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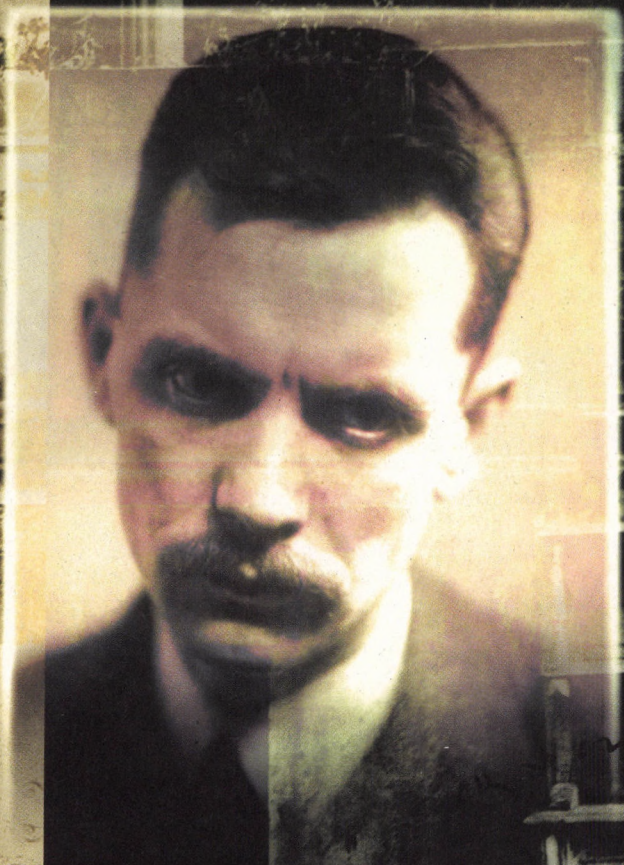

- ATTILA JÓZSEF 1905–1937

Poems, translated by Daniel Hoffman, George Szirtes & David Hill

Dezső Kosztolányi, Sándor Márai, Gyula Illyés, Tibor Déry, Anna Valachi & Frederick Turner on Attila József's Life & Work

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ATTILA JÓZSEF 1905–1937

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Attila József (1905–1937)

Seven Poems in New Translation

Night on City's Edge

Külvárosi éj

Hoisting its net up from inside
the walled-in yard of the housing block,
and like a ditch at water's bottom,
our kitchen slowly fills with dark.

Silence. A scrubbing brush appears
to find unskilful feet and crawl.
A piece of plaster hanging near
is wondering whether or not to fall.

The night, with oily rags to wear,
is hovering in the sky.
It sits at city's edge. It sighs,
it flits across the concrete square,
and lights a moon to make it flare.

Like stacks of rubble roughly strewn,
factories loom.
Nonetheless,
it's inside these a denser dark's compressed:
the base plate of this silence.

And on the windows of textile mills
in loose bundles
the moon's rays fall.
The moon's soft light becomes a fiber,
stretched on the ribs of weaving frames.
Into the night, while work stands still,
the weaver-women's shapeless dreams
get woven by these sad machines.

And farther on, like arched cemeteries,
foundry, cement factory, screw factory
are echo-laden family crypts.
These places of production keep
rebirth's dark secret to themselves.
A cat is scratching at a fence,
and beetle-backed dynamos
send light-signals, give night-frights, to
the superstitious watchman,
as they glisten cold.

A train whistles.

The dampness fumbles around the evening—
pervades bent trees and makes them heavy,
clogging the traffic dust
trapped in their leafage.

A cop and a drunk labourer do their rounds,
and some comrade with pamphlets to read
sneaks across.
Sniffs his way forward like a dog,
with catlike ear inclining back,
dodging the streetlights, zig and zag.

The tavern's mouth spews tainted light,
its open window vomits, splashing.
A choked-up lamp swings round inside.
One worker's on an all-night session.
He bares his teeth against the walls—
the tavern owner long since snoozing—
fills up the stairwell with his wails,
and weeps. And hymns the revolution.

The river is like ore cooled off.
They clatter, they lie stiff.
That roaming wind's a homeless dog—
prods the water with big loose tongue,
and laps the water up.
Like drifting rafts, straw sleeping-sacks
swim down this silent stream, this night...
The warehouse is a stranded boat.
The foundry is an iron barge.
Its worker dreams the molds have forged
a smolten baby, red and hot.

Everything's damp, everything's heavy,
sketched over with designs of mildew
that map the lands of misery.
And off there, in the barren meadow,
ragged grass. Cast-off rags. And paper
which would so love to crawl! It stirs,
but has no strength to start...

Your gusty wind, all damp and clinging,
echoes through dirty washing swinging—
night!
You're hanging from the sky like cambric
hang loose from rope, like human grief
hangs from life. Night!
Night of the poor! Be my coal,
smoulder and smoke within my soul,
find iron in me, melt it down,
fashion an anvil hard as stone,
a hammer spitting sparks of metal,
a swift blade that will win the battle,
night!

The night's a joyless, heavy load.
So, brothers, now I too will rest.
May grief and pain not crush our soul.
May vermin not consume our flesh.

(1932)

Translated by David Hill

Reckoning

Számvetés

I've dined on rancid filth, on rot,
swallowed dung-water and drunk piss;
no man could be more rash than this.
But so far, happiness is not my lot.

Not one moment of mine was noble
in this world contrite, redeemed,
none warm, sweet, or pleasant seemed
as a pig would find in a puddle.

Morality teaches me to be
sneaky, as you do too, my dear.
I've been hungering twenty-eight years.
Only a weapon now can harm me.

That is why my heart's oppressed
by such dark powers, my love's tender face
shows anguish when she sees my gaze
—even my smile causes distress.

(1933)

Translated by Daniel Hoffman

Mama

Mama

For a week now I have thought of nothing
but mama and keep thinking and stopping.
I see her dutifully bustling up the attic
a creaking basket balanced on her hip.

I was an honest sort back then and screamed blue murder,
like any toddler I wailed and bellowed at her.
Let someone else wash the pile of wet clothes there.
It is me mama should be taking up the stair.

She went on quietly spreading out the cloth.
She didn't curse, or even look across,
and the clothes swished and shone and swirled
billowing above the roofs of the world.

I'd not fuss now, but it's too late for fuss,
I see her now for the giant that she was,
her grey hair billowing above grey weather,
her blue dye rinsing through the sky's blue water.

(1934)

Translated by George Szirtes

Fall

Ősz

Between their bars the barren branches clog
with flimsy scraps of autumnal fog
and dew is sparkling on the iron gate.
Wagons loaded with exhaustion dream
of engines that are chuffed with steam
returning to the sidings where they wait.

Here and there a sour looking pale bough
still preens itself, at least for now.
The paving stones fizz beads of sticky damp.

Summer has gathered its rags up like a tramp
its blushing mood soon done,
as abruptly vanished as it had begun.

Has anyone noticed while at work how Fall
lingers on the factory wall
as it drips with spittle, slimy with its tears.

I knew that Fall was coming, that we'd light
the fire, but not that it would be here tonight
staring at me, mumbling in my ears.

(1935)

Translated by George Szirtes

Late Lament

Kései sirató

My temperature's normal but I'm feverish,
mother-nurse, where have you gone?
Death has crooked his finger and got his wish,
you were an easy lay for him and I'm alone.
I try to piece you together now from mild
autumn winds and the kindness of other women,
but time's too short, its fires too compact and wild
to forge you from anyone.

Last time I saw you the war was at an end
and the town was starving so I rode the train
out to the country for food, for we had to fend
for ourselves, then straddled the wagon home again.
The stores were empty and breadless but I brought
potatoes and flour and like a smart lad found
even a chicken, but when I arrived home and sought
you, you had gone to ground.

You had taken those sweet nipples, which were mine
and gave yourself over to worms.
You, who comforted and lectured me once in such fine-
sounding, sweet, but now it seems, false terms.
You cooled my soup, blew on it, stirred it and spoke,
saying: Eat, sweetheart, grow big and strong for me!
But now your dry lips bite at the greasy soil and choke,
so you must have been lying, don't you see?

Had I but eaten you! You, who brought me, whether I would or no,
food that was yours again and again.
Why was your back bent over washing? Was it so
that it might be straight in the box they put you in?
Look, I'd be happy, if you thrashed me just once more!
Yes, happy, because I could tell you to your face
how useless you are by not-being! I'd give you what for!
You mere shade, you disgrace!

You're a bigger con than any woman might seem,
outdoing everyone, you cheat,
deserting the faith you gave life to with a scream,
the product of your many couplings, in heat.
You gypsy! Whatever you gave with all that coochy coo,
you took back in the end, at the last minute.
Can't you hear your child cuss? Shut him up, won't you!
Tell him to put a sock in it.

Slowly my mind is clearing, the myth is put aside.
The child that clings to its mother
demanding her love must eventually decide
to put an end to his blather.
All mummy's boys are doomed to disappointment,
one way or another, or by practising deceit.
However they fight it or accept it with resentment
the result is the same: defeat.

(1935)

Translated by George Szirtes

You Made Me Be a Child Again

Gyermekké tettél

You made me be a child again.
Through thirty winters' biting pain I grew.
I can't sit still, I try to walk in vain.
My legs keep dragging, pushing me toward you.

You're in my mouth as a dog carries its pup
and so as not to choke on you, I'd flee.
The years that wrecked my destiny rise up
at every moment and sweep over me.

Look, I'm starving—feed me! Cover me,
I'm cold. A stupid fool, give me your care.
Like draft in a house your absence goes through me.
Say it, say that I'll be free of fear.

You listened, and by silence my tongue was seized.
All memory vanished when I felt your gaze.
Make me be no longer unappeased
so I can die, or, alone, live out my days.

My mother threw me out—I lay on the sill,
stone below me, emptiness above.
I would have crept into myself, impossible.
O how I long for sleep! Let me in, my love.

There are many men like me, unfeeling,
from whose eyes nonetheless tears flow.
My love for you makes possible my healing
so I can love myself as well as you.

(1936)

Translated by Daniel Hoffman

So Finally Now I Have my Home

Íme, hát megleltem hazámat

So finally now I have my home,
that place where they have learned to spell
my name, and write it on my grave—
with luck, they'll bury me as well.

Earth will accept me like an old tin,
sad but true, and perfectly fit:
nobody values last war's coin,
that bent tin dime, the farthing bit.

Nor iron rings engraved with such words
as new world, legal rights or land,
our laws are still the laws of war:
people prefer a golden band.

I was alone for a long long time,
then whole crowds descended on me.
You're on your own, they said, although
I'd gladly have kept company.

My very existence was in vain
I now conclude, since I was led
up the garden path all along
and will be useless still when dead.

Throughout my life I have tried to stand
firm in the whirlwind. What a laugh
I didn't sin more than was sinned against: do please
include that in my epitaph.

Spring, summer, fall are all pretty good,
but winter gets ten out of ten
from one whose last remaining hope
is hearth and home for other men.

(1937)

Translated by George Szirtes

Anna Valachi

"Finally Now I Have My Home"

On the Centenary of Attila József's Birth

Budapest, 11 April 1905—Balatonszárszó, 3 December 1937

A unique fate awaited Attila József, the greatest figure of twentieth-century Hungarian lyric verse. His oeuvre documented both the dominant ideas of his age and the universal experience of the human psyche with unparalleled intimacy—through his own fate. József's impact on poetry is comparable to that of Bartók on music. And yet his contemporaries realised with dismay just what an epoch-making poet he was only when his death certificate was issued, at the age of thirty-two, after he had laid himself on the tracks under a freight train about to depart a small village and was killed on the spot. Thus the symbolic date of his birth as a major poet and the all too tangible date of his death are one and the same.

He published his first volume of poetry at the age of seventeen in Makó, the small town 200 kilometres south of Budapest where he attended secondary school. In the fifteen years that followed, seven more volumes of his were to appear, with an increasing number of mature masterpieces in them. And yet, neither the critics nor József's fellow writers recognised his stature as a poet. With the exception of a few good friends and Dezső Kosztolányi, practically everyone received his lyric experiments in which he strove to expand the bounds "to the limits of reason and beyond" with incomprehension or indifference.

One factor behind this strange night-blindness on the part of József's contemporaries may have been his personality. Attila József arrived on the literary scene with the explosive vehemence worthy of a François Villon; indeed, his adolescent, extravagant behaviour, his iconoclastic disposition and his provocative tone led many to view him more as an oddball than as a poet worth taking seriously. His unusual penchant for self-revelation likewise reinforced such prejudices. And it led many to overlook the fact that he always spoke of his own experiences, his

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Anna Valachi

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own suffering, precisely so that others might also look into the laboratory of his thoughts. He expressed timeless human experiences through that which, being most palpable to him, he could study most credibly—his own fate and personality.

As news spread in December 1937 of József's suicide, the public, beset by a collective guilty conscience, was swept by a sudden determination to set things right. Indeed, from one day to the next, everyone in Hungary knew just who this posthumously discovered genius was. He had endowed all those who survived him with more truths about life, more lyric bull's eyes-turned-adages, than had anyone else. He himself had shared with us the tragic secret of his creative genius, when, taking the measure of his life, he wrote: "They took me for a child prodigy; actually, I was merely an orphan."

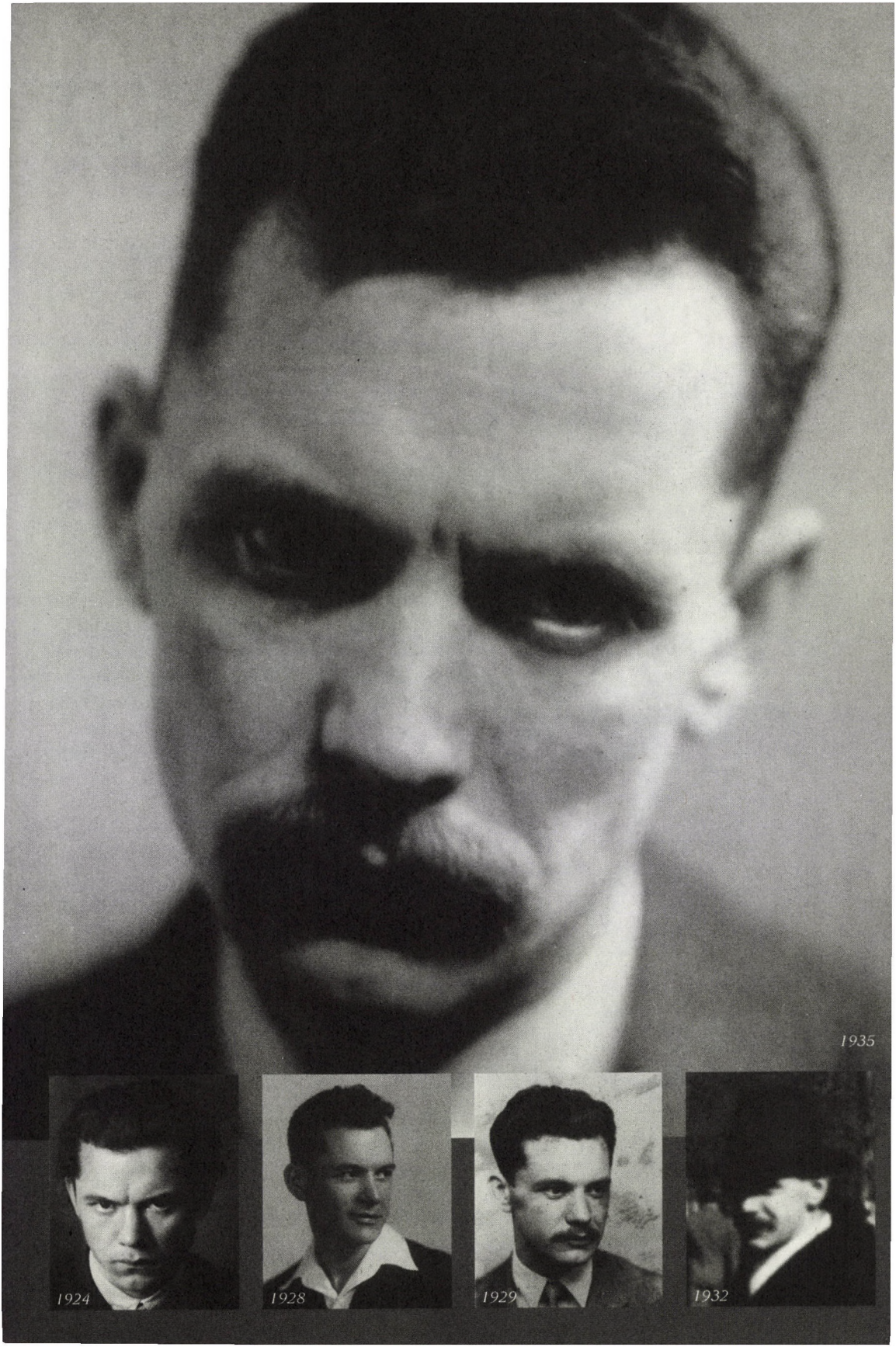
From early childhood on, Attila József's life had been marked by unanticipated losses, emotional traumas and unusual turns; all of this was later to permeate his verse and his thinking as both motivation and motif.

"I was born..."

On April 11, 1905, in a flat comprising a room and a kitchen, on an upper floor of a tenement house at 3 Gál Street in Ferencváros (then an outlying working class district of Budapest) a midwife who lived in a neighbouring flat helped deliver the sixth and last child of Áron József, a soap-maker, and Borbála Pőcze, a maidservant who'd fled to the capital from the provinces. Years later, Attila was to come under the guardianship of his two older sisters, Jolán and Etelka, Etus for short. After living together for years, Áron József and Borbála Pőcze had married only in 1900. Three of their six children died early on. Jolán had been born before their marriage, Etus and Attila afterward. In summer 1908 their father left his family to their fate, plunging them into privation. (Based on his farewell letter, they figured he'd "drifted out" to America along with hundreds of thousands of the unemployed who tried their luck in the New World. However, as research later revealed, he'd returned to Transylvania, from where he had come to Budapest as an itenerant labourer. They never did hear from him again.)

Though the mother tried to support her children through laundering, ironing, sewing, and cleaning, the struggle to survive depleted her energy, self-confidence and health. In 1910 she was compelled to turn over her two youngest children, then five and seven years old, to state care.

The brother and the younger of the sisters were placed with an old peasant farmer and his wife in Öcsöd, a small village well away from Budapest on the Great Plain. Treating them as free labour, the aging couple put them hard to work: Etus looked after the geese, Attila, called Pista (Steve) by his foster father, tended to the hogs. Deprived of their past and their individuality, and wearing straw hats and "institutional" clothes, they suffered through two years as outcasts among the other children, without a mother in an alien environment. In the school year 1911–1912, the boy learned to read and write at the elementary


1935
1924
1928
1929
1932

Attila József with Jolán, their mother Borbála, and Etelka in front. Budapest, 1908–1909.

Attila József, his mother, and sister Etelka. Budapest, late Summer 1919.

school in Öcsöd. Later, he strove to get over the psychological trauma through compulsive introspection and thinking about himself and about the world, and with the help of poetry.

> In the Year 3 reading primer, though, I came across some interesting stories about King Attila and I threw myself into reading. The stories about the king of the Huns were of interest not just because my name is also Attila, but also because my foster parents in Öcsöd had called me Pista, having concluded after a consultation with the neighbours, and in my hearing, that there was no such name as Attila. That had taken me greatly aback, because I felt that my very existence was being thrown into question. I think that discovery of the tales about King Attila decisively influenced every one of my endeavours from then onward, and ultimately it may have been this experience that led me to literature, this experience that turned me into a thinker, into a person who listens to the opinions of others but examines them for himself; the sort of person who answers to the name Pista until he proves that he is called Attila, as he had thought. (*Curriculum vitæ,* 1937. See pp. 2–34)

Seven years after they had returned to their mother and sister in Budapest, at Christmas 1919, their mother finally succumbed to a long battle with cancer. However, the oldest sister, Jolán, who had married a man whose higher social status consequently raised hers, continued to care for her younger siblings. It is thanks to her that (with the financial support of his brother-in-law and foster father, Dr. Ödön Makai, an attorney) Attila, who had long been writing exceptional poetry, was able to continue studying at the secondary school in Makó.

The fourteen-year old boy from Budapest was a boarder at the school and, though he adjusted with difficulty at first to the new environment, he soon shone among his peers. His thirst for knowledge, his diligence, and the poems he recited in the school's literary society all earned him respect. Not only did his teachers grow fond of him, but he also found adult benefactors who helped ensure the publication of his first book of poetry in 1922, while he was still in secondary school. *Szépség koldusa* (Beggar of Beauty) appeared with a prophetic preface by Gyula Juhász, a famous poet from the southern city of Szeged: "Fellow Hungarians, here is a poet who is off to great heights and great depths: Attila József. Love him and champion his cause!" The student-poet paid tribute to his master's generous and loving gesture in his next collection with a brilliant sonnet sequence, *A Kozmosz éneke* (Song of the Cosmos).

At the same time, the young man struggled with neurosis and troubled self-esteem, and his sense of abandonment—deriving in no small part from the absence of a caring mother and father—led him to several suicide attempts even as a student. The humiliation of assimilating into a society in which privilege by birth and property ownership were held in such high esteem, a society of hypocritical morality, tore at his psyche. Indeed, eventually he gave up trying to assimilate. He tells the story of a childhood suicide attempt in an arresting piece of short prose. (See pp. 29–31.)

In 1924 the public prosecutor's office took Attila József to court for blasphemy over his poem *"Lázadó Krisztus"* (Christ Rebelling). Later, when a student at the

Etelka József and Attila József with their grandfather, Imre Pőcze. Szabadszállás, late Summer 1928.

Attila and Etelka József. Makó, July 1923.

university of Szeged, he was barred from a school-teaching career by his conservative-minded professor, Antal Horger, for similar reasons. Taking issue with the blasphemous, provocative spirit of József's poem *"Tiszta szívvel"* (With a Pure Heart), Horger said he'd see to it that József would not have a teaching career.

Earlier that year his second volume had appeared, *Nem én kiáltok* (That's Not Me Shouting). With financial backing from his brother-in-law and his older sister, he spent the 1925–1926 academic year studying in Vienna and the following year in Paris, at the Sorbonne. What with his university studies and being a tenacious autodidact, he became a true intellectual poet, a poet who realised his verbal talents, creativity, and refined conceptual thinking in poetry with exceptional versatility in a multitude of styles and verse forms.

József synthesised the cultural experiences he had derived as a "son of the street *and* the soil" from life in the village, the capital and abroad as surely as he did ancient lyric traditions with modern literary orientations. Schooled by the voices of his masters, he individualised his own voice. Free verse à la his compatriot poet Lajos Kassák, avant-garde schools of poetry, and "pure poetry", whose various forms aimed at extirpating content, all of this inspired his own masterful sense of verbal play. And no less credible were his efforts to incorporate antique lyric forms; folk songs; Hungarian *regős* songs (akin to winter-solstice wassailing songs); the *Kalevala;* and even the rhythms, rhymes and melodic patterns of more popular Hungarian tunes.

In the spring of 1928, József wooed his love, Márta Vágó, with poems exhibiting playfulness à la Mozart and complex content clothed in simple, song-like forms. Márta Vágó had an upper middle class background and promised to be an exceptional intellectual companion. But their marriage plans came to nothing under the opposition of Vágó's parents, who feared for their daughter. József, who had yearned for the warmth of a home in the Vágó household, experienced this rebuff as a serious debacle. Indeed, in September 1929, he entered a sanatorium with symptoms of neurosis. Afterward, looking to heal himself of the fiasco of this love affair, he turned increasingly to radical, leftist politics. In his poem *"Végül"* (In the End), we hear the social scientist in him as he explains what had happened to him: *"I once loved a well-to-do girl, but her social class snatched her away."*

Once his "folksy period" of 1928–1929 came to a close, Attila József proceeded to pen vitriolic articles for the radical-bourgeois weekly *Toll.* It was there that he published his acerbic pamphlet *"Az Istenek halnak, az Ember él"* (The Gods are Dying, Man is Alive). Though he called it an "objective, critical essay," it was quite enough to offend one of Hungary's most respected literary idols—the great poet, translator and novelist Mihály Babits—for a lifetime. Babits was not only editor of the era's most distinguished literary journal, *Nyugat* (1908–1941), but also chairman of the board of the Baumgarten Foundation, which supported talented impoverished writers. József's temper had been stoked by a likewise acerbic review in *Nyugat* of his volume *Nincsen apám, se anyám* (No Father Have I, No

Mother, 1929). However, writing *The Gods are Dying, Man is Alive,* the offended poet had directed his anger not at the critic who'd penned the review but at the editor of the journal that had published it. This vehement assault on Babits was the biggest blunder in József's life, a symbolic intellectual patricide that hurt only his own career. No longer could he count on the even-handed goodwill of his country's foremost literary figure, Mihály Babits, even though he did atone for his reckless deed. (Later he conciliated *Nyugat*'s editor with letters and with poems probing guilt and remorse—poems which then appeared in *Nyugat.* But instead of the Baumgarten Prize he had yearned for, he was twice the recipient of merely financial aid, with the top honour only coming to him posthumously.)

"...melting in the crowd..."

In keeping with his characteristic self-destructive nature, in 1930, having delivered this fatal blow to his career as a poet, József did something equally fateful: he joined the illegal communist movement. Within its fold he held lectures, led seminars, explained Marx's precepts to workers, choreographed groups that recited political-poetic texts, set his earlier poems to a revolutionary score, and urged on his new brothers-in-ideology with illegally duplicated lyrics. Eventually he was taken to court again, this time over his poem the *"Lebukott"* (Nabbed).

József even moved in with a woman he'd met in the movement, Judit Szántó, a worker and poetry reader—and the ex-wife of the proletarian poet Antal Hidas, who had lived in Moscow for a time. This strong-willed woman cared for József through six years as a strict, surrogate mother of sorts. She created a home for him, stood by him for better or worse, and struggled for his poetry to be recognised. That said, she never did manage to become the sensitive, inspiring, intellectual companion to József that Márta Vágó had been. In the first years of their life together, József was primarily interested in renewing revolutionary poetry.

No sooner had the result, the volume *Döntsd a tőkét, ne siránkozz* (Strike at Capitalism, Stop Moaning) appeared on March 21, 1931, than the public prosecutor's office confiscated all the copies it could get its hands on. It was around this time that József first began therapy under a psychoanalyst. Dr. Samu Rapaport asked his patient to improve the style of his own volume of essays; and so the poet was simultaneously immersed both in psychological scholarship and his own childhood memories. His lyric perspective and conceptual thinking were permeated, above all, by his study of the invisible connections between the physical world and the world of the mind, by a desire to knead and so create a new quality out of the contradictions. ("Weigh yourself with the universe," he wrote in *"Ars poetica,"* one of his later poems.) At the beginning of the 1930s József was engaged in philosophising on art's mission to fill the void in the world; on inspiration and on intuition; and on how a work of art renders perceptible the whole, imperceptible world. (In his lecture "Literature and Socialism," he

theorised on the mutual impact of society and art, and his aim was that his intellectual forays should be understood by manual labourers.)

Although party membership meant a great deal to József, personally speaking, he reserved the right to think freely even within the folds of the illegal organisation. Not only did he continue to manifest his exceptional erudition and tortuous way of thinking in vitriolic essays and polemic articles but, in keeping with his nature as an enfant terrible, he annoyed his dogmatic comrades, who were exasperated by the heretical thinking of this poet "directed from within." When the "Draft Platform of Hungarian Proletarian Literature" appeared, in June 1931, in *Sarló és Kalapács* (Hammer and Sickle), a Hungarian-language journal published in Moscow, signed by Hungarian writers in exile there, one of its proclamations maintained that Attila József was looking to the fascist camp for an escape route from Hungary's political crisis. As always when at the receiving end of an unmerited attack, the offended poet avenged himself through his intellectual superiority. In June 1932 he co-edited the Marxist journal *Valóság* (Reality) with his friend Ferenc Fejtő. (François Fejtő, who at ninety-six, today lives in Paris, is a historian and writer who was among the first to recognise a great poet in József.) The "poeta doctus" who sought to synthesise the basic precepts of scientific socialism and psychoanalysis, and alongside poetry, also wrote essays on philosophy-cum-economics, published his pseudo-Marxist essay *Egyéniség és valóság* (Individuality and Reality) in the journal. It clearly showed the influence of the POLSEX movement theory of the Austrian psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich. No one understood a word of the piece, which had been written in a deliberately complicated manner so as to "annoy the comrades"; consequently its author—whose name also appeared as editor in chief—was branded an anti-Marxist bedlamite. (The censors soon banned the journal, and József's co-editor, Ferenc Fejtő, wound up in jail.)

By autumn 1932 Hungary's Communist Party leaders were determined to expel the heretical, "headstrong" Attila József from the illegal movement. Indeed, they were further troubled by the meditative tone of the poems in his newest volume, *Külvárosi éj* (Night on City's Edge): ruminative, brooding poems like *"Mondd, mit érlel"* (What Will Become of Him), *"A város peremén"* (On City's Edge), and *"Holt vidék"* (Dead Landscape) would hardly incite the masses to revolution, unlike the volume he had published a year earlier calling for the overthrow of capitalism. However, the prose pieces József wrote at this time—for example, an unfinished essay, *Hegel, Marx and Freud,* as well as fragmentary meditations, bear witness that this "engineer of the enchantments of the given world" aimed to place even psychoanalytic thinking in the service of the struggle for social justice.

The year 1933 offered much to brood on for a compulsive rationalist like Attila József. Hitler's arrival in power posed the question of where the Communists went wrong in calculating that their world revolution was just a matter of time. In early summer József engaged in a rough and tumble battle of articles published in the party paper *Új Harcos* (New Warrior) over the question of antifascist workers'

unity. In consequence, the Hungarian Party of Communists broke its ties once and for all with the heretical poet. Although there are no written records of József's formal expulsion from the party ranks (to protect the illegal party and its members, records were not kept of names) many of József's contemporaries recalled that from 1933 on he was no longer in the party's organisational fold. (After 1948, when the Hungarian Workers' Party rose to power under the leadership of Mátyás Rákosi, this point of ambiguity was used to the advantage of those who steered the nation's cultural politics. In order to popularise their own ideology, they tried to make use of the poetry of Attila József, who by then had been dead for eleven years. It was in the party's interest that the relationship between the poet and the Communist Party be sold to the public-at-large as having been conflict-free. Consequently, they falsified his biography and denied that he had been expelled. Indeed, the very issue of József's party membership was taboo for decades.)

Notwithstanding his expulsion, it appears that József, disillusioned though he was with the nearsighted, aggressive, dogmatic communist movement, retained his faith in "scientific socialism" to his death. Indeed, for the rest of his life he was a self-avowed leftist. Once his formal role in the movement had become untenable, however, he turned with all the more passion toward psychoanalysis. He put what he had learned on this front to good use as a poet; his verse took on the language of conceptual-visual metaphors and drew on those subconscious, concentrated memories that assume visual form, namely, dream symbols. (Take poems such as *"Ritkás erdő alatt"* [Under a Sparse Forest], *"Óda"* [Ode], *"Téli éjszaka"* [Winter Night], *"Eszmélet"* [Consciousness], *"Kései siratő"* [Late Lament], *"Iszonyat"* [Dread], and *"Nagyon fáj"* [It Hurts A Lot].) Indeed, the psychoanalytic perspective fertilised both the thematic and the conceptual universe of his poetry in a unique way. His boundless imagination allowed him to "measure" his own self using nothing less than the universe's own unit of measure; through this imagination he created a lyric oeuvre from personal experiences that was at once cosmic in perspective and unmistakably individual in tone.

József's application of depth psychology to verse yielded one of the world's finest love poems, *"Óda"* (Ode). He wrote this masterpiece in the space of one night in June 1933 at a gathering of poets in the tranquil retreat of Lillafüred, in northern Hungary, under the inspiration of an unknown beautiful woman. Though he was still living with Judit Szántó, József was unable to write her love poetry; for it was the proximity of the unattainable, unpossessable, "timeless woman" that, from beginning to end, brought his imagination into gear. *"Ode"* is more than a poem: it is love magic in a modern guise. And it is certainly the only poem in József's oeuvre written from the perspective of an embryo in blissful symbiosis with an imagined mother. With the "pure discourse" of poetry, József here brought to life and rendered fully accessible not only the organic wholeness of the world—the world as a biological and industrial landscape expanded to universal proportions within a woman's body with respect to the precise, synchronised operation

of unseen internal organs, suggesting the "spontaneous timelessness" of divine perfection. (Mihály Babits, whom József had since placated in a gracious letter, published this exceptional poem in the August 1933 issue of *Nyugat*. However, the hypersensitive poet-eminence could never bring himself to forget the unmerited, boorish attack he'd received from that enfant terrible, Attila József.)

"Ode" very nearly caused a fatal change in the poet's personal life: Judit Szántó found it in his pocket. What she chanced to read was an enchanting poem written in the hand of the man she lived with but which was clearly inspired by another woman. Szántó took an overdose of quinine. Discovering her suicide attempt in time, the poet called an ambulance, and while the doctors fought for Judit's life, he awaited the outcome in a coffee house. Try as he did to swathe himself in a nervous, sullen silence, those of his acquaintances who saw him brooding in the coffee house could hardly fail to notice the devastated state he was in. And so they kept asking him what had happened until finally, answering each query with only a "yes" or a "no" in keeping with the rules of the game of Twenty Questions, until he allowed them to discover the cause of his agitation. This morbid game was immortalised in a short story by Dezső Kosztolányi, who'd recognised József's talent early on and had encouraged the young poet. Kosztolányi, who'd heard the story from József's friends who'd been there in person that day, published it in the September 10, 1933 issue of *Pesti Hírlap Vasárnapja* under the title *Ezerkilencszázharminchárom* (Nineteen-thirty-three); and, later, aptly titled *Barkochba* (Twenty Questions). (It is also described in Tibor Déry's memoir, see pp. 47–58 of this issue.)

"...only to leave them"

It was around this time that József, in his late twenties, made the acquaintance of Arthur Koestler, who was visiting Budapest, and they were introduced to each other by a mutual friend, the writer and critic Andor Németh. Koestler was to remember Attila József as someone whose hobby-horse was psychoanalysis and Hegelian-Marxist dialectics, and who, notwithstanding his expulsion from the Communist Party for his Trotskyist deviations, remained a good proletarian and hated Stalin's Bonapartism with Jacobin passion.

By around 1933–1934, the poet's foremost aim in life was to stand on his own two feet as a man. He wanted to be a "mature man... whose heart / harbours neither mother nor father"—a man capable of winding up the burdensome relationships of childhood and creating an independent existence for himself. And so he was all the more determined to break with Judit Szántó—unsuccessfully, however, until the summer of 1936. Since making a living from poetry was impossible, József felt it was his foremost ambition to obtain the recognition of Babits and the era's leading literary scholars, and (in the footsteps of fellow artists more fortunate but not necessarily more talented than he) to be awarded the prestigious Baumgarten Prize. His poetic self-esteem had long needed such recognition of his achievements; and his bread-and-butter worries were such that the

prize, whose three thousand pengős amounted to a one-year scholarship that would have guaranteed worry-free working conditions, would have been a financial godsend. (According to a popular song of the day, "Two hundred pengős a month of pay, and a bloke'll joke every day.")

Inseparable from József's grand project to stand on his own two feet were his urgent compulsion to disengage from his symbolic mother and his concomitant sense of alienation from the world. He was twenty-nine in 1934, when he cast his cycle of twelve free-standing poems *Eszmélet* (Consciousness) into final form. This monumental piece, a meditation on the philosophy of existence that had ripened to maturity from his own experiences, is the single most analysed poetic work in Hungarian literature, having spawned several books' worth of essays.

For József, such "rumination" meant a methodical self-vivisection. And no sooner did he begin therapy again, than in the course of conjuring up and virtually reliving the past, he played spine-tingling psychodramas with himself, so that he could shape his phantasmal experiences into poems. Poems of a sort never written before. Arthur Koestler christened this type of poem, invented by Attila József and inspired by depth psychology, the "Freudian folk song." Their alarming content notwithstanding, such poems could indeed be crooned or hummed, bringing the listener an ambivalent, uncanny sense of beauty.

From 1933–1934 onward his past, which until then had been lost in a silent fog, resonated in József as an ever more resounding grievance. Now that he was rebelling as an adult against former humiliations, he, the poet, could cast his current psychological state onto that powerless child at the mercy of adults, onto his former self. The child evoked in his poem *"Mama"*, who lives on within an adult choking with regret, is screaming and stomping because his mother is attending not to him but something else. In *"Kései sirató"* (Late Lament) the adult, likewise identifying with his child-self, reproaches his mother—who has long since turned into dust—with fuming, blasphemous anger for her unforgivable sin: leaving her son in the lurch by dying. (See these two poems on pp. 6, 7–8 of this issue.) The poet of *"Iszonyat"* (Dread), meanwhile, derives an almost masochistic, sensual pleasure from identifying with a helpless infant whose seven-year old sister, in their mother's absence, tortures him day long with a "pretend-nursing game": the dimly lit one-room flat resounds to the sounds of moaning, howling, gasping for breath, whimpering and whining.

"Dread" appeared on November 15, 1934 in *Toll;* and, a month later, in József's newest volume, *Medvetánc* (Bear Dance), in which the poet collected those of his poems he thought most important. By then he rightly felt that the time had come: his art had earned him the longed-for Baumgarten Prize. However, both in 1935 and in the following year he received only that lesser Baumgarten award, a relatively modest sum, given to talented beginners. Meanwhile, some of his peers who were certainly more fortunate but far from as accomplished, had already won the top prize more than once.

József managed to endure this flagrant injustice only because in the meantime he had realised a great dream of his: he had co-founded a journal with Pál Ignotus, the son of *Nyugat*'s founding editor. And so, in the last two years of his life, as co-editor and principal poet of this journal, he was finally able to work in the company of friends who understood and appreciated his art.

> I am an editor on the literary and critical magazine *Szép Szó*. Apart from Hungarian, I can read and write French and German, correspond in Hungarian and French, and I am an accomplished touch typist. I was also able to do shorthand, and I could brush up that knowledge with a month's practice. I am familiar with newspaper printing technology, and I can draft documents. I consider myself to be an honest person; I think I am quick on the uptake and an assiduous worker. (*Curriculum vitae,* 1937)

The ceremony at which the journal was finally named has lived on as an endearing anecdote. The founders, who could not come to agreement on this matter, felt that József's suggestion, *Szép Szó,* "beautiful word", had an all too aristocratic, affected ring to it. Indeed, they were still pondering on the title when they gave the manuscript of the first issue to the printer. Finally they opted to let chance decide. They had József write down all the titles suggested by the editorial board and put all the slips of paper into a hat. Then they asked a writer who just happened to stop by to fish out the winning title with his "virgin hands". The lucky slip of paper read *"Szép Szó".* And so the board members resigned themselves to fate. Only later did the poet own up: he'd written the same title on each and every slip of paper. At first the others were annoyed, but with time they came to be grateful, for the name did in fact sensitively and precisely embody the ideals of the leftist liberal journal.

With the founding of this journal, József developed a working relationship with old friends. Imre Cserépfalvi, whom he had met in Paris, was the first publisher of *Szép Szó;* Andor Németh, a good friend whom József lured home from Vienna to help with the journal, also became a full-time staff member. It is Németh who was to recollect that the position of editor had the effect of temporarily steadying József's tottering self-esteem. In addition to being poetry editor, József dealt with the technical aspects of publishing the journal. Indeed, the printers later recalled that "in his zeal, he thoroughly mixed up the first issue, which at least doubled the compositor's work." And so, among themselves the printers dubbed him "Attila, the Scourge of the Press"—after his legendary namesake, "Attila, the Scourge of God". József Attila's dedicated work and good intentions were, however, not in doubt. As for those poets who approached him with a view to publication, he more than won their respect: the young craved for his severe judgements and advice, and some even echoed his poetry.

But not even his editorial position with *Szép Szó* brought Attila József unmitigated happiness; financial independence remained elusive. All his life he had struggled to get by; he'd always depended on the support of family members and

occasional patrons, and continually being at the mercy of others had devastated his self-esteem. Now it was the journal's sponsor, Baron Bertalan Hatvany, who financed the poet's personal expenses, including the cost of psychoanalysis (and, later, the cost of treatment at a sanatorium). Nor was József capable of regarding a poem that sprang from the depths of his soul as a "product" ("My verse belongs to those who asked for my heart imbued in poems/ and all I need in return is friendship")—though the need to make a living meant he invariably had to ask to be paid. His ambivalent relationship with money only further reminded him that he was incapable of making a living, unlike others: those rival poets among his peers who were more fortunate and savvy than he.

Before the founding of *Szép Szó,* József was already seeing another psychotherapist, Edit Gyömrői. It was with her help that he reconnected with his ambivalent feelings toward his long dead mother. Indeed, he went to her office with great curiosity, as if entering a time capsule for continual, thrilling journeys back to his own past. The trouble began when the therapist noticed that the poet lying on the couch and zealously consumed in free associations and fantasies was afire with love for her, a love with all the symptoms of transference neurosis. And the patient's mother complex manifested itself dramatically: he was less and less inclined to distinguish between past and present. With frightening intensity he now relived the sense of abandonment he had felt on being sent to Öcsöd. The little boy yearned for his mother's love and warm embrace, meanwhile thinking of her with hatred for having deprived him of all this by dying. As an adult confronting his memories, he was also consumed by an intense guilty conscience over the unbridled anger he felt toward her.

The poet projected onto his analyst all his old, stifled emotions that, through the prism of his mother, he nurtured toward women. With impassioned transfiguration he imaginatively relived the past. He couldn't get enough of this game: he behaved like a demanding child even with his therapist. Indeed, he pursued and blackmailed this woman with his love, notwithstanding that she had a sixteen-year-old son; of course, knowing that she had a son may have only strengthened the poet's predilection to imagine her as his own mother—and as his lover, too. Nine years his senior, she was no beauty, but her personality was exceptionally attractive and suggestive. With longing entreaties, with attempts to make her feel sorry for him, and with fanatic verbal wizardry, he strove to melt the armour of professional indifference off his mother-confessor. He wrote her a poem, the aptly titled *"Egy pszichoanalitikusnőhöz"* (To a Woman Psychoanalyst) and in another he announced: *"Gyermekké tettél"* (You Made Me Be a Child Again, see p. 9). This confession, inspired by the "mother love" that sprung from his transference neurosis, appeared in the May 1936 issue of *Szép Szó,* which honoured Freud on his eightieth birthday. Indeed, it appeared in close proximity to another of József's poems, one that rendered homage to the father of depth psychology, *"Amit szívedbe rejtesz"* (That Which Your Heart Disguises).

Freud, to whom József sent a German translation of his poem, replied with a telegramme thanking him for both the poem and the thoughtful gesture. József waited in vain, however, for Edit Gyömrői to respond to his love.

Dissatisfied with his psychoanalyst, the poet sat down in the Japán Coffeehouse on May 22, 1936, to interrogate his own subconscious self. In a notebook whose 170 pages he had numbered in advance, he proceeded to write his self-confession, an unrestrained flood of impressions he titled *Szabad-ötletek jegyzéke két ülésben* (Record of Free Ideas in Two Sittings). He completed it two days later, at home. His aim in writing this was to cast from himself—and thereby to objectify—his chaotic jumble of memories, his feelings toward the key figures of his life, and his transports of intense emotion toward Edit Gyömrői, who had given him nothing in return for her fee, he felt. By switching off his consciousness, as it were, and recording his subconscious self on paper, he hoped to create a precise picture of himself. He filled practically every page of the notebook with an unbridled mass of words. He let everything pass out of him that came to mind: obscenity, blasphemy, puns, flickering traces of memory, obsessions, fleeting thoughts. And yet he was neither any wiser nor any calmer on completion.

> The hapless soul writing all this longs immeasurably for love, for love to keep him from doing things he is afraid of doing. He was beaten for doing something he never would have done, had he been loved. He is the child who wasn't loved, and who, moreover, was beaten by those who couldn't bear not loving him. And so he yearns for love, so they don't bother him. *Szabad-ötletek jegyzéke két ülésben* (Record of Free Ideas in Two Sittings) May 1936.

By the end of 1936, József's delusions had taken on chronic proportions. In a fit of jealousy he wanted to kill László Újvári, his therapist's fiancé. Using what remained of the fourth instalment of his modest Baumgarten award for that year, he bought himself a pair of knuckle-dusters and proceeded to attack the other man in her consulting rooms. Fortunately, nothing terrible happened: the intelligent and physically strong young man, who only felt sorry for the afflicted poet, "disarmed" the assassin who'd been sawing the air in so frenzied a manner. On another occasion, knife in hand, József awaited his therapist from behind the front gate of a home on a tranquil hillside in a residential neighbourhood of Buda. However, she did not react with fright towards her agitated patient, who in turn proceeded to talk effusively for hours: she walked about with him through the night, until the poet finally wearied of his ceaseless complaining.

József's worsened mental state became increasingly apparent to those around him. He was performing even his editorial work with impatience, as though it was a burdensome task and little else. "I've got to read so many bad poems submitted for publication that in the end I will become a really bad poet," he complained to his former loved one, Márta Vágó, who was the secretary at *Szép Szó* at the time. But he insisted on the value of analysis; for, as a poet, he wished to continue mining the treasures of his subconscious mind. He confessed to Márta that his great

poems would never have been written had therapy not served to stir up his past experiences from the fog of oblivion and bring them into sharp focus; these experiences had then worked their way into his poems in the form of concrete images.

Even as he objectively recognised the practical benefits of therapy, József continued to harbour subjective and ambivalent feelings toward his therapist. He was determined to take revenge on Edit Gyömrői for being too "cowardly" to love him. Damning poems and malevolent words were not enough to placate his fits of murderous rage. His friends tried talking reason to him, but in vain. He decided to file a complaint against her for charlatanism: she was not a qualified medicinal practitioner, after all, but a lay analyst. However, he finally abandoned this plan for revenge. And at the end of 1936, Edit Gyömrői turned József's continued therapy over to a male therapist.

December 1936 saw the publication of another collection, *Nagyon fáj* (It Hurts a Lot), which comprised poems inspired by psychoanalysis and poems drawing on recollection that had appeared over the course of the year in *Szép Szó*. On one of the days before the Christmas holidays—the eighteenth anniversary of his mother's death—the poet, wanting to see how many people sought out his new book, waited about in the publisher's bookstore on Váci Street in the centre of Budapest from morning to night. Not a single copy was sold that day. Later, the publisher, Imre Cserépfalvi, was to recollect that "one of the most beautiful and most profound books of poetry in Hungarian was met by deathly silence."

Thomas Mann and Attila József. Budapest, 1937.

The final year of József's life began with the usual letdown: he did not receive the Baumgarten Prize. To make matters worse, the censor banned him from reciting his poem *"Thomas Mann üdvözlése"* (Welcome to Thomas Mann) at a January 13, 1937 reading in Budapest by the Nobel Prize-winning writer, who had been exiled from his country. József had written the poem for just this occasion.

Together with the intensive emotional tribulations stemming from his self-induced love of Edit Gyömrői, these fiascos further set the stage for his nervous breakdown in early February 1937. His new therapist gave him a referral to the Siesta Sanatorium, and after a two-week round of relaxation therapy he left

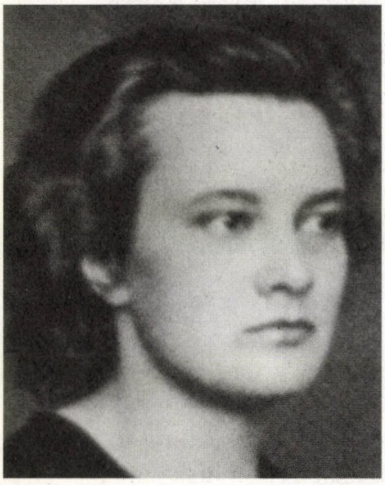
appearing strengthened and free of his dependence on Edit. This marked the close of that stage of József's career comprising his most innovative poems.

Judit Szántó

Hardly was József beyond his love for Edit, which had utterly depleted his emotional energy, when—at a literary salon—he met his final muse, Flóra Kozmutza, on February 20, 1937. This young and beautiful woman, studying to be a teacher of mentally handicapped children, worked in the Budapest laboratory of the famous analyst Lipót Szondi. There she had the poet do a Rorschach Test. József fell in love at first sight, not only with the girl but also with her very name. Soon he was busy wooing her with hymn-like poems modelled after classical forms, and at their second meeting, he asked her hand in marriage.

Flóra was the most secretive of all of József's muses—not only because her sense of propriety disinclined her to be in the public eye, but moreover because the poems addressed to her seemed in fact not addressed to *her,* the flesh-and-blood woman, but to an imagined, impersonal beauty, an incorporeal ideal. At the same time, the studied, illusory, otherworldly beauty at the centre of the Flóra cycle was fraught with the certitude of hopelessness.

Flóra Kozmutza



Throughout, there was something peculiar and irrational about József's relationship with Flóra. The poet's unusual "assertiveness"—the rapid marriage proposal—alarmed her, but as she later admitted, she was unable to "resist the onslaught." The poems, too, affected and impressed her even though she felt they weren't addressed to her; no, she was but an instrument of their creation. József meanwhile worked himself increasingly into a frenzy over this love; for Flóra was beautiful, clever and considerate, while also being strong and resolute, capable of opening the door to his own "rebirth" while also offering refuge. And yet deep within himself the poet must have sensed that his hope was an illusion, not only because of the girl's ambiguous demeanour. Flóra did stand by him honourably and was supportive throughout, but her vacillation suggested to him that she was committed to someone else.

And so it was. Much later, Attila József's final muse wrote that, some two months before she met József, in December 1936, she'd made the acquaintance of the poet Gyula Illyés—

a onetime friend of József's who had since become a rival who was close to Babits—and that her heart had immediately skipped a beat. But as Illyés was married, she suppressed her feelings for him. (For his part, Gyula Illyés, who was later to become Flóra's husband, wrote in his journal that he'd fallen in love with the girl at first sight; but, being a married man, he knew full well he wouldn't have the slightest chance of winning this upright young lady.)

József, who had incomparable intuition and a flair for conjecture, gradually pieced together the puzzle of this emotional love triangle; and his jealousy only strengthened his already well-developed inferiority complex.

In June 1937 József suffered another nervous breakdown and again wound up in the Siesta Sanatorium. This time he received intensive treatment for schizophrenia, although in fact he was not insane, as Flóra was virtually alone in perceiving. All indications suggest that József in fact feared that which he also desired: that Flóra would say yes to his proposal. For then he would really have to prove himself to be the same sort of man as the charismatic Gyula Illyés. And yet he felt at home only in the fantasy world of imagined love. Indeed, once the game turned serious, and Flóra—with her self-sacrificing spirit and her sense of calling, but not out of love—accepted his proposal, József chickened out and backed down. He escaped into a mad game, into illness. Indications are that he carried on this game unbeknownst to his doctors, wanting to outmanoeuvre them. They, believing him to be ill, set out to cure him of his supposed schizophrenia, naturally without success. The circle began to close: the poet retreated into the isolation he'd erected for himself and with the bitter awareness that he could never again shake off the stigma of mental illness.

