not do not do not.
Tilos.	Do not.

10 ■ István Örkény. "Trilla" ["Rondo"]. *One Minute Stories*, 63.

On the one hand this use of repetition deprives the words of their meanings, while on the other it invests them with new meanings. The game is not a game at all, but rather a very clear manifestation (if with an element of satire) of power. The repetition induces fear because in the injunction, which is increasingly simplified and increasingly general, one hears the voice of the dictatorship. By the end, grass has disappeared entirely and only the emphatic prohibition remains.

Unlike in the art of the Avant-garde, in Örkény there is no Utopian vision of the future, nor is there any notion of a break or even distance from the past. The Absurd is not a forward-looking gesture of liberation from conventions, and neither the present nor any envisioned future has any kind of privileged perspective. In "Apróhirdetés: Örök nosztalgia" ("Classified Advertisement: Nostalgia") the owner of an apartment seeks to find other lodgings:

> Must urgently exchange two-room, fifth-floor apartment with built-in kitchen cabinets on Joliot Curie Square overlooking Eagle Peak for two-room, fifth-floor apartment with built-in kitchen cabinets on Joliot Curie Square overlooking Eagle Peak. Money no object.[11]

Can this short narrative be read as a warning not to mistake change for progress? Are notions of the future mere projections of the past? The Absurd offers no reassuring vantage point from which the two, the past and the envisioned future, can be compared.

Anecdote was one of the fundamental elements of nineteenth-century Hungarian literature. Authors like János Arany (1817–1882) and Mór Jókai (1825–1904) often used anecdotes in their works, and literary historians have written copiously on the historical and folk anecdotes in the novels of Kálmán Mikszáth (1847–1910). In an article on Mikszáth, literary historian Sándor Karácsony cites László Németh's provocative contention according to which "the anecdote is our national vice, it's why to this day there is no Hungarian philosophy."[12] Mihály Sükösd goes so far as to claim that the anecdote makes literature shallow and fatuous.[13] Yet one could venture the claim that the anecdote is a manifestation of abstract thinking, a gesture towards generalization that transcends the particular. The distinction between anecdote and allegory, after all, is little more than a question of interpretive reflex, the inclination to read a tale as idiosyncratic in the case of anecdote or metaphorical in the case of allegory. In one of his most brilliant one-minute

11 ■ Translated by Judith Sollosy and commissioned for this issue.

12 ■ Sándor Karácsony. "A cinikus Mikszáth" ["The Cynical Mikszáth"]. *Magyar Filozófiai Szemle*, 3-4, 1990, 212.

13 ■ Mihály Sükösd. "Örkény István egy-percei, avagy a konkrét abszurd" ["István Örkény's One-Minute Stories, or the Concrete Absurd"]. *Új Írás*, 6, 1970, 110–113.

stories Örkény exposes the menaces of any reading that invites generalization and reduction. The story is entitled "Ahasvérus" ("Ahasuerus"), the Old Testament king who, having given his deputy Haman permission to massacre the Jews, was persuaded by Esther, the queen, to spare them:

> Two Jews are walking down the street.
> The first Jew asks the second Jew a question.
> The second Jew answers.
> They continue walking.
> The first Jew, who in the meantime has thought of another question, asks it.
> The second Jew answers.
> Sometimes this is funny.
> Sometimes it isn't.
> And they continue walking.
> They also continue talking.
> It's a tough thing, this.

Örkény maims the joke of its accoutrements and reduces it to mere form, revealing the underlying and fundamentally violent incitements to simplification and objectification, which in turn are exposed as the interpretive mechanisms on which any "parabolic" reading rests.

Experience sometimes can seem to serve as the handrail or chain to which we grasp as we stumble through an unpredictable world. The art of the Absurd resembles someone who has sensed the tenuousness of the links of this chain and has let go. If the mind is always in search of causality and predictability, the Absurd rejects this automatism. To existential questions, the Absurd offers the striking answer that there are no answers. The one-minute stories of István Örkény are not narratives unhinged entirely from any vision of "reality," but rather tentative linkings of anecdote and parable. Their humor is a transgressive act that establishes survival with neither reason nor purpose as a value. The stories are inventions rather than portrayals, and as such they are reminders that language and the causalities within language are themselves inventions, pretexts, and refuges. ❧

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Stumble, Remain Standing

Event and Repetition in the Works of István Örkény

One major characteristic feature of István Örkény's *Április* ("April," an early novel that was written around 1934 but published for the first time in 2012)[1] and several of his short stories written at the turn of the 1930s and 1940s is the juxtaposition of different value systems and the lively depiction of the collisions of distant worlds. One of the distinctive qualities of Örkény's style is his tendency to focus, at the level of plot and characterization, on the words and deeds of his figures, rather than on their psychological states. He tended to forego explanations of the motivations behind the acts of an individual character, rarely making use of any kind of interior or internal perspective. This remained largely true of his oeuvre throughout his career. Örkény also essentially omits any kind of authoritative narrative perspective, and these two aspects of his works generally entail the juxtaposition of the social worlds and prospects of his characters and the impossibility of fashioning any kind of coherent unity out of these worlds.

In Örkény's oeuvre the omission of internal characterization and any explicit "intervention" on the part of a narrator, features that can be observed both in earlier short stories like "Matematika" ("Mathematics"),[2] "Kereplő" ("Merry-Go-Round"), "Nagy Amál" ("Amál Nagy"), "Nyár" ("Summer"), and

1 ■ István Örkény. *Április*. Budapest: Palatinus Kiadó, 2012.
2 ■ See the translation of this story by Judith Sollosy in this issue.

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"Kárhozat" ("Damnation") and in his narratives from the 1950s and 1960s, remained distinctive characteristics of the later one-minute stories as well. This is true of many other aspects of his works, including for instance the reduction of the narrative to an account of the events of the visible world, the sudden, often joke-like twists, and the inclination towards parody. The satirical tone already palpable in the early years of his career also became a typical feature of Örkény's writings. For example, in "A nagy küldetés" ("The Grand Mission") the protagonist Brosch, an anarchist and terrorist, adopts the identity of his own cover and turns into a kind grandfather. In "Állatmese" ("Fable"), the story of the worms in a walnut shell who long for freedom, the mixture of incongruous discourses and the contextual transposition of stereotypes create a satirical effect that is reminiscent of some of the didactic and humorous sketches of Frigyes Karinthy (1887-1938), such as "Mese három éves kisfiúknak" ("A Tale for Three-Year-Old Boys"), "Oktatom a kisfiamat" ("Teaching my Son"), and "Régi húsvéti szokások" ("Old Easter Traditions"). Karinthy's mentality is conjured by the skeptical, ironic, yet, to borrow the words of Dezső Kosztolányi (1885-1936), "most logical and unyieldingly rational"[3] manner of seeing the world, a manner of seeing that regards humor as the most effective remedy and palliative against the vicissitudes of an unpredictable fate that continuously thrusts the individual into unforeseen situations in which he or she is left defenseless. Örkény's affinity with Karinthy became more apparent later in *Babik* ("Babik," an unfinished novel that began as a work for the cinema in 1954 and grew into a screenplay, though it failed to win the approval of the authorities), in some of the stories in the collection entitled *Ezüstpisztráng* ("Silver Trout," 1956), and in particular in many of the one-minute stories.

Örkény uses the parodic potentials of writing based on allusion and repetition in several other pieces of short fiction. For example, the 1942 "Ifjúság, ifjúság" ("Youth, Youth"), a story of mischievous youngsters, constitutes an allusion to *Rebels (Zendülők),*[4] a 1930 novel by Sándor Márai (1900-1989), but at the same time it is an overt parody of the style of Gyula Krúdy (1878-1933). Indeed the source of his inspiration may well have been Márai, who published a Krúdy pastiche entitled *Szindbád hazamegy* ("Sindbad Returns Home") in 1940, a reference to Krúdy's Sindbad cycle. In "Fagyosszentek" ("Ice Saints"),[5]

3 ■ Kosztolányi offered this characterization of Karinthy in an article entitled "Krisztus, vagy Barabbas? Karinthy Frigyesről" ("Christ or Barrabas? On Frigyes Karinthy"), published in *Nyugat*, 18, 1918.

4 ■ Sándor Márai. *Rebels*. Translated by George Szirtes. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007.

5 ■ The title is a reference to Pongrác, Szervác, and Bonifác, the Hungarian equivalents of the Latin names Pancratius, Servatius, and Bonifatius. Their name days are 12, 13, and 14 May. May frosts were considered particularly dangerous since they could kill important vegetables like cucumber, so it was common to wait until after the days of the Ice Saints to plant them.

Örkény contrasts the wild decadence of the European world with the rationalistic indignation and resoluteness of Asian cultures. In other words, he essentially switches stereotypical assessments. In the end of the story Asia sets out to free Europe from intolerable decadence. "Fagyosszentek" can also be interpreted as a miniature parody of Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West*.[6] Örkény, who liked to employ ironic "re-enactments" by changing contexts and backdrops and reversing original intentions, also caricatured himself when he published a parody of of *Far from Moscow* (*Daleko ot Moskvy*, 1948), the ill-famed novel Vasily Nikolayevich Azhayev, in *Irodalmi Újság* ("Literary News") precisely at the time when he himself was writing his own "Socialist Realist" novel *Házastársak* ("Husband and Wife," 1951). The satirical-parodic method of repetition and allusion would become a distinguishing feature of some of the one-minute stories.

The text of *Április*, which Örkény wrote at a very young age, and the series of schematic works composed between the mid-1940s and the mid-1950s diverge somewhat from this pattern. Written around 1934, the novel reflects the influences of two of the most captivating authors of the time, Márai and Antal Szerb (1901–1945). From Márai, the author of *Bébi vagy az első szerelem* ("Baby, or First Love," 1928) and *Rebels*, Örkény primarily borrows the pattern of the relativity of values and the potentials of the Grotesque, which lie in latent interrelationships and unexpected twists (an idea originally deriving from Kosztolányi). From Szerb he borrowed the use of magical and marvelous elements, distorted characterizations, and the exaggeration of mood. The sanatorium in *Április*, which can be interpreted as an evocation of the poetics of space in Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* (1924), is a model for a state of the world in which order entailing loss of freedom and the use of violence collides with madness, the anarchy of foolery, and the struggle against common sense. The eccentric and bizarre inmates of the sanitarium all escape into the realm of dreams and desires, and the products of their imaginative visions become everyday accoutrements of the institution. This series of events, a mixture of the miraculous and comic and even frivolous, is combined with the elegiac-melancholic recollections, a kind of Bildung and family-history motif, of the protagonist Kristóf Kapu (whose name means Christopher Gate). Örkény never gave as much space to psychological revelation and suggestive portrayal as he did in this early work. The detailed description of the Sunday bar-scene in a village is an illustrative example:

> [t]he men leaned against the table and, watching one another with bulging, bloodshot eyes, sang with howling distress. They sang simple, innocuous songs, mostly praising

6 ■ Originally published in German as *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* in two volumes between 1918 and 1923.

the fairness, figure, or lips of a woman beloved, occasionally complaining about the coldness of her heart, but they never ventured beyond such themes. Nevertheless, the men were angrily beating out the rhythm and rhythmically stomping their boots. Anger and passion were boiling in them, as if the songs had some other, hidden meaning that made them clench their fists and made the blood rush to their heads. The cock-feathered gendarmes were patrolling the streets in pairs, worriedly watching the spree and occasionally peeping in through the window.[7]

One finds comparable instances in the first of the five chapters of the book, entitled "Erna" (each chapter bears a woman's name), in which Örkény explores the "readability" of human behavior and touches on the tension between the known and the mysterious, as well as the defenselessness and confusion of childhood. Similarly, the third chapter, "Klementin" ("Clementine"), examines the intricacies of close family bonds, depicting the relationships between the seemingly strong yet unstable father, the secretive mother, and their child.

As is often the case in Örkény, unexpected twists lie at the core of the plot of *Április*. However, this unforeseeableness is somewhat counteracted by the way in which the plot and the characterization, in accordance with the contemporary Hungarian tendency to imitate Greek traditions, follow the pattern of Greek tragedies. The unsuspecting characters bear the consequences of ancient passions, sins, and frailties. Some parts suggest that in this novel Örkény also attempted to arrive at a mode of self-reflexive representation. The imitation of the Greek tradition is also apparent at the level of motifs, for example when Kristóf associates Germaine's awkward teenage figure with the world of Greek pastorals. Envisioning his homecoming, the protagonist compares himself to Ulysses on one occasion and on another to Robinson Crusoe. While the first comparison helps him find some assurance in the thought that, unlike his father, he will be able to return home at the end of his adventures, to the land of his childhood, the second reminds him that within himself he is building the very world he intended to escape.

Despite its many artistic merits (such as the gentle irony mixed with exaggerations of passions and copious witticisms), Örkény's first novel seems somewhat overwrought and uneven. Neither the rhythm nor the compositional structure of the novel is perfect, and the author employs rather simple allegories characteristic of the works of Szerb. For example Freudian thinking, which was popular at the time, surfaces in a very formulaic manner.

7 ■ Unless otherwise indicated, all translations of Örkény's texts are by the translator of this article.

As early as the 1930s Örkény was impressed by the "diagnostic" accomplishments of contemporary sociography. His sociographic works written in the mid-1940s, Emlékezők ("Recollectors")[8] and Lágerek népe ("People of Lagers," 1947), are signs of his inclination at the time to experiment with an abandonment of "artistic" styles and his attempt to arrive at a language that is transparent. The short stories of Budai böjt ("Buda Fasting," 1948) are also characterized by the prevalence of an anecdotal approach to writing that seems expressive of a yearning for consensus, lack of ambiguity, a fundamentally didactic perspective, and faith in the exhaustive power of narrative, not excluding irony, but irony from a kind of self-assured bird's-eye view. At the turn of the 1940s and 1950s Örkény was drawn to the ideology of Communism and became affiliated with the so-called literature of Schematism. Later, in his famous essay entitled "Írás közben" ("While Writing")[9], he characterizes this period of his career as a kind of delirium, or, more precisely, a hallucinatory state. In the fall of 1953 he gradually began to deconstruct the standard formulae of "Socialist Realism" in his writings, though the generic patterns ("factory report" and "portrait"), the system of clichés, and the political references had become a kind of "base" and one of the significant sources for the allusions of his later satirical-parodic works, including some of the one-minute stories.

As is commonly known, the transformation that took place in Örkény's style, a development partly based on the already existing generic patterns and vocabulary, essentially came in 1958-1962. This was the period in which he was not allowed to publish because of his involvement in the Revolution of 1956. The transformation brought significant changes in three areas: the classical narrative, the short story, and the drama. Of the short stories published in 1962, i.e. immediately after the period in which he was silenced, three stand out as works of timeless value in Hungarian short prose: "Nincs bocsánat" ("No Pardon")[10], "Honvédkórház" ("Military Hospital"), and "Meddig él egy fa?" ("How Long Does a Tree Live?"). Each of these narratives is based on an ontological turn: as characters are confronted with mortality, the validity of their identities—which, as is common in Örkény, are conceived of as social roles—is suddenly thrown into question.

In "No Pardon," death disrupts the economy of money and the services procured with it. A man takes his ailing father to the hospital and, as was

8 ■ Previously published as "Amíg ide jutottunk" ("Until We Got Here"). Under this title first published in *Lágerek népe* ("The People of Lagers"). Bratislava – Budapest: Madách Szépirodalmi Könyvkiadó, 1981.

9 ■ First published in the 7 November, 1953 issue of *Irodalmi Újság* ("Literary News").

10 ■ "Nincs bocsánat" was published in English translation as "No Pardon." *The New Hungarian Quarterly*, 17, 1965, 218-220, <http://orkenyistvan.hu/sites/orkenyistvan.hu/files/no_pardon.pdf>.

common under Socialism (and not unheard of today), offers nurses money as an expression of gratitude and in the hopes of assuring that his father will receive good care. When he learns that his father has died in the night, he returns to the hospital to tend to the various tasks that await him. He still has 100 forints that he had intended to give to the physician, but that he had never actually had a chance to hand over. Instead he gives it to the attendant who is responsible for cleaning and dressing the corpse. The story concludes with the narrator's reflection: "[t]here was nothing I could have said or done for my father any more [sic!]; and there was no one else I could have given money to. There was no way for me to make amends, even if I had myself buried with him."[11]

In "Honvédkórház," the clear roles of schematic discourses, such as a reverential speech and commands, are blurred in a confrontation with imminent death. A Major asks the army doctor about his wife, who has had an operation to treat cancer. The doctor informs him that the operation was a failure and his wife has only a few weeks to live. He informs the Major that his wife was told the operation had been a success and asks him to continue to behave with her as he normally would, lest she realize she has been deceived. The doctor is later shocked to hear the Major yelling at his wife. "You ugly, hysterical woman," the Major shouts, "why are you whimpering at me?" Outraged, the doctor asks him how he dare speak in such a tone to his dying wife, to which the Major responds with incomprehension, noting that the doctor himself had instructed him to behave with her as he normally would.

With its finely chiseled form and semiotic complexity, "Meddig él egy fa?" merits recognition as an outstanding work among the literary compositions of the time. In the story, a woman dying of cancer wishes to purchase a tree from a gardener, not a sapling that could be easily replanted, but rather a tall linden. The gardener's wife (the gardener himself is away from home) is perplexed, but accepts the woman's money. The conversation between the two of them touches several times on death and also on the fact that the gardener's wife is pregnant, and the reader senses a tension between the absurd (the woman's desire to purchase a tree that she intends to leave where it is already growing), the mundane (the gardener's wife's financial concerns), and the tragic (the shadow of looming death). But the note of the bizarre in no way reduces the story to the trivial. As literary historian Tibor Bónus observes, "the shifts between the literal and metaphorical levels of meaning take place with subtle transitions, whereby the grotesquely poetic nature of the exchanges does not destroy the psychological plausibility, indeed [...] it even strengthens it. At least

11 ■ The last line of the story is "[a]zzal sem tudok jóvátenni semmit, ha elevenen mellétemettetem magam." It could also be translated, "I cannot do anything to make amends, even if I were to have myself buried alive beside him."

to the extent that the metaphorical layer of meaning in the text gives underlying motivations to the ruptures in the empirical order of everyday norms of behavior and the elements of the Grotesque."[12]

Macskajáték (*Catsplay*),[13] both the narrative and the drama, brings together the "parallel stories" of memory and the passing of time. It began as a short novel written by Örkény in 1963 and was published in the journal *Kortárs* ("Contemporary") in 1965. Örkény later transformed the tale into a work for the stage, and performances of the drama met with considerable success both in and outside of Hungary. (The 1972 film directed by Károly Makk was entered in the 1974 Cannes Film Festival.) All of the characters of the play have an inclination towards the theatrical, the deceptive, and the manipulative, but at the same time the theatrical and the manipulative create the interpretive framework for the drama. The many letters that are read aloud by the characters in the play (a device that represents a clever dramatic twist on the genre of the epistolary novel) allow Örkény to create a system of perspectives that preserves the distance between the characters. The use of the telephone plays a similar role, allowing the characters to converse without seeing one another and emphasizing the significance of the voice, of verbal communication, as well as illustrating the everyday nature of deception. Paula and Erzsi, two women who end up in love with the same man, have a quick telephone conversation as they prepare to meet for a concert:

> Paula (nervously): Are you ready, dear?
> Erzsi: Ready, ready, just the last touches.
> Paula: And are you beautiful?
> Erzsi: I won't say! You'll see. I'll meet you at the bus stop in ten minutes.

The playful deceptions (Erzsi is not in fact ready, she is still choosing a dress), dramatized by Örkény's use of the spaces of the theater, gradually seem to appear the norm rather than the exception for communication. Manipulation comes to seem a matter of self-preservation, or more precisely the preservation of one's identity, but at this moment of play (of deception) aesthetics is unhinged from ethics.

In *Catsplay*, manipulation of the other is a means of defending identity. In *Tótek* (*The Toth Family*, 1967),[14] defense of one's own position is also the point of departure for aggressive manipulation. While in *Catsplay* the closing role play suspends but does not resolve the contradictions (which rest on deceit

12 ■ Tibor Bónus. "Irodalom és politika bonyodalmai." *Alföld*, 3, 2009, 123.
13 ■ István Örkény. *Catsplay*. Translated by Clara Györgyey. New York: French, 1976. The excerpt quoted here, however, was translated by the translator of this article.
14 ■ *Tótek* was published first as a story in *Nászutasok a légypapíron* in 1967. Örkény rewrote it as a drama in the same year.

and misunderstanding), the conclusion of *Tótek* can be interpreted as a grotesque episode of resolution in which there is emphasis on the restoration of the dislodged world. As a moral parable of the humiliation of man cheated out of his life and his value system and utterly abandoned, the play suggests that there is a balance of values that is presented by the series of events in both the short novel and the drama as a kind of deformation and breakdown. Thus meaningless in *Tótek* is conditional, not absolute.[15]

This tendency towards the Grotesque and often the satirical is particularly palpable in Örkény's extremely heterogeneous one-minute stories. I have written a monograph on Örkény entitled *Örkény István (Pályakép)* ("István Örkény: A Monograph"),[16] in which I offer a systematic classification of the one-minute stories. Today I feel that many of the one-minute stories show the influence of the sketches of Karinthy more than they do the influence of the more "artistically impressive" short narratives of Kosztolányi published in *Tengerszem* ("Tarn," 1936). The most successful of Örkény's short prose compositions are those the semantic complexity of which is due either to the exploitation of the ontological and metadiscursive potentials or, in the case of transcriptions, the inventive transformation of the clichés cited (the subtexts, hipograms, and paragrams).

One of Örkény's dominant modes of storytelling is to present the unnatural, unreal, and uncanny as if they were natural and self-evident, and this is closely related to his irony and the Grotesque effect of his works. Readers and literary historians in Hungary have often spoken of Örkény's influence on authors of the so-called prose turn. The many rewritings of his works indicate the interest people take in his oeuvre, though I have not come across any kind of essay or "confession" in which a contemporary author has given a persuasive explanation of this alleged Örkény-effect. However, it is quite possible that Örkény's influence is present in places where one might least suspect it. For instance, perhaps there is some affinity between the characters of Örkény's short stories and novels and the voice of the narrator-protagonist of Imre Kertész's 1975 *Fatelessness* (*Sorstalanság*).[17] Perhaps this affinity lies in the way in which Örkény omits characterizations and leaves the motivations of the figures of his narratives in obscurity, or, possibly inspired by the works of Franz Kafka (1883-1924), the way in which the unnatural, the uncanny, and the bizarre are left without any reflection on the part of the narrator. Essentially

15 ■ See Péter Szirák. "A Grotesque Allegory of Human Dignity: István Örkény's *Welcoming the Major*." Kamila Černá, et. al. (ed). *Visegrad Drama III: The Sixties*. Prague: Arts and Theatre Institute / Institut umění-Divadelní ústav, 2009, 183-212, <http://orkenyistvan.hu/sites/orkenyistvan.hu/files/welcoming_the_major_full.pdf>.

16 ■ Péter Szirák. *Örkény István: Pályakép* ["István Örkény: A Monograph"]. Budapest: Palatinus, 2008, 156-178.

17 ■ Imre Kertész. *Fatelessness*. Translated by Tim Wilkinson. New York: Vintage Books, 2004.

this seems to be the method adopted by Péter Hajnóczy (1942-1981) in his short prose works written in the second half of the 1960s and in the 1970s, for instance in the short stories of the 1981 collection *Jézus menyasszonya* ("The Bride of Jesus"), including "Rakaszolás" ("Crating"), "Három" ("Three"), "A kecske" ("The Goat"), "Ösztönző elem" ("Stimulation"), "A latin betűk" ("The Latin Letters"), "Alkalmi munka" ("Odd Job"), and "Nyikolaj a handzsárral" ("Nikolai with the Poniard"). One can also discern similarities between Örkény and Transylvanian Hungarian author Ádám Bodor. The omission of any focus on the interior lives of the characters, the absence of an intrusive narrator, and the generally impersonal narration reduced to the sights of the visible world, all characteristic of Örkény's oeuvre, are also distinctive aspects of many of Bodor's narratives from the 1970s and 1980s, for instance the stories in the 1985 *The Euphrates at Babylon* (*Az Eufrátesz Babilonnál*).[18]

As far as so-called Postmodern prose and the influence of the works of Örkény are concerned, the re-use of citations or for instance the transposition of non-literary texts into literary contexts are devices that clearly link these two textual worlds. The re-contextualizing effect of citation is particularly palpable in the Szövegek ("Texts") cycle of the one-minute stories.[19] Often humor in Örkény arises from the tension between the titles of the texts and the discourse to which they allude. "Prózaversek" ("Prose Poems"), for instance, contains "Ballada Budapest bombázásáról" ("Ballad of the Bombing of Budapest"), which is actually little more than a joke:

> "Imagine, I left my suitcase at the luggage drop-off at the railway station and by the time I got back my suitcase was gone."
>
> "That's nothing, I left my suitcase at the luggage drop-off at the railway station and by the time I got back the railway station was gone."
>
> (A contemporary joke, 1944)

Similarly, the story (or sketch) "Segítség!" ("Help!"), included in "Humanizmus, 1975" ("Humanism, 1975") contains a list of instructions for people giving first aid. These include, "determine whether or not the person who has suffered an accident is still alive, in other words whether or not he or she actually needs help. [...] The most conspicuous signs of life are movement, breathing, heartbeat." Humor is also sometimes based on the fictive impression or imitation of citation, such as in "Egy magyar író dedikációi" ("The Dedications of a Hungarian Writer"). The piece opens with the description of a commemorative museum that has just been opened, a museum dedicated to the work of Tá. Dé. Vé., a famous writer:

18 ■ Ádám Bodor. *The Euphrates at Babylon*. Translated by Richard Aczel. Edinbourgh: Polygon, 1991.
19 ■ On preparing his oeuvre for publication in 1979, István Örkény arranged his one-minute stories into four cycles: Aforizmák ("Aphorisms"), A groteszk felé ("Towards the Grotesque"), Szövegek ("Texts"), and Egyperces novellák ("One-Minute Short Stories").

[v]isitors to the museum can come and go in the spacious rooms and admire the collection of the great Realist writer's fountain pens, coffee makers, and Party-membership books. The display cases contain books dedicated to friends and loved ones. We take this opportunity to publish the most beautiful of these dedications:

1. To Mother and Father, your faithful child.
2. To Ella.
3. To Bella.
4. To Eliza.
5. To Liza.
6. To Honey.
7. To Bunny.

The dedications continue, borrowing from a number of formulas of official styles, for instance in the dedication "To Kornél Ostorovics, the great critic and author of the essay 'The Prose of Goebbels'! Tá. Dé. Vé."

One finds numerous similarities between such works of Örkény and the parodic and humorous effects in works by Endre Kukorelly or László Garaczi. There is a significant difference, however, for Kukorelly's and Garaczi's short prose narratives are part of the Neo-avant-garde "rearrangement" of language. Through the demolition of linguistic structures, the texts of Garaczi's novels *Plasztik* ("Plastic," 1985) and *Nincs alvás!* ("No Sleep!," 1992) or Kukorelly's *A Memória-part* ("The Memory Shore," 1990) strive to bring the literary closer to "real" perception by separating language as form from language as meaning. They utilize semantic openness not simply by mixing incompatible contexts, but also on the level of grammar and syntax. This approach remained distant to Örkény. His tendency towards satire and parody, his humor, and his sensitivity to tragedy was always accompanied by a certain faith in language and a didactic intent, in other words some ethical-parabolic value that could be seen as "meaning." He was tempted by the Absurd of the twentieth century and the works of Kafka, the great master of the Absurd, but he remained an heir to Karinthy, perhaps the most logical and unyieldingly rational figure of the twentieth-century pantheon of Hungarian writers. ❧

Translated by Thomas Cooper

Péter P. Müller

Variations on the Theme of Revolution in the Works of István Örkény

Blonde Girl: [...] Doesn't the revolution happen for the people?
Energetic Pisti: [...] Take good note: the greatest obstacle to the revolution is the people.[2]

Revolution—its character, meaning, and the conduct of its main characters—is a recurring theme in the literary career of István Örkény. The eponymous short story of the 1941 collection *Tengertánc* ("Miny, Moe") from the early part of his oeuvre was originally published in 1937 under the title "Forradalom" ("Revolution"), while his 1979 play *Forgatókönyv* ("Screenplay"), his swansong,

1 ■ This article is based on a presentation held at the conference entitled "ÖRKÉNY 100: Ünnepi ülésszak Örkény István születésének századik évfordulója alkalmából" ["ÖRKÉNY 100: A Commemorative Conference to Celebrate the 100th Anniversary of István Örkény's Birth"], held at the Petőfi Literary Museum in Budapest. I am grateful to Péter Szirák, József Tamás Reményi, and Zsuzsa Hetényi for their comments.

2 ■ István Örkény. "Pisti a vérzivatarban" ["Pisti in the Bloodshed"]. *Drámák* ["Dramas"]. Vol. II. Ed. Zsuzsa Radnóti. Budapest: Szépirodalmi Kiadó, 1982, 237. Clara Györgyey uses the title "Stevie in the Bloodbath: A Grotesque Play in Two Parts" in her 1990 translation, published in István Örkény, György Spiró, and Mihály Kornis. *A Mirror to the Cage: Three Contemporary Hungarian Plays*. Edited and translated by Clara Györgyey. Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1993. All translations of passages from István Örkény's works are by the translator of this article.

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also has this theme as its focus. Obviously the mass hysteria and social upheaval caused by mental patients escaping from a lunatic asylum is hardly analogous to demonstrators flooding the streets and citizens fighting an armed revolution against a dictatorship in October 1956. In the time between these two works, which one could describe as framing the more than four decades of his career, Örkény returned to this question on a number of occasions. In what follows I will discuss a few examples from Örkény's oeuvre, analyzing the ways in which he presents the social events described by him or by the powers-that-be as revolutions. These variations on the theme of revolution allude to diverse socio-political processes and situations. Although the term used in some of Örkény's works is "revolution," it is not possible to arrive at a standard definition of the word in the various contexts. More important than his general definition is the way in which Örkény presents the characters he sees as active participants in the given revolution and the social and political contexts in which he uses the terms "revolution" and "revolutionary," as well as the manner in which he does this, whether from the perspective of the protagonists or the narrator.

Örkény's short story "Forradalom" appeared in the July-August 1937 issue of *Szép Szó* ("Beautiful Word"), a journal on literature and the social sciences. It tells the story of how patients escape from a lunatic asylum in Budapest and seize power. A revised version of the work was published in 1941 under the title "Tengertánc" in Örkény's first volume of short stories, which bears the title of the story. However, changes to the title and the text did not affect its basic structure or themes. This wartime version was followed in 1967 by a third variant in the volume of prose works entitled *Nászutasok a légypapíron* ("Honeymooners on Flypaper," 1967), and the text included in the four-volume compilation *Időrendben* ("In Chronological Order," 1971) is also slightly different. In this essay I examine only the first two versions. The direct inspiration for the story was a newspaper article about patients who had broken out of a psychiatric clinic in Lipótmező (Leopold's Fields) in Budapest, with one of the patients as their leader.[3] As several critics have pointed out, the work also clearly relates to the domestic and global politics of the 1930s, the rise of fascism and Nazism.[4]

The opening sentences of the first version, "Forradalom," are as follows: "[t]he whole thing began at lunch, when Oil dropped the knife on the stone floor. Strangely, the knife hit the floor not with its handle but with its blade,

3 ■ István Szabó B. *Örkény*. Budapest: Balassi, 1997, 13.

4 ■ See for instance István Lázár. *Örkény István alkotásai és vallomásai tükrében* ["István Örkény, Seen in the Mirror of his Works and Confessions"]. Budapest: Szépirodalmi Kiadó, 1979, 79-81, István Szabó B. *Örkény*. Budapest: Balassi, 1997, 13, and Péter Szirák. *Örkény István (Pályakép)* ["István Örkény: A Monograph"]. Budapest: Palatinus, 2008, 29.

emitting a prolonged twanging noise, like a bad or dented tuning-fork."[5] "Tengertánc" begins with the following two sentences: "[t]he trouble began at lunch, when the knife fell from Oil's hand onto the stone floor, and, for once, hit the floor not with its handle but with its blade. It pinged, at great length, like a dented tuning-fork [...]."[6] The sound of the blade falling on the ground sets a butterfly effect in motion: the noise leads first to an uprising against the nurses and then to the patients going out into the streets and ultimately taking power. In the course of this, more and more inhabitants of the capital and later even people from abroad join the rebellious mental patients. Initially passers-by, observers, and new participants alike are unsure how to treat this group and its members, who are wearing ridiculous clothes, or how to tell who belongs where in the crowd. Only those escaped from the asylum seem untroubled by doubt: "[i]t was chaos. No one knew where the person next to him belonged. Only they knew: they could recognize one another, incontrovertibly, by one another's smell, like dogs."[7] The mental patients form a closed group, the members of which have spent years together locked in a mental institution. In this new situation, they use this closeness and camaraderie to become the leaders of a spontaneously formed crowd made up of individuals who do not know one another. The police come at news of the upheaval, but the exponentially growing tumult overpowers them. The crowd grows and grows, unstoppably. This inundation is presented in similar fashion both in "Forradalom" and "Tengertánc," but in terms of style the latter describes the process more precisely and systematically. First the various psychologically troubled figures join the proceedings, then:

> [c]ame those who stroll at the edge of the sidewalks and those who don't take the train on Fridays. People who can hardly wait to see someone jump out of a window, and people who have the welfare of their nation at heart, but who regularly beat their children. Then came those who are pushed aside, spat on, pushed under water, laughed at. Behind them the sober and the healthy. Crest-fallen piano tuners, waving cacti bound to a prop; dogcatchers with sanctuary lamps in their hands; hard-souled bank managers, playing the harp. Post office ladies left on the shelf came with firecrackers, and politicians came too, carrying enormous oil paintings in which the sun was setting and a mother was dandling her baby in her lap. They were out of breath, their heads unkempt, swimming in sweat; they pushed and shoved and squeezed one another, as everyone was afraid of falling behind.[8]

5 ■ István Örkény. "Forradalom" ["Revolution"]. *Szép Szó*, 16, 1937, 40.
6 ■ István Örkény. "Tengertánc" ["Miny, Moe"]. *Tengertánc* ["Miny, Moe"]. Budapest: Renaissance Publishing, 1941, 20.
7 ■ István Örkény. "Forradalom" ["Revolution"]. *Szép Szó*, 43.
8 ■ István Örkény. "Tengertánc" ["Miny, Moe"]. *Novellák* ["Short Stories"]. Vol. I. Budapest: Szépirodalmi Kiadó, 1980, 88.

In the two earlier versions of the short story, the word "revolution" occurs twice, in both cases to refer to the takeover of power by the patients. "The revolution has been victorious," one reads of the consequences of the mass movement, which has been reinforced by comrades from abroad. Then, soon afterwards, the first achievements of the new order are described as follows: "[o]n the day after the revolution everyone was given a tube of Vaseline [...]."[9] It is worth noting that in editions published after 1967, the corresponding passages read "the uprising was victorious" and "the day after the victory." At the end of the story, on the third day of the victory, the leaders of the escapees from the asylum convene a rally on Szabadság (Liberation) Square. The last lines of "Forradalom" are:

> Oil stepped forward and self-assuredly slapped the balustrade with his fist. Suddenly there was silence, an overheated muteness. A decrepit assessor of a board of guardians had a hemorrhage from all the excitement and died. Twenty-eight people fainted. Oil cocked his head back and spoke in a booming voice, using simple, spontaneous words: "Fellow followers, the skies have clouded under! Now we blather our dead!" At that, a pregnant woman, who was standing too close to the dais, gave birth to twins in the throes of her rapture.[10]

So ends the first version. The conclusion of "Tengertánc" is as follows: "[h]alf-a-million people formed a human wall on the road, while there were three-hundred-thousand crowded into the square. They were waiting for Oil, the chief brother, as they called him, as well as the additional and substitute brothers and sisters and the whole over-adorned caboodle." When the leader spoke, "at the sound of his voice the pansies fainted in the flowerbeds and the bell in the Cathedral tolled. All he said in resounding Armenian was 'Eeny, meeny, miny, moe!' This is more than anyone can stand! The crowd screamed, wept, moaned, and was overjoyed. His voice soared victoriously over the square, and an assessor of the board of guardians had a seizure. How beautiful it was!"[11] However, Örkény was to modify this ending again in later editions.

On the change of title from "Forradalom" to "Tengertánc," Örkény wrote that the idea had been prompted by a suggestion made by Attila József (1905–1937), one of the editors of *Szép Szó* at the time, in whose view the subject of the short story was revolt, not revolution. Örkény wrote of the details of the discussion with József in his 1955 work, "Első estém a 'Rózsabokorban'" ("My First Night in the 'Rosebush'"), which was published in

9 ■ István Örkény. "Forradalom" ["Revolution"]. *Szép Szó*, 44. See also István Örkény. "Tengertánc" ["Miny, Moe"]. *Tengertánc* ["Miny, Moe"], 26.
10 ■ István Örkény. "Forradalom" ["Revolution"]. *Szép Szó*, 45.
11 ■ István Örkény. "Tengertánc" ["Miny, Moe"]. *Tengertánc* ["Miny, Moe"], 26-27.

the May issue of *Csillag* ("Star") as part of the compilation entitled *József Attila emlékezete* ("In Memory of Attila József") to commemorate the 50th anniversary of József's birth.[12] In 1931, József expressed his views on a question pertinent in this context in a lecture entitled "Irodalom és szocializmus" ("Literature and Socialism"). The essential thesis of his lecture was that a composition must have social content in order to be art. He offers two lines of poetry (a hypothetical poem) as an illustration: "The soup of history / Is already lifting the lid." According to József, the use of the word "already" makes the social content clear: "it evokes our era and the historical and social processes that preceded it and even created it, [...] and thus the two lines become artistic. Obviously this derives from their revolutionary outlook. We can make it counter-revolutionary by replacing the word 'already' with 'still.'" He then adds, "[a]rtistic content cannot be socially untrue. But this must not be confused with the absurd demand that artists should be honest. For people can be honest and counter-revolutionary because they are intellectually limited and stupid and they still won't be able to create works of art, no more than can old ladies who often happen to be honest."[13]

When Örkény gave his short story the title "Forradalom," he mocked the rhetoric according to which all upheavals are revolutions. The story dramatizes an upheaval that is only "revolutionary" on the surface: hitherto oppressed, downtrodden people rise up against their captors, but these people are psychopaths and lunatics who are isolated from mainstream society for clinical, and not political, reasons. At the same time, their escape from confinement brings the mass demonstration, the army of hundreds of thousands of people, in its wake. In this one cannot fail to see a Grotesque critique of society and a kind of diagnosis of how masses can be influenced. The characterization of these events as a revolution does not represent the narrator's assessment so much as the perspective of the patients who come to power. The escape from the asylum is not motivated by any goal to reshape society. The hero and leader Oil and his fellow patients have no political agenda. Their accidental rise to power creates a situation in which the social order is genuinely altered, but the dénouement of the story indicates that the people who have come to power are not suitable to wield it. When Örkény changes the title from "Forradalom" to "Tengertánc," he changes the

12 ■ István Örkény. "Első estém a 'Rózsabokorban'" ["My First Night in the 'Rosebush'"]. *Csillag*, 5, 1955, 966-967. A few pages earlier (955-958) in the Attila József compilation is the memoir of János Kádár, entitled "Munkás-költő, a munkások között" ["Working Man's Poet among the Working Men"]. In the volume Pál Réz, ed. *Tengertánc: In memoriam Örkény István* ["Miny, Moe: In Memoriam István Örkény"]. Budapest: Nap Kiadó, 2004, 18-21, however, the title of the republished Örkény text does not contain quotation marks.

13 ■ Attila József. "Irodalom és szocializmus" ["Literature and Socialism"]. *József Attila összes művei* ["The Collected Works of Attila József"]. Vol. III. Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1958, 84-85.

perspective. The title no longer represents the view of the characters of the story, but rather that of the narrator. In the first version, the title and the conclusion are connected by the word "revolution," which frames the piece. The new title, taken from a children's rhyme (in Hungarian: "Egyedem, begyedem, tengertánc, hajdú sógor mit kívánsz...," similar to "Eeny, meeny, miny, mo..."), and the use of this rhyme at the end of the story alter the emphasis. On the one hand, this change highlights the infantilism of the events and the protagonists and thus strengthens the comic overtones. On the other, it may give the narrative a certain gravity. Literally "tengertánc" means "sea dance," and a Hungarian reader might well hear an allusion in this title to two poems that are important parts of the Hungarian canon, "A magyarokhoz" ("To the Hungarians," 1807) by Dániel Berzsenyi (1776–1836) and "Föltámadott a Tenger..." ("The Sea Rose Up...," 1848) by Sándor Petőfi (1823–1849). Berzsenyi's poem, which in Ádám Makkai's translation begins with the line, "The Seas of Sorrow boil with a rage, Magyar,"[14] can be read as an exhortation to the people of Hungary to shake off the shackles of foreign rule, as can Petőfi's "Föltámadott a Tenger...," in which the sea is a metaphor for the masses, who in the poet's prophetic vision will someday rise up against the galleys. Thus the ambiguity of the title "Tengertánc" suggests the unpredictability and irrationality of the process, and thereby also the fears it should awaken. The change of title also proved fortunate given the political developments in Hungary during the decades that followed. "Revolution" would have had an incendiary or provocative effect both during the era of the Mátyás Rákosi "revolution" after 1949 and during the János Kádár period after 1956, when the events of the October 1956 Revolution became a taboo (Rákosi was the General Secretary of the Hungarian Communist Party and then the Hungarian Working People's Party until his removal from power in 1956; he was succeeded by Kádár, who was General Secretary of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party until 1988). It is no accident that in the editions published in the 1960s and 1970s Örkény consistently removed the word "revolution" from the text. Furthermore, with its ambiguity, "Tengertánc" can be considered a precursor to the Grotesque period of Örkény's career, as indicated, for instance, by the fact that in the In Memoriam series the compilation presenting Örkény's oeuvre, published on the 25th anniversary of his death, the story was included with this title.[15]

The next work by Örkény in which revolution is an important theme is *Babik* ("Babik"). It is one of the writings that were not published in Örkény's lifetime, one of which there are also several versions, but which survives only in a

14 ■ Ádám Makkai, ed. *In Quest of the "Miracle Stag": The Poetry of Hungary*. Vol. I. Chicago: Atlantis-Centaur, 1996, 178.

15 ■ Pál Réz, ed. *Tengertánc: In memoriam Örkény István* ["Miny, Moe: In Memoriam István Örkény"]. Budapest: Nap Kiadó, 2004.

fragmentary form. In 1982-83, *Babik* was published three times, first as a stand-alone volume,[16] then in the collection of his unfinished novels *Önéletrajzom töredékekben* ("My Autobiography in Fragments"),[17] and then as a screenplay in the third volume of *Drámák* ("Dramas").[18] The work was first written as a story for film in 1954 and then turned into a screenplay by Örkény, together with directors Péter Bacsó and Károly Makk. He then started to turn it into a novel, but it remained unfinished. A short extract from one version of the screenplay is in István Lázár's 1979 Örkény volume, in which the author mentions that in the spring of 1956 the manuscript was informally passed around.[19] A short excerpt of the text was also published in 1956.[20]

The story takes place in the Hungary of the 1950s in a factory for skeleton keys. The protagonist of this political satire is Rezsö Mausz, the director of the factory. On the morning of 4 March, 1951 he is taken from the factory in a prison van to be executed, but at the last minute it turns out that his name is on the list not of those to be executed, but of those to be given a distinction. By this time, however, one has learned a great deal about him, for example, how he has his company car driven straight through the closed gate to the factory in order to avoid getting wet in the morning rain. In response to the chauffeur's objections that if they break through the gate, "the car will be ruined," Mausz reassures him: "[t]here's a revolution on. [...] Let's go."[21] Later in the story, one night a burglar breaks in on Mausz, claiming to have arrived as a representative of the whole Hungarian burglary community, in the name of many thousands of his colleagues. There is a long dialogue between them. I cite here merely a few excerpts from their edifying exchange on revolution:

> "What is wrong with my skeleton keys?"
>
> "That they are worthless, Mr. Mausz, Sir. [...]"
>
> "My, my, how demanding you are... I'll admit, it'd be better if they opened something. But just because they don't, that doesn't mean that the key is defective. [...]"
>
> "You mustn't make light of this, Mr. Mausz, Sir. [...] You should have sensed that we expected great things of you; and now the fitting thing would be for you to admit that our grievances are justified."
>
> "Only partly," the director said. "But why can't you all see that we are living in

16 ■ István Örkény. *Babik* ["Babik"]. Budapest: Szépirodalmi Kiadó, 1982.
17 ■ István Örkény. *Önéletrajzom töredékekben: Befejezetlen regények* ["My Autobiography in Fragments: Unfinished Novels"]. Budapest: Szépirodalmi Kiadó, 1983, 37-114.
18 ■ István Örkény. *Drámák* ["Dramas"]. Vol. III. Ed. Zsuzsa Radnóti. Budapest: Szépirodalmi Kiadó, 1982, 5-189.
19 ■ István Lázár. *Örkény István alkotásai és vallomásai tükrében* ["István Örkény, Seen in the Mirror of his Works and Confessions"], 198.
20 ■ The excerpt was published in *Új Hang* ["New Voice"], 9, 1956, 20-22. See also Péter Szirák. *Örkény István (Pályakép)* ["István Örkény: A Monograph"], 123, Footnote 193.
21 ■ István Örkény. *Babik* ["Babik"], 14.

exceptional times? The world is falling to pieces. There's a revolution on. We have renamed the streets. Everyone is allowed to walk on the grass. It used to be just the poor who couldn't travel abroad. Now the rich can't, either. [...] Who is concerned with whether that key fits into that hole?"

"Are you saying that if there is a revolution on, nothing matters? [...]"

"Nothing matters. Only the revolution matters. [...] The revolution is the repetition of its very self. Continuous rotation, movement, change..."

"Now please do not be offended by what I am about to say, but these are not the touchstones of a revolution."

"Of what, then?" smiled Mausz.

"Of a cartwheel," smiled the guest.

"The cartwheel: a game with nothing," the director said, still smiling. "But the revolution has a purpose."

"What purpose?"

"The repeated harassment of the local population."

"And what purpose does that serve?"

"History teaches us that from time to time people need to be mortally offended. The moment that existence becomes bearable and there is an end to queuing, to leaking roofs, to the annoyance, vilification, and humiliation of the people who live under these roofs, the people will set about grumbling and will rise up. But this way, during the brief respite between two acts of harassment, everyone is happy and satisfied, and the revolution will gain more and more enthusiastic followers."[22]

The revolution described in *Babik* has a few beneficiaries, such as the factory director (and his comrades and political superiors), and many losers, namely, the ordinary people. This revolution has an end of its own, it is a self-generating process, and yet it is also a maniacal intervention in people's everyday lives. In this situation, described as revolutionary by those who do well by it, nothing matters but fueling the will. The powers-that-be overstep all physical and metaphysical laws, all rules and logic, running amuck in the belief that their power and their will give them the right to do as they please. What unfolds is a Grotesque, risible replica of George Orwell's portrayal of totalitarian power. The act of driving through the closed factory gate clearly shows how tyranny rides roughshod over anything. Mausz is utterly incompetent, and therefore perfectly suitable for a political appointment, such as that of factory director. When we hear him argue his point to the complaining burglar, we bear witness to the escalation of the pseudo-revolutionary, which is somewhere between self-justification and ideological gobbledygook. The situation and process that privileged people such as Mausz

22 ■ István Örkény. *Babik* ["Babik"], 63–66.

refer to as a revolution could be characterized not just as repetition or as things in a state of constant, cyclical change, but as any number of things, since the apparent reality of the situation is created not by facts or experiences, but by speech acts. According to the official position, also espoused by the director, every statement and every action acknowledges the so-called revolution. In this situation, referred to as "revolution" by those in power, the ruling class can say or do as it pleases. There is no better example of this than the factory director, who finds the aim of power in the humiliation of the people and who oversees a production line that produces only cast-offs. The approach exemplified by Mausz is easy to adopt, as the following part of the previous dialogue illustrates. In this, the burglar suggests that constant humiliation and harassment will not make the people believe in the revolution. Why should the people be enthusiastic, for example, about new houses that are uninhabitable?

> "Why not?" replied the director, shrugging his shoulders. "A house's habitability is but one of its many aspects. I can imagine a whole city that is uninhabitable. It could be constructed, it could be lined with trees, it could be given a name..."
>
> "Wouldn't the name be enough?" asked the burglar, not without disdain. "Why build it if it will be uninhabitable anyway?"
>
> "Wow!" exclaimed Rezsõ Mausz with surprise. "You are not as backward as you look... Only a natural-born revolutionary would have an idea like that!"[23]

The absurd suggestion of the burglar, who soon sees through the mindset of the revolutionaries of Mausz's ilk, is immediately adopted by the director as his own. The burglar recognizes that as far as the powers-that-be are concerned, it is enough to make statements, to give voice to words, without putting them into action. Actions can be separated from words. And, using the burglar's words as his starting point (that there is no need to build a house, the use of the word "house" is enough), the revolutionary bureaucrat ponders the suggestion that in order for the revolution to triumph, words may well suffice and there is perhaps no actual need of things. For example, there is no need to build a new bridge across the Danube, one need simply put up a sign saying "bridge." In fact, difficulties in use can themselves be *bridged* through the use of words: in summer, the sign can announce that "[t]he bridge is temporarily out of use," while in the depths of winter it can read, "when the Danube has frozen over, the bridge is in service."[24]

In the dialogue between the revolutionary director of the skeleton key factory and the burglar who objects to his useless products, Örkény does not simply provide a satirical criticism of the abuses of the 1950s, he rejects in its entirety

23 ■ István Örkény. *Babik* ["Babik"], 66-67.
24 ■ István Örkény. *Babik* ["Babik"], 67.

the system of power and politics that was forced on the country at the time.[25] He highlights the fundamental principles on which a system of tyranny, falsely termed "revolution," was based, primarily the role of the construction of reality in the maintenance of power and authority through the use of revolutionary rhetoric. Örkény also points out the way in which this kind of regime, blinded by its own sense of mission, sees fiction as fact and the way in which it veils dilettantism in social policy and the organization of the economy through an aggressive power discourse, which in reality is simply the magic of words.

In the first version of the play *Pisti a vérzivatarban* ("Pisti in the Bloodshed"), which was written in 1969, the factory director of *Babik* reappears in the figure of Energetic Pisti, one of the four characters who are each embodiments of different traits of the protagonist of the play, Pisti. Also, the non-existent protagonist of *Babik* appears in references to Diffident Pisti, who in some scenes is represented as a vacuum in a bottle. In the scene following the show trial, which is conducted in a nonsensical language, there are references to the 1956 Revolution. There are also allusions to 1956 in the bus sightseeing tour at the end of the play.

In the 1979 version of *Pisti a vérzivatarban*, Örkény expanded the play in all of the moments mentioned here. He made the main characteristics of the tyranny of the 1950s and the events of October and November 1956 more evident, and so in what follows, instead of offering a detailed comparison of the two versions, I analyze this later, final one. It is interesting that this extension of the drama to include elements of the Rákosi era and the 1956 Revolution escaped the attention of critics, who preferred to discuss the earlier version on the grounds that "attempts to put the play on stage in the following decades [...] have borne out the superiority of the *original* work: today 'everything is clear' in this version, so it is the one most commonly performed."[26]

The second part of Pisti begins with the scenes involving the birth, education, and medical examination of Diffident Pisti, who in these scenes appears in the form of a vacuum. The episode with the factory director is also part of this series of scenes. Energetic Pisti hurries onto the stage, dictating his résumé to Blonde Girl and explaining the various changes that have taken place in the course of his career by saying that he is "a revolutionary from top to toe."[27] He lists the various leading management positions he has held and concludes by saying, "there are so very many things I am no good at that this itself counts as versatility."[28] This, therefore, is one of the characteristics of the

25 ■ Cf. István Szabó B. *Örkény*, 86.

26 ■ István Szabó B. *Örkény*, 151.

27 ■ István Örkény. "Pisti a vérzivatarban" ["Pisti in the Bloodshed"]. *Drámák* ["Dramas"]. Vol. II. Ed. Zsuzsa Radnóti. Budapest: Szépirodalmi Kiadó, 1982, 235.

revolutionary. He was given his new post as director of the ladder factory two months earlier, but he still has no idea what a ladder is. When one is brought in, he expresses his disappointment, referring to it as rubbish. He then envisions revolutionary innovations: ladders should be five times as big, in the future they should be as tall as skyscrapers, and they should have one leg, not two. When Blonde Girl replies that the ladder will tumble and people will fall from it if it only has one leg, the factory director says: "[f]all, fall... Why do you have to presume the worst? There's a revolution on, sweetheart. The earth is trembling underneath our feet. Who's going to notice if one person falls?"[29] This is followed by the dialogue quoted at the beginning of this essay and then by Energetic Pisti's claim that "the greatest obstacle to the revolution is the people."[30]

According to the stage directions for the scene, Blonde Girl looks with awe and admiration on the revolutionary *cum* ladder factory director, whose existence and attitude are based on spontaneous, unconsidered actions and a lack of regard for the circumstances and conditions (as was the case in *Babik*). The principle and rallying cry, "the greatest obstacle to the revolution is the people," suggests a vision of a society in which everyone submits to a single will. People are subjects who implement the tasks they are given, as otherwise they would obstruct the plans of their leader, in love as he is with his own ideas of how to change the world, the country, or at least the ladder factory. Such a revolutionary treats time in a way that is different from that of ordinary mortals such as Blonde Girl. On the one hand, he is driven by an urgent need for his every idea to be put into practice at once, but at the same time his eyes (and his rhetoric) are firmly set on the future. At the end of the scene he makes his grand prophecy: "[w]e'll live to see a ladder that reaches the sky."[31]

The wannabes and manic devotees who brand themselves revolutionaries in "Forradalom" / "Tengertánc," *Babik,* and *Pisti* are the only such characters in Örkény's oeuvre. These works present the traits of the right-wing dictatorship of Hungary in the 1930s and the left-wing dictatorship of the 1950s in a Grotesque, ironic form. The common element in these movements and systems, which referred to themselves as revolutionary, was not their "revolutionariness," which was mere rhetoric, but rather their radicalism. Mental patients rushing out into the streets represent not a revolution, but rather anarchy, while the ideas and actions of dilettantes and incompetents elevated to positions of power are manifestations of social absurdity. The objective of the centralized systems of both the 1930s and the 1950s was to

28 ■ István Örkény. "Pisti a vérzivatarban" ["Pisti in the Bloodshed"]. *Drámák* ["Dramas"], 236.
29 ■ István Örkény. "Pisti a vérzivatarban" ["Pisti in the Bloodshed"]. *Drámák* ["Dramas"], 236.
30 ■ István Örkény. "Pisti a vérzivatarban" ["Pisti in the Bloodshed"]. *Drámák* ["Dramas"], 237.
31 ■ István Örkény. "Pisti a vérzivatarban" ["Pisti in the Bloodshed"]. *Drámák* ["Dramas"], 237.

overturn the social order and, by inspiring fear and destroying the rule of law, to attain exclusive control of power. In both eras, the attainment, extension, and reinforcement of power involved the rhetoric of revolution. The concept of revolution functioned to cover the subversion and usurpation of the pre-existing set of social institutions. Örkény also uses these works to touch on the role and behavior of those who put their weight behind the "revolution." Although the crowd pouring into the street and then finding itself in awe of its leader in "Forradalom" / "Tengertánc," the loyal, opportunistic or Stakhanovite employees of the skeleton key factory, and Blonde Girl, who hangs on every crazed word of the factory director in *Pisti*, are only minor characters who endure or adapt to the social and political changes, they are all examples of how effortlessly individuals, groups, and masses can be blinded to facts and social realities. And yet, radical tyranny has a very complex task to solve: it must break down the people's will without their noticing it. With the use of punishments, rewards, and suitable ideology, these systems resolve this question by creating a situation that Erich Fromm describes in the following way: "most people believe they are following their own will and are unaware that their will itself is conditioned and manipulated."[32] Örkény, however, does not deal with the question of motivation or inducement, but rather with behavior, with what happens, with what can be described and presented as fact, as process, and although the question of (mass) influence does appear in the writings discussed above, it is not given a central role.

Alongside these works, which evoke the world of the 1930s and 1950s, there is another, recurring example of revolution in Örkény's work: that of 1956. The notice for the funeral of the protagonist executed after a show trial in *Pisti* includes the following:

> [i]t is with a grief-stricken heart that we announce that our only son, the widely-loved pistipistipisti, an innocent man, has been executed. We hereby invite his friends, acquaintances, and those who admired him to participate in the funeral of our martyred son, and then in the protest march to follow, which will continue with the storming of the Radio, a civil war, and the shelling of our capital city to smithereens. This funeral notice also serves as an entrance ticket, which is uniformly valid on this and the other side of the barricades. The street fighting will begin at 8:00 in the morning and, with the inclusion of a half-hour lunch break, will finish at 6:00 in the evening. [...] To those under the age of sixteen only light infantry weapons can be distributed, but with written parental consent minors can also throw Molotov cocktails, but only if they do not obstruct the progress of the civil war or public transport safety by doing so.[33]

32 ■ Erich Fromm. *To Have or to Be?* London: Abacus, 1979, 83.
33 ■ István Örkény. "Pisti a vérzivatarban" ["Pisti in the Bloodshed"]. *Drámák* ["Dramas"], 257-258.

This text is read by Diffident Pisti and, as mentioned above, is not included in the 1969 version of the play. Here Örkény mentions a civil war, not a revolution, but we know that the Kádár regime officially presented 1956 as a counter-revolution until 1989. Two-and-a-half years after Örkény's death a theater regarded as acceptable by the state presented the events of October 1956 as a revolution. The performance in question was the December 1981 premiere of *Marat halála* ("The Death of Marat") in Kaposvár, directed by János Ács.[34]

In this section of the 1969 version there is only a short funeral notice that lists a number of causes of death for Pisti. In the 1979 version, however, "Pisti's death counts as a political murder and as a (partial) precursor to the events of 1956."[35] Diffident Pisti closes the above monologue with the words "Pisti, you didn't die in vain!"[36] and he swears allegiance to the revolution.

In the stage soliloquy of the tour guide that concludes *Pisti*, delivered in the 1969 version by Blonde Girl and in the 1979 version by Diffident Pisti, Örkény blends three layers of time in a Budapest that is sometimes lively, sometimes lying in ruins: that of the Second World War, that of 1956, and that of a time after a future nuclear attack, but without identifying these historical moments specifically.

In the last Örkény work, the play entitled *Forgatókönyv*, the questions raised in *Pisti* that touch on the 1956 Revolution are brought to center-stage. Örkény uses the various layers of time much as he did at the end of *Pisti*. In this case the three periods are 1944, 1949, and 1956. By comparing or identifying them, the viewer learns which year and political-historical era is being depicted.

The central date of the play is 22 September, 1949, the time of the trial of László Rajk, a prominent member of the Hungarian Communist Party who was executed as part of the show trials held by Rákosi. In the course of the play Örkény establishes a parallel between the Nazi terror and left-wing resistance of 1944 on the one hand and the 1956 Revolution and struggle for liberty on the other. The alternations and overlappings of the different periods are exemplified by the fact that in scene 14 of part one, which is set in 1944, the same proclamation is made as in scene 14 of part two, which evokes October 1956. It is made first by Mrs. Littke while stunts are being performed and later by Barabás during his trial, as if he were delivering a speech over the radio:

34 ■ Péter P. Müller. "1956 újraértelmezései a Kádár-korszak drámáiban és színpadán" ["Reinterpretations of 1956 in the Plays and the Stage of the Kádár Era"]. *Ezerkilencszázötvenhat az újabb történeti irodalomban* ["1956 in Recent Historical Literature"]. Ed. Gábor Gyáni and János Rainer M. Budapest: 1956 Institute, 2007, 329.

35 ■ Péter P. Müller. "1956 újraértelmezései a Kádár-korszak drámáiban és színpadán" ["Reinterpretations of 1956 in the Plays and the Stage of the Kádár Era"]. *Ezerkilencszázötvenhat az újabb történeti irodalomban* ["1956 in Recent Historical Literature"], 326.

36 ■ István Örkény. "Pisti a vérzivatarban" ["Pisti in the Bloodshed"]. *Drámák* ["Dramas"], 258.

I order that work be stopped at once, that you march out into the streets, that you occupy the capital, first and foremost the Radio, so that the whole country can learn of the uprising. Attack formations should besiege the main post office, all of the capital's railway stations, the telephone exchanges, the Waterworks and Gasworks, and the bridges over the Danube. All airports must be closed. Let everyone who is one of us join us! Police, you are the men of the people, do not shoot at the people! And you too, soldiers, you must all arm yourselves, and there must be arms for all of us! Out with the foreign occupiers! Down with those in power![37]

When Barabás reads this proclamation aloud during the trial in the second part of the play, the following dialogue ensues between him and the Master, who appears as judge:

Master: [...] So do you admit that, as the prosecution claims, you stirred up the people to rise up in arms?

Barabás: Yes. No. Yes. No.[38]

Then, after some toing and froing, and after the court "offers to turn back time," Barabás says of the above proclamation "[t]he dregs of society has filled the streets, rising up against the Party and against the working class! I announce a state of siege at once, and order a curfew from 6:00 at night until 6:00 in the morning! We will show no mercy! Even if blood has to flow, even if rivers of blood flow, we must fight on, soldiers!"[39] Here, then, is the other perspective, according to which 1956 was a counter-revolution. But this is not the final perspective of Barabás, or of the play. In his confessional monologue that concludes the play, the main protagonist tells of how "I have no direct experience / of the present circumstances / facing the country; / I can only / infer from the indictment, / the witness statements / and the bangs / making the window-pane / of my cell shake / that there is a civil war / raging outside these walls. / Burned-out tanks / are stranded on / torn-up tram-tracks, / with the incinerated corpses / of soldiers / of which, / according to the indictment, / I am the cremator. / If only I knew how and why and with what."[40] What Barabás refers to here as a civil war he will a few minutes later call an internecine war.[41]

The image of revolution in *Forgatókönyv* is strongly determined by the juxtaposition of historical periods and the interplay of historical figures (Rajk,

37 ■ István Örkény. "Forgatókönyv" ["Screenplay"]. *Drámák* ["Dramas"]. Vol. II. Ed. Zsuzsa Radnóti. Budapest: Szépirodalmi Kiadó, 1982, 332-333, and see the same excerpt 453-454.
38 ■ István Örkény. "Forgatókönyv" ["Screenplay"]. *Drámák* ["Dramas"], 455-456.
39 ■ István Örkény. "Forgatókönyv" ["Screenplay"]. *Drámák* ["Dramas"], 459.
40 ■ István Örkény. "Forgatókönyv" ["Screenplay"]. *Drámák* ["Dramas"], 488.
41 ■ István Örkény. "Forgatókönyv" ["Screenplay"]. *Drámák* ["Dramas"], 493.

Imre Nagy, and Kádár). Thus the play accentuates the fact that Kádár's reprisals after 1956 used exactly the same procedural mechanisms as the show trials that began in 1949 (that is, the martyrs of the Revolution became the victims of show trials in the same way) and, in addition, in its portrayal of 1956 it presents an alternative view to the received opinion of the time, according to which it had been a counter-revolution. Although Örkény made a number of compromises in the interests of having the play published,[42] the theme of doublespeak remained central in the final version of the play. Part of this duality, beyond the comparison of different historical eras (through which, in point of fact, he highlights the parallels and similarities between radical right-wing and left-wing systems of power), is that his depiction of the 1956 Revolution is not in line with the official classification at the time. In fact, he almost dares to claim quite the opposite. It is hardly surprising that Örkény does not call 1956 a revolution, but as *Pisti* and *Forgatókönyv* show, neither does he call it a counter-revolution. In Barabás' confession, Örkény also makes it clear that it is under duress, as a consequence of manipulation by the authorities, that 1956 must be spoken of as a revolt of the mob and an attack on the Party. In the choice of genre for the play that concluded Örkény's oeuvre, namely, tragedy, one can also see the pain that characterized the events of October and November 1956, as well as the extent to which Örkény was affected by the suppression of the Revolution.

It is customary to associate the notion of revolution with the destruction of tyranny, the creation of a society that is more just, and the concepts of freedom, democratization, and rationality. Örkény's writings that touch on the dictatorships of the 1930s and 1950s instead point to the dominance of lunacy and the drive to autocracy. These stories involve maniacs, psychopaths, and self-serving bureaucrats who call themselves revolutionaries and their acts revolutionary, but who represent exactly the opposite of what a revolution should stand for. The objective of their radicalism is to destroy the normal mainstream lifestyle and value system, intervene in people's private lives, and construct a totalitarian system of power that brings every sphere of social existence (the economy, public administration, culture, education, etc.) under its complete oversight. This is all, in point of fact, a travesty of the spirit of revolution.

In the early 1950s, for a short stretch of his career Örkény himself had blind faith that made him a believer in and servant of the propaganda of the dictatorship. He wrote his Socialist Realist production novel, *Házastársak*

42 ■ István Örkény. *Levelek egypercben* ["Letters in One Minute"]. Budapest: Szépirodalmi Kiadó, 1992, 228-230. This compilation includes two letters dictated by István Örkény on his death-bed, addressed to György Aczél, who was in charge of cultural decisions during most of the Kádár period. In these letters, Örkény asks for a preliminary opinion and declares the acceptance of Aczél's objections to the work.

("Husband and Wife," 1951), and was included in the anthology *Magyar írók Rákosi Mátyásról* ("Hungarian Writers on Mátyás Rákosi," 1952), published on the occasion of Rákosi's 60th birthday. Under the title *Korán kelő emberek* ("Early Risers," 1952), he collected his enthusiastic reports on forced industrialization, the forced restructuring of agriculture, and the construction of Sztálinváros (renamed Dunaújváros in 1961). Then, in 1953, he reassessed his actions, publishing his reflections in an article entitled "Írás közben" ("While Writing"). As Péter Szirák writes, "[i]n his dramatic reappraisal, Örkény tried to uncover how he lost his intellectual discernment, how he could have been blind to the absurdities of the construction of Socialism, and how his talent as a writer had withered beneath the constraints he had taken on."[43] In his introspective article, Örkény tells of how he managed to identify with the revolutionary zeal and rhetoric of the regime, and how, referring to March 1848 and the role played by Petőfi, he had "lived in a permanent March, for months and years."[44] He grew out of this deluded and supposedly revolutionary state not gradually, but rather as a result of an internal and external turn of events. He strove to confront the crisis of his calling as a writer and artist and the trap that the "revolutionary" powers-that-be had set for the (artistic) intelligentsia. This realization, his "loss of confidence in the *practice* of the communist system," was what "forced him to rethink his role and his vocation as a writer."[45] His Grotesque and ironic authorial stance emerged from this, a stance that would become stronger and more solid in the years of silence after 1956 and would eventually bring his art as a writer to its highest level.

Meanwhile came the only real revolution in Örkény's life and in twentieth-century Hungarian history: 1956. In the last decades of the author's life, this revolution was denied, its memory silenced and lied about, and thus in his literary works written in the 1960s and 1970s he was only able to present the revolutionary nature of 1956 and the disturbing precedent set by its suppression by turning to the ambivalences of the Grotesque. As for what he really thought about 1956, a revolution that was not declared or forced on the masses by some faction fighting for power, we can look to his diary written from October to December of that year, entitled *Noteszlapok 1956-ból* ("Diary Pages from 1956," 1956), as well as "Fohász Budapestért" ("A Petition for Budapest," 1956), and his inaugural talk written for the Free Kossuth Radio broadcast on 30 October, 1956.[46]

43 ■ Péter Szirák. *Örkény István (Pályakép)* ["István Örkény: A Monograph"], 100.
44 ■ István Örkény. *A mesterség titkaiból: Arcképek, korképek* ["The Secrets of the Craft: Portraits of People and an Age"]. Budapest: Palatinus, 2003, 399.
45 ■ Péter Szirák. *Örkény István (Pályakép)* ["István Örkény: A Monograph"], 106.
46 ■ These works are included for instance in István Örkény. *Levelek egypercben* ["Letters in One Minute"], 50-77.

Unlike in his literary writings, short stories, and plays, here Örkény describes the subversive events that disrupted the normal order of things from the perspective not of the writer but of the witness or participant. The experience of subversion evokes a different response from Örkény than the response he gave to the radical "revolutionary" systems, either as an ironic observer or, briefly, a fellow-passenger. On the one hand, the notes, vignettes, almost one-minute stories of *Noteszlapok 1956-ból* exemplify identification with historical events. On the other, they highlight how the uncertainty of such uncontrollable events can create feelings of freedom and fear. "Not one of us knew we were insurgents," he writes of 23 October, 1956.[47] He later speaks of a "moral revolution" and the "revolution of hopelessness."[48] The entry for 23 November begins as follows: "[t]he revolution broke out a month ago. So a friend told me on the street. I would never have worked it out myself: ever since the revolution broke out, time has stopped. For a month now I have not known what date it is, what day it is: if I want to know, I check the calendar, but the next moment I have forgotten. The man-made division of time crumbles in the face of the movement of history."[49]

Örkény's "Fohász Budapestért," which was published in the 2 November issue of *Igazság* ("Truth") and which was one of the factors in the subsequent decision by the government to silence him, is an ode to the Revolution. In it he refers to Budapest metonymically, while alluding all along to the Revolution. The petition emphasizes the extraordinary situation and change by which, thanks to the Revolution, "Budapest, in every language of the world, is now synonymous with faithfulness, self-sacrifice, freedom, and national honor."[50] During the Revolution and through the Revolution the city (and the nation) wins its real identity, which will distinguish it among other cities (and nations). Alongside moments of heroism, he also mentions the barricades, the street fighting, the invading hordes, and the foreign flags, but the finale of the text (which also brings ambiguities to light) is hymn-like: "[l]ive forever, Budapest, in work, battle, smoke; in blood, soot, and honor, live forever, capital of liberty, Budapest!"[51]

A few days before this another short text had been composed the starting point of which was not a vision of the future full of pathos, but the confrontation with a distorted system that falsely characterized itself as revolutionary. The first lines of the inaugural talk have become famous (if often quoted incorrectly): "[t]he Radio was for many years a tool for lying. It carried

47 ■ István Örkény. *Levelek egypercben* ["Letters in One Minute"], 50.
48 ■ István Örkény. *Levelek egypercben* ["Letters in One Minute"], 57.
49 ■ István Örkény. *Levelek egypercben* ["Letters in One Minute"], 61.
50 ■ István Örkény. *Levelek egypercben* ["Letters in One Minute"], 73.
51 ■ István Örkény. *Levelek egypercben* ["Letters in One Minute"], 74.

out orders. It lied at night, it lied during the day, it lied on all wave-lengths."[52] And yet, in addition to this reckoning with the past, at the end of the statement there is a clear identification with the new state of affairs. "We claim to speak for the whole revolutionary movement, and we want to see that the voice of the Hungarian people is heard by the whole world," Örkény wrote on 30 October.[53] Regarding the radicalism of the Revolution, a radical confrontation with the (recent) past is more important than a vision of the future. In this petition, Örkény dares to state what the supposedly revolutionary regime denied and swept under the carpet: that the whole system of power was based on lies, that it discredited the essence of real revolutions, because, in a way cynical and full of vices, it gave a dictatorship the noble title of (people's) democracy, while it did the opposite of everything it claimed. And that, as a result of its blind sense of mission, it regarded its greatest obstacle the people. ❧

Translated by David Robert Evans

52 ■ István Örkény. *Levelek egypercben* ["Letters in One Minute"], 75-76, Footnote marked ***.
53 ■ István Örkény. *Levelek egypercben* ["Letters in One Minute"], 75-76, Footnote marked ***.

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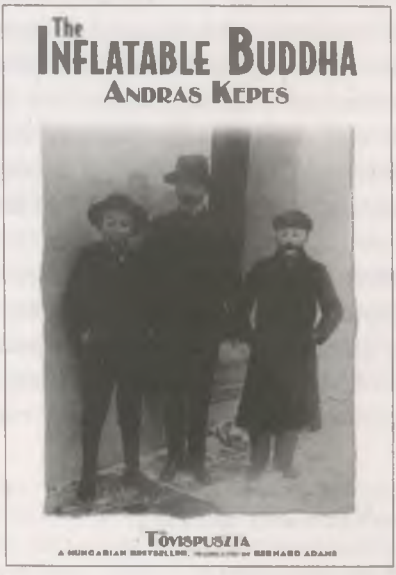

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Translated by Bernard Adams

Tamás Berkes

István Örkény's Kindred Souls in Central European Literature

It is one of the commonplaces of literary history that on occasion the intentions of a writer do not necessarily seem to harmonize with the interpretations his or her work is given. Once completed, a work of literature is not always quite what the author may have envisioned. It acquires its final meaning in the process of reception, in the conversation it prompts among its readers. Thus the notion of "final meaning" is not final at all, since even a motif in the reception of a work that enjoys widespread acceptance today can conflict with later readings as shifts take place in social consciousness.

The reception in Hungary of literary works that were conceived in the spirit of the Grotesque offers a fine example of this. István Örkény is regarded as one of the central figures of the Grotesque in Hungary, and indeed in the mid-1960s many—including perhaps Örkény himself—thought that he had invented both the concept and narrative strategy. Naturally the Grotesque, as a mixture of dissonant styles and genres, was hardly peculiar to the twentieth century, but one finds innumerable examples of hybrid blends of tragedy and comedy in the literatures of Central Europe, perhaps in particular after 1945. For the sake of clarity, however, it is worth drawing a distinction between works of literature that have elements of the Grotesque and works of literature that exemplify more broadly the spirit of the Grotesque. In the case of the latter, the Grotesque is palpable on every level of the literary work as a manner of depiction, an approach to the phenomena of life, and even a poetics.[1]

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The emergence of a literary tendency is never simply a matter of choices made by individual authors in search of a distinctive style. Rather it is a matter of shifts that take place as a consequence of changes in the cultural attitudes of an era. Life in Central Europe in the two decades following the Revolution of 1956 was marked by a number of circumstances and contradictions that themselves seemed to tend towards the Grotesque. For instance, there was tension between consumer practices and people's everyday survival strategies, not to mention the ambiguous assessment of the Stalinist era and the loss of all faith in the official ideology. Urbanization, which brought with it greater social mobility and a greater sense of social security, made it possible or at least easier for a raw kind of individualism to emerge that implied an ironic distance from tradition and even culture. The institutions of political power, however, did their best to hamper the development of any kind of open, autonomous thinking, and reform efforts sufficed to do little more than clarify the limits set by state power. The Grotesque began to emerge in the literature that focused on the problems of the individual personality in part because the people of the era were caught in the trap of belated modernization, which narrowed the notion of personal freedom to the formula of "individuality," without, however, social autonomy.

It is thus hardly incidental that in the two decades following the Revolution of 1956 a pleiad of authors of Grotesque literature gained prominence in Central Europe, indicating one of the possible paths of artistic innovation. One might well think of Polish authors Sławomir Mrożek and Tadeusz Różewicz, or the Czech Bohumil Hrabal, Milan Kundera and Václav Havel, but one could find examples in each of the national literatures of the region. In their works the Grotesque figures as a mix of tragic and comic. This is not simply a juxtaposition of the classic "comic blunder" and the "tragic flaw," since in the Grotesque both tragedy and comedy lose their unequivocal connotations and undermine each other's self-evidence. Elements of the Grotesque are incorporated into the works in an ambiguous manner such that neither the tragic nor the comic is ever absent. Furthermore, one should distinguish the Grotesque from other literary devices. Irony is a more general quality than the Grotesque, while the Absurd is narrower. Satire tends to offer a clear point of reference from which to assess the events and characters, while the Grotesque lacks any kind of self-assured perspective (the assertion of any such perspective can only be the interpretive work of the reader).

The notion of a literary "trend" suggests an assortment of works with common themes and structures.[2] In the case of the Grotesque, the most

1 ■ For an analysis of the notion of the Grotesque and the literary trend see Tamás Berkes. *Senki sem fog nevetni: Groteszk irányzat a hatvanas évek közép- és kelet-európai irodalmában* ["No One Will Laugh: The Grotesque As Trend in the 1960s in the Literature of East-Central Europe"]. Budapest: Gondolat Kiadó, 1990, 13-29.

2 ■ Endre Bojtár. *A kelet-európai avantgarde irodalom* ["The Avant-Garde Literature of Eastern Europe"]. Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1977, 9-31.

prominent common structural element is perhaps alogism. The perturbation of logical understandings is evident on every level in the Grotesque, including character, style, setting, and the passage of time. Another common feature is that, with very few exceptions, the character sketches are shockingly flat. This, however, is natural, for the Grotesque world view, a balance between the tragic and the comic, is best expressed in "stills," there can be little or no development. The tragicomic, one could say, is a process, while the Grotesque is a snapshot. Tragicomedy makes you laugh and cry at the same time, while the Grotesque freezes the smiles on your face. This is why one rarely finds Grotesque narratives that could be described as novels, since the novel tends to center around plot and character development. Russian author Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* (1967)[3] is an exception or perhaps borderline case, as are the Czech Karel Čapek's *War with the Newts* (1936) and Josef Škvorecký's *The Cowards* (1958), since these novels each contain a motif that gestures outwards, away from the wax-work figures of the Grotesque.

It would be a mistake, however, to contend that each and every composition of Örkény's kindred spirits belong to the Grotesque. The trend is comprised not of oeuvres, but of individual literary works that can be compared and contrasted (and grouped into "tendencies") on the basis of their generic and structural elements. It is worth noting that like Mrożek, Örkény wrote enduring works of literature in three genres of the Grotesque: short prose, Absurd drama, and longer works that interrogate the coherence of national histories.

In this context Örkény's career is distinctive in part simply because as a manner of perceiving and casting the world, the Grotesque is almost entirely foreign to the Hungarian literary canon, in contrast with Polish and Czech literature (with the possible exception of Frigyes Karinthy [1887-1938] and the coffeehouse literature of the first half of the twentieth century). In the early 1940s Örkény had already struck an ironic tone that had Grotesque overtones, but this remained stifled for some two decades because of the prevailing circumstances. As a fellow-traveler communist who had done forced labor and been held as a prisoner of war, he tended towards the literary ideal of Socialist Realism, adapting to the cultural policy of the Stalinist regime. He then became part of the writers' opposition accused of laying the intellectual foundations of the Revolution of 1956, and after the suppression of the Revolution he was excluded from literary life. In his years of forced withdrawal, his ambitions and vision as a writer matured, and as of the late 1960s some of his works began to win worldwide acclaim. At some 50 years of age he returned to the Grotesque and frivolous narratives of his youth, building in part on his experiences of the war and of Stalinism. He was able to do this in part because

3 ■ The dates in parentheses refer to the publications in the original.

in the meantime censorship had relaxed somewhat (in the early 1960s he had trouble publishing works, and his first Grotesque pieces were received with outrage by the official organs of literary life), but also because his artistic sensitivities were ideally suited to the hidden inner workings of the decade, a time at which absurd and torturous contradictions were consigned to the sphere of the unspeakable. Essentially three factors made it possible for Örkény to succeed, in the end, as a writer: his unique disposition, the relaxation of censorship and the consequential opportunities to publish, and the social and psychological peculiarities of the time.

Regarding the genres of the Grotesque, Örkény's kindred souls tended to prefer the short prose narrative. These "single-motif" stories were particularly popular in the early 1960s. Most of them deal with the stumblings of common people as they lose their footing while navigating the scenes and backdrops of everyday life. They lose their balance, and as they misstep, the orderliness of everyday life is overturned. In one of Mrożek's early stories, the director of a zoo uses an inflatable rubber elephant to cut costs. The personnel, weary of pumping the elephant full of air, use the gas-tap to finish the job. As a group of school children stares at the enormous animal, hanging on the teacher's every word (who is speaking of the elephant's tremendous weight), the great balloon suddenly begins to rise above the gaping crowd and drift away. As a kind of epilogue of this moral fable, the children will become hooligans, guzzle vodka, and break windows. The distorting lens of the Grotesque makes routine lies and even terrifying occurrences laughable. The Czech author Karel Michal's heroes in *Everyday Spooks* (1961) find themselves face to face with various creatures of the imagination, including phantoms, imps, and talking cats. The absence of values is revealed on the plane of the fantastic. A dead cat is thrown into the apartment of a journalist, and he speaks, which one would not expect even of a living cat. Furthermore, he cannot conjugate verbs properly and frequently uses the second-person singular instead of the first-person singular. Anyone who speaks to the cat begins to feel schizophrenic. The characters of the satirical short story think for a moment that in his second-person answers the cat is expressing their thoughts, then suddenly come to their senses and distance themselves from the animal's dangerous utterances. In Michal's stories false halos shimmering above the everyday person's head are shattered. When the hero blunders, the narrow-minded, paltry, conservative, even drunkard personality of the average citizen rises to the fore.

In this context it is quite clear that the Grotesque short prose of the early 1960s took form on the border of Satire or the tragicomic. This was the case with Örkény as well, who of course did not begin writing Grotesque narratives from one day to the next. When he began to publish again in 1962, his first narratives were remarkably varied. An experimental tone and a technique of omission and insinuation blend in them with the flat descriptive style and the

stylized portrayal of character.[4] The first new collection of stories, *Jeruzsálem hercegnője* ("The Princess of Jerusalem," 1966), includes both traditional and Grotesque tales, as well as the first cycle of one-minute stories. Its principal strength is the ironic distance that enwraps the meaning, the "message" of the text in the cold style of objectivity. As Tamás Ungváry notes, Örkény never figures as the narrator: "his characters speak about themselves; that the author would 'recount' a tale about them is impossible."[5] *Nászutasok a légypapíron* ("Honeymooners on Flypaper," 1967) acquaints the reader with the new Örkény in his entirety. There is much less retrospection, the Grotesque depiction is unswerving. It is interesting to wonder what it might have been that prompted this shift in his prose, apparently sudden but clearly the result of years of maturation, a shift in which the discovery and development of the Grotesque played a central role.

Örkény was no theoretician, and he never devised any kind of coherent theory of the Grotesque, but in interviews and in notes he jotted down he gave explanations of his approach, which had become a way of seeing the world.[6] The interviews were done much later, however, than the works to which he referred in the course of the chats, and it can be difficult to determine the extent to which they were colored by the lens of recollection. He was able to become familiar with the works of kindred Central European writers only "on the way," as it were, so it would be misleading to speak of any direct influence. If one wishes to consider possible promptings, it would be worthwhile to mention some of the events of literary life at the time. Örkény was one of the many writers who were influenced by the rediscovery underway at the time of the works of Franz Kafka, and the literary journals in Hungary at the time were also beginning to write on Wolfgang Kayser's monograph on the subject, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature* (originally published in German in 1957).[7] In 1965 Hungarian literary historian Endre Bojtár wrote an article in the widely read journal *Kritika* ("Critique") on the new generation of Czech authors of the Grotesque. Bojtár was the first person to introduce audiences in Hungary to the early works of authors such as Hrabal, Havel, and Škvorecký.[8] All signs suggest that Örkény developed his literary style spontaneously, even

4 ■ Péter Szirák. *Örkény István: Pályakép* ["Istvan Örkény: A Monograph"]. Budapest: Palatinus, 2008, 156-178.

5 ■ Tamás Ungvári. "Egy modern elbeszélő: Örkény István novellái" ["A Modern Narrator: The Short Stories of István Örkény"]. *Új Írás*, 11, 1966, 119.

6 ■ István Örkény. *Párbeszéd a groteszkről: Beszélgetések Örkény Istvánnal* ["Dialogue on the Grotesque: Conversations with István Örkény"]. Budapest: Magvető, 1981.

7 ■ Wolfgang Kayser. *Das Groteske: Seine Gestaltung in Malerei und Dichtung*. Oldenburg/Hamburg: Gerhard Stalling Verlag, 1957. See György Walkó. "Könyv a 'groteszk'-ről" ["Book on the 'Grotesque'"]. *Világirodalmi Figyelő*, 3, 1958, 271-274 and Péter Pór. "A groteszk és története" ["The Grotesque and Its History"]. *Filológiai Közlöny*, 1-2, 1965, 253-264.