> I ended up in psychoanalytic therapy for treatment of neurosis. How to characterise my illness? I had always considered myself sharp-minded, as someone who easily finds a home among abstract concepts and is blessed (or, as I often thought, cursed) with imaginative talents. As someone who vanishes amid images like a startled bird amid the trembling leaves of a lush forest. However, I was utterly bewildered by real life. I felt no connection between my ideas and my life, my mind and my instincts, my knowledge and my desires. On the one hand, I knew full well that I resembled a paranoid being that constructs a system of ideas out of delusions, and I knew that I wasn't insane, after all; for, although I had considered this possibility—indeed as a youth I had told myself that I was insane—this system of ideas I'd constructed was to reality what a more or less precise map is to the depicted piece of earth. *Önvallomás* (Self-Confession). Summer 1937

Dazed by medication though he was, he continued to correspond with Flóra, and at the urging of friends, tried to write. (*"Költőnk és kora"*, "Our Poet and His Time" is a lyric masterpiece of self-confession, portraying the sublimation of a soul resigned to and preparing itself for the journey to the "Mother," to the "great void.") Finally, at the urging of the poet, who was still being treated at the Siesta Sanatorium, Flóra said yes to their planned marriage—but in his final poem (*"Íme, hát megleltem hazámat"*, "So, Finally Now I Have My Home", see p. 10) and in the farewell letter

he wrote to Flóra the day he died, Attila József himself relinquished his imagined family completeness in freeing his chosen companion to "he who will be more worthy of her." For his part, he chose the first woman, the divine Mother, in Heaven.

The tragic sequence of events comprising the final phase of his life speaks for itself.

4 November 1937: József leaves the Siesta Sanatorium and travels with his older sister, Jolán, for home care with Etus and her three children at the family pension in Balatonszárszó.

28 November 1937: Flóra pays them a visit. József hands her his two final poems, which he wrote on hearing of her impending arrival, so that she would see that he is working.

2 December 1937: József's friends and his doctor come from Budapest to see him with good news on several fronts: about a job, about word that he will receive the Baumgarten Prize. He says he'd happily ride back to the capital with them, but there is no room in their car.

3 December 1937: After writing farewell letters in the afternoon, he goes for a walk in the evening from which he never returns. He is struck and killed by a freight train departing at the Balatonszárszó station. According to witnesses, he kneeled down alongside the tracks and lowered his head under the approaching wheels once the train finally started off after a long delay.

The events to follow illustrate posterity's strange byways:

5 December 1937: In the presence of a small group of friends and family, József is buried in the Balatonszárszó cemetery. National newspapers milk the tragedy for all its worth, turning it into a sensational bit of bloodcurdling news; and from then on they nurture his memory with utmost respect, as one of Hungary's best poets, and they look for a scapegoat to blame for his death.

20 February 1938: *Szép Szó* hosts an evening at the Academy of Music to honour the memory of Attila József. Hungary's greatest writers and poets are present to remember him. However, members of the Hitler-inspired Hungarain Arrow Cross Party disrupt the event by handing out leaflets.

April 1942: Attila József's body is exhumed in Balatonszárszó.

2 May 1942: His ashes are reburied in an honorary gravesite in Budapest.

20 March 1959: On order of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party, at a ceremony excluding the public, Attila József is again reburied, this time along the so-called Workers' Movement Grave Promenade.

17 May 1994: Attila József is laid to final rest in the family plot in Budapest.

Since 11 April 1964, the anniversary of Attila József's birth, Hungary has celebrated Poetry Day. Scholarship on him and his work has burgeoned from year to year and might well fill a small library; his poems have been translated into many languages. Both the tenement building he was born in, on Gát Street in Budapest, and his final home, the family pension in Balatonszárszó, the poet's earthly and spiritual birthplaces, today house memorial museums.

In **2005,** the centenary of his birth, UNESCO declared a year of remembrance for Attila József. ❧

Attila József

Suicide?

Nine years old I was at the time. Mama would go to work early and come home late. Father had emigrated two years previously. In our small room and kitchen flat, we lived the life of poor people—not that I felt poor. I was glad that from springtime until autumn I had to go around barefoot and I actually felt a hero when I stole fuel from the Ferencváros goods-yard. The only bad thing that happened was that sometimes I would be nabbed and get a spanking, but then if there had been no danger, I wouldn't have felt a hero. On those occasions, by bursting into tears and exploiting, rather than feeling, our genuine poverty—lying the truth—I would melt the sappy hearts of the grown-ups and make myself scarce. Apart from that, I bawled only occasionally in the evenings, when I had to wash my feet. In any case, I was the only man in the house, a pest to my two older sisters, and on Sunday afternoons Mama's favoured hope.

Once—Mama happened to be at work at the time—I can't remember why I was not roaming on the streets. It could be that it was getting on for winter and I had no shoes on my feet. I don't remember. I filched a cigarette from the handbag belonging to one of my sisters (she was already engaged to be married), and instead of withdrawing with my loot to the toilet (that's the only place a child who is poor can do what he pleases) I lit up in the kitchen. That was open revolt, of course. Jolán was allowed to, but not me? Yet it was always me they sent to the shops. It was me who brought kindling from the little coppice, not her. (In making such revolts, I always found a way of explaining, of pleading the social significance of any deed that I cheerfully undertook of my own accord and would maybe even have undertaken against express prohibition.) So there!

I lit up, but all the same planting myself gingerly in a corner of the kitchen. Jolán sniffed the smoke: she pulled me out from behind the stove, and gave me a sound cuff round each ear. Not so much due to any stinging pain the blows may have inflicted (I don't remember that either) as more to the incredibly deep sense of moral outrage caused by the violence that had encroached on my rights, in a flood of tears I started to howl, yell and rage. Jolán, unable to stand it for long, suddenly upped and left, though it could have been she had something to attend to anyway.

She had barely set foot outside than I quietly plonked myself down and plotted vengeance of a direness in direct proportion to the powerlessness I felt. "Hello there", said sister Eta, who had got back with her girlfriend. "Hello", I scowled back, at which the two of them went into the room. (I think they were reading the cards.)

I resolved that I was going to drink some caustic soda. Squatting down in the corner, I relished the idea as I heaved the occasional sob. I was greatly moved to imagine how, when I was dead and gone, people would be crying and constantly picture me to themselves. They would know who I was when they looked for me in vain. And Jolán, that rotten bitch, she could go to the shops herself if she wanted something. Or they could send Eta. Mama would tear Jolán apart when she got to know in the evening why I had died. At this point tears started to flow. I cried expressly like someone touched by deep condolences on the death of someone else whom one loves a lot and greatly admires. And I started to feel sorry for Mama, poor thing—what indeed was she to do when it was all over? But it serves her right, I said to myself, the whole thing was her fault. She was to blame. She gives the orders, she's the one in charge; the death of such a sweet and good and clever and pleasant and brave and talented young boy was on her conscience.

Assuming a grave look, I got to my feet. I went over to the shelf under which the caustic soda usually stood in a low, thick-walled, brown jar. However, there was nothing in the jar, only a spot of dampness on the bottom. I stood there glowering, motionless. Then I suddenly recalled what Mama had said: "Get five *fillér*'s worth of caustic soda, eight *fillér*'s of starch, and four of bleaching powder!" Caustic soda, starch, bleaching powder—it seems those things belonged together. After a bit of rummaging I came across the starch: there was half a bar still. I ran a bit of water into the caustic soda jar, dissolved the starch in that and gulped it down. (To this day I don't know why I didn't drink bleach.) Then—on the basis that anyone who dies falls down—I adroitly dropped the jar onto the kitchen chair and slumped to the ground. I stretched out on the kitchen flags and awaited death.

I sighed and was very scared. I swallowed heavily, my mouth started foaming. Thinking solely of the effect, even in my fright, I realised that the only way I would offer a truly shocking sight was if the foam were to stream profusely from my mouth. I now concentrated all my attention on expelling with my tongue as much foam as possible onto my chin. But I was also trembling all over, and I recall writhing movements: I really did believe I was about to die.

I felt a huge sadness, and would maybe even have regretted my action, if I had not been growing more and more exasperated by the fact that no one was noticing my death agony. I began to seethe with anger, raged—specifically against Eta, who was calmly amusing herself with her girlfriend in the room. I groaned out loud every now and then. I started to claw away at the stone flooring with hands and feet, as if I were seized by cramps. This, though, seriously had the effect of

making it seem that I was indeed in the clutch of convulsions. And I was indeed in the clutch of convulsions, only these convulsions were of my "cramped volition". No effect. I was lying, head toward the kitchen door, legs toward the door to the room, on my back. I was longing for someone to come and notice. And because I knew that someone might enter and notice, I somehow managed, without getting up from my supine position, to wriggle over close enough to the door to the room to reach it with my feet. Then, feeling somewhat relieved of anger, but still sadly, I carried on the writhing. Eta finally noticed the rattling, because she exclaimed, "Quit that!" And it went on like that for several minutes until, finally losing patience, she came out, though she was still in the room when she launched into "Attila, have you gone raving mad?"

But when, in the twilight gloom, she saw my face, foaming at the mouth, red from crying, weary with sadness, distorted by animosity as it was, she screamed out in terror. I became even more scared at her consternation, and so I started to cry and stuttered out, "Oh my God! I'm dying, Eta, I drank the caustic soda." (It did not enter my mind that it was the starch that I had gulped down.)

Eta ran downstairs to the concièrge; the latter put me to bed, and before long the little room was full of wailing old women. I was very scared and very proud of myself. It did not even bother me that in the end the old women did not talk about me but were moaning about how expensive potatoes were.

Eta also ran off to fetch Mama, and Mama, dropping her work, raced home. Pushing everyone aside, she raced to the bed. Her lips were trembling, there were tears in her eyes. Then she picked me up—me, a nine-year-old boy—in her arms, began to caress me, carried me into the kitchen. And quietly, almost in a whisper, she asked, "Tell me, son, show me, my little one, what was it you drank?"

I was almost boundlessly happy that Mama had taken me in her arms. All the accusations were forgotten, I just snuggled up tightly to her. Once again there was a lump in my throat as I felt that I would be blissfully happy if Mama had picked me up this way, had caressed me this way and were to speak this quietly to me without my having done what I had done. Then I pointed to the starch and merely said, "That!"

Mama heaved a sigh of relief. Thereupon I too was freed of my inner burden. I no longer thought of anything, just felt her as she carried me into the room, laid me down on the bed and tucked me in. She sat there for a little while, quietly said a little, just the odd word, I don't recall what, but it was wonderful.

Then she went out into the kitchen and sent Eta down to the shop to fetch herbal tea for me. She lit the stove, put water in a pot—I could hear the scraping on the stove, while I... I fell asleep. ❧

[1935]

Translated by Tim Wilkinson

Curriculum vitæ

I was born in 1905, in Budapest, Greek Orthodox by religion. My father, the late Áron József, emigrated when I was three years old, and the National Child Protection League placed me with foster parents in Öcsöd. I lived there until I was seven, by which time, like most poor children in villages, I was already working—in my case as a swineherd. When I was seven, my mother—the late Borbála Pőcze—brought me back to Budapest and enrolled me in Year 2 at elementary school. My mother supported us—me and my two older sisters—by doing laundry and cleaning, working in different homes from dawn to dusk, and I, not being under parental supervision, would skip school and misbehave. In the Year 3 reading primer, though, I came across some interesting stories about King Attila and I threw myself into reading. The stories about the king of the Huns were of interest not just because my name is also Attila, but also because my foster parents in Öcsöd had called me Pista, Stevie, having concluded after a consultation with the neighbours, and in my hearing, that there was no such name as Attila. That had taken me greatly aback, because I felt that my very existence was being thrown into question. I think that discovery of the tales about King Attila decisively influenced every one of my endeavours from then onward, and ultimately it may have been this experience that led me to literature, this experience that turned me into a thinker, into a person who listens to the opinions of others but examines them for himself; the sort of person who answers to the name Pista until he proves that he is called Attila, as he had thought.

When I was nine the world war broke out and our fate went from bad to worse. I did my share of standing in queues in front of shops—there were cases when I would take a place in the line before the food store at nine o'clock in the evening, then at half past seven in the morning, just when it would have been my turn, they announced under my very nose that they had run out of lard. I helped my mother however I could. I sold water in the 'Világ' picture-house; I stole wood and coal from the Ferencváros goodsyard so we could keep our home warm; I made toy windmills from coloured paper and sold them to better-off children; I lugged shopping baskets and parcels around in market-halls, etc. In the summer of 1918 I holidayed in Opatija, thanks to King Charles' campaign to give children summer breaks. By then my mother was ill with cancer of the womb, and now it was me who presented myself to the Child Protection League, ending up for a short period in Monor. Returning to Budapest, I sold newspapers, dealt in stamps and later on in 'blue', 'white' and postal bank notes like a little banker. During the Romanian occupation I was a bread-boy in the Café Emke. In the meantime, having done five years at elementary school, I attended a junior secondary school.

Mother died at Christmas in 1919. The Chancery court appointed my recently deceased brother-in-law, Dr Ödön Makai, as my guardian. For a spring and a sum-

mer I served on the Atlantica Marine Shipping Co.'s steam tugs *Vihar, Török* and *Tatár.* It was then that I took the junior secondary school Year 4 exam as a private student. My guardian and Dr. Sándor Giesswein next sent me to the Salesian Seminary at Nyergesújfalu. I only spent two weeks there, being Greek Orthodox, not Catholic. From there I ended up in Makó, at the Demke Boarding-School, where I was soon granted a free place. For my bread and board in the summer I tutored at Mezőhegyes. Year 6 at the grammar school I completed with distinction, although as a result of pubertal disturbances I attempted suicide on several occasions, as there was no one, neither then or prior to that, who stood by me as a friend able to give some advice on sexual matters. By then my first poems had appeared in print, *Nyugat* publishing the poetry I wrote at the age of seventeen years. They considered me to be a Wunderkind, but I was only an orphan.

I left the grammar school and boarding-school after completing Year 7, because in my loneliness I felt I was very indolent: I didn't study because by the time the teachers had explained anything I had already learnt the lesson—the distinction on my report was proof of that. I went off to Kisszombor to be a maize-field guard and day-labourer in the fields and got work as a private tutor. On the entreaties of two kindly teachers of mine, I decided to obtain the school-leaving certificate after all, so I took the combined Years 7 and 8 examination and thereby finished a year earlier than my ex-classmates. Altogether just three months were available for studying, however, which is how I got straight good marks for Year 7 but only pass marks for Year 8. The school-leaving certificate itself was better than Year 8: the only pass marks were for Hungarian and History. By then I had been charged with blasphemy over a poem of mine. I was cleared on appeal.

After that I was a book salesman for a while here in Budapest, then during the inflation I was a clerk in Mauthner's private banking house. There, after the Hintz system was introduced, they assigned me to the book-keeping department, and not long after, much to the vexation of older colleagues, I was entrusted with supervising what could be paid out on cash desk days. My keenness was slightly undermined by the fact that, aside from my own duties, I was also saddled with things that were properly theirs by my older colleagues, who anyway never missed a chance to cause me vexation on account of my poems appearing in the newspapers. "I wrote poems myself when I was that age," they all said. The company later went bankrupt.

I decided that I was going to become a writer for good and would also find myself a bread and butter job that was closely related to literature. I enrolled to do Hungarian, French and philosophy in the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Szeged. I signed up for 52 lectures a week and out of 20 passed the end-of-term examination with distinction. I was given a free lunch every day by a different family; I paid for my lodgings out of what I was paid for my poems. It made me very proud that Professor Lajos Dézsi declared me fit to do independent research. Any pleasure, however, was stripped away by the fact that Professor

Antal Horger, by whom I was to be examined in Hungarian linguistics, summoned me and in front of two witnesses—I know their names to this day, they are teachers now—declared that as long as he was around I was never going to become a secondary school teacher, because—so says he—"the sort of person who writes poems like this," and at this point he held up an issue of the daily *Szeged,* "cannot be entrusted with the education of the future generation." There is much talk about the irony of fate, but in this case it truly is so, for that poem, which bears the title 'With a Pure Heart', became celebrated, with seven articles written about it. Lajos Hatvany declared it on more than one occasion to be a document of the whole postwar generation "for later eras", while Ignotus "coddled and caressed, burbled and murmured" this "exquisite" poem "in his soul", as he wrote in *Nyugat,* and he declared this poem the epitome of new poetry in his *Ars Poetica.*

The following year—I was twenty by then—I went to Vienna, enrolled at the university and earned a living by selling newspapers at the entrance to the Rathaus Keller and cleaning the premises of the Hungarian Academy in Vienna. When the director, Antal Lábán, heard about me he put an end to that and gave me meals in the Collegium Hungaricum as well as putting students my way: I tutored two sons of Zoltán Hajdu, the managing director of the Anglo-Austrian Bank. From Vienna and dreadful slum quarters, where I lacked even a sheet on my bed for four months, I went as a guest straight to the Hatvany Mansion in Hatvan, and then, with fares provided by Mrs Albert Hirsch, the lady of the house, and the summer having ended, I travelled to Paris. There I enrolled at the Sorbonne. I spent the summer in a fishing village on the coast, in the South of France.

After that I came to Budapest. I attended two semesters at the University of Budapest. I did not take the exam for a teaching diploma because—with Antal Horger's threat in mind—I supposed that I would not get a job in any case. Later, the Institute for Foreign Trade, on being established, employed me as a Hungarian and French correspondent; I believe Mr Sándor Kóródi, my managing director there, would be happy to provide a reference. At that point I was assailed by the kind of unexpected blows that, however much life may have toughened me up, I was unable to withstand. The National Social Insurance Institute referred me initially to a sanatorium and subsequently put me on sick-pay for severe neurasthenia. I resigned from my job, having realised that I could not be a burden on a young institution. Ever since then, I have been living off my writings. I am an editor on the literary and critical magazine *Szép szó.* Apart from Hungarian, I can read and write French and German, correspond in Hungarian and French, and I am an accomplished touch typist. I was also able to do shorthand, and I could brush up that knowledge with a month's practice. I am familiar with newspaper printing technology, and I can draft documents. I consider myself to be an honest person; I think I am quick on the uptake and an assiduous worker. ❧

[1937]

Translated by Tim Wilkinson

Gyula Illyés

Five Years Later

Öt év múlva

Though five years dead, you still could find your way
from the graveyard—everything's the same—
to this old coffeehouse, here where I came
to wait for you, and you for me that day
of our last meeting in this corner's gloom.
You shivered, as in a shepherd's hut. It rained.
Our voices rose. By then you were "insane,"
but not even I could sense your doom.
I am sitting, silent and alone,
on the shore of vibrant time, now flown.
There's nothing that remains of you tonight.
You're gone. You've vanished. How absurd, as though
the whole world had gone mad since then, and you,
only you, are unalterably right.

(1942)

Translated by Daniel Hoffman

Gyula Illyés and Attila József, 1931

Gyula Illyés (1902–1983) poet, essayist, playwright, editor, translator and diarist, author of the widely translated People of the Puszta *(1936), was a close friend and rival of Attila József. He eventually married Flóra Kozmutza, József's last great love.*

Sándor Márai

The Poet's Grave

Attila József's ashes have been brought to Budapest and interred in an honorary gravesite at the Kerepesi Street cemetery. With this reverential gesture Hungarian officialdom and the friends of literature have honoured themselves. Attila József was one of our most important contemporary poets. Yes, only time can tell: was he perchance among the very greatest? This tragic poet, chased by fate and madness under an oncoming train at the age of thirty-two, was a proletarian. By mobilising his exceptional poetic talent in empathy with his companions in fate and distress, he consciously stood up for his social class. And yet he was no programme-driven bard: the willed strength of every line of his was illuminated by that glimmer of tenderness which deeper, more intuitive, true poetry radiates.

Legends are arising about his death and fate. He is mentioned as a victim of our social order. From a medical perspective, this allegation is preposterous. In the final years of his life, Attila József was insane, a victim of an incurable mental illness, of schizophrenia—which usually first emerges during puberty. There is no medicine for this terrible mental disorder, least of all is there an easy cure. Nor is there an explanation. We certainly cannot say that penury and society's indifference set alight the fateful psychological affliction in this genius of a man. I know of millionaire schizophrenics as well. No, mental illness is sovereign and picks its victims at random in the tenement houses of Angyalföld, where Attila József was raised and in the town houses of the magnates. His illness was decided not by the circumstances of his life, and neither can his suicide be explained by his loneliness and destitution. All this was fate. What is of course debatable is this: Might his gentle frame and tremulous, sensitive mind have wrestled more successfully against the illness, had his life circumstances been more fortunate, unruffled, a shade less wearing on the psyche? Had he had his "two hundred a

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Sándor Márai *(1900–1989)*
a novelist who left Hungary in 1948 and spent the rest of his life in exile in Italy and the US, had also published important journalism in Hungary and Germany before going into exile.

month," as he complained in a famous poem, perhaps his constitution and soul would have been more resistant. Penury did not cause the illness, but it is partly to blame for his psyche's inability to shoulder the weight of life and illness simultaneously. Standing above the graves of dead Hungarian poets and calling society to account for the fate of one departed genius generally amounts to cheap demagoguery. I am not about to take on this role. But I knew Attila József well, I knew his genius, his pure soul, and his appalling destitution. And now that he has been granted an honorary grave, I cannot remain silent, for the indifference shown this poet was in fact shocking and heart-rending. Perhaps he couldn't have been saved, but he could have been helped, his destiny could have been allayed. Only a very few people did help.

This poet was an angelic creature, the purest human being and the purest writer. Sometimes he honoured me by stopping by with a copy of his latest, usually self-published, book. On such occasions I found it necessary to engage him in close combat until, bashful though I was about it, I finally managed to convince him that it is his responsibility to accept the price of the book even from me, a fellow writer. Invariably he then accepted only the price the book was selling for in the bookshops, and not a *fillér* more. He was proud as could be and yet as humble as Saint Francis of Assisi, *il poverello,* must have been. Indeed, whenever we met, went for a walk, or sat in a café he always reminded me of Sándor Petőfi and of Saint Francis. There is a haunting resemblance between the only surviving photograph of Petõfi and the last photographs of Attila József. And indeed he could speak of birds, of flowers in the voice of *il poverello.* His loneliness, his fate, his agonising in the coffee-houses of Budapest; his terrible, implausible penury; his resounding isolation in the prison of poverty and illness; the insane and yet genius-laden glimmer of his eyes; his stare, simultaneously calling for help and calling to account; the excited yet intimate whisper of his voice; the deep magical current of his verse—all this ordained this poet as a formidable, unique phenomenon. His voice seems ever purer, ever closer to our hearts and our minds, and we are incessantly pained that he fell silent so early. Mourners will scatter flowers for a long time to come on his honorary gravesite —how painfully awkward, this term, "honorary gravesite," in connection with Attila József! For a long time to come—as long as Hungarian is read.

Pesti Hírlap, 7 May 1942

Translated by Paul Olchváry

Dezső Kosztolányi

Twenty Questions

Short story

"People reproach me," said Kornél Esti, "for drawing most of my stories from my younger days, from the age that nowadays can already be referred to as 'prehistoric times.' But that's only natural. I look where I know I'll find. All of us only really live for a decade or two, in the first decades of our life. That is when the treasures are laid down in our soul, in deep-lying strata. A lifetime would not be enough for us to mine them.

For me, life will forever be a part of my childhood and early manhood when I was at school in the provinces, and I wandered around the wonderful, glittering boulevards of Budapest on which peace still cast its stormy light. With the passage of a certain time, our susceptibility, our receptivity, declines. Anyone who is more than thirty is likely to have experienced this. Spring or winter gradually shrink to a calendar event. We notice less and less of them. Their image has evolved definitively within us, and succeeding years are barely able to contribute any more to this. Now there would be no point in my watching an American skyscraper burn. For me a conflagration is the burning of a Lowland shack that I watched, unselfconsciously, as a child. If I had to describe the burning of an American skyscraper, no doubt I would pinch spark and colour from that trivial experience of mine.

Dezső Kosztolányi (1885–1936)

was a leading poet, novelist, short-story writer and critic of the period. He also worked as a journalist all his adult life and was a regular at the literary cafés in Budapest. He was among the few who recognised József's great talent at an early stage and encouraged the young poet. The incident he describes, also recounted in Tibor Déry's memoir (see pp. 47–58), appeared as one in the series of his semi-autobiographical stories called Esti Kornél. *Kosztolányi was not present at the scene, it was the critic Andor Németh who told him about it. Judit Szántó (Marika in this story), the poet's companion at the time, but not his wife, tells in her memoirs that she had discovered the manuscript of József's great love-poem,* Ode, *which the poet had written to another woman, and that caused her to attempt suicide. The* Ode *has excellent English translations, including one by Edwin Morgan (in* Sixty Poems by Attila József. *The Mariscat Press, Glasgow).*

I'm like that with people as well. My new acquaintances may be more substantial than the old ones, but the old ones are still the true ones. They are what symbolises humanity for me, just as old objects symbolise the world for me.

People also say that I don't live in the present, that I am turning away from it. That's fiddlesticks. I live just as much in the present, and will die in the present, as everyone else. But what am I supposed to do against the absolute psychological law that the age of our experiences is closed at a certain point? It's not me who turns away from the present. I can goggle at it all day, but I see nothing, just facts and strangers. Experiences can't be rushed. Hustling gets you nowhere. The light comes from within, not from the outside.

Still, I'm not saying that there are no surprises left in store for me. An event or a face can still sometimes crop up that engages my attention for a long time. True, if I were to get to the bottom of them, I would usually discover that the only reason they fascinated me so much was because, by chance, they were attuned to a memory and resonated with it. Now luck is also needed for that kind of thing to happen.

Just imagine, not long ago I was lucky. At the Café Sirius I had the sort of experience that is worth relating. It was as if it happened only yesterday, now, as present as the present gets, to my young friend, *János Johnny*.

Excuse me? You take exception to the name? You find it unnatural? I'm sorry, but that's what he is called. Life is implausible. Names likewise. I should warn those of you who write novels and short stories never to name an ordinary person John Smith or a world-famous 'cellist Titus Timoransky. Readers will simply not believe you because they will sense the implausibility of the plausible in that. They are more inclined to believe it the other way round, because then they sense the plausibility of the implausible in it. You'd do well not to forget that.

Anyway, Jancsi or Johnny, as you wish, is twenty-nine years old and a poet. He had spent long years of his short life in waiting. He waited for the sun to rise, then he waited for the sun to set. Though why he waited for the one or the other, he himself could not have said. In point of fact, he expected nothing at all from the waiting. Sometimes he waited for trams and buses. He would sit in the glass shelters of the halting-places. He would watch ten or fifteen cars pass before his nose. Then, as if he had accomplished something, he would get to his feet and proceed toward a goalless goal. Eventually, as a rule, he would run aground on the shallows of the Sirius, where his friends hung out, members of the postwar generation who pay war reparations with their superfluous lives for the bloody spree that another age-group staged back then without their knowledge and consent. The bill, by a fateful blunder, was handed over to them.

These young people were not disappointed. Only people who have at some time believed can be disappointed. They had not been allowed time for that. When they were in Grade 1 at primary school they spelled out from newspapers lying in the gutter that people were clubbing one another to death with rifle butts and setting hospitals alight on patients. They had nothing to become disillusioned with.

They have never felt, as we do, that adults are wiser or more honest. They learnt world history, and the lessons that are to be drawn from it, from the bold type of newspaper headlines. And thoroughly at that. Nor did they ever forget. As it is, if they meet now, they just sit around. They don't complain about this; they don't mock; they aren't unruly. Bias is needed for this too, faith and strength. They just look at one another, nod, and they already know everything.

For a long time I didn't understand them either. Never have two generations differed so much from one another as ours and theirs. When we were twenty, our fathers, pencil in hand, calculated how much we could make in this or that career, and if we worked diligently, what sort of pension and golden handshake we would be able to retire on; so it was easy, in that certain knowledge, for us to break loose from "ordinary" life. For them this ordinary life itself had been an adventure, because everyone around them was unruly. In the dreary eventlessness of our age, we exaggerated big events so they should not be reduced to nothing; they, poor things, were obliged to trivialise great events for the same reason. We puffed away at cigarettes, wreaked havoc on ourselves, lived in a fever of divine and coarse passions; they do not smoke, they exercise and marry young. We wanted to die five or six times a day; they would rather live, if that were possible.

Many obstacles loomed in the way of this, what may be called, reasonable desire of theirs. Yet they tried everything, this way and that, cheekily, defiantly, submissively. They cannot be accused of faint-heartedness or indolence. Johnny too had tried his hand at everything there is. He had worked, studied too, but since his manuscripts had found no home for years on end, he understood there was no call for him and he stepped aside. Now he frequents the Café Sirius. That is his social life. That is where he meets his illustrious contemporaries. Hernád, the hugely talented novelist, who is unable to sell his novels. Or Ullmann, the hugely talented book reviewer, who has not been given even one book that he might review. Or Balthazar, the hugely talented newspaper editor, who has no newspaper. And Bolváy, Géza Kerner, as well as the rest.

What do unemployed writers do? The same as everyone else. Unemployed carpenters, in the first flush of their enforced idleness no doubt glue together and bang nails into anything around the house, fixing limping tables or wobbling chairs, indeed, out of wise foresight, maybe even size up and assemble coffins for themselves and their family. Unemployed magicians strive to use their wands to make gloomy thoughts disappear and create money from nothing. Unemployed teachers—so I imagine—rap their own offspring on the knuckles and get the dog to spell. For a while, each one pursues his own craft. Unemployed writers too. Due to their perseverance, they proceed at the old terminal velocity. Words are in motion within them that otherwise could have served great creative works; they overgrow feelings and thoughts and, for lack of a central streering and braking force, break loose from their customary orbit, rebel and demand their rights. The words start to live an independent life, just like tools that have been downed for

too long: bored mallets that all at once jump out of their toolbox and hammer everything, left, right and centre, or undeservedly neglected planes, which in their desperation dash and slide around, back and forth, without their master's hands on them, deliriously planing down walls, carpets, mirrors, whatever is in reach. It's spooky, my friends.

I noticed this in Jancsi too. He wrote less and less. In the end he wrote only the titles of his poems, or the rhyme scheme, as the most necessary elements, salvaging the motive force of form, the essence, and casting the rest away. That is how his eloquent but not exactly voluble poem about earthquakes came into being, in which he merely makes the following assertion about the giant who carries the Earth on his shoulders:

Atlas,
How tactless

which is how the similar poem *'Tout comprendre c'est tout pardonner'* also came into being, in which he strove to justify or excuse an unfortunate friend who was addicted to narcotics in the following manner:

Don't stand amazed at the morphinist.
Think rather what an orphan he is,
then you'll understand.

These creations, to which I could not totally deny all spark of curiosity, already show a deformation and stunting of his art, demonstrating where the greatest God-given talents can end up if insufficient scope is given to their abilities.

But that's what they were like, all of them; they lay fallow, untapped, interminably. What were they to do? They played, that's what. Words played with them, so they themselves played too. Or rather, since a writer's job is essentially play, "they worked." They played and worked with the futile tools of their futile craft. They played with vowels and consonants, speaking fluently with *'e'* as the only vowel, so that the 'army' became *select he-men-engendered deterrent strength.* They played Twenty Questions, raising that exercise in mental gymnastics to an unimaginable degree of virtuosity and, by narrowing the field of concepts, deducing every conceivable and inconceivable item in the shortest possible time from a respondent's yes's and no's—for instance, the flint in Poincaré's first cigarette lighter, or Oedipus's own hale and hearty Oedipus complex. They played at 'framing sentences', in which the most ridiculous foreign names would be artistically blended, woven and worked into a Hungarian text—the names of Rabindranath Tagore or Count Axel Oxenstierna. They played with the initials of proper names. At the drop of a hat, they could reel off every poet, scholar or philosopher whose name began with a U or W, so at least at these times and in this manner they saw some use for their broad cultivation—out-of-work writers for their familiarity with world literature, out-of-work linguists for their years-long exhaustive delvings, out-of-work mechanical engineers and out-of-work paediatricians for their schooling in

natural history and their multiple universities—because, having rattled off the various eminent names for around half an hour, with everyone by now worn out and having given up, someone at the very last moment would clap their brow and pronounce the name of a barely known Polish biologist whose name began with a U or W, thereby winning that game, the prize, as well as recognition and admiration from us all. But they played most of all with words themselves, these mysterious minutiae of language, these supposedly non-decomposable elements of language, constantly searing and distilling them in their alembics, like alchemists in the Middle Ages, and in the course of their labours they would triumphantly discover that *deliver* read backwards is *reviled* or *top bard notes putrid tang* backwards is *gnat-dirt upset on drab pot,* while the more outstanding among them were, in next to no time, able to compose lengthy poems and stories that made almost as much sense when read from front to back as they did when read back to front. That is how they prattled and wittered on, the poor things, without material or object, running on empty, like windmills, thrashing the air-nothing.

Suffice it to say, the other day, getting on for the evening, about seven o'clock, I too was sitting among them at the long marble table in the Sirius, wallowing in this tepid nothingness. In comes Johnny. Without so much as a greeting he settles at the table, resting his elbows on it and saying not a word. He holds his tongue.

He looks a little pallid. But then his normal complexion, you must know, is always pale as a sheet from all the fasting he has done, both of old and more recently. He seemed excited, and that was picked up on by the others too. Something extraordinary had happened to him. Something was the matter with him. They asked him too: What's wrong?

He just shrugged his shoulders.

What could possibly be wrong? It's wrong that we are born into the world and have to live. It's also wrong that we depart from here and die. It's wrong that we are healthy and so have to eat. It's wrong that we are sick and so cannot eat. One way or another a lot is wrong in the world. It could be worse.

"All the same, what's wrong with you? Come on, spit it out. What's got into you?"

Johnny smoothes back his curly, up-brushed hair, twirls his minuscule moustache. A cocky chap, a gutsy fellow, and no mistake. Flimsy in frame but very manly.

"Did you lose you job, perchance? You've been declared bankrupt? Gone totally bust?"

Jests and jibes of this kind have long ceased to get a rise around here. Neither the wags nor those who are ragged are amused.

Lalojka, the waiter, rushes over to him. He bows politely and confidentially:

"The usual extra-large draught will that be, sir?"

Johnny nods.

Lalojka comes back with two glasses of water, setting them down before him on a tray. Johnny drains both of them, one after the other. Look how thirsty he is.

Balthazar, Ullmann and Kellner return to grilling him.

"Why are you saying nothing, you pudding?"

The reason he is saying nothing is that he sees no sense in it. Nothing can be done about it. He throws out:

"Guess."

"Is it something that happened today?"

"Yes."

"This morning?"

"No."

"This afternoon?"

"Yes."

"You had no suspicion of it even yesterday?"

"No."

He answers in this fashion, casually. The least of his problems is that they will guess.

At the far end of the table, an overweight, dark-haired young man is blocking his ears with both hands as he is immersed in the *Daily Mail* crossword. Every blessed day he solves all the domestic and foreign crosswords: he qualified as a teacher of Greek and Latin eight years ago, and for eight years he has had no job. Out of boredom, he has also learnt Arabic, Persian and Turkish. His name is Dr Scholz. His friends once used to call him Socrates because of his sharpness of mind and brilliant polemical flair. Later, when he pursued his luck at the race track, putting a florin on every horse, they called him Suckeratgeegees. Very recently, though, since he had started to neglect his apparel, changing his shirt only on rare occasions, they used neither that name nor the other but simply called him Socksarecheesy, both behind his back and to his face, the writers just as much as Lalojka and the other waiters, which he took cognisance of with an understanding and unconcern worthy of a philosopher.

He writes into the squares of the crossword the appropriate English words—an Australian river, an Indian wild animal or an American statesman—then, like someone who has done their daily duty, heaves a sigh of satisfaction. He yawns. He takes off his grubby spectacles, wipes them with his grubby handkerchief, which only makes the glasses even grubbier, though the handkerchief is no cleaner for it. He listens to how Johnny is being assailed. He raises his tired gaze to him.

He thinks they are playing Twenty Questions. He is wrong, however. They are not yet playing Twenty Questions, or they are as yet unaware that they are. The instinctively curious questions and instinctively curt replies gradually, unremarked, tip over from reality into game as when an aeroplane lifts off from the ground to hover above it, albeit by only a few spans as yet.

Scholz smiles at the amateurishly bungling game—it's something in which he is a true master. He already knows what the task is: to ascertain what happened

to Johnny and what is the cause of his melancholy. He takes over the game purely out of compassion. He levels his questions with scientific methodicalness at Johnny's chest, and the latter responds apathetically.

"Object?"

"Yes."

"Just an object?"

"No."

"A concept as well?"

"No."

Scholz purses his lips, as he considers that unless it is an "abstract concept" the task is unworthy of his efforts.

"An object and person together."

"Yes."

"An invented figure."

"No."

"Living?"

"I can't answer that."

"Not living? Dead?"

"I can't answer that either."

"What do you mean? Neither living nor dead? Living dead, then?"

"No."

"Ah! I see," says Scholz. "As of now you don't know whether the person is dead or alive," he adds, though sensing that something is not quite right.

He thinks back on the nice and hard games he has played in his life. He thinks that at Shrovetide last year he worked out colour-blindness and also the hole that a nail makes in a wall, and not long ago he hit upon Abigail Kund's maternal grandma, or in other words a fictitious, non-existent figure's fictitious, non-existent relative whom the poet himself did not consider it worth making up, and he had equally hit upon the purely hypothetical psychologist who diagnosed, or might have diagnosed, the same Abigail Kund's madness.

He hauled an article of value out of one of his pockets, a flat silver case containing green gum-drops. He offered them around the table, as was his habit, but the company refused, as was its habit with anything that he had touched. He alone took one. He chewed the green gum-drop with his black teeth.

"Let's get on with it," he urged himself on. "So, this is a person like you or me? Male? Female? Between twenty and thirty? Your wife?"

"Yes."

"Marika," Scholz says to himself pensively, adjusting his spectacles on the bridge of his nose and staring at Johnny.

The others likewise stare at him.

"The object in question," Scholz carried on, "was it slung at your head? Did you have a row?"

"No," Johnny answered sternly, and with that 'no' simultaneously quelling the sniggers that had already started to sputter around him.

"No?" Scholz asks, and he has a sense of having lost track. "All right, then. But this object is still related to your present psychological state, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Is this object large? Is it as big as my head? Is it as big as my fist?" displaying his grubby fist. "Is the object on you now? Is it with your wife now? On her perhaps? On her head? On her ears? On her hand? Is it beside her, on the ground?"

"No, no, no, no, no, no, no."

A few minutes later, with the game still going on, Scholz cries out:

"So, this object is or was in you wife's stomach, it doesn't matter which. An item of food? Not that?" he says and lowers his raised eyebrows. "Organic? Inorganic? An inorganic industrial article; a medicine, but something that neither I nor you have yet taken? Poison?" he slipped in quickly.

"Yes," Johnny answers.

The company is leaning forward attentively, but without any great excitement, because the excitement is fraternally divided between Johnny, who seems to be the hero of a domestic tragedy, and Scholz, who has figured this out.

"Poison," Scholz reiterates, "Right, so poison."

Someone started whistling. "...bubbling as it goes in."

"Silence, please!" Scholz yells. "Don't distract me. Given that it's inorganic, could it be a sublimate?"

"Yes."

"Corrosive sublimate, mercuric dichloride," sounded a voice. "$HgCl_2$."

"That's neither here nor there," Scholz gestured for the voice to desist, now with the goal in sight.

I won't continue, my friends. Just that I have taken many things to heart, but nothing like that. After a few minutes of fencing with words and close combat, Scholz had winkled it out of him that his wife, Marika, the good and amiable Marika, barely an hour beforehand, for an unknown reason but with the intention of ending her life, had swallowed a lozenge of corrosive sublimate. An ambulance had taken her to hospital and that was where she was right then.

So help me! there were beads of cold sweat on my forehead. You, of course, would have supposed that the whole thing was just a leg-pull, a juvenile prank, a bluff. That wasn't what I was thinking. I know those lads who are living in 1933. They don't act up like we do, and they never lie, either to themselves or to others. We were romantic; they were objective. Johnny objectively communicated how matters stood, according to the strict rules of Twenty Questions, and they accepted it just as objectively. It did not occur to any of them to doubt it for a second. They were not even greatly surprised. They can't be surprised by anything.

As to why Johnny fell in with a game of such questionable taste, God only knows. Perhaps out of tiredness, or nervousness maybe. He hurt nobody by doing

so. Marika was meanwhile receiving expert treatment in hospital: they pumped her stomach out, made her drink milk, and dripped many litres of water through her. They sent Johnny away so he would not get under their feet; he was only supposed to go back an hour later. Right at that moment, then, there was nothing he could do. He wanted at least to help himself; he had to kill time somehow until he could see her again.

I don't condemn him. He loved that wife of his and still loves her now. I recall that in the early days of his marriage he went around with four scones constantly in his pocket, happily showing them to everyone as having been baked by his wife. What does that prove? Not what you maintain: that the scones were inedible, because then he would have thrown them away and not kept them in his pocket for months on end, like some sort of holy relic. In short, he loves his wife.

After the Twenty Questions, he drained two more glasses of water then dashed over to the hospital. He returned only hours later, late that evening. He reported that Marika had got through the critical time, she had been saved. She was feeling fine and the doctors were confident there would be no after effects.

The Russian musicians in the Sirius struck up with their scraping—you know, the prisoners of war who got stuck here after the war ended. For a while they wore national dress and played Russian songs; then, as their clothes got shabbier, they forgot the Russian music, and now they play almost nothing but Hungarian popular songs—in line with their Slav temperament, dreamily, languidly, and usually also flat as well. So we fled.

I accompanied Johnny back to his home on Hungária Boulevard. He has a monthly rented room there. He sat down on the divan on which they had previously been sleeping together. He registered that today he would be sleeping alone. His pain was objective. He got to his feet, threw a gaudy cushion and a thin quilt onto the divan. After that he paced up and down, hands behind his back, without saying a word. He stopped every now and then in front of the window. He looked out onto the street. It seemed he was waiting for something. I already told you, he was a chap who was always waiting for something. It was night-time now, a dark and cloudy night. He was obviously waiting for the dawn. ❧

[1933]

Translated by Tim Wilkinson

Tibor Déry

No Judgement

Excerpt from a Memoir

A lone skeleton walks past the lilac-bushes, another one a long way behind it. They are not coming from the trench that was excavated and has meanwhile again been filled in, beside the eastern wall of the ruins of a medieval Romanesque church at Dörgicse, though that is where, in my heart of hearts, I would assign them to their so-called final resting-place, which, as it were, amounts to the respectful scale pan of posterity's balance. Fortunately, that too wobbles from time to time, so there is no repose. There would only be that if posterity too were to get into the trench.

The foremost skeleton is carrying his skull back to front, a severed right arm under his left shoulder: he has brought it from Balatonszárszó, from the railway station, from beneath the wheels of a goods train, under which, of his own free will, by dividing his body in two, he intended to save the better part from the hell already designated for it from the outset and perfected yet further by careful human hands. All the signs are he was successful in that.

He was still intact, fortunately, when I first met him in 1927, at Ernő Osvát's table in the Café Seemann on Vilmos Császár (now Bajcsy-Zsilinszky) Avenue. Whether he was already sitting there when I showed up at the honoured booth, or he turned up later, I no longer recall; nor, indeed, whether he was already twirling his moustache or he only grew that later on. My first impression of him was mistaken; swiftly as he grew in my affections and esteem, I liked him just as little the very first time. After we had been together just a few minutes, he recited one of my poems to me. Why's he buttering me up, I groused to myself. It did not occur to me that there was no reason for anyone to pay court to me. Having returned to my native land after seven years of exile, with nothing to show for it, my name was practically unknown back here in Hungary, with only a few writer friends noticing that I was back home. Nor could I have known that Attila József may well have heard my poetry in Vienna (where I had not come across him) at one of the poetry readings given by Jolán Simon, the now deceased wife of the poet and artist Lajos Kassák, and out of the computer of his memory, into which it was possible to feed any amount of poetry, it was retrieved as a playful

Tibor Déry (1894–1977) was a leading novelist who came from a wealthy middle-class family but became a Communist in his youth and spent most of his younger years abroad. After experimental poems, drama and fiction, he wrote the huge *A befejezetlen mondat* (The Unfinished Sentence, published only in 1947), a panoramic treatment of Hungarian society between the two wars, seen from a left-wing point of view. In 1945 he joined the party and more or less supported its Stalinist policies despite severe ideological criticism of his work up to 1954, when he began airing his misgivings. For his leading role as a writer in the 1956 Revolution he was sentenced to 9 years in prison, but—as a result of world-wide protests from the likes of André Gide, Arthur Koestler, T.S. Eliot and many others—he was amnestied in 1961 "for reasons of health". His novellas, *Niki, Love,* (1955–1956) and some short stories depicting the real face of the political system, appeared in numerous foreign translations at the time and made him famous. In the mellowing years of the Kádár regime he wrote a number of important novels and collections of stories and essays. His autobiography, *Ítélet nincs* (No Judgement, 1969), from which the above excerpt was taken, is written in the form of a "conjuration": during it some of the deceased he had been close to join him as he sits at a stone table in his hillside garden at Balatonfüred, overlooking the lake, and there he reminisces and engages them in conversation.

Nyugat (West, 1908–1941) was the leading literary periodical of the period. One of its editors, the poet, novelist and essayist **Mihály Babits** (1883–1941), a stern personality of immense prestige and authority and a father-figure to the younger generations, denied Attila József the much coveted Baumgarten Literary Prize as the head of the Baumgarten Foundation. The penniless and often starving young poet lampooned him for this in a cruel poem, something Babits was never able to forgive, not even when years later József duly apologised in a fine poem. To the end of his short life he continued to receive only smaller sums of aid from the Foundation.

Lajos Nagy (1883–1954) was a prolific writer of short stories, a great realist and satirist, and the author of volumes of descriptive sociology in which he depicted the dire conditions of village and small-town life. His chef d'oeuvre is "Grand Café Budapest", a delightful, humorous description of coffee-house life in Budapest in the thirties, of which he and Déry and Kosztolányi and József were, among countless other writers and intellectuals, regular players. Beside Lajos Nagy, the poet Gyula Illyés was invited to Russia to attend the Soviet Writers' Congress held in Moscow in 1934, an invitation which stung Attila József deeply because he thought he would have better deserved it.

E. Gy.: Edit Gyömrői, one of József's analysts, with whom the poet fell in unrequited love. **Andor Németh** (1891–1953) was a critic and novelist, a close friend of Attila József and also his first biographer. The incident mentioned here, the suicide attempt of Judit Szántó, József's companion for six years, is the subject of Kosztolányi's story "Twenty Questions", appearing on p. 38–46 of this issue.

courtesy in honour of the older poet (I was then thirty-three). My instinctive antipathy, which over the course of my life has done fair service in steering me between the likeable and the objectionable, was intensified by his physical appearance; I looked dismissively at his broad hands with the stubby fingers, the first joint of which was bent backwards more markedly than usual, but then I cared no more for his disproportionately long neck either, the vertebrae of which were subsequently to be crushed by that train at Szárszó.

"Seat yourself here, Attila, beside the millstone," I say to him. "You've lain around enough in that lousy trench. But do put your skull on the right way round! It's making me nervous to see you look the other way."

"This is how it stays," says he. "You and the likes of you taught me how to squint. I'm practising."

"Well, I for one didn't," I answered. "I told you to your face that you'd become a great poet."

I saw from his head movement that he wished to brush that aside, but his right arm was ripped out of its socket. One can't accomplish expressive gestures with a nibbled shoulder bone. I wanted to help him.

"Put down your right arm on the millstone," I say to him. "Don't worry, I'm not going to filch it. I've still got my own, even if the muscles are a bit atrophied due to a childhood bout of bone TB. If you set the right arm down on the table you can brush aside with your free left hand as much as you like. But then why did you want to brush it aside anyway?

"Everything's staying where it is," says Attila stubbornly.

"You don't have to worry," I responded, "about my being put off, if you lay it down nice and neatly on the table. I've slept with a one-legged woman in my time, let me tell you. Why did you want to brush that aside?"

"It's true," says Attila, nodding with his averted head, "You did prophesy that I'd become a great poet, I can't deny it. But why did you not take to me straight away when we first met at Osvát's table?"

"You noticed? And you haven't forgotten?"

"Nothing," says Attila, "Not a thing, ever."

"That's why you were unhappy," says I. "You never learned how to forget. The way I learned—and fairly quickly too, given what a slow-coach I am. Why did you say nothing about it?"

"What would have been the point?" says Attila, setting his back-to-front skull even more askew. "There was nothing to be done for it. Like everything else."

"That's as may be. That's why one has to forget. All the same, park that right arm of yours on the table!"

"It stays where it is," says Attila. "Why anyway?"

"So you can raise that admonitory index finger of yours, as is your habit. When you wanted to draw attention to one of your scraps of thought that needed to be emphasised in order to gain attention. Or if you sang. Do you remember..."

"I remember."

"... that you learned that song about the piper in hell from me? From me and my painter friend, Dezső Kornis, in that cellar bar in the Józsefváros District that used to be called the 'Rat's Breath'. You've got no voice, but sing it anyway! Raise that index finger of yours!"

If piper true you want to be,
Hell's the place you have to see.

"There you are," says Attila, contentedly nodding his skew-whiff skull, "I took your advice."

"Rightly so: you were younger than me," I said grouchily. "Mind you, it wasn't meant as advice; I was merely giving an example, throwing myself on the wisdom of the people. What can you tell me about the other world?"

"It's the same as this one," says Attila. "Since that too is what you people appointed as heaven and hell out of your tawdry obsessions. In any case, I have already tipped off the multitude of my biographers, who by now in one way or another know more about me than I do myself."

"True," says I. "Let's look at Lake Balaton, then!"

"Not me, " says Attila.

With our first encounter not encouraging any continuation, we did not seek one another's company for a long while. I was not yet paying any attention to him, being preoccupied with my own seemingly intractable solitude, in no wise lesser than his. According to this note, that year marked the start of my rocky relationship with Aranka K., and that was also when Attila fell in love with Márta Vágó, whose father, József Vágó, the now deceased secretary-general of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry, at one point, toward the end of the First World War and up to the October revolution of 1918, was my boss, and our families even mixed socially, so I had known Márta when she was a little girl. During the five years of my love affair, and for another five years afterwards, I lived with only one foot in Budapest, and I kept even that out of literary life; if I wrote anything, it was for the desk drawer, and on the rare occasion I published anything it was only in *Nyugat,* I earned my bread solely from translations. It was usually sheer chance that brought me together with old friends, when, on returning from one of my belt-tightening tours abroad, I looked in on the Japán, the Simplon or the Centrál coffee-houses, so there was little I could have known about Attila's life; I merely paid attention to his poems with growing interest. Through an intimation from these, however, I had already forgotten all about those disagreeable stubby fingers and that long neck; I was happy to sit down and argue with him—the Lord knows what about!—and I marvelled at those flashes of charming, boyish wit, the quizzical smile under his moustache, the laughter that bypassed the barrier of the intellect—and all without knowing or asking a thing about his private life. But by then already indignant at the incomprehension shown by official literary tribunals, which meant

that only two short poems of his made it into Babits' *New Anthology,* when even I got three in, to say nothing of the worthy but now unheard-of Márta Sági, who takes up three times as much space, the equally lost-to-sight Lajos Fekete: twice as much, or Sophie Török, Mihály Babits's wife, who takes precisely ten times as much space in the volume, which the editor assembled after listening to twenty writers, fourteen among whom—so Oszkár Gellért told me in a letter (and on this occasion, given what we know of public morals, we should believe him)—voted against Attila.