8 ■ Endre Bojtár. "A groteszk a mai cseh irodalomban" ["The Grotesque in Czech Literature of Today"]. *Kritika*, 10, 1965, 27-34.

instinctively, as if happening upon the Grotesque in the privacy of his own study without having any knowledge whatsoever of what he had discovered. This is illustrated perhaps the most clearly by the fact that "Ballada a költészet hatalmáról" ("Ballad on the Magic of Poetry"), one of his finest short stories, which inclines strongly towards the fantastic and the Grotesque, was published in 1956 in *Ludas Matyi*,[9] but it took years before the Grotesque began to dominate in his short prose works. In order for the Grotesque to permeate his work as it came to do, he needed the budding discourse on the Grotesque and the general influence of the other literatures of the region.

The Grotesque short story, however, is not yet a one-minute story. The one-minute story was Örkény's most significant literary innovation, and it is unique in the literatures of Central Europe. (Only the Polish Andrzej Bursa and the Czech Miloš Macourek have come close). One-minute stories are distinct from Grotesque short stories not simply because they are short. Örkény dismantles and reduces to a minimum the generic elements of epic story-telling and essentially shelves the narration of plot. "Some 12 years ago I turned off the path of epic prose," he commented in 1970, "as a kind of uprising against the hegemony of explanation. It was not first and foremost as a writer that I rose up against the recounting of everything, the detailed description of setting, the portrayal of character from head to toe, but rather as a reader."[10] The events of the one-minute stories do not recount a single, unified story. The fragmented prose is a crucible of opinion, palpable thought, and palpable philosophy. Unlike the traditional conclusion of a tale, the closing line, sometimes almost a punch line, more often than not is absurd. It elevates the short story to the level of the abstract, but symbolically and with an intense grimace.[11]

Of Örkény's works for the stage, *Tóték* (*The Toth Family*, 1967)[12] and *Pisti a vérzivatarban* ("Pisti in the Bloodshed," 1972)[13] can unquestionably be considered part of his turn towards the Grotesque in the 1960s. Both share many affinities with works of prominent authors of other national literary traditions

9 ■ A Satirical weekly that was published between 1945 and 1992. It was named after *Ludas Matyi* ("Mattie the Goose-Boy"), an 1804 epic poem written by Mihály Fazekas that was based on a folk tale.
10 ■ István Örkény. *Párbeszéd a groteszkről: Beszélgetések Örkény Istvánnal* ["Dialogue on the Grotesque: Conversations with István Örkény"], 101.
11 ■ See Tamás Berkes. "Örkény groteszk pályafordulata" ["The Turn towards the Grotesque in the Career of Örkény"]. *A magyar irodalom története*i. Vol. III. Ed. Mihály Szegedy-Maszák and András Veres. Budapest: Gondolat, 2007, 564-572.
12 ■ *Tóték* was published first as a story in *Nászutasok a légypapíron* in 1967. Örkény dramatized it in the same year.
13 ■ Clara Györgyey uses the title "Stevie in the Bloodbath: A Grotesque Play in Two Parts" in her 1990 translation, published in István Örkény, György Spiró, and Mihály Kornis. *A Mirror to the Cage: Three Contemporary Hungarian Plays*. Edited and translated by Clara Györgyey. Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1993.

of the region. *Tótèk* is a good example of how the presence of elements of the Absurd alone hardly exhausts the concept of the Absurd drama. This Grotesque work follows a traditional pattern, as there is one dramatic conflict in the center of the linear and unified plot. In the case of *Pisti in the Bloodshed*, one finds all of the formal accoutrements of the Absurd drama: the mosaic-like plot, which is constructed out of shivers and shards, is a collective autobiography, in so far as it interprets basic dramatic situations. History appears in forms of behavior.

The elevation of the Grotesque and the Absurd drama of Central Europe to the level of social, historical, and political parables distinguishes them from the Grotesque and the Absurd drama of the West. For Mrożek, Havel, and Örkény the Absurd is not a matter of the metaphysical questions of human existence, but rather the product of social mechanisms. The Central European version of the Grotesque and the Absurd bears affinities with the Western trend, but it is different in significant ways. They share the theme of alienation, but their principal similarity lies in formal and artistic structure. The Absurd is, first and foremost, a kind of logic. It is not based on causal relationships, but it has its own internal consistency. Its logic is unbelievable in the extreme, but in principle not unintelligible. The inversions of logic are made possible through the deformation of language. An Absurd work of literature or art builds on the confusion and disturbance of communication in general, and some such works deal almost exclusively with this. They demythicize and expose prejudices, mythologies, and ideologies that cloak and distort reality. But this similarity is more formal than anything else. The Irish Avant-garde author Samuel Beckett parodies redemption, while Mrożek parodies the ideology of power and national ideals. The Western version is abstractly symbolic, while the Central European version maintains its ties to the concrete. It bears the clearest resemblance to the Grotesque comedies of the Swiss author and playwright Friedrich Dürrenmatt.

One finds a similar difference in the thematization of language. While Eugène Ionesco demolishes petrified clichés of language because they obscure any possibility of experiencing manifold life, the falseness of language in Havel refers to clearly discernible social relations and interactions. The real hero of Havel's *Garden Party* (1963) is the empty (or emptied), platitudinous language that crushes the individual. However, through the proliferation of commonplaces the play derides the intertwinings of the machinery of communism and the worst of petty bourgeois tradition. The dogmatic apparatus and the philistine share a common "platform": they both cling to schemas and empty linguistic formulas. The protagonist assimilates the language of the official apparatus so perfectly that he begins to rise to the height of power, and in the end terminates the Liquidation Office. These examples give a sense of how, while the Absurd in the West has always been more a philosophical stance, in Central Europe it is more

political. In the West the Absurd inclines towards disarming distress, while in Central Europe there is the subdued sound of liberating laughter. The reader, understanding the situation, rejects the world that is portrayed.

Not counting the antecedents during the interwar period, the first Grotesque drama of Central Europe was Mrożek's *The Police* (1958). The play is set in a fictive dictatorship, where the police are so efficient that every last one of the political prisoners gives a profession of allegiance. The police chief then tells one of his men to play the part of the enemy, a role with which he comes to identify so thoroughly that in the end he becomes a revolutionary. Mrożek simplifies everything to a logical level and creates a complex conceptual structure, stretching his passion for analysis to the limits of absurdity. He is not concerned with metaphysical perspectives, but rather hierarchies among people. Many have compared his drama to *The Great Wig* (1965); a play by Slovak author Peter Karvaš in which the bald are identified as the enemies of the system, but with the exception of the protagonist everyone loses their hair and those who wear wigs rule. The protagonist, the only person who actually has hair, is sentenced to death as an agent of baldness, but following the revolution of the baldies he is executed anyway because he does not change sides and become loyal to the new regime.

Mrożek crowned his early dramas with *Tango* (1964), perhaps the most important composition of the Polish drama of the time. The play is a Grotesque recasting of the philosophy of history that bitterly parodies the classical line of the Polish national tradition. If one were to attempt to reimagine this work, which both bemoans the rupture of the national tradition and at the same time rejects it, as part of the Hungarian canon, one would have to envision a play that, building on allusions to József Katona's *Bánk Bán* (*The Viceroy*, 1819) and Imre Madách's *Az ember tragédiája* (*The Tragedy of Man*, 1861), pronounces the most hallowed ideals of the Romantic heritage useless without, however, sparing Avant-garde Modernism. It is perhaps not an exaggeration to claim that there is some affinity between *Tango* and *Pisti a vérzivatarban*. Örkény's ultimate question refers to the notion of a collective Hungarian "personality," embodied by the manifold characters of Pisti. Is this collective Hungarian character simply Pisti, or the transformation of Pisti (the nickname for István) into the heroic István? Örkény's play raises the literary question of remaining moral despite the circumstances, and according to many critics also conjures the referential world of Madách's *Az ember tragédiája*. But he gives an answer similar to that of Mrożek: "but how are we supposed to give new life to something that never existed?" ❧

Translated by Thomas Cooper

Magdolna Jákfalvi

Pisti in the Bloodshed

Stage History

"We not only live close to each other, we have kindred tastes, humors, rhythms, the many woes and joys of our lives so far are kindred."[1]

István Örkény would have turned 101 this year, as would director Zoltán Várkonyi. At the height of their careers they were both stars of the system as acclaimed creators of major films, great books, and legendary performances. Born only a few days apart, they lived a few houses away from each other, died a few months apart, and even composed their last work for the theater together, *Pisti a vérzivatarban* ("Pisti in the Bloodshed").[2]

The careers of Örkény and Várkonyi, artists whose lives bore so many similarities, offer insights into the sociology of artistic composition under state

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1 ■ István Örkény's letter to Zoltán Várkonyi on 3 April, 1976. National Széchényi Library, SzT Fond 27, Documents of Zoltán Várkonyi.

2 ■ Clara Györgyey uses the title "Stevie in the Bloodbath: A Grotesque Play in Two Parts" in her 1990 translation, published in István Örkény, György Spiró, and Mihály Kornis. *A Mirror to the Cage: Three Contemporary Hungarian Plays.* Edited and translated by Clara Györgyey. Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1993.

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socialism. Furthermore, they constitute revealing examples of the intricate and at times contradictory processes whereby dramatic works were brought to the stage. In the history of the Hungarian theater, *Pisti* can be regarded both as a classic that has undergone reinterpretations and an experimental, Avant-garde composition. The eleven premieres that were held over the course of 34 years were met with a quiet but consistently enthusiastic reception, and along with Várkonyi, other innovative directors, including László Babarczy, Pál Mácsai, and later László Marton, demonstrated through their productions that the challenges of dramatic art reach beyond the horizons of the aesthetics of the theater. Örkény spent more time writing *Pisti* than he did any other individual play, and similarly Várkonyi spent more time working on it as director than he did on any other production. This process, which spanned some ten years, was documented, sometimes openly, and it developed into a curious kind of opus with a dramatic structure of its own.

The play itself, or more precisely the version published in 1972, consists of scenes that resemble the stations of a confused, sometimes interrupted journey. The protagonist, Pisti, is broken into four different characters, a kind of "main character" and three other "Pistis," who embody individual characteristics that are, according to the stage directions for the drama, "sometimes positive, sometimes less positive": Energetic Pisti, Diffident Pisti, and Reserved Pisti. The storyline unfolds through a series of scenes that are held together by the cultural traditions of the Everyman-motif.[3] The Everyman character is generally challenged by the allegorical figures of good and evil, although in Örkény's writing these very categories elude definition, or rather they are represented by the multiple characters of Pisti.

The period between 1969 and 1979 bore witness to a continuous shift in Örkény's play and Várkonyi's approach to stage directing. This was an unusual phenomenon in the history of Hungarian theater, as it involved not the revision or dramatic rethinking of a controversial composition that had become part of the national canon, but rather the continuous rewriting and dramatic re-envisioning of a play that took a decade to reach its final form. The second volume of the 1982 edition of Örkény's plays[4] contains all of the various versions and revisions, edited scenes, and letters written to theater directors, creating a number of perspectives from which to interpret the play in the context of literary history and the history of the theater. Várkonyi's production constitutes the culmination of the conceptual experiments he conducted over the course of these ten years, beginning with actor Zoltán Latinovits in the leading role (though Latinovits died before the play was performed) and concluding with Dezső Garas.

3 ■ Péter Szirák. *Örkény István.* Budapest: Palatinus, 2008, 291.

4 ■ István Örkény. *Drámák* ["Dramas"]. Vol. II. Ed. Zsuzsa Radnóti. Budapest: Szépirodalmi Kiadó, 1982, 559-726.

Indeed the history of the performances of the play presents scholars of the theater with an intriguing sequence of events. The mechanisms, strategies, and motives behind the decisions of the state concerning official attitudes towards works of art are usually studied on the basis of samizdat publications, as are the various strategies and ruses used by authors and artists to avoid coming into direct conflict with the authorities. Often the inventiveness of a samizdat composition captivated readerships and audiences and secured the work a place in public memory. Cultural historians have shown more interest in the Squat Theater of Péter Halász or the exhibitions of György Galántai held in the Chapel Studio (a chapel in the town of Balatonboglár where Galántai organized exhibitions of Avant-garde art, which at the time was politically risky, between 1970 and 1973) than they have in Várkonyi's productions. One might be tempted to conclude that this is in part simply because the historical narratives of these figures of art and theater in Hungary have been easier to write given the meticulously detailed reports that were submitted to the authorities by informants of the state. Yet works that were regarded, at least initially, as acceptable by the state were no less subject to manipulation or interference, but the mechanisms of this interference are more difficult to study. Decisions to ban a composition were documented, as were the explanations for these decisions. In contrast, while there is a plethora of sources on the performances of dramas (for instance) that were deemed acceptable by the government, the actual discussions[5] on the terms and conditions of including them as part of the "official" canon were never or only rarely written down.

Alongside the predictable routines of the exercise of government power, there were also almost untraceable intrigues in the everyday life of the state-supported theaters, as was noted by prominent personalities of the era in the 2013 series of talks entitled *Színházcsinálók* ("Theater Makers"), organized by József Katona Theater and Krétakör ("Chalk Circle," which from its founding in 1995 to 2008 was an independent theater and then became an artistic center and production studio) and chaired by Árpád Schilling (the founder of Krétakör). An examination of the changes made by Örkény to the text of the play over the course of the years offers insights into the contexts in which both a playwright and other contributors to a production worked. Furthermore, it may also shed light on the processes, which for the most part involved oral channels of communication, underlying the decisions to ban performances of a particular play, whether permanently or temporarily. For *Pisti* at first was banned. Vígszínház ("Comedy Theater") had wanted to perform it in 1969, immediately after its composition,

5 ■ László Rajk. "Amikor a folyó belelép, ahelyett, hogy lábjegyzetben maradna..." ["When the River Surges In, Instead of Remaining in a Footnote..."]. *Művészet és hatalom: A Kádár-korszak művészete* ["Art and Power: Art in the Kádár Era"]. Ed. Tamás Kisantal and Anna Menyhért. Budapest: József Attila Kör—L'Harmattan, 2005, 80.

Photograph by Éva Kocsis

Pisti in the Bloodshed. *(1979)*
Directed by Zoltán Várkonyi. Pesti Színház.
Scene from the Performance

but the censors only gave permission for studio performances (founded in 1896, Vígszínház is one of the oldest theaters in Budapest). This was soon revoked, however, and in 1971 an issue of a literary journal that would have included the script was stopped at press. When it finally made it to the stage in 1979 under Várkonyi's direction, the drama was a resounding success, and it was performed over 100 times.

Since in the case of *Pisti*, the parallel growth of the play and the performance is well-documented in the correspondence between Örkény and Várkonyi, one can relatively easily trace the evolution of the production. Örkény rewrote several scenes and Várkonyi developed further ideas for staging the drama, as becomes evident from Örkény's replies, included in the 1982 edition of the play. Furthermore, they not only revised their original concepts of the performance, but also seized every opportunity to publicize their work in tabloids and in various organs of the press. Várkonyi, for instance, requested official permission to put the work on stage every season, but at the same time he occasionally aired the details of the proposed performance and the possible roles of the actors of Vígszínház in organs of the press. Örkény was interviewed several times by *Film Színház Muzsika* ("Film, Theater, and Music"), and sometimes Latinovits and Mária Sulyok, stars of the Hungarian theater and film world, appeared in *Esti Hírlap* ("Evening Herald") or *Hétfői Hírek* ("Monday News"). It is worth noting that in 1969 the director of Vígszínház was Lajos Lenkei, who, before his appointment to the position in 1962, had been the editor-in-chief of *Film Színház Muzsika*.

As editor of the volume published in 1982, Zsuzsa Radnóti, a dramaturge of Vígszínház and Örkény's widow, made the notable decision to publish the 1969 and 1982 scripts of *Pisti* at the same time, thereby suggesting that they represented two different plays. She included public documents and private correspondence in the volume. It is worth emphasizing that we are speaking of 1982, in other words a period in which archives were closed and nothing was known about the work of (for instance) Péter Molnár Gál (who served as an agent of the regime in the world of the theater under the name Róbert Luzsnyánszky). It was difficult for people to have any clear sense of the interactions between the organs of power and institutions of culture, yet

Örkény's rewritings in and of themselves suggest his familiarity with and understanding of the mechanisms and expectations of the regime.

And indeed the structure of the volume seems to make one thing clear: Örkény himself triggered a kind of interpretive tradition with this dramaturgical conspiracy, deliberately writing and rewriting the various versions over a long period of time in a manner that could not possibly fail to draw the decision makers' attention to the very process of revision. From 1969 on, he inundated Várkonyi's and Lenkei's mailboxes with a dozen different versions of the script, thereby shifting the ideological debate, whether intentionally or not, from literary Realism to a more practical debate on the role of dramaturgy.

Pisti can be seen even as a blunt attempt to address ideological issues. In a 1969 letter dated 27 October, Örkény wrote to Lenkei, commenting that, "[m]y play is open and direct in its speech, and the director could even display the year at the beginning of every scene for the sake of slower audiences if he wished. Thus no one could think of ulterior motives."[6] This straight talk was characteristic of Hungarian theater events in the 1970s, if not of the Socialist Realism of major theaters then of the (Neo-)Avant-garde theatrical productions. The earliest Hungarian happenings were characterized by the same straight talk,[7] and they were routinely banned because of this. Neither Örkény nor Várkonyi could easily follow or influence the laws governing the practices of censorship and banning, because they witnessed the process not from the periphery of the cultural milieu, like members of Avant-garde circles, but from the perspective of people who were playing shaping roles in one of the major state-supported theaters. It is difficult not to conclude that *Pisti* was banned at least in part because of the unusual dramaturgy and the use of Avant-garde forms of expression in a theater that was in the end an institution of the state.

Critics at the time characterized the ideological precariousness of the play, which was allegedly a consequence of structural weakness, as a grave flaw. The staging was not sufficient, in their assessment, to mold a coherent dramatic text out of the collection of scenes. In 1979, celebrated economic historian Iván T. Berend (who served as President of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences from 1985 until 1990 and now is a member of the faculty at the University of California, Los Angeles) defended the play, contending that Várkonyi's directing gave it dramatic unity. Berend used terms from the fine arts to describe *Pisti*, comparing the performance to the Pointillism of Georges Seurat: "*Pisti* radiates a magic that is broken into points and colors, yet still a unity, irregular, erratic, grotesque and distorted, and still real."[8] As a historian,

6 ■ István Örkény. *Drámák* ["Dramas"], 586.
7 ■ Magdolna Jákfalvi. "Beszéd" ["Talk"]. *Avantgárd–színház–politika.* ["Avant-Garde—Theater—Politics"]. Budapest: Balassi, 2006, 188.
8 ■ István Örkény. *Drámák* ["Dramas"], 570.

Berend sought to discern elements of "reality" and defend Örkény in his comments regarding the scene on the bank of the Danube, a reference to the Jews shot into the river by Arrow Cross soldiers during the Second World War (the Arrow Cross Party, in Hungarian the "Nyilaskeresztes Párt," was in power in Hungary from 15 October, 1944 to 28 March, 1945 and ordered numerous atrocities, in particular the mass murder of Hungarian Jews who had survived earlier deportations). It is precisely the "perspective on history" that can be easily misread in the published texts of Örkény's play because of the technique dubbed "open dramaturgy,"[9] but in the performances it is unmistakable. Berend's lengthy analysis gave legitimacy to the performances of the actors who played the parts of Pisti (alongside Garas, Géza Tordy, Gyula Szombathy, and Péter Balázs), whose interpretations clearly imply that the clichés of Realism yield nothing but works of mundane Historicism, while Örkény's scenes distanced the play from these petrified forms. The scene in which the murderer joins the group of victims and gives the order to fire may seem implausible if one is reading the script, but Várkonyi's directing captures the uncertainty, hesitation, and at the same time the resolution and rigidity in a counterpoint of performances that can only be understood as the dramatic interplay of four different voices. Várkonyi manages to embody in a single, four-bodied character the victims and the butchers of the Second World War.

Örkény plays quite inventively with the multiplicity of voices by varying the character and, indeed, using four characters of Pisti over the course of the decade in question and playing with the interpretive reflexes of Realism and its stubborn insistence, even in the case of works that patently incline towards the Absurd, on seeking meaning through "identification" with a "protagonist."[10] But to no avail, for the reception of the theater premiere of *Pisti* in 1979, very much like the reception of the literary narrative in 1972, was still centered around the search for Marxist aesthetics, the authenticity of Realism, and reflections of "reality." The absence of this ideological construct was interpreted as a flaw, with no consideration of the possibility that the playwright and the director were working in an aesthetically and politically different register.

Consequently, the reception history of *Pisti* reads a bit like a grotesque dialogue between Pál Pándi on the one hand, who describes the play as a failure in a review published in the journal *Kritika* ("Critique")[11] in defense of the ideology of state socialism, and Gábor Szigethy on the other,[12] who toned

9 ■ Tamás Koltai. "Pisti kuzdj..." ["Pisti, Don't Give Up!"]. *Színház* ["Theater"], 4, 1979, 11.
10 ■ Péter P. Müller. *Drámaforma és nyilvánosság: A magyar dráma alakulása Örkény Istvántól Nádas Péterig* ["Dramatic Form and the Public: Evolution of Hungarian Drama from István Örkény to Péter Nádas"]. Budapest: Argumentum, 1997, 44.
11 ■ István Örkény. *Drámák* ["Dramas"], 565-566.
12 ■ István Örkény. *Drámák* ["Dramas"], 564-565.

down the verdict in his article in *Népszabadság* ("Freedom of the People"), contending simply that Pisti's character fails to grasp "the call of history." There have been replies to these reviews by people like Berend and Anna Földes, who claimed that the play portrays the absurdity of the "real" world and therefore represents a kind of Realism. Földes argues that the Grotesque is a depiction of reality.[13] In her 2006 *Örkény a színpadon* ("Örkény on Stage"), in which she compiles a list of Örkény's dramatic works, Földes defends him from the precepts of Realism, making frequent use of the terms "authentic" and "valid" to characterize his use of the Grotesque. She even goes so far as to compare *Pisti* to one of the canonical works of nineteenth-century Hungarian drama, Imre Madách's *The Tragedy of Man* (*Az ember tragédiája*, 1861).

Critics who attempted to salvage the play from the attacks of ideologically motivated reviews tended to rely on this kind of reference to an earlier canonical work, in spite of the fact that the differences between Madách's play and *Pisti* are arguably more striking than any alleged affinity.[14] Each of the two plays consists of scenes that can be said to represent stations in a journey, but with the work-in-progress technique Örkény began to move in the direction of the docudrama. Furthermore, Várkonyi also experimented with documentary forms for the theater, but for whatever reason critics and regular theater-goers in Hungary at the end of the 1970s still linked the play to the traditions of nineteenth-century drama instead of contemporary European theater. However, Várkonyi's and Örkény's collaborative work is far more evocative of the style of Peter Handke and the German attitude towards responsibility in general than it is of the poetic ethics of Madách. It is perhaps also worth noting that in the 1970s authors like Sławomir Mrożek and Eugène Ionesco often raised the question of dramatic identity by using a technique involving multiple identities. Their works were neither published nor performed in Hungary, but nonetheless the similarities bear mention as they could be characterized as symptoms of a Zeitgeist that stretched across national borders.

Explaining his hesitations to Károly Kazimir, the director of the Thália Theater who enjoyed remarkable success with his staging of Örkény's *Tóték* (*The Toth Family*, 1967),[15] Örkény contended that *Pisti* was not meant for Vígszínház.[16] In all likelihood he was thinking of the potentially controversial aspects of the play. However, in part because of his desire to work together with Latinovits and Radnóti, Örkény nonetheless opted for Vígszínház. But over the course of the ten years spent preparing for the performance Latinovits

13 ■ Anna Földes. *Örkény a színpadon* ["Örkény on Stage"]. Budapest: Palatinus, 2006.
14 ■ Péter Szirák. *Örkény István*, 290.
15 ■ *Tóték* was published first as a story in *Nászutasok a légypapíron* in 1967. Örkény dramatized it in the same year.
16 ■ István Örkény. *Drámák* ["Dramas"], 585-586.

died and Sulyok, who played the role of Rizi, retired. Indeed, the whole company of Vígszínház changed. Director-in-chief Várkonyi, however, remained, and indeed was promoted to the position of theater director. Both Várkonyi and Örkény were in their late fifties at the beginning of the *Pisti*-project, when they attempted to bring an entirely new dramatic form to a theater that was ensconced in mainstream performance traditions.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ÉVA HORVAT

Pisti in the Bloodshed. *(1979)*
Directed by Zoltán Várkonyi. Pesti Színház.
Scene from the Performance

In the reception history of *Pisti* two actors were to play prominent roles that have continued to exert an influence on various interpretations and new stagings. The first was Hilda Gobbi, who, following the decision of Sulyok to retire, was cast in the part of Rizi, a sort of prophetess in the play, who can hear the voice of God. Gobbi and Várkonyi were old friends and had worked together as colleagues in the Nemzeti Színház ("National Theater") under the directorship of Antal Németh. They had both also played roles as cultural ideologists in a team of five during the brief coalition period of the early post-war years, and Gobbi was godmother to Várkonyi's son. The decision to have Gobbi, who was regarded as a "heavyweight realist,"[17] play the part of Rizi constituted something of a performative act in and of itself. Her embodiment of the part was as distinct on stage as Rizi's sense of time is from that of the other characters. By casting her in the role, Várkonyi made Rizi a Realist oracle, a unified figure alongside the fragmented plurality of the four Pistis.

17 ■ Péter György. "Várkonyi Zoltán: Finom avant-garde és ideológiai konstrukciók" ["Zoltán Várkonyi: Subtle Avant-Garde and Ideological Constructions"]. *Várkonyi 100: Tanulmányok Várkonyi Zoltánról* ["Várkonyi at 100: Studies on Zoltán Várkonyi"]. Ed. Magdolna Jákfalvi. Budapest: Balassi, 2013, 22.

Gobbi's career was that of an engaged, politically motivated actress, whose performance in the first scene of the second act in 1979 was as powerful as her performances in the spring of 1945 as a leading figure of the so-called Szabadság-matiné ("Liberty Matinee," formed in January 1945, when the building of the National Theater on Blaha Lujza Square in Budapest lay in ruins). Her presence in the cast and her career as an actress who openly espoused political causes unquestionably lent a sense of authenticity to certain aspects of the play and provided a possible defense against critics who faulted Örkény for the lack of Realism. Rizi cannot be likened to the figure of Lucifer in Madách's *Tragedy of Man,* because the old woman as performed by Gobbi embodies knowledge won through experience, not the certainty of the "chosen" Romantic figure who belongs to a sphere above mere mortals.

Gobbi simultaneously used the power of gestures of Bertolt Brecht's political theater and the "magic if" approach of Konstantin Stanislavsky's School. Her character is last in the line of the condemned in the scene on the bank of the Danube, facing the audience on her knees in a black cocktail dress and white apron, wearing a white headband. Everyone bids farewell to life by murmuring the Lord's Prayer while Arrow Cross men shoot them in the head in a steady rhythm. The spotlight moves to this rhythm from victim to victim as the doomed utter the prayer, "hallowed be Thy name" and, later, "lead us not into temptation." When the spotlight falls on Gobbi, the audience hears her praying in Hebrew. The light focuses for a moment on her for effect and the Hebrew farewell lingers in the auditorium for several minutes. Várkonyi adjusted the performance to center around her tremendous power as an actress. Her performance was clearly moving to actor and director Mácsai. In his production of the play, which was put on in 1992 in Madách Kamara Színház ("Madách Studio Theatre," today the Örkény Theater), Gobbi's voice, and nothing but her voice, fills the space for two hours during the performance.

The second actor to exert a palpable influence on the reception and later interpretations of the drama was Garas in the role of Diffident Pisti. After the death of Latinovits, Várkonyi realized that although young actor Tordy of the Vígszínház company could play one of the figures of Pisti, his performance alone would not have sufficient presence on stage to carry the drama. He decided on Garas, another guest actor of the 1979 production, for the role of Diffident Pisti.[18] Garas was employed by Mafilm (Mafilm Hungarian Film Studios) as an actor in 1979, and by then he had already become known for his

18 ■ The archives document the evolution of Pisti as a figure who begins as a single character, then later becomes several characters, then four in the 1979 premiere, then many in 1988, and then is reduced to a single Pisti in the 1992 performance.

role as Ede Minarik in *Régi idők focija* ("Football of the Good Old Days," 1973), a film directed by Pál Sándor and set in Budapest in 1924. In Vígszínház, Garas played the character of Pisti together with Tordy, Szombathy, and Balázs, yet his dramatic talent, costume, and interpretation of his role dominated the production. This casting decision shows how Várkonyi perceived a script that had been arranged and rearranged over the course of ten years of radical dramaturgic vision and revision.

Given the prominence Garas enjoyed as an actor, Várkonyi's casting emphasized the place of the character of Diffident Pisti. One month before the premiere, however, Örkény wrote that "Garas is only good in places. Though the role is easy, an ancient theater role: the fallen, who does not dare utter a breath, the clown. It is tailored to him perfectly."[19] Similarly tailored to Garas was the costume, a jacket several sizes too small, buttoned only at the top, and short but loose-fitting pants, clothing that recalled his performance in the role of Minarik. Várkonyi gave the skinny, nimble Garas the line, "Ever since childhood I have always made a mess of myself when I eat," a confession with which he interrupts and prolongs one of the most powerful and controversial scenes of the 1979 staging, the executions on the bank of the Danube.

In a comment in his correspondance Örkény remarked that the figure of Diffident Pisti could become as much an embodiment of Garas the actor as it was a character in the play. This was to have a discernible effect on later performances. In Várkonyi's staging, Garas' performance became not a portrayal of an archetypal figure of history or the Hungarian nation, but rather a kind of *commedia dell'arte* gag. Várkonyi used Garas' talent and his familiarity to Hungarian audiences to create the character of Pisti, and the actor he put on stage was more the figure of Minarik than Madách's Ádám.

In his seminal *Postdramatic Theatre*,[20] German theater historian Hans-Thies Lehmann ventures the contention that theater since the late 1960s has shown a tendency towards a performative aesthetic that gives as much or more prominence to the site and circumstances of a performance as it does to the dramatic text. According to Lehmann, this form of theater "is categorically different from epic theatre and the epicization of fictional events" in that it gives "preference to *presence* over representation."[21] Furthermore, Lehmann contends, while the question of the political nature of the aesthetic sphere invariably touches on all the arts, in postdramatic theater the relationship between aesthetics and the political is particularly dense. Could the various

19 ■ István Örkény. *Drámák* ["Dramas"], 608.
20 ■ Hans-Thies Lehmann. *Postdramatic Theatre*. Translated by Karen Jürs-Munby. London and New York: Routledge, 2006.
21 ■ Hans-Thies Lehmann. *Postdramatic Theatre*, 109.

stagings of *Pisti* be regarded as examples of postdramatic theater, as works in which there is not mimesis so much as performance? In 1988 László Babarczy of Csiky Gergely Theater in the city of Kaposvár in southern Hungary staged the drama within the framework of video-game addiction. Characters in the drama appeared as soldiers in video games, and this gave new poignancy to the execution scene, reducing the "human" figures to machines responding in automated fashion to simple commands. In 1992 Mácsai directed a staging of *Pisti* for which Balázs Horesnyi designed the set. Horesnyi mounted images of Heroes' Square and Andrássy Avenue, prominent sites of memory in Budapest, onto screens that rested on stands of varying heights. The set restricted movement onstage, which is uncommon in modern staging, and conveyed a sense of transient traditions that have created spaces familiar but devoid of meaning. In 2004, in a staging of the drama in Vígszínház, Marton lowered the set to the orchestra pit below the stage, forcing the actors to climb up as if climbing out of trenches. Alongside Várkonyi's stagings, these innovative reinventions of the play are testimony both to the many potentials of Örkény's work and the creative freedom he gave his colleagues. Marton himself commented, "[n]ever in my career in the theater have I met a playwright who believed this much in the role and work of the director. Örkény cherished and trusted his directors because he firmly believed that in the theater the director is the person charged with the task of turning dramaturgy into poetry."[22]

Unquestionably Örkény's play, in its various incarnations, has played a significant role in prompting assessments and reassessments of the past and present. The genre of the docudrama, like works of art that have evolved over the course of a long period of time, often makes community traumas visible. Responses to performances of *Pisti* have tended to focus on the same scenes that critics called attention to following the publication of the script in 1972. The scene on the bank of the Danube, the change from Arrow Cross terror to Soviet occupation, and the coffeehouse painting of a hammer and sickle all bring to the surface traumas of Hungarian history that have not or at least had not been openly discussed. In his choice of Garas for the part of Diffident Pisti, Várkonyi assumed a stance: the character of Pisti as performed by Garas (a performance that had a defining role) was a Jewish Pisti. True, critics avoided the topic of the Holocaust and signs of anti-Semitism under state socialism, but Várkonyi's staging of Örkény's play set in motion a confrontation with the past, and the productions that have been staged over the course of the past three decades continue this work. The show trials of the 1950s, the schematism of the 1960s, and the consolidation of the 1970s are staged in the context of the theater as communal acts, and the productions begin to speak,

22 ■ László Marton. *Criticai Lapok* ["Critique News"] 3, 2006, 11.

if in varied ways, about the most stubbornly silenced trauma of Hungarian history, the Holocaust, given dramatic form in the scene of the massacre on the bank of the Danube.

In their reworkings of the drama, Örkény and Várkonyi wrote and rewrote shifts in national consciousness and the historical consciousness of state socialism. The 1979 production of *Pisti a vérzivatarban* took possession of the stage with such force that it remains a powerful interpretation today, over three decades later. A deeply disturbing staging that continues to influence more recent productions, it can be seen as the birth of new forms of theater in Hungary, the documentary theater on the one hand and the postdramatic, performative theater on the other. ❧

Translated by Lili Herczeg

Catalogue of the Incunables

in the Library and Information Centre of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (Magyar Tudományos Akadémia Könyvtár és Információs Központ) INC-MTA

Compiled by Marianne Rozsondai and Béla Rozsondai

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Viktor Horváth

Turkish Mirror

Excerpts from the novel

Efendi of the bright countenance!

Precious offspring of my offspring! You have opened this book leaning on fluffy pillows, no doubt, surrounded by rugs hanging from the walls of your room, warmed by a crackling fire, sipping a hot drink. I am writing this for you. Read it with an open heart!

I, for one, did not like books, nor did I like committing words to paper. I liked full-blooded stallions, fixing feathers to arrows, pillage and ambush; and I liked exquisite women and machines; and I cared only for catching someone on the forehead with my mace from a distance of ten feet. But now I write hoping to quell the strife within, and also so that I may salvage some colorful tiles from the grand mosaic of the Golden Age before it is smothered under a thick blanket of dust.

You will hold this story of mine in your hand (if Allah wishes that you should hold it) when I, Isa, son of Yusuf, will have been dead again for many centuries, just as I had been dead before I was ever born. For we are living in late times, Friend! I am writing these things for you in the 1007th year of Hijra or, as the

Photograph by Zsófi Rick

Viktor Horváth

was awarded the European Union Prize for Literature for emerging authors at the Frankfurt Book Fair in 2012. He received the award for his first novel, Török tükör *("Turkish Mirror," 2009), a kaleidoscope of life in Pécs during Turkish times, when the followers of Islam and Hungarian Christians lived in a symbiosis that seems to belong to the realm of fairy tales today. Horváth currently teaches poetics and medieval literature at the University of Pécs. His latest novel,* A Kis Reccs: Utaztató regény *("The Little Snap: A Novel of Travel"), was published by Jelenkor in 2012.*

Crucifix idolaters reckon, in the 1599th year after the birth of the Prophet Jesus (may He find happiness by Allah's tabouret). I am now grown very old.

I write for you of happy times, when men on earth had their dreams fulfilled through prayer, but they also worked loathsome miracles through magic.

Back then there was peace, now there is war. Back then there was summer, now there is winter. I hankered after war, and Allah gave me war; now I beg for peace, but behold, Allah will not have it. Armies are marching along muddy roads headed north and south, east and west; commanders are sending the heads of their enemies stuffed with balsam to their lords; and infernal exploding machines, inconceivable before, are born. All the pagan warriors of Frangistan have descended upon us. Satan has let loose Walloons, Germans, Frenchmen and Kozaks upon our heads, while even here, in Pécs, we need fear the men of Kanizsa galloping through the smoldering villages; and frightful news is coming from Buda, besides, which withstood the terrible siege; but when its defender, the governor of the province, rode out of the ruined city and beheld the devastated suzerainty swept by contagion, he broke into bitter tears.

We are living in evil times. But you, my reader, will be reading these stories for your edification in far happier days, when the true faith will have brought peace to all the nations of the earth once more. May Allah grant that it should come soon! For He does as He wishes.

Be of good cheer, effendi, for whoever you are, and regardless of which of God's countries you call home, you are no doubt a Muslim, for as Surah 110 of the Holy Koran prophecies:

When comes the Help of Allah, and Victory,
And thou dost see the people enter Allah's Religion in crowds,
Celebrate the praises of thy Lord, and pray for His Forgiveness:
For He is Oft-Returning in Grace and Mercy.

We shall enjoy ourselves greatly, for though the wind may whine and the storm may rage in this desolate suzerainty, I will tell you tales of spring, of a happy beginning, and of summer, the tasty fruits of the ripening of time; I will relate stories of joy and beauty, of youth and genesis and heroic adventure.

I will relate to you the adolescence of the world, the history of my ancestors as I heard it from the lips of my nurse Halima, the story of the great wars and my birth and my childhood, as I heard it from the lips of my servant Sejfi, and many wondrous things besides that I recall with my own mind; and though those things are terrible, yet the breath of Paradise renders them precious, for I was young then, and young was the beginning. The distant past is sweet even if I know that I was brutal and obdurate, for I have long since abandoned all my wickedness. Peace be with us! Amen.

Part One
1526

How the foolish Frenghi sultans came to blows

My tutor Sejfi told me the story just as the Ottoman scribes of blessed memory recorded it. I listened to him spellbound, and he, Sejfi, related it with due seriousness, though from time to time he paused for a smile.

I loved Sejfi very much.

This is the tale he told.

Back in those days, blinded by the errant faith of idolatry, the sultans of the Western nations paid homage to the imperial crown, and so they coveted it, down to the last man. But this crown was in the possession of Laus (whom the base giaours called King Louis the Second), in short, this so-called crown was in the possession of this foolish Laus, who was the sultan of the lands of Alamania and Ungurus. The infidel idolaters called these vilayets of Alamania and Ungurus Germany and Hungary.

So then, this sultan Laus, or Louis, held great power in his unclean hands. The domain of his sandzaks and his numerous castles spread over immeasurable distances, his foot soldiers and mounted soldiers were as the stars in the sky, his estates and serfs who worked the soil like blades of grass in the meadow, like grains of sand in the desert. And as for his armies! Every one of his pig-headed soldiers was so tall and terrifying, you'd think that they'd descended from djinns, their horses snorted fire like dragons, and they were as huge as the Rukh bird in the Arabian Nights. The equestrian and foot soldiers were clad in iron head to foot, and they wielded their weapons as ferociously as any devil's ram. Their lieutenants were as expert in the arrangement and deployment of their troops as Asaph, the warlord of Solomon the Wise, while their bravery was akin to that of Tuse, the great Persian hero of times of yore.

But that's not all, because Louis was not the only sultan of Frangistan. There was Louis's basest of all relatives, Ferendus sultan, who had himself called Emperor Ferdinand, and this Ferendus was legendary for his avarice.

And what happened? The sultan of Franche was the dim-witted and conceited Francisco, also known as Francis. This Franche is what we call France. Anyway, this Francis also coveted the crown and reasoned thus: "I shall wage war against Louis to get my hands on that crown." But Louis was strong, because he and the German Ferdinand traveled in the same caravan. Besides, Ferdinand had a brother, Karlo, also called Charles, the sultan of Hispania. This Charles, who also bid his time sunk in the putrid marshes of the infidel, was a sultan who wielded great power, and when he learned that

Francis had attacked Ferdinand, he boiled with rage, because Ferdinand was his brother. He promptly went to war and attacked the sultan king Francis, that French villain.

So Francis was now waging war on two fronts. He clashed swords with Ferdinand and Louis, both of whom he had attacked with Charles, who came to Ferdinand's aid, he being his younger brother. It was soon made apparent that King Francis was no match for the combined strengths of Louis, Ferdinand and the Spanish king, Charles.

When these three had seized several castles from Francis along with the surrounding villages, and when King Francis saw that he could not vanquish all three, he became sore afraid. He began ruminating about how he could maneuver the chariot of his plan, conceived by his intellect, contaminated as it was by the contagion of conceit, into the courtyard of the palace of action, when thus reflecting, a small spark of inspiration suddenly flared up in his deluded intellect. He called for paper, pen and ink, sat himself down, and penned a letter to the Padishah (may he shine in the light of Allah!), the Mighty Suleiman, because back then he was the khalifah, the defender of the faith, the heroic successor to the Prophet Muhammad (may blessings shower down upon him and his family!). I quote the letter just as it was writ.

The letter of the pigheaded King Francis

O, Bright and Exalted Suleiman, who art the defender of the true faith against, pork eaters and Christians who are themselves as pigs! I, the base and mean-spirited Francisco, driven by the promptings of my witless brain feeding on the dung heap of rashness, did attack Laus, the unclean and unvirtuous sultan of Alamania and Ungurus in order to lay my hands on his worthless and vainglorious crown. But the blood brother of Ferendus, the ignoble King Karlo sultan fit for the gallows, who is the sultan of the land of Hispania, thereupon also did take up arms against me, and now the three of them are devastating my loathsome country, an abomination even to behold, from two directions at once. Their forces united, they are dealing destruction and bringing ruination on Franche, this deepest cesspool of idolatry, every impenitent inhabitant of which will burn in the fire of the lowest circle of hell after their deaths, myself included.

Grand Padishah of the bright understanding! I, Francisco, crawling on my belly, rubbing my unworthy cheeks against the leg of your tabouret, beseech you to teach the German and the Magyar giaour Jesus-followers to the east, inebriated as they are with the wine of pretension, a lesson they will not soon forget, in which case my own ignoble army can make short shrift of the wicked King Karlo to the west. If you will assist me in my great affliction, I shall be the

happiest of your base vassals and shall be your humble servant until my dying day and beyond, and so shall my black-hearted giaour descendants and depraved issue be likewise devoted to you to the end of times, down to the last man. I will also bring the Sun and the Moon down for you.

And the Padishah of the angelic nature was merciful unto him.
And that was how it all began.

Petrovaradin

Suleiman's army was marching along the Danube by then on the military trail that had been plied by soldiers, merchants, sorcerers and nomadic people of all sorts since times untold, and which the Roman sultans had turned into a hardy and smooth stone pathway so admirably that the Islamic troops were still able to use it.

The happy crowd—the tenured and mercenary cavalry, the regular, voluntary and court infantry—were surging along to the sound of drums and trumpets the way the majestic Danube itself was flowing steadily downstream, and upstream, in the opposite direction, the eight hundred boats.

Sejfi did not like to ride, yet sometimes he drew so far from the noisy columns that they appeared no bigger than quietly undulating streamers in the shimmering summer air. An unfamiliar scent wafted from the river towards him.

They reached the first Hungarian castle on the third day of the month of Shawwal, which was July 13th by the Christian calendar. It was a big and strong castle called Petrovaradin, which in Hungarian is Pétervárad. Sejfi could hear the cannons as the Ottoman nasads clashed with the Hungarian boats and chased them from the castle, thus preventing them from unloading new reserves. On dry land, Ibrahim pasha had surrounded everything by then and was making preparations for the siege, because the pagan horde that had taken refuge there were uninclined to bow their heads in submission, rendering all peaceful and good intentions things of vanity thereby; they continued obstinate even after the arrival of Suleiman Padishah, wherefore the Grand Vizier had trenches dug, he had the scaffolding set up, and also the heavy artillery guns had to be hauled from the ships with great effort, and the strategic points for attack had to be agreed upon with the sappers and the aga of the lagumdja.

On the first night of the siege a messenger arrived from Istanbul. The viziers in the great tent were just reporting on the progress of the siege operations and the movements of the Magyars on the other side of the river

and about the fodder, and in the distance, on the walls, the defenders were firing their harquebus guns hoping to kill as many of the Azap soldiers filling up the cannon beds with earth as they could before night fell; and a bit closer the carts of the artillery pushed past toward the front line when the chaus gained entry. The Padishah was at first much relieved when he learned that it wasn't the governor of the capital who had written, because had he written, it might have meant that the monster of rebellion had reared its ugly head in Istanbul or Anatolia, or that one of the distant vilayets had suffered attack from the outside. And then, when it turned out that the letter had come from the Harem, from his own inner chambers, he was surprised. This had never happened before. The letter had been written by Roxelana, his Polish slave, to the Lord of the World. They had started calling Roxelana Hurrem, the laughing one, in the Saray, because her laughter echoed through the rooms like the streams of the groves of Irem in the Garden of Salvation. Of course, this laughter did not always bode good, for Hurrem's might had grown greater than if she'd been his wife, and it was terrible to behold how she treated her master. Also, her influence grew with time, until lately, it has even become a concern to Ibrahim himself.

The holy king of the civilized world stared uncomprehending at the exquisitely illuminated parchment, because he'd never seen the likes of it before. A slave sending a message in the midst of a campaign to the sultan? Suleiman read the missive, and when his countenance paled, the pashas of the bright intelligence began thinking that it might be advisable to lead a charge against Petrovaradin that very minute, without preparing the artillery, even, or go help, without delay, the sweating Azaps and Janissaries shoveling the earth; and then, when the Padishah's cheeks turned purple, they tried to shrink in size as best they could. But there was no escape; leaving without permission would have been even worse than staying put.

"By the name of Allah, she bit her!" fumed the Padishah (blessing upon his head!).

The pashas stood by quietly.

"It says here that she bit her! That... that she bit her!"

Ajas pasha, the third vizier, gulped.

"Mahidevran bit Hurrem!"

The sultan sprang to his feet and began running up and down the tent brandishing the letter, and as the leaping flames of the honey wax candles projected the silhouettes of fearful djinns on the walls, Sejfi felt bound to mutter the first lines of the al-Fatiha prayer between his trembling lips. Meanwhile, outside the Ottoman boats began bombarding the castle with artillery guns.

"She bit her! She bit her! She bit her!" he screamed at the back of the chaus lying prostrate on the ground before him. "You will head back after the first

prayer, do you hear? And tell the chief eunuch in the Saray to have Hurrem transferred to the Rose Arbor Khane! No! She'll be too close to Mahidevran there. Have the chief eunuch take her personally to my palace at Galata, next to the houses of the Fuggers and the Beg Oglu and stay with her until I say otherwise. No! Gritti hates Hurrem, no, not there! Let Mahidevran go. Hurrem shall stay in the Saray. As soon as I'm back, I'll put them to rights myself! A wonder Allah's angled thunderbolts don't strike from the Fourth Heaven, that beastly marids don't play ball with Mount Ararat! The believers of the true faith are being ripped to shreds here, while back there they have nothing better to do than bite each other! And I want my son Mustafa to stay in the Saray, too! His mother goes alone, do you hear? Mahidevran will go to Galata alone! That accursed woman! Biting her! The nerve! Oh, the outrage, the outrage, the outrage!" [...]

Madonna

The weeks went by, the giaours' Christmas celebrating the prophet Jesus' birthday (may round-eyed houris pamper Him in Allah's orchards!) had come and gone, and I was still suffering because of Sudabé, thinking how I might catch a glimpse of her countenance at last. Meanwhile, after late night prayers, I continued peeling away at the wall by the light of a candle in that bare room. The erring bishop had left many books behind, so Dervish bey ordered Sejfi to instruct me in Latin and rhetoric, but Sejfi was too caught up to check if I'd done the lessons from the Koran he'd marked out for me. The scribe Gergely was supposed to teach me to write Latin and Hungarian, but I ran away from him and hid behind the church with the Serbs. And all the while Ferruh saw the plaster gradually peel away on the wall behind the heap of straw. Also, my foster father never noticed that I wasn't intent on my lessons. He was too preoccupied running after all those many altercations waiting for him in the surrounding areas, and in town, too.

The castellan was a veteran Janissary. His name was Ali, and he bagged fifty silver akçe a day. Anyway, on one occasion I saw this dizdar prepare to visit the town, so I went up to him and lied that the bey ordered me to go with him and chose a cat and buy it, and he'd give Ali the price afterward. Ali dizdar believed me and had one of his men accompany me round the great market while he visited the meat surveyors and the market supervisors. But there were no cats to be had at the market, so we returned empty-handed. The minute we walked through the castle gate I scurried off, while the castellan went to tell the bey that he could not purchase a cat, alas. That's how ignorant and wicked I was.

The good Dervish bey had me locked up in a downstairs room of the palace. I had never been there before. The room was situated in the northern wing, where it veritably brushed up against the corner of the great church. It was never heated, and it had just one small window that afforded scant light under the crossbeams. First I tried prying it open to make my escape, and then, when I couldn't open it no matter how hard I tried, and I didn't dare shatter the glass, I began scattering the rush mats heaped up along the wall so they'd serve me for a cover against the cold. But there was something behind them that they had meant to hide, framed canvases leaning against the wall, twenty of them, at least. Colorful canvases stretched taut between wooden frames! Some of the frames were simple, but others had ornate wooden carving on them the likes of which I had never seen. Allah, help me, I thought, these are paintings! Kasim bey had not burned them when he occupied the castle. Why not? He didn't have the heart? He had them taken down from the walls and brought to this remote chamber on the ground floor, so no one should see them. Also, in order to protect them, because the rooms upstairs that were not used were damp.

I flung the rush mats hiding the pictures to the side and took a look at the first, when I immediately started back. Oh Lord, have mercy on me! There is no strength and might besides the most majestic and august Allah! There was a hideous image on that canvas reviling the prophet! And how beautiful! And how that beauty frightened me! It was just like life, and that made it distasteful. It wasn't the prophet Mohamed, just the prophet Jesus, but he was naked, with just a little bit of cloth covering his loins, and he was nailed to that wooden cross the pagans worship, and he had a wound in his chest, and the blood was flowing. A disgrace. And the distance! How can the giaour masters portray distance when the canvas is flat? And yet I felt as if I were tumbling into a well, as if a maelstrom were sucking me in, because there was distance on that canvas, and the prophet had a body! His thighs and arms and every part of him was round. Beauty and sorcery! I reeled as I touched it but then, frightened, quickly drew my hand away.

I looked at it for a long time, but then I wanted to see the others, too, because the first painting affected me the way opium affects the morbid. And when I put the Jesus painting aside, I saw the one behind it, but by then it was too late, I couldn't cover it! It showed Mother Maryam nursing the baby Jesus. I saw the infant take the nipple between his lips, and all the time he was looking at me with such mischief, squinting, but looking at me all the same, looking out of that picture, somehow, and Mother Maryam's other breast was uncovered, too, and her pale pink nipple stiff, and just like Jesus, she was also looking straight at me, and I stepped back, because I would have never thought such shocking impertinence possible, and meanwhile my manhood stiffened and strained against my pants because I imagined Sudabé's face like that, and I had to reach inside my pants to fix it, and I grabbed it, but I pulled back the

skin too far and then back again, and then the muezzin's ezan calling the faithful to prayer sounded from the great tower, and the room turned dark, my knees weak, the heat flooded me, the key turned in the door, and it was Ferruh aga come to take me to the mosque because it was Friday, and I groaned, helpless, and the viscous fluid flooded by pants, and Ferruh just stood there, but then there was a strange gleam in his eye as if he'd been struck by lightning.

"Which hand did you slip inside your pants?"

"What? What did you..." I wanted to say, trembling, leaning against the wall.

"Which hand was in your pants?"

"This," I said with a look at that something shimmering on my left hand.

"Come with me," he said, then grabbed me by the scruff of the neck and ran up the stairs with me, and there dragged me into the room where I used to practice archery.

"Pick it up," he said, pointing. "Grab that bow! No. Not with that! With the other hand! Your right hand! And place the arrow against the string with the other!"

"But it's... it's... you know."

"You'll wash it off later. Here, take it, draw it back. And now, shoot!"

I pulled taut that bowstring. I didn't have much strength, just a new sense of balance I hadn't felt before. I took a deep breath and released the string. The arrow pierced that darned bale right in the middle and landed in the half apple I'd stuck there for a bull's eye. I looked incredulous at Ferruh aga, and he grinned like one demented. He had tears in his eyes, and he kept slapping his thighs. I placed another arrow along the bowstring and sent it in wake of the one before it, and then again and again, so the arrows split each other apart in what remained of the apple.

"In the name of Allah, boy, you're left-handed! You're left-handed, boy, understand?"

Moral: God is the best teacher. ❧

Translated by Judith Sollosy

Fictitious Truths: Literature and the Medleys of the Past

Judith Sollosy in Conversation with Viktor Horváth

Judith Sollosy: *"Turkish Mirror". If you were to run into someone on the street and they said to you, "I heard you wrote a book, 'Turkish Mirror'. Tell me, what is it about," what would you say to them? Just one sentence, let's say, because the other person is in a rush. Or you are.*

Viktor Horváth: Yes, I see. If I can put it in a sentence, that's good.

J. S.: *It was a dirty trick, I admit. Still, could you try?*

V. H.: The book is about the life of my hometown Pécs during the Turkish occupation as seen through the eyes of the conquerors. Will that do?

J. S.: *I was especially taken by the details of life in Pécs during the sixteenth century, when Hungary was a Turkish province, and the way these details create a world so real, one instantly accepts it and feels at home in it. And the same is true for the narrative of Suleiman the Magnificent's long march from Istanbul to Hungary—how he issues with his viziers and forces from the Topkapi Seray. I felt as if I were on the scene, seeing and hearing them, even the clanking of their weapons, both in Istanbul and in Pécs. What attracted you to this world that you familiarized yourself so thoroughly with it?*

V. H.: I love Pécs. I grew up there and I still live there much of the time. But that wouldn't have sufficed. I am attracted to everything that is not the here and now. For all I know, this could be a character flaw. An escape hatch. An escape from the

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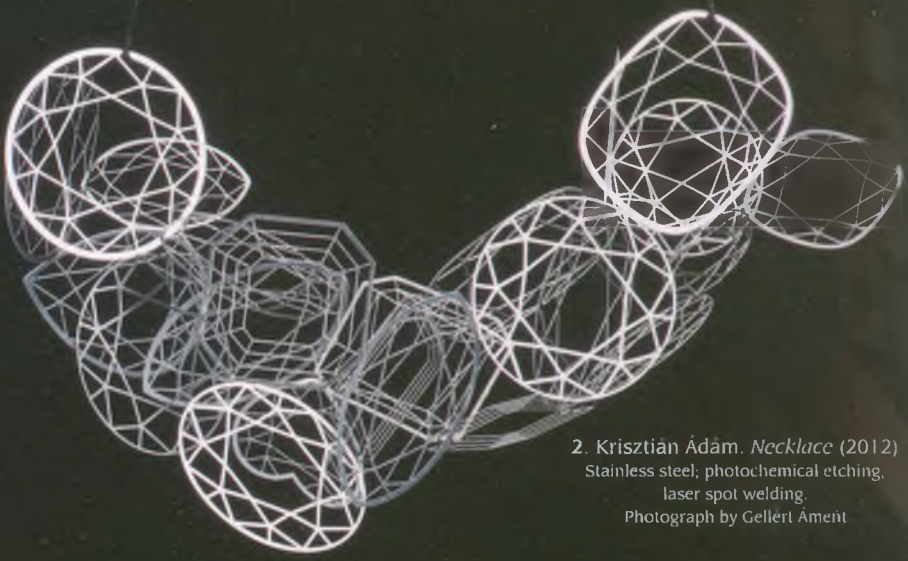
Judith Sollosy

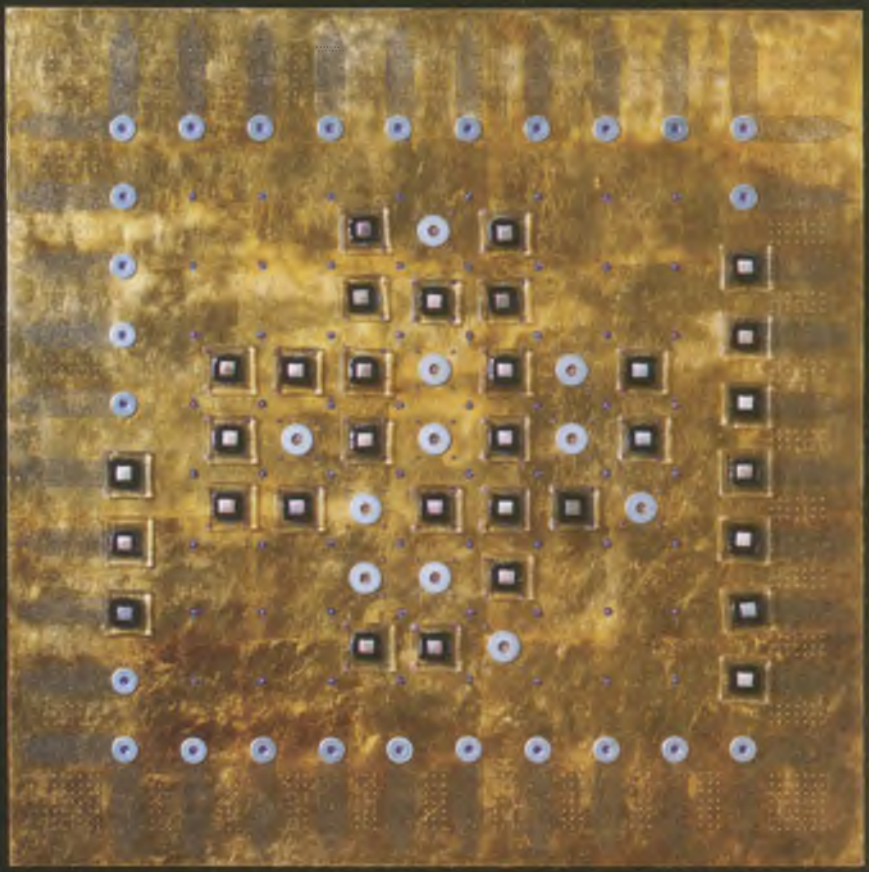
is the translator of contemporary Hungarian authors Péter Esterházy, Mihály Kornis, Lajos Parti Nagy, and István Örkény. Until recently she was Senior Editor at Corvina Books, Budapest. At present she teaches translation at Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest. Her latest major translations include Péter Esterházy's Celestial Harmonies *(2004),* Not Art *(2010) and István Örkény's* More One Minute Stories *(2006).*

1. Zsuzsanna Szentirmai-Joly. *Laokoon Moving Texture* (2012)
Plastic, paper, polyester thread. Photograph by Dániel Horvát



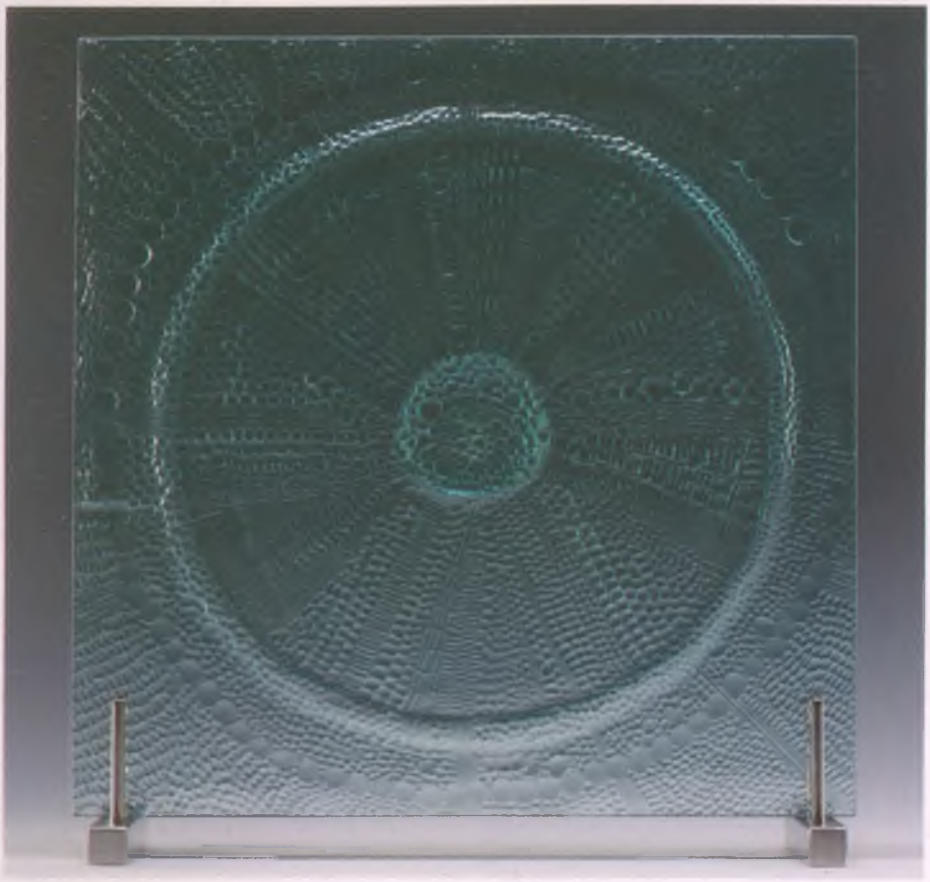
2. Krisztián Ádám. *Necklace* (2012)
Stainless steel; photochemical etching, laser spot welding.
Photograph by Gellért Ament

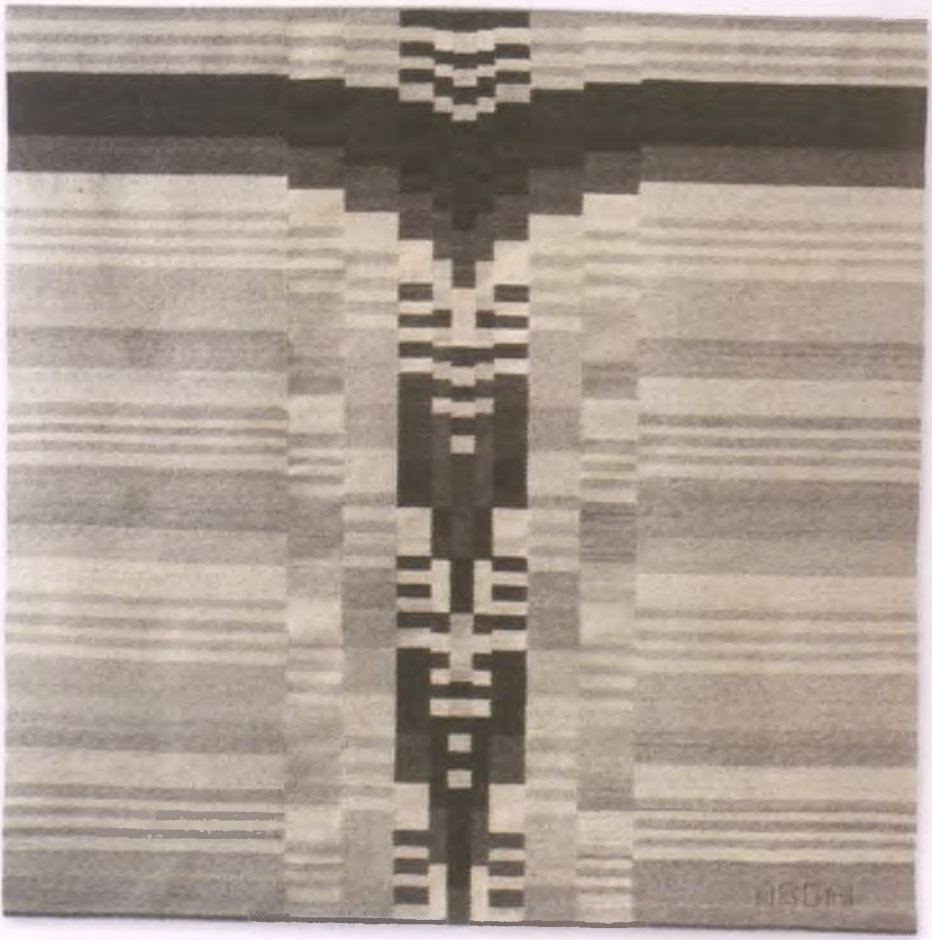
3. Réka Csikszentmihályi. *"Ludere necesse est…" Solitaire* (2012)
Woodboard, iron washer, magnet, nail, glass pearl and pieces, sequin; gold plating, nailing, adhesive application, fusing. Board: 100×100 cm, pieces: 5.5×5.5 cm. Photograph by Márton Csikszentmihályi



4. Edit Kondor. *Porcelain Table Set Ensemble* (2012)
Porcelain. Photograph by Gellert Ament

5. Judit Dobolán. *Plant* (2012)
Glass; fusing. Photograph by Gellert Ament



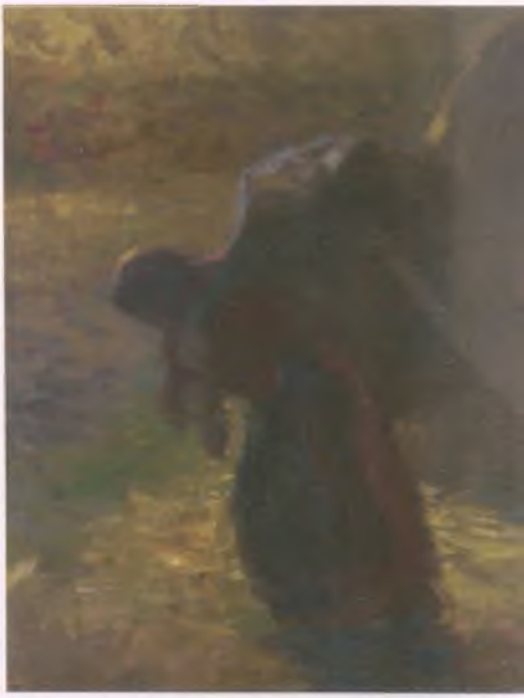


6. Ildikó Ardai. *Celestial Bird* (2012)
Undyed wool; hand weaving. Photograph by Gellért Áment

Detail

7. Margit Kányási Holb. *Veil Paraphrase* (2012)
Wool, plant matter, acrylic fiber, textile dye; textile printing, felting, application, 400×150 cm, 400×120 cm.
Photograph by Gellért Ament

1. János Thorma. *Portrait of Irén Bilcz* (1892)
Oil on canvas, 111×97 cm. Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest



2. János Thorma. *Homecoming* (around 1912)
Oil on canvas, 95×80 cm. Bay Collection, Budapest

4. János Thorma. *Danaë* (around 1930)
Oil on canvas, 75×96 cm.
Private collection

5. János Thorma. *Bathers* (1926-1933)
Oil on canvas, 120×130 cm.
Bay Collection, Budapest

< 3. János Thorma. *Violet Pickers* (1921)
Oil on canvas, 73.5×100.5 cm.
Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest

6. János Thorma. *Nude* (around 1930)
Oil on canvas, 75×100 cm.
Private collection

7. János Thorma. *Woman in a Hat by the River Zazar* (late 1920s)
Oil on card, 60×70 cm.
Private collection

8. János Thorma. *Nagybánya Landscape* (1930s)
Oil on wood, 52×63 cm.
Bay Collection, Budapest

9. János Thorma. *In Monastery Meadow* (1930s)
Oil on wood, 38×47 cm.
Bay Collection, Budapest

present. An addiction. The same forces are at work inside me as in a drug addict, I bet. In short, wanting out. Turning to some drug so we can bear it, so we can sever the ties, so we can escape from all this. What I say is corroborated by the fact that I have a serious problem with strategy computer games. I'm not kidding. I'm an addict by nature. I even underwent therapy because of my addiction to strategy games. I'm better off shifting this addiction to writing novels.

J. S.: You did a considerable amount of research for the novel. This is one of the things that come through in the text. Could you say something about how you went about building up the world of "Turkish Mirror"? What were your sources? Obviously, there was the Koran, which you know by heart, no doubt.

V. H.: I didn't have to know the Koran by heart. I took notes. But researching this book was also a kind of addiction. My real difficulty was setting limits, because the research can draw you in. You always come up against something new that intrigues you, something you feel you should know, and that opens onto something else, and you feel you should know that, too, and if you don't pay attention, you will never start writing, because there are no limits. At some point you need to call it a day and start writing. Of course, there are still many things to research as you go along. This is how the two things intertwine, the writing and the research. This whole thing can function as an addiction that will produce something worthwhile.

J. S.: Still, could you say something about the sources you used to reconstruct Suleiman the Magnificent's long march to Hungary and life in Pécs under the Turks?

V. H.: Maximalism. I aimed for maximalism, which is impossible, of course. Still, I wanted to bring in every segment of life, all aspects of it, religion, culture, the arts, the structure of the governing setup, including the workings of petty officialdom, the monetary system, taxation, customs, folkloristic customs as they manifest themselves through Islam, as well as the pre-Islamic pagan elements, because they were synthesized with Islam. The thinking. I tried to change the optics with which we regard the world. And since you asked, the sources I consulted are a result of this striving. First and foremost the Koran, because life at the time was imbued with the sacred. Whatever a person with an archaic view of the world engaged in, whether he worked or fought or ate or made love, it shared in the transcendental. So it is natural that everyone should quote the sacred texts at every turn. Sayings and proverbs also gave me a point of reference.

J. S.: Am I right in thinking that some of the sayings and proverbs in the book are your invention?

V. H.: Some of the proverbs I lifted out of the original Ottoman and Turkish collections I read, and kept them as they were. Others accommodated

themselves to the text and merged with it, but had to undergo a slight modification in the process. Then after a while, with my help, the text was able to create for itself the proverbs it needed. So yes, some were my invention.

J. S.: You also played with Turkish sayings as well, sometimes creating your own. Is that right? For instance, "This is as deep to me as a well to a nightingale." I bet you made that up.

V. H.: I might have.

J. S.: So this might be the best time to ask you. When the Good Lord placed a pen in your hand, He found you in a playful frame of mind. Is this so? Because this is what I felt while I was reading "Turkish Mirror."

V. H.: You say that as if it were a Turkish saying.

J. S.: I feel this sense of fun and playfulness throughout the book. For instance, where did you get the idea that Mahidevran should bite her rival Hurrem? I thought it was very funny.

V. H.: But it actually happened.

J. S.: Still, you didn't have to include it in the book, but you did.

V. H.: Mahidevran, the legal first wife of the sultan, was not good at intrigue, and was probably desperate because Hurrem was sly and educated, whereas she was just a slave, but had more power over the sultan, thanks to her brains. And her penchant for intrigue. Also, she knew how to write, whereas she was just a Ukrainian slave who converted to Islam from Christianity, and in the twinkling of an eye had the whole court under her thumb. And Mahidevran had no other means of fighting back.

J. S.: I'm glad this episode is in the book. Which reminds me. "Turkish Mirror" is full of finely nuanced innuendoes, such as the sentence on page 103 that reads: "Halima [the narrator Isa's nurse] hailed from Egypt, and it was said (but Allah knows better) that she converted to Islam only for show." I love the fine undercutting created by the insertion of this.

V. H.: But I didn't make it up. It's a so-called panel.

J. S.: Still, why insert it at this point? To me, it is a very good example of your spirit of fun, which motivates much of the book. I would love to know to what extent this sort of fine, incisive undercutting was conscious on your part. Its unexpected appearance in this sly way made me laugh out loud.

V. H.: Thank you. It's good to hear. Perhaps I have a propensity for intrigue myself. Yes, perhaps I do.

J. S.: A propos your propensity for intrigue...

V. H.: First it turns out that I'm an addict, and now it turns out I'm an intriguer as well.

J. S.: *And we've only just started! But help me, please. Again and again in the novel, we come up against the mock heroic. You know, when someone is presented as a hero who has done something heroic, but then comes the undercutting to suggest, without actually having to say it in so many words, that his deed was not as heroic as it may seem. It's a distortion that aims to amuse.*

V. H.: In short, that the statement becomes ironically uncertain?

J. S.: *Yes. Have you read [Geoffrey] Chaucer? Your spirit of fun reminds me of him.*

V. H.: Yes, of course. I even translated some Chaucer. One of my special fields of interest is the Middle Ages, and I translate medieval poetry. Occitan, Old French, Iberian, Italian, medieval English.

J. S.: *How many languages do you speak or understand?*

V. H.: Among the modern languages, English and Spanish. My German improves when I'm in a German-speaking country, because my grandparents were Swabians and I used to spend the summer with them, so I acclimatize rather quickly.

J. S.: *Back to Chaucer. Passages in your book are reminiscent of his sense of the comic, which is evident in* The Canterbury Tales.

V. H.: Yes. "The Nun's Priest's Tale."

J. S.: *Yes. Chantecleer and Pertelote. When I asked you about the mock heroic in "Turkish Mirror," I was thinking of them. Your book carries within it a stable sense of familiarity with old literature and bygone worlds, which enriches it in many ways. T. S. Eliot wrote an essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," in which he posits that a piece of literature can be authentic, original and good only if ..*

V. H.: ... You are familiar with tradition.

J. S.: *Yes, if what you create is backed up by tradition, the way your book is. And this added to my enjoyment when I read it. The sentence with the parenthetical comment about Allah thrown in for good measure is just one example of many. And yet, I had no way of knowing that you've read Chaucer. And your book reverberates with your familiarity with other writers as well. Though I was planning to bring it up later, let me ask you now. You must have some favorite novels. What are they?*

V. H.: Yes, I do... But it's difficult, off-hand.

J. S.: *Still, could you name one or two?*

V. H.: Those written by others. Incredibly—but no, not incredibly—they're not my contemporaries, though. Especially not my Hungarian contemporaries, but... I don't know.

J. S.: In that case, let me tell you which novels I was thinking of, and if you say I'm being ridiculous, I won't mind. But as I got into "Turkish Mirror," two books fueled by a sense of playful humor and sheer fun came to mind. Chaucer's Canterbury Tales *we've already mentioned. The other is [Miguel de] Cervantes's* Don Quixote, *and also...*

V. H.: Yes, I was about to say that. And also...

J. S.: [Laurence] Sterne's Tristram Shandy*?*

V. H.: One of the great comic novels of Western literature.

J. S.: I imagined these books lying on your table as you were writing, or in the storehouse of your mind.

V. H.: Yes, the archetypes are there, the archetypes of these brutal, gigantic tales. Homer's epics, *Gilgamesh*, Chrétien de Troyes. The French are very important to me. And there is someone else, though I've only read him in translation. [John] Milton and *Paradise Lost*. It is very close to my heart. So then, these are the great books. Yes, these ebullient giants, these great storytellers with their God-given talent.

J. S.: I asked about your favorite novels because it seems to me that "Turkish Mirror" springs from and expands on a certain classical novelistic tradition.

V. H.: That's very complimentary. But since you brought up intrigue, another important writer of intrigue is de Laclos. I'm thinking of *Dangerous Liaisons*. It should be added to the list. Choderlos de Laclos. And that man of shadows, the shadows that are the terrible element of the Romantic, E. T. A. Hoffmann. He is very important to me as well. *The Nutcracker and the Mouse King*.

J. S.: Which has recently been published in your poetic adaptation. The quotes from the Koran as they appear in your novel also bear your poetic touch. You doctored them to suit your text, didn't you, in keeping with the striving to create the total world we talked about before, your attempt at maximalism?

V. H.: Yes, indeed. In the Arab original, the Koran has a special versification and rhyming structure. But the Hungarian translation of the Koran in Robert Simon's excellent translation is not in verse. On the other hand, it is very reliable, authentic. I used it as a raw translation, and the parts I needed I versified. I created a new translation that would suit my purposes. In short, at times I cheated a bit, changed the text slightly.

J. S.: I wish you hadn't done that. Do you realize what that means to a translator?

V. H.: Yes, you have your hands full. It's an interesting problem for the theory of translation. If my Koran quote is my text because I created it, how will you solve it? You must decide whether you will cut and paste out of an English

translation of your choice, or rewrite the Surahs and verses like I did and create your own Koran. An interesting predicament. What will you do?

J. S.: *It's best not even to think about it! I'd rather return to your sense of fun, one aspect of which is your invention of tales. "Turkish Mirror" has many characters. It is a veritable* Thousand and One Arabian Nights*, and each character has his or her own story. There's Isa, who tells his tales for the readers of the future, and there's Sejfi, Isa's old teacher, who tells him tales for his edification. The book rolls along its banks like the wide expanse of a surging river.*

V. H.: Halima also tells tales.

J. S.: *Yes, Halima, Isa's nurse, also tells tales. These tales are about the everyday lives of the Turks, and there are tales within the tales, and we've already mentioned the material richness, the ever-present appurtenances of this world. Mapping out the everyday lives of people under Turkish occupation. Where did all these characters and stories come from? It seems to me that without a sense of playfulness, this kind of invention is not possible.*

V. H.: This made me think of the way the Internet works today. It may not be such a novel manner of interaction with the world. The mind of ancient man probably worked very much like the Internet does today. They have common roots... How does the Internet work? We look for something, and a new world opens up, and we read and look at the pictures. And then we spot something interesting, click on it, and another new world opens up, and we know we should turn back, but we forge ahead. In short, the Internet is not such a novel invention. It is based on the natural way we all function. Just think. *Don Quixote* has continued to work like this for the past four hundred years. So it's nothing new.

J. S.: *I'm glad you brought up* Don Quixote *again.*

V. H.: Yes, because it functions in just the same way. And Homer, too.

J. S.: *The great storytellers, yes?*

V. H.: Yes. [Henry] Fielding, too. *Tom Jones*. Nearly every chapter opens with a diatribe against lawyers and doctors, which is the author's own musical part, as it were, and then the story continues. This is the play of detours and their return back to the fold. By the way, the Bible also has many colorful stories that grow out of one another. This is the epic tradition of humankind.

J. S.: *Yes, but I can't help thinking that it takes a certain kind of person to further this tradition, someone who can't get enough of a good thing.*

V. H.: We're back at addiction again?

J. S.: *If it's addiction, you're putting it to good use. But let me change the*

subject. "Turkish Mirror," as we've said, is rich in stories, tradition, and invention. It incorporates the ancient, mythical story formations of humankind, the clichés that storytelling has relied on for many centuries. Their presence speaks of a special ebullience that is a source of pleasure. I would like to ask you, how important is the so-called pleasure principle to you? To me it's very important. That's why I ask, obviously. I'm a selfish monster. I prefer to be involved only with those books that were motivated by it.

V. H.: The selfish monster you mention is the ideal reader.

J. S.: *I think the presence of the pleasure principle as a motivating force is especially important because I've found over the years that any creation, a poem, a novel, a sound, a flower, if it gives you pleasure, if it satisfies the pleasure principle, it always turns out to be very good. In short, that in the arts there is no separating pleasure and quality.*

V. H.: Yes, I see. It's not important, it's natural. Yes, that's how it is, yes. I'm thinking that modern literature in the literary sense, in short, from around the beginning of the twentieth century, with its concentration on structure, has changed this. Changed what up till then was natural. In short, literary theory as a discipline gradually entered the primary works of fiction, rendering them esoteric. Huge, exceptionally high quality works were born, but the principle you mention, the pleasure principle, was compromised. The sophisticated, enlightened reader was more satisfied than ever, but they form a tiny fraction of those who read books. High art and popular art suffered a split. Popular art was inundated with garbage, while high art was invaded by academic theorizing about literature, and texts were born that demanded an exceptional knowledge and effort from the reader. In short, this literature that only a select few could read became unavailable to the masses. Take [James] Joyce. He is brilliant, but who can read *Finnegans Wake*? *Finnegans Wake* doesn't give pleasure. *Ulysses* is a borderline case, but you can still read it. On the other side, the general readership is left with, for want of a better word, garbage. In Hungary, the segment that suited everyone became very narrow. We need to fight our way out of this situation. These two types of text must find each other again. In this modern approach to literature, formulas, patterns, and clichés have been given a pejorative coloring. I would like to restore to them the respect they deserve. Of course, the mass-produced garbage that's being published has also done its share in giving them a bad name. I would like to help restore their good name by having us regard certain formulas and clichés as the thousand-year-old treasure trove of forms, as part of the heritage of humankind. An example is the epical cliché, such as the double bind, when we must fight against elemental evil from two directions while our own community doesn't understand us or who we are fighting for. So we must even fight this predicament. The archetype

of this cliché is the story of Jesus who fights evil for the benefit of humankind, but his own people have him killed because they don't understand that he is fighting for them. Of course, this cliché was not new, but the Bible borrowed it and canonized it. We see the same thing in *The Fifth Element*, the movie in which Bruce Willis wants to save the world. He is fighting evil, but he is also forced to be on the run from his own people. There are countless novels in which this basic epic motif is used. It is powerful, it can be resorted to at any time, and we recognize it, and recognition is a source of pleasure.

J. S.: You're intrigued by ancient epic narratives and clichés.

V. H.: Yes. I collect clichés. And collecting and recognizing them calls for a certain kind of knowledge, and this can be taught and should be taught. By the way, the basic principle behind pleasure of all kinds is another ancient principle, the rhythmical exchange of the new and the familiar. What this rhythm is like depends on the tempo. In short, yes, recognition is a basic source of pleasure and we're glad to participate in the recognition. And it's important that when the recognition is about to tire us, something draw our attention away from it. The playful interchange of these two gives a composition its shape.

J. S.: This mechanism is at work throughout "Turkish Mirror." I opened the book at random and started to read the story on that particular page, because the novel is a bouquet of stories, very cleverly orchestrated or woven together, and no matter where I opened it, I found myself smiling with delight.

V. H.: You embarrass me, but it's good to hear.

J. S.: No problem. We can always cross it out. Something else. Many characters tell many tales in your book, and they're not in the same time frame. But there is a principal narrator and he has his own perspective that informs the universe he is describing. The medley of voices is held together by this narrator's voice, and you successfully keep his voice intact throughout the five hundred forty-five pages of the book. I think I'm saying that even when he is not present, his presence is felt—his world view, his voice.

V. H.: Which brings up the problem of homophony, something that I feel strongly about. For one thing, I feel strongly about it because it's interesting when one person says what another person has said. And for another, homophony is also a literary tradition. Texts and novels of all sorts are homophonic until about [Fyodor] Dostoyevsky. When we read *Don Quixote*, the educated and well-read aristocratic Don speaks the same language and uses the same turns of phrase as the roughhewn peasant, Sancho. They express themselves the same way, with the same stock of words. Everything is the same. In Homer, too, the king and the tiller of the soil speak the same way. As so do the gods. In short, the voices were not divided yet. The literature of the time and the ears

of the time did not concern themselves with registers. There were stylistic differences, but all discourses merged into the more or less sacred stream of discourse that was literature. Everything was one. Polyphony was not important. Even in [Honoré de] Balzac, everyone speaks the same way, more or less. It's with Dostoyevsky that we catch ourselves thinking, what's going on? Every character has his own truth here! Everyone has his own style. Yes. Everyone has his own truth. There is not one truth organizing the characters' thoughts, and so there is not one truth holding sway over the dialog or the style either. There isn't one central point of view, Homer's singular point of view, or that of Cervantes or Chrétien de Troyes. They have a single God-like perspective on things that sees everything and knows everything. The world is fragmented into subjective points of view, and the character who is speaking is always right. But when Homer wrote, or even much later, at the time of "Turkish Mirror," there was still one truth, and that one truth was Islam. That world and that way of thinking were based on respect for authority. They were based on accepted, stable points of reference. That your grandfather had said it this way, and Allah said it this way to the Prophet, and the Prophet said it this way. The homophonic style is naturally suited to this way of thinking. I also have my sources to thank for the homophony in my book. I read many contemporary Turkish chroniclers, and the voice of the narrator at the beginning of the book where he talks about the political situation of the time is the voice of the Turkish chroniclers, in Hungarian translation, of course. Taking my clue from the religious commitment and the chronicling of history that doesn't even pretend to be objective, which is the hallmark of these ancient sources, and then applying them in unexpected situations also helped me create circumstances of humorous homophony. One example is the letter of the French king to Suleiman the Magnificent, in which he calls himself a pork eater and a pig, because he speaks in the voice of the Ottomans from the Ottoman point of view, base and mean-spirited, driven by the promptings of a witless brain. He is just a pipeline for the voice of Islam, and if we get a feel for the beauty of it, it becomes easy to write like this, and the writer's horizon expands.

J. S.: *This leads to my next observation. Your book is held together by the fictitious truth that its two main characters take for granted; namely, that the Turks are here, and it is evident that they are here to stay, and it is only a matter of time before the giaour Magyars become Turks themselves and followers of Islam. How did you come up with this literary conceit?*

V. H.: It is written in the Koran that sooner or later all men will see the light and the true faith shall triumph.

J. S.: *Okay. In that case, let's talk about love. Would you talk about your conception of love as portrayed in the book? I'm especially intrigued by Sejfi's unrequited love*

for Sudabé. And Mariam. I haven't read anything about it anywhere.