One afternoon I went into the Japán (it was after my divorce, as best I recall). Lajos Nagy was the first to bid me to join him.

"I've got 48 *fillérs,*" he said. "I need another 76 to pay for my coffee and the two Memphis cigarettes so that I can take the column that I've just finished over to *Népszava.* Have you got any money?"

I usually had 76 *fillérs* on me, sometimes even two *pengős*, but Lajos Nagy would never ask for more than one *pengő* on principle. Admittedly, he would beckon me over to his table every time I showed up at the coffee-house: even a good two-*pengő* friend was a rarity in those days, particularly one from whom it was possible to cadge without blushing. If I was not left with enough money after making a loan available, I would not order anything. "Later!" I would say to Jancsi, the pleasant, round-faced lad, who had advanced from cigar-seller to waiter and subsequently headwaiter. "Yes, sir, later," he would smile encouragingly, well aware of the position. At another table Attila József was reading a newspaper.

"Will you come to Hódmezővásárhely with me?" he asked.

"When?"

"Tomorrow."

"What are you going to Vásárhely for?" I asked him. "I would go, but I've got no money."

"You don't need any money," said Attila József. "My brother-in-law will take us there by car."

Stunned: "Your brother-in-law is that rich?"

Attila brushed that aside; he was still able to do so back then. The next day, totally unacquainted with his family circumstances, I got into the car. In front were the chauffeur and the brother-in-law, Dr Ödön Makai (now deceased); in the back seat, Attila and I. I did not know his sisters either, only by name—one of them, from a poem of his, Lidi, who was actually called Jolán, but whom I later had to address as Lucie—but I did know Attila's poems a good deal more thoroughly, and in point of fact it was to go to their place that I had got into the car. In Budapest the chauffeur drove, but when we reached the outskirts of the city the brother-in-law took over at the wheel. Within five minutes he had run over a chicken, then crashed into a tree in his nervousness.

"He passed his driving test yesterday," Attila said.

I laughed out loud, knowing I was invulnerable, but Attila was trembling beneath the smile, white as a sheet. "Don't you have something to do in Kecskemét?" he asked after a while.

Attila József. Spring 1930.

"Sure I have," I said. "About as much as in Vásárhely."

"Then we'll get out there," said Attila, "and do the rest of it by train."

The brother-in-law respected our open lack of confidence and was apparently not offended. Only at Kecskemét it turned out there would be no more trains that day in the direction of Vásárhely, so we had to spend the night there. We still had enough money for a hotel room for the night.

It was not only my restless flitterings abroad that meant there was no continuity in our friendship, a ten-year age gap also separated us, although during my stays in Budapest, whenever I returned home from Germany, Italy, Norway, Yugoslavia, Vienna, Mallorca, Transylvania, and so on for a rest, my affection for him, which would have grown further during my absence, always sought him out and found him, and on those occasions we would wander about the streets arguing for half the night, with him usually ending up sleeping at my place. But Attila, like his contemporaries, was one of the second generation of *Nyugat* writers, whereas I hovered between the two generations, which is to say, neither accepted me, both fending me off with one hand: the one by right of their prestige, the other by right of their youth. I did not join in either trend or circle; I merely had specific friends in the one and the other. But then Attila was too shy to invite the older and more or less respected fellow writers back to his place, to the desolation of his mundane existence; I never went to call on him at any of his lodgings, all I knew about his financial circumstances was from his poetry. I only met his partner, Judit (now deceased), once or twice at best; and I was quite unaware of his life-threatening attachment to E. Gy. He didn't know much more about me either. Our questions, the problems of literature and Communism, converged without any personal background, and although we argued we were largely in agreement, particularly in his last, seared years. But whereas I burned with a slow fire, the earsplitting explosions of his emotions could increasingly be heard from his hell.

I suppose that was the formula of his life and art: reason's interminable compromise with uncompromising, merciless instincts. What people of more fortunate dispositions surmount, the artist sublimates. His mind—an excellent work superintendent—reorganised his instincts into a world view; that is how it found room and a role for his cruelty too. That couplet, 'With pure heart I'll rob and steal, If needs must, will even kill," I reckon, should be taken literally: the murderous desire in art's smiling Orphic discipline.

I take a look at his poems now, here on the pink millstone table, under the sun's rapidly slanting rays. The skeleton is seated next to me but no longer wishes even to face his life's work: he is still averting his skull. There is an autumnal mist over the surface of Lake Balaton.

"Don't be ashamed!" I tell him. "Look around you! Twilight's delicate charm, like your poems: how much murderousness it conceals. Take that swallow over there, for example, above the baluster: the innocent lives of how many insects does it extinguish, I wonder, as it flits back and forth, like your lightning-quick associations of ideas? Innocent, did I say? They too kill one another."

But the skeleton merely shrugs his shoulders, if I'm not mistaken.

"Give yourself credit," I carry on, "for having striven to give your aggressions human dignity. You set them in the service of a noble idea, that of making the life of man easier. They did serve as well, until the idea, dunked in the dust and mud of this Earth, declared you altogether unsuitable. You couldn't put up with that. Nor I, later on."

"We couldn't put up with it because we really were unsuitable," Attila says, or rather murmurs, even whispers, so neither of us should hear.

"Are you trying to tell me," I respond, having heard anyway, "that one is unsuitable?"

"No, I'm not trying to tell you that," says the skeleton, with a stubbornness that was already familiar from his living phase, and raps on the table with the right arm pressed under the left armpit. "The idea reckons on dust and even mud, because the dust came first and a soul could only have breathed into it afterwards. It was me who was altogether unsuitable."

"You believe that?" I respond doubtfully. "On that basis, I am too. Man is a responsive being, says Georg Lukács. Unaware of your nature, you clung to that proposition, unfortunately for you. I would class you more as an asker, along with myself. You would have found more peace inquiring, although not into Eastern Orthodoxy."

The skeleton again shakes just its head, squinting in its whole being. I blush beside the millstone table: Am I applying my own pattern to him, to his weak physique, to the answers he wants to rely on? All the same, answering is simpler than asking. It's more perilous to churn up the sea than to contain the storm in Aeolus's ox-hide bottle. If he asks and finds no answer to his bloody internal battles, where is he going to turn for help: to mental disorder?

"Yes, of course," I say soothingly. "Being younger, you sought certainties, just as I did for a long time. You needed supports in the obnoxious reality that you were so superbly acquainted with. Where you were short on experience you patched that with a poem. Your dissatisfaction rubbed up against the dissatisfaction of an entire class and caught fire. Sympathy, like air pressure, tossed you high above yourself. I am familiar with the process; it took me too on its back."

"You regret that, perhaps?" the skeleton asked sarcastically.

"The hell I do," says I. "I record it as among fate's happy gifts."

I presume that at this juncture he would have raised his index finger if he had one, as a signal of concurrence. But this time the word to go with the index finger is missing, as if midway he had had second thoughts. With his head being averted, only one eye socket can be seen, and it is empty anyway.

"Likewise put it down to your credit," I say, "that you vigorously drew mankind's attention to the intermediary function of reason between nature and society. You yourself may have come apart in the struggle between the two, but you encouraged further efforts precisely by the spectacular, heart-stirring example of your defeats."

I have the impression that he would gladly turn his head my way with an interrogative gesture, were he able. But visibly, nature is again stronger than the etiquette of social intercourse.

"Oh yes," I go on, "by the crude, forthright depiction of your instincts, with which there is little comparable in world literature, you vociferously warned of the danger with exemplary sensitivity and credible strength. You didn't even put a question mark after the picture, rightly entrusting that to the reader."

"It wasn't the question mark that I entrusted to the reader but the proofs," the skeleton says.

"Where," I asked in near-professorial tones, though immediately ashamed of myself for my seeming self-assurance, "where in literature, with the possible exception of folk poetry, do we come across such shameless directness as your bravery in expressing the conflicts in your love life? Such plain declarations not just of your desires—there are other examples of that—but of frustration, physical and mental disappointment, vengeance, menace, curses from beyond the grave, in a word: sexual blackmail—as in your esteemed poetry? Offering the whole thing as a lesson for public use."

"Naturally, I wasn't the first to go down that narrow path," rejoins the skeleton, modestly averting his skull still more, as if he wished to inspect the neighbouring vineyard with his unrealisable line of sight. "I also gained encouragement from medieval poetry; as is well known, I endeavoured to develop that further."

"And you placed in the other pan of the poetic scale, by way of expiation," I carry on, "all the tenderness that you could no more call into play than your thirst for revenge. Again, just as an example of public utility. Though if I rightly recall, in real life as well..."

"Let's drop it!" says the skeleton, once more with an absent, dismissive gesture.

"Don't let's drop it!" I say "This is just between the two of us. There was that time once when you really did attack a woman with a kitchen knife, because she didn't love you but another man. Though by then, given the advanced stage of your illness, you were often confusing real life with the imaginary, and vice versa, dissolving poetry with insoluble facts."

A fair time before that, in 1933, when he was at the height of his intellectual powers, he dropped by the apartment in which Andor Németh was living in Jókai Square.

The inconsequential story that follows has been recounted by three writers: by Jolán József, in her recollections of her younger brother; in an account by Andor Németh in his more recent book about Attila; and finally in a novelistic treatment by Kosztolányi, likewise based on Andor Németh's account. All three, though drawing on a single source, differ from one another, and indeed also from a fourth, the one recorded below, which may well also have Andor Németh as its source. I was apprised of the event on returning home, some eight to ten days after it had occurred, from Yugoslavia, where I had been flexing my novel-writing muscles for the past year on my book *Szemtől szembe* (Face to Face), and readying myself for Vienna, where I would make a start on *A befejezetlen mondat* (The Unfinished Sentence).

In how many diverse garbs events get clothed! What is left, if one attempts to strip them off? If down to the bare bones—a painful undressing process—there remain the facts that prosaically run the world. Fortunately, an event pulls on so many layers that even the most astute investigative historian's fingertips are barely able to palpate where the clothing ends and where the facts begin. Sadly, in the course of being stripped down, the event loses the very thing that makes it comprehensible and interpretable: its human magic.

In his flat in Jókai Square, Andor Németh was just in the middle of dictating a translation to Juci, his wife to be, when, getting on for noon, Attila József stopped by and, as was his habit, stretched out on the couch in one corner of the room. Németh carried on dictating. After a while he left off, happily, and went to lie down beside Attila. Let me conjure up for the dear reader the lock of greying hair that would fall down over his brow with each sudden movement.

"Any news?" he presumably asked, maybe even giving a yawn as well.

"Yes," said Attila.

That would have been enough for Németh to lose interest, I imagine, knowing his character. He was no fan of events. Quite evidently he would not have responded at all.

"You're not even curious?" Attila would presumably have asked.

"No," said Andor Németh.

"Then do a 'Twenty Questions' on it!"

"An event of public interest?"

"No," said Attila.

Andor Németh perked up a bit at that. "So, the kind of event that primarily affects our friends and acquaintances?"

"That kind," said Attila.

"Will it put me in a better mood?"

"Not likely," said Attila.

At that Andor Németh slumped back. "Keep going all the same!" said Attila.

Presumably Andor Németh gave another yawn; he had been dictating his Balzac translation since nine o'clock that morning. "I'm not in the mood," he said. "Sum it up in two words!"

"Just keep going," said Attila.

Juci brought in three black coffees from the kitchen and perched on the corner of the sofa. "Are you staying here for lunch?" she asked Attila.

"Yes, here," says he.

"Does it affect me personally?" Andor Németh asked.

"No."

"You?"

"Yes."

"Literature?"

"No."

"Something to do with a woman?"

"Yes."

"Trouble then." Andor Németh would more than likely have said. Attila's dealings with women were of no interest to him. "Judit?"

"Yes."

"You had a row?"

"Yes."

"She's left you?"

"No."

"You've left her?"

"No."

"She's committed suicide?"

Andor Németh was a dab hand at Twenty Questions: as Attila was lying next to him on the divan, alive and unscathed, indeed had even asked for lunch, as a logical sequel to the events only Judit could have committed suicide. Or attempted to do so. That there had been an attempt only became clear the next day, or the day after that, when she, taken to hospital by ambulance, was able to walk out under her own steam.

The story is inconsequential, but all the same, if it has diverted four writers, it points beyond the history-shaping fact latent within to what lies above the bare bones. And, being interpretable, that straightaway sets in motion a game of Protean changes. I barely knew Judit, nor did Kosztolányi, and Andor Németh did not like her; however, they all knew that Attila had been living with her for three

years, that she would get up at crack of dawn to do a full day's heavy manual work in an umbrella factory, that she cleaned, cooked and washed for Attila, who spent his days in coffee-houses and often spent his evenings too away from home; and—now it turned out—she had attempted suicide out of jealousy, because while going through Attila's pockets during her cleaning she had found a love poem addressed to another woman. None of that could have happened without leaving a mark in the poet's sensitive conscience. Yet Attila, pallid though he may have been, was playing with the possibility of her suicide, her death?

If it's true that the ludic instinct is one of the sources of art, I muse quietly, likewise averting my head, albeit towards the Balaton, then the same motive—the passion and need to mould and form—prompted in Attila that spooky Twenty Questions as it did his poems. He endeavours to surmount the disorderliness of reality, as in his poetry, by forcing it between the human laws of the game, neutralising it by elevating it in this way. Great art nullifies (changes) reality, though starting off from it. I am thinking not just of the autonomous magic of words, which links our basest instincts with what is most sublime within us, but also of their effect: by proclaiming the magic word I actually drive out my demons. What is uttered aloud changes. Murderous instincts lurked in Attila: it is sufficient for me to refer to the recurrent motif of the knife. If he had not resolved them in his poetry, he might perhaps have killed sooner or later. "I'd like to kill, the same as everyone," he writes in one of his *Medallions*. Andor Németh left something out of his Twenty Questions: the question "Did you kill Judit?", because highly as he esteemed the poetry, he nevertheless did not reckon it powerful enough to strike the knife out of the killer's already upraised hand: so if Attila was lying beside him on the sofa, then on this occasion he had not wished to kill.

And did I, at any time during my life? It could be. But my instincts were duller—tamer, you could say politely—than Attila's; or I did not dare to face up to them and spell things out, or there was no need. I recollect that there were times when I wished for the death of one or another enemy, maybe sometimes a creditor too, but that wish made do with a sighed "Wouldn't that be nice!" and dwelt on the thought no longer than that. Only once did I attack a person physically, when I was a lad, and that was no more than a slap in the face. But the fact that a killer instinct was also at work in me, "the same as in everyone," is proved by the writings of my early years, which never came to a close without some person dying. I might also include here my passion for gambling, which thrust a playing card, rather than a knife, into my hand when there was no pen in it to overcome reality.

Attila looked for a community to which he might cling: he assembled his class around himself. When he adjudged, rightly, that this had been alienated from him, he turned the Mongol slant of his eyes—the inner slit of which he was so proud of that he would make a special point of calling women's attention to it—he gradually trained them away from the world on himself.

What little joy his friends were able to give him for two years came late for someone whom troubles had aged so rapidly. One slowly comes to hate the thing that one longs for in vain. An artist's loftiest secular pleasure, the sole like-material reward that he can receive for his work from society, the sole handkerchief for the artistic sweat of his brow, is recognition; if that comes late, he rejects it. Attila turned inwards; he no longer wanted to be freed from himself. He did not put on airs with his misery; he was not sentimental. He despised sympathy, that paltry substitute for love. He could no longer find any other solution than holding himself to be responsible. He accomplished that just as extremely and daringly, ran his head just as much against the wall that he had set before himself, as he had previously done against the outside world. I was a witness to the slow, sometimes spasmodic, moving self-education, with which he tried to find space for misanthropy in his heart, like a mother finding space for the growing child in her body. He would have liked to be cunning, tough and calculating, yet the youth that was stranded in his nerves, time and time again, gave the lie to that, filtering through into the play of his features, shining out of his movements; he resembled a clumsy puppy preparing to play the role of a wolf. I recall one interminable nocturnal conversation we had—we kept one another company in the street for a long time—when he said he did not want to write any more poetry, he was done with his poetic career, and he would fight tooth and nail for an ordinary job. There was nothing else he wanted than to earn two hundred pengős a month, he explained; a world founded on interests could offer him no more than that.

That is why he no longer wanted to accept anything free at the psychiatric clinic, where he could have accepted everything. He lit up a cigarette, cried, and worked out what his friends spent on cigarettes for him. He would hide gifts of cakes or mandarin oranges and passed them on to others. He brooded about leaving the expensive sanatorium and placing himself under free treatment, so as to be a burden on no one. He no longer considered his poems were a return service; the conviction grew in him that they were worth nothing. He no longer even trusted in his reason, not even in his lucid spells. If he still heard the occasional optimistic word, it was evident from his smile that he personally did not believe it. He visibly became detached from his future, the sweet, ethereal form that we imagine is hovering above us, and before our very eyes he slowly sank into the earth. Even then I was watching out for whether he would find some way of writing. A year later, five years later, in a recurrent lucid spell as his doctors had pronounced?... The living are cruel, a week before his death I sat down to write a letter to him in Szárszó about how magnificent his poems were, and he should work... I never finished the letter; I ripped it up.

Being worsted in the struggle that he waged for a humane order, and not wishing to harm another person, Attila killed himself. Thinking over this, I was so moved that I turned to him to embrace him, skeleton though he might be. By then, though, he had gone. ❧

Translated by Tim Wilkinson

Frederick Turner

Attila József Among his Peers

A Personal Assessment

If any enterprise were doomed to failure, it would be the attempt to compare the stature of the great poets. Any good artist is almost by definition incomparable—often the more so, the greater the artist's effort to do no more than faithfully represent the tradition and avoid mere originality and quirkiness.

Yet the exercise of comparison does have its virtues, if only to provide one more data point in the tracking of canon formation. The critic becomes a humble part of the great sensitive membrane of the literary public as it tastes and tastes again the vintages it is given—but a part that explicitly states its preferences and thus opens itself to the disapprobation of all the other parts. But the discovery of one's own sudden intuitive disagreement can be the spur to making up one's mind.

How, then, would I place Attila József among the great poets of the twentieth century? Obviously, I have already concluded that he is there at all, among the great poets. Why? Perhaps because as a poet myself I find he has got under my guard, has been admitted into the bridal chamber of my own creative activity —I reply to him, as among the few dozen poets through the ages who demand from me a reply. His pain and the terrifying strength of his countervailing will to joy will not let me be. To change the metaphor, if I have a map of the poetic universe, there is a whole section of its frontier that is marked with the words "Attila got here alone and his is the only account we have of it. He never returned. Beyond there are surely monsters."

Frederick Turner

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Some of József's Hungarian contemporaries—and what an astonishing century that was for Hungarian poetry!—are more congenial to my own temperament than he. Miklós Radnóti's courage as a poet and a man appeals more to my own ideals of knighthood; Kosztolányi's sense of the holiness of life inspires me; Babits's lyrical insight and spiritual refinement are more comfortable, and his noble public stand on behalf of political reason and moderation wins my admiration. Nevertheless, I would argue that none of the others reached as far into territory that only poetry can enter. Nobody in the history of the world has taken us so deeply into the waking nightmare—and strange delights!—of the suffering child in all of us. Moreover, he brings a sensibility sharpened by those experiences at the edge of it all to bear on the public terrors of his time: the monster ideologies of left and right, the inhuman sufferings attendant upon the advent of industrial economics, the moral and historical threat to all meaning posed by material determinism, the challenge of the newly-discovered labyrinth of human psychology and of the wretched and tormented minotaur who lives at its center. And withal he gives us a beautiful and hopeful view of a future from which he himself is barred.

Perhaps Radnóti is József's most likely rival among his Hungarian contemporaries. Radnóti discovered at the age of thirteen that he was "fatherless and motherless", but he was already old enough and strong enough to be able to construct a great myth for himself out of the rich cultural materials in his possession—of the angel, of Cain and Abel, of the Gemini. This myth had the power to counter even the ideology of the Holocaust, and is part of the cultural capital of both the Hungarian nation and the Jewish people.

But József *lived through* the childhood catastrophe that Radnóti heard about after the fact; and Attila, his very name erased by a new one ("Pista", which is the diminuitive of István—Stephen—the martyr), a pauper child deprived of cultural resources, was forced to go to the substance of his own life's marrow to make a story that could contain the dread of his orphaning and abandonment. Not that one should, in the fashion of well-meaning progressives left and right, applaud him simply for his handicaps in a sort of "affirmative action" poetics. József did not merely endure and survive his "disadvantages"; he took them, by some strength it is hard to even imagine, as an opportunity, as a natural experiment on his own body and soul, by which he could make discoveries for the rest of us. His childhood grief and loneliness he took as the training of a shaman and the ordination of a victim-priest. By a short head, I would maintain, he stands above the other contemporary giants of his nation.

Now that I am embarked on this doomed mission of comparison, I might as well ask how József "stacks up" against the poets of other twentieth century traditions. Here again my ignorance and prejudices will be obvious. But for me the challengers would be Rilke, Yeats, Eliot, Borges, Celan, Pasternak.

Just for the sake of provocation, and despite the fact that I am not worthy to fasten the strap of their sandals, let me explain the absence of a few others. Lorca, gorgeous as he is, seems trapped within a Hispanic and revolutionary context. The civilized detachment of Auden and Heaney stands in the way of the madness that the very greatest poets must adventure into on their shamanic journey. Plath is the opposite—one who cannot see past her personal ordeal to the public world the poet is called to serve. Akhmatova, Mandelshtam, Milosz and Brodsky are busy repairing the human fabric torn by the Soviet abomination, and have only their own lovely private visions and voices to spare from the effort. Neruda is too much the buoyant propagandist for me. Pound damned himself with his preference for gold over human currency, and is a great learned-ignorant voice crying out from the ninth circle of the Inferno, blind to so much in the upper world. Brecht, for me, is the other half of Pound's double flame—though his unforgettable and highly accessible music is a huge resource for the future recovery of a poetic audience. Williams, though he has his lovely moments and a distinct vision, was an inferior technician and something of an American crank. Stevens used aesthetic beauty as a screen to hide from himself the gigantic heights and depths of spiritual experience, and his deathbed conversion was too late. After the glories of the nineteenth century, twentieth century French poetry seems to me either strained or over-intellectual. I suspect that there were probably great Chinese, Indian, Indochinese, Japanese, Indonesian, Persian, Latin American, Arab poets, and great oral poets in the traditional cultures of Africa, Asia, and elsewhere, but I do not know them well enough to say. And I am leaving out of consideration poets who are my own personal friends, in case my admiration for their poetry is weighted with shared affectionate experiences.

Pasternak is a great writer; whether he is as great a poet *per se* is another matter. His poems concentrate and refract the light of his extraordinarily poetic fiction, but they get their beauty from the layering of story, character, and setting in his great novel *Doctor Zhivago,* especially from its ecstatic description of the landscapes and weather of Russia. Pasternak's poetic myths of Hamlet and of St. George and the dragon are given substance and evocativeness by way of the prose fiction. József, on the other hand, accomplishes it all in the poetry itself. Like the great sonnet sequences of Petrarch and Shakespeare, József's poems tell the story in a mosaic or holographic way—not as a simple linear narrative but as a recountal of a pattern of moods and incidents, many of them repeating poignant themes, that gradually builds up a total picture whose temporal order emerges as does the clarifying form of the whole. Gradually we see how the theme of rejection by the beloved who has seen too deeply into the abysses of his soul is not just a repetition but also a consequence of his double abandonment by his loving mother—first through his being put up for foster care, then through his mother's death of cancer. His own shamanic social mission as teacher and exorcist and mental traveller and sacrificer emerges as an implied story at the same time as it emerges as a theme.

With József, Celan is another in the company of great poetic suicides that constitutes so devastating an indictment of the twentieth century (and perhaps of the warped vision of poetry that the crimes and needs and fashions of the century imposed on the poet). Celan accepts with Nietzschean clarity the fragmentation and monstrous meaninglessness of the world as seen from the point of view of the Holocaust inhabitant. The fragmentation is itself recruited as a desperate poetic device: the shattered shards of all the beautiful things in western religious and secular culture are made to glitter with a terrible beauty as they are hurled together in his poems. By comparison, Radnóti never accepted the breaking of the lovely urn of civilization, the snapping of harmony's string. His last free act was to use his own dead body, wrapped in the famous overcoat, as the ark to carry his last words to a new world that would rise from the ashes of the old. Did Celan cave in to the nihilism of his universe, while Radnóti kept his sentry-post to the last? Or was it that Radnóti blinded himself, preferring the romantic myth of the Hungarian poet dying for freedom to the reality of his being just another murdered Jew—while Celan stared the truth in the face and thus left us a record that is irreplaceable? József, one might argue, managed to take all four roles—the victim, the hero, the Quixote, the stainless clairvoyant. His suicide was, explicitly, not a condemnation of the world he left; his last words are heartbreakingly generous to the world of nature and of human beings that he is leaving—their joys are real, but they are not for him:

Spring, summer, autumn, all are lovely;
but winter's loveliest for one
who hopes for hearth and home and family
only for others, when all's done.

But at the same time he was only too well aware of the betrayal of all human value and meaning that the "monster ideologies" of the twentieth century had accomplished. He himself did not pass through the event-horizon into the black hole of the Holocaust; but he knew what it was from his own childhood, painted with the same macabre surrealism as Kosinski's imagined outcast in the *The Painted Bird,* and could speak to the world with the authority of such knowledge.

To compare József with Jorge Luis Borges may seem incongruous. Yet they share certain great virtues as poets: astonishing technical virtuosity, a nobility of mind and expression, an aware and ironic spirit, an intricate and experiential philosophic brilliance, and a capacity to enter the strange world of dreams and alternative universes, drenched in some unforgettable mood and atmosphere. Borges is in my opinion the greatest short story writer in the history of the form; but, as with Pasternak, I would ask whether his poetry matches his prose. As Borges admits, he lived the life of one who

...never goes anywhere
without a thermometer,
without a hot-water bottle... ("Instants")

—but József went naked into battle with life and flinched from no wound. Despite the majestic grace, philosophical brilliance, wit, and luminous clarity of Borges' verse, I must prefer József.

T.S. Eliot makes an even more problematic match with József. Prufrock, of course, is not so very far in feeling from the bitter young Attila—both are alienated, sardonic about the cultural pieties, shockingly original in imagery and discordant cultural reference. But József's early rebellion is much deeper, more passionate, even more despairing, more proudly defiant, even while it lacks Eliot's erudition and multi-layered self-irony. Eliot's *Wasteland* is a metaphor, clad in the fragments of all the great Indo-European myths; but Attila lived the wasteland, in those industrial outskirts with their de Chirico perspectives, their dandelions growing in the cracks, the vermilion glowing portent of the molten iron baby in its cast, the moonlight pouring through the factory windows. Instead of fleeing to Eliot's country churchyards, József, like Milton's Satan, decides to make a heaven of his hell and find in industrial modernity the promise of a just and loving human future out among the stars. Who knows what József might have become if he had lived? Could he have found, as Eliot did, a spiritual home? Probably not—the damage had gone too deep. Eliot is cautious and reserved in feeling and sensory response to the world, and this protects him. "Go, go, go, said the bird; human kind cannot bear very much reality"—and Eliot went. But not Attila József. "Terrify me, my hidden God," he says in *"Tumble Out of the Flood":*

I need your wrath, your scourge, your thunder;
quick, come tumble out of the flood,
lest nothingness sweep us asunder.

I am the one the horse knocks down,
up to my eyes in dirt, a cipher,
and yet I play with knives of pain
too monstrous for man's heart to suffer.

How easily I flame! the sun
is not more prone to burn—be frightening,
scream at me: leave the fire alone!
Rap my hands with your bolt of lightning.

At this stage in canon-formation it is clear that Eliot is by far the better known poet in terms of influence, citation, and general familiarity with his oeuvre. Eliot, moreover, filled out nobly the other duties of the poet as critic, scholar, cultural conscience, philosopher, witness, and lived enough years to do it. He has the huge advantage of being in English, while József must live fully only in the ear of ten million Hungarians, and but haltingly in the world language. But for me Eliot will remain the glory of conservative modernism, while József looks forward to the new human age that we are entering, painfully but in hope, today:

...I must have work. Would it were task sufficient
that one confess the past. The ripples of
the Danube, that is future, past, and present,
fondle and hold each other in their love.
Our forebears' struggle, with its strife and slaughter,
remembrance melts and renders into peace:
our common labours now to set in order,
were pains enough to be our masterpiece. ("By the Danube")

József's mission as a shaman to his people was not, could not be, completed and fulfilled in the gathering shadows of the Second World War and the Holocaust. One could well argue that William Butler Yeats did indeed complete and fulfil his own work as prophet and liturgist of a nation—and in the electric medium of the English language, could act as a model poet to the world at large. No poet is Yeats' superior in sheer musicality and perfection of expression. Yeats' golden hallucinations, the sages standing in God's holy fire, the jewelled bird, the silk-enfolded sword, the stone-eyed sphinx, are forever. Yeats made sure that Ireland's revolution and liberation were guided and uplifted by poetry, and that nation's contemporary success may be largely due to the enormous infusion of cultural capital he gave it and its language. By comparison, József's Hungary had to go through two or three more unsuccessful revolutions before it found its political home, and the revolution that finally freed it was, sadly, not a poetic one but a decent down-to-earth affair of civil society and sound business administration.

But Hungary's task was far greater than Ireland's, and the consequences of its liberation may be more important. I was in Budapest in 1989 as the walls were coming down and the city was full of fleeing East Germans. The gaiety of the Hungarian spirit, though not led by poetry, was nurtured by it: Attila József and Mihály Babits, among others, had taught Hungary what it was to be a "true European", and the cultural memory, undaunted by the Soviet half-century, fed those brave middle-class people as they clamoured for truth and free elections.

In another way József can stand comparison with Yeats. Yeats' learning is profound, but partial. His romantic rejection of science and technology, his preference for the history of art and the mystical philosophers, led him toward the gorgeous but barren temptations of magic and astrology. This tendency does not harm his poetry, but dates and limits its relevance in the long run. On the other hand, József's grasp of the sciences as true miracle, and of the real promise of technology and just laws, gives him a power that will remain and increase. Even if warped by Marxist ideology in its early years, his practical vision of the future, his refusal to be poetically daunted by its prosaic reckoning of rural electrification and decent health clinics and sound labour law, stands as a remarkable achievement. In an odd sense, he ends up being a rebel against the rebellions of modernism—"fascist-communist romance" as he calls it in "Enlighten Him". His

imaginative triumph is to see the simple business of having families and exploring the universe as worthy of shamanic celebration and poetic joy:

> *For we'll beget a girl so pretty,*
> *clever and good; a brave wise boy;*
> *they'll save a shred of us, our pity,*
> *like sunfire from the Milky Way,—*
> *and when the Sun is guttering,*
> *our princelings in their sweet machines*
> *shall fly, and fearless, chattering,*
> *find stars to plow the human genes. ("March")*

Crude and naïve, perhaps, but for me this outflies anything in Yeats' vision.

Rilke, however, in ways seldom even noticed, certainly not celebrated, is like József profoundly aware of and interested in science. Rilke's grasp of the mystery of biological evolution and genetics—and still more, his ability to see their spiritual implications, invisible to most proponents of it, is exemplary. It marks him as someone who will be useful—indispensable—to future ages. Though Rilke's androgynous sensibility is very far from József's gallant, defiant boyish masculinity, they are both reaching beyond the sociological modernism and sterile revolutionary spirit of their times.

Rilke's inimitable music and grace, the visionary shiver of his land of grief, his celebration of nature as passionate as Pasternak's intoxicated springscapes, his learning that rivals that of Eliot and Borges—these redeem in many ways the century he worked in. How does József compare? Perhaps we could say that Rilke's spiritual aestheticism distances him just a little from the raw edges of life that József tore himself upon. The darkest tragic spirit, that is close to a nightmare kind of picaresque, where one wanders through a Bosch landscape of terror—the landscape of much of middle Europe in the twentieth century—cannot be contained in Rilke's angelic spirit. But József perforce had to make room for it in his, and it did not destroy him. What destroyed him was the joy from which he was barred—and knowingly but helplessly barred himself—but which he had the heroic honesty to recognize as valid.

I find I cannot after all provide a league-table in which we can place József as equal first, or second, or third. But I hope I have made the point that he has carved out a place for himself in it. ❧

Anna T. Szabó

Poetry in the Night

It happened in Kolozsvár (Cluj) when I was thirteen. Julcsa and I were monitors. After lessons were over it was our task to tidy the old, high-vaulted classroom. The class was gone and the only sound was the soft thud of the creaky benches as we tipped them on their sides and brown apple-cores and forgotten pencils rolled out of them. My friend happened to take a book out and suggested a deal: she knew I liked poetry, so how would it be if she read some poems aloud while I did her share of the tidying. Without waiting for an answer she sat on an up-ended bench, leant back a little, threw open the brown-spined volume and began immediately to read. What she read stopped me in my tracks: the broom in my hand stopped moving. There was such elegiac suffering, such pure disenchanted comprehension in those simple clear phrases that I started to tremble. *"Here is where all / life is manufactured. Here all is ruin."* Julcsa finished the poem and looked up in anticipation. Go on! I invited her and began furiously to sweep so she could see I kept my side of the bargain. She chose another poem, and that's how I heard *Külvárosi éj* (Night on City's Edge) for the first time. The classroom was like a trench underwater, thick with the stench of the caustic powder that tickled the throat as it mixed with the petroleum slopped across the floor, the benches with their cracked and peeling paint strewn across it like wreckage. I could hear the crawl of the scrubbing brush in the rustle of the broom as my friend read the poem in her deep, firm, rather adult voice without a trace of declamation. Suddenly she came to a substantial halt. I was all attention in the damp

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Anna T. Szabó

*is a Transylvanian-born poet and translator, author of four volumes of poems, an outstanding representative of the upcoming middle generation. Some of her poems appeared in our previous issue (*HQ *177), translated by Clive Wilmer and George Gömöri. Her essay and two poems published here, all inspired by Attila József, show the many ways the poetry of Attila József fertilises and permeates the work of younger generations.*

Attila József.
Budapest, circa 1935.

dense night that had settled round me. *"A train whistles,"* Julcsa eventually pronounced, then kept another silence before continuing. It was the first time in my life that I understood the meaning of the pause in poetry; how a simple well-placed cadence can strike at the heart of silence and immobility like the sound of a whistle. And that is when I began to understand something else too: that it wasn't merely under the stresses of life in nineteen-eighties Kolozsvár, in the Communist lies about heroic workers and victorious revolutions that had been hammered into us with an embittering intensity, that the utter hopelessness of their insignificance might be felt by people on their very pulses. Our disenfranchisement was Communist disenfranchisement, not capitalist—but the stink of nitre, alcohol and walls drenched in urine was the same under any system.

Oppressed people in an oppressed place. The factory floor of an empty, dusty, godless night. The sound of vain prayer rises then falls to earth again. There's nowhere for it to go. Heaven is untenanted, the revolution is hopeless, all that is sure is the burden of the working week, the stifled fury of the drunk weeping and sobbing in the pub.

Currently I too am living in one of the old suburbs of Budapest, on the edges of Józsefváros, next to the bakery where workers lean against the factory wall opposite the small store on payday, the pavement stained with piss, littered with piles of dog droppings and glittering from dawn till dusk with the fool's gold of bottle tops from beer bottles and other miscellaneous drinks. The delicious smell of bread rises from the factory which is hissing with steam: in winter icicles the thickness of an arm dangle from cracked gutters under which an increasingly decrepit old woman, blind in one eye, totters along exercising her scrawny fox terrier. I occasionally stop to talk to a retired assistant baker used to carrying heavy trays: he still complains of his aching shoulders. At night the walls resound with screaming, rumbling noises. I spend some time gazing out of the window at the street, the lights of the greengrocer opposite, the orange streetlights, the procession of car headlights. "O Night!" Everything and everyone may be seen from here. People go about their business, sweating, carrying mobile phones, swearing, ducking between trucks, coughing, humming. You can't not move. The most frightening thing is that there is hardly any break in the constant movement. I have written an entire book of poems about this district, about this spectacle.

I don't believe in the swift blade of the victorious struggle, in the rightness of that victory, only in the melancholy that attends on life, in the oppressive night, in the silence before and following the battle, when a dream TV glimmers like neon, when workers believe that they are masters of their own destiny, when gawky weaver-women fantasise about wearing famous designer labels, flouncing down the catwalk, and the foundry-man...

I listened astonished as Julcsa carried on reading, her voice a little hoarse on account of the powder: *"The foundry is an iron barge. / Its worker dreams the molds have forged / a smolten baby, red and hot."*. My intellect has long grasped this but the image I see is still the same, that in the place of the immensely hot ore, in the light of the glowing foundry, a helpless naked baby is desperately kicking its legs in the casting trough. You cannot cast human beings: flesh is softer than iron. That is what those two lines say to me. It is not tender: it is ruthlessly objective. This then is adulthood: the recognition that no sooner are we born than we are placed in a cast and that the burning liquid ore of eternal loss is poured over us.

Julcsa's family had a maid, or rather a home help, a nervous Moldavian girl constantly batting her eyelids. I don't think Julcsa read to her while she was doing the cleaning: the dust in her mouth was not helped down with a dose of Attila József. But my life changed there and then as we stood the benches up again. I no longer saw night and poetry through the eyes of romance or revolution. My mouth was bitter and my heart darkened. Attila József taught me gravity once and for all: the sheer beauty of it. ❧

Translated by George Szirtes

Anna T. Szabó

This Day

A minap

"Wherever I lie is your bed"
(Attila József: Ode)

Imagine this. It was early afternoon
and I was on the road seeking a new apartment
wondering as I went, what next to do,
while staring vacantly at January stores
their worn-out goods, their seasonal display
and thought of many things along the way—

suddenly everything vanished:
the tram clattered between the houses, over
the bridge, and instead of the broad
vistas of river and road
dense fog hung over invisible water—
I stood astonished.

Fog everywhere: anxiety was a tight
cold sleepless night;
that's my life I thought and felt it glide
swiftly away but I wasn't part of the ride;
my life went on without me inside.
I felt it all but saw nothing anywhere
of the rails I was speeding safely on
across the bridge, on water, ground or air,
in the clouds or a plane high above land
with all assurance of reality gone
but for the cold metal barrier in my hand.

Nothing new then for two long minutes, no less.
And anything might happen now I guess.

2
How my tears flowed! I couldn't tell why they flowed
I simply lay beneath you, bearing my load
Of happiness. Another apartment. Another town, then
Nothing after it, nothing ever again.

I lost that but found you. I lost no more
than what remains. It wasn't heaven's door
that opened but my body. So we meet.
You come and we make our way along the street.

3
I sweep up the waste cuttings of your hair.
Sixteen years together, everywhere.
Squares and apartments. I note a few grey strands.
My life lies there.

Into the pan with them. Can they be for disposal?
I'd sooner collect them all, however fine.
Yes, yes I know, I don't throw things away.
But, well, they're mine.

Some pine needles among them. In summer
light sunflower petals. How things drift and fall.
The earth continues spinning. Does it matter?
No, not at all.

4
Who cares what happens: your neck and shoulder alone
interest me as we cross the bridge in the snow
clutching each other. I will expect you home.
Only tramps take their houses with them wherever they go.

I don't care where we are as long as we are together.
A bare floor, a few chairs and a single table.
There's only one thing I desire, no other,
but that one thing is indispensable.

5
Imagine this. I feel myself getting older.
Our home is a fortress: that's the way I am,
Though the edifice is not founded on rock.
Instead we're travelling in each other's warmth
Across the fogbound bridge with its tram.

And anything might happen now, I suppose,
the way it did that first night there, back then.
Though there are only rails and fog. Who knows.
Wherever you go now, come with me again.

Translated by George Szirtes

Fire, We Say

Azt mondjuk: tűz

"What kind of spirit, what sort of fire?"
(Attila József: Ode)

Flesh, we say. Though I don't know
your flesh. It isn't mine to know,
merely hidden, bloody, decaying stuff.

Bone, we say. I hide and lightly touch:
I know its articulation, its perfect
mechanism but it isn't you, not half enough.

Eyes, we say. My lips feel the rapid
trembling motion of your eye beneath the lid.

Inside your mouth the gentle pink
silkinesses where your body heat
pulses, transfusing tissue,
the eddies of your navel, the secret
valleys between your toes, the spiral
windings of your ears, the cradle
of collarbone and shoulder-blade
where I can drown in your scent
and sleep, those muscles of yours
so toothsome, your heat, your excitement,
the overpowering smell of fresh sweat,
your fierce tight embrace—still none of that is you.

You are living flame. Bone, flesh and blood,
you blaze where decay may not touch you,
you are movement itself, the prime mover,
occupying your body as you might a nest,
my body too, the way that you push onward,
let nothingness too have life, let flame lick sky
it powers and fills, with no source left to light it—

fire, we say: what we feel is the burning.

Translated by George Szirtes

László Lugosi Lugó

Fluffy Animals in the Window

A long time ago, back in the days of socialism, we used to go to Vienna to buy photographic film to work with. In Budapest you could not buy colour reversal film at all (ORWO from East Germany was in colour, but it did not give faithful colour reproduction), neither were there roll films. Roll film is like what glass plates used to be like long ago: big, multilayered, professional. None of this was in the shops, nor were a good many other things.

Then Canaan arrived. I—and indeed half of Budapest—could pop into my favourite shop, just pop in, reach into the fridge, take out the film, and ask them to write it into the Big Book. I bought my stock on credit. There were times when I owed them enormous amounts of money, sometimes many hundreds of thousands of forints. There was always someone from the Big Book who paid, including me, and so everyone else could cheerfully run up their credit. Every professional photo shop had a spiral-bound notebook, and one of them even thought up the slogan *"Fizet vagy Füzet?"* "Book it or buy it?". It was good living on credit, of course: it made our work faster and more comfortable.

Then, a few years ago, the digital world took off, and as a photographer made indolent and not a little insolent by the Big Book system, I suddenly realise that in the space of a few days my mobile has rung three times, with my favourite shop pleading for me to pay. No, I don't have any money right now, but I'll have it soon, and so I can pop into my favourite shop, I thought, where I have been a customer for years, to nurse my good relationship with them and agree on a deadline for payment.

An unexpected sight greets me as I arrive. The window of this professional photo shop is full of fluffy animals. Inside the atmosphere is funereal. Analogue photography is over. The owner begs me to pay if I can: she cannot pay her employees nor the labs she sends the films to. She will go bankrupt any minute.

László Lugosi Lugó
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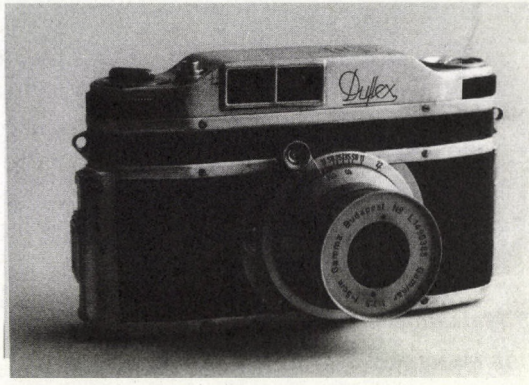
What will happen then, Mária, I ask? I don't know, she replies, we'll sell bedlinen or something. Or these fluffy animals in the window, she adds.

The end has been in sight for some time, of course. I use a lot of roll film, and before, back in the days of Canaan, if it happened to be out of stock in my favourite shop, I would just pay a visit to the other one, where they were bound to have some. Today the stock has to be ordered from abroad, Hungary is such a small a market for Kodak or Fuji that they do not keep any, and it can be many weeks before the order arrives. We are still, or rather again, living in a provincial backwater. Or we can go to Vienna again to buy film, a city that is much more important, not a colony, and where there is film in the shops.

Living in a province is not the only issue. I recently heard that Ilford, one of the largest manufacturers of film, is on the verge of demise. I don't know what will happen to us if they really disappear. Their films had to be ordered, too, and at this moment I have been waiting for five months for my order to arrive in our provincial backwater, but at least there was a glimmer of hope. I hear that the Hungarian company Forte is meeting its end, too; however provincial we might be, only a month ago Forte was still famous for being willing to cut and deliver roll film in whatever extreme or extraordinary size the customer required. But it seems that even this unique service was not enough to stop the inexorable logic of the digital world from devouring Forte as it will devour Ilford.

Maybe there will be a time when all of us who want to work with traditional technology will have to reach all the way back to that of the nineteenth century, to the wet collodium process, and prepare the light-sensitive emulsion and pour it on the paper ourselves in order to have photographic stock.

Let us take another nineteenth-century analogy. In those days lithography ruled the printing presses, and everything—newspapers, journals, posters, labels, theatre tickets—was printed using this technology. Then, towards the end of the century, the more modern techniques, screen and offset took its place. Today the lithograph is only found in fine art, and in Hungary I can turn to one or two very specialised workshops should I want to print one. Perhaps in the not too distant future, if I want to make silver-based photographs, I will get the necessary materials from a shop for photographic artists, and I will have to go to specialist workshops to get



The Duflex reflex camera made by the Gamma Company, Budapest in 1947, from a patent by Hungarian cameraman and inventor Jenő Dulovits (1903–1972). Plain rectangular in shape with rounded corners and free of protruding parts, it was a typical rangefinder camera.
From: Gyula Ernyey: Made in Hungary: The Best of 150 Years of Industrial Design. *Rubik Innovation Foundation, 1993.*

them developed, just as I might now do for lithographs. Analogue photography has turned into a mere curiosity of technological history.

Of course, many things have changed since Arago reported the invention of photography to the Académie des Sciences, and the digital revolution is not the first such change. The evolution of cameras, optical systems and photographic stock all transformed the world of photography. The most important change was nevertheless the invention itself, an invention that made it possible to put the past on display, previously only visible in drawings or paintings, but not in true-to-life pictures. An enormous repository of knowledge has accumulated in the photographs of the last 166 years, and it seems as if there is not an object, affair or person on the Earth of which a photograph has not been taken. A baby is photographed while still in its mother's womb with the help of an ultrasound camera, and there is no secret corner of the globe where someone has not been with a camera in their hand. Not to mention outer space and the bottom of the sea. This state of affairs has changed our relationship with the past and probably to time itself, and it is no longer possible for us to imagine how the past can have lived in the brains of those born before 1839.

At the time of its inception and the decades that followed, photography was a specialised and complicated profession, today there are not many people who do not have at least one camera in their home. We all take pictures, and use photographs to capture moments in time. Of course, the lion's share of these pictures only show or mean something to the photographer or the person depicted. This is why an unknown amateur, on seeing a picture of the child next door, might well exclaim, "I have the same photo, just the kid is different!"

Even though today the vast majority of the photographs that come into being are by amateur photographers, who will also be responsible for the vast majority of digital pictures, photography is not limited to amateurs. In its history so far, professional photography has become a highly complex language, but nevertheless a language that everyone speaks and understands, and the various specialised types of photography are its dialects. Let us just stop to think how many areas of photography we can distinguish. To mention but a few: photos of space, microscopic photography, pornographic photography, photos of plants, of children, and antiques, architectural photography, fashion photography, aura photography, and so on, almost ad nauseam. We are faced with photographs in every imaginable situation, from the label on a jar of coffee to the surfaces of huge billboards.

Today, when digital cameras are even built into our mobile phones, we can confidently state that photography has become a really democratic medium. I won't even dare to guess the direction that the technical and cultural history of photography will take, but it is certain that we can expect a good few more revolutions in the course of its progress. I don't as yet own a digital camera, but the inevitable moment in which I have to buy the first one is nigh. And if my favourite shop is selling fluffy animals instead of film, I can be sure that moment has come. ❧

Endre Lábass

City in a Suitcase

Getting up in the morning and crossing over to the other quarter, there was nothing else. It was good crossing to the other side of the city in the mist over the river. Each roll of film a record of the route taken on a given day, morning or afternoon, undeveloped to begin with. Unbidden. Then, as conscience kicked in, I decided to develop the negatives at least, and put them away in a drawer. One roll of film in each pouch-like negative strip holder, a hundred rolls in every drawer, twelve drawers in the cabinet. Little by little the cabinet filled, but there was no semblance of order in any of the pouches, in any of the drawers. After a while I began to make rough notes of the contents on every pouch; the trouble was that I never knew where any given pouch was in the serried ranks of pouches. And yet they were all numbered. In time I stopped taking the whole thing seriously. And time passed.

There was no more room in the drawers for new negatives. I started putting them in boxes and filling new, bigger drawers with them. And yet, if all the pouches contained the chaos of the days, and there was no logic in the sequence of pouches, how, then, was that incredible orderliness achieved within the suitcase? It was the neat arrangement of things that created the semblance or order; the pouches were replaced by folders, the contents of a hundred pouches were now slotted into soft plastic pockets, but lo and behold, the streets were still tangled up, like the strands of a ball of yarn. A hundred plastic sheets with pockets went into each black folder, fifteen brand-new folders holding one thousand five hundred sheets, neatly arranged, one on top of the other, inside the suitcase: the city.

It would be worth getting the suitcase weighed, to know its weight exactly, to the kilo, to know whether one could take it onto a plane. What is that you're carrying? That's what they'd ask when they stopped me at the security gate. What do you think? Boom! My God. All that work, and nothing useful to show for it. Houses are not aligned according to street numbers. Tens of

negatives, and a total disregard for city districts. Over the years the images have acquired new meanings. An afternoon was placed in a box, and nothing in the whole wide world held the images contained in that box together except the bygone mood of an afternoon in the past. Then some of the photographs of those afternoons fell out from among the rest to end up in other boxes that were put aside, like a discarded toy rabbit with an ear missing; others lived the charmed lives of old favourites, remaining in the light, these I took out and looked at every day, and put them beside other favourites. And in five years, say, the folder containing the chosen images of those bygone afternoons was complete, containing the best-loved moments. And that was when the phone calls started coming, do I have a photograph of such and such a house? Who can give you an answer to a question like that, nobody in the world. No one ever asked me about such and such an afternoon, no one ever begged for a rainy Sunday. The shadow of an old man on a stone wall. The shadow raises its hat and softly, politely bids one good day. Good day to you, sir, and how are we today?