V. H.: Though we are dealing with an Oriental man, here in the book I am portraying the old Western concept of love. It is related to the Virgin Mary.

J. S.: *Yes. This relationship is portrayed literally, if indirectly, when Isa, still a young boy, discovers a painting of the Virgin Mary, whom he calls Mother Maryam, nursing the baby Jesus.*

V. H.: Something happened in eleventh-century Provence that was new to Europe. Thanks to contact with Iberian Arabic culture and Arabic poetry, the conception of love began to change. But the change was most indebted to the literature of the Church. Except that the spiritual love that the Latin poets of the Church projected onto Mary, the troubadours of Provence projected onto women. This was their great invention. The troubadours addressed their songs exclusively to married women, because they knew that the pure love that was the subject of their songs had no place in real life, that it reflected another aspect of one's character, a transcendental, untouchable aspect or dimension. Even if a troubadour managed to bed the lady of his songs, the celestial aspect of courtly love remained intact. His idealized passion took on the functions that monastic Latin poetry assigned to God and Mary and the saints. But where the earlier religious poetry said that the love of God and devotion to Him make me better and more noble, the troubadour said that the love and the woman I love make me a better person, they ennoble me. And where monastic Latin poetry said that God destroys whom He wants and redeems whom He wants, the troubadour said that his lady destroys and tosses into ruin whom she wants in what amounts to a magical, sacred way, and she raises and redeems whom she wants too. In short, she assumes all the functions of the sacred. Of course, this can be construed as blasphemy. Be that as it may, the troubadours understood that this was just a game, an amorous luxury at odds with the institution of the Church and the institution of marriage, so they severed it from both and flung themselves into the game, while the husbands, who were refined courtly aristocrats, were happy to play along. In fact, sometimes they commissioned the poems themselves, because it added to their prestige. And their wives' prestige. I'm interested in this conception of love because in eleventh-century Provence the haute aristocracy popularized it and it spread throughout Europe, but only to the courts of Europe. But as was to be expected, eventually it filtered down, until in nineteenth-century Romantic literature it burst on the scene with an explosive force that proved to be destructive.

J. S.: The Lady of the Lake?

V. H.: Yes. And its destructive force continues to ruin people's lives even today, because what the troubadours knew was a game the Romantics took seriously,

and they turned the ideal of one true love into a sacrament and made the waning of love tantamount to sin. Yet it always wanes, and so people today are constantly experiencing a crisis of conscience, because this Romantic expectation can't be met. This absurdity appears in the book, and this is why I don't have my character Maria speak. She speaks just once, and then the subject happens to be translation. But otherwise I was careful not to have her speak, and so she is not a flesh and blood woman. She remains a fanciful image. Love is a lie. It's not about the other person, but what we imagine about her or him. And that's not fair.

J. S.: I'd like to ask you about your sentences. As a translator, I have a vested interest in sentences. Your sentences are often breathtakingly beautiful, effortlessly suggestive, evocative, containing a great deal more than the sum of their parts.

V. H.: Yes, I understand.

J. S.: What did you wish to accomplish with these sentences that go beyond sense and open onto another dimension?

V. H.: I couldn't have done it without what you said with respect to T. S. Eliot. Can I cite a parable? Riding, let's say. Learning to ride a horse is an investment. It takes time and perseverance, but once we master it and can work together with the horse, we'll make quick progress. But if we lack the humility to learn this cooperation with the animal—this is tradition—we will either have to travel on foot and the whole thing will take a very long time or we may even end up having to carry the horse. There's no getting around tradition.

J. S.: But what about the sentences in your book that approximate the state of poetry? They have a special interior rhythm, when it is not the words alone that dictate the sense, but the sound of the words, their placement, and the calm forging ahead towards new horizons of meaning. These sentences want to approximate something that is more than simply a thought and so are not relying on linearity. I hope you understand what I mean. Words for me have scent and weight and color and sound and gesture. This is why I'd like to ask you again about your sentences, which often have the deep consistency and color palette, the saturation that brings sixteenth-century and seventeenth-century painting to mind, though admittedly, they contain more light. How aware were you of this aspect of your style?

V. H.: I wasn't. I didn't do it on purpose. Still, in that case perhaps I succeeded in conveying the spirit of the times in the language of the times. After all, what painting achieved visually elsewhere, this epoch produced in writing. And if these times come through in the text, then perhaps I was able to imitate its style, too. Be that as it may, I enjoyed creating my sentences. And I enjoyed being able to ride that horse, the fact that I developed a close working relationship with that

particular tradition and that I was able to speak in the voice of that tradition. It was good, but it was risky, too. What would the reader think?

J. S.: To what extent are you in charge of the story and the words, and to what extent do the story and the words tell you what to do? Who dictates to whom, and what is this give and take like?

V. H.: That has to do with practical matters. For example, when you start writing, you need to know the ending. It may turn out differently, but you have to know. You have to know the curve and as you progress, you must let the world you're creating and the story make their own choices and decisions. You have to pay attention, because the story might take an unexpected turn and slip through your fingers. You need to keep control over it while giving it free rein.

J. S.: I was thinking that once I write something down, half a sentence even, it creates a constraint, it binds me. I can't continue it any which way I want.

V. H.: That's why it's so difficult to start writing. One is afraid to begin, like a sculptor who begins to carve a block of stone, knowing that if he makes a mistake and it splits and splinters, he can't glue it together again. Let me give you another example. You write a strategy game program, software, and as it takes shape, as you progress, you are also playing the program. As you write it, you are also one of the creators of the program and one of the players. So you are at your own mercy. But in the meantime, it takes shape.

J. S.: My impression is that you like your reader. You like telling him tales, and it is partly his presence that motivates you to do so.

V. H.: That's a great question.

J. S.: In short, we're talking about yet another game of give and take. At least that is how I see it. Would this irrepressible mood for telling stories exist with quite the same intensity, I wonder, if you didn't care about your reader? Do you have someone in mind to whom you'd like to hand your tales as a present?

V. H.: That's an excellent question. And it is related to the problem of modern literature we talked about earlier. One of the games the Postmodern plays is to re-circulate theory back into the literary works themselves, making them far too refined and esoteric, fodder for theorists and college professors. And this leads to what you're saying. Writers begin to write for a special readership. And this special readership is made up of critics and academics. And they enjoy nothing better than discovering layers upon layers of meaning and signification, cultural references and what have you. On the other hand, these works are unavailable to the large camp of readers. My ambition is to make the novel accessible once again. If we make a book accessible to the public, it can still please a restricted readership. We won't lose the college professors, because I'm thinking of them

now, and not the critics. And it's really a question of paying attention. The reader, as you say, is there with us. Every writer writes about his or her private affairs, because in one way or another, the writer's character as monster finds its way into the text. Writers do not share a collective experience with the reader, and this must be kept in mind. The writer has to consider the reader. But the bottom line is that I write because I enjoy it, and when I'm enjoying myself in this way, I can escape the here and now. And if I can do so, and in the meantime give someone else a chance to drug themselves with my writing, so much the better.

J. S.: Do you see yourself as a raconteur?

V. H.: I enjoy talking, yes. Teaching, too, because it's good to talk, and because talking makes me discover new things. But you ask in vain. My main motif for writing is purely selfish.

J. S.: There is a leitmotif in your book that Allah is good, Allah is merciful. Do you think that the idea that God is good and merciful, that everything is good as it is, can hold up today?

V. H.: We need to put this in a historical perspective. I would like to refer once again to the difference between modern thinking and the thinking of earlier times, the polarization that first appears with Plato. For tens of thousands of years there was no good and bad. People knew what was good or bad for them, but there was no need for the abstract categories of good and bad. The ancient gods are neither good nor bad. Sometimes what they do is good for humans, sometimes it is not, but there's no abstraction. It is in Plato's world of ideas that the process of abstraction, of thinking in terms of ideas and notions, begins. Then it is picked up by Christian doctrine.

J. S.: Which reminds me of [Karl] Marx.

V. H.: And Marxism. Marxism is profoundly Christian. Communists didn't persecute Christians because they were different, but because they were the same. They were rivals. In short, Christianity picked up the concept of good and bad, without which we can't ask whether the world is good or bad. Obviously, the world is neither one nor the other. We must accept relativity, I'm afraid. Absolutes do not exist. Anyone who acts in the name of some abstract good and this is how he wants to redeem his fellow men, will destroy himself and his fellows and is engaging in something evil. This is why I steer myself as well as others away from believing in absolutes, even in absolute good.

J. S.: Would this help shed light on why the idea of tolerance, which is one of the book's leitmotifs, a kind of subtextual ideal, shines through your book? As a matter of fact, with respect to tolerance, I can't help but ask you the following question. Did your reaction to the current state of post-1989 Hungary influence the book while you were writing it? Did it influence your choice of subject?

V. H.: It didn't influence my choice of subject. But the fact that tolerance runs through the book, yes, this was influenced by life in Hungary today, whether I wanted it or not. It must have slipped in somehow. I can't help feeling what is in the air today, and I find it disturbing. And terrible to watch. And it worries me. It's a bad feeling. And I'm aware that much of what is out there is inside me, too, which makes it all the more important to me. Writing the book was an exercise in mental hygiene. I know that the only chance for a normal life is reflection.

J. S.: Like reflecting on the absurd question, who is a true Hungarian?

V. H.: This terrible, outrageous question is important with respect to this novel, because treating it was also therapeutic. When in trouble, one needs an outsider's wider perspective. There is something terribly wrong with Hungarian national identity. Where the inclination towards confrontation with those who are different is so strong, there is something very wrong with identity. If we can see ourselves through the eyes of another religion or culture, perhaps we will see things more clearly. With respect to these eyes, perhaps my book is a bit didactic because it says, hey, look inside you! Others who are different are human beings, like you. As far as they're concerned, it is you who is different. If you want others to accept you and respect your culture, you must respect them as well. To tell you the truth, it even occurred to me that the book might be too didactic.

J. S.: But yours is an indirect "message" that comes through to the reader via the literary conceit that we are seen through a strange culture's eye in a way that you manage to render the most natural thing in the world, and we immediately accept it, even laugh at it. However, this is never pushed too far. Clearly, you had no intention of being, for lack of a better word, relevant.

V. H.: It wasn't a primary concern, no. I relied on contemporary sources. Also, in those days, under the Turkish occupation, there was freedom of religion, and racism didn't exist. It wasn't even a question.

J. S.: One last question. You are a translator yourself with several volumes of poetry under your belt, plus your recent Nutcracker *adaptation, and you teach literary translation at the University of Pécs, so you know that translation involves rethinking and rewriting.*

V. H.: Re-creation.

J. S.: Yes, re-creation. The translated work is the same work in another language, yet it is not the same work. The differences in language and world view and so much else can act as formidable roadblocks to the translator's best efforts to keep the integrity of the original text intact. Aren't you afraid of what a translator may do to your text?

V. H.: Yes, the thought has occurred to me.

J. S.: *And what do you expect from your translator or translators? What should they pay special attention to?*

V. H.: I am aware of the difficulties. I can gauge them. The text of "Turkish Mirror" is archaic and archaizing, and that poses a serious challenge. But the trust I feel is stronger than the apprehension I feel, the trust in the translator, because the translator is also a writer. And the translator has the same drive for individualism and the same selfishness as the writer. After all, if translation is re-creation, then the translator is a creative artist. The translator's ambition, her knowing that her name will be linked to the translation, and the fact that the act of translation is a source of pleasure for her, they are my insurance policy. Of course, anything can happen. A work can end up in the wrong hands. But one must also trust the publisher, trust that they want what is best for them, and that they know who to turn to for the translation.

J. S.: *In concrete terms, what is it that you're most worried about, worried that your translator may not be able to tackle? There's the archaic language. But is there anything else? Or maybe the atmosphere of the book as such? Anything.*

V. H.: That is a very difficult question, because I've read the excerpts that you've translated, and it may sound awkward if I start praising you in this interview, but based on what I've read, I am perfectly at ease with regard to the English translation of my book. But in general, I consider archaizing a great problem. I have translated much medieval poetry and continue to do so today, and the question is always the same—What are we to do? When the poem was written, it was written in the language of the time, and if we start using archaic or pseudo-archaic language now, we end up lying, because we are not using contemporary language. On the other hand, we can't use modern language either, because the text has been elevated by the fact that it is a text, especially in the case of poetry. This problem calls for individual solutions, depending on the particular text we are translating. We must let the text tell us what to do. Of course, hearing the answer depends on the translator's sensitivity. How qualified he or she is. And how well-read and educated. And how demanding he or she is.

J. S.: *How many languages is "Turkish Mirror" being translated into at this point?*

V. H.: For the time being Macedonian and Bulgarian. The Poles have also shown interest. And the Turkish edition will be out this autumn.

J. S.: *Also, let's keep our fingers crossed for an English edition. The more versions of this novel fill the bookshelves, the better. This is not very professional and not very profound, but it's nice populating the world with books like "Turkish Mirror." I hope you will keep me busy for many more years to come!* ❧

Humphrey Tonkin

Perdition or Perfectability in a Mechanized World:

On Sándor Szathmári's "Dystopian" Novel Voyage to Kazohinia

Some novelists are driven by the urge to compose, others by their interest in ideas. The Hungarian novelist Sándor Szathmári (1897-1974) belongs to the second category. An engineer by profession, Szathmári came late to serious writing, embarking in the early 1930s on a trilogy of novels, one set in the past, a second in the present, and a third in the future. He called them *Hiába*—"In Vain."

"I was convinced," he wrote, "that there was a basic defect in human nature itself." Every social reform leads in due course to a new degeneration: "[e]very time, from the blood of the prophet a new tyranny will arise." With each revolution, people suppose that a definitive improvement has been achieved, but it is only a prelude to a new upheaval, undermined by human selfishness and cruelty.[1]

Szathmári was influenced by two writers in particular—by Jonathan Swift (1667-1745), who in the fourth part of *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) describes Gulliver's visit to the horse-like rationalists, the Houyhnhnms, and their slaves, the degenerate, human-like Yahoos; and by the Hungarian Imre Madách (1823-1864), whose massive dramatic poem in fifteen scenes, *The Tragedy of*

1 ■ Summarized from Éva Tófalvi. "La du testamentoj de Sándor Szathmári." *Fonto*, 179, 1995, 25-30. The translations are by the author of this essay.

Humphrey Tonkin

is President Emeritus and University Professor of Humanities at the University of Hartford, Connecticut. A sociolinguist and speaker of Esperanto, he has translated extensively into and out of Esperanto and English and has published on the language, in addition to his work as a scholar of English Renaissance literature, particularly the poetry of Edmund Spenser. For many years he was Professor of English at the University of Pennsylvania and also served as Visiting Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University. Recent books include The Translator as Mediator of Cultures *(2010), edited with Maria Esposito Frank.*

Man (*Az ember tragédiája*, 1861), describes how, throughout history, humans have striven for a better future, alternating between collectivism and individualism, only to have their hopes dashed, time after time—undermined by human nature itself. In the twelfth scene, the protagonists, the eternally optimistic Adam and the realist Lucifer (Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and John Milton are never far away), visit a phalanstery, a socialist utopian community dedicated to science (the term was created by the French utopian social reformer Charles Fourier in the early nineteenth century). Here they see all the animals, now mutated to serve human needs, and they learn that the humans themselves have eschewed those parts of human nature that led to competition and the dominance of human passion. Says their guide, the Scientist, escorting them around the community's museum,

> Here is the very last of all the roses
> That blossom'd in the world. A useless flower—
> With millions of its sisters it would steal
> The fertile acres from the waving corn.
> A favorite toy of many grown-up children,
> A curious fancy, truly now it seems.
> But play-things such as that pleas'd Man of yore...
>
> Here we still treasure up as rarities
> Two of those efforts. One of them a poem.
> Its author, who was wickedly conceited,
> And longed for personal celebrity,
> Was known as Homer.[2]

A third influence was Frigyes Karinthy (1887-1938), whose extraordinary and insufficiently-known short novels *Faremido* (*Utazás Faremidóba*, 1916)[3] and *Capillaria* (*Capillária*, 1921) describe, respectively, a world of beings made up of inorganic material who have yet discovered the secrets of nature, and an undersea matriarchal world of powerful women and subservient men. The inhabitants of Faremido (whose name is derived from the solfège scale, which forms the basis for their [sung] language) are really *robots*, a name invented only a few years later by the Czech playwright Karel Čapek in his 1920 play *R.U.R.*

2 ■ Madách Imre. *The Tragedy of Man* [*Az ember tragédiája*]. Translated by Charles Henry Meltzer and Paul Vajda. Budapest: Vajna and Bokor, 1933, 188-189.

3 ■ The dates in parentheses refer to the publications in the original. Both novels have been published in English as *Voyage to Faremido. Capillaria.* Translated by Paul Tabori. Budapest: Corvina, 1965.

Setting his unpublished but largely completed trilogy aside, in 1935 Szathmári turned to a new project, *Voyage to Kazohinia*,[4] based on the second novel in the trilogy. Karinthy had written his two novellas as the fifth and sixth parts of *Gulliver's Travels*. In *Kazohinia* Szathmári uses a similar device, though the island known as Kazohinia is modeled in many respects on Gulliver's fourth voyage. The place of the Houyhnhnms is taken by the Hins, an entirely rational people, who have harnessed technology to do their bidding and who hold all things in common; the place of the Yahoos is taken by the Behins, a dirty, ill-favored collection of buffoons and madmen, prone to violence and given to totally irrational behavior. The Behins live in reservations, away from the Hins, on whom they are fully dependent. While Swift's Houyhnhnms are notable for their friendship and benevolence (as Gulliver is fond of pointing out), the Hins are devoid of human emotions, their relationships determined entirely by convenience and necessity. They do not talk if they have nothing to say and, having no vices, have no bonds of virtue either. In short, they are the products, the logical conclusions as it were, of perfect collectivism, much as the Behins are manifestations of manic individualism.

The history of the novel *Kazohinia* is almost as arresting as its extraordinary contents. Like Karinthy, whose use of the solfège scale in *Faremido* was based on François Sudre's 1827 planned international language Solresol (a language that could be sung as well as spoken, thereby combining melody and language),[5] Szathmári became interested as a teenager in Esperanto, a constructed international language of a quite different character, designed by its creator Ludwik Lazarus Zamenhof as a second language for everyone, and at that time already spoken by thousands of people across the world. It is unclear whether he wrote *Kazohinia* in Esperanto or in Hungarian (some say Hungarian, but Szathmári himself suggests Esperanto).[6] What we do know is that his first attempts at publication were in Esperanto: he sent the manuscript of his novel to the Esperanto publisher Literatura Mondo, in Budapest; it was accepted for publication, but the deteriorating economic and political situation led to the closing of Literatura Mondo before the novel could appear. He now (apparently) translated the Esperanto text into Hungarian and was successful in finding a publisher, who published it, albeit in a truncated form due to the depredations of the military censor, in 1941. The Second World War over, a

4 ■ First published in Hungarian as *Gulliver utazása Kazohiniában* ["Gulliver's Travels in Kazohinia"] in 1941 in a highly truncated version. All subsequent publications in Hungarian bear the title *Kazohinia*.

5 ■ Paolo Albani and Berlinghiero Buonarroti. *Aga Magèra Difùra: Dizionario delle lingue immaginarie*. Bologna: Zanichelli, 1994, 382-383.

6 ■ Vilmos Benczik. "Postparolo." Postscript to *Perfekta Civitano*. Budapest: Hungaria Esperanto-Asocio, 1988. See also Sándor Szathmári. "Mia vivo kaj verkado." Epilogue to *Mašinmondo*. La Laguna: Régulo, 1964, 179.

second edition, with the cuts restored, appeared in 1946, and a third in 1957. In 1975 an English translation by Inez Kemenes was published in Budapest by Corvina Press. This translation was recently (2012) re-edited and republished in the U.S. by New Europe Books.

It was not until 1958 that the novel finally appeared in Esperanto, with a preface by the Esperanto poet and former proprietor of Literatura Mondo, Kálmán Kalocsay. It was followed in 1962 by *Maŝinmondo* ("Machine World"), a collection of short stories, whose titular novella describes a world (featuring the British novelist and futurist H. G. Wells) in which humans, having entrusted machines with the well-being of their country, gradually find themselves displaced by these machines, whose rationalist interpretation of the notion of "well-being" causes the humans to rebel and the machines to annihilate them. If the story looks back to Čapek's *R.U.R.*, it looks forward to today's emerging field of machine ethics, in which specialists in artificial intelligence are raising more and more questions about the need to add ethical constraints to machines increasingly assuming functions formerly carried out by humans.

From the 1930s on, until his death in 1974, Szathmári remained active in the Esperanto movement, primarily as a writer.[7] With its continuous tradition of speakers and literary production, spanning a hundred years, the Esperanto movement provided a devoted audience for him, free of the constraints that publication in Hungarian, under a repressive regime, was apt to impose. *Kazohinia* became an important milestone in the history of the Esperanto novel, not least because its origins lay largely outside the Esperanto literary tradition. It led ultimately to a flowering of science-fiction writing in Esperanto (the late sci-fi writer Harry Harrison was an Esperantist), and also to a significant increase in the production of novels in Esperanto in general. In the early 1990s, thanks to the efforts of the Esperantist Éva Tófalvi, the manuscript of *Hiába* was rediscovered, and the third part of the trilogy, *In Vain: The Future*, was published in Hungarian. *Perfekta civitano* ("A Perfect Citizen"), a complete collection of Szathmári's short stories, gathered from various Esperanto periodicals, was published in 1988.

Much controversy surrounds the interpretation of *Kazohinia*.[8] Some see in it a utopian blueprint—a vision, in the world of the Hins, of a perfect collectivism. They point to the absurdity of Gulliver's arguments in the face of those of the Hins—failing to recognize that such absurdity is essential to the satiric edge: Gulliver's very name reflects gullibility and veritas. In a postscript to the English translation of 1975, Dezső Keresztury even goes so far as to call the novel "a

7 ■ Geoffrey Sutton. *Concise Encyclopedia of the Original Literature of Esperanto (1887-2007)*. New York: Mondial, 2008, 305-311.

8 ■ See for instance Ralph Dumain. Reflections on the Kazohinia Seminar, 2013, <http://utopianseminar.commons.gc.cuny.edu/2013/03/20/>.

prophetic image of the perfect life Szathmári holds up to a healthy mankind as an example." The purpose of the vision of the Behins, Keresztury goes on to say, "was to lay additional emphasis on the beauty and truth of the Hins' perfect way of life." While, to give him his due, Keresztury acknowledges the satirical nature of the novel, he surely misreads Szathmári's tone—perhaps in a misplaced zeal to locate the author in a Marxist tradition (Vilmos Benczik's afterword to *Perfekta civitano* calls *Kazohinia* "anti-capitalist satire"). In his 1964 introduction to *Maŝinmondo* William Auld praises the novel as a major satirical work, pointing out that satire bears an ironic relationship to reality: the satirist aims not so much at presenting a coherent fictional world view as at seizing targets of opportunity to disparage and belittle conventional assumptions. It is enough to recognize Szathmári's own assertion of his indebtedness to Madách and of his strict upbringing as a Protestant in a largely Catholic Hungary to become aware of his sense of the ineradicability of Original Sin. Like Milton, with his statement of the doctrine of the fortunate fall, Szathmári is fascinated by humankind's precarious oscillation between good and evil.

The satiric tone is constantly present. In a revealing essay entitled "Klarigoj al *Vojaĝo al Kazohinio*" ["Clarification of *Voyage to Kazohinia*"], published in the Esperanto magazine *Sennacieca Revuo* in 1960, two years after the publication of the Esperanto version, Szathmári writes:

> [i]n today's civilization, technical equipment should make available to humankind an abundant, tranquil life without fear. The more productivity rises, the larger the percentage of the work of society that goes to preparation for war. Today's wars profit neither the victor nor the loser. War brings only suffering and loss to all. Material gain can result only from peace and work. Why, then, does the world make war, or at least threaten with war, today, when war has long since lost its material goal? The cause is the fact that, still today, humans have the same instincts that they had in prehistoric times; when production was lacking, people ate only what nature gave them and what they were obliged to acquire by struggling and fighting against nature and against one another. In the present time, we are incited to conflict only by our atavistic instincts, which are already superfluous, or unhelpful, but which we cannot drive out of our nature. Love, hate, etiquette, style, gambling, art, collective passions (for example philately), political parties, religious antagonisms—all function only to assuage our instinct to fight, to dominate others. Even class and national repression have no material goal: they aim at repression for its own sake.

It is hard, not to say absurd, to take such assertions merely at face value: Szathmári is advancing a proposition, a place to begin an argument, rather than a vision of the future. Only a satirist could find a connection between stamp collecting and eternal perdition, and only the unobservant could be taken in by it.

The proposition that Szathmári advances is crucially important. It brings us back to machine ethics: as we become increasingly capable of shaping our environment, or of having machines do so, what kind of world do we wish to construct, and how, given the obstacles, can we go about constructing it? Szathmári offers no answers, any more than Swift does. Swift's Gulliver, returning to England, spends "at least four hours every day" conversing with his horses; Szathmári's Gulliver worries about how to pay the insurance company back for his life insurance. Perhaps we can do better. ❧

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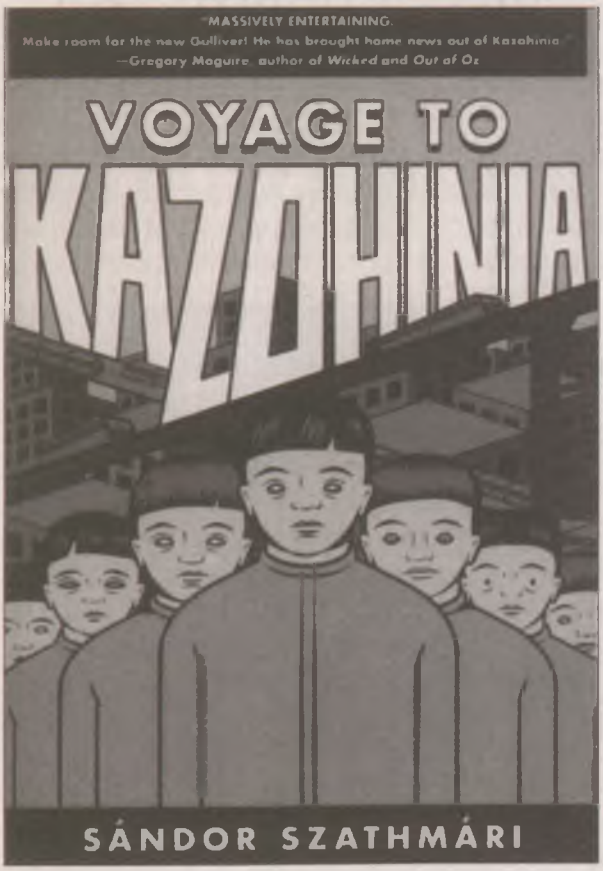
MTA KÖNYVTÁR ÉS INFORMÁCIÓS KÖZPONT

English Title



Sándor Szathmári
VOYAGE TO KAZOHINIA

New Europe Books has republished Sándor Szathmári's 1930s-era classic, which has been praised as a singular blend of Gulliver's Travels *and* Brave New World. *A re-edited edition of the translation that appeared decades earlier in Hungary (Corvina, 1975), it marks the first time the book has been widely accessible in a major world language outside of Hungary. New Europe Books completed the copy-editing of Inez Kemenes's deft translation, which was done incompletely at the time for purposes of distribution mostly within Hungary.*

*"*Voyage to Kazohinia *is among the secret treasures of Hungarian literature, and it is really about time it appeared on the world stage. As if Bradbury and Orwell had been mixed with fresh wild berries, it was so ahead of its time that its time still hasn't caught up. Perhaps now it will."*

Miklós Vámos, author of The Book of Fathers

Bernadett Sulyok

Visual Poetry and Magyar Műhely

A Segment of Contemporary Experimental Literature

After the defeat of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, several young members of the Hungarian intelligentsia immigrated to Western Europe, many of them settling down in France. They became the "founding fathers" of the journal *Magyar Műhely* ("Hungarian Workshop"), which was established in Paris in May, 1962. The journal celebrated its 50th anniversary last year, a momentous event that was accompanied by a major exhibition at the Petőfi Literary Museum, Budapest. The exhibition, which bore the title *Betűk kockajátéka* ("The Dice Game of Letters"), was opened on 10 May, 2012. A two-day conference was held and readings, concerts, and performances were organized. An exhibition catalogue was also compiled. The diversity of the events was intended to reflect the full range of a journal that over the course of several decades has grown increasingly broad in its range. It has functioned as a literary, artistic, and critical journal and a forum for the publication of contemporary literature and experimental fine arts albums. It has also nurtured a sense of community among the artists and authors who have published in it, and it regularly organizes meetings to discuss both theoretical issues and one another's works.

Bernadett Sulyok

Literary historian, currently serves as a museologist of the Manuscript Archive of the Petőfi Literary Museum. In 2008 she completed her doctorate at Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, in which she offers narratological analyses of some of the novels of János Kodolányi. She has published innumerable essays and reviews in a variety of Hungarian literary journals. In 2012, together with art historian László Sípos, she organized and curated the exhibition The Dice Game of Letters—Five Decades of the Parisian *Magyar Műhely at the Petőfi Literary Museum.*

Alpár Bujdosó, who at that time lived in Vienna, joined founding editors Pál Nagy and Tibor Papp in 1973. They played a decisive role in shaping the style of the journal until 1996. Due to the change of regimes, in 1989-1990 the journal was finally able to return to Hungary, but the connection with Paris and Vienna was not lost, and Nagy, Papp, and Bujdosó gradually handed over the tasks of the editorship to a younger generation. Since its establishment in 1995, the Magyar Műhely Alapítvány ("Hungarian Workshop Foundation") has vouched for the legal background necessary for the publication of the journal

A room of the exhibition with covers of Magyar Műhely. *The monitor in the center features a meeting of the artists of the Parisian* Magyar Műhely *in Szombathely, Hungary. Photograph by Csaba Gál*

and the works published by Magyar Műhely Kiadó ("Hungarian Workshop Publisher"). Magyar Műhely Galéria ("Hungarian Workshop Gallery") opened its doors in 2004 to provide space for various contemporary solo artists as well as groups seeking to introduce themselves to the larger public. The journal also represents computational and media art and other peripheral spheres of *belles lettres* and the visual arts.

The first period of *Magyar Műhely* lasted until 1970. At the time the primary concern of the editors was to provide an opportunity for Hungarian authors who had been marginalized for political reasons under the Socialist regime to publish.

Special issues were devoted to Sándor Weöres (the 7th and 8th issues, published in 1964), Lajos Kassák (the 13th issue, published in 1965), and Milán Füst (the 23rd and 24th issues, published in 1967). Füst's essay "Szexuál-lélektani elmélkedések" ("Musings on Sexual-Psychology"), which at the time was considered scandalously open-minded, appeared in a special issue (the 37th issue, published in 1970). Parallel with the special issue celebrating the 50th birthday of Weöres, Magyar Mühely Kiadó published a volume of his poetry entitled *Tüzkút* ("Well of Fire"), which had not previously been published in Hungary. Because of Weöres' success in Paris, the Hungarian publishing house Magvető ("Seed-Sower") reconsidered publication of the work and it came out a few months later in Budapest, a sign that Weöres had again become an officially tolerated poet in Hungary. From the outset, the editors of *Magyar Mühely* were striving to represent immigrant authors together with those living in Hungary in order to generate a fruitful dialogue between people living on either side of the iron curtain, while the June 1968 special issue (the 27th) on Structuralism indicates their interest in contemporary Western European literary theory. In 1966, the fourth year of the journal's existence, Nagy and Papp trained themselves as printers to establish the private printing office of *Magyar Mühely*, a clear sign of their interest in typography and the formal characteristics of various verse forms. However, due to the May 1968 Paris student riots and the workers' general strike that followed, their printing office soon went bankrupt. Unexpected support came when Ioan Cuşa, a poet, editor, and publisher of Romanian origins who at the time was living in Paris, offered them part-time positions as printer's assistants in 1970 and continued to be the primary supporter and patron of the journal until his death in 1981.

The two 1971 issues (the 38th and 39th) are anthologies that mark the end of the first period of the journal. These issues contain poems, prose works, and essays that had been written over the course of the preceding decade. The editorial introduction, which contains the remark, "in times to come, the editors intend to deal solely with authors and works that seek and find novel manners of expression,"[1] indicates a conceptual turning point, as it makes evident that from that point on *Magyar Mühely* explicitly provided a platform for Avant-garde tendencies. Special issues on James Joyce (1973) and Hungarian writer and Joyce translator Miklós Szentkuthy (1974) followed. Two special issues were devoted to Avant-garde architect, artist, and writer Miklós Erdély (the 67th issue, published in 1983, and *Erdély Miklós-szimpózium* ["Miklós Erdély Symposion"], the 110th and 111th issues, published in 1999). As of 1972 *Magyar Mühely* increasingly widened its scope and organized annual or biennial meetings in Marly-le-Roi (near Paris) and Hadersdorf (near Vienna), where artists who worked with the journal were able to discuss

1 ■ *Magyar Mühely*, 38, 1971, 3.

PHOTOGRAPH BY CSABA GAL

Works in the first room of the exhibition. The inscription on the wall reads: "Avant-garde is not a style, but a mode of existence or attitude."

PHOTOGRAPH BY CSABA GAL

Works in the exhibition

theoretical issues, produce collective artworks, and hold performances. Friends of Magyar Műhely (later renamed the Lajos Kassák Circle of Magyar Műhely) established fruitful professional and personal ties with other Western European organizations of émigré artists, including the Mikes Kelemen Circle in Holland, the Szepsi Csombor Literary Circle in London, and the Péter Bornemissza Society in Vienna, among others.

The third period of *Magyar Műhely* commenced with the spread of electronic poetry and prose in the 1980s. At this time the majority of the works were already "written" using slide projectors, video recorders, and computers, which resulted in the creation of Gesamtkunstwerks and intermediary works of art, while artists pursuing Concrete Poetry, Lettrism, and Phonic Poetry also gained ground. From the end of the 1970s the artists of *Magyar Műhely* were regular presenters at international poetry festivals, such as the festivals organized by the French Association Polyphonix in several places, both in Europe and beyond. The exhibition organized by the Petőfi Literary Museum celebrates the rich history of *Magyar Műhely*, while it also provides a glimpse into the complexity of the visual poetry created by its members. A fine example of this is Papp's 1994 *Disztichon Alpha* ("Distich Alpha"), the first automatic Hungarian poem generator. The interactive computer programme is capable of generating 16 billion distichs.

Experimental Literature and Visual Poetry in the Twentieth Century

In the first decades of the twentieth century, the emergence of Avant-garde tendencies brought about a radical change in art theory, as the relevance of mimetic art, a primary principle of Aristotelian aesthetics, began to be thrown increasingly into question. Artists no longer found it necessary to imitate reality in their works. Parallel to this tendency, the previously clear-cut boundaries between the fine arts and literature were blurred. In the 1960s and 1970s literary texts were disarticulated first by visual and Concrete Poetry, then by Lettrism, which led to new constructions. These novel genres and waves of experimental literature, however, were received with noticeable antipathy. As Hungarian writer and artist Bálint Szombathy puts it in his essay "Irodalmon innen és túl" ("Literature from Here and Beyond"), "[l]iterary scholars encountering the Avant-garde take notice of the new visual experience with a nod of approval, but they understand the words as belonging to literature and the images as pertaining to the visual arts. This division is a natural consequence of the theoretical tradition of the preceding centuries. [...] But the deconstruction we experience today is accompanied by a reorganization as well."[2]

Regarding various forms of visual poetry, Nagy's monograph, *Az irodalom új műfajai* ("New Genres of Literature"), offers a threefold classification.[3]

The first category is comprised of the *carmina figurata*, i.e. figural visual poems (the visual poetry of the Middle Ages and calligrams), the second includes visual poems of the mandala type (circular or quadrate-shaped poems organized around a center, such as Papp's logo-mandalas), while poster poems and the visual poems of the Lettrist type belong to the third category (for example Kassák's 1921 letter poem, "Tipográfia" ["Typography"] or László L. Simon's *met AMorf ózis* ["met AMorph osis"]).

Writing on the visual poetry in *Magyar Műhely*, Hungarian philosopher András Bohár specifies three major tendencies.[4] Some authors have chosen to draw on traditional visual poetry and have interpreted it in a creative way (Ákos Székely, István Mészáros, Emőke Lipcsey, Mária Hegedűs, and Károly Bari, to name only a few), others have produced variants that belong to the fields of Conceptual and Concrete Poetry (such as András Petőcz, L. Simon, János Géczi, and Szombathy), and others have made creative use of intermediality and technology in their art (for example editors Papp, Nagy, and Bujdosó).

Nagy dates the twentieth-century Renaissance of visual poetry back to 1897, the year in which the galley proof of Stéphane Mallarmé's poem "Un coup de Dés jamais n'abolira le Hasard" ("A Throw of the Dice Will Never Abolish Chance") was completed. Due to Mallarmé's death in 1898, the volume was never published in its original form. It was only in 1980, when *d'atelier*, the French-language sister journal of *Magyar Műhely*, published the facsimile edition[5] of the original galley proof in collaboration with French Avant-garde journal *Change*.[6] The book was edited by Mitsou Ronat, a member of the French National Research Institute. Papp implemented the printing design, and internationally acclaimed visual poets, such as Philippe Dôme, Jean-Pierre Faye, Rodolfo Hinostroza, Claude Minière, Bruno Montels, Nagy, and Jacques Roubaud, contributed visual poems and essays.[7]

Nagy formulated his views on the use of the term Neo-avant-garde in Hungarian literary criticism, which he found inherently problematic, in a 1998 conference presentation entitled "Avantgárdról avantgárdra" ("From Avant-Garde to Avant-Garde"). In his paper he asserts that "the concept of the Neo-

2 ■ Bálint Szombathy. "Irodalmon innen és túl" ["Literature from Here and Beyond"]. *Új Symposion*, 11-12, 1987, 20-22.

3 ■ Pál Nagy. *Az irodalom új műfajai* ["New Genres of Literature"]. Budapest: ELTE BTK Magyar Irodalomtörténeti Intézete-Magyar Műhely, 1995, 89.

4 ■ András Bohár. *Avantgárd '89–99 = Kánon és olvasás – Kultúra és közvetítés* ["Avant-Garde 1998-1999: Canon and Reading—Culture and Mediation"]. Eds. László Bengi and Szilvia Sz. Molnár. Vol. II. FISZ Könyvek 16/b [Association of Young Authors Books 16 / b]. Budapest: Fiatal Írók Szövetsége, 2002, 117-132.

5 ■ Stéphane Mallarmé. Un coup de Dés jamais n'abolira le Hasard. Présenté par Mitsou Ronat. Réalisé par Tibor Papp. Paris: Change errant / d'atelier, 1980.

6 ■ Pál Nagy. *Az irodalom új műfajai* ["New Genres of Literature"], 111.

7 ■ Pál Nagy. *Journal in-time: él(e)tem* ["Journal In-Time: My Life"]. Vol. III. Budapest: Kortárs, 48.

avant-garde, which by the way has been transplanted into Hungarian literary criticism and literary history from Italian Marxist literary criticism by Miklós Szabolcsi, is absurd and useless."[8] In contrast, *Magyar Műhely* defines Avant-garde in the following way: "every era has its own progressives (and conservatives), has more and less pronouncedly radical Avant-garde tendencies and authors. [...] Avant-garde [...] is primarily an authorial and artistic attitude; a stance. The compound 'Neo-avant-garde,' however, inherently contains pejorative connotations, as 'neo' implies repetition, reworking, and redundancy."[9] This is a major point of divergence between the artists of the *Magyar Műhely* and literary and art historians, for the *Magyar Műhely* artists see Avant-garde more as an attitude and a mode of existence than a style or a period of literary or art history.

In their visual poetry the point of departure for the *Magyar Műhely* artists has always been literature. They strive to expand the potentials of language by making use of visuality, audibility, and, subsequently, computer science. As opposed to meaning, they emphasize the sign-like nature of language and they locate the poet's task in the rearrangement of the system of language and, furthermore, in the task of evolving a system of symbols of a more progressive kind. In this proposed system, signs can take the form of letters, words, fragments of words, graphics, formulas, street signs, even map symbols, as indeed Papp's poem "Double Talk" illustrates clearly. Visual poems thus have an aesthetic value that is both idiomatic and visual, which naturally reduces the difference between the ways one perceives works of temporal and works of spatial art. When looking at visual poetry, both hemispheres of one's brain are engaged: the left hemisphere scans the text, while the right hemisphere scans the visual image.

Since Hungarian literature produced by Western émigré authors exists in another cultural and linguistic milieu, and the writers themselves tend to perceive their mother tongue through the filter of a second or third language, these texts often evince a (self-)consciousness of language that is much less pronounced in the works of non-émigré authors. This (self-)consciousness usually leads them to adopt a critical stance: texts of émigré literature are characteristically open to irony and demystification, and they also reflect on the (im)possibilities of expression and provide an amalgam of various literary and non-literary registers. Therefore, self-reflexivity is an innate component within the texture of visual poems.