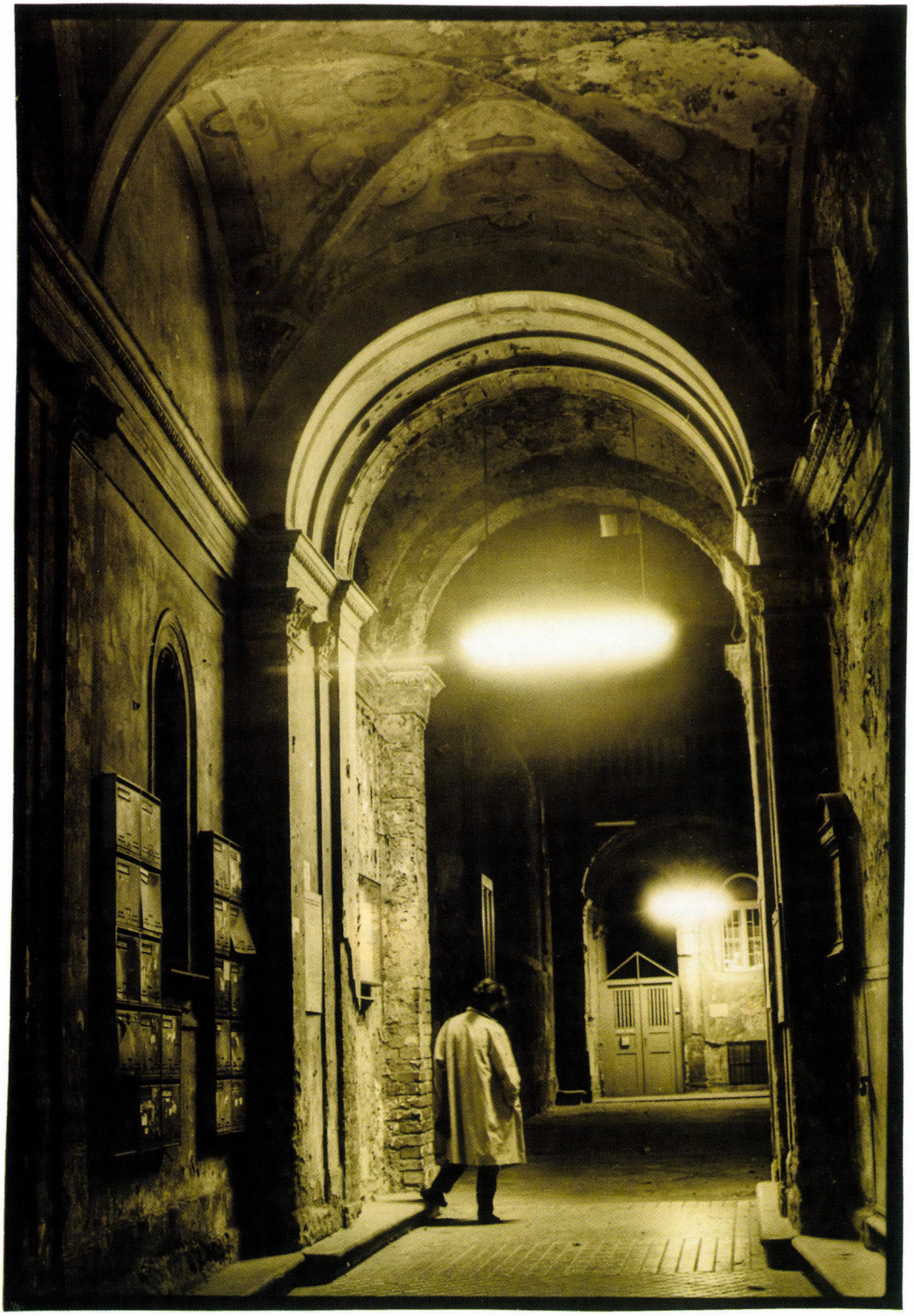
Yes. Exactly so, in the plural. How are we today? I am glad that we are, that we exist. Taken separately, not so good, but together, in the plural, quite well, and this feeling of well-being lasts a couple of minutes, as long as it takes to pass each other by. And the memory remains, and the raising of the hat on the negatives, which does not fit in anywhere among the house numbers or the arrangement of the districts, because how is one to define it, classify it: this raising of the hat, if you please, originates from in front of the Aladdin Tavern, it's an old and treasured piece from my collection.

If we have nothing left and we are standing in a square, no matter which road we decide to take we can return before sunset with the happy awareness that that same night, or early next morning, we can take a different one.

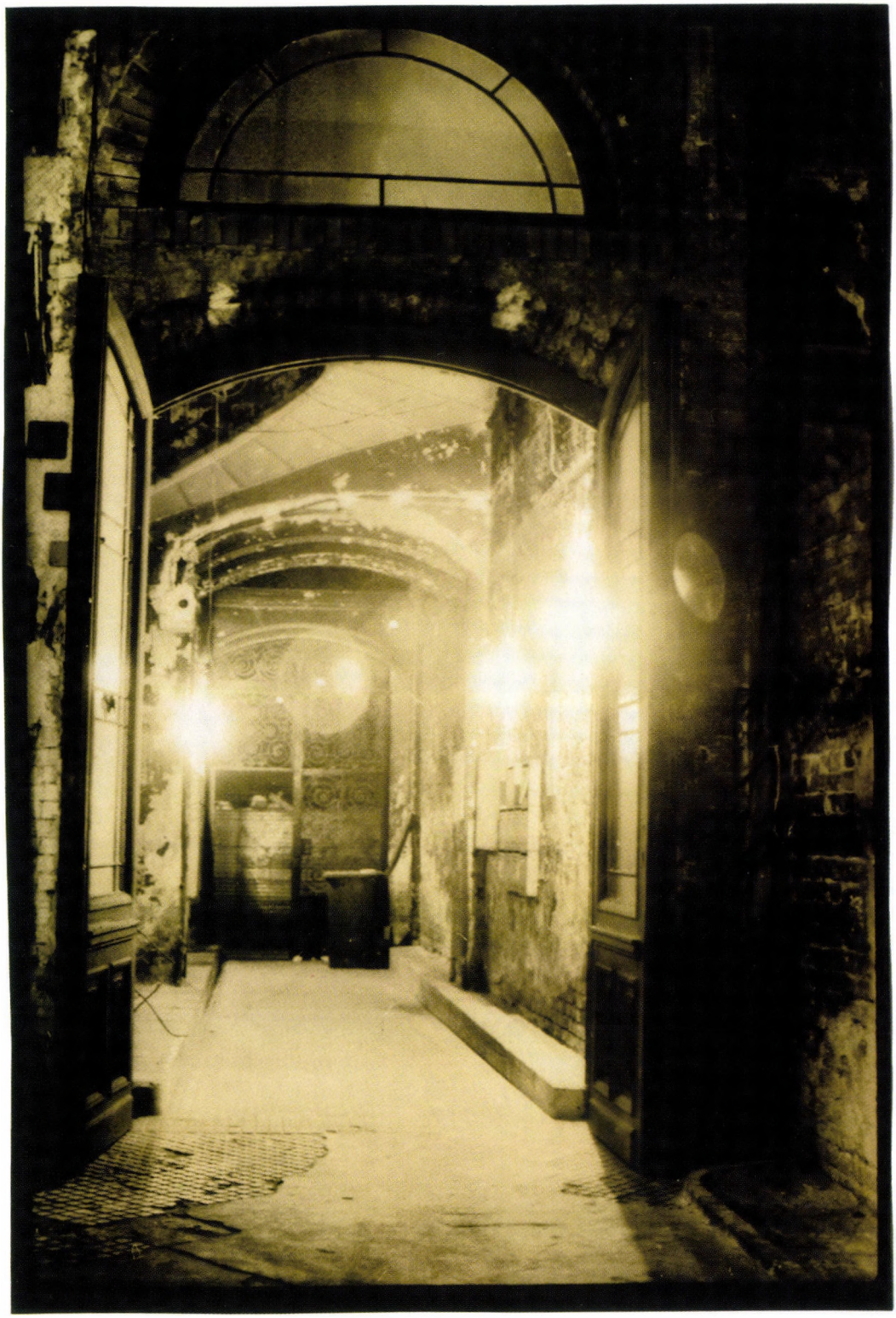
I brought no clothes with me except for what I was wearing and what fitted into the suitcase, beside the city that is. Luckily, it was not a large city, there was plenty of room left for my favourite jackets. ❧

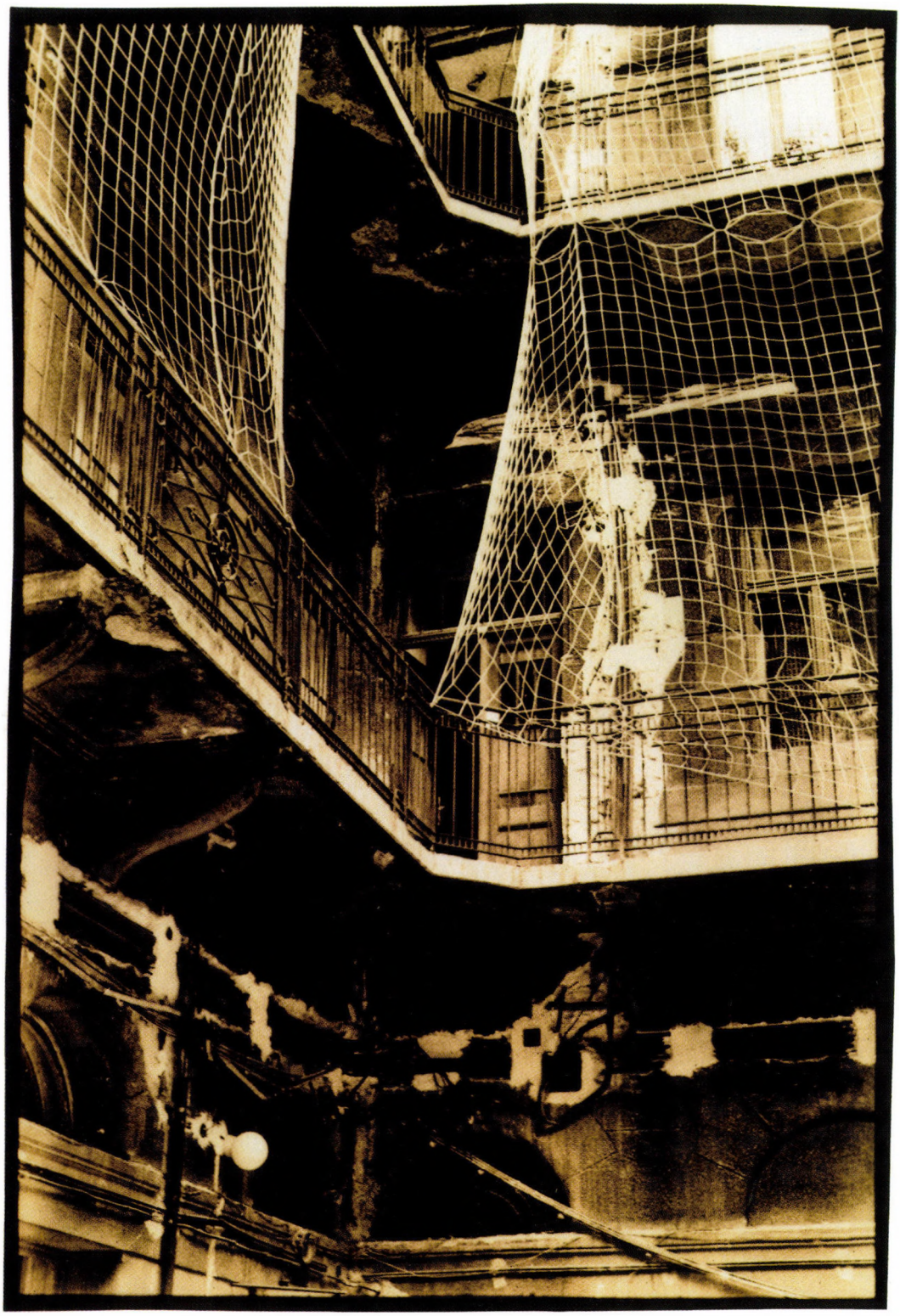
Translated by Eszter Molnár

Endre Lábass
is a painter, author and photographer who has been photographing Budapest for decades. The above is an excerpt from his forthcoming book, Moonfaced Traveller, *in which the author runs away to see the world taking with him only the city.*



Lábass in the City





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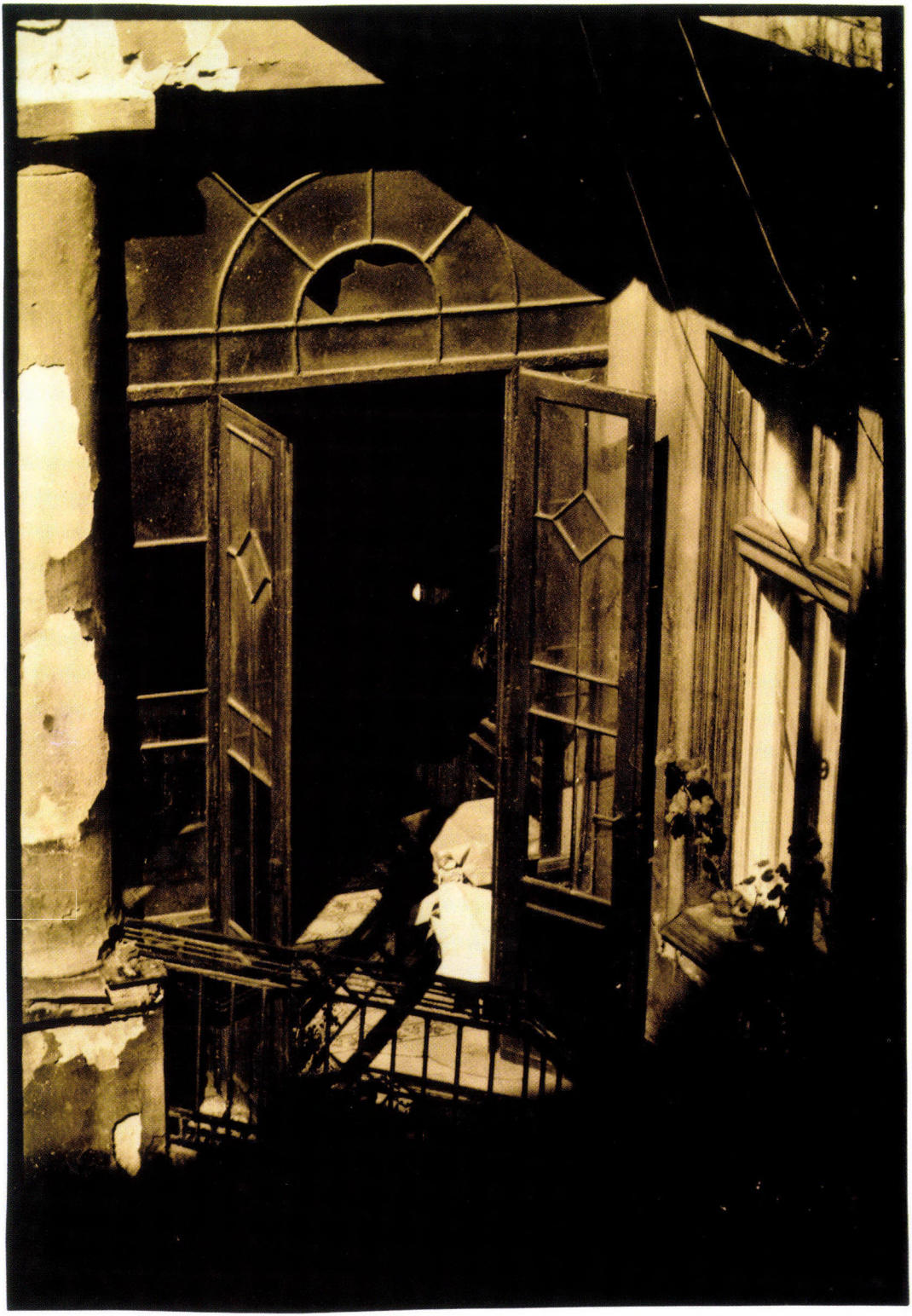

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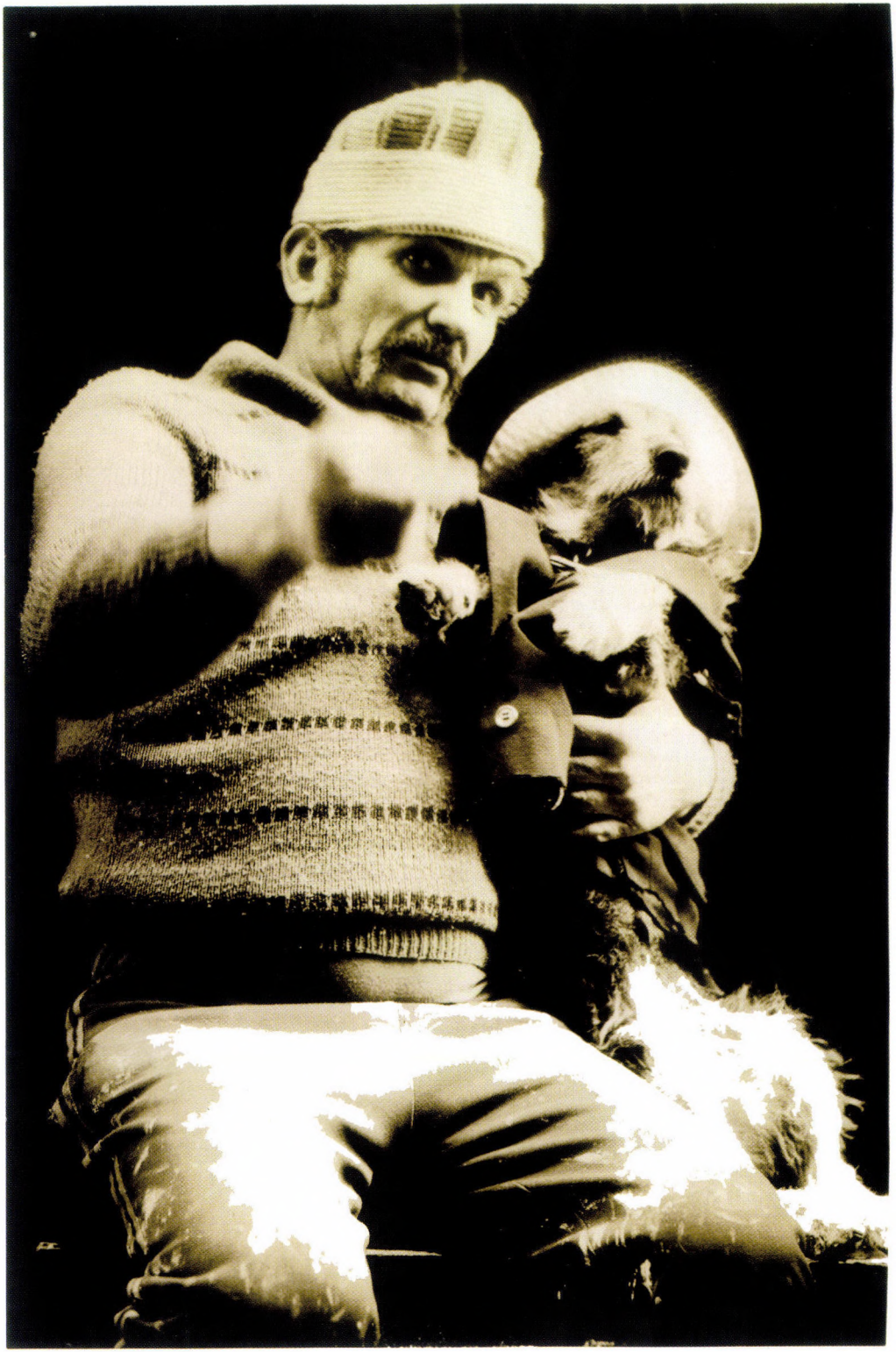

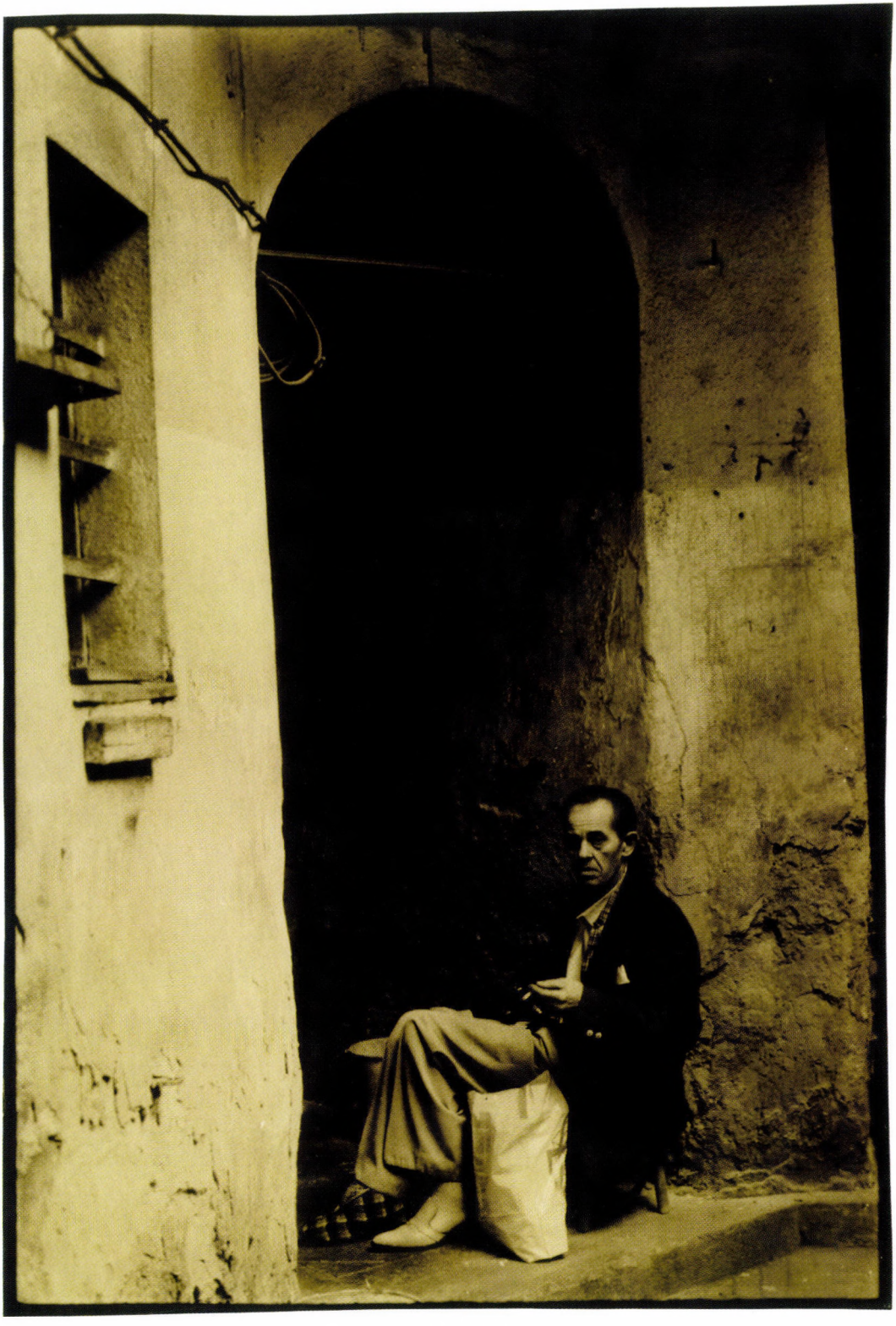

Lábass in the City

János Gács

The Lisbon Enigma

The Fall and Rise of a Secret Plan

On 22 and 23 March, 2005, the EU's prime ministers and heads of state convened in Brussels to survey the so-called Lisbon Process, a complex set of reforms with a set deadline. Any honest account of events would have been bound to report that the Lisbon Process produced one of the major failures in the history of the European Union. Up until then, the Union had more or less managed to usher through institutional reforms and repeated enlargements without fuss and on schedule. Examples include institutional reforms as complicated and time-consuming as the creation of the Single Market in 1992, the finalisation of the European Monetary Union in 1999, or the accession of ten new countries in 2004: all of these were completed on time and, in essence, successfully. But not the Lisbon Process, it seems, which has grossly failed to satisfy the goals it has set. What went wrong, and how will the Union deal with this failure?

It was November 2002. At the conference, a growing number looked at each other as if to say, "Did I hear that right?" As in every autumn over the last few years, the Austrian National Bank had organised an East–West Conference in Vienna to discuss issues of the Eastern European economic transition and the EU enlargement. The participants were bank analysts, government officials, experts from international organizations and researchers. Speaking at that particular moment was a middle-aged professor from Portugal, who said something definitely odd: that a few years previously, the EU had launched a programme that would ensure that the Union would outstrip America in competitiveness within 10 years. In addition, it sought to achieve progress in all kinds of other areas that could previously only be dreamt of. Be it employment, research and development,

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education, social protection or the environment, the Union set itself ambitious and precise goals which could be and had to be achieved within a decade. This was the Lisbon Process, otherwise known as the Lisbon Strategy.

The desire to catch up, ambitious plans, an unstructured mass of tempting objectives, the naïve "if you wish hard enough you will succeed" logic of all this was terribly familiar to those of us from Eastern Europe who happened to make up the majority of the target audience. But Western participants were also irritated by what they apparently perceived as pure voluntarism. Thus those commenting on the lecture were either ironic or gave polite expression to their misgivings. We thought of ourselves as familiar with EU issues, but in two and a half years we had heard nothing of the Lisbon initiative. How could this be? And neither did the whole thing really fit into our picture of the Union. True, the European economy is growing more slowly than that of the United States, but how can the Union initiate a catch-up programme, and why would it set out deadlines and numerical objectives for 2005 and 2010? The European Union is not a planned economy. One of the many fundamentally flawed assumptions of the ideology of centrally planned economies based on state ownership was that the planner was omnipotent. The Union is, however, a group of associated market economies, so none of its administrative centres can hope to exercise comprehensive control over the economies of all the member states. Indeed, a number of areas, like employment and social protection, are in the hands of national governments, and the Union has next to no jurisdiction over them. How, then, is the Union to be expected to induce member states to observe "plan targets"?

Anything nice and good

So what happened in March 2000 in Lisbon, and what has happened since? In 2000 the EU's heads of state and government met for their usual spring summit. The turn of the millennium ran hot with notions such as the "new economy", information technology, telecommunications and biotechnology; the world was feverish thanks to booming stock markets and the dotcom revolution. The continent's leaders thought it was time to shake up the member states, else in this speeded-up world Europe would forever lag behind a United States that was leading the way in revolutionary change. Meanwhile Europe's employment problems and an increasingly aging population made the reform of labour markets and welfare systems inevitable. The summit decided that a new strategy was needed: a reform strategy with suitably ambitious goals. A document was passed that declared the following:

The Union has set itself a *new strategic goal* for the next decade: to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion.

Increased *competitiveness* was to be guaranteed by liberalisation and reforms: liberalisation of telecommunications and financial services, of transport, of rail and air travel, less bureaucracy with company formation, reducing the burden on enterprises, and state support for particular sectors. The objective was for the Union to increase GDP each year by an average of 3 per cent. The *knowledge-based society* was partly to be strengthened by the introduction of a unified European community patent system and by increasing spending on research and development. This was expressed numerically, with spending on research and development to reach 3 per cent of GDP by 2010, with, if possible, 2 per cent of this to be raised by the private sector. As far as *employment* was concerned, ambitious objectives were set for the total employment rate to rise from 63.4 per cent to 70 per cent, for female employment from 54.1 per cent to 60 per cent and for the employment rate of older workers from 37.8 per cent to 50 per cent. Full employment was declared to be desirable, that is an average unemployment rate of around 4 per cent. Plans were made for the training of the young and the life-long learning of those in employment. This was also expressed in numerical terms: by 2010, 20 million new jobs were to be created in what in 2000 were the 15 member states. The *social cohesion* objectives concentrated on a tangible reduction of poverty and social exclusion, a strengthening of the European social model, while at the same time—in view of the ageing population—seeking to reform it. *Environmental protection* was to be served by various measures, including fulfilment of commitments under the Kyoto protocol and restrictions on growth in transport.

The plan—with nothing in the way of preparation or debate

Essentially, the Lisbon Process can be likened to a long-term plan for the period from 2000 to 2010, with a list of numerical objectives. As we have seen, with the exception of a few areas, this plan covers all of the Union's more important issues relating to the economy. These objectives refer to the Union as a whole, however, and are not broken down to individual member states. One reason for this is that the Union's heads of state and government are well aware that the Lisbon Process mainly targets areas traditionally under national jurisdiction. The EU cannot, for example, force any of its member states to raise its employment rate or spending on research and development to a particular level in any given year.

The Lisbon Strategy, in essence, expresses the belief that progress cannot be made in many EU areas without coordinated leadership at the EU level. The unspoken corollary of this is that these questions should perhaps be brought within the scope of EU competence. These areas—the labour market and employment, social protection and welfare institutions, the tax system, education and training, research and development, innovation—however, are all politically sensitive. Individual states differ widely, as to their national preferences and they are not likely to accept rigid universal directives set across the EU. In all coun-

tries, whoever is in government is aware that their hold on power depends on the domestic policy framework within which they deal with the above questions. In the light of this, they cannot easily be persuaded to abandon their control over these areas and hand them over to the Union. In truth, the Lisbon Strategy is an experiment in moving many aspects of the EU into a grey area which, in terms of its coordination, lies somewhere in-between questions clearly under national jurisdiction and those under centralised EU control.

Questions included in this grey area cannot be dealt with in the same way as those under EU jurisdiction. (The latter are, put simply, mutually accepted EU laws and directives that are transposed into the member states' own legal systems.) For this reason, the Union has developed a unique technique for implementing the Lisbon Process, the so-called *open method of coordination.* The elements of this are as follows: the elaboration and regular updating of community-level guidelines, and a schedule for the achievement of stated objectives; the use of quantitative and qualitative indicators to measure the performance of the Union and its member states; the analysis and benchmarking of innovative solutions; adapting EU guiding principles to policies at the national level, regular common monitoring, evaluation and a so-called "peer review" of the achievements of member states.

This new method seems somewhat complicated at first, and looks like little more than an over-elaborate etiquette of consultation serving only to waste time and resources. The European Union is a complicated institution, however, and even decisions taken with partially or completely centralised jurisdiction come about only after a prolonged mechanism of negotiation.

The new coordination mechanism, then, seemed not so much unusual as simply inefficient. But the real puzzles of the Lisbon Strategy are as follows: (1) the strategy was not preceded by competent professional preparatory work and research; (2) for years, awareness of it among the public in member countries was nil; (3) despite its evident and peculiar characteristics, it encountered no criticism for years. Criticism has not been forthcoming from either academic or political quarters, and not even—as far as one can see—from the press.

Although I am an economist, I do not think that all political decisions should be taken in the light of academic considerations. The European Union, however, is to a large extent the realization of rather utopian concepts of an institution that has never really existed, and so those who dreamed it up regularly turned to the experts when creating the edifice. This is what happened during the Union's two significant transformations in the 1990s, for example. The implementation in 1992 of the single market for goods, services, labour and capital was prefaced by a series of academic studies, just as was the introduction of the euro as a common currency, at the end of the decade. When creating the Lisbon Strategy in 2000, however, the EU's heads of state and government did not think any academic study of the strategy to be necessary. This was later to blow back in their faces. For they failed to raise the question of what the relationship between the many

individually desirable objectives (competitiveness, employment, building a knowledge-based society, social cohesion, protection of the environment) was. Put simply, were these to strengthen each other, or be at each other's expense? Did the numerical goals have any basis in reality? Would all the interstate consultation and coordination be enough to persuade member states to implement the objectives?

A similarly mysterious circumstance is that since the launch of the Lisbon Strategy in 2000 there has been simply no specialist literature on it: in contrast to the extensive writing on the operation of the single market or the euro zone, until the middle of 2004 there were hardly any articles in the international database of economics literature that dealt with the subject. And it has inspired but a single volume, edited by the very Portuguese professor, mentioned above, Maria Joao Rodrigues.

A good example of just how unknown the process was until very recently is the case of Jean-Claude Juncker, prime minister of Luxembourg, who started talking about Lisbon at an election campaign rally in 2004, only for his followers to interrupt him and tell him to stop talking about his holiday plans and turn to the real problems in hand.

The victory of politics

This brings us to the essential question: how can the EU's leading body have burdened the community with such an inadequately prepared and voluntarist programme, a programme whose obvious errors were not discussed at all for many years, and which was doomed to failure almost from the outset?

The political climate of the summit in Lisbon gives some answer as to the rapid, unprepared beginnings, and a continuation far removed from the initial enthusiasm. In March 2000, the prime ministers of the EU's three largest economies were Tony Blair, Gerhard Schröder and Lionel Jospin, all leaders of socialist or social democratic parties, just like Antonio Guterres, prime minister of Portugal, the country holding the EU presidency. At the time of the Lisbon summit, a number of politicians put great hope in the success of Blair's "third way", and they knew that their respected rival, the United States, was led by Bill Clinton, a politician both of whose terms in office had displayed unprecedented economic successes. The faith of the Lisbon Process in medium- and long-term planning, and the belief that questions of employment and the welfare state should be coordinated at the EU level, were rooted in their left-leaning way of thinking. Yet the proposed strategy was also supported by governments that were not left-wing, because they mostly expected that it would systematically remove the bureaucratic obstacles to competitiveness. In the first half of 2000, many thought that strengthening international competitiveness, increasing employment and enhancing social cohesion in line with European values could all easily be harmonized with one another. This historical moment did not last for more than a few months, however: the momentum which set the Lisbon process in

motion was soon blown away by the bursting of the *dot.com* bubble, by a change in the direction of American economic policy, by the deepening difficulties of the German economy and by a host of other factors.

While clearly playing its part in the management of the tasks it involved, the apparatus of the European Commission never fully put its weight behind a plan that was essentially political in motivation and that had not been professionally deliberated. This meant that the Lisbon Strategy and the efforts made to implement it were to all extents and purposes kept a secret for many years. Academic researchers either did not know about this hushed-up initiative, or did not take it seriously. Hardly any critical thoughts were formulated, perhaps also for fear of picking a quarrel with the EU: after all, the chief sponsor of research into the Union is the European Commission. The EU is not an imperial power structure, but sadly some of its behaviour nevertheless reminds one of the tale of the Emperor's New Clothes.

Enthusiastic officials, dismal achievements

In the first months of 2004, with a number of Austrian, Italian, Swedish and Hungarian experts and leading civil servants, I discussed the progress of the Lisbon Strategy both in member states and accession countries. Without exception, these experts saw it as an important initiative, and considered their own participation and the systematic international harmonization of EU policies to have been useful. It transpired from these conversations and the documents analysed that the greatest advantage of the Lisbon Process was indeed that it put the long-term strategic problems facing the countries of Europe on the agenda, and made the consideration of institutional reform a permanent issue. What from the outside appears to be an endless series of consultations and negotiations in fact encourages the governments and bureaucracies of the individual member states to have a strategic outlook, to think in terms of institutional alternatives, and to compare notes on their substantive experiences. In addition, advocates of certain issues, who by the nature of the issues have limited representation of their interests and also face indifference in their countries—like those fighting poverty and social exclusion—are armed with significant ammunition by dint of the attention Europe pays to them.

Despite these positive experiences, the years passed and there was no sign of the goals of the Lisbon Process being met. By 2004 and 2005, the European public was forced to face the fact that here was a strategy for growth and reform for the period 2000–2010 which had already brought dismal results in its first five years: the competitiveness gap between Europe and America (however we interpret it) had not diminished, the employment objectives appeared unrealistic, and Europe as a whole was still not at the forefront of the establishment of the knowledge-based society.

Criticisms and corrections

In 2004, a few articles and studies appeared in academic circles that formulated an honest critique, and the president of the European Commission asked a so-called High Level Group, led by Wim Kok, the former Dutch prime minister, to evaluate the progress of the Lisbon Process. While researchers pointed to its structural weaknesses, the report of the official committee echoed, alongside some restrained criticism, optimistic clichés. "The objectives, comrades, were good ones; the only problem was with the implementation"—the Wim Kok report clearly evokes memories of similar turns of phrase used in the Comecon countries in the days of centrally-planned economies.

In February 2005, and based on the Kok report, José Manual Barroso, president of the European Commission, submitted a proposal to the European Council, comprising EU heads of state and government, which promised a restart of the Lisbon Strategy. He suggested that the issues of social cohesion and environmental protection be left out of it. In the future, the revived Lisbon Strategy will concentrate on growth, employment and the establishment of a knowledge-based society. Almost all of its numerical objectives have been put aside; even the 2010 deadline has been removed, and the Strategy has, in good enough time, become an open one. The EU's approach would become simpler on condition that member states were to make greater efforts and take ownership of the process for themselves. The government of each member state has individually to prepare unified annual and tri-annual Lisbon action plans, report on their success and to nominate a national commissioner responsible for the Lisbon Strategy—a Mr or Mrs Lisbon, if you like. The involvement of national parliaments and the European Parliament in the elaboration of the Lisbon Strategy and the evaluation of its achievements is called for in order to increase recognition and legitimacy for it.

The Commission's proposal has been debated in both the Council of Ministers and the European Parliament. Ministers and MEPs from many countries (including Hungary) objected to the initiative of social cohesion being thrown overboard by the captain of the Lisbon ship. Belgian Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt, taking seriously the substantive criticism of researchers concerning the Process, came up with a radical alternative proposal. Amongst other things, he wished to see the Union accept minimum and maximum requirements for the labour market and social and fiscal issues that are to remain within the jurisdiction of member states. This would mean regulation similar to that in place today in the case of value added tax, i.e. that every member state can freely set the rate of the tax between the minimum and maximum values determined by the EU. From the point of view of management technique, Verhofstadt's proposal clearly provided an alternative to the inefficient method of open coordination. Its substantive objective, however, would have been the implementation of a unified European growth strategy, without allowing certain member countries, primarily the new member states in

Central and Eastern Europe, to undermine the European social model with a form of fiscal and social dumping (i.e. low taxes and welfare levels). This proposal only strengthens the impression, one that is in the air, that whereas the United States had once been the only bogey-man for the 15 old member states, it was being joined not only by China, but also by the new EU countries.

The debate was concluded in record time, alternative opinions were not the order of the day, and in the end the EU heads of state and government accepted the original proposal of the Commission led by Barroso. The starting gun for the new incarnation of the Lisbon Strategy had gone off. Following five years of fruitless meandering, perhaps there is now more hope that in addition to, or rather instead of, thunderous talk of change, the member states may really sit down and think through what is desirable, what is possible and what is politically acceptable for them, and for the community as a whole, as far as a coordinated growth and society-shaping strategy is concerned. ❧

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Sir,—As a long time subscriber and/or reader of *The Hungarian Quarterly* (in all its many changes), since 1986, I am pleased by the increasingly sophisticated historical commentary in your journal. This is particularly true in your commentary on the Holocaust in Hungary. As you may know, I have not always been able to say this and wrote several critical letters to you in the past; however, recent articles in Summer 2004 and Winter 2004 were thoughtful and made significant contributions to our understanding of this period. My own family suffered greatly during this period, so I am happy to congratulate Gábor Kádár and Zoltán Vági, as well as István Deák, for their historical commentary, as well as their compassion. I visit Hungary at least twice a year and recently purchased a flat in Budapest; your journal is proof, as Professor Deák commented, of a new "recognition" of the past that suggests a better future for all Hungarians, including this Hungarian American.

Michael Kaplan
Portland, Oregon
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Ilona Sármány-Parsons

A Melancholy Colourist

Munkácsy a nagyvilágban. Munkácsy Mihály művei külföldi és magyar magán- és közgyűjteményekben (Munkácsy in the World: Mihály Munkácsy's Works in Private and Public Collections at Home and Abroad)
An Exhibition at the Hungarian National Gallery, 24 March–31 July 2005.

Through the spring and summer of 2005 the Hungarian National Gallery is showing a substantial exhibition of the paintings of Mihály Munkácsy (1844–1900), an important realist painter who, although he has always been a cornerstone of the Hungarian artistic canon, remains a controversial figure in Hungarian aesthetic and cultural discourse. For several decades there has been a glaring disparity between the wide popularity of his works among the general public and the evaluation of his oeuvre by art historians and critics.

Viewed against such a background of *Rezeptionsgeschichte,* this exhibition must be deemed a major success. Thanks to the two curators, Zsuzsanna Bakó and Judith Boros, the presentation of the works has been competently and appealingly arranged against a historicist backdrop of dark green or red walls. The paintings, in their elaborately gilded frames, are intelligently lit with spotlights. The sequence of the display roughly follows a chronological order, apart from some deliberately anachronic groupings on the basis of genre. While it is clear that the National Gallery hoped to repeat the great success of the retrospective of László Mednyánszky (1852–1919) in the winter of 2003/04 by presenting Munkácsy in a similarly accessible manner, this show and its catalogue will certainly also do something different as it offers a new critical consensus in respect of the oeuvre and reaffirms the significance of this artist in the dual contexts of European and Hungarian nineteenth-century painting.

Most importantly, we are indebted to the exhibition for an opportunity to reconsider Munkácsy's role within Hungarian painting and to ponder the implications of this re-evaluation for our broader perception of Hungarian art in general. Thereby we are also led to address those factors which for so long have stood in the way of an informed and unprejudiced approach.

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Two major issues have to be addressed here, one practical and one theoretical. The practical one is of long standing, a problem to which all critical writings on Munkácsy have repeatededly referred when explaining the absence, indeed the impossibility, of a definitive, seminal study of his art. At least one third of his oeuvre has never been on public show and is hidden in private collections, mainly in the USA. Consequently a scholarly discussion covering all aspects of his art has hitherto not been possible.

Munkácsy was an exception among Hungarian painters in the nineteenth century in that, apart from a few early years spent studying in Pest, Vienna, Munich and Düsseldorf, he passed his entire active life in Paris, then the art capital of the world. The wealthiest and most generous collectors of his age were American millionaires, who bought his works straight from his studio; the art dealer and marketing genius Charles Sedelmeyer acted as an intermediary. With the exception of a few publicly exhibited paintings such as *Milton* and the monumental religious canvases, the greater part of Munkácsy's paintings disappeared into private collections and has not been shown since. For many years, organising an "international Munkácsy exhibition"[1] was not a realistic proposition, partly because of the existence of the Iron Curtain and partly because of the lack of adequate financial sponsorship.[2] In the new political dispensation, and not least due to the generous help of a few American collectors of Hungarian origin (first and foremost, Imre Pákh), it has at last become possible to mount such an exhibition, and more importantly to include in it the least known of Munkácsy's oeuvre.[3] Years of intense preparation and much organisational work have preceded this show, all of which labour is triumphantly vindicated by the new light it casts on the style of an old master.

Notwithstanding these practical difficulties there were clearly theoretical considerations, considerations of the canon, at work too. From the 1890s onwards, the structure of the European art market changed fundamentally. A network of private dealers (galleries) took over the role of guiding public taste from traditional art institutions, bringing about a dramatic shift in the tastes of the art-consuming elite. These dealers were assisted by the new "opinion makers", the art critics of the daily, weekly and monthly press.[4] This paradigm shift brought with it the cult of Impressionism and a rapid acceptance of the various "-isms" that followed, but

1 ■ International in the sense that the works on show are in the majority international loans, since more than half of Munkácsy's oeuvre is in collections outside Hungary.

2 ■ There were anniversary retrospectives in Budapest in 1914 and 1944 and a large show in 1952, but none of them included works from foreign collections.

3 ■ According to Zsuzsanna Bakó, joint curator of this exhibition, 45 pictures came from American collections, museums in Western Europe also lent important works. Thus the National Gallery did not have to draw on its own Munkácsys in the permanent exhibition, and visitors can see them all the same. It was possible to gather together such rich and varied material from the above sources, that even Debrecen could keep the three famous Christ pictures in its permanent show in the Déry Museum. They are represented in the exhibition by half-size "reductions" by Munkácsy's hand.

4 ■ Robert Jensen: *Marketing Modernism in Fin-de-Siècle Europe.* Princeton, 1994.

also (perhaps inevitably) led to the dethroning of the idols of the previous generation. This implied a rejection of realism or academic idealism, and finally a downgrading of the classical, so-called "mimetic," aesthetic values. The change came about very rapidly, but its consequences were enduring. For more than seventy years, realism, with the exception of Courbet's brand, lost its appeal and (seemingly) its historical importance. Even the international exhibition boom since the 1980s has left this type of painting almost entirely unnoticed.

Thus the greater part of nineteenth-century "bourgeois realism" in painting, especially where it cannot be squared with a left-wing political agenda, has become a nearly forgotten field in the history of art. Even the most representative painters are little known: virtually no exhibitions, no monographs and no cultural studies have been devoted to their oeuvres since the second great paradigm shift that took place around 1905. That was when the canon of the nineteenth century was rapidly constructed and almost overnight the French contribution became the normative one within the great European narrative of the fine arts.

By the second half of the twentieth century certain trends of French painting from the second half of the nineteenth century and focusing on the autonomy of visual representation were seen as the harbingers of abstraction and non-figurative painting. In practice this meant concentrating on the sequence of "-isms" that began with French Impressionism.[5] The rest of the artistic production of the period was relegated to a minor status, variously described as conservative, official, retrograde or even pseudo-art, and was almost universally regarded as something inferior, not to be measured by the same aesthetic standards as the art admitted to the canon.

This heavily ideological concept of modernist progress, valuing only the production of avant-garde artists, and focusing always on the newest stylistic developments (the so-called "cutting edge" within a handful of leading art centres), established a highly selective value-system in which other artistic trends, such as narrative and figurative painting, became endowed with negative connotations reaching well back into history, nearly indeed to the age of Romanticism or Courbet. Even such a pioneer of the "new art history" as T. J. Clark, while brilliantly elaborating the historical and social milieu of nineteenth-century art in all its cultural, ideological and spiritual aspects,[6] ends up bestowing the accolade only on the politically engaged "revolutionary realists" (Courbet, Daumier).

Although attempts were made to rescue the different local traditions and historic values of this or that national canon, the discourse of art history (and in a broader sense, that of the critical literature of most countries) were adjusted to

5 ■ Only Art Nouveau achieved a similar success with representative shows that were as impressive as those for the great French painters of Impressionism or Post-Impressionism. The rest of European art (with a few exceptions among the Russian Avant-garde) has far less appeal for visitors to art galleries than have Monet and his colleagues.

6 ■ T. J. Clark: *The Painting of Modern Life—Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers.* Princeton University Press, 1984.

this international norm and became increasingly ambivalent about the "cultural heroes" of the previous century.

During the decades of isolation in the fifties an ideologically censored profession of art history in Hungary was able to accommodate appreciation of some realist masters. Munkácsy, because of his plebeian origin and plebeian subjects, was still celebrated;[7] indeed, he was among the very few Hungarian painters to be honoured with a richly illustrated monograph and even a *catalogue raisonné,* the latter published in 1958. It remains a seminal work on Munkácsy, despite the fact that its author, Lajos Végváry, was unable to see a great part of the oeuvre, the data for which he collected with enormous difficulty.[8] By the late 1960s, and concomitant with the slackening of ideological control, it became a sign of "backwardness" to admire romantic subjects, bourgeois realism and indeed the work of most of those painters who had been highly appreciated in Hungary in their own lifetimes. These artists were rather patronisingly regarded as likely to appeal only to the naive, uneducated public; any serious intellectual, who thought of himself as a part of the nation's cultural elite, would not indulge a taste for such art. At the same time, a younger generation of art historians, trying to catch up with the scholarly discourse dominating the profession in the West (non-socialist, North Atlantic countries), and simultaneously struggling for the autonomy of artistic experimentation in opposition to the dogma of Socialist Realism, naturally turned away from those artists and trends which were officially accepted, for whatever reason.[9]

The promotion of non-figurative art was assisted by the historic fact that most of the Hungarian Avant-garde during and after the First World War belonged to the political left, or even to the Communist Party, and thus could be counted ideologically as "one of us" by the Marxist cultural establishment of the late sixties and early seventies. (However, even within the official cultural establishment there was a difference of opinion as to which Communist tradition should be preferred—the local Hungarian one or the orthodox, Russian line.) Gradually the socialist national cultural canon (or at least what was regarded as such) was reformulated by the urban political opposition in the 1970s and 1980s. Many of those artists who had been heavily promoted by the state as standard-bearers of "official art" were demoted in favour of those who had earlier been on the mar-

7 ■ This appreciation was naturally highly selective, dismissing the awkward part of the oeuvre, namely the politically undesirable "salon paintings," the images of upper-class leisured society and the religious pictures. These were dismissed as resulting from the negative influence of, or even manipulation, by Munkácsy's art dealer. Reproductions of the early peasant genre paintings, and those landscapes and still lifes which were in the posession of the National Gallery, decorated the walls of public buildings or the compartments of trains up to the late 1970s.

8 ■ Lajos Végváry: *Munkácsy Mihály élete és művei* (Mihály Munkácsy: Life and Work), Budapest, 1958. It was practically impossible to travel abroad between 1948 and 1963, so that the art books written in Hungary during those years were not based on autopsy of any work held in a foreign collection.

9 ■ This was a necessary, perfectly legitimate and psychologically understandable process, but it produced also some unreasonable intolerance concerning earlier alternative traditions.

gins both of society and of the art world.[10] National icons thought of as embodying genuine artistic values were no longer to be artists like Munkácsy, but rather painters like Csontváry, Derkovits or Kassák.[11]

An ahistorical and rather frivolous tone was in vogue in cultural journalism reflecting the changed preferences of art historians and questioning the whole practice of academic Historicism and realism, while disregarding the social context in which many artists of the nineteenth century lived and worked.

In addition to these factors, an appreciation of Munkácsy's early work is all the more difficult because many of his works in the permanent collection of the National Gallery have suffered from serious material debilitation.[12] They stem from the artist's early period, when he used a cheap bitumen-mixture as a gluing element for treating the canvas before composition. This primer began to oxidise already in the lifetime of the painter, and with spectacular rapidity; the pictures became darker and darker, some coloured highlights disappeared completely, and finally the paint began to crack and acquire a dull lead-like surface. Unfortunately this chemical process is irreversible. The early realist peasant genre paintings, which made Munkácsy suddenly famous and indeed gave him the chance to settle in Paris, have been the victims of this oxidisation. On the other hand, the later works, when the artist could afford better primer and paint, have retained their high-quality craftsmanship and their original colouring.

II

The current Munkácsy exhibition is new in its selection and offers an informative bilingual (Hungarian-English) catalogue,[13] which will help to disseminate internationally some freshly clarified facts about Munkácsy's life and work. One of its major achievements is that its authors, without exception, challenge directly or indirectly the avant-garde-centred narrative within Hungarian art historical discourse. Avoiding the earlier clichés that depicted a plebeian national genius ruined by the Parisian art market, they set out to discuss the position of Munkácsy within the international art scene of his day.

10 ■ These were the years when Kassák and his group became acknowledged as a legitimate alternative tradition and when young artists were rapidly radicalising the art scene.

11 ■ The first detailed scholarly survey, edited by Lajos Németh, on Hungarian art between 1890 and 1919 and published by the Academy of Sciences was conceived in this spirit: Németh Lajos (ed.): *Magyar Művészet 1890–1919* (Hungarian Art 1890–1919). Budapest, 1981.