Another major difference between poetry and visual poetry is that the syntactic structure of visual poems is fractured and the written form acquires meaning. In visual poems, the combinatorics of letters and words is eliminated

8 ■ Pál Nagy. *Journal in-time: él(e)tem* ["Journal In-Time: My Life"], 121.
9 ■ Pál Nagy. *Journal in-time: él(e)tem* ["Journal In-Time: My Life"], 122.

and the boundaries between words are lost, while words in communication with one another are arranged in playful constellations.[10]

Petőcz's term "visual-textual literature," which is also used by other *Magyar Műhely* artists, indicates that this form of literature is a meeting point between literature and visuality that represents the complexity of the textual and visual arts. Its complexity is also palpable in its preference for a variety of media (from rubber dolls to washbasins filled with water at poetic performances) and a variety of techniques, for instance elements of acoustic poetry. Among the various styles of visual poetry, visual-textual literature centers more on the text as such, as the text's visual characteristics often convey the information necessary for an understanding. The text becomes the source of the visual image, although it does not lose its semantic meanings. Texts of visual-textual literature are often truncated and fragmentary. Among their most common shared features are puns, allusions, foreign terms, large quantities of word sets, fragmented sentences, and verse paragraphs.[11]

In a review entitled "Képírók" ("Image Writers"), Áron Kibédi Varga writes with praise of the three albums, all published at the end of 1984 or at the beginning of 1985, of Bujdosó, Nagy, and Papp, the three major editors of *Magyar Műhely*. As Kibédi writes, "[y]ears of practice and technical and theoretical preparations led to Bujdosó's *Irreverzibilia Zeneon*, Nagy's *Journal In-Time* (1974-1984), and Papp's *Vendégszövegek 2, 3* ("Guest Texts 2, 3"), which are transitional highpoints of their oeuvres, as they are typographic works, *objet d'arts,* and visual-textual albums at the same time. [...] Visual image and written text share a borderline in these works: the image becomes legible and the text becomes visible."[12]

An Analysis of Three Visual Poems

Having contextualized visual poetry and delineated possible strategies of reading and interpreting, I would offer an analysis of three visual poems. The first is Papp's "Páros beszéd" ("Double Talk," Image on page 111), an offset from 1977, which was one of the works on display at *Betűk kockajátéka.*

10 ■ Mónika Dánél. *A közöttiség alakzatai – Magyar neoavantgárd szövegek poétikájáról = Kánon és olvasás – Kultúra és közvetítés* ["Figures In-Between—On the Poetics of Hungarian Neo-Avant-Garde Texts: Canon and Reading—Culture and Mediation"]. Eds. László Bengi and Szilvia Sz. Molnár. Vol. II. FISZ Könyvek 16/b [Association of Young Authors Books 16 / b]. Budapest: Fiatal Írók Szövetsége, 2002, 73-115.

11 ■ András Petőcz. *Dimenzionista művészet: Tamkó Sirató Károly költészeti törekvései a két világháború között, illetve annak hazai és nemzetközi megfelelői* ["Dimensionist Art: Károly Tamkó Sirató's Poetry between the First and the Second World Wars and Its Hungarian and International Parallels"]. Budapest: Magyar Műhely, 2010, 116.

12 ■ Áron Kibédi Varga. "Képírók" ["Image Writers"]. *Új Látóhatár*, 3, 1986, 415-418.

The poem provides a striking example of what Petőcz writes regarding Papp's art. According to him, Papp understands texts and works pertaining to the visual arts as semi-erotic objects, living bodies that are taken "into the possession" of the artist at the very moment of their birth. For Papp, the examples of ardent lyricism represent literature as such.[13] The text is situated in the center of typographical and graphic signs, which do not hamper our readings of it, but rather add to the subtlety of our understanding.

double talk: your gracious knees have parted
a word of mine starting with v
yellowlight on the opposite partition wall—a varnished tart in the window-frame
morning row of bricks (écartement critique de fissuration)[14]
Keat's
teacher! you little whore! you will become an ice-creamed dart board!
a hatched shadow under your arm (pam-pam) the child wearing jeans
has a domestic servant again our poets tempt'n twitter—they weep over the moo-cow
reared on milk— —to their shapes, teacher! the shapely is the patron
whatnot
come for a horseback ride now
or should there be a suture on my neck?
I will never become a bishop(ric of Ladány)
yet, I will surmount her knees someday:
I will taste the crispate garden sorrel at her thighs for
bidden?
I have set the bush afire
that I see you ankles to breast
before the engine house, darkly no more.

The text has many layers that are connected by recurring words and motifs. It evokes a rendezvous but also the potential roles that a poet may play. These roles constitute allusions to a predecessor,[15] while the pejorative connotations of the expression "tempt'n twitter"[16] remind one of the superficial attitudes sometimes associated with poets. Another complex verbal pun conjures

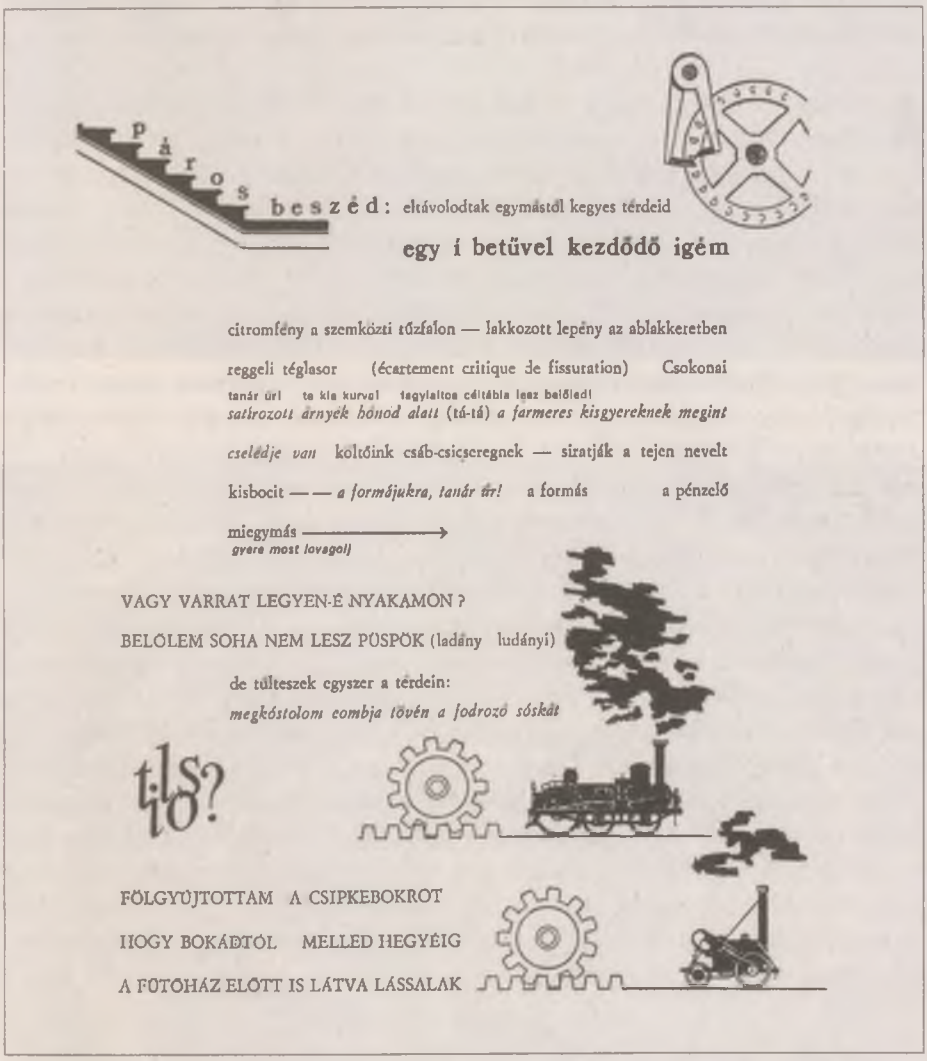
13 ■ András Petőcz. *Dimenzionista művészet: Tamkó Sirató Károly költészeti törekvései a két világháború között, illetve annak hazai és nemzetközi megfelelői* ["Dimensionist Art: Károly Tamkó Sirató's Poetry between the First and the Second World Wars and Its Hungarian and International Parallels"], 118.

14 ■ "critical distance from the fissure"

15 ■ The original alludes to the poet Mihály Csokonai Vitéz, whose name appears in a distorted form, as the correct way of spelling Csokonai plus the suffix –ig (meaning "until") would be Csokonaiig.

16 ■ The word in the original, "csáb-csicseregnek," is an invented compound word consisting of the truncated version of "csábít" (tempt) and "csicsereg" (twitter).

priesthood and a city. The original plays on the word "püspök" ("bishop") in the name of the city of Püspökladány in eastern Hungary. One notices a striking contrast between the graphic signs surrounding the text (a flight of stairs, a pair of compasses, a protractor, and steam engines), which can be



Tibor Papp. Double Talk *(1977)*
Offset print, paper, 33.5 x 25 cm. Photograph by Csaba Gál. Petőfi Literary Museum

interpreted as representations of technical civilization and mathematical precision, and the emotionally highly charged punctuation marks (exclamation marks and question marks) and the sometimes irregular layout of the text (the undulation of the word "tilos," or "for/bidden").[17] The last three lines are

emphasized by a larger font size and the use of upper case letters, while the expressions "set the bush afire" and "darkly no more" evoke Biblical connotations. The first refers to the meeting of God and Moses in Exodus, while the second recalls the longing of the Apostle Paul to see God "face to face." The poem offers a narrative in which the poetic "I" attempts to know both the lover and the true nature of the everyday things of this world.

According to Petőcz, Nagy's visual poems show a less accentuated identification with contemporary literary problems and trends, or at least his lyricism is more discrete than that of Papp. In "imago!" (1978, Image on the next page), the second work to be analyzed in detail, Papp visualizes human thinking. This visual poem is the first in a four-poem series in which Papp pays homage to Hungarian poet Attila József (1905-1937). The work itself has a concentric, oval form, which evokes the shape and the convoluted surface of the human brain.[18] The text can be read along three concentric circles that form three "guiding threads." In English translation the outermost thread reads: "imago! mago! mound magic benumbing subconscious frosts 'I thought he would pay a goodwill visit' (he thought he had paid a goodwill visit) ... il viendrait pour l'amour d'une voix ... ignescent[19] white sun white (insert parendthesis here)." The word in the original, "bezárójel," is an invented word that refers to the closing parenthesis ("bezár" means "close," while "zárójel" is "parenthesis"), hence the word "parendthesis" in the translation. The thread in the middle reads: "sticky duckweed amnion duckwalk dribbles drabbles in apollo cinema sells water forewaters he who sees the mote sticking holes tight shirt collar birthmark break-neck death by drowning trope could have done him in with the rope anger boiling inside him could have been endre ady andrew the second joseph the first forbidden lilac tights men send their retention salaries home gap." The outermost thread reads: "at night I imagined taking the gas-tube into my mouth getting a long sniff and taking a swig which would end it all it felt great to take big breaths I am alive my head is still on my neck the train has not cut it off[20] in my view this states the facts what do you say how splendidly I live here thinking about the time spent in the mother's body think about the smelly bedpan."

17 ■ It is "tilos" in the original, found in the lower left side of the Image of the poem.

18 ■ András Petőcz. *Dimenzionista művészet: Tamkó Sirató Károly költészeti törekvései a két világháború között, illetve annak hazai és nemzetközi megfelelői* ["Dimensionist Art: Károly Tamkó Sirató's Poetry between the First and the Second World Wars and Its Hungarian and International Parallels"], 123.

19 ■ The word in the Hungarian, "izsó," sounds like the world "izzó," or ignescent, but could also be a reference to nineteenth-century Hungarian sculptor Miklós Izsó.

20 ■ Attila József died in 1937 when he was hit by a train. His death was long thought a suicide, though some have contended that it was an accident.


Photograph by Csaba Gal

Installations and visual poetry in the third room of the exhibition

Pál Nagy. imago! *(1978)*
Offset print, paper, 42 x 59.5 cm. Photograph by Csaba Gál. Petőfi Literary Museum

Nagy guides the reader through his poet-predecessor's "cerebral labyrinth," mapping József's poetic oeuvre and offering an interpretation of József's works by selecting excerpts which he in turn intertwines with his own texts. His homage to József serves as a way of posing questions regarding his own personal existence. I interpret "imago!" as a web of free associations, a method frequently used in psychoanalysis, which unfolds through the evocation of a series of words and phrases that usually share similar phonetic forms. This is the connection between "sticky duckweed," "duckwalk dribbles drabbles," and the distorted locutions, such as "he who sees the mote sticking holes." This fictitious locution is made up of several existing ones: "he sees the mote in his brother's eye and not the beam in his own" and "always picking holes," with the difference that "picking" is replaced by "sticking" to resonate with "sticky." The invented locution of the original is similarly complex.

Various images of death, another central element in József's oeuvre, are also conjured, such as drowning, hanging, and a train accident. However, to counterpoise this, Nagy also evokes life in its plenitude, represented by the embryo in the mother's womb ("forewaters" and "the time spent in the mother's body"). Eminent kings of Hungarian history, Andrew II and Joseph I, are mentioned as parallels to poets József and Endre Ady (1877-1919), while "lilac tights" can be interpreted as a reference to "Körúti hajnal" ("Dawn on the Boulevard"), a poem by Hungarian poet Árpád Tóth (1886-1928). Nagy's original has the word "zsebkendő" (handkerchief) instead of "nyakkendő" (necktie), the word used in Árpád Tóth's poem: "A lilac tie in a shopfront began to recite / Some ballad."[21]

Regarding Bujdosó, Petőcz writes that, unlike Papp and Nagy, he works his texts in the literal sense of the word. The materials on which he applies the texts or which he places next to them are as important as the letters themselves. Several parts of Bujdosó's cyclic poem "Babiloniaca" ("Babyloniaca")[22] are engraved in clay. The text is given a body and a substance. He also uses X-ray photographs, facial outlines, and masks, and of the three poets he shows the greatest interest in history.[23] Bujdosó's 1986 "Bűvös kocka" ("Magic Cube," Image on the next page) was chosen as the emblem of the exhibition at the Petőfi Literary Museum, and therefore figures on the cover of the exhibition

21 ■ See Adam Makkai, ed. *In Quest of the Miracle Stag: The Poetry of Hungary*. Volume I. Budapest: Tertia Könyvkiadó, 2000, 604. Tóth's poem was translated by George Szirtes. One could also translate the lines "A necktie in a shop window / sprang into a lilac song."

22 ■ A reference to Hellenistic-era Babylonian writer Berossus's *Babyloniaca*, The History of Babylonia in three books.

23 ■ András Petőcz. *Dimenzionista művészet: Tamkó Sirató Károly költészeti törekvései a két világháború között, illetve annak hazai és nemzetközi megfelelői* ["Dimensionist Art: Károly Tamkó Sirató's Poetry between the First and the Second World Wars and Its Hungarian and International Parallels"], 124-125.

Alpár Bujdosó. Magic Cube *(1986)*
Mixed techniques, 5.8 × 5.8 × 5.8 cm.
Photograph by Csaba Gál.
Petőfi Literary Museum

catalogue. Bujdosó chose a unique way to give the text a spatial dimension and "objectify" it: he fashioned it on a Rubik's Cube, sticking one fragment of the text on each of the six faces, thus multiplying the number of possible readings. The fragments of the text, the incomplete words and sentences, tempt one to arrive at ontological interpretations: the fragments form parts of the shared referential system of European culture, but at the same time they also remind readers and viewers alike of their cognitive limitations and restrictions. Furthermore, every person has his or her own point of view, sociocultural background, and presuppositions, and this can be interpreted to mean that we live in parallel "cultural universes." The "Magic Cube" is an artistic expression of this plurality.

I would conclude by concurring with Bohár, who posed several relevant questions in his essay on the Hungarian reception of the Avant-garde, many of which are still pertinent today. According to Bohár, one can unquestionably trace the effect and the significance of various Avant-garde tendencies in individual oeuvres, primarily with regards to matters of poetic form, but not as a complex artistic interpretation of the world. Bohár, an aesthete and a visual artist who died at a tragically young age, contended that Hungarian folk traditions, late-Modernist tendencies, and the Avant-garde should be approached with due consideration of the peculiar features of each, as should the mutual influences between the three. He thereby urged people to foster a kind of "open cultural universe" in which individual works and the (possibly manifold) approaches to interpretation exist in parallel and in conversation with works and approaches of other kinds.[24] The success of the exhibition *Betűk kockajátéka*, as well as the long and distinguished history of *Magyar Műhely*, suggests that audiences remain open to his ideas. ❧

Translated by Eszter Krakkó

24 ■ András Bohár. *Avantgárd '89–99 = Kánon és olvasás – Kultúra és közvetítés* ["Avant-Garde 1998-1999: Canon and Reading—Culture and Mediation"]. Eds. László Bengi and Szilvia Sz. Molnár, 117-132.

Csilla E. Csorba

Points of Connection

Time and Space in the Photography of Péter Nádas

When the Petőfi Literary Museum began to plan its exhibition of works of photography by Péter Nádas, an exhibition that was held in part as a celebration of his 70th birthday, the Kunsthaus Zug in Switzerland was also organizing an exhibition as a tribute to his work. The exhibition in Zug, which was the product of years of preparatory work on Nádas' part, examined the relationships between image and text and the affinities of motifs in his textual and visual art. It also presented works by Hungarian artists and photographers, from the early modernist period to the present day, with whom Nádas feels a creative kinship. It constituted a kind gesture on the part of Nádas, who has won international acclaim as a writer, to introduce audiences in Switzerland to Hungarian visual arts and photography and offer them an opportunity to acquaint themselves with works of artists who represent a source of inspiration for him and a kind of cultural background to his photographic works.

Over the course of the past few decades the Petőfi Literary Museum has supported comparative research on the works and careers of Hungarian authors whose talents in other branches of the arts, their "Ingres' violin," have won them a place among other multitalented writers of international fame. Hungarian authors such as Károly Kisfaludy, Mór Jókai, Géza Csáth, László

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studied Art History at Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest. In 1996 she accepted a position as Assistant Director of the Petőfi Literary Museum and in 2005 she became the Director. She is the head of the Museology and Educational Section of the Hungarian Association of Literary History and a leading member of the Alliance of National Public Collections. She has been given a number of awards, including the prize awarded by the Budapest General Assembly for contributions to the cultural life of the capital (2010) and the Toldy Ferenc Prize (2010). An earlier version of this essay was published in Hungarian as "Kapcsolódások: Nádas Péter fotográfiái időben és térben." "... Mit tesz a fény...": Nádas Péter fotográfiái, 1959-2003. *Budapest: Petőfi Irodalmi Múzeum, 2012, 5-11.*

Nagy, Dezső Tandori, János Háy, and Attila Bartis can be placed alongside such luminaries as William Blake, Victor Hugo, Leo Tolstoy, Émile Zola, Hermann Hesse, and Günter Grass. The results of this research, which at the moment the Museum is hoping to make part of an international exhibition in 2014, cast light on the shared creative processes and habits of many of the most influential figures of Hungarian literature and other literary traditions, offering perspectives from which to consider the relationships between these branches of the sister arts in different national and international contexts and glean insights into the ways in which individual writers relate to the visual arts.

Péter Nádas. Self-Portrait Using the Linhof-Technika Camera II *(1959 / 2011)*

Many thought-provoking essays have been published on the works of Hungarian poets and novelists who have flirted with the visual arts. Gradually an increasing amount of attention has also been given to the photograph, both as a complement to, for instance, works of imaginative literature and simply as a mode of artistic expression. Over the course of the past two decades it has become common practice to publish albums of photographs by writers who have won prominence as novelists or poets, and often albums of photography contain prefaces by well-known writers.

French writer Michel Tournier once made the contention that if a writer is also a photographer, there is no need for either of the two media to be seen as subordinate to the other. This is particularly true when the writer/photographer in question has pursued both as an occupation, as Nádas, for instance, has. Though in the work of Nádas one could speak both of his manner of making and his manner of using photographs, in either case the visual depiction is by no means subordinate to the textual narrative. The precise planning of his photographs and Nádas' ability to seize the shards of a broken moment enable one to sense that he understands every aspect of the creation of a picture. He knows the raw materials, the techniques, and the formal criteria of a good photograph, and he understands dimensions of a visual composition that lie beyond the mere creation of a picture. For Nádas, light is the point of departure

Péter Nádas. Stormy Day *(1984 / 2011)*

Péter Nádas. The Tree (Large Series I), *(2000-2001)*

Péter Nádas. Glowing Details *(2000)*

Péter Nádas. Glowing Details *(1999-2003)*

and the point of arrival of both. He knows light in all the moments of the day. He knows the afternoon sunlight shining in through the shutters, the light at daybreak slipping through the narrow slit by the velvet curtains, the spectacle of moonlight broken into rigid angles and planes, the reflected light of streetlamps shining off the wet, dark asphalt, and the tender shades of eventide, and he is able to capture the mysterious and sublime flicker of images in the mind's eye at the touch of light from an unknown source, images that awaken an inner sense of rejoicing.

Péter Nádas. Light Coming In *(1985 / 2011)*

Nádas' work as a photographer is a significant chapter in the history of photography in Hungary. His eye for shading, angle, perspective, and moment enables him to create photographs that are as much redolent impressions as they are depictions. His photographic oeuvre invites reflection on the works of Alfred Stieglitz (1864-1946), the photographer often credited with having created the first abstract photographic works of art. Stieglitz was one of the defining figures of the history of the art of photography, a photographer whose ideas and compositions exerted a decisive influence both on the practices of photography and on its reception as an art. Without his contributions, the photographic art of the first half of the twentieth century would not have been what it was. In part as consequences of his work, photographers' clubs were founded, journals of photography were launched, and both publishing houses and galleries were created devoted to the art of photography.

In the first part of his career, Stieglitz was fascinated by the effects of light and the effects of shifts and breaks in lighting on mood and atmosphere. He took captivating photographs of city streets shimmering in rainwater or snow. In the last 15 years of his life, however, he distanced himself both from the urban environment of Fifth Avenue and Wall Street and from his earlier pictorial style. He lived, something of a recluse, in his home next to Lake George, where he focused on his immediate surroundings. His series of photographs contain numerous depictions of the white wooden house in the middle of the overgrown meadow, sometimes seeming almost to sink beneath snow drifts, other times glimmering in the blinding noonday sun. Sometimes the photographs were taken

ten years apart. The intimate landscapes gradually were replaced by almost abstract images drawing on contrasts between black and white. The poplars surrounding the house—a tree that has a short lifespan from the botanical point of view—seem to age with him. They become another one of the subjects of his photographs. Shimmering silver leaves on wind-swept boughs, dry, haggard branches, the foliage, which always seems the same yet is constantly in flux, these all enabled Stieglitz to create a variety of darker and lighter pictures developed with stern contrasts or gentle shifts. In an article on Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) published in the eleventh issue of the journal *Nyugat* ("West") in 1939, Hungarian literary historian Aladár Schöpflin (1872-1950) wrote on the passing of time: "we are speaking of man's relationship to time: how time forms people, how our initial transports of emotion fade or become immersed, how the years carve wrinkles not only into our faces, but also into our souls, and how this all conjures the flow of time." Perhaps Stieglitz was driven in his many attempts to depict the trees, which bore the furrows of the seasons on their bark, by the unspoken desire to create a portrait of death, to capture the last days of the majestic, aging poplars. And for Stieglitz, who seemed to become ever more engrossed by the details of the narrow surroundings of his life of withdrawal, the material world around him came to consist increasingly of elemental contrasts. He spent years studying the relationship between earth-bound shades and the lights and tones of the heavens.

In the early 1920s Stieglitz became increasingly absorbed by the idea of photographing clouds. In particular with the development of panchromatic photographic emulsion, which allowed him to capture a far wider range of colors, he took ever more photographs of clouds, and in 1925 he began to refer to these photographs as "equivalents." Often regarded as the first abstract photographs, the *Equivalents* constitute attempts to free photography of its documentary role and elevate it to the rank of the visual arts. As former *New York Times* art critic Andy Grundberg writes, "[the *Equivalents*] are intended to function evocatively, like music, and they express a desire to leave behind the physical world [...]. Emotion resides solely in form, they assert, not in the specifics of time and place."

A worthy heir to Stieglitz, Péter Nádas began taking photographs before he chose the written word as his primary form of artistic expression. The 100 photographs that were on display in the exhibition held at the Petőfi Literary Museum from October 2012 to February 2013, some of which were taken as early as 1959, offered an overview of his work as a photographer. They included a range of subjects as diverse as laughing girls dressed in traditional attire, documentary photographs, still lifes, landscapes, captivating abstract elegies, and, finally, the images with which Nádas began his career as a photographer: photographs of a stately wild pear tree, transfigured from day to day in the shifting light of the sun. ❧

Translated by Thomas Cooper

Lilla Erdei T.

Hungarian Applied Arts, a Cross-Section

The Applied Arts Exhibition Funded by the National Cultural Fund of Hungary Museum of Applied Arts, Budapest

In 2013 an exhibition was organized in the rotunda of the Museum of Applied Arts in Budapest of works by thirty contemporary artists, winners of the competition held, now for the seventh consecutive year, by the Applied Arts Committee of the National Cultural Fund of Hungary (Nemzeti Kulturális Alap—NKA). The exhibition lasted from 25 January to 10 March.

Over the course of the past several years, the committee has provided funding for applied artists as a call to create inspired and unique works of art. Contemporary artists were invited to submit portfolios of their works to the judges. The exhibition showcased a rich diversity of new works that were not focused on a single theme or concept. By providing a cross-section of applied art in Hungary as it is today, it offered samples of articulations through the media of art of the social and personal concerns of the artists. The exhibition represented a reasonably small yet colorful slice of contemporary Hungarian applied art, which continues in the twenty-first century to draw sustenance from earlier traditions. A rich palette of artworks came alive through bold combinations of materials, inventive crafting techniques inspired by playful experimentation, and varying responses to the rapidly changing times. The artists whose works were on exhibit reached beyond the trinity of conventional matter-form-function in conveying their perceptions of and responses to the world. Some of the artifacts went well beyond the borders of classical applied art and design and also incorporated elements of photography, musical instrument manufacturing, and performance art. The broad spectrum of works

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included practical household items, statuesque compositions, and snapshots of scenes from the performing arts. The materials that were used were similarly diverse, including textiles, ceramics, glass, metal, paper, various plastics, and materials taken from the world of nature.

This diversity notwithstanding, one could nonetheless discern recognizable themes that were the core concept of several works. One of these themes was play. Réka Csíkszentmihályi, for instance, created a series of wall-mounted logic games that could be interpreted as large interactive pictures. She used nails and assembled pieces from wood, iron, and glass to complete her handcrafted board games, *Solitaire*, *Memória* ("Memory"), and *Dáma* ("Checkers") (Image 3). Balázs Püspök constructed a multifunctional and convertible nursery furniture set, which includes a bench that transforms into a plotting board and a conventional shelf that can be turned over to form a swing or a box. The works crafted by Attila Norbert Dávid, toys with the aura of jewelry, blur the borders between children's play and the social rituals of adults. His necklaces, rattles, and dice also function as whistles. Péter Vető spent three years experimenting with sound before creating his work *Elektroakusztikus fretless gitár* ("Electroacoustic Fretless Guitar"), which mingles the tones and registers of the jazz guitar and the double-bass.

The theme of play also found manifestation in more subtle ways. The exhibition was characterized by experimentation with varying materials, shapes, and techniques, including the coupling of mismatched materials to achieve unique visual effects and even create a number of potential uses in the process. Arguably the series of works of Zsuzsanna Szentirmai-Joly entitled *Laokoon mozgó szövet* ("Laokoon Moving Texture") was among the most unusual compositions (Images 1). They consist of loosely joined plastic strips with jagged edges that stem from a rectangular base. The strips can be slid on top of one another in any direction to create a variety of three-dimensional shapes. These "textiles" can be made out of a variety of materials, and given their pliability they can be used to make a number of practical objects, such as openable and collapsible panel casings or screens used to divide interior spaces. The element of play is palpable in *Oxalis*, a collection of women's clothing designed by Zsanett Hegedűs, as well. Hegedűs created a line of garments the small details of which can be quickly altered, making them suitable attires for different occasions. Krisztián Ádám crafted his jewelry collection by using a special metalwork technology to accentuate the contrast between hard matter and ethereal form in his wafer-thin stainless-steel compositions (Image 2).

Another recurring idea was the contrast of light and shade. This contrast is a compositional element in a variety of forms that at first glance may seem distant from one another, including ceramics, glass art, design, and textil art. Bernadett Pager, for instance, wove reflective strings into modern tapestries. Her series of household textiles entitled *Of Course* was inspired by old photographs that had

been subsequently tinted. Béla Rex-Kiss further developed the concept of suspended ceiling systems by using elements of various plasticity, overlapping protrusions, and special LED effects to create his subdued lighting composition. Zsuzsanna Pannonhalmi's internally illuminated porcelain light objects are decorated with plant images and poem fragments. Her lamps and light sculptures of various shapes and sizes make fine decorative elements for intimate and spacious rooms alike. Judit Dobolán's translucent fused glass pictures, in which light shimmers through simplified macro-images and graphic symbol patterns, if built into walls, create particularly striking effects (Image 5).

Handicrafts and Hungarian folk traditions were recurring elements of the exhibition. Katalin Illés, for instance, used traditional techniques to make distinctive velour shoes, while Edit Kondor's *Porcelain Table Set Ensemble* (Image 4) consisting of 28 pieces, which was designed for use in fashionable fine dining settings, accentuates the delicate beauty of the material out of which it was made.

Benedek Balás went one step further in reviving Hungarian folk art in his series of graphics entitled *Magyarország* ("Hungary"), a contemporary interpretation of folk tales and traditional decorative patterns. The graphics feature references to the myth of the origins of the Hungarian people from a contemporary perspective, including the tale of the miracle stag, and incorporate traditional decorative elements such as images of singing birds. Károly Balanyi drew the attention of audiences to the desolate settings of rural areas, such as Kiskunság (Little Cumania, a region of south-central Hungary), patches of land left uncultivated, and the decaying remains of old farmsteads. He chose the fitting title *Magyar ugar* ("Hungarian Fallow") for his photomontage series, in which he combines photographic and enamel techniques.

Many of the textile artists experimented with combinations of established textile techniques and innovative new approaches. Ildikó Ardai fashioned a rethinking of traditional Székely dyed tapestries (Image 6). In her large tapestry, Ardai blended traditional materials, colors, and weaving techniques with a distinctively individual embossing technique, and her work offers a playfully fragmented version of the patterns characteristic of Csík county in Transylvania (Ciuc county in Romanian). Ildikó Somodi used the ikat dyeing technique in her *Annunciáció* ("Annunciation"), the theme of which is Angelic Salvation. In her work *Rétegek* ("Layers"), Emese Csókás mixed classical tapestry weaving with the unusual surfaces she produced from wrought metals.

The work of Margit Kányási Holb stood out from the rest of the exhibits. *Lepelparafrázis* ("Veil Paraphrase," Image 7) combines the mediums of textile and, by displaying a video, of performance art. The exhibition featured the work, which addresses the theme of the veil and the umbilical swathing, in the form of a video of Kányási Holb's performance and a single frame of the video fashioned into a sheet of textile. The textile image was produced using various techniques, such as felting, textile dyeing, printing, and application. The work consists of enormous

textile veils with window-like holes, which, if hanged one behind the other, allow one to see, from time to time, some of the details of the textile that hangs behind.

Each of the compositions offered glimpses into the mind of its creator. They enabled visitors to the exhibition to glean insights into the thoughts and feelings that preoccupied the artists and see the world as it is interpreted and transformed through the process of artistic creation. The exhibition as a whole provided a sample of captivating tendencies in the applied arts in Hungary today, offering audiences a chance to enjoy engaging combinations of tradition and innovation.

The judges of the Applied Arts Committee of NKA in 2011 were: graphic artist and head of Committee Krisztina Rényi, textile artist Hajnal Baráth, ceramist Mária Minya, gobelin artist Judit Nagy, art restorer Enikő Sipos, art historian Lászlóné Szepes, interior architect Béla Tildi, silversmith artisan Ilona Zidarics, and Committee secretary Mária Pusztai. The exhibition consisted of works by the following artists Krisztián Ádám, Ildikó Ardai, Károly Balanyi, Benedek Balás, Rozália Békés, Balázs Bitó, Teréz Borza, György Buczkó, Réka Csíkszentmihályi, Emese Csókás, Attila Norbert Dávid, Judit Dobolán, Marcell Égi, Ilona Harsay, Zsanett Hegedűs, Katalin Illés, Margit Kányási Holb, Edit Kondor, Ida Lencsés, Katalin Orbán, Bernadett Páger, Zsuzsa Pannonhalmi, Eleonóra Pasqualetti, Antal Pázmándi, Balázs Püspök, Béla Rex-Kiss, Ildikó Somodi, Zsuzsanna Szentirmai-Joly, Edit Szűcs, and Péter Vető. ❧

Translated by Lili Herczeg

Lilla Erdei T.

Century through the Needle: 110 years of Halas Lace

An Exhibition at the Budapest Museum of Applied Arts

From 13 December, 2012 to 24 March, 2013, the Museum of Applied Arts, Budapest paid tribute to the Halas lace tradition by holding an exhibition entitled *Cérnába szőtt évszázad: 110 éves a halasi csipke* ("Century through the Needle: 110 Years of Halas Lace"). (Image 1). The exhibition marked the 110th anniversary of the first exhibition of Halas lace, which was also held at the Museum of Applied Arts. It offered an overview of the eventful history of Halas lace over the past century.

The Emergence of the Halas Needle Lace Technique

The style was named after the town of Kiskunhalas in southern Hungary, where it was first developed. Unlike bobbin lace, needle lace, also known as *punta en aria* or "stitch in air," was essentially unknown in Hungary until the late nineteenth century. The first works of needle lace in Hungary were the creations of Árpád Dékáni and Mária Markovits. The basic concept took shape in the 1880s with the foundation of the State Lace-Makers' Workshop in what at the time was known as Upper Hungary (Felvidék), today Slovakia. Dékáni saw great potential in artisanal handcrafts, so he hoped to establish a similar workshop that would serve social, economic, and artistic functions in Kiskunhalas, in part to create work opportunities for poor women of the town who were left without work during the winter months. Part of his vision was to offer an alternative to the handmade and machine-made laces imported in great quantities by developing a novel Hungarian needle lace for the domestic market.

Árpád Dékáni (1861-1931) was a Transylvanian-born art teacher who played a key role in the movement to develop and support domestic industry. He was born and educated in Alsójára, a village in Transylvania (now Iara in Romania). He pursued technical studies in Budapest, but left to finish his higher education

Lilla Erdei T.
curated the exhibition Century through the Needle: 110 years of Halas Lace.

at the Hungarian Royal Drawing School (the precursor to today's Hungarian University of Fine Arts). During his college years he was influenced by prominent figures of the time, such as painters Bertalan Székely (1835-1910), Gusztáv Keleti (1834-1902), and Károly Lotz (1833-1904) and architect Frigyes Schulek (1841-1919). Upon graduation in 1886 he was offered a position as an art teacher in the Calvinist grammar school of Kiskunhalas, where he subsequently taught art for two decades and closely observed the domestic and international applied arts trends of the era. He also played an active role in the city's cultural and sport activities and collected items for his private ethnographic collection with his students, whom he encouraged to create new designs rather than content themselves with mechanical copies of folk artifacts done during art classes.

Mária Markovits (1875-1954), the other person credited with developing Halas lace, was a lingerie seamstress and one-time student of the Hungarian Royal State Women's College of Crafts. Her unusual talent became apparent during her apprenticeship. Markovits embroidered the surplices of the Matthias Church on commission of Archbishop Kolos Ferenc Vaszary and later won a gold medal at the Paris Exposition Universelle of 1900 with an upholstery set made for Emperor Franz Joseph I. Following her graduation from college, she respected the wishes of her ailing mother and returned to her hometown, Kiskunhalas, where she opened a custom lingerie shop.

Halas lace is the creation of cooperation between Dékáni and Markovits. Part of the novelty of the lace, which can be described as a tasteful mix of features of William Morris' Art Nouveau and Hungarian folk art traditions, lies in the accentuation of the distinctive techniques with which it is made and the inherent beauty of the patterns. Dékáni designed his first laceworks in early 1902. Looking back on this pivotal moment, he recalled, "in the spring of 1902 I had a conversation about laces with my mother, who was visiting me at the time. We both noted that there was no Hungarian needle lace. [...] My mother, who embroidered beautifully, agreed to craft my lace design. Both the design and the execution failed, but that lacework [...] marked the beginnings of Halas lace." Several months and failed experiments later he eventually paid a visit to Markovits. She spared no effort developing a technique that was suited to his designs. The key to the revolutionary solution was her use of the embroidery stitch, a technique she borrowed from undergarment making. This allowed her to create a more even texture suitable to the fine contours of Art Nouveau lacework compared to the loop stitch technique that had been used for centuries. In this Dékáni saw the reflections of his original idea and their collaborative work began.

This new type of lace was first presented to the public in 1902 at the Christmas exhibition, which was organized in the the National Museum of Applied Arts in Budapest by the Hungarian Association of Applied Arts. Based on the exhibition catalogue record, fifteen of Dékáni's laceworks were on display. They were made of thread and silk mesh lace with motifs of roses and

other flowers, buds, leaves, grapes, deer, swans, and crests and included a lace fan made for Alice Roosewelt. Experts soon took notice. The first written laudatory comment to survive was penned by the noted lace collector Antal Szmik, who wrote the following in the 1902 Christmas issue of *Budapesti Hírlap* ("Budapest Herald"):

> [o]ne of the corridor display cabinets features a rather fascinating collection of the Hungarian Halas lace crafted by the Kiskunhalas women's association. [...] Halas lace represents a new method of lace-making in our homeland, and this cannot be praised enough. Needle lace is virtually unknown in Hungary, and this makes the introduction of Halas lace all the more significant. While one can hardly tell the difference between machine-made lace and handmade lace, and the uses for the former change at the whims of fashion, nonetheless for those of refined tastes genuine lace remains precious and sought-after merchandise.

The Making of Halas Lace

The technique involves meticulous, precise handcrafting, and therefore requires clean hands with smooth skin. As peasant girls and women were accustomed to doing physical work and had rough hands, they had to have their fingertips polished in order to make them smooth so that the silk and thread would not get caught on dry skin. For the first ten years silk thread and linen thread was used. As of 1910 only bleached or unbleached linen thread of various thickness was used, at least up until 2006, when linen was replaced by knitting yarn.

Lace motifs are initially drawn on paper which is then placed with the drawing facing down onto a waxed linen sheet or a thin piece of cardboard and carefully traced. A transparent piece of colored paper is placed on this and several layers of textile provide a firm surface. Then the whole thing is stretched into a rectangular frame to tauten it. Then a thick thread is sewn onto this with stitches a few millimeters apart in order to trace the contours of the pattern. The unfinished lace is then taken off the frame along with the blueprint and underlayers of fabric and the upper end of the lace is fastened to a pillow stuffed with sand. The main pattern is sewn with embroidery stitches in a semi-stretched, part hand-held fashion. Other overlapping stitches must not be sewn into the base fabric, but only attached to the contour thread or to another "filling" stitch (hence the expression "stitch in air," used to describe needle lace as opposed to drawn-thread works). Once the lacework is complete, the stitches are detached from the drawing and bits of thread waste are removed. Some lace designers were familiar with needle lace techniques, while others were not. Depending on their abilities, they indicated the appropriate stitches to be used on the drawing or else simply let the lace-makers pick the desired stitching style, which explains the slight variations in finished items that were based on the same drawing.

The Early Years of Halas Lace

The stitching style, materials, and distinctive techniques that were used in the first decade were substantially different from what is now known as Halas lace. In the early laceworks the emphasis was on large surfaces with embroidery patterns that were accentuated by the loose stitches of the background. They can be grouped into three distinct categories based on the kinds of thread that were used: colored silk and coarse and thin linen thread laces. The first two materials were not used after 1910 and the current style emerged from the use of the latter, the thin linen thread.

Lace was in fashion at the turn of the century. The makers of Halas lace aimed to exploit their inventive techniques to their full potential, using the rich designs and broad range of products to compete with the machine-made and handmade imports. Fortunately for them, lace had a prominent decorative function at the beginning of the twentieth century, and many garments and accessories were adorned with lace. Various hems, extravagant collars and neck-pieces, shawls, handkerchiefs, tie ends, pouches, and fans were made of decorative lace. Home textiles, such as tablecloths, runners, and curtains, were also often adorned with lace. Lace was commonly used even in churches, where altar cloths and palls were routinely decorated with lace.

The most original early works are the colored Halas silk laces. They are indeed regarded as a curiosity of needle lace, since though colored fiber was not unknown at the time, for the most part it had been used in bobbin lace techniques. Écru linen or black silk thread gave contour, while colors showed best on larger areas covered with embroidery stitches. Strong, vivid colors were achieved with horizontal and vertical stitches using the same silk thread, while shades and transitions were created with the use of interwoven threads of different colors. This technique allowed for almost imperceptibly gradual shifts of tone. The most popular colors were olive, crimson, orange, pink, gray, and cordovan.

The lace trimmings represent a good balance of elements of folk art and Art Nouveau, the latter having had a profound impact on Dékáni in the form of textiles and wallpaper patterns in the style of English artist and textile designer William Morris. The folk art motifs were inspired by the richly decorated sheepskin coats and waistcoats, chests, ceramics, and other practical items that Dékáni and his students collected from the Kiskunhalas region. Images of flowers with gently bending stems (Image 3), flower-bushes, stylized imaginary flowers and sarmenta, pairs of birds facing each other, peacocks with feathers spread, and male and female figures wearing traditional folk costumes all exemplify Dékáni's view that "a pinch of folk art that we sense is often better than an overt display." His laces feature an array of flowers and plants, such as strawberry flowers, pomegranates, morning glories, daisies, tulips, and

1. The exhibition on Halas lace in the Budapest Museum of Applied Arts

2. The Halas lace trademark
Photograph by Gellért Ament

3. Lace trimming with squill motif (1903)
Design by Árpád Dékáni. Photograph by Gellért Ament. Museum of Applied Arts (No. 10589)

4. Handheld fan lace depicting youths and maidens (1909)
Design by Árpád Dékány
Photograph by Gellért Ament
Museum of Applied Arts
(No. 54.2945.1)

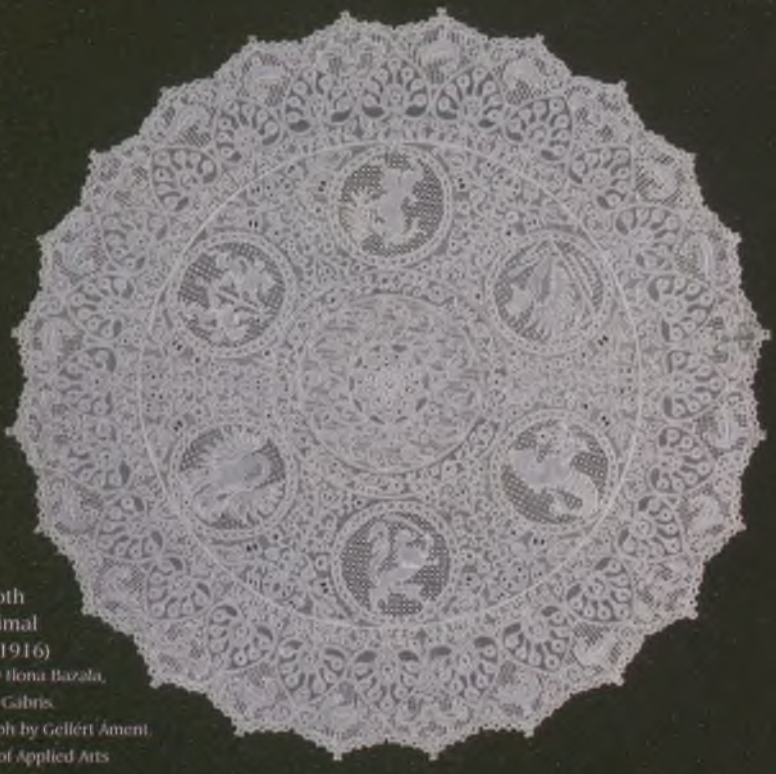

No 38.