12 ■ See on this technical issue: Zsuzsa Wittmann: "A 'bitüm': Munkácsy sötét alapozó masszája. Anyagvizsgálati eredmények." (Bitumen. Munkácsy's Dark Grounding. The Results of an Examination of the Material) Munkácsy Catalogue. MNG—Szemimpex Publishing House Budapest, 2005. p.149–151.

13 ■ *Munkácsy a nagyvilágban: Munkácsy Mihály művei külföldi és magyar magán- és közgyűjteményekben* (Munkácsy in the World: Mihály Munkácsy's Works in Private and Public Collections at Home and Abroad) Catalogue. Budapest, MNG—Szemimpex Publishing House, 2005. 247 pp. 118 illustrations.

Even a reader familiar with the "Munkácsy problem" may be shocked by the opening paragraph of Judit Boros's brilliant study, which suggests that his oeuvre cannot be discussed (as has traditionally been the case) exclusively in terms of Hungarian art, and of the Hungarian art world of his time.[14] This in itself represents a major change of attitude within the local art historical discourse, since Munkácsy has invariably been handled as a patriot, one who, even in his Paris studios, continued to live in a sort of virtual Hungary, a romantic world populated by impoverished peasants and vagabonds. That his works and his style, and his sudden changes of artistic direction, should be judged instead by the norms and conditions of the Paris art world and the demands of the art market, strange though it may seem, is quite new in Hungary.

Apart from Liszt, Munkácsy was the only Hungarian who "made it" internationally in his own lifetime and who became accepted as a great artist, a celebrity, a cult figure of and for the nation.[15] His career was even more impressive than that of Liszt since he came from an extremely modest background. His childhood and youth read like something out of Dickens—he was orphaned and maltreated as an apprentice to a carpenter, he suffered horribly like so many child-heroes of Victorian novels, yet with the help of a few good and honest people, and through the power of his artistic genius, he succeeded in becoming a famous painter. He went to Düsseldorf and moved from there to Paris, winning gold medals along the way, and ended up living in luxury as an ornament of high society.[16] Amazingly, this is actually a true story, and its tragic end is also true: he was plagued by self-doubt,[17] his uncurable illness (syphilis) drained his energies; and he died at the comparatively early age of 56 after spending several years in a lunatic asylum, where he was forbidden to paint by insensitive attendants.

For about a quarter of a century, Munkácsy was the example to follow for all Hungarian painters who dreamt of making a career. He himself tried hard to live up to his image, founding a scholarship for young talents and always being ready

14 ■ Judit Boros: "Egy magyar festő Párizsban. Munkácsy Mihály pályája 1870–1896 között." (A Hungarian Painter in Paris. Mihály Munkácsy's Career between 1870 and 1896.) Munkácsy Catalogue, pp. 33–60.

15 ■ See: Judit Boros–László Szabó: "Munkácsy Mihály hazai ünneplése, temetése és hagyatéka." (The Celebration, Funeral and Heritage of Munkácsy in his Native Country) In: *Aranyérmek, ezüstkoszorúk* (Gold Medals, Silver Wreaths—The Cult of the Artist in Hungary in the 19th Century.) Exhibition catalogue, Budapest 1995. pp. 86–92.

16 ■ Munkácsy was handsome and attractive as a personality. In 1874 he married Cecile Papier, the rich widow of his earlier patron, Baron de Marche, who had a large estate and a country house set in a beautiful park at Colpach, Luxembourg. This French society lady—habitually demonised by the Hungarian press—ran a famous salon and supported the career of her workaholic husband. She was more of an ally to him than has generally been accepted.

17 ■ Munkácsy had already attempted suicide in 1872, right at the beginning of his career. He was tormented by waves of depression, but at the same time was a disciplined artist who drove himself hard.

to help his countrymen to find their feet in the French capital. His hospitality was proverbial. However, as a foreigner who never mastered French well, he was never truly integrated into the official Parisian art scene. Moreover, the uniqueness of his style (virtuoso, highly emotional, yet realistic) marked him out from his contemporaries. His work offered psychologically convincing and often dramatic scenes from the life of the poor (*Last Day of the Condemned Man,* 1869), and later from history generally (*Milton Dictating "Paradise Lost" to his Daughters,* 1878, *Christ before Pilate,* 1881.) Yet, and despite his idiosyncratic talent, it would have been extremely difficult for him to have become a celebrated painter in the Paris of the 1870s that abounded with gifted artists, had he not been adroitly promoted by one of the shrewdest art dealers of the age, Charles Sedelmeyer.[18]

Originally a specialist in Dutch painting, Sedelmeyer had moved from Vienna to Paris in 1866. Besides selling old masters, he developed a line in promoting and selling painters from the Austro-Hungarian Empire, artists such as August Pettenkofen, Rudolf Ribarz, Eugen Jettel and Václav Brožik. Perfect craftsmanship and a virtuoso technique were the *sine qua non* for any artist he agreed to represent. Although a very shrewd businessman and a brilliant presenter (he staged theatrically impressive shows of his artists' work, took their major paintings on tour and was adept at working up expectations at auctions), Sedelmeyer was also a fair manager, and by no means the exploitative villain that the later literature on Munkácsy likes to present.[19] He was in fact an art manager in the new style, carefully assessing how to appeal to the snobbery of the *nouveaux riches,* or to flatter the taste of American collectors. Actually he did not much differ in his dealings from Paul Durand-Ruel or Georges Petit, the dealers of the Impressionists. Sedelmeyer also recognised very early the immense influence of the media, which in those days meant the daily press.[20] He established the marketing ploy of "travelling pictures", taking the famous monumental works of the Paris Salon or the World Exhibition on special tours round the big European cities.

18 ■ Charles Sedelmeyer (1837–1925) lived in Vienna before moving to Paris in 1866 and it was in Vienna that he had learned the basics of his profession. When Goupil refused to take Munkácsy's *Milton*, Sedelmeyer offered him the substantial sum of 30,000 francs, exhibited the painting in his Paris palace, and promoted it at the World Exhibition of 1878. His generosity paid dividends: Munkácsy signed a ten year contract with him, making him the exclusive dealer for his works. The contract was very fair and both sides kept to it scrupulously. *Milton* was also the first picture that Sedelmeyer toured round Europe, including England, before finally selling it to Robert Lenox Kennedy, who placed it in the Public Library in New York. See: Christian Huemer: *Charles Sedelmeyer: Kunst und Spekulation am Kunstmarkt in Paris.* Belvedere, V, 1999, Nr.1. pp 4–19.

19 ■ From various sources it became evident that Sedelmeyer was an honest ally, who genuinely appreciated Munkácsy's art. Long after the death of the painter, he published a favourable book on him, and some of Munkácsy's best pictures (e.g. *Dusty Road* 1, 1874) he loved so much that he kept them for himself.

20 ■ He carefully primed the press, collecting the favourable criticisms written on his "hero" and publishing in book form the reviews of the paintings, translated into the language of the country where the painting was about to go on tour, in this way creating modern-style publicity campaigns.

At that time, giant Historicist canvases played the same role as costume dramas from Hollywood were to play in the twentieth century.[21] The public of the 1870s and 1880s lived in a much poorer world than today as far as visual stimulation was concerned: coloured pictures could only be seen in churches or in museums, and what was on offer locally could be very limited.[22] The spoiled and sophisticated Parisian art scene (at that time the undisputed centre of the European art world) was uniquely rich in the number and scale of regular art shows it had to offer. The rest of the world was grateful if it was able to see an important painting occasionally, such picture tours helping to make an artist world-famous and his dealer extremely rich. This sort of stage-management was thus the best publicity an artist could get at the time and inevitably also distinguished the big names from those destined for relative obscurity.

Sedelmeyer made a contract with Munkácsy, under the terms of which he payed him a substantial regular salary, which enabled the artist to live in grand style. For ten years from 1878, Sedelmeyer had exclusive rights to sell Munkácsy's paintings and organised the exhibition-tours of the painter's most monumental compositions, the subjects of which had usually been suggested by the dealer in the first place. These giant historical canvases had to have well known historical themes that were readily accessible for the majority of the educated middle class. The subjects of the paintings therefore had to be well known beyond their own native shores, which meant that internationally celebrated historical personalities were considered the most suitable, those who belonged to the collective memory of European (or, more generally, Western) culture. Milton, however, was something of an exception to this rule: of course he was a well-known literary and historical personage for the educated Anglo-Saxon public, but his fame was limited to Continental Europe.

Sedelmeyer became actively involved in devising new subjects for monumental compositions by Munkácsy, and it was he who suggested a biblical theme (at that time still the most universal of narratives) equally able to address Catholics and Protestants in Europe. The result was that the greatest sensation (and also

21 ■ Nineteenth-century history painting had an enormous influence on the imagination and the pictorial techniques of the great Hollywood directors. Scenes from films like *Ben Hur, Cleopatra* etc. recall the canvases of Leighton or Alma Tadema.

22 ■ Coloured reproductions were a great rarity, although the commercialisation of the lithograph enormously expanded the circulation of reproductions. Original oil paintings were still something special for the general public and limited to art exhibitions. Thus it is not surprising that to see even a monochrome depiction of a historic event painted "lifesize" was extremely appealing; over a month several thousands of people usually queued up to see such paintings. In Vienna, during the ill-fated World Exhibition of 1873, in spite of the cholera epidemic, thousands of visitors went to see Makart's giant *Catharina Cornaro*. In 1877, *The Entry of Charles V into Antwerp* attracted 34,088 visitors. It was the same with Munkácsy's *Christ before Pilate* (50,000 visitors in four weeks), which was the most successful of all. It toured Europe, leaving its imprint as the seemingly authentic depiction of a biblical scene in the memory of a whole generation.

profit) for Munkácsy was achieved by *Christ before Pilate* (1881), the first of his biblical canvases. It was first toured round England (London, Manchester and Liverpool). Then it went to Vienna, to Budapest, to Munich, and finally (in 1886/87) it travelled round the United States. More than a million people certainly saw the work on its journeys. It ended up being sold for the sensational price of $160,000 in 1887; together with *Golgotha* (1884), it was purchased by the millionaire, John Wanemaker, who placed both pictures in a special room designed for meditation in his Philadelphia department store.[23]

Before the advent of Post-Modernism, which blurred previously sharp ideological distinctions, the autonomy of painting was not only an aesthetic ideal but was also closely tied to spiritual and ethical values in art. This meant that an authentic art work came to be seen not only as necessarily abstract, but also something that was as independent as possible of the materialistic social value of a commodity. It followed that a true artist had to ignore not only the mechanisms of the art market but even its existence. Subsequently, however, this was a doctrine that was honoured more in the breach. Indeed, in the last fifteen years or so, the discourse of art history more and more reflects the dramatic change caused by the vigorous marketing of modern works of art. It is no longer a matter of shame to confess that art is also a commodity—quite the contrary. Art was of course a commodity in nineteenth-century Paris too, and we would be well advised not to fall into the trap of thinking that the aesthetic quality of a picture is necessarily diminished simply because it was well marketed within the lifetime of the artist.[24] The manner in which art prices, success and celebrity were built up has recently become a fashionable subject for art historians, but it is important to remember that this is a theme that belongs as much to the history of Impressionism as it does to that of "official" art, or of "consumer" art.

23 ■ The excellent and scholarly study by Katalin Sinkó in the *Catalogue* offers a detailed history of Munkácsy´s biblical pictures. Sinkó analyses them in the context of other contemporary religious paintings and illustrates in detail the historical moment when the secularisation of nation-states began to exercise formidable pressure on the Catholic Church. Thus Munkácsy's achievement appears all the greater: precisely because of the artistic authenticity of his *Christ before Pilate,* he managed to harmonise the different concepts of Christ held by Catholics, Protestants and even Positivists, like Ernest Renan. This in itself was something which hardly any other contemporary painter could aspire to. See: Katalin Sinkó: "Munkácsy vallásos képei és a századvég 'szent realizmusa'" (Munkácsy's Religious Painting and the "Sacred Realism" of the *Fin-de-Siècle.*) *Munkácsy Catalogue* MNG. pp. 61–86.

24 ■ Judit Boros in her discussion of the Parisian art market and the sociological phenomenon of the "juste milieu" in painting, leans heavily on the pioneering scholarly work of Jensen. This author was among the very first to re-evaluate the reduction of the canon of late-nineteenth-century painting in favour of avant-garde-centred modernity and modernism. It was he who began the rehabilitation of those important painters of the age whose contemporary role in the art world of Europe and Paris was of equal importance to that of the Impressionists or Post-Impressionists. See: Robert Jensen: *Marketing Modernism in Fin-de-Siècle Europe.* Princeton, 1994.

The great paradigm shift that has occurred in art-historical and aesthetic discourse[25] has made it possible for us to look with a fresh eye also at those works of Munkácsy which were subsequently pushed to the margins of his oeuvre, although they actually constituted a major part of it: these are principally the "salon" pictures of the upper middle class at leisure, and his history paintings with biblical subjects. The present exhibition at the National Gallery gives appropriate and generous space to both genres.

Naturally, for the art connoisseur of the twenty-first century, the landscapes, still lives, and even the salon pictures will tend to be more pleasing than the biblical scenes. However, Post-Modernism has gone some way to rehabilitating narrative and figurative representations of the nineteenth century. The family idyll verging on sentimentality is regaining legitimacy in terms of its own aesthetic; the virtuoso brushwork depicting the tactile values of velvet, silk, glass or metal can again be appreciated for what it is: a bravura display of perfected technique. Recent auctions have demonstrated how esteemed such painterly virtues are, even in the eyes of modern collectors. The novelty in these dark, claustrophobic and luxurious, but nevertheless pleasing, interieurs is the freshness of the palette, the warm and bright colour harmonies, the sophisticated, rare hues of the drapery, the sureness of the compositions and the sophisticated light-effects (*The Music Room,* 1879; *Morning in the Country House,* 1881.)

Munkácsy was only one among a number of successful painters (for example, Alfred Stevens, James Tissot, John Singer Sargent) who specialised in depicting these domestic interieurs of leisured high society when in Paris. The painterly quality of the tonal harmonies and the fascinatingly modern brushwork in the details are a genuine surprise even to those art historians who like to focus on technical *trouvailles,* that is, on the métier of the individual painter.

In the case of the religious pictures, it is other merits which bring revelations, even for sceptics, when confronted with well restored and well-lit canvasses. Before restoration, many were puzzled by the enthusiasm of the leading nineteenth-century art critics for these works, and by their inclination to write lengthy psychological analyses of the scenes depicted and of the individual figures.[26] Now, even the reduced versions shown here of the huge originals, or the sketches for them, reveal their expressive qualites, a genuine effort to catch the psychological drama of the scene, while never overstepping the limits of a

25 ■ I refer here to the change which was begun by gender studies, but continued with a revision of the canon from other perspectives, including the sociological, semiotical and linguistic. In the case of Munkácsy, it is certainly the sociological perspective which helps us to understand his art much better than has previously been possible.

26 ■ Another novelty of the *Catalogue* is the section which focuses on the contemporary criticism of Munkácsy's work in the press and on the early reception of his work in Paris and in Vienna. One excellent study illuminates the dramatic decline of his cult in Hungary, when the modernist generation of art critics took over around 1910. See: Ferenc Gosztonyi: "The Munkácsy Monograph of Hungarian Modernism: Géza Feleky: Munkácsy (1913)", *Catalogue* pp. 115–132.

plausible historical reality. Even to the average viewer today, whose secular outlook might incline him to expect an allegorical treatment of the narrative, these representations still have a powerful immediacy. When Munkácsy's compositions are compared to run-of-the-mill contemporary religious depictions, it becomes clear that his approach to such well-worn subjects is by far the most realistic, as it is the most human and dramatic.

Finally the present reviewer cannot help but confess that for her the greatest pleasures of this exhibition are to be found in the landscapes. Art historians always knew what mesmerising effects radiate from a "Munkácsy dusk" with its bleeding reds, its soft, liquid greens, and its numinous trees. *Dusty Road* 1, painted in 1874 when Munkácsy had returned to Hungary for his honeymoon, is a depiction of intense realism; at the same time, it offers a dynamic new vision of the "most national feature of the Hungarian countryside " the *Alföld* (the Great Plain), with its sizzling summer heat and its gleaming, yet curiously immaterial, colours.[27] This magical canvas (a cart drawn by three horses dashes across the plain—and directly towards the viewer—in a cloud of swirling dust) has two versions, and the one in the exhibition is perhaps the more powerful.[28] Recently returned to an ex-Hungarian family through the restitution law, it has fetched the highest price achieved by any Hungarian painting so far in the revived Hungarian art market. The new owner, who wishes to remain anonymous, has generously lent it to this exhibition.

The other version of this picture hangs among other Munkácsys in the permanent collection of the National Gallery. Its brushwork is fundamentally different from *Dusty Road* 1, so that the scene also emerges differently; the effect being to draw attention to painterly technique rather than to emphasise mood. *Dusty Road* 2 is thus somehow a less spiritual work than the first version, and was indeed always referred to by Munkácsy specialists as the most "Impressionist" work painted by him. In the last resort, however, it is of little significance as to whether Munkácsy was familiar with Monet's paintings when he painted it, since both these landscapes are undoubtedly authentic masterpieces in their own right. If the first seems more appealing, it is surely because it triumphs as a Turneresque romantic, even pantheistic, vision of Munkácsy's homeland, a passionate evocation of its lights, its colours, its immense sky and

27 ■ The *puszta* pictures were doubtless inspired by Sándor Petőfi's poems. Ever since Károly Markó's and Károly Lotz's paintings on this theme became popular they have represented the enigma of Hungary. They were seen as evoking both national sorrow and national joys by means of a romantic depiction of weather conditions. e.g. the storms of the Alföld stood for historic traumas and tragedies, while its bucolic, sunny aspect, with its peaceful shepherds or macho horsemen, symbolized the character and fate of the nation. Munkácsy's *Dusty Road* 1 is (to my knowledge) the first such vision of the *puszta,* where a Hungarian painter abandoned the Biedermeier conventions of tangible depiction and focused exclusively on the atmospheric effects of colours and forms.

28 ■ The specialists (Anna Szinyei Merse and Judit Boros) are still uncertain about the dating of the two works, although 1874 seems very convincing in the light of available data.

wide horizon.[29] Realistic and visionary at the same time, it is a work that endows the Hungarian homeland with transcendentality through an explosion of colour and light. How different is the mood of those Munkácsy landscapes which were painted in Colpach in the park of his wife's estate! Like a series of musical pieces, they explore the chromatic tones of the deep woods, the still, majestic avenues of the park, very much in the spirit of Barbizon. It is a mark of the painter's extraordinary versatility that he could render landscape in two such contrasting styles with equal aplomb.

Munkácsy's landscapes are his most melancholic works, although his unruly wild-flower still lifes can rival them in this respect. It is amazing how many different colour harmonies the painter discovers in nature, and reproduces in his canvases, his greens alone offering a myriad of variations (as, for example in *Ploughing in Colpach*, 1885.) Some of these greens seem very soft, verging on the silver tones of Corot; others evoke moistness, giving the canvas a breathing coolness, like a shady, moss-covered hillside after rain. Then again, there are dark and sinister greens that creep across the painted surface, turning a clearing in the forest into a scene of mystical menace, a spot haunted by premonitions and intimations of mortality (*Dusk,* 1880). Some landscapes have human figures, some are deserted, but all are filled with a gentle, dreamy mood, redolent of powerful yet ill-defined emotions; the prevailing stillness and motionless foliage create an aura of anxiety, resignation, suppressed desires and melancholy.

Perhaps it is the colouring, or perhaps the trembling, nervous brushwork (so typical in the late phase of his work), which suggests to the viewer a lonely spirit turning to nature for comfort. There is a close kinship between the melancholy vision of the aging Munkácsy and the powerful, soulful landscapes of Mednyánszky. As we look at such paintings, it becomes apparent that we are witnessing the birth of the hermeneutic tradition of melancholic colourism in Hungarian painting.

It would be hard to over-emphasise the significance of some of the studies in the excellent *Catalogue.* By incorporating a sociological approach in a fresh evaluation of Munkácsy's achievement, these studies provide new and vivid insights into the workings of the Paris art market in the late-nineteenth century and into the influence of contemporary bourgeois taste. At the same time, the *Catalogue* as a whole, together with this excellently presented show, rescues a great painter from ideological prejudice, from ahistorical misconceptions—and, above all, from unjustified neglect. ❧

29 ■ The brushwork, the rather thick use of paint with tiny bravura highlights on the coachman and the horses, together with the daring perspective, shows a kinship with the masterpieces of Turner, some of whose works Munkácsy might have known. Even if Turner was unknown to him, the romantic visionary quality is similar.

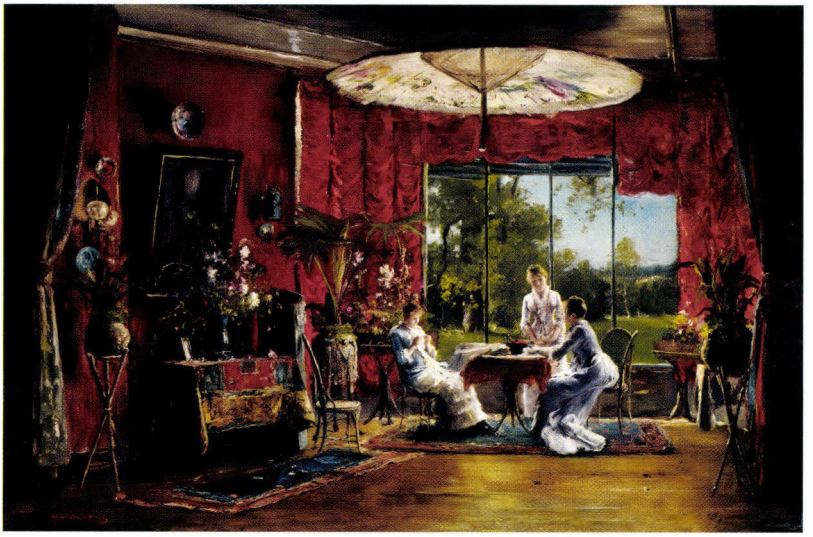
Mihály Munkácsy:
Self-portrait II, 1881,
oil on wood, 42.7 x 32 cm.
Hungarian National Gallery,
Budapest.

Mihály Munkácsy:
Charles Sedelmeyer, 1879,
oil on canvas, 81.5 x 61.5 cm.
Hungarian National Gallery,
Budapest.

Mihály Munkácsy: *Milton Dictating "Paradise Lost" to his Daughters* (reduction), 1878, oil on canvas, 93.5 x 122.5 cm. Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest.

Mihály Munkácsy: *Dusty Road* I. *(Race in the Hungarian Steppes),* around 1874, oil on wood, 77 x 117.5 cm. Private collection, Switzerland.

Mihály Munkácsy: *The Music Room,* 1879, oil on wood, 88.9 x 116.8 cm.
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York,
bequest of Martha T. Fiske Collord.



Mihály Munkácsy: *Morning in the Country House,* 1881,
oil on wood, 82 x 114 cm. The Albany Institute of History and Art,
Albany, New York, USA, bequest of Margaret F. Lynch, 1999.

Mihály Munkácsy: *Avenue (Park in Colpach)*, 1873,
oil on canvas, 55.5 x 38 cm. Private collection.

Mihály Munkácsy: *Christ before Pilate* (reduction), 1881,
oil on canvas, 218 x 324 cm. Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest.

Mihály Munkácsy: *Landscape with Cows near Jouy-en-Josas in the Evening,* 1881,
oil on wood, 92.5 x 130 cm. Hamburger Kunsthalle, Hamburg.

Mihály Munkácsy: *Ploughing in Colpach,* around 1885,
oil on canvas, 60 x 100 cm. Collection of Imre Pákh, USA.

Mihály Munkácsy: *Dusk,* end of the 1880s,
oil on wood, 95.8 x 116.5 cm. Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest.

Dóra Sindelyes

Reading Attila József, Antal Szerb and Sándor Márai Abroad

This, Attila József's centenary year, provides a perfect opportunity for the writer canonised as Hungary's greatest twentieth-century poet to become well-known outside his own country. The opportunity has been taken, with much being written on this great modernist, especially in the German-speaking countries.

Not that there have not been attempts before this. One of the first commentators on József was Arthur Koestler, a friend who had been living abroad since his childhood. His "A Dead Man in Budapest" appeared in 1939 in *Das Neue Tage-Buch,* published for German exiles in Paris and Amsterdam. Even then Koestler remarked on the guilt that wracked Hungarians when they remembered the poet and his suicide. This attitude, still obvious to this day, has been discussed by Attila József scholars from a wide range of perspectives. The pang of conscience reverberates from Koestler's words: "We were his friends, and we did much to help him find himself under a train, and now we are all writing obituaries about him". With even greater remorse: "Attila József was already considered a great poet at the age of seventeen, we all knew he was a genius, and yet, in front of our eyes, we allowed him, nice and slowly, to crumble." Koestler understands precisely how difficult it was to help Attila József: "Before he was beatified, that is while he was still alive, he was argumentative, hot-headed and difficult to deal with". Koestler does not blame the poet for his difficult personality, he seeks rather the explanation in a kind of inescapable national characteristic: "To be Hungarian is to be part of a collective neurosis." Apart from providing a reminiscence on his friend, Koestler can be said to have written József into the annals of world literature: "This Attila József, whom the world has never heard of before, and who will not be much heard of hereafter either, who threw himself under a train under the 47th parallel—this Attila József was Europe's greatest poet." Koestler wrote at length on József in his memoirs and made attempts to translate the poems and have them translated. His prediction that the world would not hear much of him thereafter was, however, off the mark. Attila József's poetry has been published in a number of languages, though translations that do justice to his poetic greatness are few and far between.

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It was the Hungarians themselves who were among the first to do something. Corvina Books published the poet in German in 1960, and a year later he appeared in French in a joint Hungarian-French publication. There was an Attila József collection published in New York in 1973, and Italian readers were introduced to his poems in the 1980s. József is the Hungarian poet whose work has been most translated into English. In 1966 a small Hungarian press in London (long since defunct) issued *Poems,* featuring one excellent version by Michael Hamburger and six from Vernon Watkins amid a fair amount of dross. John Batki's 1997 volume appeared at the Oberlin College Press, and the British/American poet Frederick Turner, with Zsuzsanna Ozsváth, published a volume of József translations in 1999 (Bloodaxe). The most important collection to date in English is that by the great Scots poet Edwin Morgan, *Attila József: Sixty Poems* (Glasgow, Mariscat Press, 2001) which met with a major critical reception. Difficulties with translation are clearly the main explanation for Attila József failing to take his place amongst the acknowledged major poets of the twentieth century, though the American literary historian Harold Bloom finds space for him in his famous *The Western Canon* (1994).

This current centenary could herald a breakthrough for the presence of his work abroad. Perhaps the bilingual volume (running to no less than 503 pages!) published this year by the Ammann Verlag in Zürich, *Ein wilder Apfelbaum will ich werden* (I Wish I Were a Wild Apple Tree, translated and edited by Daniel Muth) will achieve this since the book has caught the attention of German critics. "In Hungary, Attila József is as popular as Erich Kästner or Bertolt Brecht," is how the poet and critic Harald Hartung placed József in the literary pantheon in the April 9 issue of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung.* Most reviews took up the chance to add to the Attila József cult, putting particular emphasis on the tragic life. "Rejected by the love of his life, deserted by his literary friends, he threw himself in front of a train in terrible poverty," writes Michael Braun in the weekly journal *Freitag.* He finds it definitely odd that "a poet who underwent immense suffering and was hardly the right character to be one of the nation's heroes" is considered as such in Hungary. Some critics see the reason for this in Attila József's genius for "finding a unique expression for a common plight," as Anat-Katharina Kalman pointed out on Deutschlandradio's literary magazine programme. According to Hartung, however, it is the poet's capacity for illuminating reality that makes him one of the modern greats. In the 11 April, 2005 edition of *Neue Zürcher Zeitung,* the actual centenary of the birth, the Austrian writer and publisher Karl-Markus Gauss argues that it is time for the "birthday boy" finally to find his place in the world literary canon. Yet, Gauss complains, it is hard to discern his greatness in the translation by the poet Csaba Báthori, who lived for a lengthy period in Austria and hides behind the pseudonym Daniel Muth. "In my view, its errors, heavy-handed artistic pretentions and troubled word order make the translation a wasted opportunity." According to the Austrian literary critic Cornelius Hell, József's lyrical poems, which should be on a par with those of the Austrian poet Georg Trakl or Federico Garcia Lorca, sound terrible in German: "the translations are buzzing with perfect examples of how to ruin a poem". Hell finds some of Muth's solutions for names absurd, for example. In one autobiographical poem, the translator gives the poet's mother, who was called Borbála, the name Bärbel, and in *"Altató"* (Lullaby) changes Balázs to Blasius. (It is worth noting that translator Géza Engl in the Corvina version turned "little Balázs" into the no less unnerving "kleiner Klaus".)

Muth uses a word order completely alien to German, Hell's charge continues, positing that he did this for the sake of rhyme, yet even then he often has to omit the rhyme. The critic is also incensed by epithets put at the end of a line, a technique he says was last used by Goethe. Neverthess, he thinks it is a cause for celebration that the volume found its way onto the bestseller lists of the radio stations Südwestrundfunk (SWF) and Österreichischer Rundfunk (ORF).

Attila József is not the only Hungarian writer of the first half of the twentieth century to have been discovered by the outside world in recent years.

The most recent star has been Antal Szerb (1901–1945), whose 1937 novel *Utas és holdvilág* (Journey by Moonlight), first published when he was thirty-six, became a sudden bestseller last year to some extent in England and even more in Germany. French, Italian and Spanish readers have also become acquainted with Szerb's name. Each country has its own reading. The narrative line of the novel can be understood anywhere: after going through his *vie bohème* phase, Mihály is turning into a man, but in his father's shadow and in his father's firm. To emphasise his coming of age, he elopes with his lover and the pair of them travel to Italy for their honeymoon. Once there, however, he is terrified by the bourgeois life marriage will bring with it, and after a few days takes to his heels again. The wonderings that ensue take him into the past: he relives his adolescence when with the Ulpius children Éva and Tamás, and some of their friends, he played games that were both erotically inspired and death-defying. After Tamás's suicide, the group dispersed, but through a set of uncanny coincidences, Mihály meets the friends who are still alive, so that he might finally find his real self. It is after illness, romantic adventure and contemplations of suicide that he can return with his father, who has come to fetch him home.

Most people are not aware that Christina Viragh's is not the first German translation of the Szerb novel. Thirty years ago, in Berlin, and commissioned by Corvina Books, Irene Kolbe prepared a version that was not considered very elegant and hence garnered little in the way of response. Today, though, everything has changed: "those who haven't read Szerb have lost a great deal," warns Thomas Steinfeld in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. He argues that "with this novel the writer proves himself one of the great storytellers". In the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, Ilma Rakusa found the book "thrilling to the very last page" and as a fellow writer draws attention to its disarming style, "a masterful balance of feeling and irony". Punctilious German observers are already trying to categorise him: in the *Wiener Zeitung*, Reinhard Ebner sees Szerb's work as a kind of coming-of-age novel, or the obverse of one, for we can follow the protagonist's progress and (at least in terms of bourgeois values) his meanderings and decline. Volker Hage considers *Journey by Moonlight* as falling into three categories all at the same time: he writes in *Der Spiegel* that Szerb has created a "bewitching romantic, social and travel novel".

As it happens, German readers came by the "travel novel" via the English version. The 2001 English translation (there had been another translation a good decade earlier that had not caused much of a stir) fell into the hands of Ulrike Ostermeyer, an editor at Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag (dtv), who, as soon as she had read it, immediately acquired the publication rights from the author's daughter, Judit Szerb. The new and excellent English version was the work of Len Rix, who had in fact translated it a decade previously but had found no publisher willing to take it on until he happened upon

Magyar Magic et al.

One of the major opportunities in recent years for Hungarian literature to introduce itself abroad was the series of events called Magyar Magic, held in the UK from November 2003 to December 2004. Among the venues, an outstanding part was played by the Hungarian Cultural Centre in London, whose literary evenings featured Hungarian authors and their translators night after night. These evenings included one dedicated to the poet Ágnes Nemes Nagy, dead for 14 years, whose poetry, owing to fine translations by George Szirtes, Hugh Maxton and Bruce Berlind, is not unknown in Britain. The New End Theatre in London dedicated a night to the martyred poet Miklós Radnóti, killed in a forced labour battalion during World War II, whose poems have been available in English since 1979. *The Hungarian Quarterly* also introduced itself to the London audience at the same theatre. Sándor Márai's novel on Casanova, *Conversations in Bolzano*, already on best-seller lists in a number of countries along with *Embers,* was published in English by Viking in 2004 in George Szirtes's translation. Perhaps the best-known Hungarian classic of all, the narrative poem *John the Valiant* by Sándor Petőfi, was published in the translation of John Ridland.

Parallel with the Hungarian Cultural Season in Great Britain, Hungarian literature was given an opportunity to gain wider popularity in The Netherlands where, on the occasion of Hungary's accession to the EU, a Hungarian cultural season was staged from 1st July 2004 till the end of the year. The most prominent guest at the matinee "Three Generations of Hungarian Writers", held at the *Muziekcentrum* in Utrecht was almost certainly Magda Szabó, who has several novels in Dutch translation. Dutch audiences were able to encounter Hungarian poetry not only on literary matinees but also on the walls of houses. On October 18, a house in Leiden's Lijserstraat bore the poem "Celebration of the Nadir" by the poet János Pilinszky whose work focuses on existential problems and who found his first English translator in the person of Ted Hughes.

Hungarian writing seems to be on the move in the east of Europe as well. Currently a Hungarian season has been running in Russia. Hungary was also guest of honour at the

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Pushkin Press, committed to popularise Central and East European literature.

British reviewers enthusiastically extolled a previously unknown Hungarian author. "It has been semi-seriously proposed by baffled scientists that Hungarians are not actually native earthlings, but a super-intelligent extra-terrestrial race which has managed to blend in with humanity, only giving themselves away by the genius of their works and the absolute impenetrability of their language" is the unorthodox approach of Nicholas Lezard in *The Guardian.* He takes the book to be a comedy of depth, "the comedy all the more striking in that the chief subjects of the book are abnegation and suicide". "*Journey by Moonlight* is an exhilarating comedy," states Paul Bailey in the *Daily Telegraph,* adding that, in his reading of it, "this book is very erotic in a playful way". Szerb, he says, "doesn't bother with heated descriptions of what his characters do in bed, but simply states where and how they become attractive". Bailey promptly ranks Szerb amongst the greatest writers of the twentieth century.

There were also cooler responses. "The parts are finer than the whole," is how the well-regarded Internet literary journal *The Complete Review* commented on *Journey by Moonlight*—anonymously, as always.

Non/Fiction Book Fair, staged for the sixth time in Moscow's Central House of the Arts, on 2 December 2004. The appearance, among others, of the novel *Fatelessness* by Nobel Prize winner Imre Kertész as well as *The End of a Family Saga* by Péter Nádas, was timed to coincide with this event. So was the volume of a sequence of short stories, *Sinistra District* by Ádám Bodor, an author whose work bears the marks of "magic realism".

Along with these, a new series was launched under the imprint 'Biblioteca Hungarica', which will mainly publish volumes of essays—this time round by István Bibó, Béla Hamvas, Gyula Illyés, Imre Kertész and Péter Nádas. An exhibition was also put on of photographs by Péter Nádas. One of the most sought-after items of all at the fair, though, was István Bart's cultural dictionary, *Hungarians for Russians.* A TV film that Yevgeni Popov and Endre Kukorelly have made about literary walks in Budapest was screened; shooting of a twin film set in Moscow has already started. A Hungarian Day that was organised on December 2nd—with appearances by Ádám Bodor, Endre Kukorelly, Lajos Parti Nagy, Ákos Szilágyi and Péter Zilahy, and with Victor Erofeyev introducing Péter Esterházy's *Harmonia Caelestis* (in English: *Celestial Harmonies,* Ecco, 2004) was a success, with barely a book left on the shelves—but see Ádám Bodor's wry account of all this and András Zoltán Bán's article on pp. 105–113 of this issue.

A permanent opportunity for Hungarian literature is presented by the annual Frankfurt International Book Fair. In 1999, the focus country of the Fair was Hungary. In that year, beside authors already successful in Germany, like Péter Esterházy, Péter Nádas, Imre Kertész and others, also some of their elder contemporaries have been presented for example the oeuvres of Gyula Illyés and Tibor Déry.

The presence of Hungarian literature in Germany, if for geographical reasons, dates back to earlier times, and is, one might say, something that readers are used to. Up to most recent times, when that role was taken over by English, German had been the "intermediary" language between Hungary and the world. Hungarian culture in turn has always had a certain degree of familiarity in the German-speaking countries, so much so that the epithet of the nineteenth-century poet Lenau in his own time was "the German Petőfi".

The book has received fewer laudations in Romance-language countries, even though it has been available in Italian for a decade and a half, in French for fourteen years, and appeared in Spanish some five years ago. The review in the French literary journal *Le Libraire* saw no more in the story than "the novel of a cure", while the critic for the Italian Internet site *Versacrum* claims to see the conflict between "magic Italy" and "rational Hungary" as reflected in the protagonist's internal struggle. In Spain *El Pais* published a damning critique under the title of "The Adventures of a Boring Bourgeois."

The newly-discovered Szerb novel is most often associated with Cocteau's *Les Enfants terribles,* published in 1924, with the erotically-charged games of its protagonists blended with a longing for death. Thomas Mann's name is also mentioned: the anonymous review on the English-language literary portal *Waggish* sees the friendship of Mihály and Tamás Ulpius, which is free of physicality, as evoking the boy-love motif in Mann's *Death in Venice.*

The relative success of Antal Szerb's novel is a sign of the international attention Hungarian writing is attracting. And, not just for literary reasons: the majority of articles also mention that Szerb, educated by Piarist Fathers as the godson of the

Catholic bishop Ottokár Prohászka, but of Jewish extraction, was beaten to death at the forced labour camp in Balf in 1945.

Around 2002, before Szerb's success, it was Sándor Márai who achieved sudden international renown. Everyone in Hungary is delighted at this success, but there are varying answers to the question of why *Embers,* never considered the author's strongest work, has aroused public interest almost everywhere and at almost the same time, and why this has happened sixty years since it was first published.

The author, who ended his own life in 1989 at 90, did not live to enjoy the reprieve that came six decades after the first appearance of the work in question. Yet, in the last four years, the Italian, German, English, French, Spanish, South Korean and American editions of the book have achieved a critical and even commercial success. The plot—the General who has locked himself into his castle in the Carpathian forests, the arrival, after four decades, of someone who was once a friend and later a rival, followed by their unusual "encounter"—appear to have struck a chord almost everywhere. The structure of the book was universally praised. In the first part, the author tells of the events leading to the conflict by "building on" the General's (Henrik's) fragments of memory. In the second part, the meeting with the former friend (Konrad) offers an unusual writer's device for confrontation—the General's monologue. In the process, the General makes an effort to find out whether his late wife ever tried to cheat on him, or whether she and Konrad ever planned to kill him. A good part of the reviewers' attention was given to Márai's own exodus following the Communist takeover in Hungary, first through Switzerland and Italy, then later to the United States, as well as to Márai's devotion to the traditional (Central) European bourgeois lifestyle. Recognition was thus given to his political attitude or to him as the "documenter of the last days of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy", or to the writer as a *"homo europeus".*

It is the Italian writer and publisher Roberto Calasso who is considered the prime mover behind this current series of successes. It was he who in 1998—after reading a French translation published three years earlier to almost no public response—saw an opportunity not only for an Italian version, but also for editions in other languages. He announced to the wider public that his research had led him to Márai, who in this book had created a real gem, prose "on a par with classics of world literature like Thomas Mann and Franz Kafka". No doubt this made a big difference, as did the vagaries of readers' changing tastes, for those familiar with the Márai oeuvre will remember earlier translations (for example a Spanish one in 1946, a German one in 1954 and a French one in 1958) which received little in the way of attention. Márai never ceased to write after leaving Hungary and repeatedly tried to publish his books with the help of ad hoc agents, but with no success.

Calasso, in contrast, did a professional job of staging the book's comeback. The news of an enigmatic love triangle from an author labelled a romantic émigré made its way to the columns of popular women's magazines like *Amica* or the Italian version of *Elle.* They praised the "uniquely aristocratic" atmosphere emanating from Márai's text. But there was also a response from serious critics. In his review in the left-wing *La Repubblica,* for example, Pietro Citati, as if to flaunt his ignorance of Márai's life and concentrate solely on this one work, mostly lauded the beautiful attention to detail in his prose. He draws our attention to the uniquely effective construction, to the many

The Hungarian Book Foundation

Some ten to twelve thousand titles appear annually on the Hungarian book market, of which a tiny proportion are literary works. No global figures are available for the number of literary works which are translated and published abroad.

The Hungarian Book Foundation (MKA) has a translation programme which provides a subsidy to translators and foreign publishers to support the publication of Hungarian works. Currently heading the list of authors who have received such MKA support are Sándor Márai, Imre Kertész and Péter Esterházy. The MKA support is fairly minimal, around 1750 per title or approximately half the average translation fee. The total dispensed annually amounts to 80,000. Over the last eight years 140 authors and 33 anthologies have appeared in 35 languages through the programme. In parallel, the Hungarian Translation House Foundation offers grants to permit commissioned translators to reside in its Balatonfüred residence and take advantage of seminars and workshops, some fifty of whom do so annually.

Hungarian Websites for Literature in Translation

"When two people from different European countries meet, they often use English as their common language. Literature can also play a great part in learning about each other's cultures." That is how the pilot version of the Internet literary database and anthology **Babelmatrix** justifies why it has chosen English as its main language. Beside prominent Hungarian authors whose work is accessible in English, Czech and Polish writers are among those the website intends to introduce. As regards Hungarian literature, the site, now in progress, features the biographic facts, bibliography and works or excerpts of translated authors.

Babelmatrix, run by the publishers Typotex, is not the only place on the Web devoted to Hungarian literature in English. **Hunlit,** edited by the Hungarian Book Foundation, contains the biography, career description and a detailed analysis of a few works each of 75 authors. The site provides information also on classics such as the nineteenth-century Romantic novelist Mór Jókai, widely read in Hungary up to this day. It would hardly surprise anyone that the Nobel Prize-winning novelist Imre Kertész, with numerous other contemporary authors, merits several pages. The efforts of several individuals also deserve credit. A number of these have been fan sites. One outstanding example is the Attila József site created by the physicist András Roboz, and, of course the *HQ*'s own website, which always offers contemporary poetry and prose in good translation.

http://www.babelmatrix.org http://www.hunlit.hu http://www.kfki.hu/~roboz/ja/ http://www.hungary.com/hungq/

memorable episodes and images such as that of a yellow diary crumbling in the fire.

Different countries, different tastes: the majority of German reviews paid less attention to such nuances. When the book burst onto the German scene two years ago, coinciding with the Frankfurt Book Fair, it was more of a rediscovery than a novelty, for, as mentioned, there had been a previous German translation fifty years earlier. Back then the novel hardly garnered a mention; more recently Cornelia Geissler, writing for the left-wing *Berliner Zeitung,* was deeply impressed by "the suggestive force radiating from the General's monologue". Petra Schellen, critic at the similarly left-wing

Die Tageszeitung, points out a Márai comment she deems to be misogynist: "Only men know this feeling. It is called friendship." After seeing the stage version, Ulrich Siedel of the *Berliner Zeitung* talks of male chauvinism with regard to these words of Márai's: "Friendship is of course quite different from the actions of people with unhealthy leanings who seek some kind of strange satisfaction with those of the same sex". In the weekly *Freitag,* Kerstin Hensel describes as kitsch precisely the same "attention to detail" so warmly praised in Italy, reproaching the author for repeated nostalgia for "Vienna, the emperor, the waltz, goulash soup, and Hungarian wine", which she regards as clichéd and pamphleteering. The success of *Embers* in Germany was given a major boost when in the highly popular programme on public service television called Literary Quartet, Marcel Reich-Ranicki, (referred to as the "Pope of Literature"), found himself saying that "anyone who has not read this book has missed out on twentieth-century literature".

Success in France was less vocal, but those who paid attention to Márai again praised him for quite different reasons. There it was more the "exotic" quality of the writer's birthplace that had a bearing on things. The literary historian Lili Braniste, writing in *Lire,* joins others in praising the "marvellous style" conceived in the middle of *"la puszta magyare".*

Michael Dirda, editor of the literature column on *The Washington Post,* sees a different kind of exoticism or mystery in the book. He attributes what he sees as the tension that is maintained until the very end of the novel to the secrets that it masterfully keeps from us. Clare Lochary, a younger literary historian at the University of Georgetown, agrees with this in part, in the most literal sense, when in *The Hoya,* a university paper, she only admires the first half of the novel, arguing that "the second half of the book is such a disappointment that it hardly makes the first half worth it".

In *The Independent,* Lesley Chamberlain is less blunt, but essentially of the same opinion, seeing Márai as "a good but—on this evidence—not great writer of his day". Two reviewers of Hungarian extraction, George Szirtes and Tibor Fischer, both writing in *The Guardian,* take on a task the others understandably overlook: comparing the translation by the American Carol Brown Janeway with the original text. And, what with this English-language edition having been based on the German translation, they both claim that it has whittled down much of Márai's original style, judged by many to be affected, but certainly distinctive. It should be noted however that the author would probably never have agreed to his work being translated from any text other than the original.

None of this could trouble David Davidar, critic for *The Hindu* in India, who describes the book as "perfect". In his 2002 review, he claims that Márai "writes with the wisdom of a great philosopher and the narrative skill of a crack detective novelist". As to more recent developments, *Embers* is to be filmed by Milos Forman, with an expected release date in 2006.

Márai's international success has largely come as a surprise to those in Hungary, despite the revived interest in him at home over the last ten years or so. Hungarian critics do not regard *Embers* as such an exceptional novel. Antal Szerb's foreign popularity has also been greeted by puzzlement—in Hungary his name tends to be held in high regard more as a brilliant essayist and literary historian than as a writer. But the increasingly strong international reputation of Attila József is something Hungarian readers have long been waiting for and quite a gratifying one at that. ❧

András Zoltán Bán

Moscow, Moscow...

"I'm not taking long johns! No way!" That's my steely battle-cry as I lock my suitcase that morning, before setting off to the airport. Even though telephone calls and e-mails from all the experts on Russia advise me of the necessity of taking long johns, I decide, with Bolshevik resolve, that I am not going to take any long johns; nothing could be less masculine and thus more ludicrous. The title of that old Soviet TV series: "They Accept Danger..." looms in my memory while I contemplate my responsibilities as the correspondent of the magazine *Magyar Narancs.*

No sooner have we reached a so-called safe cruising altitude when the captain comes on and in genially matter-of-fact tones informs us that it is dead calm in Moscow, the local time is 11 a.m. and the temperature is minus 22 degrees Centrigrade. I shrink to the size that Gregorius memorably did, the priest later made pope in Thomas Mann's last novel, *The Elect.* The captain retracts himself a little before we descend, in that he now speaks only of 17 degrees. I had packed a newly published edition of Chekhov short stories for the journey, and I ponder why the heck the three sisters were so set on getting to Moscow. I hope that in four days' time I'll be in a position to venture an answer.

Arrival

In the arrivals hall at Seremetyevo one is welcomed by an enormous queue, as if they were waiting to be deported. *Barishnya*s who remind one of bread rolls on two legs, with their stockings askew and fetching uniform of startling hue (you will have to imagine something between mould green and hippopotamus brown), guide the ever-swelling throng. After a forty minutes' wait I find myself in the

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capital of the empire, soon to be heading toward the city centre at 10 kilometres an hour. It is barely snowing and Alexei, the chauffeur of the Hungarian Cultural Centre, is stealing ahead through postage-stamp-sized gaps in the traffic, thanks to which we are scraping the mud off the soles of our shoes about fifty minutes later.

First impressions are not bad. It turns out that minus 17 degrees here is almost a heat-wave, corresponding to minus 3–4 degrees in Budapest. A few minutes of ceremonial loafing around, a few warming cups of tea, then off to check in at our accommodation, which goes by the name of Gasis and offers tolerable places of rest for academics. The hotel, as I learn, lies in the heart of the city, which in local measures amounts to a one-hour bus journey from Red Square, insofar as one (arbitrarily) calls that the centre of Moscow. After minor bafflement (where, I wonder, did those eight years of compulsory Russian vanish to?), it seems as if I feel the room key in the palm of my hand, before it turns out that I will be given that by the *dyezhurnaya* on the floor. You mean that venerable institution still lives on?, I yell out to myself in the lift. Too right it does; all the signs are that it is immortal. What was a *dyezhurnaya* in the Soviet Union? A cleaning lady, chambermaid, directrix, handywoman and, of course, informant all rolled into one. She's obviously still the same today though the hotel seems to be full of various other informants, to start with, two spruce KGB types, in surprisingly high-quality suits, are holding up the counter at the reception desk. The lady herself is not as frightful as the bile-spitting one in György Petri's poem about Moscow *("fat-legged cow, inhospitable, stupid slapper"),* indeed more pleasant (it is noticeable, incidentally, that everyone here is friendly); in any event, she displays touching naïveté in showing off what, in her view, are the entrancing appointments of my two-room suite: the wallpaper is white nylon, an enormous arrangement of plastic flowers is in one corner of the room, while the 'rustic' bedspread may well have been purchased at some flea market (without the fleas, one hopes), and the sofa is shot to hell, its spring boring through to my throat.

Having unpacked, I need to make my way back to the Hungarian Cultural Centre. That, however, is out of the question, for two reasons. For one thing, I still haven't got the *registratsiya*—the *kartyinka* that officially corroborates my hotel accommodation. Without that one is not advised to set a curious foot outside, for if asked to identify yourself—and apparently that happens quite often—you will immediately find yourself in the police station, assuming you haven't greased the policeman's palm with a few greenbacks. I have stubbed out a good few ciggies by the time the *kartyinka* is ready: at first sight a product of careful work by deft bureaucratic hands. It later turns out to be slapdash, with the receptionist having entered the wrong date, as a result of which three days later I shall find myself being interrogated by two KGB types at Izhevsk airport.

Our splendid taxi ride

The first obstacle has been cleared, then, but here is the second. Frantic telephone calls make it clear that the car sent to pick us up is lodged in the continuous Muscovite traffic jam that avowedly relents only around three o'clock in the morning, so Ilona Kiss, the Centre's director, recommends that we push off under our own steam. I set about this task by teaming up with a Siberian lady translator. You stand at the kerb, raise an arm, and within seconds a car will stop beside you and a beaming informal taxi-driver asks 'Where to, folks?' I am sceptical, so we ask one of the KGB types idling in the hall to order a taxi. After it emerges that even the quickest car will only arrive in an hour and a half, we take up our position by the kerb after all. And wonder of wonders! The system is so finely tuned that a car going by us brakes merely on spotting that we hesitate. Having agreed on three hundred roubles, we hurl ourselves into the mind-boggling traffic. I now finally see Moscow illuminated—an unreal spectacle, with the city as a whole looking like an unimaginative cross between Las Vegas and an industrial housing estate built beside two six-lane motorways, enlivened with unearthly flourishes by the Imperial idiocy of the seven Stalinist houses ("the seven Sisters"), illuminated at night by blue, green and red floodlights. We speed by the Foreign Office and the Hotel Ukraina at 20 kilometres per hour.

Consoling arms await us at the Hungarian Cultural Centre. We head now for an Uzbek restaurant known as KishMish. By now it's nine-thirty and I'd be prepared to eat a boiled mouse (like the Muscovites who survive the Blast in *The Slynx,* that masterly novel by Tatyana Tolstoya) but the choice is of Oriental opulence and, waited upon by swivel-hipped maidens with jaunty caps, we stuff ourselves to the brim.

The next morning I wake up without a headache (I should hope not, the vodka here is pure!). In the metro I come face to face for the first time with that celebrated spooky underground world: the dim candelabras bordering the escalators as if they were lighting the paths leading down into hell, with every face in this semi-darkness from Dostoevsky's *The Insulted and Humiliated,* while in ten corridors of sheer marble, decorated with chandeliers of opera-house grandeur, frescoes depicting the uninterrupted victory of the working class (and their peasant allies) tell of some kind of five-dimensional monumentality. As on the streets, there are conspicuously large numbers of uniforms: militiamen, policemen, gendarmes, firemen, war veterans, former partisans, Gulag prisoners who survived their death. Figures belonging to God knows what organisations, their chests almost caving in under the weight of the diverse medals with which they are laden direct the streams of humanity down the appropriate channels. Fear of terrorism, apparently the explosions that went off in the metro not so long ago have had their effect. For all that, I am more scared of those who are supposed to be dispelling the fear.

Translators entre nous—then Lenin

At the gathering put on in the Hungarian Cultural Centre, the first person to take the floor is the splendid translator Vyacheslav Sereda, who says that whereas until not so long ago he found only 450 hits about Hungarian literature on the Russian internet, today there are over five thousand articles. That, of course, is mostly thanks to Imre Kertész's Nobel Prize. Ákos Szilágyi, in perfect Russian, then expounds what works ought to be considered for translation (a selection from Dezső Tandori's poems and Milán Füst's novel, *The Story of My Wife*), although emphasizing all along that this is purely his own private canon; anyone else should feel free to add to the list.

But every literary gathering comes to an end at some point in time. It's one o'clock: let's see the sights of Moscow. So it's off to nearby Red Square. On the enormous open space we are welcomed by likenesses of the tsar and tsarina; further off, a dead-drunk sham-Lenin uttering impassioned imprecations is being stowed away in a paddy wagon by the omnipresent uniforms. The Kremlin and the St Basil's Cathedral are just as in the pictures—huge, entrancing, but I can see this city, sadly, will forever remain foreign to me. Nor do I make any further effort to subjugate it but flee from the continuously falling snow and howling wind into the GUM department store for tea and vodka. There are barely any shoppers in the halls, which remind one of nothing so much as a massive funeral home. Most of them are women, attractive and fresh-faced in a city so dominated by stubble-chinned men. It's staggering how many beauties dance by in the street in conspicuously classy clothes.

At the Fair

At the book fair's Hungarian Day, one is welcomed by a familiar spectacle of crowds storming some distant objective. In Moscow, one has to queue for everything (apart from private taxis, as we have already seen): entrance ticket, cloakroom, tea. In the Hungarian pavilion, of course, that crush is encouraging; one after the other, our literary sons make their appearance with their devoted translators. What our chances will be in the literary triple jump will not emerge now, but one thing is for sure: there's a lot of interest. At one table in the buffet a young university student is wrestling with the translation of a poem by Lajos Parti Nagy. I'd like to help, but I see that deciphering this highly virtuoso text, crammed as it is with allusions, would be tough enough for a Hungarian; the bespectacled young man's effort is nonetheless truly touching. I go upstairs to the upper level. The Russian crowds that are thronging the neatly arranged pavilions are buying the by no means cheap books by the armful—a thirst for culture reminiscent of Soviet times.

To assuage my own thirst I pay a visit to the nearby new Tretyakov Gallery. Besides the famous names of the Avant-garde of the 1920s and '30s, I discover

one who, for me, was barely known. The pictures of Liubov Popova are fizzing with genius. All of a sudden, I feel at home in this inscrutable city.

At the large reception that is justifiably thrown that evening to celebrate the Fair's success, everyone is preparing to go their own way. One group of writers will be going by overnight train to St Petersburg; I, along with a journalist colleague, by plane in the morning to Izhevsk, the main town of the Udmurt Republic. Let's see a bit of the bear's lair.

In the land of Kalashnikov

The republic itself is not primarily known for the fact that the Udmurts (otherwise known as the Votyaks) are linguistically related to the Magyars, but because this is where they used to (and still do) manufacture one of the most lethally effective weapons in the world. First, though, we offer a sacrifice on the altar of kinship, with me delivering a lecture on contemporary Hungarian literature to those studying Hungarian at the university. Out of the total student roll of 26,000, some 50—all of them young women, as far as I can make out, and of a beauty vying with the girls in Moscow—are curious to find out how I endeavour to elevate Dezső Tandori's poetry to a central place. In the Finno-Ugrian Department, I then spot the first Russian samovar and take great pleasure in drawing the boiling water onto the *"zavarka"*.

That evening my journalist colleague attends a performance of *The Nutcracker* at the Udmurt State Theatre, after which he sets off for a village as the guest of the family of one of the university lecturers. For my own part, I seek the joys neither of *The Nutcracker* nor of visiting any village, but first inspect the roll of honour set into one wall of the theatre. The heavily retouched supermarket salespeople and big sports officials eye the European traveller, but we have little to say to one another. Later on, I dine magnificently, then rummage around, open-mouthed, in a general goods store that is open around the clock. (It is noticeable that no one sleeps in Russia, as Antal Szerb already pointed out seventy years ago in his essay on Dostoevsky.) The shelves are groaning under a profusion of excellent French wines, while over there a range of marvellous smoked fish entice at ridiculously low prices. All this at the foot of the Urals. Who would have thought it? Strolling in the street is magical, with snow that puts one in mind of diamond dust; I am spellbound as I saunter toward bed. Snuggling beneath my blanket, I immerse myself in the short stories of Chekhov.

Mikhail Timofeyevich Kalashnikov, after hard years of misery and experimentation, set out in the early 1940s to develop the machine gun that first came into service in 1947. "I created this weapon to defend the fatherland," is the ars poetica that stands on a plaque, in English as well as Russian, in the museum that was constructed (and naturally named after him) for the 85th birthday that he celebrated not so long ago. The abstract visions of Kandinsky, Malevich, Popova, Rodchenko and the rest that were admired earlier would be put to shame beside

the extraordinary dreamlike quality of this collection. In one display is a decorated weapon, with the gun hanging in a gilded picture frame. It is an image that beats the most daring of Marcel Duchamp's ready-mades hands down. In other places, the creatively inclined artist has engraved pleasant folk-life scenes on the mother-of-pearl of the gun butt. Here too control is total. When I set off to the right in the circular room the museum's *dyezhurnaya* bawls out that I must keep to the left! I can hardly shake her off, with her expression a mixture of part contempt for me, part religious ecstasy for Kalashnikov. But we just rush through the rooms; we are in a hurry, because the plane will soon be setting off back to a Moscow I am barely acquainted with. On boarding we are taken aside and grilled, and on account of the Moscow reception-*dyezhurnaya*'s incorrect registration I am required to sign a two-page, closely typed statement of which I understand not a word. It's just a formality, the officer assures me. This puts paid to my plans as to how to spend Sunday morning in Moscow. I am told to go to the Hungarian Embassy where it will take me two hours to get myself properly registered. My prospects of acquainting myself with the city fade in the distance.

By Sunday afternoon it is already time to take leave, this time on my own, and once more in the place that has become my regular haunt—the KishMish. Basking in the smiles of the fresh-faced Uzbek maidens, I raise a last tumbler of vodka to the, for me, inscrutable city: Long life and prosperity, along with the three sisters! Maybe next time I shall understand more of your gigantic reality.

Yet even though it will not be long before a year of Hungarian culture kicks off here, it is questionable whether I really want to come again. Not long ago the idea was seriously floated in the Duma, Russia's parliament, that visas should be withdrawn from those who do not show the requisite respect towards Russian culture. For me that at least shouldn't be a problem. Gogol, Pushkin, Tolstoy and Dostoevsky have been part of my everyday reading matter since adolescence. Look! Even now I hold a new volume of Chekhov clutched to my chest, and if an officer were to interrogate me in the passport office there is a fair chance I would be able to correctly answer any literary question he cared to pose. Still, do I qualify? Or had I better give my respects to this wonderful culture from afar? ❧

Ádám Bodor

Bookless in Russia

From the report in the daily paper *Népszabadság* about the contribution made by Hungarian writers to the 2004 Moscow Book Fair back in December, any reader might have been forgiven for supposing that this was all delightful encounters in the bleak midwinter, and that it must have warmed the cockles of the heart to be a Hungarian writer there. To mark the publication of a Russian translation of my novel *Sinistra District,* I was a guest over the several days that the programme was held, so let me, by way of a supplement to that report, recount several particular circumstances which, although forming part of the meat of the subject, were for some inscrutable journalistic reason omitted from the record.

Let me start with the fact—even if it may sound like hair-splitting by an overpedantic author—that since there was no valid contract, signed by myself, to underpin said Russian edition of my novel, I hastened to Moscow in the dead of winter for the festive launch of what, in point of fact, was a pirate edition. It was possibly as a result of this awkward circumstance that both the book's translator and all of the publisher's employees felt constrained to hide themselves from my presence, for believe it or not I did not have the pleasure of meeting a single one of the people who had a hand in the book's publication.

Given the nature of the place, I had not been counting on any excessive pomp or disagreeable, formality-ridden ceremoniousness, yet all the same the puritanical exiguousness of arrangements for the events was intriguing. For instance, the ingenuity by which, with a strong enough will, it is possible to put on a book launch even without a book. As regards the prospect of the book launch in the

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Ádám Bodor

is a highly acclaimed novelist and author of short stories. In 1982 he came to live in Budapest from his native Transylvania where, when still a schoolboy, he had served a prison term for "subversive activities". For the same reason he was not admitted to university, so he studied Calvinist theology instead. Out of his ten-volume oeuvre, several works appeared in almost a dozen foreign languages.

town of Aleksandrov, it turned out en route, in the passenger compartment of the car, that not one copy of my book was to be found at the venue; moreover, we had not brought one along with us either, but as to where copies of the Russian version of my novel might be concealed—that was information to which very few in that vast country were privy at that moment. Yet even had the geographic co-ordinates of an existing copy been known, there would have been little sense in asking for a few pages to be faxed over to the office of the event's organiser, as we had not the slightest reason to count on there being a person who would be prepared to read them out. It was possible to count on a moderator for the evening, given that I was travelling with him, and he, harking to the insistent voice of the passage of time, was attempting, in the car's rumble, to gather from me, as the person responsible, what, broadly speaking, the novel that was to be presented was about and, above all, what it's title might be. Why, in the end, were we bowling along at a crazy speed in a north-easterly direction out of Moscow in a wild Russian winter? The answer was slumbering somewhere out there in the frozen, mute wilderness, in the murk of the twilight that happened to be descending on it, perhaps lodged in the depths of vanished centuries, in eternal night.

It became clear soon enough that it was really me who ought to be ashamed on account of my pathological lack of faith, my moments of despair, for in the end, thanks to solidarity, exemplary fraternal collaboration and boundless human patience, the book presentation was not cancelled even in the absence of the material perquisites.

As for the status of the copies, several of them mysteriously turned up the next day at the Book Fair, on the stand of the Hungarian Cultural Institute in Moscow. Although I had disclosed my identity in due time, seeing that the pall of indifference around me was showing no inclination to lift, and not a single soul was beating a path toward me with my novel in hand, a gleam of appreciation in the eyes; after some brief dickering I purchased a copy—before it was too late!—for forty roubles. My own complimentary copy. Because I suppose that is what one may rightly call a copy with which an author, in his infinite narcissism, compliments himself at a certain cost.

As far as further compliments go, the encounter with V. Erofeyev was a definitive compliment by world literary standards. Though no one had ever asked me whether I placed any confidence in the success of an impromptu exchange of views with a writer whose forte, in my view, lies more in the realm of light literature, the programme in principle offered the prospect of a roughly one-hour conversation involving my fellow Hungarian writer Lajos Parti Nagy, my humble self and the aforesaid personality, whom *Népszabadság*'s reporter referred to, with the casualness of an insider, as "the *enfant terrible* of world literature." Well, it soon transpired that there was not the slightest reason for any anxiety: the aforesaid personality effortlessly brushed aside any expectations the invitation might have aroused by cutting himself off from any possible form of personal

commerce, while equally the organiser—mark you well!—was also evidently not concerned to press for any rapport between the impending discussants. Celebrated in his own land, the writer, having discharged himself of a brief five- or six-minute exposé, stood up from the table and, without dignifying his interlocutors with so much as a word, or at least a fleeting handshake, took himself off to one knows not where. Registering this turn of events, the moderator of the thwarted conversation directed a question relating to my novel at me, but without waiting for an answer, no doubt under the influence of the preceding, he likewise rose from his seat and made himself scarce.

I have figured in my fair share of farcical situations before in the course of my precarious life, so these somewhat incongruous encounters did not exactly upset me. Since, in one's striving for better global understanding, a chap is anyway constrained to laugh at himself in his agony, one sneaks away onto the street and saunters one's lonely way to another event, the tap-room of some watering hole, let us say and the warm fug of cordiality slowly evaporates, vanishes, in the frigid Arctic wind. What's left is numb resignation, a dash of pity, and a dash of shame. As well as the undeniable magic and awe-inspiring beauty of the foreign scenery. Because outside, to be sure, icy spikes of hoarfrost are already hanging in the evening air, preparing bountifully to encrust the muck of the day gone by; to coat with an ashen jacket what, not long ago, were ostentatiously glistening brown little jobbies that an attractive little doggie left behind in the snow. ❧

Translated by Tim Wilkinson

István Riba

Higher Education in Transit

The year 2005 marks a turning-point in Hungarian higher education, being the last year of a system which goes back centuries. The new Higher Education Bill, now before Parliament, fundamentally changes the structure of tuition as well as the management and legal status of the institutions. 2005 saw the mode of university entry changed, with the entrance examination abolished. From now on, only results achieved at secondary school finals (the "matura") will decide whether a student may or may not gain admission to a university or another institution of higher education.

Around the year 1900 there were 67 institutions of higher education in Hungary, of which only two were full-fledged *"universitas"*, covering the entire spectrum of study. One was in Budapest and the other in Kolozsvár (Cluj), a town now in Romania. In addition there existed a University of Polytechnics (renamed later as the Polytechnic University of Budapest); while the rest were so-called "academies" which, in practice, had the rank of "school of higher education". The academies covered a variety of areas. They included institutions teaching law, commerce, economics and art, but the overwhelming majority were theological academies, 46 in number. In 1895, some 10,000 students were in higher education, 5400 of whom were attending the universities. Their number had doubled by the time the First World War broke out; in 1914 a third university opened in Pozsony (Bratislava, now in Slovakia). Strangely enough, the number of students continued to grow for a while even after 1920, despite the fact that the country had lost nearly two thirds of its territory under the terms of the peace settlement. For this reason the Kolozsvár and Pozsony universities relocated themselves in Szeged and Pécs, respectively. At any rate, in 1922 the number of students in higher education was 23,000. That expansion, however, did not last long. By the middle of the 1930s that number had dwindled to 13,000.

This was partly due to the Great Depression but also because in a smaller country there were simply fewer students. The condition of admission to university was at all times the completion of the "matura", the secondary school finals; any-

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one who passed it was, in principle, eligible for continued studies at a higher level. There were limits, though. Women, for instance, did not enjoy full equality until 1947. Many families could not afford to pay tuition fees for their children; very few were able to enjoy the benefit of scholarships, and the number of those having the advantage of free or cheap lodging was also small. Thus the children of the poor had little, if any chance, to go to university. According to contemporary statistics, 6 per cent of all students came from working-class families, and 10 per cent had a peasant background. Half of the latter were engaged in theological studies, a traditional point of breakthrough for bright boys of a peasant background. From the 1920s on, the government itself put limits on university admission, mainly for financial and labour market reasons. The so-called numerus clausus Act of 1920, introduced after the fall of the Communist Republic of Councils, made "national loyalty" a condition of admission and also ruled that every ethnic group or "race" could only send students to university in proportion to its ratio in the population. This unprecedented and highly discriminative law was clearly brought in order to limit the number of Jewish students, even if this remained undeclared at the time. As everyone knew, about a quarter of all students in higher education were of Jewish background, far exceeding their ratio in the population.

Before the Second World War, the standard of the education offered at the medical and natural science faculties and at the polytechnic university were exceptionally high. Graduates of these universities often continued their studies and improved their skills at the best European universities. Standards in the faculty of arts were also high; Greek and Latin were compulsory, and graduation was almost equal to scholarly achievement. Grammar school teachers were graduates of the faculty of arts, and this produced a high-standard grammar-school education. The so-called academies were more problematical; law graduates coming from these schools were nicknamed "field lawyers" by their colleagues.

The situation changed fundamentally after 1945. Although the number of students to be admitted remained formally limited, this was not taken seriously. As the new regime was eager to replace the old elite with its own, they launched university-level workers' courses as soon as 1945, and a faculty of evening classes was put into operation in 1947. The passing of secondary school finals—the "matura"—continued to be a condition of admission, and in order to speed it up, special, so-called "trade" secondary school finals, taking one or two years to achieve, were organized for young workers who were then able to proceed to university. From 1948 on a desirable quota of students coming from working-class and peasant families was established by the Hungarian Communist Party. By the early 1950s that quota had reached 65 per cent, though it stabilised later around 30–40 per cent. It became increasingly clear that the enforced admission of working-class students with an insufficient education was destroying the quality of higher education. University teachers were instructed to accommodate to the level of these students, sometimes to the point where giving them fail marks was actually prohibited. Categorisation by descent, and the limits put on the number of those admitted meant that many classified as "children of parents with a profession" were classified as "bourgeois" and kept out of the universities. There were years in the 1950s when half of the students with excellent or good marks coming from intellectual or professional families were rejected, while working-class students with far weaker marks gained admission.

Children of families classified as "enemies of the people" were denied even the slightest chance to study at daytime classes. After 1952, entrance examinations were introduced, comprising a written and an oral test, while an admission system in force up until recently developed at the beginning of the 1960s. The essence of the latter is that half of the points needed for admission is provided by continuous assessment in secondary school and by the results of the "matura", while the other half of those points is acquired in entrance exams.

The years after 1945 brought about fundamental changes in the institutions and structure of higher education. Theological schools were not part of the centralised state system, while the various academies had ceased to function or had been transformed earlier on. The last three legal academies were closed down in 1949. On the other hand, independent medical universities were established as well as four new polytechnic universities in the early 1950s, and several teacher training colleges were set up to produce primary school teachers. The number of institutions involved in higher education was 32, which had increased to 43 by 1960, accommodating a total of 40,000 students. This was followed by the establishment of "higher-level polytechnic schools" brought into being because of a shortage of well-trained professionals in engineering; this increased the number of higher education institutions to 92, with some 90,000 students studying in them, although half of those students were not attending the regular daytime courses but evening and correspondence courses. The "higher-level polytechnic schools" however, did not come up to expectations and were turned into colleges. By 1972, the overall number of institutions had decreased to 55. However, at the same time 29 outplaced faculties or departments were established, operating in locations other than the seat of their "mother institution". Student numbers also declined significantly, mainly because the number of those attending evening or correspondence courses fell back to half the earlier figure. From then on, the number of undergraduates attending regular daytime classes started to grow slowly, reaching two thirds of the total which had risen to 100,000 by 1980. Between 1980 and 1990, however, that figure stagnated. In 1990 it was still 100,000. Attendance at correspondence and evening courses dwindled even more. By 1990, only a fourth of all students attended them.

In 1990, the year of the changeover to multi-party democracy, higher education was accessed by a very narrow circle only, covering some 10 per cent of the age group concerned. The main goal of the system of higher education developing in the past fifteen years and of the predominant education policies of the period was to catch up with educational praxis in the more developed nations and extend the benefits of higher education to as many young people as possible.

The basis of admission was a 120-point system. That was, in theory, the maximum number of points available, half of which were calculated on the basis of marks achieved in secondary school and at the school finals, while the other half consisted of points attained in entrance tests. A maximum of fifty points was yielded by the results achieved in five subjects over the last two school years (that meant a total of ten marks; since the highest mark achievable is five, the total figure was calculated by multiplying these two figures with each other), and another ten points came from the marks won in the "entrance subjects" at the finals (these differed in accordance with the school or faculty at which students wished to continue their studies). Points at the entrance exams were awarded in a

manner that the final results achievable would add up to a maximum of sixty points. From this year on, however, only the results of the finals, the "matura" will count.

The manner of financing institutions was changed in the mid-1990s. Since then, the normative (per-capita) subsidy received for students admitted is the basis of the funds provided by the state. Year by year the government determines the number of undergraduates whose admission it is willing to finance, then that figure is divided between the various institutions and their faculties. In addition, institutions are also allowed to admit a certain number of students paying their own tuition fees. An earlier measure limited that number by decreeing that only students achieving up to 10 per cent less than the pass mark were eligible to become "paying students". This limitation, however, has now been abolished, and today it is only the need for money of the universities or other institutions that limits the number of fee-paying students they admit. These revenues have become vital to their survival since the per-capita support has fallen so low that frequently it barely covers the teaching salaries, while the other costs of operation have to be covered from other sources.

Every university or other institution makes public the number of students it intends to admit to each of its faculties well ahead. As a result of the introduction of per-capita support, universities and institutions of higher education have adopted a policy of recruiting as many students as they possibly can, giving places to candidates with poor or mediocre academic achievement. In the past 15 years, as higher education numbers have grown ever more substantial, it has also become clear that universities are no longer interested in the best and the brightest only, but are, so to speak, omnivorous. Undergraduates were turning up in growing numbers who achieved no more than the bottom limit for admission, 72 points (for a short time this was actually lowered to 60 points, which, of course, proved untenable, so the bottom limit is currently back at 72 points); today students admitted on the lowest number of points are far from rare even at Eötvös Loránd University, the country's largest and most prestigious university.

That is how it came about that in 2004 even such elite faculties as law or medicine made themselves accessible—true, only on a "paying" basis—to students achieving the entrance test minimum of 72 points. This means that the point has been reached where it only depends on the parents' wallet for a student with a mediocre achievement at secondary school and at the matura cum entrance exam to become a student of law or medicine. Of the medical faculties, it was the one at Szeged which accepted candidates with a low achievement and a thick wallet. The cost of a semester there is 850,000 forints, thus, at current rates, a degree in medicine, attainable in six years, requires some 10 million forints, or 40,000 euros: this amount is hardly affordable for the average Hungarian family, which earns only a fraction of the average West European income. In Debrecen, too, students taking part in "cost-covered" medical schooling needed financial power rather than genuine gifts and achievement to be admitted; the bottom limit there had been drawn at 75 points. As for future dentists, of the country's four medical schools, all three in the provinces admitted candidates with the lowest number of points.

For would-be lawyers it was also Szeged and the Károli Gáspár University of the Calvinist Church which set the level lowest; 72 points sufficed for those two. This is not all that much lower than the 80 points required for state-financed basic daytime

tuition at Miskolc; however, it makes one think that legal training, a field regarded as overcrowded yet still an "elite" profession, has by now become accessible for candidates with barely better than middling achievement during their years at secondary school. The problem regarding the low admission points applied for paying students is that once universities stoop to scoop in money, it is unlikely that undergraduates who are, in fact, unfit, will be sifted out during their years of study. The problem has come full circle: universities and students have become dependent upon each other. The university needs the money, the student the diploma. Massive admission naturally brought a deterioration of the standards of teaching offered. An ever increasing number of students were admitted to faculties the demands of which they were unable to meet. Different universities chose different strategies in reaction: the medical schools continue to provide their traditional, high-quality training. They make no concession as far as their standards are concerned; on the contrary, for the sake of even higher standards, they have added a two-year internship to supplement their six-year undergraduate courses. The Budapest Polytechnic University is also maintaining its high standards. It does admit a greater number of students but weeds them out; the dropout ratio is extremely high. The faculties of sciences and arts, on the other hand, have been facing difficult problems. It takes a bare minimum of points to gain admission as a future teacher of mathematics and physics, but the students admitted in that way, mediocre achievers already in secondary school, simply cannot keep up with the curriculum developed earlier. Universities have therefore begun to adapt to these students, practically providing secondary-school level training for them in the first year, since they would not like to see these departments abolished; to be able to keep them, they have had to lower their standards. Teaching staff at the faculties of arts, for their part, often complain that students they have to teach are often quite poorly read, and grapple with difficulties in text interpretation. The main reason of the problems caused by massive admittance is that even less well-prepared students go to university rather than to high-grade colleges, the inheritors of the former academies, partly because the capacity of the daytime courses available in the latter is not high enough. A practical cause, of course, is that because of the money, even weaker but paying students are welcome by the universities.

In order to improve the image of institutions—in other words, so that a higher number of admission points could be displayed next to a given faculty or department —the government made it possible for candidates for admission to win bonus points; however, after 1990 it became the prerogative of the institution to decide how many of these to award to candidates, and for what achievement. That practice, how-ever, was ended in 2002, when limits were set on the number of bonus points to be granted. The reason was that schools showed extraordinary creativity in finding reasons to hand out bonus points. One agriculture college rewarded a tractor driver's licence with no less than six bonus points, while a teacher training college gave 15 for "outstanding aptitude" (these, however, were taken into account only when the candidate already had the minimum of 72 points). Bonus points of that kind might even have been tolerated, but a gardening college, for example, handed out bonus points for runners-up in flower-arrangement contests, an agricultural faculty rewarded "notable cultural achievement", and the natural science faculty of one of the universities granted bonus points for sports achievements.

Another opportunity for students, made use of by several institutions before 2002,

SOME IMPORTANT INDICES OF HIGHER EDUCATION	1990	2004	Index 1990=100
Undergraduates of which	102,387	409,572	400
daytime	76,601	217,095	283
evening or correspondence course	25,786	192,477	746
Budgetary support (million forints)			
at current rates	23,785	190,714	802
real value	23,785	23,839	100
Support for a state-financed undergraduate (thousand forints)			
at current rates	313	1,042,5	333
real value	313	130,3	42
Support for higher education as percentage of GDP	1.14	1.0	0.88

was the so-called "doubling" of points brought along from secondary school. What this meant was that students who got good marks in secondary school and who were also succesful in their finals were allowed to double those marks and were thus freed from taking entrance exams. This system retroacted on secondary schools as well, since it was obvious that students would be able to get better marks at less demanding schools and move on to university or college from there without making a serious effort.

Providing high-quality tuition for the growing masses of students would have been possible only if the government budget had been able to finance the costs, the increase in the number of teaching staff and the necessary infrastructural investment. "The higher the standards of teaching, the greater is the shortage," heads of universities declared at several forums, emphasising that the real value of government support per undergraduate has been steadily and radically decreasing since 1990. According to calculations found in the *Magyar Universitas Program* (Hungarian Universitas Programme), the real value of the support of a state-financed university undergraduate today is a mere 42 per cent of what it was in 1990.

It seems that there is a dire need for even that support, low as it may be, by the universities and colleges, so every institution inflated the number of undergraduates it accommodated, but the real boom after 1990 was experienced by the (non-university status) colleges. In theory this may have pointed in the right direction, but in reality the faculties rushed to were not the daytime ones but the correspondence and remote teaching courses. In the last semester, in addition to nearly 100,000 daytime students, more than 130,000 students enrolled for the correspondence courses; college degrees offered by these are highly popular because they take less time to obtain. Many people choose this form of study because their existing job requires certain qualifications, a requirement which they can fulfil by taking a three-year correspondence or distant learning course. It is quite frequent, for instance, for public service employees of municipal administrations to simply enrol, without any entrance test, at a correspondence or remote training course at a college faculty for humanities or cultural organization studies, and receive a diploma after a few years of not too demanding study. There was a time when, for example, one provincial university took on five thousand "students" a year in this way.

It became a proverbial saying among researchers into education that the Hungarian higher education system may be aptly described not as a "knowledge factory" but rather as a "paper factory". Such a piece of paper, however, may sometimes have a high value on the job market. According to statistics, when the national unemployment average was 5.9 per cent, and 5.5 per cent among those with only a secondary school education, it was only 1.7 per cent for those with higher education diplomas.

After 1990, universities could actually increase their independence in selecting teachers. Anyone wishing to become a university teacher must have a doctorate, that is, a degree which, in the years of "socialism" could only be awarded by the Academy of Sciences, and not by the universities. This was changed after 1990. Postgraduate faculties, or doctoral schools, were established at every university, making it possible to train a reserve of scholars and scientists to teach in the future. At the same time, every university requires a special examination, called "habilitation", to be passed by those who wish to achieve tenure at that particular university. This, however, unfortunately does not mean that in the current circumstances, elite training was really possible, if only because another feature of the post-1990 era has been the multiplication of institutions, followed by government measures aimed at reducing it. While the number of institutions was 55 in 1980, it was 89 by 1998. Of these, however, only 55 were state institutions, the others were established by Churches, foundations or other private organizations. The reason was that after 1989, universities or colleges could be founded practically without any restrictions. The government was powerless to prevent it. In the mid-1990s, however, the Hungarian Accreditation Committee was brought into being for the purpose, among others, to investigate beforehand whether a newly launched institution had created the right conditions. The Higher Education Act of 1996 precisely determined which institutions were entitled to call themselves "university" or "college", and the Committee had to observe those rules in its work.

The new law produced a number of oddities because it ruled that only institutions offering tuition in at least two disciplines are entitled to call themselves "university". That abolished the status of two large Budapest universities, the University of Economics and the Polytechnic University, at one blow, because they did not meet that condition. They could only escape the consequences if they amalgamated with an-other university. (The unification of the two would not have been unprecedented; there was a time when they belonged to one and the same institution, and it was only after the Second World War that they were separated.) Frantic searching began, hair-rising combinations were being rumoured, and at one point the Polytechnic University signed a declaration of intent to unite with the University of Veterinary Medicine. Finally, the Polytechnic University solved the problem by establishing a social science faculty of its own, so now it offers tuition in two disclipines. The University of Economics meanwhile united with the University of Horticulture.

In 1988, 55 institutions were regarded as far too many by experts, and all political forces agreed that their number should be reduced, that what was needed was a more efficient, less fragmented system of higher education institutions. The problem was increased by the existence of some thirty out-placed faculties, which meant mainly that some Budapest universities and colleges offered courses in provincial towns. No special licence or approval was needed for that, and it was to the benefit of both the mother institution, which received more money, and the town, after all having an

institution of higher education always makes a town more attractive. Beside faculties, degree subjects were also mushrooming; as after 1996, colleges also became entitled to launch university-level-degree subjects. True, from that year on, the accreditation committee also checked the launching of degree subjects, and many applications were rejected. Hungary currently has nine law schools; every expert agrees that this is exactly three times as many as are needed, if for no other reason then because the supply of teachers has not kept up with the increase in the number of law faculties and students, consequently the number of law professors in Hungary suffices for three schools and no more. To fill the shortage, the newly established law schools borrowed teachers from elsewhere, some have jobs at three or four universities. University jargon calls these teachers IC professors, since they commute by Intercity trains between universities to do their teaching. And that is not the worst. The case of the professor who, taking on too many jobs, sent his videotaped lecture to a provincial university, is well-known.

This is, of course, not only a problem for the legal faculties. One of the most difficult problems regarding the quality of higher education is that the number of teachers has been stagnating since 1990. This means that a swollen mass of undergraduates has to be provided for by a teaching staff practically the same size as it was in 1990. This led to an overall situation where teachers for the mushrooming new degree subjects could be found only by employing staff teaching elsewhere, sometimes in three or more institutions. The Ministry of Education is therefore planning to prescribe that in the future teachers would be ableto have a maximum of one main and one secondary job. To be able to enforce such a measure, however, it would be necessary to increase the currently available teaching staff, which, in the current budgetary situation, is practically impossible. In fact, the 2005 budget forecast a reduction in financial resources and staff in institutions of higher education, moves that are now being made. According to some forecasts, institutions will have dismissed several thousand employees by this summer; true, only a minority will be fully qualified.

Governments of different political hues reached a consensus that the different institutions should be brought together and concentrated, forming genuine campuses where possible. The basis of integration was the reduction of fragmentation, the elimination of the many parallel faculties and degree subjects, the development of up-to-date education structures and the strengthening of certain urban institutions. By the end of the process of integration in 2000, only 30 of the former 55 institutions survived. Nevertheless, several problems turn out to be unsolved. The reason for one was that some of the institutions had become deeply indebted before being combined with others, and the debt had to be taken over by the newly combined institution. This caused, and still causes, serious problems for several institutions which had been well-run and solvent up to then. In some places, lobby interests won over, and institutions were combined for no good reason. There are provincial universities with faculties in three different towns, which will never make a genuine university campus, and will never make it possible for students to combine their subjects with those taught at other faculties. The result is that there are certain departments that exist in triple form because of the fragmentation.

Thus, higher education in Hungary has become ripe for a complete overhaul; this is what the current structure, well-nigh impossible to finance, and the increasingly obvious decline of teaching standards

demand, and so does the need to adapt to European trends. According to plans, the transformation will be accomplished in two stages. This year, the entrance exam will be replaced by two-level secondary school finals, and from next year on, only degree subjects offering a three-year basic training will be launched. On completing it, students will receive a degree similar to the Anglo-Saxon type of bachelor degree, which, according to the Ministry's plans, will serve as a basis for a further two years of study for a master's degree taken by a select few, in any case, far fewer students than now studying at universities. This also means that after three years, the universities, too, will have to release the majority of their students, keeping only the best for continued master's studies.

The original principles of the two-level "matura" promised for 2005, however, ran aground before they were introduced, blocked by the resistance of the universities. The original idea behind the new kind of secondary school finals was that the condition for entry into elite higher education, to the universities, should be passing the higher level "matura". The obvious objective would have been reducing the number of undergraduates by actually selecting the best. That, however, ought to have entailed changing the system of financing the universities, for instance, by compensating for a lower number of students with a higher per-capita support. This, however, was not included in the plans, and the universities, afraid of losing a large number of students and capitation grants by introducing the requirement of the higher-level "matura", decided in 2003 that, with the exception of the foreign language departments, they will accept the middle-level "matura" at all faculties. Naturally the colleges had planned to require that level from their future students from the very start.

The middle-level exam, however, does not make proper selection possible. Trying to salvage what could be salvaged, the government therefore decided in December 2003 that a raised-level "matura", when passed with at least mediocre marks, should be worth seven points for each admittance subject. Additional bonus points will be awarded for two medium or upper degree C-type foreign-language grades too, thus candidates may, as opposed to the maximum of 120 points achievable without bonus points, gather as many as 144 points. The new system completely upset the preparation strategies relied on up to now. It can already be seen that chances for equal opportunity will hardly be improved by the new system. Thus, students whose parents have enough money to spend on foreign language tuition will be at a distinct advantage. The maximum of 20 bonus points obtainable thereby (two languages are taken into account, and an upper level exam will be worth 10 points) may have a decisive role in next year's admissions. ❧

Miklós Müller

A Martyr of Science

Ervin Bauer (1890–1938)

What is life? This remains a perennial question which has received and receives hundreds of different answers. These depend on the developmental state of science at any given time and on the beliefs of the person giving it. Ervin Bauer raised this question in the first third of the last century and tried not only to give a convincing answer but also to develop from first principles a consistent theoretical framework that would account for all known manifestations of life. A friend of his, Boris Petrovich Tokin, who did so much later to keep Bauer's name alive, said that

> Bauer's dream of theoretical biology was similar to Einstein's goal in physics to create a single equation that encompasses the "Essence of Nature," from which all physical phenomena can be derived.[1]

The sentiment is topical in this Year of Physics, when we celebrate the centennial of the publication of Einstein's seminal papers that changed our view of the World. As we know, neither Einstein himself, nor modern physics have reached this Holy Grail yet. Biology was much less likely to do so in those remote years. Even today, however, Bauer is often presented in the Russian and Hungarian literature as an outstanding scientist, who was much ahead of his time and is often regarded as one of the key founders of theoretical biology. His fundamental "principle of the permanent inequilibrium of living matter", dubbed "Bauer's principle", is often quoted. What follows is an attempt to retell his complicated and tragic life and the curious afterlife of his work. Details of his elaborate theory and of its significance for contemporary biology, however, cannot be discussed in this brief note.

Ervin Bauer, or Ervin Simonovich Bauer, as he was known in his final years, was born in 1890 and died in 1938. His life was that of a typical Hungarian intellectual of the beginning of the 20th century, framed by the First World War, the Spanish flu pandemic of 1918, the short-lived Hungarian Soviet Republic of 1919, followed by a search for a new home, where he could live quietly and fulfill his scientific dreams. The *Wanderjahre* took him, together with his

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Ervin Bauer and Margit Kaffka in Fiume. Summer 1914. MTA Archives, MS 5616–81.

second wife, Stefánia (Stefi) Szilárd, to Göttingen, Prague, Berlin and finally in 1925 to the Soviet Union, to Moscow and Leningrad, where, after receiving much scientific recognition, the Stalinist terror swallowed up both of them.[2] Today he is remembered both in his native and in his adopted country, the Soviet Union and its successor states, although for a long time he was a "non-person" and his name was not to be mentioned. Elsewhere in the world he is essentially unknown.

Ervin Bauer was born into an educated family. His father taught in a *gimnázium,* he was a linguist who translated German classics into Hungarian and also published papers on linguistics. His mother was also highly gifted. Ervin was the youngest of three. His older brother, Herbert, became a well known literary figure and film theore-tician under the name Béla Balázs. (See Nicholas Vázsonyi's article, pp. 141–153) His sister, Hilda, also older than Ervin, studied languages. Living in such an environment, Ervin movied in literary circles. Among his many friends was the young Georg Lukács, the philosopher. Ervin wanted to study mathematics, but at the request of his mother, he studied medicine in Budapest and Göttingen. Already as a student he was engaged in research and had his first original paper published before obtaining his medical degree. He passed his accelerated final examinations in the fall of 1914, to be drafted immediately into the Austro-Hungarian army.

In the spring of 1914, the medical student Ervin fell in love with a well-known writer and poet, Margit Kaffka, who was 11 years his senior. His feelings were ardently reciprocated. While travelling in Italy in August, they learned in Venice that war had broken out, returned quickly to Hungary and got married. Their marriage was happy although it was difficult for them to spend time together. Ervin was soon posted to the eastern front and served later in a military hospital in Temesvár (Timişoara in Romania) far from Budapest. Letters expressing their love and longing for each other make poignant reading. In Temesvár Ervin was able to do some research and published several papers. He became interested in general problems of the living world and began formulating his concepts of theoretical biology at that time. From a letter to his wife dated October 28, 1918:

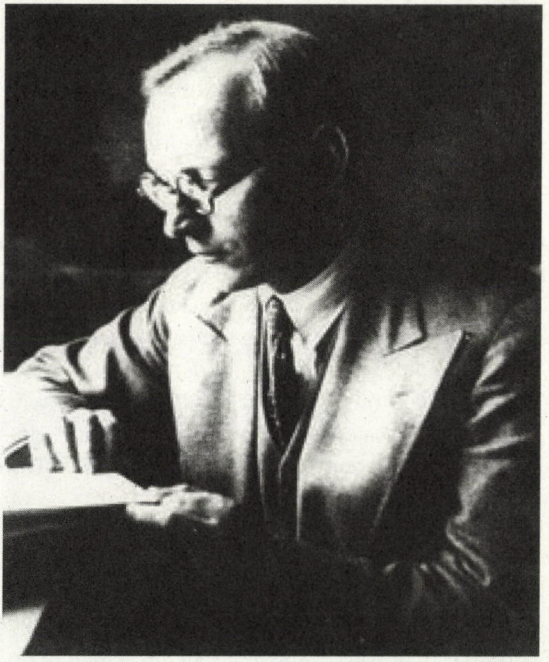
> ...I am deep in work... If we just could be together in Pest... It is true that I am handicapped, because I constantly keep thinking about biology [...] I accumulated many ideas and would like to work on all of them at the same time.[3]

From the memoirs of Bauer's sister, Hilda:

> Ervin read his paper to Margit and when I visited them... Margit opened the door. I immediately noticed that something extraordinary happened. Her eyes were shining and instead of greeting me, she blurted out: "Hilda, I married a great man." She was so taken by what she has heard.[4]

Their happiness did not last long. The Spanish flu swept through Europe and Margit died on December 1, 1918. Margit's last hours are described by her attending physician. Margit asked her to

> "tell my husband, whom I adored and who made me so happy... that he should not mourn me... He should marry soon again, but only to a woman... who will guide him to great heights, just as I did..."[5]



Ervin Bauer in his Leningrad years. Courtesy Svetlana Bauer.

The year 1919 was as difficult for Bauer, as it was for most Hungarians. After the fall of the Hungarian Soviet Republic, he had to find a new country to live in. He married Stefánia Szilárd, who fullfilled all that Margit prophesied. She was a loving companion and a gifted mathematician, who contributed decisively to the development of Bauer's theoretical concepts. In the difficult years of their exile they tried to settle somewhere in a tolerant environment. They lived briefly in Göttingen, then some years in Prague, where Ervin worked in the medical faculty. Their life was far from luxurious. As their Prague friend, the Hungarian poet and physician Imre Forbáth describes,

> their poverty and modesty were proverbial. Bauer had a single worn suit, two shirts and a few books. But we were often together in their friendly home, a single room in the building of the Institute, where we helped to prepare a simple supper and discussed politics and science."[6]

This period was, however, scientifically productive. In addition to several shorter papers, the first version of Bauer's theoretical work appeared in Germany during this time, with the telling title of *Fundamentals of a Pure Scientific Biology*.[7] This was an amazing achievement for someone who had practically no time to do his work.

After Prague, they moved to Berlin in search of a better post. It remains unknown whether they wished to settle there permanently or, as Forbáth implies, they regarded Berlin as a temporary home, until they obtained permission to move to the Soviet Union. At any rate, Bauer found no long term position and worked first in a

cancer research institute and subsequently for a pharmaceutical company looking for a treatment for cancer.

Eventually, in 1925, invited by Semashko, the Peoples' Commissar for Health, the Bauers moved to the Soviet Union, the country of their dreams. This was not an unusual choice for a Communist scientist in the mid 20s. Bauer probably became committed to communism during the Hungarian Soviet Republic. His correspondence with Margit reveals him as a pacifist but not a politically engaged man, while Forbáth describes his Prague years already as those of a person who faithfully fulfilled all tasks set by the leadership of the party in exile.

His biographer, Tokin, sketches an idyllic life for the Bauers in the Soviet Union, which is probably not entirely true. Certainly they found employment in leading institutions, and his work seems to have progressed well, as shown by the numerous experimental papers he wrote in these years. Yet Bauer spent even his relatively short time in the Soviet Union in three different institutions and in two different towns. Until 1931 he worked in the Obukh Institute of Work Hygiene as head of the Department of Experimental Pathology and General Biology. Published papers from this period describe mundane improvements in routine blood tests, but Bauer also achieved here the publication of the second version of his magnum opus, *The Physical Principles in Biology*.[7]

Soviet science, and biology in particular, saw some immense battles in the late 20s and early 30s among scientists interpreting differently the role of dialectic materialism in biology. The end of the New Economic Policy and the beginning of the Great Breakthrough, (in simpler terms, the establishment of Stalin's absolute authority in all areas of life, including science) pushed much of the old guard into the background (or into something worse) and a young generation took over.

We do not know what role, if any, Bauer played in these changes. His early acceptance of dialectic materialism as a guiding principle in scientific research is clear from a number of his general papers. Just as an example, a 1928 paper of his bears the title, "Dialectics and Natural Sciences".[8] I would not dwell on this topic, were it not for an interesting coincidence. One of the "Young Turks" was the already mentioned Tokin, who was an active leader of the new trend. He was named the new director of the Timiryazev Institute of Biology of the Communist Academy, with the task of introducing a new regime into biological research. In retrospect, this institute, and Tokin himself, played a positive role in the development of experimental biology in the Soviet Union. One of Tokin's first actions in 1931 was to invite Bauer to organise a team for general biology. Bauer moved from the Obukh Institute and successfully established a productive research team. This new place also provided him with the environment needed for intense work on his great monograph. Motivations for the invitation and its acceptance remain hidden.

In 1933 Bauer moved to Leningrad to head the Department of Cancer Research and subsequently the Department of General Biology of the Leningrad Division of the All-Union Institute of Experimental Medicine, the most prestigious medical research institute of the Soviet Union. The names linked to it, such as I. P. Pavlov, L.A. Orbeli, K.M. Bykov, S.J. London, A.S. Speransky bear witness to its importance. Bauer organised an active team and it was at this new, stimulating place that he finished and published his major monograph. Their son describes a harmonious, busy but friendly family environment, so tragically shattered in 1937.

Bauer was highly respected and was regarded as a major authority by his colleagues in the Soviet Union. He was asked to contribute, in collaboration with two young scientists, the entry "Life" to the *Large Soviet Encyclopedia,* intended to be the definitive summary of knowledge for the Soviet Union.[9] The text was also prepublished in a major ideological journal to solicit comments, but it seems that no major objections were raised. A further testimony to his authority was the commission to edit a textbook of *General Biology for Teachers' Colleges.*[10]

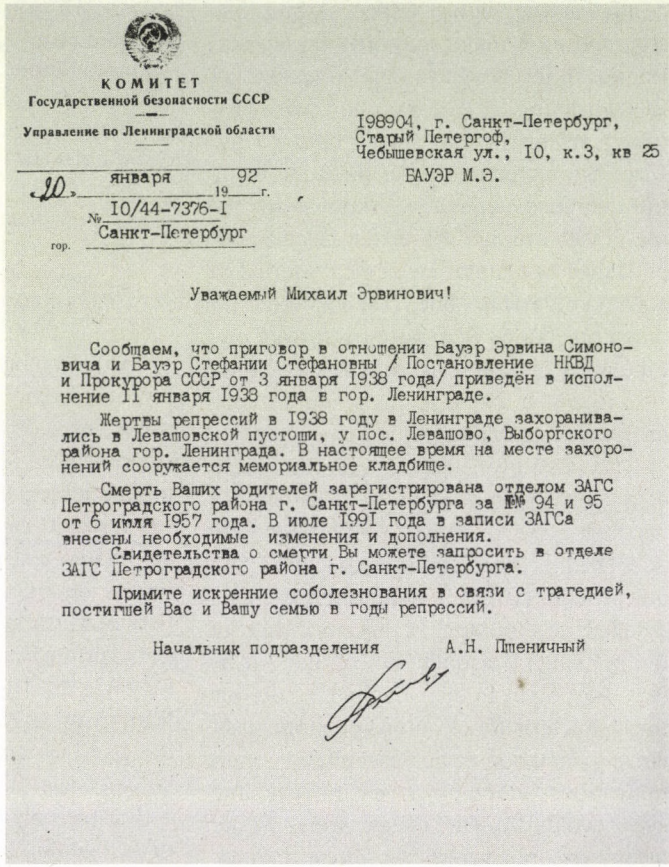
This period was the high point of his life as a scientist. In 1935 the third version of his major work, *Theoretical Biology* was published in Leningrad in 5200 copies, and quickly sold out. This volume represents a detailed development of his "principle of the permanent inequlibrium of living matter." Starting from this principle, he derives the characteristics of various phenomena of life, e.g. metabolism and assimilation, multiplication, adaptability, excitability and even evolution. His theses were by no means uncontroversial. An article anouncing the publication of this book and briefly outlining its content was published in the journal *Socialist Reconstruction and Science.*[11] The editors preceded it by a commentary that is worth quoting:

> Prof. E.S. Bauer developed his ideas over 15 years, beginning with the publication of the *Grundprinzipien der rein naturwissenschaftlichen Biologie* in 1920. These ideas are to be presented in detail in his *Theoretical Biology,* which will leave the press this summer [...] These ideas are of great theoretical interest, providing a completely new and original concept of living substance, based on the principle of permanent inequilibrium [...] [The author's] views are often in contradiction with those generally accepted. Suffice it to mention the paradox, well argued by Prof. Bauer, that 'the raw material for the evolutionary process is provided by the losers and not by the victors in the struggle for life.' These views deviate from the accepted ones, they are bold and unexpected [...] Many ideas of Prof. Bauer will provoke opposition, many will require experimental verification, but what is the most important in this work is the consistent application of a dialectic approach to solving the main problem of biology, the problem of living matter.

Bauer's monograph clearly represented an outstanding contribution to the biological sciences of his time. The systematic development of a self-consistent theory of living matter and life in general, however controversial it might have been, should have stimulated extensive further work and extensive discussion. That it did not enter the pool of widely known scientific ideas and did not exert its deserved major impact on biology was due to two circumstances. Its publication in Russian certainly kept it out of the hand of most biologists. This problem still persists and even today the book is accessible only to those who read Russian or Hungarian. It looked likely that after its appearance a translation into English or German would have been published soon. The political situation in the Soviet Union and the tragic fate of the author resulted, however, in the complete disappearance of the book from circulation and no reprint or translation could be considered for a long time.

The Bauers were arrested by the KGB on August 4, 1937, during their summer vacation, accused of spying for a foreign country and condemned to death. This was the time of the great purge when trumped up charges were used against just about everybody who had migrated to the Soviet Union from the West, with only few surviving. The Bauers were shot on January 11, 1938 by Senior Lieutenant A.R. Polikarpov of the Leningrad NKVD and interred in a mass

Letter to Bauer's son, Mikhail, from the Leningrad Division of the State Security Commission (KGB). Courtesy of Mikhail and Svetlana Bauer.



КОМИТЕТ
Государственной безопасности СССР

Управление по Ленинградской области

198904, г. Санкт-Петербург,
Старый Петергоф,
Чебышевская ул., 10, к.3, кв 25
БАУЭР М.Э.

«20» января 92
19 г.
№ 10/44-7376-I
гор. Санкт-Петербург

Уважаемый Михаил Эрвинович!

Сообщаем, что приговор в отношении Бауэр Эрвина Симоновича и Бауэр Стефании Стефановны / Постановление НКВД и Прокурора СССР от 3 января 1938 года/ приведён в исполнение 11 января 1938 года в гор. Ленинграде.

Жертвы репрессий в 1938 году в Ленинграде захоранивались в Левашовской пустоши, у пос. Левашово, Выборгского района гор. Ленинграда. В настоящее время на месте захоронений сооружается мемориальное кладбище.

Смерть Ваших родителей зарегистрирована отделом ЗАГС Петроградского района г. Санкт-Петербурга за №№ 94 и 95 от 6 июля 1957 года. В июле 1991 года в записи ЗАГСа внесены необходимые изменения и дополнения.
Свидетельства о смерти Вы можете запросить в отделе ЗАГС Петроградского района г. Санкт-Петербурга.

Примите искренние соболезнования в связи с трагедией, постигшей Вас и Вашу семью в годы репрессий.