5. **Braided lace** trimming (1903)
Design by Árpád Dékáni. Photograph by Gellért Ament. Museum of Applied Arts (No. 13422)

6. Lace trimming with deer motif (1903)
Design by Árpád Dékáni. Photograph by Gellért Ament. Museum of Applied Arts (No. 10605)

7. Lace trimming with peacock motif (1902)
Design by Árpád Dékáni. Photograph by Gellért Ament. Museum of Applied Arts (No. 10583)

8. Hem lace with crosses and "SZT. ISTVÁN" (Saint Stephen I of Hungary) (1902)
Design by Árpád Dékány. Photograph by Gellért Ámem. Museum of Applied Arts (No. 10585)



9. Tablecloth with animal motifs (1916)
Design by Ilona Bazala, née Ilona Gábris.
Photograph by Gellért Ámem.
Museum of Applied Arts
(No. 79.26.1)

10. Family coat of arms of András Fáy (1934)
Design by Tibor Szakácsi Csorba.
Photograph by Gellért Ament.
Property of the Fáy András Technical School of Traffic Engineering

11. Tablecloth with large floral motifs (1938)
Design by Antal Tar.
Photograph by Gellért Ament.
Property of the Halas Lace Foundation

12. Peacock (2001)
Design by Mária Brodi. Photograph by Gellért Áment. Property of the Halas Lace Fundation

13. Sabretache cover (no date)
Design by Erno Stepanek. Photograph by Gellert Ament. Museum of Applied Arts (No. 79.64.1)

dandelions. Laceworks used in church settings often featured as central motifs the cross between floral patterns and the dove surrounded by undulating flowering vines (Image 8). Metal threads around the cross in Image 8 were added to the silk-thread to imitate divine rays of light. Alternating female and male figures lined up on handheld fans or in seam-laces are another characteristic theme of the Halas style (Image 4).

Another one of the distinctive elements of Halas lace is the unique incorporation of a Hungarian technique originally used for decorating military uniforms by applying strings onto the chest and thigh area of garments. Needle lace strings and prominent contours were created by braiding three silk threads. These decorative adornments, which are familiar from pants worn in the seventeenth century by the Hungarian aristocracy and hussars and later men's hosiery found in the Székely Land, have become part of the Halas lace patterns. Complex lines, smaller loops, and tightly packed treble loops were mostly used on the hems (Image 5).

Working with colored silk thread required a high level of precision, and thus the process was extremely time-consuming. Dékáni ceased creating silk needle lace in 1910 presumably owing to a change in fashion, but possibly also with the aim of simplifying his technique. Attempts were made to revive colored lace-making and rethink the tastes of the age as part of a 1967 lace design competition, but they met with little success. Although works that were planned with the distinctive style of the 1960s in mind won first and second prize, with their large surfaces and strong use of color they were unable to conjure the ethereal delicacy of the laces that had been made at the turn of the century.

Laceworks made using thick, coarse yarn had a rustic appearance that resembled cutwork embroidery due to the large patches covered by satin stitches. Thick linen threads were used to make relatively large pieces, such as hems, collars, and shoulder frills of various designs. As heavily ornate as these accessories may seem, they actually feature an airy arrangement of flowers, pairs of birds facing each other, and deer (Image 6). Human figures garbed in folk attire are a pictorial representation of everyday life, a sort of genre art depicting shepherds leaning on their staffs, for example, or a sabretache decorated with an image of a young couple.

Extremely detailed laces with elaborate patterns were made using thin, white linen to achieve a refined batiste effect. The most common uses of fine linen lace were for handkerchiefs borders, tablecloths, runners, and jabots. Delicate floral patterns were the dominant motifs, and as the connecting spokes began to become more prominent, the various stitching styles also acquired a more noticeable role. Markovits used some ten to fifteen different styles of stitching initially. However, the sewing styles dramatically increased in number in the second half of the twentieth century and today designers and manufacturers have as many as over 60 types of stitching styles to choose

from. The newly developed stitching techniques were given colloquial, folksy sounding names like bouquet, ribbon, dandelion, rosary, fence, snowflake, windmill, etc. (Image 7).

Initial Successes

The popularity of Halas needlework became evident shortly after the first exhibition in 1902 at the National Museum of Applied Arts, an event that won the new craft numerous awards and prizes. The following year a colored silk lacework featuring a water lily motif won the first prize in a handheld fan design competition organized by the Hungarian Association of Applied Arts and an artistic society called Vízcsöpp Társaság ("Water Drop Society"). In 1904 the Halas workshop was awarded an Applied Arts Prize of 2,000 Hungarian Crowns given by the Secretary of Commerce. In the early years Markovits executed Dékáni's series of designs, working with three of her students in her own workshop. With the prize money she was able to continue her work under better conditions, and several other seamstresses were given training in lace-making to meet the growing demand for needle lace products. Gradually Dékáni's vision was becoming a reality.

In 1904 the Halas collection won the Grand Prize at the Louisiana Purchase Exposition and the collection was bought by the city of St. Louis. The Hungarian National Museum of Applied Arts purchased a collection consisting of nearly 40 works that now constitutes the largest collection of works made in the early years of Halas lace. In 1906 Halas lace won the Grand Prize of the Milan International. An article in the journal *Magyar Iparmüvészet* ("Hungarian Applied Arts") mentions the influence of these international successes on sales in Hungary: "[a] sudden burst of enthusiasm ... has finally made Halas lace, which has won quite a reputation abroad, popular in Hungary, indeed to such an extent that women belonging to the aristocracy flood the workshop with orders." The English journals *International Studio* and *The Studio* published several articles on Halas designs, and exhibitions of lacework were also met with enthusiasm in cities in Hungary such as Pécs and Kecskemét.

In 1906 Dékáni moved to Budapest, where he was entrusted with organizing and managing the production of lacework in Hungary. He established the "Workshop," a state-owned lace manufacture artisan shop and gallery in the heart of Budapest. The venture proved short-lived, however, due to lack of funds, and two years later Dékáni was appointed head of the newly founded Department of Industry of the Hungarian Royal National School of Arts and Crafts (the predecessor to today's Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design). There he was responsible for coordinating the production of twelve textile workshops, including the Halas Workshop and the Gödöllö Tapestry

Workshop. Over 700 apprentices were trained in these institutions, and in addition to Kiskunhalas, the Halas style lace-making was also taught in the workshops of Kispest and Diósgyör. The National School of Arts and Crafts itself also ran courses on lace manufacture and design. Some of the Halas laces designed and made at the school are known from the school yearbook and from the 1911 issue of *International Studio*. The Austrian Museum of Applied Arts and Contemporary Art in Vienna has a few of the smaller, colorful floral samples made by students of the school in its collection.

One of the masterpieces of Halas lace is a 60 cm wide tablecloth made by Ilona Bazala, née Ilona Gábris. This work, which is remarkable both for its design and its execution, was made in 1916 in the Budapest workshop (Image 9). Six heraldic animal figures can be seen in the middle band of the tablecloth (a lion holding a sword, a creature with the body of a lion and the tale of a fish, a floating swan, a unicorn holding a pine branch, a lion and a lioness holding a scepter, and a pelican feeding her chicks). The figures are linked by motifs characteristic of Hungarian folk art, such as representations of flowering shrubs, flower wreaths, and doves. Towards the center there are several bands of flower wreaths, and the outer edges are decorated with flowers arranged in heart shapes with images of birds between them. This design proved so inspirational that the original drawing served as a template for subsequent designs of animal characters. Also, each animal image was used as a separate centerpiece for further tablecloths, as in the case of a tablecloth exhibited in The Metropolitan Museum of Art in which the figure of a lion holds a sword.

In 1906 Ernő Stepanek (1881-1934) took over Dékáni's role at the school of Kiskunhalas. Stepanek was a versatile artist known for his drawings, paintings, and writing. He also played the violin, composed music, and collected motifs of Hungarian folk art. Along with Dékáni, he was one of the best-known designers of Halas lace, and most of today's lacework is based on his designs. Stepanek joined in the work of the Lace House (Csipkeház) as early as 1908. Before the First World War, his designs were based on patterns used in traditional Hungarian embroidery. He was the first person to use loop stitches to sew contour lines, which made the lace appear even more airy because of the formation of tiny holes. The generation of designers who followed in his footsteps copied this technique, and thus it became a distinctive element of Halas lace. The motifs became lighter and more slender, while increasingly large areas were covered with a diversity of other stitches. Stepanek's patterns were usually symmetrical and consisted of rows of alternating elements, as one can see in his most remarkable work of the pre-war era, a sabretache cover design depicting a young couple in folk costumes of the Kalotaszeg region, which he made in 1916 for Queen Zita to commemorate the coronation ceremony of Charles IV, the last king of Hungary.

Lace-Making during the Interwar Period

Markovits continued working together with a few of her students in the calamitous years of the First World War, patiently awaiting a time when Halas lace would flourish once again. In the interwar period artisans continued to make stunning pieces on the basis of Stepanek's designs. To this day several of his tablecloth designs, such as Páros hattyú (Swan Couple), Úszó hattyú (Floating Swan), and Kétszarvasos terítő (Tablecloth with Two Deer), are among the most popular. One recognizes the border decorations, which are not linked closely to the centerpiece, in the works of later designers. His meticulous drawings of lush flowers and vines on large collar designs captivate the viewer. Twisting floral patterns, paired deer and bird images, folktale characters, and other folklore themes depicted on tablecloths and neck-pieces create an atmosphere of Baroque and Rococo, and the flowering branches add a Romantic touch. One impressive work with a Romantic theme is a sabretache cover representing two bashful young lovers, which has a strip of the Hungarian tricolor incorporated in the skirt area of the female figure and the boy's trousers and hat (Image 13). Stepanek also designed many family and county coats of arms. The coat of arms of Jász-Nagykun-Szolnok county and of the city of Kiskunhalas are based on his work.

In 1911 Margit Pongrácz joined Stepanek as a co-designer. A graduate of the Royal State Women's College of Crafts, Pongrácz had a sound background in stitching techniques and was competent working in the Halas style. At the time she was store manager in the Budapest department of the National Handicraft Cooperative. She opened her own shop in the late 1920s in the center of Budapest and developed a unique type of needle-lace, which she named Pongrácz lace. Her border laces of various widths feature a series of flowers primarily made up of loop stitches. One of her striking jabots, for example, shows a pair of doves resting on an enormous pomegranate. Later she had success with her large tablecloths, which were most often decorated with heraldic animal figures and were popular works at international exhibitions.

By the end of the 1920s the effects of the Great Depression had become palpable in Hungary, and they adversely affected the development of Halas lace. Orders and lace sale figures were on a gradual decline due to the lack of state funding and advertising and the idea of closing the workshop was voiced. Among the many people who spoke up in an attempt to save it was prominent art historian Károly Lyka (1869-1965), who wrote on the importance of Hungarian lace in a 1928 issue of *Magyar Iparmūvészet*: "[s]everal lace collections have been carefully gathered, and lace-making traditions of the past are kept alive in our country, but where are the most beautiful pieces of modern lace-making? Soon we will have to cross the Atlantic Ocean to America if we wish to study Hungarian lace, for that is where our vibrant collections of lace art have been taken by the

dozens. What is the flaw with these works of art, which have earned such high praise abroad but are largely ignored by Hungarian collectors? Simply that they are current, made by our contemporaries. This art must first die and become part of the past to win appreciation. The problem is that if this is our attitude we essentially toll the funeral bell for our applied arts."

In the early 1930s, Dr. Imre Fekete, the mayor of Kiskunhalas, recognized the tourist value of lace-making, which harmonized well with the city's new cultural and economic policy, so he took steps in the hopes that Halas lace would flourish once again. The lace workshop received state aid and inexpensive train services were provided between Budapest and Kiskunhalas, where the world-famous needle lace technique was exhibited. He also helped produce radio broadcasts that popularized local lacework. In 1933 Tibor Szakácsi Csorba (1906-1985) published his book entitled *A halasi csipke múltja-jövője* ("The Past and Future of Halas Lace"), which offered an overview of three decades of the history of Halas lace.

The campaign proved so successful that in 1934 the Hungarian Chamber of Commerce and Industry issued Halas lace a trademark registry number in order to protect the technique which was used on every subsequent piece of artwork. The image of three fish lying on top of one another (an image that was taken from the coat of arms of Kiskunhalas) was included in the drawings, and ever since every work of Halas lace has come with this trademark stamp on a paper label (Image 2). In the same year a visit to Brussels inspired the idea of establishing a center for ethnography. A year later the plan was executed and on 23 June, 1935 the Halas Lace House was opened to the general public at its current location. In a peasant house set in the middle of a huge park lace-makers carried on with their work under much better conditions than they had been used to. The building, which was built with help from the Museum of Ethnography, dedicated its three rooms to a collection of Halas laces and household items, including items that Dékáni and his students had collected at the turn of the century, and which he subsequently used as inspirations for his designs. The building also housed lace-makers who worked among old folklore artefacts and contemporary works of local craftsmen.

The favorable conditions and business opportunities paved the way for artistic development and the collection became an overwhelming success at the Brussels International Exposition of 1935. Mme Paulis, lace expert of the Royal Museums of Art and History in Brussels, spoke highly of Halas lace: "[w]e are familiar with the lacework of many cultures. Still, the novelty and elaborate execution of the lacework of the Hungarian cottage industry caught us off guard. We found strikingly beautiful Hungarian lacework in the ocean of recurring patterns and common techniques known around the world, works that stand tall as indications of refreshing originality and exceptional artistic merit." Also in 1935 a call for tenders was issued for new themes and motifs:

"[m]uch thought is required to create original concepts and characteristically Hungarian motifs and arrange them tastefully. Finished textiles should be airy and special attention must be paid to the technical requirements of production. Each piece must be pleasing to the eye in every detail, and it must be harmonious as a whole." Applications were accepted solely from artists living in Hungary. 119 entries were submitted and the first prize was given to Antal Tar, who had returned to design in the 1930s following a long break after the First World War, for his shepherd-themed tablecloth. This distinctive piece features a solar symbol in its center and recurring motifs in a rotating palette of stylized flora with a shepherd driving his herd. In 1938 he designed a collection of large tablecloths of symmetrically arranged lush flower images alternating with an asymmetrical arrangement of random motifs (Image 11).

Halas lace enjoyed another golden age in the interwar period, and the demand was high from both domestic and foreign customers and tradesmen alike, and the state also placed regular orders. Many fine examples of the art of lace from the period were done by independent designers such as the aforementioned Szakácsi Csorba. A writer, literary translator, philosopher, and art teacher, Csorba made lace designs during the years he spent teaching in Kiskunhalas. He was a prominent designer of coats of arms. One of his finest works is the flower-framed family coat of arms of Reform Era writer and politician András Fáy (1786-1864), which is now held by the Fáy András Technical School of Traffic Engineering. The large framing flowers give a perfect balance to the composition and accentuate the beauty of the centerpiece (Image 10).

Bazala showcased her needle lace skills at the 1937 Paris International Handicrafts Exhibition with her tablecloth adorned with animal figures, for which she won a gold medal. She was also awarded Grand Prize for a work based on a design by Béla Molnár the following year at the 1938 Berlin International Handicrafts Exhibition. This lace is a composition of narrow and wide rings of flower wreaths around Hungary's coat of arms with the Holy Crown in the center, held by two angels, one on either side. Molnár was a Munkácsy Prize-winning textile designer and Head of the Textile Department at the School of Arts and Crafts. His artwork combined elements of modernity and traditionalism. Molnár presented his themes, which included figures dressed in traditional costumes, folk conversation pieces, angels holding coats of arms, and images of birds and flowers, in a somewhat rigid style, which reflected the taste of the period. In 1940 he won the Diploma d'Onore at the 7th Milan International Exhibition of Applied Arts.

In 1939 a new wing was added to the Kiskunhalas Lace House, which employed nearly one hundred lace-workers at the time. The wing functioned as a museum with a permanent exhibition, and the workshop was also extended. However, the effects of economic and social unease were increasingly pronounced with the approach of the Second World War, and the demand for

lace began to fall drastically. Tablecloths and aprons decorated with family coats of arms were still sought after, but the majority of the orders were for small items and emblems, so many lace-makers were laid off, and part of the Lace House was used for other purposes.

From the Post-War Years to the Present Day

By the end of the Second World War, the Lace House had been badly damaged and looted and much of the equipment and documentation had been lost, along with items from the ethnographic and lace collections. Despite the grave damages, the Halas workshop exhibited at the 1946 Kiskunhalas Agricultural Show, and in 1949 it received an honorary diploma at the Budapest International Autumn Fair. This success was thanks in large part to the dedicated work of Markovits, who had worked tirelessly during the war with her colleague, Amália Papp.

In the early 1950s the economic changes and the shift in cultural policy ushered in by the Communist regime fostered production in the Lace House. The National Association of Domestic Industry and Folk Arts and Crafts Cooperatives was founded, along with a body of local administration, the Kiskunhalas Domestic Industry Cooperative. The local branch sought to revive and coordinate lace production by partially restoring the Lace House and organizing courses and securing orders, while the newly formed People's Applied Arts Council provided artistic supervision. In 1954 a wing of the Lace House was restored and lace-making began again in the building. Sadly, founder Markovits died two weeks before the event. In 1957 renovation was complete and a ceremony was held to mark the reopening of the Lace House. A commemorative plaque of Markovits was unveiled and an exhibition on the history of Halas lace was opened. For this occasion the Budapest State Mint issued bronze and silver-plated bronze commemorative medals based on a design by Vikória Csúcs.

Thus the art of lace was gradually recovering strength. Primarily small items sold well, such as handkerchief edges, coaster-sized lace cloths used for ornaments in display cabinets, narrow lace strips for lingerie, tie ends, jabots, and cross motifs. However, orders placed by the state still constituted the main source of income. Large tablecloths were made for a number of ceremonies, including for the celebration of Stalin's birthday in 1950, the Women's Congress of the Hungarian People's Democratic Federation in 1951, Communist Party leader Mátyás Rákosi's birthday in 1952, and the 10th anniversary of Hungary's "liberation" by the Soviet Union. These tablecloths, as well as other orders placed by the state, all had symbols of the new political system as central motifs, such as the five-pointed star, a tractor, or an ear of wheat and a hammer. The designs were made by Béla Tóth (1910-1996), an art teacher

and workshop leader at the Kiskunhalas grammar school. There are recognizable elements of earlier drawings by Stepanek, Tar, and Pongrácz in many of Tóth's designs, because he often had to meet short deadlines, sometimes with as little as a single night to prepare a design.

The greatest international success of the post-war era came at the 1958 Brussels World's Fair, in which the Lace House took part with designs by Molnár. The Lace House won the grand prize with lacework depicting the coat of arms of the city and the town hall, and following the exhibition the lace was donated to the city. Molnár used geometric shapes, a characteristic feature of the 1960s, throughout his career. Interestingly, he redesigned the Halas trademark for his own use by making the image of the three fish more angular, although these rigid lines become somewhat relaxed in his portrayals of folk genre art. A special item of Molnár's is the folk style tablecloth with a peacock motif, which he made for the 75th birthday of composer Zoltán Kodály. The writing in the middle, "Hej páva, hej páva" ("Hey peacock, hey peacock"), which is the first line of a Hungarian folk song, is a reference to Kodály's legacy as a collector of folk music motifs and one of Hungary's most prominent twentieth-century composers. The Hungarian pavilion at the Brussels World's Fair also displayed a 100 cm wide floral tablecloth, which took 5,800 work hours to complete. The piece, which in all likelihood was designed by Pongrácz, was donated to the Museum of Applied Arts by Franciska Schei in 2010. This particular tablecloth was remade with a different middle section in 1967 by eight lace-makers. The success at the Brussels World's Fair raised the number of lace-maker employees to forty, then a few years later their number dropped to twelve due to a sudden decline in demand.

In 1960 the Hungarian Post issued a stamp series in eight amounts (20, 30, 40, and 60 fillér and 1, 1.50, 2, and 3 forint) with the support of the Minister of Transport and Postal Services. The stamps were the work of graphic artist Éva Zombory, who used detailed lace images of the 1920s and 1930s. In 1964, parallel with the renovation of the museum section of the Lace House, another series of stamps was issued by the Hungarian Post in the amounts of 20, 30, 40, and 60 fillér and 1, 1.40, 2, and 2.60 forint. The images were based on the collaborative work of Éva Zombory and Mihály Füle.

The demand for lace in the 1960s was on the decline and new designs were rare. To remedy this, in 1967 and in 1976 design tenders were once again invited, but only a few laceworks achieved lasting success. At the end of the 1970s Györgyi Lengyel collected and wrote several hundred pages documenting Halas lace. Regrettably only a small fraction of this was published in 1982 in a volume entitled *Kiskunhalas – A csipke városa* ("Kiskunhalas, the City of Lace"). In 1981 the government ceased funding the Lace House and the city council began to use the building for other purposes, including simply storage. Since then, the majority of the lacework that was done was made for international and domestic

exhibitions, and very few lace-makers were employed. In 1988 graphic artist Miklós Bodor (1925-2010) borrowed motifs from the Hungarian Coronation Mantle of Saint Stephen I for his tablecloth design, which was given as a present to Pope John Paul II in 1996 during his visit to Hungary. In the 1970s and 1980s traditional designs and new drawings were used to create new lacework, but by the end of the 1980s the survival of lace as an art form seemed imperiled.

1992 marked the dawn of a new era. The Lace House was again restored and the Halas Lace Foundation commenced operation with state funds. The Foundation, the mission of which was to revive Halas lace, was chaired by mayor Zoltán Tóth. In 1996 an official catalogue of Halas lace was issued thanks to financial support provided by the Foundation. The catalogue, which is regarded as a milestone in documenting the evolution of this needle lace technique, was the work of Emőke László, Emese Pásztor, and Aurél Szakál. Domestic and international exhibitions were held in order to foster and maintain interest in lacework.

In recent decades, the Lace House has commissioned applied artists to search for opportunities to renew and extend the artistic potentials of Halas lace through the use of new designs and inventive uses of old laces and drawings. Graphic designer and decorator Mária Bródi has been designing for the Lace House since 2000. Her work is a unique combination of Art Nouveau style drawings and the pure and delicate themes of fairy tales in modern interpretations of Dékáni's style. Bródi indicates the stitches to be used in her drawings. Embroidery stitches are for highlighting the main elements of the pattern and various densely sewn stitches are for use in the background details that form a contiguous mesh. She creates balance in the composition by breaking up the pattern with patches of cutwork (Image 12). Since 2001 she has designed the laceworks that are awarded to the recipients of the titles Pro Urbe and Honorary Citizen of Kiskunhalas.

The Hungarian Post issued a series of stamps in denominations of 100, 110, and 140 forint in 2002 for the 100th anniversary of Halas lace, as well as a first day of issue envelope based on a design by György Kara. The stamps depict popular works by three outstanding designers: Bazala, Tar, and Stepanek. Both the stamps and the envelope feature high-resolution embossing. For the occasion the Hungarian Mint issued pure silver commemorative medals with Halas lace decorations designed by István Kósa. In 2001 the Lace House was home to a garment exhibition of designer Éva Mészáros, who used Halas lace decorations. The living tradition of Halas lace-making was added to the Hungarian National Inventory of Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2010 and thus became a protected cultural treasure. In 2012, Halas lace was given a Millennium Award of the Hungarian Intellectual Property Office for its role in the protection of cultural heritage. ❧

Translated by Lili Herczeg

Museum Keeper: People Go to Museums for Refreshment

Nicholas Penny Interviewed by Beatrix Basics

When art historian Nicholas Penny was appointed director of the National Gallery in London, the profession responded with universal approval. Penny began working at the Gallery in 1990 and became noted in broad professional circles the following year, when he identified a painting thought to be a copy as an original Raphael. He applied for the post of director unsuccessfully in 2002, but he got the job in 2007. Although the number of visitors to the National Gallery has steadily increased every year since his appointment, Penny strongly criticizes measuring a museum's success by the number of visitors or the popularity of so-called blockbuster exhibitions. As he has remarked, he has "no problem with popular exhibitions, only with exhibitions designed primarily to be popular." Nicholas Penny came to Budapest for the opening of the Cézanne exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts. Neither the city nor the museum was unfamiliar to him, and he seemed rather knowledgeable about events concerning museums in Hungary. Moreover, he had a definite opinion about what was happening in the Hungarian capital, and the parallels in Britain gave him cause to reflect. The

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Beatrix Basics

studied Art History and English at Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest. From 2004 until 2010 she was Assistant Director of the Budapest History Museum. As of 2011 she has served as Directorial Consultant to the Management of Museums of Pest County and as of 2012 as Editor of MúzeumCafé. *Her primary fields of interest are eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century European art. She has published some 150 articles and essays and has organized innumerable exhibitions at the Hungarian National Museum, the Budapest History Museum, and a number of other institutions in and outside of Hungary. The Interview and the Debate that follows are edited versions of articles published in* MúzeumCafé *33, 2013, 104-107. The Exhibition entitled* Cézanne and the Past: Tradition and Creativity *was held at the Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest, 26 October, 2012—17 February, 2013 .*

After having completed his studies at the University of Cambridge, ***Nicholas Penny*** *did his doctorate at the Courtauld Institute of Art in London. He has taught at the University of Manchester and at Oxford. From 1990 to 2000 he was the curator of the collection of Renaissance paintings at the London National Gallery and in 2002 he accepted the position of curator of the collections of sculptures and applied arts at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. He returned to London after having been offered the position of Director of the National Gallery in London in 2007.*

PHOTOGRAPH BY CSABA VILLÁNYI/FLASHBACK PHOTO/MUZEUMCAFÉ

following is the text of an interview held by Beatrix Basics of the Museum of Fine Arts soon after the opening of the exhibition.

Beatrix Basics: *I remember that you mentioned three things in connection with the Cézanne exhibition in the Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest yesterday in your opening speech about its importance. What do you think about it in an international context?*

Nicholas Penny: There have been many exhibitions on [Paul] Cézanne, but there has not been an exhibition of any size that has explored his relationship to the past. It is a very rich subject, because Cézanne, as perhaps the most significant artist of the late nineteenth-century Avant-garde, was more interested in the reconsideration of the past than any of his contemporaries. I do not think any of his contemporaries had such a continuous relationship with the art of earlier times. [Edgar] Degas, for example, was clearly trained in the classical tradition, and he collected paintings by earlier French painters, but I do not think that he actually regarded the works of previous centuries as models for his art. This turns out to be more important than people realize. One can feel the constant effort Cézanne made to draw strength from previous masters. You feel as if you really get inside his mind in this exhibition. It is very ambitious, both in its scope and in its comprehensive character. One finds it really enthralling, it is extremely unusual. It is a kind of exhibition proposal that most museums would turn down, saying well, with this many drawings it will not be of interest to the public. Some of Cézanne's drawings could obviously be said to be affected, especially the watercolor still lifes, for example. And most of them are not alluring drawings in themselves, they are not in any way finished works of art, they are a sort of experimental approach to something. Yet I think it will be a very popular exhibition, because it is just so intriguing, it absorbs you so much, and it is punctuated by really major paintings. It has some extraordinary loans.

B. B.: Do you feel that anything is missing from the exhibition?

N. P.: You can always try to imagine what else might have been included, but no, this time it has not even occurred to me. This is a surprising question, because this exhibition is quite large and very absorbing—well, I think it is a good exhibition, and one does not really think about what is not there. Of course, there are always some who point out things they find wanting, although in the case of this exhibition there are many things I am surprised to see, magnificent loans. Maybe if I were to go back again I might find that there is something else that might have been included, but no, I think that I would not. Looking at the drawings, I asked myself the purely practical question of how Cézanne worked. I just wondered what type of drawing pad he had and what materials he used, was he standing or sitting, things like that. There was nothing missing, and there were a great many things that I was surprised to find.

B. B.: What is your opinion about the Museum of Fine Arts, about its collections, and its place in comparison with other museums?

N. P.: I have been familiar with the Museum for a long time, and I know that it has a great number of significant works of art. The building has always impressed me as a little bit mysterious, because it is such a grand, Classical building with a complicated floor plan, and it has a lot of huge rooms, most of which are now not filled in the way they were intended to be. It is in fact a bit of a mystery to me how all these rooms were used. I know that originally a significant part of the Museum was devoted to plastic art, including ornamental works of former buildings, but even so, it is difficult to imagine how it was used. I have always wanted to ask for old photographs of the Museum, from the time when it was packed with works of plastic art. There must be such pictures, but I have never encountered any. It was opened in 1906, and I would love to see old photographs with the original arrangements of the installations. But I think that even if you disregard the changes in function, it must always have been a larger building than was ever necessary to house the collections.

However, this is understandable, as the Museum was built during what was a heyday for Budapest, when people were confident that a wide-ranging collection would fill its spaces. Of course you do have many great works of art; interestingly, some of the greatest are also the smallest. So when I think of the Museum of Fine Arts in Budapest, I think of huge halls and small paintings, like *Esterházy Madonna* [painted by Raphael in 1508] or beautiful Dutch paintings, which are also quite small. I have always felt that this is a museum that is bound to change, while at the same time it is very difficult to find ways to fill these huge spaces. This has been solved in the case of the temporary exhibition rooms of the Cézanne exhibition rather effectively, as the architectural plans

for the interior have been designed independently of the building's characteristics. It has been planned very ingeniously, with angled walls guiding the visitors from one part of the exhibition to another without ever giving you the impression that you have gotten lost. You do not feel as if you were in a labyrinth, since it is up to you whether you turn left or right. But there is order all the same, which I think is quite important, because the way the exhibition space is broken up into independent units creates an exhibition that resembles thirty small exhibitions.

B. B.: *It is also worth noting that, parallel with the Cézanne exhibition, a twentieth-century permanent exhibition has also been opened, which is quite a novelty, as there has never been an exhibition of this kind in the Museum of Fine Arts.*

N. P.: But last year I saw the exhibition of The Eights here.

B. B.: *Yes, but it was a temporary exhibition.*

N. P.: Oh, that's a big difference.

B. B.: *What do you think about the difference between permanent and temporary exhibitions?*

N. P.: Well, this is a very important question, because nowadays it is difficult for museums to establish a meaningful relationship between their permanent collections and the temporary exhibitions. The problem is that although temporary exhibitions are only slightly more expensive, they attract all the attention. Consequently, when the trustees of a museum (as in the case of the National Gallery in London) or the ministry in charge of culture appoint the director of a museum, the first thing they decide on is who will be responsible for the temporary exhibitions, since temporary exhibitions mean publicity. The problem is that it is getting increasingly difficult and expensive to organize exhibitions. Nevertheless, the exhibitions are always in focus. What we try to do in London is never to have a temporary exhibition that does not have at least some relationship to our permanent collections. In this way, even if the visitors to a temporary exhibition leave without seeing the permanent collections (because they go for lunch or become tired), what they have seen has some relationship to what they could have seen in the permanent collections. Another thing that happens quite often is that permanent collections are transformed into quasi-temporary exhibitions, either because new items are added or because works are displayed anew to attract publicity. Nowadays the only way to get publicity for a permanent collection is to announce that it has just been reopened or that a new wing of the museum has been opened. That is why it is such a great advantage that you have this new permanent exhibition site here in Budapest.

The whole situation reminds me of the joke they used to tell in Florence at the time when there was a gradual decrease in the number of visitors to the Bargello National Museum, the renowned Italian museum of sculpture. All you need to do, the joke went, is to put up a poster saying that there is a new exhibition on the works of Donatello, Desiderio da Settignano, or, for that matter, Michelangelo, and everyone will rush to see it, because the only thing they will notice is that there is something new to see. From this perspective, the permanent exhibitions are hindrances, because by nature they are not new. However, in my view their virtues and strengths lie precisely in this. A permanent exhibition is not something people simply go to, it is something to which they can always return. Therefore, it has to be defended and provided with special advantages. Even more so, since museum spaces previously occupied by permanent collections are increasingly occupied by temporary exhibitions. This is also the case in major national collections, such as the National Gallery of Art in Washington, and we allot the space in the same way in London. For instance, we used the galleries of the permanent collection for our [Diego] Velázquez exhibition, and we will do the same thing in two or three years when preparing for the [Paolo] Veronese temporary exhibition. But these are solely occasional solutions, a means of keeping the permanent collection alive. I think one has to accept that even within a permanent collection there is need for constant change, but not without stability and predictability. People are justifiably annoyed if they go back to a permanent collection and cannot find the work they are looking for, all the more so, since they are the most important visitors, the lovers of art, who come to see the same works again and again. But they do not mind if, when going back, they see something that was not there before. So this is a delicate balance every museum has to find.

I think that the opening of the twentieth-century installation is extremely important for the Museum of Fine Arts in Budapest, because there are several galleries in various cities where the collections end at 1900 (for instance the Musée d'Orsay in Paris, the Prado in Madrid, and the National Gallery in London), so it is a great advantage if a museum has enough space to show the art of the twentieth or twenty-first century as well. We can do this only via temporary exhibitions. Anyway, one of the main aims is to show the continuous interconnectedness of various periods of art, the art of the twentieth century included. But once you have decided to do this, you face the additional difficulty that the visitors' expectations regarding twentieth-century painting are determined by a canon that since the middle of the twentieth century has been associated primarily with American painting. And then people visit exhibitions of twentieth-century art and are often disappointed, because they feel that artists or trends they find important, such as [Mark] Rothko, Jackson Pollock, and Andy Warhol, are not represented, but this is only

PHOTOGRAPH BY CSANAD SZESZTAY

Cézanne exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts. In the foreground one of Cézanne's paintings of Mont Sainte-Victoire.

because they have a narrow idea of twentieth-century art. Of course, one has to admit that the task is simpler regarding the first half of the twentieth century, as the expectations are not as high. But then again one has to decide whether to represent contemporary art internationally or nationally. Therefore, it will remain a great challenge for the Museum of Fine Arts to maintain equipoise between modern art and ancient, and between European and Hungarian art. It is difficult to find and keep the balance, and the Cézanne exhibition further accentuates the timeliness of this question.

B. B.: *The collections of the Museum of Fine Arts and the Hungarian National Gallery have recently been united. I am curious to know your opinion, should national and international art be displayed together or separately?*

N. P.: Well, you are asking the right person, because in Britain we have not quite decided. One important decision, however, we have made. The National Gallery exhibits primarily European art, but we will also include a small but significant selection of British paintings, which in this way will be represented in a European context, to show that they are not unworthy of their European contemporaries. But of course this also means that we should separate this group of artworks from the enormous collection of Tate Britain, the storehouse of British art, and in this way we uproot many of the masterpieces. So I have great sympathy for those attempting to address this problem in Hungary.

In any case, it would be most unfortunate not to have any Hungarian paintings in the Museum of Fine Arts. Let me explain. Take an artist like [Mihály] Munkácsy, for instance. He was exhibited in Paris, was active in

Vienna, and had kindred souls among artists working in Italy, so it would be natural to have his works exhibited among those of his contemporaries. And if you remove him from the wider European context, you cannot understand his art in its entirety, and cannot sense his significance either. Nobody outside Hungary will recognize what a great artist he was, because they will not see his art together with the art of other Europeans. Of course, there are many possible ways of presenting him, but it is a pity not to have at least some of his works in an international context. What I mean is that you diminish the value of the Hungarian schools of art if you do not represent them in a European context, because then you cannot show the significance of the role that they have played in the history of European painting. Hungarian art should definitely be represented together with the art of other European contemporaries. Then again, the difficulty lies in the fact that one always attempts to present the national artistic heritage first and foremost, which one can do much more profoundly and thoroughly if this national heritage is represented on its own. It is not a bad idea to show Hungarian art in two different ways and in various contexts, but not more than only a few works at a time. Anyway, this is a problem that cannot be solved completely. The national collection should be displayed in a very careful way. Even if you have a lot of new buildings and there is a unified organization that is in charge of the whole thing, you still have to see very clearly how you would like to show things. Things should be well-coordinated. So without knowing anything about the political context of this decision, I trust that it will be to the advantage of the Hungarian art scene.

B. B.: You have referred to the plans for the new museum district next to Heroes' Square several times. Do you feel there is any reason to build a new Museum District in Hungary at the beginning of the twenty-first century?

N. P.: Well, walking on Heroes' Square, I thought that there is certainly enough space there for more museums. It is a huge public space with a kind of recreational feel. It is surrounded by Városliget, a big park, which I think could be utilized to a much greater extent. What I would love to see is something lively and optimistic, something that conjures the spirit of Budapest at the time when the Museum of Fine Arts was built. I think it is essential not to build something that is too grandiose. I think of museums as symbols of national consciousness, but the days of imperial architecture are over. Nowadays you should think of museums of fine art as places where people go for a kind of refreshment, spiritual refreshment, and they must not feel that they are in any way oppressed by these spaces. So even if you have an ambitious vision, it should in no way consist of one huge building. Art appreciation is quite an exhausting business, and many people bring children to these fascinating places, so I hope that the new building will be something that unfolds piecemeal, where one can see how things are interconnected, and where

1. Jakab Bogdany.
Still Life with Birds and Squirrel
(early 1700s)
Oil on canvas,
55.6×105.4 cm.
Private collection

2. János Szentgyörgyi.
Still Life with Fruit and Melon (1834)
Oil on canvas, 78×59 cm.
Private collection

3. Ádám Mányoki. *Young Man Standing in a Crimson Coat* (1705-1706)
Oil on canvas, 91×73 cm. Private collection

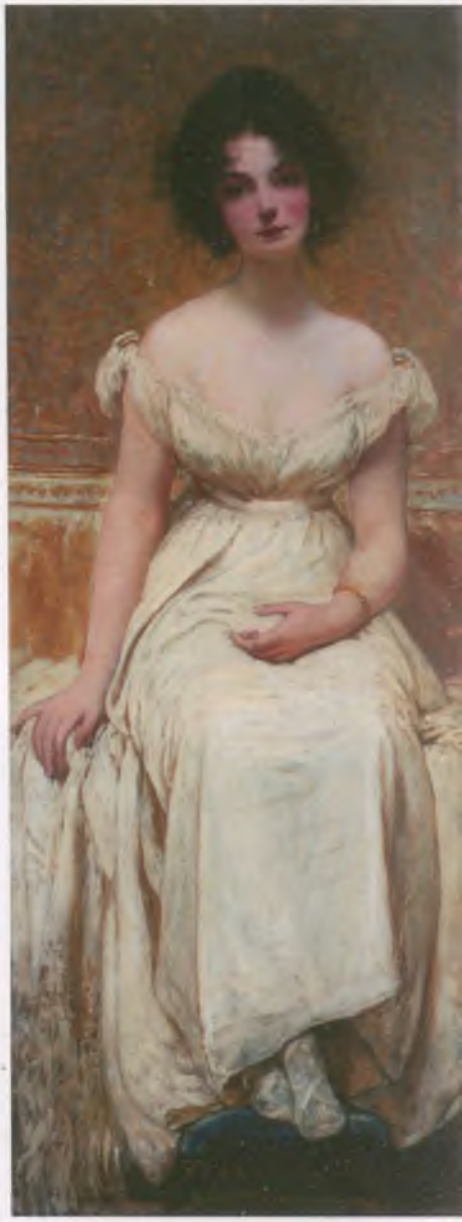
4. János Donát. *Dániel Berzsenyi* (1817)
Oil on canvas, 62×50 cm. Private collection

5. Miklos Barabas. *Miniature Portrait of His Wife* (1842)
Ivory miniature, 11.8×9.8 cm. Private collection

6. Károly Markó the Elder. *The Fisherman* (1830)
Oil on canvas, 46×59 cm. Private collection

7. László Paál. *Forest Detail with Rocks* (1876)
Oil on canvas, 61×81 cm. Private collection

8. László Mednyanszky. *Forest Creek with Bridge* (1880)
Oil on canvas, 120×72 cm. Private collection



9. Károly Lotz. *Kornelia* (1901)
Oil on canvas, 130×96 cm.
Private collection

10. Mihály Munkácsy. *Father's Birthday* (1882)
Oil on canvas, 101.7×137.5 cm. Private collection

11. József Rippl-Rónai. *Birthday of Grandmother* (1890)
Oil on canvas, 105×146 cm. Private collection

12.
Gyula Benczúr.
Chubby (1909)
Oil on canvas,
110×70 cm.
Private collection

13. Tivadar Csontváry Kosztka. *View of Trau in the Sunset* (1899)
Oil on canvas, 34.5×66.5 cm. Private collection

14. Tihamér Margitay. *The Irresistible* (1896)
Oil on canvas, 55.5×99.5 cm. Private collection

15.
János Vaszary.
Courtship:
Lovers with
Tennis Racket
(around 1895)
Oil on canvas,
71.5×93 cm.
Private collection

16. István Csók.
At the Maid's
Agent (1892)
Oil on canvas,
116×150.5 cm.
Private collection

visitors do not feel forced to look at everything. Let me mention an example. I think it is a pity that the large Louvre Pyramid was built. It compels everyone to go in through one entrance, and you feel as if you were in an airport. Visitors may well have a clear goal in mind, but upon entrance they have to choose from hundreds of destinations, and all this amidst a huge crowd. The Museum Island in Berlin is likewise intimidating, with museums everywhere. Zoological or botanical gardens, like Kew Gardens in London, if combined with museums, would be places where people could go for walks or go to relax, and in my opinion these are the ideal places for exhibition spaces. Some think that museums should be right in the middle of the city, but I can tell you it is unpleasant to have the National Gallery in Trafalgar Square. I do not recommend it. There are many reasons for this, but I do not intend to go into them. There are advantages as well, for instance it is quite easy to find, but only in theory. In practice, if places for recreation are in the city center, it is likely that many old people will not want to visit them because of the crowd. However, there are other advantages as well, for instance it is much easier to organize outings for school groups. Well, I recommend that you stay where you are, but do not make it too grand, that is all. It would be wise to do the construction in parts, because it is going to cost a lot.