Начальник подразделения А.Н. Пшеничный

Translation of the letter:

[Seal of the SOVIET UNION]
State Security Commission of the SOVIET UNION
Leningrad Division
January 20, 1992
No. 10/44-7376-I
City of St Petersburg

198904, St Petersburg
Stary Petergof
10 Chebyshevskaya street, block 3, apartment 25
BAUER M.E.

Dear Mikhail Ervinovich,

We inform you that the judgment against Bauer Ervin Simonovich and Bauer Stefaniya Stefanovna (Decision of the NKVD and the public attorney of the Soviet Union of January 8, 1938) was carried out in Leningrad city on January 11, 1938.

The victims of the 1938 repressions from Leningrad were interred in a neglected, vacant area near the settlement Levashovo, Vyborg district of Leningrad. A memorial cemetery is being erected over the site of interment.

The deaths of your parents were entered in the municipal registry of the Petrograd District, city of St Petersburg under numbers 94 and 95 on July 6, 1957. Necessary corrections and additions were entered in the registry in July 1991.

You may obtain death certificates from the municipal registry of the Petrograd District, city of St Petersburg.

Please accept our sincere condolences for the tragedy experienced by you and your family in the years of repression,

Subdivision Head
A.N. Pshenichnyi

grave. Until recently all references implied that the Bauers were sent to the Gulag and that Ervin died in 1942, sometime during the war. In 1954 both were rehabilitated with all charges withdrawn. In spite of their innocence being officially declared, the fact and date of the execution was kept secret. The family learned the truth only in early 1992.

Ervin Bauer's sons were only children when the parents were taken away, Mikhail twelve and Karl only two. Mikhail was old enough to retain memories of the arrest. Both children were raised in orphanages run by the NKVD, were eventually separated and Karl was given a different family name. The two brothers found each other only after many years and both now live in St. Petersburg. Their tragic and adventurous fate deserve retelling but this is beyond the scope of this article.

Bauer's Russian books shared the fate of their author. Like other books by "enemies of the people," the copies were removed from all libraries and pulped. Only a few copies were kept in special collections of selected libraries and in the personal collections of a few brave souls. I quote from a book by S. E. Shnol:

> I heard the name of Ervin Bauer from my teacher, Sergey E. Severin. We were discussing some central questions of biology. I was curious whether the basic facts of biology could be deduced from a few fundamental principles. [My teacher] kept quiet for a while and then said in a low voice—we were alone in his office—"You know, it seems as if I heard somebody else [...] It was a long time ago and people hardly understood his thinking. Please do not mention my name but try to get Ervin Bauer's *Theoretical Biology* from somebody." I found the book... at a friend of ours and I was much impressed."[12]

Shnol became a champion of Bauer when it was still forbidden to utter this name.

Bauer's name reappeared in Hungary in the 1960s. Tokin, a friend and superior of Bauer in the 1930s and later a professor at the Leningrad State University, regarded it as his duty to revive the memory of a scientist cut down in the most promising and productive period of his life. Tokin visited Hungary repeatedly and used his visits to reacquaint the Hungarians with Bauer. He collected documents and interviewed family members, friends and colleagues of Bauer, both in the Soviet Union and in Hungary, and wrote a small biography with an overview and evaluation of Bauer's scientific achievements.

In Hungary Bauer, first an exile, then persecuted in the Soviet Union, was remembered only as a mythical figure by a few people but certainly not known as a scientist. In the autumn of 1962 Tokin gave a talk on Bauer and his work at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.[13] This was the beginning of the renaissance of Bauer in his native country, soon to be followed by the publication of a biography by Tokin in Hungarian in 1965.[14] These events were reported in the periodical press and the name of Ervin Bauer slowly emerged from obscurity. Even the head of the Party, János Kádár, thanked Tokin in a personal note, as mentioned in a brief report in the newspaper of Leningrad University.

The Hungarian Academy of Sciences decided to publish a Hungarian translation of *Theoretical Biology* soon after the publication of Tokin's book. The translation appeared in 1967. Indicating the rarity of the original edition, the translator had to work from a photocopy and never even saw the original. The Hungarian press published some comments on the appearance of the book. The published Hungarian version was more a homage to Bauer than an attempt to contribute to scientific discourse. Scientists in Hungary welcomed the book, however.

Shnol regarded *Theoretical Biology* as so important that for years he kept doing everything possible to have the book reprinted in the Soviet Union, without success, however. Finally he sought the help of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and enlisted a small team of Soviet and Hungarian Scientists for this project. It took many years, but finally these efforts were crowned with success. In 1982, quite a few years after the publication of the Hungarian translation, a book appeared that contained the facsimile of the Russian original but only an extended summary in English. Curiously this edition does not even mention the existence of the previous Hungarian version and contains a bibliography that ignores the significant amendments made in the Hungarian version of Tokin's biography.

A few copies reached scientists in the Soviet Union. A former colleague of Bauer's, G.G. Vinberg gave a warm welcome to this volume in the largest Russian popular science magazine.[15] Tokin devoted his 1988 book to it, (see note 1) in which he analysed Bauer's views in detail and challenged Shnol's interpretation of Bauer's theory. Both reviews address a Russian readership and do not even presume that the book will reach its intended target. Another mishap happened in the fate of this work. The central foreign trade company, Mezhdunarodnaya Kniga (International Book) did not distribute the book in the Soviet Union, and essentially all copies remained in Hungary. It will remain a mystery whether the book was simply not ordered by Mezhdunarodnaya Kniga or, as Shnol assumes, the company exerted excess vigilance. Whatever happened, in contrast to their Hungarian colleagues, Russian scientists had still no access to the work of this outstanding scientist, rehabilitated years earlier by the Supreme Court of the Soviet Union.

Shnol and others did everything possible to keep Bauer's work alive in the Soviet Union. They organised a symposium in Pushchino on the centenary of his birth. Among the guests of honour were both of Bauer's sons and his granddaughter, Svetlana. Bauer's work was discussed and commented on in a number of lectures. The published proceedings contain 22 papers. A special feature of this volume is the publication of a stenographic transcript of a lecture Bauer gave in May 1935 the material of which was recently discovered in the archives of the Academy of Medical Sciences of the Soviet Union.[16]

The adventurous fate of this book came to a full circle in 2002, almost three quarters of a century after its original publication, when a reprint of Bauer's chef d'oevre was published in the town now again named St. Petersburg. The volume was edited by Yurii Pavlovich Golikov, head of the Museum of the Institute of Experimental Medicine, Ervin Bauer's last place of work. Historical justice was thus served and the book finally reached its originally intended readership. The world scientific community, however, still has no easy access to this historical work. The 1982 reprint with its extended summary in English has remained essentially unknown. I am aware of only one review in an East German journal and none in English.

Since Bauer's time the face of biology has undergone a sea change. Our current understanding of living matter has made obsolete most specific aspects of Bauer's theoretical constructions. It would be futile to try to imagine how Bauer himself would have accommodated the new paradigms. The historical and linguistic barriers to the dissemination of his ideas when they were developed were tragic, as was his personal fate. None of this should, however, obscure the memory of a great original thinker. ❧

NOTES

1 ■ Tokin, B.P. (1988) "Theoreticheskaia biologiia i biofizika (Zametki v sviazy s tvorchestvom E.S. Bauera)" (Theoretical Biology and Biophysics [Notes on the work of E.S. Bauer]). Trudy Leningradskogo obshchestva estestvoispytatelei, 88 (1), 8–50. (All translations of quotes and references are from the originals by the author.)

2 ■ Documentary evidence on Bauer's life is scanty for the period after his emigration. The short biography of Ervin Bauer by B.P. Tokin was published in three languages: in English in the 1982 reprint of the *(Theoretical Biology* (see footnote 14); in Russian in Tokin, B.P. (First edition 1963 and second amended edition 1965) *Theoreticheskaia Biologiia i Tvorchestvo E.S. Bauera,* Izd. Leningradskogo Gosudarstvennogo Universiteta, Leningrad; and in Hungarian Tokin, B.P. (1964) *Elméleti Biológia és E.Sz. Bauer Munkássága.* Theoretical Biology and the Work of E.Sz. Bauer) Budapest, Akadémiai Kiadó. A brief, amended biography is included in the 2002 reprint of the *Theoretical Biology* (see note 14). Bauer's son, Mikhail Bauer tells much about his childhood in his recently published memoires: Bauer, M. (2003) *Vospominaniia Obyknovennogo Cheloveka,* ASSPIN, Petergof.

3 ■ Bauer's letters to Kaffka, OSzK manuscript div.

4 ■ Bauer, Hilda (1985) *Emlékeim. Levelek Lukács-hoz.* (My Memories. Letters to Lukács) MTA Filozófiai Intézete, Budapest..

5 ■ Dr. J.B. (Jaulusz Borbála) (1949) "Kaffka Margit utolsó napjai" (The Last Days of Margit Kaffka). *Válasz,* January issue, p. 40–41.

6 ■ Forbáth's letter to Tokin (In German). MTA Archives M5375/53.

7 ■ The three sucessive versions of Bauer's monograph are Erwin Bauer (1920) *Grundprinzipien der rein naturwissenschaftlichen Biologie* (Fundamentals of a Pure Scientific Biology), Springer Verlag, Berlin; E.S. Bauer (1930) *Fizicheskie Osnovy v Biologii* (Physical Principles in Biology), Izd. Mosoblispolkoma, Moskva, E.S. Bauer (1935) *Teoreticcheskia Biologia* (Theoretical Biology), Izd. Vsesoiuznogo Instituta Eksperimentalnoi Mediciny (VIEM), Moskva–Leningrad..

8 ■ Bauer, E. (1928) "Dialektika i estestvoznaniia" (Dialectics and the Natural Sciences). *Moskovskii medicinskii zhurnal,* (10–11), 17–28.

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10■ Vinberg, G., Dorfman, V., Morozov, B., Paramonov, A., Eskin, I. (1935) *Obshchaia Biologia. Uchebnik dlia vysshikh pedagogocheskikh zavedenii.* Bauer, E.S. red. (General Biology. Textbook for Teachers' Colleges, Bauer, E.S., editor). Uchpedgiz, Moskva.

11■ Bauer, E.S. (1935) "Principy teoreticheskoi biologii" (Fundamentals of Theoretical Biology). *Socialisticheskaia rekonstrukciia i nauka* (9)., 7–13. (Ot redakcii, p. 7)

12■ Shnol', S.E. (2001) *Geroi, Zlodei i Konfromisty Rossiiskoi Nauki* (Heroes, Villains and Conformists of Russian Science). Second edition. Kron-Press, Moskva.

13■ Tokin B.P. (1963) Az elméleti biológia és Bauer Ervin magyar és szovjet biológus munkássága. (Theoretical Biology and the Work of a Soviet Biologist) *Magyar Tudományos Akadémia Biológiai Osztályának Közleményei.* 6 (3–4), 18–35.

14■ Posthumus editions of Bauer's 1935 monograph: In Hungarian: Bauer Ervin (1967) *Elméleti Biológia.* Akadémiai Kiadó. This edition contains also the *Grundprinzipien.* In Russian with an extended summary in English: Bauer, E.S. (1982) *Theoretical Biology,* Reprint of the 1935 edition with a preface, a biographical and critical essay. Bauer, E.S. (1982) *Teoreticheskaia Biologia.* Perepechatka izdania 1935 g. dopolnennaia predisloviem, biograficheskom ocherkom i kriticheskoi statei. Edited by G.M. Frank, J. Tigyi, S. E. Shnol and A.A. Yamyatsin. Akadémiai Kiadó, Budapest. This volume also includes in Russian and in English an article by Shnol' on Bauer's principle of "permanent inaequilibrium," the biography chapter of Tokin's book and a bibliography of Bauer's works. The title page lists as sponsors the Academies of Sciences of both the USSR and Hungary. In Russian: Bauer, E.S. (1982) *Teoreticheskaia Biologia,* Edited by Iu. P. Golikov.. Rostok, Sankt-Peterburg. Includes a biography of Bauer by his son and Golikov and three essays discussing various aspects of Bauer's work.

15■ Vinberg, G.G. (1984) "Recenziia na budapeshtskoe izdanie knigi E.S. Bauera" (Review of the Budapest edition of E.S. Bauer's Book). Priroda (2), 120–122.

16■ Shnol', S.E. (Editor) (1993) *Ervin Bauer i Teoreticheskaia Biologia (K 100-letiiu so Dnia Rozhdeniia)* (Ervin Bauer and his Theoretical Biology (To the Centenary of his Birth)). Pushchinskii Nauchnyi Centr Rossiiskoi Akademii Nauk, Pushchino.

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MUSIC

Nicholas Vázsonyi

Bluebeard's Castle: The Birth of Cinema from the Spirit of Opera[1]

The Prologue

Béla Bartók's one act opera, *Duke Bluebeard's Castle (A kékszakállú herceg vára),* breaks with precedent. Before the curtain rises, even before the music begins, the ancient figure of a Prologue appears and speaks the opening text of Béla Balázs's libretto.[2]

Why is he there? What do his words mean? All too often, opera productions, recordings, academic discussions, even the one video, avoid these questions by omitting the Prologue entirely. Perhaps worse, the published German version of the libretto by Wilhelm Ziegler—based on Emma Kodály's first translation—imputes specific meaning to phrases left vague in the Hungarian. Similarly flawed, the English translation attempts to retain the poetic and rhythmic features of the Hungarian at the expense of rendering a literal equivalent.[3] Even recent scholarship (e.g. Frigyesi and Leafstedt) misrepresents the text, despite the declared intent to be literal. For purposes of further discussion, therefore, I offer here the complete text of the Prologue with my own literal translation:

1 ■ An earlier version of this essay, along with full scholarly apparatus, was published as: "*Bluebeard's Castle:* Staging the Screen—Screening the Stage," *arcadia* 36.2 (2001): 344–362.

2 ■ Béla Bartók and Béla Balázs, *A kékszakállú herceg vára,* Opus 11, Piano Score (Leipzig: Universal Edition, 1921), 5. All translations from the original Hungarian into English are my own and are literal rather than poetic.

3 ■ Two English translations are in circulation: Christopher Hassall's, published in the Universal Edition, and an even more fanciful version by Chester Kallman published in the booklet of several recordings dating from the 1950s and sixties. The Universal Edition orchestral score ((c) 1925) ends with a "word-for-word" translation of the Prologue both in German and English of which the former is more accurate than the latter.

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Oh I conceal the tale[4]	*Haj regő rejtem*
Where, where shall I hide it	*Hová, hová rejtsem*
Where was it, where not[5]: outside or in?	*Hol volt, hol nem: kint-e vagy bent?*
Old is the story, oh what does it mean,	*Régi rege, haj mit jelent,*
Lords, Ladies?	*Urak, asszonyságok?*
Behold, the song sounds.	*Im, szólal az ének.*
You all gaze (at me), I gaze at you.	*Ti néztek, én nézlek.*
Our eyelash-curtain is up:	*Szemünk pillás függönye fent:*
Where's the stage: is it outside or in,	*Hol a szinpad: kint-e vagy bent,*
Lords, Ladies?	*Urak, asszonyságok?*
Lamenting and happy	*Keserves és boldog*
Notable matters,	*Nevezetes dolgok,*
The world outside is full of feuding	*Az világ kint haddal tele,*
But that's not of what we die,	*De nem abba halunk bele,*
Lords, Ladies.	*Urak, asszonyságok.*
We gaze at each other, we gaze,	*Nézzük egymást, nézzük,*
Our stories we recount.	*Regénket regéljük.*
Who would know whence we bring them?	*Ki tudhatja honnan hozzuk?*
We listen and are amazed,	*Hallgatjuk és csodálkozzuk,*
Lords, Ladies.	*Urak, asszonyságok.*
Music sounds, the flame burns	*Zene szól, a láng ég,*
Let the play begin.	*Kezdődjön a játék.*
My eyelash-curtain is up.	*Szemem pillás függönye fent.*
Applaud when it has fallen,	*Tapsoljatok majd ha lement,*
Lords, Ladies.	*Urak, asszonyságok.*
Ancient castle, already ancient	*Régi vár, régi már*
The tale, making the rounds of it,	*Az mese, ki róla jár,*
You should also hear it.	*Tik is hallgassátok.*

4 ■ This essentially meaningless phrase evokes the formulaic opening associated with ancient epics, or troubador's songs, whose equivalents can also be found in the Greek, Roman and Germanic traditions. However, the literal meaning of the verb *"rejteni"* (to conceal) in this formula needs to be noted not only because the opera's dramatic structure is dependent on the tension between "concealment" and revelation but, even more compellingly, because Balázs's literal use of "rejteni" in the second line, I argue, undermines the formulaic meaninglessness in the first.

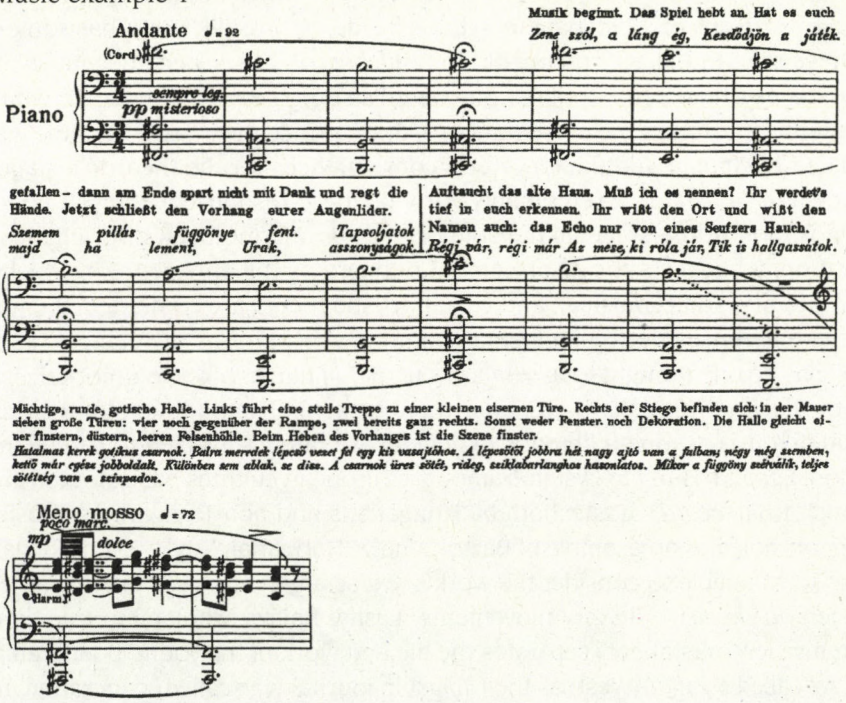
5 ■ This standard beginning of Hungarian fairy tales (English equivalent: "Once upon a time...") again needs to be understood literally, because of the second line. In the fairy tale, *"hol"* normally conveys a temporal notion ("when"), but the literal meaning ("where") needs to be considered not only because it thematizes the opera's central notion of spatial indeterminacy but, again more compellingly, because the literal meaning of *"hol"* is prefigured by the use of *"hová"* ("where [to]") in the second line. Thus, the second line functions as a decoder which unlocks the linguistic enigma contained in the formulas of the first and third lines.

Not unlike Richard Wagner before him, Balázs (re)constructs the sound and texture of a distant past when poems were recited aloud. The formulaic use of alliteration and lilting rhythm—*"Hol volt, hol nem" "Régi vár, régi már"* or *"Regénket regéljük"*—combined with an AABB rhyme scheme and a fifth refrain line *(Urak, asszonyságok)* evokes a mythic world whose vagueness is underscored by non-specific adjectives ("ancient," "old"). The search for spatial specificity ("where") is similarly resolved only with a generic location ("castle"). By dislocating time and space which, according to Kant, determine cognition, meaning itself is rendered indeterminate and unstable, as the text itself concedes ("oh what does it mean?"). The loss of context and thus meaning becomes even more significant later, but already here serves to undermine the notion of a coherent narrative, a loss compounded when the traditional location of dramatic representation—the stage—is itself placed in doubt ("where's the stage: is it outside or in?").

For those who don't already ignore the Prologue, the "in" has come to mean the stage as representation of Bluebeard's soul. But, if we read carefully, the Prologue never mentions "Bluebeard" or his "soul." Instead, he refers to visual and aural stimuli ("Behold, the song sounds") and he questions the physicality of the stage. Even the conventional theatrical device separating spectator and action is textually eliminated leaving only the "eyelid" to function as "curtain." The Prologue uses the "eyelash–curtain" metaphor twice but with an important difference. The first mention (second stanza) is of "our" eyelash–curtain and the reciprocal gaze between Prologue and audience, a gaze-dynamic repeated at the beginning of the fourth stanza. After the fourth stanza, the music begins slowly and quietly in the low strings, an event noted in the first line of the next stanza: "Music sounds." Upon hearing the music, the Prologue commands the play to commence. Now the "drama" proper may start. The eyelash–curtain-metaphor is repeated, but the pronoun is altered from first person plural ("our") to first person singular ("my"). The Prologue's own eyelash–curtain is now up and, commanding that there be applause when it has fallen, draws our gaze directly into and *through* his eye. "The camera draws my eye along, deep into the picture," writes Balázs elsewhere.[6] Accompanying this process is the music, constructed of four symmetrical four-bar phrases, which fuse the "Hungarian" pentatonic sound with the phrase structure of a Bach chorale, complete with fermatas. Listen how the already low strings playing in unison begin on F-sharp and move downwards, ending sixteen bars later on F-sharp an octave lower (see example 1):

6 ■ Béla Balázs, *Schriften zum Film,* 2 vols., eds. Helmut H. Diederichs & Wolfgang Gersch (Munich: Hanser, 1984). Here, *Schriften,* 2:56. Translations from the German are my own in the event that there is no published version.

Music example 1



The music pulls the listener in, like a camera slowly zooming in for a close-up. Text and music combined thus suggestively draw our gaze through the surface of the Prologue's eye where the unfolding drama of light and sound appears on the screen of his retina. We no longer see for ourselves but, rather, our vision becomes synonymous with his. We see only what is mediated through his eye: the lens of the camera.

Introduction

Duke Bluebeard's Castle, composed in 1911 and premiered in 1918, has by and large been interpreted as a symbolic journey through Bluebeard's soul, with Judith as the doomed explorer. This reading, loosely based on sporadic utterances by Bartók and Balázs, has been repeated time and again, from Sándor Veress's lengthy 1949 article, to essays by esteemed musicologist György Kroó, through to more recent books by Judith Frigyesi and Carl Leafstedt. To decode this enigmatic work in terms of psychological interiority is powerful and convincing, especially since this approach seems confirmed by the creators themselves. But it by necessity leaves many issues in the Prologue and elsewhere unresolved, and does violence to Balázs's marvelously open-ended text, whose vagueness resists definitive interpretation. This approach also quite literally puts the cart before the horse by using the drama to explain the Prologue rather than the other way around.

"Where's the stage: is it outside or in?" asks the Prologue. The conventional answer "Bluebeard's soul"—is enriched by an important clue from Balázs, not in

his comments on the opera itself, but in his later writings on film theory: "Film is *a surface art (Flächenkunst),* where 'what's inside, is outside'" (emphasis in original).[7] If we refer to Balázs's theory of film, *Bluebeard's Castle* becomes much more than just a psychological profile of Bluebeard's soul. It seems consumed with the most significant shift in the presentation of drama since the invention of the genre: the advent of cinema and the long-term consequences for the theatrical stage.

Bluebeard's Castle is a remarkably early operatic response to film. It ponders the dislocation of the stage as the sole or even dominant locus of dramatic representation; it suggests the displacement of opera as the only genre in which the textual-literary, sonic-musical, and visual-artistic media are combined; it emphasizes the differences between cinematic and theatrical forms of seeing.

Why has no one thought to use Balázs's theory of film as a key to unlock the mysteries of *Bluebeard's Castle?* I can offer three reasons. First, because of their often sheer ludicrousness, opera librettos in general are rarely subjected to careful interpretation. Second, Hungary's status amongst European cultures has coloured investigations of *Bluebeard's Castle* both by Hungarians and non-Hungarians. Musically it is pigeon-holed as an example of Bartók's new "Hungarian" style. Even Hungarian readers seem unable to consider the work's text as anything but a "provincial" echo of French *fin-de-siècle* literary movements. Lastly, Balázs scholarship traditionally and, in my view, mistakenly separates the life and work of the young poet/dramatist of the so-called *Nyugat* (West, as their flagship journal was called) generation, from the later exile period in Germany and the USSR after 1919 when Balázs turned to film and made a name for himself as a scriptwriter and pioneer of film theory. His visionary books and essays not only assess critical differences between film and theatre but also speculate on the as yet unrealized technical possibilities of the new medium. Is it not possible that the monumental impact of film had already begun to affect Balázs's thinking before he formally turned to the new technology?

Inside the eye of the Prologue

Once his words are spoken and the dramatic action commences, there is no further indication of the Prologue in the musical score or the stage directions. Productions and analyses that don't already cut him entirely assume that he exits the stage at this point. But there is no evidence in the score to support such an interpretation. What if the Prologue never leaves? If, as I am suggesting, the drama is mediated through the lens of his eye—the camera lens—then the ensuing action is contingent on his existence even if we are not aware of it. In fact, we must not be "aware" of it, just as we are not aware of the camera in a film. Hence a possible answer to the "outside/inside" riddle.

Balázs explains the basic experiential transformation between stage performance and cinematic representation: in film, "our eye and with it our conscious-

7 ■ Balázs, *Schriften,* 1:61.

ness" undergoes a shift in identification: "In the cinema the camera carries the spectator into the film picture itself. We see everything from the inside... for our eyes are in the camera and become identical with the gaze of the characters".[8] Perhaps this is why the score makes no mention of the Prologue's "exit".

The directions specify only that there is "total darkness" *(teljes sötétség).* The setting is a "mighty, round Gothic hall" *(hatalmas kerek gotikus* [sic] *csarnok)* which is "empty" and "dark" *(üres, sötét)* without "any windows or furnishing" *(sem ablak, se dísz).* Again, "Gothic" here signifies an indeterminate location rather than a specific historical style:

> There is, so to speak, no Gothic per se ... only a Gothic ... as we see it. Today, if a Gothic film were made not by an art historian, but instead by an artist with modern sensibility, then that Gothic would take on an "expressionistic" character.[9]

The freedom, even necessity, to interpret, reflected in this 1925 essay, is an important structural element in *Bluebeard's Castle,* necessitated by the deliberate vagueness of Balázs's stage directions. Today, the question of the stage director's role and responsibility is the most hotly debated issue in the world of theatre and opera. Balázs's text seems to anticipate this twentieth-century development, and his position in the debate is clear:

> Enduring works for the theatre can be interpreted anew and in the spirit of the times by succeeding generations of directors and actors. Those works which can no longer be re-interpreted, fade. Only the possibility of renewed misunderstanding guarantees new understanding.[10]

For a host of reasons—sociological, economic, aesthetic—the creation of new operatic works has decreased substantially over the last century and, with that, the emphasis has shifted to the revival of older (canonical) works. The ongoing debate concerns the dramaturgical scope of operatic revival. To what degree must the staging be "faithful" to the "intentions" of the composer and librettist, indeed what does "faithful" mean? The objective futility of the debate has done nothing to dissuade subjective expressions from all sides. All the more interesting then is Balázs's astonishingly early advocacy of what the Germans call "Regietheater" or directorial theatre—the activist intervention of the director in the process of theatrical or operatic revival. Balázs was clearly not the only voice during the 1920s to note theatre's changed circumstances. According to Stefan Zweig, Richard Strauss commented on the "death" of opera; and in 1927 Arnold Schoenberg blamed film in particular for the problem, predicting that with sound-colour-film, "the general public will hardly need to hear an opera sung and acted any more, unless a *new path* is found" (emphasis added). A year later, in 1928, Berlin music critic Adolf

8 ■ Balázs, *Theory of the Film: Character and Growth of a New Art,* trans. Edith Bone (New York: Dover, 1970), 48.

9 ■ Balázs, *Schriften,* 1:343.

10 ■ Balázs, *Schriften,* 2:179.

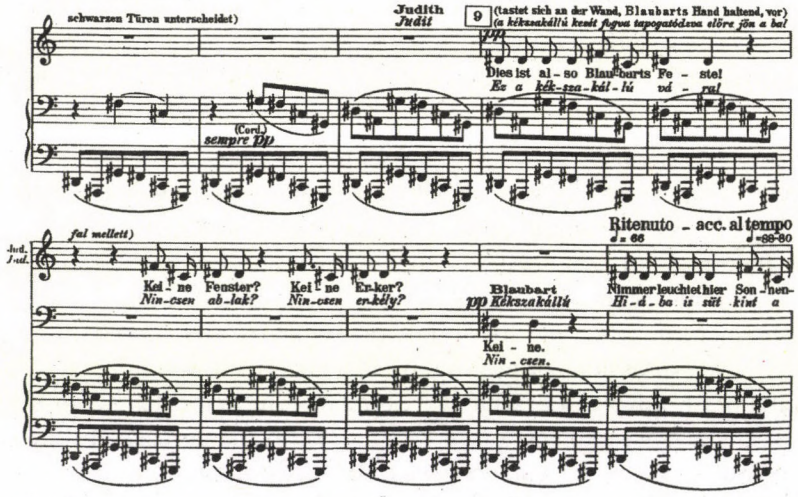
Weißmann echoed Schoenberg, stating that film "sucked the life blood" out of opera and postulated the "new path" as a renewal of operatic staging practice. Weißmann goes on to describe something like "Regietheater" as it was then practiced at Berlin's innovative Kroll Opera under the direction of Otto Klemperer.

This "new path" already seems delineated in *Bluebeard's Castle.* Balázs's dark "Gothic" hall is an empty space waiting to be filled: like a studio before filming; a darkened cinema before the movie has begun or, as filmmaker Hans Jürgen Syberberg hauntingly suggested in a different context: the "black studio of our imagination."

From operatic staging to cinematic representation

Theatrical trappings give way to the dark interior of a cinema as the silhouetted figures of Bluebeard and Judith appear standing in the doorway: "Behold, look: this is Bluebeard's castle. It does not glitter like your father's" *(Ime lássad: ez a kékszakállú vára. Nem tündököl, mint atyádé)*, he sings. The door closes and the interior returns to total darkness while the low strings slowly play a winding cycle again centered on F-sharp divided equally between eighth-notes, each cycle completed within one measure (see example 2).

Music example 2



Again and again, like the steady movement of film winding through a camera, or a warped phonograph each time tracing the same distinct contour, the repeated motif accompanies Judith as she feels her way, her eye getting used to the darkness. We grow acquainted with the castle's interior through her gaze; her eye is our eye: "the moving camera, the panoramic, moving device for the first time allows us to really experience space. ... Space remains continually in the picture, and is only combed, picked through, for the objects in it."[11]

11 ■ Balázs, *Schriften,* 2:99.

Judith:	So this is Bluebeard's Castle!	*Ez a kékszakállú vára!*
	Aren't there windows?	*Nincsen ablak?*
	Aren't there balconies?	*Nincsen erkély?*
Bluebeard:	No, none.	*Nincsen.*
Judith:	Does the sun shine outside in vain?	*Hiába is süt kint a nap?*
Bluebeard:	In vain.	*Hiába.*
Judith:	Does it stay cold? Does it stay dark?	*Hideg marad? Sötét marad?*
Bluebeard:	Cold, dark.	*Hideg, sötét.*

Judith covers her eyes *(Eltakarja a szemét);* Bluebeard observes: "Wouldn't it be better to be in your fiancé's castle? Roses run up white walls; the sun dances on the tiled roof?" But Judith does not want to go back: "Let me be ... I don't need roses, don't need sunlight," a sentiment she promptly contradicts: "your castle is so dark... Let's open the walls together: wind shall blow in, sun shall shine in... your castle shall glitter"—"But my castle doesn't glitter," he replies. Judith's conflicted reaction reflects the incompatibility between her evident expectations—a "glittering" edifice with white walls, and balconies, bathed in red (roses) and gold (sunlight)—and the reality of the dark, dank, cold environment in which she finds herself. The abandonment of the ostentatious and "glittering" opera house in favor of the austere dark cinema has its historical precedent in Wagner's conception of the festival theatre at Bayreuth, which is often described as the "original Odeon" with its concealed orchestra pit and emphasis on simplicity and complete darkness. For Balázs, too, the rejection of "everything decorative and ceremonial" contains both aesthetic and sociological dimensions:

> We've simplified... but this simplicity is not merely a matter of artistic technique! It is surely an essential change in taste, a complete transformation in our way of life... This general desire for simplicity stems from the skepticism of today's generation regarding the *traditional modes of expression* of the feudal and old bourgeois spirit (emphasis added).[12]

If the *"traditional modes of expression"* include theatre and opera, then Balázs's argument is that the demise of opera is a historical necessity. How ironic, then, that Balázs's one and only opera "stages" this process of displacement.

A gallery of images

One argument in favor of "Regietheater" is that it mitigates the banishment of opera to "museum art," a metaphor used by Theodor Adorno and others to suggest that opera in the twentieth century becomes a lifeless product placed on display as a gesture of preservation. I will return to the "museum" analogy later, but it is already hinted at when Judith becomes accustomed to the darkness and notices, in the walls of the interior, a gallery of seven large black closed doors:

12 ■ Balázs, *Schriften,* 2:62-4

Judith:	Why are the doors closed?	*Mért vannak az ajtók csukva?*
Bluebeard:	So no one should see behind them.	*Hogy ne lásson bele senki.*

Like so much else in the opera, this gallery is also inverted. While galleries normally function to present spectators with objects in their "best light," this one is designed for concealment. "You don't know what lies behind them" *(Nem tudod, mi van mögöttük),* says Bluebeard, and he later repeats: "you don't know what the door conceals" *(Nem tudod, mit rejt az ajtó).* The motif of "concealment," established in the opening lines of the prologue, is now represented visually by the closed doors. Like the modern consumer, Judith demands access and impatiently bangs at the first door until a deep sigh sounds: "What was this? What sighed? Who sighed?" *(Mi volt ez? Mi sóhajtott? Ki sóhajtott?),* she asks. Judith's inability to determine the source of the sound mimics our inability to distinguish between live and mechanical (re)production—a line blurred by the technological appropriation of human agency, a modern goal evident in the memorable advertising slogan of a popular cassette tape: "is it live or is it Memorex™." Judith's oscillation between "what" and "who" sighs thus underscores the shift in sound production between live theatrical performance and recorded cinematic replay:

> For us to become aware of a soft, fleeting sigh on stage, the director needs to stress it. ... In any event, the only way he can draw our attention to the soft sigh is by removing its unobtrusive hidden quality. ... On the other hand, the sound camera goes straight to it. And we hear the sound in its concealment as something inaudible.[13]

Bluebeard eventually gives Judith the first of seven keys. The door opens and from deep within a shaft of red light is projected out into the dark hall *(Az ajtó mögül mélyből jövő véres hosszú sugarat vet be a csarnok padlójára).* The "projection" of light marks yet another transformation. While theatrical "illumination" casts light to make a previously obscured object visible and thus meaningful, in film all the information is contained within the projected light itself.

"What do you see?" *(Mit látsz?)* asks Bluebeard. Once again, we rely on Judith's eyes since only the shaft of light is visible. Balázs's ideas about the new mode of seeing occasioned by film are significant: "My gaze and with it my consciousness *identifies* itself with the people in the film. I see that which they see from their own perspective. I myself have none."[14] "Film is the art of seeing. Its innermost tendency drives towards unmasking and discovery."[15] "Film has *dis*-covered a new world, which has been covered-up (concealed) from our eyes till now."[16] This process of "dis-"covery is literally enacted by Judith opening the doors.

After Judith describes what she sees, Bluebeard explains: "this is the torture chamber" *(Ez a kinzókamra).* Judith promptly assumes ownership of "the" torture

13 ■ Balázs, *Schriften,* 2:164.
14 ■ Balázs, *Schriften,* 2:56.
15 ■ Balázs, *Schriften,* 2:204.
16 ■ Balázs, *Schriften,* 2:56.

chamber: "your torture chamber is awful" *(Szörnyű a te kinzókamrád).* She repeats this transfer from general to particular with attendant shift in meaning after the second door reveals what Bluebeard terms "the armoury." Judith continues to demand that all doors be opened, reasoning, despite all evidence to the contrary, that fresh air and sunlight should be let in. George Steiner explains: "We open the successive doors in *Bluebeard's Castle* because 'they are there'.... We are hunters after reality, wherever it may lead." But I would counter that Judith's plea for the "reality" of sunlight is disingenuous. Instead, she is entranced by the seductive aesthetics of the projected light evidently irrespective of their often shocking content: "Here's the other stream, beautiful stream of light. Do you see it? Do you see it?" *(Itt a másik patak, Szép fény patak. Látod? Látod?).*

Judith goes on to open the first six doors revealing a gallery of images which Bluebeard in turn calls: 1. torture chamber, 2. armoury, 3. treasury, 4. hidden garden, 5. empire, 6. lake of tears. But even after he "identifies" what Judith sees, the significance and meaning of these images remains unclear: facets of Bluebeard's soul, say most interpreters. Maybe. Maybe not. "It is simply a thing per se. The picture in which it appears, doesn't refer beyond itself, neither to another thing, nor to its meaning."[17] This is Balázs's definition of "absolute film," a concept he articulated during the silent era for films depicting no event, no invented or personal story, but instead presenting objects freed of all context. "Absolute film" requires the elimination of spatial and temporal specificity, and results in an indeterminacy reminiscent of the Prologue. Like the contents behind the doors, "absolute film" suspends Kantian modes of perception (time and space): "The causal connection is absent... Instead, a thing is extracted from time and space and also from all causality. It is pure appearance, nothing but a vision. We are here in the sphere of absolute film."[18] If the images in the gallery are considered within the parameters of "absolute film," the necessary preservation of their meaninglessness accounts for Bluebeard's admonition: "You are going to see, but never ask. Whatever you see, never ask!" *(Látni fogsz, de sohse kérdezz. Akár mit látsz, sohse kérdezz!).*

Judith's self-destructive insistence on explanation sabotages the liberating potential of absolute film, and traps her within the limitations of her own constructed meaning. Her inquisitiveness seals her fate: "Judith, fear not, it's all the same now" *(Judith, ne félj, most már mindegy).* While George Steiner rightly understands *Bluebeard's Castle* as a critique of modernity, this sequence recalls the efforts of early twentieth-century filmmakers like Paul Wegener, who tried to resist the coopting of film by those who used cinema to satisfy popular tastes. Their oppositional stance continued theoretically with Adorno's indictment of the Hollywood culture industry, and programmatically with, among others, a group of leftist filmmakers dedicated to the subversive ideals of New German Cinema.

"Absolute film's" utopian potential is undermined not only by Judith's quest for

17 ■ Balázs, *Schriften,* 2:124.
18 ■ Ibid., 2:126.

meaning, but by a series of blood stains she subsequently notices covering the images. A musical "blood motif" accompanies her observation. But why does Judith never notice the blood when the doors first open? Balázs provides an important clue:

> What is the specifically filmic quality of the close-up, since theatre directors can also carefully point to details? It lies in the possibility of lifting an individual image out of the totality. Thus not only do we see the small atoms of life more clearly than on the stage, the director also takes our eyes along. On stage, we always see the entire image ....but in film, the director focuses our attention using the close-up and shows us the concealed corners within the wide angle shot... The close-up in film is the art of emphasis *(Betonung)*.[19]

It is as though Judith is first presented with a wide shot of the image and then, with the sudden change in music (literally: *"Betonung"*), sees a close-up of the blood spots. Paradoxically, perhaps, Balázs was the first to theorize the "close-up," a cinematic technique which undermines Balázs's own idea of "absolute film." The close-up manipulates context and intensifies meaning by forcing the eye of the viewer to focus on a certain spot. It exercises an authorial control inconceivable on the stage, and robs cinematic technique of "absolute film's" abstract potential.

The Seventh Door: death and transfiguration

The seventh door deviates from the pattern established by the previous six. Bluebeard tries even more stubbornly to withhold the key, relenting only after an extended argument in which Judith voices her suspicion that his former wives are locked behind the door. To her horror, she discovers not only that she was correct but that the three imprisoned women are still alive, albeit silent and "pale-faced" *(sápadt arccal)*. Are they being "projected," like the pale heroines in a silent film who move but emit no sound? Or are they like actors on a stage, "illuminated" and corporeal? While the preceding six doors suggested a gallery of projection booths reminiscent of today's multiplex cinemas, the seventh door straddles stage and screen. It is literally a "museum" which (dis)plays the moment of transition between two modes of dramatic representation.

Bluebeard explains that he found each of the women at a particular time of day: dawn, noon and evening respectively. He now perpetually identifies each wife with the time of day he found her: "Hers is now every dawn (noon / evening)" *(Övé most már minden hajnal [dél / este])*. The seventh door performs the shift from production to preservation and thus mimics the altered state of opera in the twentieth century which, according to Adorno, becomes "like a museum of bygone images and gestures, to which a retrospective need clings." Using the film analogy, the women, immortalized in Bluebeard's museum of living muses, are only shells of their former selves—all surface, no substance—timeless or sealed in time, captured on celluloid. They cannot age; they cannot change, but instead are condemned to repeat

19 ■ Balázs, *Schriften*, 1:82–84.

their appointed role in an endless loop. Robbed of their aura, they are immortalized in perpetual replay mode: Marilyn Monroe will be forever young because there are no images of her as an old woman. Balázs observes: in film, "the original artistic intent of the creator... is clearly and immutably 'immortalized'."[20]

In a sense, both opera and film fit the museum analogy, each engaged in their own particular task of preservation. The difference is that while film is a medium of preservation, the film industry tirelessly produces new works. Increasingly, opera survives largely on the revival of older works; it is a medium which is being preserved. But opera is not necessarily "dead," despite the meaning of "revival." Balázs makes an important point:

> That theatre which strove with imperfect means for the illusion of reality, means which colour-sound-film will soon have, that theatre is already redundant. But precisely for this reason, theatre will once again be theatre. ...Sound film will save the theatre.[21]

We need not belabour the point here that, of all theatre, the most distant from reality is opera. To paraphrase Balázs, then, the existence of film allows opera to be opera. His perhaps surprisingly positive evaluation of the impact film technology might have on the future of theatre thus compels a nuanced reading of the final moments in *Bluebeard's Castle.*

After Bluebeard introduces each of the three women, he turns his gaze to Judith: "I found the fourth at night ... yours will now be every night." He leads her to join the other three while Judith cries in futile desperation: "Be quiet, listen, I am still here" *(Hallgass, hallgass, itt vagyok még!).*[22] Judith is not being killed but instead undergoes a process of transfiguration. She literally loses her"self" (i.e. despite her protests, the "I" is no longer *still here*). Yet, paradoxically, she continues to exist. In film, Balázs points out: "The person is integrated as a mechanized part into a mechanical system and alienated from his individuality."[23] Judith, the insatiable consumer, is consumed, swallowed up and yet preserved for future consumption: forever lost, yet retained.

The seventh door closes and Bluebeard, enveloped by darkness, disappears with the words: "and now it will always be night" *(És mindég is éjjel lesz már),* as the music gradually withers away. Bartók's musical instruction—*perdendosi,* literally: losing itself—sonically accompanies Judith's fate.

The curtain falls and we too see only darkness, no Prologue. Have we the audience, the modern spectator, also become trapped—"integrated into a mechanical system"—our mode of viewing forever transformed by the advent of the camera?

20 ■ Balázs, *Schriften,* 2:179.

21 ■ Balázs, *Schriften,* 2:105.

22 ■ Bartók / Balázs, *Bluebeard,* 68. *"Hallgass"* is the imperative of the verb *"hallgatni"* which means both to "listen" and to "keep silent." My translation attempts to retain the ambiguity of the moment, while the standard German and English translations both assume that Balázs intends only the latter ("silence!").

23 ■ Balázs, *Schriften,* 2:196.

Concluding thoughts

The thematic ambiguity of loss and retention at the conclusion of *Bluebeard's Castle* mitigates the presumptively tragic ending. The textual, musical and visual darkness, commonly interpreted as representing "the tragedy of Judith and Bluebeard's lost love," or as an expression of "complete resignation," also functions as the state from which the opera began. The cycle from darkness to light to darkness re-enacts on stage the common experience of the audience in the (movie) theatre. Bluebeard is now self-sufficient in his home theatre, endlessly free to gaze at his gallery of images or his archival collection of preserved representations appropriate for any time of day or night.

The distinct modes of stage and screen which meet behind the seventh door continue to exist despite the suggestion of darkness. There, they perform the particular hybrid form of living death which distinguishes one medium from the other. While film is by definition not a "live" medium, it nevertheless serves as the dominant representational form of the contemporary and the current, no matter how thematically escapist. By contrast, although operatic performance is necessarily "live," the medium conveys outdatedness and, indeed, seemed outdated even at the beginning of the twentieth century accounting perhaps for the spate of operas retrospectively devoted to opera. This outdatedness becomes the pervasive aesthetic of works like Richard Strauss's *Ariadne auf Naxos* (1916) and *Capriccio* (1942) which avert their gaze from the present and, instead, indulge in nostalgic reverie for the bygone age.

Bluebeard's Castle instead looks ahead and responds to opera's crisis by suggestively hedging on the finality of death. The performance of an opera entails an interpretation—dependent on the director's own temporal and geographical context—an interpretation which the audience in turn must interpret. Films deliver the director's interpretation as an essential component. While the audience's interpretation of a film may change at each screening, the director's remains fixed. "Liveness," lost to film through mechanical reproduction, is retained in opera by the "liveliness" of interpretation combined with the "liveness" of performance. Balázs does not see the ascendance of one medium at the expense of the other. Rather, he advocates the full exploitation of the possibilities unique to each art form. This is certainly true for his later theoretical work and, in retrospect, also for his one and only opera.

Bluebeard's Castle mediates with marvellous ambiguity between the two forms of dramatic representation new and old: while film preserves in suspended animation what it embalms and repetitiously projects, opera retains its vitality through the transfigurative process of staging. In Bluebeard's Castle, there is room for both. ❧

A Master Biographer

Alan Walker Conversing with Gábor Csepregi

On the occasion of his 75th birthday, I was delighted to have the opportunity to interview Alan Walker who, amongst many other achievements, has written a magisterial biography of Franz Liszt.

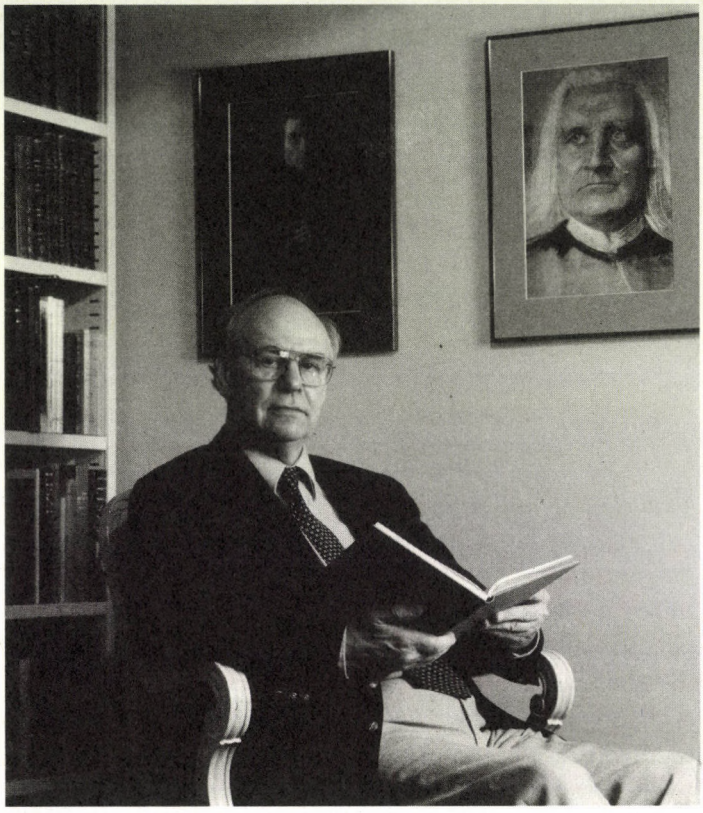
What brought you into music?

I can't remember a time when I didn't want to be a musician. My mother was musical and the first instrument I tried to play was the violin. I quickly gave it up for the piano. The great ambition of my childhood was to become a concert pianist. I was already in my early twenties when I realized that piano playing was an overcrowded profession and, while I was competent, I would never be outstanding. So I turned to writing about music. At that time, I worked on my first two books dealing with musical analysis and criticism. I also taught piano and music theory at the Guildhall School of Music in London. So I never lost touch with the practical side of music.

During your student years, who exerted a decisive influence on you?

My high school music teacher, John Brocklesby, was a wonderful human being. I would have done anything for him, because he aroused passion and enthusiasm for music in my heart. He was a Quaker, a local church organist. Sometimes he took me over to the church and allowed me to observe him practising. I was about fourteen at that time. I was fascinated by the motions of his feet and hands and, for a time, I wanted to become an organist. Much later, I studied musical analysis with Hans Keller. I was his private student. He taught me how to write.

Gábor Csepregi
is both professor of philosophy and president of the Dominican University College of Ottawa, Canada. His book, The Clever Body, *will be published later this year. He is editor of the scholarly journal* Science et Esprit.



He understood very well what one has to do to become a master of expository prose, as opposed to prose that is a nice perfume, a fine colour, and merely creates a mood. In musicology, you can either be very boring, by using a lot of jargon, which turns the reader away, or you can master the craft of writing, so that even difficult musicological matters become interesting and force the reader to turn the page. In my early days, I modelled my writing on the style of Hans Keller. Later I found my own "voice".

What do you feel you gained from your piano studies?

Having spent fifteen of the first twenty-five years of my life so intensely devoting myself to the piano, I think I can claim to possess an insider's knowledge of the repertoire. It is so important for a musicologist to be able to play an instrument, however poorly he or she does it. There are musicologists who happily enjoy a career writing about music, laying down the laws, but have no idea how to play a musical instrument. Music is basically something you do. You either create it or you reproduce it. You can also stand back and talk about it. But if you talk about it, you should at least have once been an insider. What would we say of a sports commentator who did not know how to play the game?

What prompted you to write a book on musical analysis and creativity?

I read an article by Hans Keller on musical analysis and I realized that he was the person with whom I wanted to study. He was right to say that all our knowledge of music arises from our intuitive experience of it. Just as our knowledge of grammar comes out of our intuitive grasp of the language, so does that of music. Or, to use another analogy, the edifice of knowledge that we call theology first arose from religious experience. I feel that something similar happens in music. Both the composer and listener have an unconscious connection to sounds. They need neither ask nor know what is really going on. They might be content simply to swim like the fish in the water. Some of us may want to go a little further however, and ask how does musical communication work. From these questions a theoretical picture of music starts to emerge. For the rest, there is no valid theoretical concept in music that did not first arise as part of intuitive experience.

You write about the unconscious identification of the listener with the composer's emotional impulse.

This is how children come to music. They have an immediate connection with music. In some cases we know that it is there before birth. I was always impressed with a Japanese experiment, published many years ago, showing how the recording of the mother's heartbeat calms the crying baby.

The susceptibility of the small child to sounds seems to be quite profound.