B. B.: *Hungarian people think of the National Gallery in London as a great and thriving museum. What is the key to your success?*

N. P.: The National Gallery has two main advantages, both of which are accidental. One is the fact that compared to similar great national collections of painting it was founded relatively late. This means that it was not designed according to the tastes of a king or limited by the proclivities of a certain period. It was founded first of all by people who wanted to establish a collection of masterpieces, and it has been led by directors who have always aspired to have a comprehensive European collection. The other advantage is quite small, namely, that our collection is very concentrated and there is a relative balance between the works. By the way, a third point should be mentioned as well: the British have always been aware that their painting is interesting, but they never thought it was as great as other European schools, so they always tried to find the best examples of other painting traditions, and they never felt, well, we do not need these. This encouraged people to devote particular attention to Dutch, French, and Spanish painting. I would not say that ours is a perfectly balanced collection, but it seems to be more balanced and more comprehensive than many, while at the same time it is also concentrated. So maybe this is why people think so highly of the National Gallery.

B. B.: *Which is your favorite European museum?*

N. P.: Actually, I have many favorite museums, so I have to think which to choose. I am very fond of small house museums; and of course there are a lot of museums that I have not seen yet, but I suppose all things considered my favorite museum is the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, because I have spent most of my life in London and I have never been there without finding something new. It is like a sort of endless treasure house, and I find it fascinating. But still, some part of me has always been drawn to small museums, so it was not that clever of me to choose one of the biggest, the Victoria and Albert Museum. So let me think of another. There is a museum in Dijon, the name which I have forgotten, a small house that is called *hotel* in French. I love this museum because it is like a private collection in a space in which there is simply no longer room for people to live. The place is also full of surprises. I like the idea of discovering things in museums, I find it very important.

B. B.: Is there anything that you would welcome in your museum from the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts in Budapest?

N. P.: I have already seen many masterpieces of Hungarian museums, for instance in an exhibition at the Royal Academy of Arts in London a couple of years ago. But you know, I would most like to see some great nineteenth-century Hungarian paintings in London, because I find our nineteenth-century collection very unbalanced. Regrettably we do not really have any great works of nineteenth-century Hungarian painting, particularly from the end of the century.

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Debate

Does the exhibition on Cézanne and his relationship to the past in the Museum of Fine Arts meet the expectations created by its title?

Ernő Marosi, art historian, Full Member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences
—The title of the Exhibition, *Cézanne and the Past*, is not clear. "Cézanne" is quite understandable, but are we thinking of the art of the past or the past of the art? The public reasonably expects that these questions will be addressed. The exhibition begins with works from the Museum's own collection. These works offer new insights to visitors to the exhibition and they help create a context as well as a modern perspective from which to consider the works of Cézanne. Cézanne has perhaps as many faces as there are exhibitions of his works. The most important thing is that the context into which the exhibition places Cézanne's art is something new and up-to-date, involving the integrity of his personality and the development of his art.

László Csorba, historian, Director of the Hungarian National Museum
—There is nothing more unfair than calling an exhibition to account for what is not included. There may be many reasons for the curators' individual decisions, and more often than not they have nothing to do with the aims to be achieved. What must be examined is what an exhibition presents, and why, and in what ways. It should be noted that this is not a "Cézanne" exhibition as such, but rather a *Cézanne and the Past* Exhibition. Visitors to the Museum who keep this in mind not only will not be disappointed, they will be able to enjoy what is special and original in the exhibition.

József Mélyi, art historian, art critic, President of Aica Hungary
—*Cézanne and the Past* is an outstanding exhibition in the history of the Museum of Fine Arts, and will be regarded as an important milestone in relation to the past and probably the future of Hungarian museums. It is the product of several years of preparation and precise work on the part of the curators, and it is an exhibition that any large museum in Europe, Asia, or America would be happy to have. ❧

Szilvia Rád

Women and Nature in the Art of János Thorma

In 2012 Hungary looked back on the 75th anniversary of the death of painter János Thorma. To commemorate this event, the Thorma Museum of Kiskunhalas organized exhibits in Munich, Stuttgart, and Berlin of modern pictures of Thorma around the theme of women and nature. The exhibition of the collection in Germany brought to its conclusion a process that Thorma himself, along with fellow artists such as Simon Hollósy and István Réti, began in Munich in the 1890s. This was one of the visions of the Nagybánya artists' colony (Nagybánya is today Baia Mare in Romania), which was founded in 1896 and went on to win international recognition.

In varying intervals of time, Thorma lived, studied, and worked in Munich from 1888 until the early 1900s. He returned to Munich again and again with his pupils from Nagybánya. Not long after his initial arrival, he became familiar with the artistic spirit of the Bavarian Academy of Fine Arts and he made ties with Hollósy, one of the most important forerunners of modern Hungarian painting. At that time Hollósy was already running his own French-inspired school of painting in Munich. The artistic approach of Hollósy and his followers (Réti, Béla Iványi Grünwald, Károly Ferenczy, and István Csók) began to have an ever-greater effect on Thorma, whose earlier historical and salon-style pictures were gradually replaced by plein-air landscapes populated with figures.

In the 1890s, Thorma, Iványi Grünwald, Oszkár Glatz, and Réti came to the conclusion in Munich that they had to make practical use of their knowledge and

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Szilvia Rád

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modern techniques back home in Hungary. Their plan was to expand the Hollósy school with the creation of a summer school in Hungary, the goal of which would be to introduce Modernism to Central Eastern Europe. Réti had been born in Nagybánya, Thorma had moved there at an early age, and they recommended the town and its surroundings to Hollósy. They found the characteristics of the area perfect for the foundation of a Hungarian school of painting based on the principles of nature. In 1896, Hollósy, Thorma, Iványi Grünwald, Réti, and others founded the Nagybánya branch of the Munich school in a relatively short period of time. They conducted summer sessions there, but later it grew into an international artists' colony. This was the year when Hungary celebrated the 1000th anniversary of the so-called Conquest, the arrival of the Hungarians into the Carpathian Basin, and it was a time of commemorations and new construction projects. By creating a realistic style of modern Hungarian landscape painting, Thorma and his group achieved something that, for reasons beyond his control, Pál Szinyei Merse had failed to do.

The art of János Thorma is typified by a plurality of styles that can be seen as a search for the path towards his own, individual style. This phenomenon is noticeable in the works of many artists at the end of the nineteenth century, since up until the middle of the twentieth century styles rapidly replaced one another and often several styles were prominent at a given time. The subject of women and nature is interesting in Thorma's work because in these pictures one can follow the shift in his style from detailed depictions and studio painting to delicate Naturalism, Art Nouveau, French Realism, and Impressionism, and finally his own version of Post-Impressionism. Taken as a whole, it was with this subject that, in the final period of his art towards the end of his life, Thorma hit upon both a method of painting that was full and rich with complementary colors, broad patches and swathes, and a melancholic form of expression. Art historian Jenő Muradin has very aptly called this style "post-plein-air." I have selected some works that belong to this category, works that offer an impression of Thorma's marvelous artistic achievements.

Thorma's interest in the theme of women and nature was discernible in the 1890s, relatively early in his career. He was passionately preoccupied by this subject for the rest of this life and did hundreds of paintings on it. In the beginning of his oeuvre, he painted highly-detailed female portraits and pictures of women sitting in salons. From the 1910s he became more interested in Impressionism and Post-Impressionism, and for this reason incorporated a greater number of natural elements into his paintings of women, such as plants, flowers, and Nagybánya landscapes. In the 1920s he started painting mythological pictures with full-bodies, sometimes with several figures in a natural environment. Although he continued to paint portraits of lone females, nature was always somehow present, for example in the form of a bouquet of flowers.

Thorma painted his first high-quality picture characteristic of Art Nouveau in 1892. The title was *Irén Bilcz* (Image 1). The woman depicted in the painting is nineteen years old. She was later to become the wife of Iványi Grünwald, one of the founders of the Hollósy school in Munich and the Nagybánya artists' colony. In the painting a slightly shy young lady is sitting in profile on a chair. She is wearing an elegant white dress and holding a snow-white fan. Her subtle features are painted in great detail. This kind of detailed portrait painting is reminiscent of the work of the German Wilhelm Leibl and the French Jules Bastien-Lepage. Irén Bilcz's lower left arm is gently resting on a painting in which stylized plant motifs of tendrils and flowers can be seen against a light blue sky. The background to this relatively simple composition is a kind of gilded surface that reminds one of Japanese paintings or the works of Gustav Klimt. The close affinity between women and nature is symbolized by the apparent attachment of the subject to the stylized painting of tendrils and also by the similarity between her graceful femininity and the filigree flora. The picture is a finely crafted combination of delicate Naturalism and Art Nouveau.

Thorma painted *Female Portrait* around 1900. The painting captures an aristocratic woman with reddish-brown hair in an unusually casual pose. In harmony with turn-of-the-century fashion, she is wearing a gold and white striped, apparently silk blouse with a raised collar and wide frills. Her greenish-blue skirt can only be seen down to her hips. As in the case of the painting of Irén Bilcz, the woman's face is depicted with the precision of a draughtsman. From a stylistic perspective, although one can unquestionably sense the effect of delicate Naturalism in this picture, it is also reminiscent of the portrait style of Leibl and the detailed depictions of academic drawing. It is apparent that at the turn of the century Thorma had still not set off on the path towards the powerful picturesque.

Homecoming (Image 2), painted in the 1910s, clearly shows a significant change in Thorma's art. Accurate detail has been replaced by a style in which the focus is entirely on colors. A poor female peasant, similar to the corn-gathering women of Jean-Francois Millet, can be seen. She is carrying hay through the summer heat, going home bent and broken. The artist places this composition into a landscape resplendent with golden yellow and ochre green. The effect of the strong sunshine is resolved by the brushstrokes of the yellowish-green outlines of the forms, which have the hint of a softly shadowed transition. The use of shade is so delicate in some places that the forms seem to blend into one another. This technique can often be found in the works of Hollósy and the French Impressionists. However, Thorma painted the peasant woman's headscarf in thick, dark, wavy lines, which is characteristic of the early works of Paul Gauguin.

In the center of a later work, *Violet Pickers* (Image 3), two kneeling women gather violets in a fresh green meadow. The hills of Nagybánya are turning

green nearby, while in the distance snowy peaks stretch into the greenish-blue sky. The women are enjoying the complete serenity of the springtime Nagybánya landscape. Despite the evident *couleur locale*, one can also interpret this painting as one belonging to the genre of Antique idylls that denote the close affinity between self and nature. Beyond this, it points to the affinity between women and the Earth as essential symbols of fecundity and life. In this picture one encounters a peaceful paradise, distant from decadent civilization, like in Gauguin's exotic, close-to-nature paintings of scenes in Tahiti. Though diverging from Gauguin's style, Thorma also painted his human figures with great freedom, often disregarding anatomical precision, perspective, and the harmony of proportions. An especially good example of this is the depiction of the fair-haired woman in the blue dress on the left of the picture. Thorma's main aim was not exact representation, but abstract reduction; in other words, conveying the most essential characteristics of the things depicted.

Alongside Impressionism and Post-Impressionism, in the 1920s Thorma was preoccupied with the art of Antiquity. He followed the example of Renaissance painters and drew on Greek mythology with enthusiasm. In many of his pictures he created a unique setting for his mythological figures, placing Danaë, Dione, and Leda (Image 4) in the colorful, gentle hills of the Nagybánya countryside. This geographical relocation lends a sense of distinction to the depiction of mythological themes. Thorma makes the changeability of the Nagybánya landscape, sometimes cloudy, sometimes bathed in sunshine, felt by painting mostly grey skies with dark greenish-blue shading and golden and orange patches of light. The carefully chosen complementary colors create a melancholic atmosphere in the pictures. At the same time the somber colors effectively emphasize the light beige, titanium-white shimmer of the mythological nudes. Qualities traditionally regarded as feminine, such as gentleness, softness, calm, lightness, and gracefulness are given an uncontested place at the forefront.

Thorma's cycle of pictures of women bathing outdoors (Image 5) was also painted in the 1920s and 1930s. One can divide these paintings into three groups. In the paintings belonging to the first category, like in the pictures of women bathing by Paul Cézanne and Pierre-Auguste Renoir, porcelain-white female nudes and women dressed in light summer clothes are in the center of the four, five, and six-figure compositions. Although Thorma does not emphasize their physicality and sexuality, one can still discern some eroticism in the compositions. The landscape plays only something of a background role. In the other two categories, rather than being essential constituents of the composition, women are often used as props, while the magnificent, brightly-colored Nagybánya landscape is at the forefront.

In this period Thorma also painted single-figure opalescent, semi-reclining nudes. One feels the influence of the masters of Venice and the late

Renaissance in these works. In all likelihood Thorma's models were his wife, Margit Kiss, and Zsuzsa Balkányi. Kiss, with her dark, bobbed hair, is depicted in *Female Nude with a Blue Background*. One could even term this relatively simple female nude, painted in a beautiful, cool blue with metallically glinting whitish shades, the "Olympia of Nagybánya," since it creates the impression that one is looking at Giorgione's dark-haired Olympia after awakening, with a mystical dark-blue sky in the background. In *Nude* (Image 6), the figure is most likely that of the fair-haired Balkányi, whom the viewer sees in a semi-reclining pose of expectation, similar to that of Titian's fair-haired female figures in his Danaë series.

In the 1930s Thorma often focused on the figures, and his female portraits of this period are mostly close-ups. He returned to the depictions in profile that he had used so enthusiastically in the past, although by this time his method of representation and his female types had become more modern. Nature is not absent from these pictures either, as one can regard women and flowers, allegories of beauty, as inseparable elements of Thorma's oeuvre. In the artist's later works, depictions of women draw on the Impressionist and Post-Impressionist principle of the absolute validity of colors, much as in the case of his landscapes, which can be seen as forerunners of Impressionism. The highly-detailed paintings are gradually replaced with a manner of depiction that focuses primarily on colors. The essence of his art is conveyed by colorful sketch-like stylizations. However, despite the stylization, one still senses the careful construction of the compositions.

As regards his painting style, Thorma's later pictures are characterized by the daring use of complementary contrasts, where yellowish-orange is matched with bluish-purple and rust-red with green, and also by his use of mixed dark colors for shading and reflections of golden and ochre light. Unlike the Impressionists, Thorma often used saturated colors (Images 7 and 8). It is clear that he worked with the tone-on-tone technique. This means that he first colored the elements of the pictures in dark tones and then overpainted the surface with shinier, lighter shades of the same colors in patches and broad brush strokes, skilfully making the movement of colors, that is, the play of light and shadows, perceptible. The quick, energetic brush strokes are also expressive of the emotional turmoil of the painter's soul. This extemporaneous mode of depiction, which is full of deep emotions, the application of colors in patches and stripes, and the use of saturated colors became defining characteristics of Thorma's style. *Woman Resting on the Riverbank* and *In Monastery Meadow* (Image 9) are striking examples. In these later works one senses the independent, instinctive, passionate, and emancipated artistic personality of the mature János Thorma. ❧

Zsuzsa Sidó

Affinities and Transformations: Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Hungarian Paintings in Private Collections

A Joint Exhibition of KOGART and the Hungarian National Museum
at the Hungarian National Museum
from 23 March, 2013 to 25 August, 2013

Before this exhibition opened its doors, more than 30 years had passed since the public had a chance to see the hidden treasures of Hungarian private collections. In 1981 the Hungarian National Gallery put a large selection of privately owned paintings on display in an exhibition entitled *Válogatás magyar magángyűjteményekből* ("Selections from Hungarian Private Collections").[1] To make up for the hiatus, in 2013, at the initiative of the Kovács Gábor Art Foundation, the Hungarian National Museum hosted an exhibition of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Hungarian paintings held in private collections. Almost 50 Hungarian collectors made contributions, which in the end amounted to some 130 paintings by 65 painters. The exhibition, which was curated by Péter Fertőszegi, Mátyás Gödölle, Gábor Kaszás, and Judit Virág, was unique because it offered an impression of two centuries of private tastes in the field of painting and gave a sense of the interests and affinities of individual collectors. In recent years museums have tended to focus on Hungarian painting of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This exhibition was important in part simply because it offered insights into the points of departure for these later artistic periods.

Private collections are part and parcel of a nation's cultural heritage, and if one seeks to understand the cultural products and stylistic developments of a period, the works held in private collections can hardly be ignored. Furthermore, these paintings are often borrowed by public institutions for thematic exhibitions, and they are a valuable component of the underlying

1 ■ László Mravik and Katalin Sinkó. *Válogatás magyar magángyűjteményekből* ("Selections from Hungarian Private Collections"). Exhibition catalogue. Budapest: Hungarian National Gallery, 1981.

Zsuzsa Sidó

is an art historian and doctoral candidate at Central European University, Budapest. She has pursued research on the architectural history of nineteenth-century country houses and their art collections. Her doctoral dissertation focuses on the art culture of the Hungarian aristocracy and aristocratic patronage of the arts.

concepts of such events. How is one to understand the work of Mihály Munkácsy (1844-1900), for instance, without having had a chance to see his paintings from the collections of Imre Pákh?

Since the circumstances in Hungary following the Second World War essentially liquidated the art market, the re-emergence of interest only began to become palpable after 1990. The selection of paintings in the exhibition was not based solely on the aim to gather together the rarest or aesthetically most valuable pieces, but rather on the desire to give an overall picture of the works that grace the walls of private homes. As a result, the biggest challenge for the curators was probably the task of developing a concept for the exhibition. Given the variety of themes, this cannot have been easy. The exhibition consisted of five rooms organized primarily in chronological order, but the curators also aimed to give visitors some guidelines regarding the themes emerging in the collections. Concise introductions to the main stylistic trends of the periods in question were provided, enabling one to situate the individual works in the larger context of the history of Hungarian painting.

The practice among private citizens of collecting works of art can be dated roughly to the beginning of the eighteenth century. The first paintings commissioned by the aristocracy and the high clergy were primarily portraits and still lifes. Jakab Bogdány (1660-1724) and his son-in-law Tóbiás Stranover (1684-1756) followed the manner of Dutch still lifes and vanitas painting, with their precise attention to detail. Although they spent the most productive periods of their lives in Amsterdam and London, they are included in the canon of early Hungarian painting. Bogdány's *Still Life with Birds and Squirrel* (Image 1) is a fine example of his work. The lively composition depicts a detail of a country house and a fountain in the background. This indicates that the person who commissioned the work wanted his house to be visible in the painting. Where did the painter see such a variety of birds? We know that he made diligent sketches in the aviary of Admiral George Churchill in Windsor Little Park. These he later incorporated into his compositions, together with rich, colorful fruits. One should not forget that these paintings were not exhibited in the neutral setting of the museum until the middle of the nineteenth century, but were part of domestic culture. And today the paintings on exhibit are again decorating homes, as they were originally intended to. The bouquets of János Szentgyörgyi (1793-1860), such as *Still Life with Fruit and Melon* (Image 2), were not merely decorative works. Rather, in the tradition of Brueghel, each flower and fruit bore a symbolic meaning.

Still painted mostly by foreign artists, some of the fine portraits of high ranking personalities were produced in the first part of the eighteenth century. *The Portrait of Charlotte Amalie, Princess of Hessen-Rheinfels and Wife of Ferenc Rákóczi II* (1707) by Ádám Mányoki (1673-1757) is an exquisite example of courtly portraiture by a Hungarian painter who was trained abroad and

became acquainted with international trends in the German courts. Another painting by Mányoki, *Young Man Standing in a Crimson Coat* (Image 3), shows the influence of harmonious German portraiture and can be compared with János Donát's (1744-1830) portrait of *Dániel Berzsenyi* (Image 4) or János Jakab Stunder's (1759-1811) portrait of the poet *Mihály Csokonai Vitéz* (1809). These paintings all demonstrate how the late Baroque tendencies were moving towards the Classical and Beidermeier styles of portraiture. The ultimate figure of Biedermeier domestic painting, Miklós Barabás (1810-1898), was also represented in the exhibition by *Little Girl with Doll* (1844), *Three Girls Swinging* (1849), *Mother with Child* (1860), and a fine ivory miniature portrait of the artist's wife from 1842 (Image 5). The line of portraiture and domestic scenes continued in the second room with *Before the Ball* (1851) or the humorous *Dream of the Painter* (1851) by József Borsos (1821-1883).

The second room included a fine selection of landscape paintings showing the ways in which nature provided a painterly theme expressive of various emotions and bearing messages. They include the atmospheric landscapes of Károly Markó the Elder (1793-1860), such as *The Fisherman* (Image 6), Károly Telepy's mythical-Arcadian scenes (*The Fountain of Nero*, 1852), or sites important to national history (*The Castle of Árva*, 1880). The mystical landscapes of László Paál (1846-1879), who developed his painterly technique as part of the Barbizon School in France, were represented by *Forest Detail with Rocks* (Image 7) and *Pond of Frogs* (1876). The exhibition also had some of the vibrant, almost three-dimensional pictures of László Mednyánszky (1852-1919), for instance *Forest Creek with Bridge* (Image 8) and *Snowy Land with Boats* (1898).

The portraits and the landscapes from the period of the 1830s onwards were mostly commissioned by the increasingly powerful middle class, members of which regarded the arts as a means of self-representation, but also as a tool with which to express and embody their support for the national cause. Both portraits and landscapes with their romantic or idealized features should be understood as part of the Reform Period, when Giacommo Marastoni established the first painting academy and the Hungarian National Museum opened its doors to the public. The figure of Károly Lotz (1833-1904) is connected in the mind of the public to the large murals in both private and public buildings of late nineteenth-century Budapest. The exhibition presents some sketches of these murals, but also a fine portrait of his stepdaughter, *Kornelia* (Image 9). Kornelia, who was often a model for his other mythological or historical compositions, is painted in a light white dress with an air of ease and charming elegance that reflects the painterly techniques Lotz used for his frescoes.

One is surprised to notice the stylistic trajectory of Munkácsy upon seeing two strikingly different paintings by him next to each other: *Father's Birthday* (Image 10) and *Yawning Apprentice* (1868-69). The second one shows how revolutionary in terms of expressiveness the painter was in his own time. Alongside a sketch

for the portrait of Milton (about 1877), one observes the dramatic realism that was surfacing in Munkácsy's painting after the 1880s. Similarly, one notices the stylistic development of József Rippl-Rónai (1861-1927) when gazing upon his *Birthday of Grandmother* (Image 11), which follows Munkácsy's *Father's Birthday* both in terms of composition and color palette.

In April the exhibition also included in its display one of the most valuable recent finds of the Hungarian art market, *View of Trau in the Sunset* (Image 13) by Tivadar Csontváry Kosztka (1853-1919), which was discovered after 113 years and sold at the 2012 winter auction of the Judit Virág Gallery and Auction House for a record price. After one month this painting was replaced by three other works of Csontváry.

By the second half of the nineteenth century Hungarian painting had caught up with many international trends, thanks in part to institutional state support, but also to the international character of the Munich Art Academy, which attracted many Hungarian painters. The professional life of Gyula Benczúr (1844-1920) was shaped by both. He gave up his professorship in Munich in order to teach at the Academy in Budapest. His portraits of public figures and aristocrats are well known. The exhibition included an original, gentle self-portrait with his wife and favorite dog, *Chubby* (Image 12).

Probably the most unified in terms of conception was the last room, which dealt with the genre painting of the late nineteenth century. As public demand grew, artists came up with a variety of themes from everyday life. These saloon and genre paintings incorporate various themes, from portraits to more remarkable and engaging social topics or Romantic paintings set in nature. *The Irresistible* (Image 14), a witty painting by Tihamér Margitay (1859-1922), represents humorous affections in an urban context, while in another work on the theme of romance, *Courtship: Lovers with Tennis Racket* (Image 15), János Vaszary (1867-1939) depicts lovers in nature. Conversely, István Csók (1865-1961) reflects on the difficulties of urbanization in a socially sensitive composition, *At the Maid's Agent* (Image 16). The painting offers insights into the social dynamics of the period: under the famous Halácsy map of Budapest, which was a symbol of the urban boom of the late nineteenth century, a group of people is depicted looking for a job. An elegant lady is sitting in the center of the composition. What is she doing there? She is sitting together with people who have come from rural Hungary to Budapest to find employment. She is probably from a gentry family and intends to support them.

The exhibition was accompanied by a book which is not a traditional exhibition catalogue, but rather a book of four essays on the painting of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It contains superb illustrations of the works that were on exhibit. The book not only served as a useful guide to the exhibition, but also offers a good introduction to the general history of Hungarian painting in the given period. ❧

Elemér Hankiss, "The Protean Self"

An Interview by Erika Csontos and Károly Tardos

It is a bit difficult to decide whether to consider Elemér Hankiss a literary scholar, a sociologist, or a philosopher. "I have always felt and still feel that the real adventure of my life has been that I set out, in my own amateurish way, on new journeys of discovery," he says. In this interview Hankiss speaks with Erika Csontos and Károly Tardos about some of the various paths down which he has embarked and shares some of his perceptions of Hungary today.

Erika Csontos: *You come from a family that has belonged to the urban middle class for several generations. Your father was a university instructor in Debrecen. Ten years ago László Lengyel did an interview with you in which you emphasized that although you grew up under somewhat exceptional conditions, you were raised in the spirit of egalitarianism. What role did your upbringing play in the fact that you became a sort of figure of mediation in later life, or was this influenced by the fact that your father was a Lutheran, your mother a Catholic, and you were baptized in the Catholic Church but raised as a Lutheran?*

Elemér Hankiss: The example of my father was attractive to me. He taught at universities, both in Hungary and abroad, he wrote books, published *Helikon* ("Helicon"), the internationally known quatra-lingual journal of comparative literature, and traveled all over the country holding lectures. He was also the

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Erika Csontos

studied Aesthetics at Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest before beginning a career as a freelance editor. She has done interviews with a number of prominent figures in Hungarian literary life, including Péter Esterházy, György Spiró, and Lajos Parti Nagy. She joins her husband Károly Tardos for this interview with Elemér Hankiss, originally published in Hungarian in two parts by "<http://www.litera.hu/hirek/h-e-az-ezerarcu-en>".

Károly Tardos

is a sociologist who has published a book on the sociology of the fine arts and a book of interviews with top Hungarian economists. He has also done interviews on the history of economic thought with, among others, János Kornai.

Photograph by Zsolt Reviczky

Elemér Hankiss

editor-in-chief of three other periodicals: *Forrás* ("Source"), *Magyar Lélek* ("Hungarian Soul"), and *Debreceni Szemle* ("Debrecen Review"). Regarding his view of the world and his mentality, he was closest to Christian democratic principles, without, however, this meaning any kind of rigid political affiliation. As far as his influence on us, his children, is concerned, probably his deep social sensitivity was his most important attribute. Debrecen at the time was surrounded by so-called *kertségek* ("gardens"), which were really distinct neighborhood developments. There were reasonably well-to-do "gardens," poorer "gardens," and very poor "gardens." We lived a life of urban bourgeois comfort. We lived next to the Sestakert, on the edge of the so-called "Big Forest,"[1] on the university campus. But as children we saw how our father would go from the university to some of the poorer "gardens" as if he felt at home everywhere. He didn't draw distinctions between people either. One does not forget such an example. Perhaps this is why I feel almost more at home among skilled workers, villagers who farm their small plots of land, so-called everyday people than I do in university circles. I am sometimes more interested in how to trim wood, fine-tune an engine, or sow corn than I am in the great theories of sociology or the study of literature.

E. Cs.: *You mention two decisive events in the interview with Lengyel that are later also emphasized by your alter-ego in* A Nincsből a Van felé *("From Nothing towards Having"). One of them had to do with 19 March, 1944, the day that was the beginning of your fundamental existential experience; namely, the realization that you live in a "foreign" world.*

E. H.: Usually around the age of 16 a teenager begins to realize that the real world is quite different from the dream world of childhood. In my case this realization took place precisely at a time when the world around me was suddenly in total upheaval. On the university campus we lived in tranquility, while others had already been dragged off by the destructive maelstrom of the war. We knew about the war, of course, as my father had taken part in helping the Polish refugees who had streamed through Debrecen towards Pest, and also in the efforts to provide safeguard for French officers, but the awful reality

1 ■ A large city park and protected area in Debrecen.

of the war only came crashing into our lives when, on 19 March, 1944, we saw the dusty, gray, rattling German motorcycles, trucks, and armored cars coming in the opposite direction.

E. Cs.: *In April 1944 you had to interpret for German soldiers. And when you recounted this at home your father was angered: "someone who is willing to speak with murderers becomes one of their gutless accomplices." Was this pronouncement important to you later in life?*

E. H.: At the time I was a boy scout, and we had been called on to serve as interpreters for the German soldiers. When my father found this out, he beat me thoroughly, for the first and last time in my life. I learned this lesson for a lifetime, never to serve brutal powers with words, thoughts, even gestures. After the war I soon learned that I cannot become a member of any kind of political or ideological flock. Because someone who considers the flock important, the security of the fold, loses the freedom of thought. It makes you stupid, and it lames you...

Károly Tardos: *... the pressure for group conformity?*

E. H.: This is Hungary today. Today a conservative figure cannot say a single kind word about a left-wing person, and vice versa, because the others will make them outcasts. The battle of flocks, of packs, of herds is tearing the country apart. But to contradict myself, alongside independence it is also important for a thinking person to find a kind of workshop of kindred spirits, a community of people who listen to one another's ideas, critically of course.

[...]

E. Cs.: *You took part in the 1956 Revolution, but you have always been hesitant to speak much about your role in the events. "I do not want to inflate myself as an important front-line soldier. I am not a martyr, I have no great merits to boast of I was insignificant in comparison with those who were hanged. Though I had a '00,' i.e. a case for treason." You made these remarks in an interview with Alinda Veiszer. In 1957 you were held under remand for seven months, and in your interview with Lengyel you recounted a moment when you ran into Domokos Kosáry[2] in the corridor of the prison.*

E. H.: He was walking down the corridor with such dignity, as if he were the king and the guards were his vassals.

E. Cs.: *Kosáry wrote a memoir in prison,* Látogatás a Földgolyón *("Visit to Planet Earth"). You also wrote notes?*

2 ■ A prominent historian and president of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences from 1990 to 1996.

E. H.: Yes, though in the first months we weren't even allowed to read. Later we were given books. One of our fellow prisoners would wheel the books around on a tottering trolley. Reaching out of the bars of the cell, you could select from among them. I was happy to grab one of Dostoyevsky's novels the first time, but I couldn't stand it for long. There, in the misery of the prison, I could not stand how in Dostoyevsky the whole world, all of life is a miserable prison. The next time I got a Soviet novel about a collective farm and the farmers of Sakhalin Island, who fight heroically against the ice, the snow, and the storms. I read it with pleasure, because it was triumphant life itself.

E. Cs.: And what did you write on?

E. H.: Toilet paper. I got my hands on some pencil stub, maybe I got it from one of the guards. There were decent people among them too.

E. Cs.: And who did you share your cell with?

E. H.: At first I was together with sociologist István Kemény for about two months. Then they realized that this was not a good match and they put a soldier in with me who had smuggled a radio into Hungary in November 1956. He was afraid that they were going to hang him. It was terrible to watch him suffer. But in the end he got off with less.

E. Cs.: And you? How did you stand up?

E. H.: In all honesty when they pulled me out of the bed in the early morning and took me to Fő Street, I was shivering from the cold and from fear. But inside they did not maltreat me physically, they only tried to break me psychologically. Our interrogators were no longer the torturers of the Rákosi era, but rather young lawyers who must have become part of the apparatus under Imre Nagy. Of course my interrogator tried everything to corner me, but he couldn't pin anything on me. I was beginning to think I was going to be let off, but in the end he shoved a bill of indictment in front of me and told me to sign it. I was young and a snob and I angrily threw a [Dezső] Kosztolányi quote in his face: "Law among us is not more than formality, You need someone in jail, that's our legality."[3]

E. Cs.: I have had the sense that there are two poets who are important to you, to whom you always return somehow, for instance in your 2008 book Ikarosz bukása *("The Fall of Icarus"), one is Kosztolányi, the other Attila József.*

E. H.: After university, for lack of anything better to do I worked in foreign

3 ■ Reference to a two-line poem by Dezső Kosztolányi, "Rím a földi igazságszolgáltatásra" ("Rhyme on the Earthly Dispensation of Justice"). The original poem is: *"Itt az ítélet pusztán alaki, / mindig kell a börtönbe valaki."*

trade. After one or two years I ended up in the Széchényi Library. That was where I started to deal with the poetry of Attila József.

E. Cs.: So the study of the complex images of the poet, that began there?

E. H.: By fits and starts. I thought that the Széchényi Library was the sacred workshop of culture. Instead I spent two years underlining the right words on the card catalogue slips in the Acquisitions Department. But after 5 o'clock I stayed into the evening and worked. Keresztury[4] was organizing a Csokonai exhibition and Imre Gyöngyössy—who later became a film director—and I were the gofers. We collected the pictures. Another exhibition was being organized too, on Cervantes. That was when I wrote my first essay. I found a bunch of Don Quixote pictures and I examined how painters had depicted the bumbling hero, from the first portrayals to Picasso and so on. This was what gave me the idea of looking, for instance, at the different readings that *Hamlet* has been given over the centuries. At the time I was just dabbling with the idea, but I later wrote a small book on it, *Hamlet színeváltozásai* ("Transfigurations of Hamlet"). It was then, in the Széchényi Library, that I began to study the reworkings of Attila József's poems.

[...]

K. T.: You have had an amazing career, from literary theory to value sociology, political sociology, everyday cultural sociology, and finally philosophical anthropology. Were these shifts all the result of inner promptings, or did external circumstances also play a role?

E. H.: Clearly I have always tended to want to do a bit of dabbling in everything. But independent of this, I have always felt and still feel that the real adventure of my life has been that I set out, in my own amateurish way, on new journeys of discovery. To mention just one such adventure, in the first half of the 1960s my colleagues and I immersed ourselves in the study of new tendencies in literary theory and linguistics, such as Structuralism, Semiotics, modern philosophies of language, Gestalt psychology, and cultural anthropology. I worked alongside Lajos Nyíró and József Szili at the Institute for Literary Studies. But we also had a kind of "Semiotics traveling circus" too, we traveled around the country, held conferences, published collections of essays. We brought new ideas into the country. Gyurka Szépe spoke of the theories of the great figures of linguistics and textual analysis, [Ferdinand de] Saussure, [Noam] Chomsky, [Charles Sanders] Peirce, Charles [William] Morris, [Algirdas Julien] Greimas, [John Langshaw] Austin, [Jerrold J.] Katz, [Hungarian

4 ■ Dezső Keresztury was a writer, poet, literary historian, and member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.

sociologist Zsuzsa] Ferge, and [Budapest-born American semiotician and linguist Thomas] Sebeok. Vilmos Voigt introduced [Vladimir] Propp's analyses of Russian folk tales and [Claude] Lévi-Strauss' analyses of myths. Endre Bojtár was the great scholar of the Russian Formalists ([Boris Michailovich] Eichenbaum, [Viktor Borisovič] Šklovskij, and others), the Czech Structuralists ([Jan] Mukařovský), the Viennese school ([Roman Osipovich] Jakobson), and the Polish school of phenomenology ([Roman Witold] Ingarden). Iván Vitányi amazed us with the secrets of the Fibonacci sequence and the golden ratio. Csaba Pléh overwhelmed our students and our adult audiences with the newest conclusions of linguistic psychology and the philosophy of language. Mihály Hoppál revealed the secrets of the shamanisms of Eurasia. Mihály Szegedy-Maszák studied the structure of metaphor and the structural interconnections between Gothic architecture and Scholastic philosophy on the basis of the ideas of [Erwin] Panofsky. Gábor Bonyhai dazzled us all with the theories of [Gilbert] Ryle, [Alfred] Tarski, and [Max] Bense and the hypotheses of game theory and Semiotic aesthetics. I flirted with systems theory, cybernetics, and Anglo-Saxon New Criticism. This was all a big fireworks show in a gray, underdeveloped, Zhdanovian world. It's understandable that the scholars of traditional literary history hated us, especially the stern and simple-minded guards of Marxist ideology. Once, in a thunderous party resolution, Bandi Bojtár and I were condemned as "value-nihilists."

E. Cs.: What on earth was that supposed to mean?

E. H.: I don't know, and they probably didn't know either. But these attacks played a role in the gradual shift in the second half of the 1960s, when I navigated slowly into the waters of sociology, the sociology of human consciousness, and value sociology. I felt more and more that in a tempest-tossed country crippled by state socialism analyzing poems was less important than examining how and why society had fallen apart, how and why social consciousness, the culture of everyday behavior, and people's image of the world and one another had been deformed. And I felt more and more that we had to seek the paths to recovery.

[...]

E. Cs.: Your article entitled "Igazságtalan ország" ("Unjust Country") is very inspiring. You summarize numerous praiseworthy initiatives taken abroad: how can one foster widespread social solidarity. For instance, there is a French website where you can offer services. Someone can offer language instruction, say, in exchange for plumbing. There are similar initiatives here in Hungary too, but it seems at times as if there were obstacles to solidarity that reside in our thinking.

E. H.: There are historical reasons for lack of solidarity as well. England is a good example. Between 1680 and 1850 the Industrial Revolution destroyed the villages, the small towns, the local communities. It drove people into the hell of the rapidly growing industrial and mining cities. All human bonds were broken; you no longer had your priest, your schoolteacher, your cantor, your neighbor. The individual was lost in the unfamiliar and anonymous crowd. It took some 150 or 200 years for society to reorganize itself, for communities based on solidarity to form. In Hungary communities began to disintegrate rapidly during and after the Second World War. After the war forced industrialization and agricultural collectivization were the primary forces of social disintegration, but the system used violence to shred and destroy traditional communities as well. And over the course of the past 20 years, free market competition has extended this process of disintegration, if perhaps in a different manner. Even today little circles of solidarity are only slowly beginning to take form.

[...]

K. T.: *In your 2009 "Új Reformkor? Lehetőségek és lehetetlenségek" ("A New Reform Era? Possibilities and Impossibilities") you consider whether it would be possible to usher in a new reform era today. What are the chances?*

E. H.: [Count István] Széchenyi and the figures of the Reform Era started from nothing and within a decade-and-a-half they had formulated an entire series of goals and initiatives that would define the era. You feel awed and ashamed if you think of just a few of them, national independence, the Hungarian language, Hungarian theater, equality before the law, the emancipation of the serfs, the proportionate sharing of taxation, civil society, the repeal of entailments, the legal legitimation of freehold, Széchenyi's *Hitel* ("Credit"),[5] free industry and trade, the foundation of the Society for the Protection of Hungarian Industry in 1844, the construction of a well-developed network of railway lines, the regulation of the rivers, political rights, freedom of the press, republican government, education, social life and civil society, the refinement of the nation,[6] and so on. If Hungarian society were to awaken, for it has not yet done so, and to reflect collectively on the possibilities of improving the country, if the younger generation of politicians would be just a bit more honest and talented than their predecessors, if the intelligentsia would show greater recognition of its responsibilities than it has over the course of the past

5 ■ Published in 1830, *Hitel* was a call for economic and political reforms, in particular reforms to the system of entailments and the institution of serfdom.

6 ■ A reference to József Kármán's *A nemzet csinosodása*, published in 1794. Kármán's book was one of the early calls for reform.

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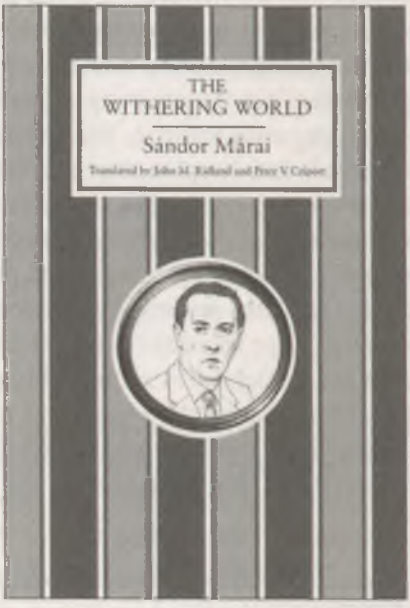
two decades, if the leaders of the country would join forces and convince people that it is worth making sacrifices in the name of a better Hungary, which could be built in the space of only a few years, if we could manage to give people back their faith in themselves and in the country, if... But this is already too many ifs, and it is hard to believe that the mentality of a society can change in only a few years. Though there are examples of this. Think of 1956, when a frightened society, hobbled by the weight of oppression, forgot its fears in the space of a few hours and became free in spirit. Or think of how in the 1970s and 1980s the idea of the possibility and even the demand for change became increasingly pervasive in Hungarian society. Earlier the more cowardly you were, the better your chances of survival. In the 1980s, however, courage came ever more into fashion. And the hope grew stronger that perhaps finally the country would begin its ascent back up the slope of history. Today it seems to me that Hungarian society is teetering between cowardice and courage, hopelessness and hope. ❧

Translated by Thomas Cooper

English Title



Sándor Márai:
THE WITHERING WORLD

Though best known as a novelist, Sándor Márai was also a fine poet and translator of poems into Hungarian. The Withering World *is the first collection of poems by Márai in English translation. They offer a glimpse of a less familiar side of the oeuvre of one of Hungary's most prominent authors of the twentieth century.*

Translated by John M. Ridland and Peter V. Czipott

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Though in the work of Nádas one could speak both of his manner of making and his manner of using photographs, in either case the visual depiction is by no means subordinate to the textual narrative. The precise planning of his photographs and Nádas' ability to seize the shards of a broken moment enable one to sense that he understands every aspect of the creation of a picture. He knows the raw materials, the techniques, and the formal criteria of a good photograph, and he understands dimensions of a visual composition that lie beyond the mere creation of a picture. For Nádas, light is the point of departure and the point of arrival of both. He knows light in all the moments of the day. He knows the afternoon sunlight shining in through the shutters, the light at daybreak slipping through the narrow slit by the velvet curtains, the spectacle of moonlight broken into rigid angles and planes, the reflected light of streetlamps shining off the wet, dark asphalt, and the tender shades of eventide, and he is able to capture the mysterious and sublime flicker of images in the mind's eye at the touch of light from an unknown source, images that awaken an inner sense of rejoicing.

From *Points of Connection: Time and Space in the Photography of Peter Nádas* by Csilla E. Csorba