I once wrote an article on infant prodigies which was published in the British Medical Journal. Saint-Saëns was probably the greatest infant prodigy. He was described as a child "lacking in inexperience." He could recognize the sound of household noises at the age of eighteen months. Handel could sing before he could talk. Chopin was composing at the age of five. And we all know about the young Mozart. All these things fit into the notion that music is an intuitive thing. It is part of the human condition. And there is something else. It is possible to be an infant prodigy in music, but not in painting or writing. The other arts involve concepts and require the use of images from the outside world. But not in music. Schopenhauer reminded us that music is not a copy of the world, it is the copy of the will, a copy of the life of the mind. This great distinction has aroused a lot of controversy. But when you talk to artists, they agree that music falls into a special category. It is the infant prodigy that really proves the case, because he does not have to become a teenager before he produces something worthwhile.

So music is felt rather than rationally understood. In this sense, musical understanding is a communication between feelings.

I even developed a concept, which governed the way I taught music. Simply put: you can't teach anybody anything that they don't already know. I never liked to

stand up in front of the class and give a lecture on a Mozart string quartet if the class did not already know the quartet. Otherwise, they would have no point of reference. They had to listen to the piece many times before coming to the class. Only then were they ready to understand their understanding.

What exactly does music express?

People have tried and failed throughout the ages to put words to this. What music expresses is too complex, so forgive me if I put it into a simple language. Listening to music is like laughing and crying at the same time. Freud once referred to an "oceanic feeling," which once more is part of the human condition. There is a release of joy, which is mixed with sadness. An emotional world opens to all of us if we are susceptible to music. This was also the gist of Hans Keller's theory. Music unlocks elements of human psychology, which are otherwise repressed. For this reason music works so well as a therapy. You gain excess to your inner world.

What about the formal aspects of music?

The musical vocabulary of the great composers, the way they use the language of music, shows great variety. They all have acoustical fingerprints. If you listen to a lot of music, in a very short space of time, you immediately recognize the composer's identity. There is of course a proviso here. It is the strong personalities who have the unmistakable fingerprints. The weak personalities, those who copy from others or are subject to too many powerful influences, cannot be identified so easily.

What is the purpose of the rational explanation of music?

It is part of the human condition to ask questions, so why not do it about music? The fact that music is something that we create, experience and enjoy does not mean that we don't build up a framework of knowledge, as we would do about any other discipline. It is important that this intellectual edifice, which is terribly sophisticated, should not be misunderstood. Knowledge *about* music should never be confused with knowledge *of* music. Some of my colleagues argue that knowledge about music leads to knowledge and even love of music. For them, it is a bridge to understanding. I have to disagree. If that were the case, there would be no excuse for anybody misunderstanding any music whatsoever, since knowledge is freely available. Take, for example, the difficult music of the second Viennese School, which is still widely disliked by people in general and even by a large segment of the music profession. We have more knowledge about this school than almost any other period of music history. Why, then, does knowledge not increase our love of this repertoire, or any other for that matter? Knowledge is a bridge to nowhere. Knowledge comes from the inside out, not from the outside in. For the rest, you cannot really convert anybody to music; music converts you to itself. That is a rather despondent picture for the professional educator.

In the 1960s you worked for the British Broadcasting Corporation.

After my first book was published and various articles appeared under my name, I became a music producer at the BBC. In the beginning, my work consisted of writing presentation notes for the announcers to read at the microphone before concerts. This experience taught me the profound difference between the written and spoken word. The output of classical music at the BBC was so enormous that, after three years, I found the strain excessive. So, for the next two years, my job was divided between writing and going into the studio and working with artists. During the last five years of my ten-year stint, I created chamber music programmes, engaged artists, built the programme with them and brought it to the air.

What made the work interesting?

The BBC was the finest music conservatory in the world. I worked with some of the world's greatest artists. At that time, I also became interested in the music of Liszt. I began to think of producing the first series of Liszt's complete piano music. I was able to call upon Louis Kentner, John Ogdon, Shura Cherkasky, Joseph Weingarten, and Ilona Kabos, all very fine pianists. I met my future wife Valerie Tryon at the BBC; she was one of my favourite pianists, and she was included in my Liszt series as well. It was when I came to write the scripts for the programs that I realized that there was no good English biography on Liszt.

Who were the most interesting artists?

I worked three times with Arthur Rubinstein. On all three occasions, spread across a period of five or six years, he played the Ballad in G minor of Chopin. His performance was different on each occasion. When I spoke to him about this, he said: "My interpretation of that piece depends on the whereabouts of the piece in the programme. If it starts the programme, I have to play it differently than when it is at the end or in the middle." His remark taught me something about programme building. I always felt that a good programme, like a good work of art, is greater than the sum of its parts. The spacing of the works and the chronology of the programme have to be taken into account. There was for me a great pleasure to work with Yehudi Menuhin. At that time he would play with no other pianist than his sister, Hephzibah. He came in to hear the playback and said that I could choose the takes to use because he, the artist, was far too subjective. His broad-minded attitude and lack of arrogance impressed me.

Why did you leave the BBC?

I needed a new challenge and I thought that the best thing for me was to get back to academia. I came to Canada, because McMaster University offered me the position of chairman of the Department of Music. My task was to create academic programmes of study, engage faculty, and the university gave me time and

resources without which I could not have written my Liszt biography. The great paradox is that I had to cross the Atlantic to travel frequently to Hungary, Germany and Italy to undertake my research.

What makes a good biography?

Somerset Maugham once famously declared that there are three rules for writing a novel, but unfortunately nobody knows what they are. The same can be said about the biography. I nonetheless worked out for myself a set of precepts based on my own experience of biographical work. They spring from the recognition of the dual nature of biography: it is both a science and an art. Biography must not only be a true and accurate reflection of reality, of the life as it was lived, but the facts must be interpreted and placed before the reader in an appealing way.

How do you present the evidence?

Make the reader want to turn the page. The reader owes the writer nothing. Unless the writer is willing to go ninety-per-cent of the distance that separates him from the reader, he does not deserve to be read. Scholarship does not have to be dull, but often is. Too many musicologists have forgotten how to write fine expository prose. In the worst cases their work amounts to a "data dump." It has the stylistic merit of the New York telephone directory. It may be useful, but nobody will read it for pleasure.

Some critics challenged you that you have written an unbalanced story of Liszt.

There is a profound difference between mere balance and point of balance. If I decide to write a life of Saint Francis of Assisi, and have to find a negative thing to say for every positive one I wish to record, the narrative may be internally balanced, but it will not reflect reality. It is obvious that a biography of Saint Francis would inevitably veer towards the "saintly" end of the moral spectrum, for the sources themselves will drive me there. On the other hand, if I write a life of Adolf Hitler, and I have to find a positive thing to say for every negative one that I write, the narrative once more may be beautifully balanced, but it will be untruthful to the historical record. The sources will inevitably drive me towards the "evil" end of that same moral spectrum. The only question that really matters in a biographical work is how closely the narrative reflects reality. Furthermore, choosing the best structure for a musical biography is important, because we must also take account of the works that made the subject of the biography significant in the first place. We must decide whether the narrative is a "life and work" or a "mix and mingle"? Making the correct decision is the equivalent of laying the proper foundations for a building. Get it wrong and the narrative itself founders. A book, like a building, may collapse because the framework is faulty. The Germans are famous in music for the first type of structure—*Leben und Schaffen.* This division is often so complete that the biography requires two volumes, one

for the life and one for the works. But this method cannot be applied to everyone. In my Liszt biography I chose the latter structure, that of "mix and mingle." The subject itself will suggest its own strategy.

You spoke about your travels to Central Europe.

There is no substitute for visiting the places described in the narrative. I have somewhere called it the geography of biography. A survey of the buildings and streets along which the subject of the biography may have walked a hundred years earlier can be an exhilarating experience. And time spent walking around cemeteries inspecting tombstones can yield a hoard of biographical treasures. Paradoxically, the places where the bodies are buried very often bring them to life.

Do you try to look at things from your subject's point of view?

There have been biographies where the writer plays counsel for the prosecution, but they are rarely successful. The reason has to do with the psychological position each side represents. You must believe in the personality about whom you are writing. It has been well said that "to know is to love." At the very least, we can say that liking opens the door to truth. Disliking closes it. And there is one more thing. Let the subject choose you. It is a somewhat mysterious process, but anyone who has ever done anything out of deep conviction, rather than dull duty, will know what is meant. Biographers who cast around for "projects" are warning us in the clearest way imaginable that they do not have anything to say, and that they are going to insist on saying it. Arnold Schönberg's warning words come to mind: "An apostle who does not glow preaches heresy."

But being chosen surely does not mean being completely seduced by your subject.

Of course not. In my forthcoming book, *Reflections on Liszt*, which is about to be published, I am taking Liszt to task on a number of points. In my biography, I could hardly interrupt the narrative to tell him how to be a better father, and not to be so reckless with his money, and not to drink so much alcohol. What business is that of mine? So I thought that, ten years after the last volume has been published, I would like to write an open letter to Liszt. I am very respectful, I begin my letter by saying: "Dear and highly esteemed master." I deal with the issue of the children, the fact that he probably wrote too much music, and it might have been better for him to give more thought to a smaller number of pieces, and that he allowed himself to be influenced far too easily by women, particularly by the fortune seekers among them. Perhaps it is a bit bold of me to write this letter. However, I think I owe this to myself. In addition, no one will ever be able to tell me that I let him off too lightly.

While writing the biography, did you come to identify yourself with your hero?

"Hero" is perhaps the wrong term to use. There is some autobiography in every biography. Had it not been for my early background and my deep love of the piano,

I might have never ended up as Liszt biographer. When I suddenly realized that there was no good English biography, it was almost as if I met my destiny. When I first went to Hungary in 1977, my Hungarian assistant Veronika Vavrinecz, to whom I have always been grateful, said to me: "Remember, it takes a life to study a life." That is a very profound statement. If you are going to study someone's life, wouldn't it be arrogant to think that you can do this in two years? If it takes 75 years to live a life, why not to take 75 years to write about this life? I took 25 years. You cannot rush a biography of an individual like Liszt. This is why so much harm has been done. Biographers, generally, deal with the headlines, and the headlines, generally speaking, tend to be false. Somewhere, in the book, I have pointed out that, because it was Liszt's fate to be so famous, so young, his very appearance created an immediate need of publicity about his unique gifts. Publicity puffs were produced in great numbers and once something gets into print, it is impossible to eradicate it. In fact, you can never eradicate the printed word. All you can do is to contradict it.

What about the misunderstanding of Liszt's compositions?

Liszt's biggest problem has to do with his interpreters. His compositions are not performer proof. We leave a Chopin recital that has gone badly and say "what a poor pianist." We leave a Liszt recital that has gone badly and say "what a poor composer." If his music falls into the hands, as it often does, of someone who doesn't understand it perfectly, it can sound like second-rate music. Liszt was the greatest performer of his generation. He composed with the outlook of a performer and he played with the insight of a composer. He was the best interpreter of his own music. Take for example the *Transcendental Studies.* They attract pianists as moths are attracted to flame. We all know what happens to the moths; they get burned to a cinder. The real enemies of these studies are not the pianists who cannot play them; their incompetence is immediately revealed. The damage is done by those whose technique is only just good enough to play them. They attack these pieces with their myriad difficulties and leave the concert hall as if it was a battlefield or a gymnastic venue at the Olympics. Louis Kentner defined the right approach in these terms: "At the piano everything must be easy, otherwise it is impossible." Whatever the difficulties, they must be absorbed and made simple. If you can play these studies in an effortless way, hidden beauties are revealed.

Did your research lead you in any adventurous direction?

I am presently working on a book-about-the-book, so to speak, entitled *In the Footsteps of Liszt.* In that narrative I describe the unexpected things that can impede scholarship, including a broken right foot in Eisenstadt, lost luggage in East Berlin, being robbed of money outside the old Astoria Hotel in Budapest, and being inadvertently locked for several hours inside the burial chamber of Goethe and Schiller in Weimar. There are separate stories attached to each one of these incidents, together with an account of their amusing consequences.

How can we reconcile Liszt's more mundane life with his ongoing spiritual quest?

I always thought that this was a false diagnosis of Liszt's character. Liszt was very impressed when he received from the Russian diplomat Wilhelm von Lenz a copy of his book entitled *Great Pianists of our Time*. He was struck by a phrase: "Liszt's desire to become a priest came from the innermost core of his being. It was thematic." Von Lenz was very perceptive. The religious impulse was present in Liszt almost from the beginning. Being deeply religious, exposed to the basic tenets of the Catholic Church from his childhood, he lived his extraordinary life, but he never lost touch with his faith. We know that there was a time when he did not attend mass and confession. But, in the deepest sense, this surely is the life story of all of us. The basic ideals that we are taught as a child are there as a compass. We may switch course from time to time, but we come back to the North Star that helps us to find our destination. That is basically what happened in Liszt's case. Because he lived his life in a blaze of publicity, his diversions from his true destination got exaggerated. If he had been less famous, he perhaps could have done exactly the same things, and no one would have noticed anything. The fact that he could have affairs with all these beautiful ladies and perhaps do things, from time to time, that allow us to question his faith, never made me think that he was being less than Catholic. He never lost his faith. In a famous letter he explained why he joined the hierarchy of the Catholic Church. "When the monk is formed within, why not appropriate the outer garment of one."

How relevant today is Liszt's definition of the artist as the "bearer of the beautiful"?

Modern musicians would benefit a great deal by going back to some of the ideas expressed by Liszt. He was convinced that music was God given, that musicians were members of a kind of priesthood, the intermediaries between God and mankind. Musicians, in brief, are chosen. You become a musician not because you want to, but because you have to. The idea that the musician is the "bearer of the beautiful" is a wonderful one and anyone who wishes to contradict it has to indicate some alternative functions for music.

What is left to research and show about Liszt?

I would like to see the scholars pay more attention to the links between the early and late music. Such work has not been properly done. How could the same composer who wrote the *Csárdás Macabre* also write the *Second Hungarian Rhapsody*? The only equivalent that comes to my mind is Stravinsky, who changed his style like a chameleon. Liszt is a kind of Stravinsky in that regard.

Do you have any advice to give to Liszt scholars just starting out on their journey?

Keep an open mind and never take anything you see in print about Liszt for granted even if I wrote it. ❧

Miklós Györffy

Apocalypse Yesterday and Today

János Térey: *A Nibelung-lakópark* (Nibelung Residential Park). Budapest, Magvető, 2004, 441 pp.

Let us imagine a writer submitting a synopsis like this to a publisher, a theatre, or a film studio:

The story revolves around three men and two women. They are all around thirty, immeasurably wealthy, living in a major city. The scenes play out in lavish apartments, skyscrapers, galleries, disco cafés, jacuzzis, bowling alleys, parks, metropolitan streets and squares. One of the men—let's call him Demigod—is chief executive of a giant market-leading corporation. His lover and fiancée—who we will call Bombshell—is at first the owner of a gallery, then of a model agency. Theirs is no huge romance: Bombshell is primarily attached to her fiancé by means of a piece of jewellery worth a fortune. The two other men and the other woman are siblings. President—this is what we will call the older man—also heads a corporate juggernaut and is a friend and ally of Demigod's. They harmonize their business strategies together, have fun together, do drugs together. President's little sister—let her be Nymphette—doesn't have much upstairs, but is a head-turning disco bimbo, and enjoys the high life.

The person who is actually the main player and the engine of the intrigue is President's half-brother: Demon Dwarf. First a broker, investment consultant, now President's right-hand man, his high-handed, unpredictable, stand-offish nature makes him unpopular. For his part, he feels he is not only smaller in stature than the two fortunate great men, but has picked the shorter straw in general, and yet is worth more than them. He starts to stir things up. His first outing is to get President together with Bombshell, and Demigod with Nymphette, all with a bit of drugs-related help. The matchmaking is so successful that it almost led to marriage, but the double wedding, held amidst enormous media attention and demonstrations, fell flat on its face at the last minute: the lesbian women choose each other. The monster party is held all the same and this is where Demon Dwarf learns that he has been fired from his job as vice-president. He swears revenge, descends into illegality and becomes a terrorist. He commits murders, using anthrax to infect his successor, hacks into the corporate empire's computer system, then uses a suicide

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bomber to blow the brand-new headquarters of Demigod's company to smithereens. He goes on to use a terrorist commando to strike at the strictly guarded residential park his former associates have retired to, and finishes them off in turn: President, Demigod, Bombshell, until he himself is shot by Nymphette.

The target audience for a show-business product made up of action and psycho-thriller elements must be the young people who like this kind of story. Whether it reaches them or whether they like it is not really relevant; the presumed synopsis does not exist, or rather it is alive and well, but as a layer in the sort of work that makes the acceptance of this layer very difficult, or even unpalatable, for this target audience. The work in question is János Térey's gargantuan verse drama trilogy *Nibelung Residential Park,* which is subtitled "a fantasy inspired by Richard Wagner". The story summarized above is unveiled in *Nibelung Residential Park* in the course of 440 pages in a way that is linguistically and substantively astonishing in the richness of its detail, a story of which it is no longer possible for us to discuss without paying attention to the layers of meaning and motif which both restrict and further enrich its acceptance. In the light of this, *Nibelung Residential Park* rewrites and recreates *The Twilight of the Gods,* the fourth part of Richard Wagner's *Ring.* This is not the first time that János Térey (1970), one of the greatest talents in the young generation of Hungarian writers, creates a modern paraphrase of some classical work: his verse novel *Paulus* transposed Pushkin's *Onegin* into a modern Hungarian context with parodistic overtones.

With such rewrites, it is often not necessary to know the original work, subject or myth on which they are based, for the reason writers rewrite a story and transfer it to a different time and place is precisely that they believe it will hold its own there. In his review of the stage production of *Nibelung Residential Park* (*Élet és Irodalom,* 12 November 2004), Tamás Koltai writes: "The question is not whether the audience should know the original Nordic German myth in order to understand it, because clearly it doesn't". In conversation (*Színház,* January 2005) the play's director, Kornél Mundruczó, has said: "The performance begins with no one understanding anything". We do come to understand something, of course, with the performance or the text affecting us one way or the other. (For a review of the production by Tamás Koltai, see *HQ* 176, pp.150–152)

There is no doubt that if the uninitiated spectator or reader pays attention closely enough, the new story will hold its own. And he or she will not only read the above synopsis into it, but will also be affected by the poetry and blasphemy of the verse text or the experimental formal language of the theatre production. But rewrites, paraphrases and parodies similar to *Nibelung Residential Park* do not come into being because the writer cannot think of a story that hasn't been written yet. The referential relation plays a fundamental role in the form and meaning of the work. We can more or less read Joyce's *Ulysses* without recognizing or understanding its references to *The Odyssey,* the Bible, and other essential works, but we would miss the reason why Joyce wrote the book in the way he did. Maybe *The Master and Margarita* can be enjoyed without noticing or interpreting the Biblical references or the motifs referring to *Faust,* but in that case we should ask they were important to Bulgakov.

A thousand strands connect *Nibelung Residential Park* to *The Twilight of the Gods* or to the whole of Wagner's *Ring,* to German-Scandinavian mythology, to the *Edda,* while it is the least close to the medieval heroic epic known as the *Song of*

the Nibelung. The man known as Demigod is of course Siegfried, and this is his name in Térey's play too, just as all the other players in the early twenty-first century story use their Wagnerian name: President is in fact Gunther, Bombshell is Brünnhilde, Nymphette is Gutrune, and Demon Dwarf is Hagen, a descendent of the dark Nibelung tribe, son of the evil dwarf Alberich, who once guarded the Nibelungs' fateful treasure of gold, the magical ring that would later curse all those it was passed on to. As any opera guide tells us, *The Twilight of the Gods* is about how Hagen gives the supposedly invincible Siegfried, the current owner of the ring, some of Gutrune's magic memory-loss potion, making him forget that Brünnhilde is his wife. Siegfried then magically adopts Gunther's appearance and seduces the Valkyrie on his behalf, and in return is given Gunther's sister Gutrune. In due course the double wedding party ensues, where Brünnhilde spots the ring on Siegfried's hand, which she was led to believe Gunther won in a duel. Shocked by this deception, she swears vengeance against Siegfried, which Hagen carries out. Térey also has Brünnhilde discovering the ring that was hers on Siegfried's finger: "Wotan give me strength, I don't believe it. / What the fuck, aren't your eyes going to burn out?! / No way... No way! No waaay... Fuck's sakes, Siegfried..." Then, on the steps of the cathedral, in front of the jubilant crowds and the television cameras, she slaps Siegfried on the face with all her might, but all she says is "You really are a rat to still wear that". She calls off the wedding, and she and Gutrune console one another. Of course there was no mention of this in Wagner.

The reference to the magic potion is a good example of the relation between *The Twilight of the Gods* and *Nibelung Residential Park,* and of the extent to which some elements of the present-day story become incomprehensible without a knowledge of Wagner—in itself a potential critical objection. In Térey, too, it is Hagen who enkindles Gunther's desire to obtain Brünnhilde: "They say she's wild and willing, that she likes / Unusual positions and places: / On the table, in the lift, or with clothes on, / It's extreme sports that get her to her peak... Blow her to pieces!" He goes on to offer Siegfried a "new type" of drug called *Tarn*: "The best thing about it is that you can / Lit'rally put anyone in your head." Under the influence of this, Siegfried visits Brünnhilde dressed in Gunther's leather coat, then speaks to her in a "changed voice", but she is not deceived. First she asks him, "For the love of God, Siegfried, what is this masquerade?", and later she just says "I can never quite work you out, you know". But when she sees his dilated pupils, she understands what is going on: "You're not clean, Siegfried. You might not show a thing in your face, / But you can't stop your little goblins at their pace". In the end, all that happens is that Siegfried tears Brünnhilde's ring off her finger, and, humiliated and dejected, she surrenders herself to a "grieving fuck": "I had a bedroom once / Forget it, the brothel's as far as I got". In itself, without acquaintance with the Wagnerian background, this scene is rather nebulous: it is not clear what motivates Siegfried to participate in this inane pretence, except perhaps that he too is nothing more than another empty-headed, decadent yuppie who is bored by Brünnhilde and wants Gutrune instead. This degrading, parodistic reading only works if the mythical framework of the Wagnerian Tarn helmet and duel is written into the background.

The situation with the ring is similar. The magical powers attributed to it, and the struggles to acquire it, are hardly comprehensible without the mythological context. Térey's two possible readings of the

RING inscription, "Rhine Industry: Neat Grosses" or "Rhine Industry: No Guarantees" are only poignant if we know *what* this acronym is distorting, whether it has become no more than a profane abbreviation which had lowered the original symbolic secret of the ring to a market keyword, or rather an omen of the risks of the market economy, of potential failure, of "twilight", which would be a semantic use rather closer to the original. Of course, it is quite possible that the magic ring has some symbolic meaning within the strict limits of the Térey context itself—if such exists—for any possible direct reference to reality is ruled out by the madness of the text's multiple linguistic-stylistic layering and of the mad confusion of genres, and by the nature of the verse drama genre itself and the work's monumental, in a sense deliberately shapeless, scope. As to what the ring symbolizes in this instance, it is rather hard to say. According to one critic, Gabriella Kiss, writing in *Színház* (January 2005), "as rewritten by Térey, the direction of the desire and will for (global) power can be determined within the order of the consumer society and the market economy, which places the themes of love and affection in what is truly a real-world dimension". For Wagner, after all, the ring is the key motif for this theme. But the ring is an ancient symbol of the infinity of eternity and of devotion, and even if we ignore Wagner we can interpret its degrading use in the "residential park" as a reference to the depletion of these values. If love becomes no more than the ownership of the other merely as a consumer good, or power over bodies as tools of sexual satisfaction, then the demigods of old become the terror dwarves of today. And this risk is not only the great danger of our age, but an eternal human danger, an eternal mythical theme for after all, what is the story of the Nibelungs and the Gibichungs if not the story of a coveted treasure, thought to be omnipotent, taken from Alberich, the evil dwarf, and, passing from one hand to the next, bringing misfortune to all its owners.

If we were to ask János Térey whether he strove to make his book accessible and comprehensible without any reference to his sources or influences, he would probably be neither willing or able to give an unambiguous answer. In any case, it is certain that as far as its inspiration is concerned, *Nibelung Residential Park* is unimaginable without Wagner, while its aesthetic effect largely draws on the multilayered dialogue it maintains with the Ring. But as much as Wagner is written into *Residential Park,* so much does Térey again and again rewrite Wagner. Indulgent things happen in this regard. The series of motif connections is so evident that while knowledge of the background helps, it works without it. It is a fantastic idea to have the Rhine Park residential park and the Notung tower, the skyscraper that is the flagship of Siegfried's company, both built by the construction contractors Fasolt and Fafner. In Wagner, the two giants are the constructors of Walhalla, the fortress of the gods. Another inspired idea is to have Woglinde, Wellgunde and Flosshilde, the mermaids of the Rhine, presented as manequins, photo models and hostesses hunting for rich and powerful executives, or to have Urd, Verdandi and Skuld, the Norns, the goddesses of destiny related to the Greek Moirae, all as television presenters. It is worth knowing that while in Scandinavian mythology, Heimdall, the night porter at the Siegfried house, was also guard to the Gods, his modern incarnation as a Hungarian concierge with security training continues to be a lively character even without this. Frei, the gardener with a finger in every pie, and the first victim of Hagen when he runs amuck, again can only be from Scandinavian mythology,

where he is the embodiment of vegetation, production, economy and peace. Perhaps it is no accident that in Térey's version he is the one who has to perish first.

In addition to a transposition that brings the opera and mythical figures and motifs up to date, Térey also uses references that place the story independently of Wagner and mythology, though admittedly in a time and space that can hardly be described as realist. *Nibelung Residential Park* is set in Worms, on the bank of the Rhine. This is Térey's own private decision, which has no connection to *The Ring,* but all the more to the *Song of the Nibelung,* which has a marginal role here. The real-life Worms is only represented by its famous medieval cathedral and the presence of the Rhine: otherwise, with its 80,000 inhabitants, it has little in common with the skyscraper-ridden metropolis described here, which evokes Frankfurt or New York. Behind the fantastical match between the fictional gigantic corporations, and alongside such easily recognizable and iconic events as the anthrax hysteria or the destruction of the Twin Towers, the crazy fantasy of this Térey work also allows the outline of twentieth-century German history to be presented. It is still in the first part, *Rhine Park,* that Hagen says to Gunther, more as a kind of epic commentary: "Your dad made a Cyclon of poisonous gas with expert skill, / My dad was on the brownshirt's side as well, what else could he do? / Iron and steel into U-boats, off the Wälsung assembly line / Huge Notung armoured tanks were rolled out, one tank after the other". When, towards the end of the third part, Hagen is raging with all his might, on one occasion the stage directions tell us that *"he returns with a Rote Armee Fraktion t-shirt in red on black".*

There are precedents for the rewriting of Wagner's *Ring,* above all the Bayreuth productions of the operas. German director Jürgen Flimm, for example, recently staged the twilight of the German gods as a battle between today's multinational corporations. Luchino Visconti's *La caduta degli dei* (The Damned, 1968) presented the Wagner theme in terms of the relationship between the Krupp family and Nazism. Alongside analogies to Wagner, German mythology and history, action movies and Shakespeare (royal) dramas, and references to the battle between global capital and terrorism, an important constituent in Térey's layering of paraphrase and all-encompassing system of reference is his use of language, familiar from *Paulus,* but, even more brashly mixing parody and pathos as well as elevated and vulgar tones. Sometimes with a rap rhythm, sometimes soaring up like an aria, sometimes reduced to vulgar colloquialisms, the diction endeavours to cover some kind of totality of the holy and the profane. Yet it is modern slang to which the predominant modality of the *Nibelung Residential Park*'s language is closest, which ties Térey's verse drama to contemporary Hungarian reality. This reinterprets the above references both individually and as a whole, or, more precisely, it puts them in a frenzy. The symptoms of this mad linguistic chase include turns of phrase so twisted and grotesquely distorted that they parody both everyday Hungarian colloquial idioms and literary quotations, in a way that is probably impossible to render into other languages.

János Térey's work is a verse drama in three parts with a prologue. Putting to one side the fact that *Nibelung Residential Park* has already been performed on stage, the question can arise of the extent to which the dramatic genre can and should be taken seriously. In terms of its form it certainly should, as the text is presented and enunciated according to the norms of

drama, with the author putting particular emphasis on the stage directions preceding the scenes. But it is precisely the pseudo-naïve requirements of these stage directions *("We are in the Notung skyscraper. We should imagine the tower itself like a sword made of granite, glass and steel, the handle of which houses the public areas—shopping mall, multiplex cinema, fitness centre, beauty parlour, bars, bistros, etc.—with the offices of Wälsung Holdings on the blade's edge and a panoramic restaurant at its tip")* and of course the gargantuan dimensions of the drama as a whole that can give the impression that this is an unperformable play which Térey did not intend for the stage ("Knowing what Hungarian theatre is like today, it was until the last moment an open question as to whether I had really created a stage work," he has said). But whether it is a work for the stage or not, its characters can still be judged according to the criteria of dramatic character portrayal. And from this—admittedly rather conventional—perspective, *Nibelung Residential Park* has its deficiencies. The intertextual web and the astonishing feats of language can obscure the fact that Siegfried and Gunther are rather undistinctive characters. If we put aside their dazzling locution, which is true of all those in the play, it is hard to discover what they are truly like. Some of the supporting characters, Alberich, Frei, Heimdall and Dankwart, are better developed than they are. The real hero of the drama, of course, is Hagen, who is wonderfully depicted both psychologically and dramaturgically, even historiographically. While *Nibelung Residential Park* primarily concerns the form that it presents, if seen from Hagen's point of view it can also be read as a study of modern terrorism. Térey derives the apocalyptic revenge of the demon dwarf from the frustration of the unlimited lasciviousness and the ambition of self-admiration.

And finally, a few words about the fact that the Krétakör Színház (Chalk Circle Theatre, an enterprising alternative company) did stage the "book drama", indeed very quickly, at about the time the book was published. Here, where my primary task is to examine the text, I will not attempt a proper critical analysis of the performance. The superficial nature of my impressions will reflect this. The script of Kornél Mundruczó's production was taken from the second *(Siegfried's Wedding)* and third *(Hagen, or Hate Speech)* parts of the trilogy, and the company performed the scenes in the narrow and musty corridors and depressingly desolate fortified chambers of the labyrinth of the wartime emergency hospital deep under Buda Castle, mostly in a large operating theatre. As a theatrical space, of course, this location radically rejects Térey's stage directions, the satisfactory implementation of which would more likely require a huge open air opera stage. It would be interesting to know which came first: the labyrinth hospital as a potential venue, for which the director sought a play, or the play, for which the hospital represented the space that suited his vision. The labyrinth hospital, which is also, at least by Second World War standards, a bomb-proof shelter, allows a unique taste of the apocalyptic dimension of *Nibelung Residential Park.* Everything here is reminiscent of wars, catastrophes or states of emergency: the stretchers, the gas-masks, the first-aid kits, the blankets, the makeshift kitchen and the makeshift operating theatre. It is as if the location projects onto the text the catastrophe that awaits the world when the great economic powers, the poet Ady's "pig-headed great lords", have finished their battle. The underground labyrinth holds the audience captive over the space of four long hours. It is not really possible to leave during the performance or the interval; at most, those who need to can

disappear to the toilet accompanying the "set". Once the iron gate of the hospital "closes" behind the audience, they have to "walk through" the performance together with the actors, becoming a part of it, so that they are literally "present" in the scenes. Along the corridors, pushed up against a wall, one occasionally stops to realize that one's neighbour, who one didn't notice before, is in fact an actor "performing" in the scene. In a sense, these actors are not performing Térey's play, but rather an apocalyptic ritual for which they use Térey's characters and text. That there is nevertheless a deep connection between the play and the performance is shown by Térey's description of the *Siegfried's Wedding* section as a "ritual drama" and the *Hagen or Hate Speech* part as a "catastrophe drama". The Krétakör production is the ritual of a catastrophe.

The actors do not play parts or roles; rather, they make use of their personalities, bodies and voices as the mediums of a theatrical ritual. The issue of whether, from a dramatic point of view, certain characters could have been better written or not loses its significance. The dramatic narrative is forced into the background, substituted by the continuous and highly intense physical presence of the actors. The price of this is that the progress of events, particularly for those not acquainted with Wagner, is even harder to follow than in Térey's original text. According to the director's statement, "it is no problem" if the viewer even snoozes for a while on the operating table. His mise en scène, which involves the audience in a kind of "time travel", rewrites and recreates *Nibelung Residential Park* in the same way that Térey rewrites *The Twilight of the Gods*. While in the Térey case the Wagner opera is reinterpreted as a literary text in a postmodern sense, the Krétakör production translates the verse drama into formal theatrical language—true, not one that has much in common with the standard language of contemporary Hungarian theatre. This does not mean that Térey's play could not be performed in a different way, perhaps using considerable technical apparatus to move the emphasis onto the monumental travesty. It is not clear whether such a production, or any other, will ever come into being, but I am certain that the experiment in the labyrinth hospital and Térey's imagination represent two of the highest cultural achievements in recent decades. Their influence is undoubtedly narrowed by the production's dependence on the unrepeatable location and the text's dependence on current colloquialisms. At the same time, an interesting symptom of the "openness" of the theatrical performance is that an important role, the function of communicating with Hungarian viewers that is not present in the original Térey, is played by a German actor, who, in Hungarian, creates a link between our age and the mythical world. ❧

Tamás Koltai

The Grotesque of Bygone Days

Mihály Csokonai Vitéz: *Tempefői*; Lajos Barta: *Szerelem* (Love); Ernő Szép: *Vőlegény* (The Bridegroom)

The most-performed Hungarian classics are tragedies. Pieces written in the grotesque or tragicomic vein went mostly unnoticed or were not much in demand. Their fate in theatrical history was often tragic, sometimes just grotesque.

Mihály Csokonai Vitéz (1773–1805) was a prodigiously great poet of the Enlightenment. Blessed with an amazing talent and European in spirit, he would probably have had a very different life, had he not been born in the semi-feudal Hungary of his time. He was "far ahead of his age"—that cliché learnt by all schoolchildren in Hungary could not be truer than in his case. His life was a drama of the absurd. He studied at the old and conservative college of his birthplace, Debrecen. Apart from Latin and Greek, he read and translated from Italian, French and German. (Among his translations was Schikaneder's libretto for Mozart's *The Magic Flute*.) At the age of seventeen or eighteen he was the greatest living Hungarian poet—only nobody was aware of it. Nor does anybody know what happened to the plays and translations he had submitted to the first theatrical company to perform in the Hungarian language, founded in 1792. In 1795 he left college—illegally—to go to Pest and find a publisher for his manuscripts, which were running to volumes by then. He found none. He arrived in Pest just at a time when members of an anti-Habsburg rebel group, the Hungarian Jacobins, were executed. There was no way back for him to the college. A "scholarly beggar", he tried to eke out a livelihood from legal work. For a time he taught temporarily at a school where he found some joy in putting on plays with his pupils. Disappointed in love more than once, he could gain no foothold for himself anywhere—and so he went home to die. He was thirty-two.

He left volumes of manuscripts in varied genres. Only one of them got published, by virtue of an exceptional grant from an aristocratic patron. He lived in a milieu of incomprehension and stifling, bare loneliness. "This world, obscure and intent on persecution, will never see any of my works," he wrote in a letter towards the end of his life. "Even if I write, as I can now no longer keep on living without doing so,

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I shall write for a happier posterity, I shall write for the 20th or the 21st century, for the age in which Hungarians will either be truly Hungarian or else truly nothing..." His first play, *Tempefői* (1793) is a veritable prophesy of his own fate, a mirror held up to a poet's predicament. The full title reads *The Melancholy Tempefői, or It Takes a Fool to Become a Poet in Hungary.* The play remained unperformed for a hundred and fifty years. A modernised version was produced in 1938, and the original was first staged 1948 in the National Theatre of Budapest.

Tempefői is about the contrast between a man of intellect and, to put it mildly, the material world, or more roughly, the boorish good-for-nothing who despise all pleasures higher than eating and drinking, hunting and playing cards. The poet wants to find a patron to support publication of his heroic poem—or, more precisely, to cover the printing costs, as the book is already out and the German printer demands payment (why German, not Hungarian, has a piquancy of its own). Tempefői is trying to find a patron, but is turned down by everyone, including the rich Count Fegyverneki, although it is his famous ancestor who is the hero of the epic poem. Fegyverneki is a telling name, and the other names also refer to the character and attitude of their bearers. Congreve's comedy of manners, *The Way of the World* (1700) comes to mind, in which the characters' names also highlight their manner; that play is currently being staged in the József Katona Theatre of Budapest. Some hundred years later, Csokonai also made use of this satiric potential. He shows no mercy towards the bad hats. Self-conceited and comic, these bumpkins deny Tempefői any money. Betrieger, the printer, allows him an hour's grace for the payment, then another, before having him sent to a debtor's prison. The hapless debtor tries his best to obtain help, even, paradoxically, from the two young women who are attracted to him, but it is a losing game, and it appears that he cannot avoid being taken in custody. The play is unfinished, Csokonai only left a draft of the ending. In this, Tempefői turns out to be a nobleman, a count, so he is immediately seen in a new light, and the happy ending is near. It is not accidental, perhaps, that the author was not very keen on writing up the bitter résumé. But more's the pity if we think of the acrimonious, back-firing dénouements of Molière's comedies, for a solution like that too must surely have had a grotesque overtone.

The Jászai Mari Theatre's production is indeed full of allusions to Molière, as if we were swatching a Hungarian version of *Le Misanthrope.* Gábor M. Koltai, who directed the Tatabánya company's production, and his literary consultant, Nóra Sediánszky, have added several passages to the text, some from other works by Csokonai—poems, letters and pamphlets—others from the dramaturgical pattern of Molière's plays. One of the characters, a successful and supple-minded poet, is strongly reminiscent of *Le Misanthrope*'s Philinte even in the original; another requests in the complemented version an 'audition' much like Oronte's, and his reading of his bombastic poem similarly is drowned in critical derision and laughter.

The Tempefői of the production is also an embittered misanthrope. A comic, at times tragic figure and no blameless victim, vis-à-vis his inferior environment he is undoubtedly an autonomous talent, afflicted with a degree of self-admiration, swashbuckling and pettiness. With the help of linguistic modernisation and association, the director 'talks out' of the past to the present. The stage is covered in piles of manuscripts—the unpublished oeuvre of a poet?; the sheets are scattered, and an arm reaching out insistently from a toilet

clearly indicates what they are used for. At one point in the plot—in line with post-modern deconstruction—the despondent protagonist offers a sarcastic toast to fellow poets, and the names enlisted range up to the recent past; some of them suicides. Tempefői also plays with that idea; the threat, however, merely elicits amusement from those around him. Another scene is accompanied by an audio-montage of poems by great Hungarian poets read by deceased actors. The emotional involement of the young director, in his twenties, is clearly to be felt, and the fact that the production will be performed locally only a few times and there is no money to take it on tour, gives food for thought. What did the author say again, some two hundred years ago? "I shall write for the 21st century..." *Nota bene,* the theatre in his birthplace, Debrecen, now bears his name.

A hundred years after Csokonai's death, another Hungarian playwright's fate also took a strange turn. Lajos Barta (1878–1964) started out as an interesting talent. The protagonist of his *Parasztok* (Peasants, 1911)—"a martyr of the land", a critic said—becomes a womaniser, pub brawler and murderer because he cannot get what is due to him: land. After just two performances, the production was taken off and even the manuscript was destroyed. A subject like that could not really reap success in a Hungarian theatre. In subsequent years he wrote more successful plays. He left the country, and his play *Oroszország napja* (Russia's Day) was staged in Berlin in 1920 in what was later to became Erwin Piscator's theatre, under the title *Russlands Tag*. He was interested in the so-called *Proletkult* style at the time, for which there was no scope in Hungary, so by the time he returned home, in 1946, he was as good as forgotten. Nor did he write anything of importance afterwards.

His most popular play, *Szerelem* (Love, 1916), is relatively frequently performed, and is usually compared to Chekhov's *Three Sisters*. Rightly, insofar as it has three young heroines: sisters who spend their life in idle daydreaming, attempts to get married, and trying to endure the tension between their longings for a colourful life and the bleak reality of their small town. There are some young men around them; one is a poet who leaves for Budapest to make his name (just like Csokonai did in his time); another is an officer who is re-posted to another town (like Chekhov's Vershinin), and the marriage plans come to nothing. Eventually the third girl seems to find a husband for herself in the person of a pedantic, hypochondriac tax collector, who first courted the two younger sisters, then has to content himself with the purposeful eldest of them. The play can truly be performed in a Chekhovian fashion; this is endorsed less by the governing style than a knowledge of theatrical history and empathy, through which the life of the Prozorov sisters can be projected onto the life of the Szalay sisters. But Barta's play is much less definitive in style. In Chekhov's play there are melodramatic, ironic, sentimental and grotesque elements, just as in Barta's, but these are present at the same time, amalgamated, appearing as an aggregate to characterise the figures and the situations. In *Love,* they follow one another in dramatic continuity. An atmospheric situation is followed by a comic one; the dramatic outburst is mellowed in a lyrical scene out of a conversation piece; we laugh at one point and weep at another, but rarely do both at the same time.

"The three girls do a St Vitus's dance in life's pathetic prose," the eminent contemporary, poet and critic Dezső Kosztolányi wrote of the première. Neither the play, nor the production, directed by Eszter Novák at Tatabánya, can be summed up better.

Novák departs from the arid tradition in which the girls' hysterical attempts to marry are explained by a desire to escape from their hard life. No such petty materialist support is provided in this production; it is much more about awakening young bodies and souls, the ebb and flow of emotions and disappointments, the interference of love between lovers that fuels emotions and future life strategies out of phase. The most elaborated, complex part of the performance is the presentation of the ambivalent, dephased relationship the sisters have to one another—the chaffy rivalry, the loving jealousy as they give and take admirers between themselves; the inner tag-play of pining, envy and tenderness; the romping that degenerates into a brawl; the cruelty that dissolves in a cuddle. One sister first offers herself to her beau with cautious, slow studiousness, then listens in painful silence to the sizzling verbal tussle between her sister and the man who is about to leave for the capital, gradually sensing in the waspish tongue that she is second-best and faces loneliness. Several scenes have a strong erotic charge, which again runs counter to tradition. Nor is the eldest the soured spinster as sometimes played; on the contrary, she is a vivacious young woman who has irony and self-irony, and relates to her sisters and her situation with wry playfulness and defiant aggression.

The performance is structurally clear and well-ordered, just as the setting is—reduced to a bare skeleton of a middle-class home, it indicates the barrenness of the life-style that goes with it. Towards the end of the play, the director metaphorically empties the room, the floor is covered with packing-paper—the stage is thus 'Chekhovianised' with the apparent signs of travel or moving house. The last scene is really grotesque, and differs somewhat from all previous ones. The hypochondriac, bed-ridden husband-to-be turns out to be a malingerer and lures one of the sisters, it is irrelevant which, into his bed by simulating illness. He even sends for the undertaker who in a vaudevillian scene informs him at length of the available services, and guarantees his customer eventual satisfaction. We have a good laugh, though the performance in fact ends with the previous, hysterical-melodramatic brilliant scene of the three sisters.

Ernő Szép (1884–1953) started his career at the same time as Lajos Barta, and like him, he too enjoyed early successes, followed by a long silence. But, at least, unlike Barta he has not become for posterity a one-play dramatist. Even though belatedly, he was re-discovered in the 1970s, and at least one of four or five of his plays has constantly been revived. He started out as a poet and remained one in his plays too, which are dreamy, poetic and grotesque depictions of simple things. Kosztolányi, who in another succinct description, called him "a blessed poet of the twentieth century", who "sees the things eternal amid the apparently dull scenery of the present-on the pavement, in the café, on the tram, and spots the ancient myth in what is ordinary and worn-out for others."

The action of *A vőlegény* (The Bridegroom) (1922) takes place in the same milieu as in *Love,* but the scene is the capital, not the provinces. The family is similarly impoverished and has come down in the world, but marrying off their only child, the fair Kornélia would suffice to make them happy (they call her Kornél, the male version of the name—the author often avails himself of such linguistic twists, one source of the grotesque in his work). Rudi, a young dentist, is ready to marry her if only she would come with a dowry, so he could set up his practice in the surgery he rents. But you cannot squeeze money from one who has none. No dowry, no marriage.

In her sorrow, Kornél becomes a 'fallen woman', bringing home expensive clothes and gifts, something the jealous dentist cannot put up with. Eventually love triumphs over financial interests. It goes without saying that Kornél has preserved her virginity.

With charm, swift-tongued humour and delightful malice, the author depicts reality and its mockery too—the bridegroom-hunting ado, the family pseudo-idyll conjured out of the shabby home, the marriageable young ones' painstaking efforts to please one another, the mercantile spirit disguised as sentiment, which is given away on both sides, then is turned the wrong side out, showing the yearning desire of the sentimental hearts as calculating fortune-hunting. In every single moment of the play, the life-like and the surreal, the commonplace and the absurd, the banal and the mythical, to which Kosztolányi referred, appear together in the wryest possible poetic spirit. Almost imperceptibly, the conflict culminates in a choreography that recalls a puppet play. The drama is built on the psychological twists of appearances exposed by sincerity. The 'girl-to-be-sold'—the telling literal meaning of the Hungarian phrase for a marriageable girl—and the bridegroom show their hands to one another: the lack of money on one part and the lack of willingness to marry without money on the other. The sincere offer on the girl's part is met with sincere refusal on the young man's part. The situation, at once unambiguous and ambiguous, calls forth various degrees of confidence, defiance, bluntness and humiliation throughout when, at the end, they converge in a moment in which melodrama and irony are fused.

In the production by the Új Színház in Budapest, director Péter Rudolf successfully intimates the dimensions of the play that point beyond petty reality. He uses the revolving stage for the scenery, in whose wall-less space the 'framework' of life disappears and the bare objects—the furnishings borrowed to justify a standard of life, the rented dental equipment—assume enhanced importance. The moves are carefully choreographed, yet appear spontaneous. Unusually, the three acts are performed without a break, and the tempo and rhythm maintained throughout from the first impetus lends the performance the ritual of a Georges Feydeau farce. In the central scene the two principal characters symbolically break out of their constrained existence and dance all around the space, including a dinner table surrounded by the family in another space-time dimension; this encapsulates the tragicomic grotesque element in the production which points beyond the actual plot. ❧

Erzsébet Bori

Two Histories of Hungarian Cinema

András Gervai: *A tanúk* (The Witnesses). Saxum, 2004, 360 pp. • John Cunningham: *Hungarian Cinema from Coffee House to Multiplex*. Wallflower Press, 2004, 258 pp. Illustrated.

The Poles, let's admit it, were frank. The official organisation that decided what was fit for the public to read, see or view was called what it is: Censorship Office. Censorship didn't exist officially in Hungary, which meant that the filmmakers and studios had to cut their way through several layers of a complicatedly intertwined jungle undergrowth before reaching their public.

All over the eastern bloc film production was in the hands of the state. The road from idea to film was no less bumpy than it was for western moviemakers, except that it was bumpy in a very different way. Here, instead of the trials of putting together the finance for a production, it was getting permission for the screenplay and, later, for the public screening that ran into obstacles. Officially the buck stopped at the Minister of Culture, except that at Party Headquarters a major department or committee corresponded to every ministry like some sort of shadow cabinet, not to mention the powerful ideological secretariat. This produced numerous degrees of censorship, starting with the self-censorship of the director and continuing with the studios, the ministry and the Party committee right up to the omnipotent György Aczél, the man responsible for culture for much of the Kádár era. The miracle is that in this "counter-filmmaking" regime so many important motion pictures were actually made.

Writing up the history of the era began only a few years ago. Though there are a fair number of documents, communism—and cultural policy, something quite inexplicable for someone from the west—operated mainly on what was called the "manual control" method (comradely phone calls, "a word in the right ear at the right time"), and this is what gives eye-witness accounts a heightened significance. András Gervai's book, covering fifty years of Hungarian film from nationalisation (1948) to the year of change (1989) has the very apt title of *The Witnesses*.

This is subjective film history consisting of interviews with directors, writers of screenplays and three former director-generals of the Film Directorate, an organisation that was wedged in between the Ministry of Culture and the studios. Supplementing these interviews are selected contemporary documents. The list of contributors stretches from Miklós Jancsó

Erzsébet Bori
is the regular film critic of this journal.

to the documentary filmmaker Tamás Almási; among them are people who were already working in the nineteen-fifties, like Károly Makk, the next generation (Lívia Gyarmathy, István Gaál, Judit Ember, Gyula Gazdag), started their careers in the Kádár era. Péter Bacsó made a name for himself as a screenplay-writer and dramaturge before 1956, but he only got the chance to direct at the beginning of the 1960s. András Kovács had an interesting career: in 1950 (at the age of 26) he was a powerful chief dramaturge, but after 1956 he swapped over to the filmmakers' side. It's perhaps not surprising that the directors don't remember things in quite the same way as the (official) director-generals, so the interviews contradict one another, giving a more nuanced picture of a seemingly simply and homogeneous period (dictatorship) which in actual fact was complex and lively.

András Gervai's book is more than a run-of-the-mill set of interviews, and the same can safely be said of John Cunningham's *Hungarian Cinema,* even though the writer promises a great deal—an entire history of the film in fact: from coffee house to multiplex, as described in the sub-title. Here the coffee house means both the venue for contemporary social life and the place where Edison's invention was presented in Hungary's millennium year of 1896. Dividing his subject into historical periods, he places the films into a broad socio-political-cultural context. His interpretation is broad too: apart from the films and film-makers he also deals with questions of production and distribution, reception and criticism.

Cunningham, who taught at various Hungarian universities for many years, originally wanted to write a book on Zoltán Fábri, but his English publisher, claiming that Fábri was little known in the western world, persuaded him to extend the subject to cover the whole of the Hungarian cinema. The memory of the original idea is manifest in the book by the greater detail in which Fábri's films are covered, and this is as it should be. Zoltán Fábri is a classic of Hungarian film but an underrated classic whom we have mistakenly labelled a skilled craftsman. The film, as we know, is not a lasting genre; today's blockbuster is of no interest to anyone two months later, the stars of earlier generations make young people smile, films which were showered in Oscars, or even our own old favourites often give rise to disappointment and incredulity when seen again. With Fábri's films, the opposite happened. Nowadays, when our view is no longer blurred by prejudiced respect for the "art" or writer's film, we no longer see him as not quite one of the great masters, but as a major director who created films of lasting value with *Körhinta* (Merry-Go-Round), *Húsz óra* (Twenty Hours), *Isten hozta, őrnagy úr* (The Tóth Family) or *Az ötödik pecsét* (The Fifth Seal). If Cunningham's book helps Fábri to get better known, it was well worth writing for that alone.

Hungarian Cinema can be sincerely praised for two reasons. A glance at the list of references shows us just how little material in English Cunningham had to draw on: about half a dozen sociological works (some by Hungarian writers); a book by the British-Canadian critic Graham Petrie *(History Must Answer to Man),* Corvina, 1979), and two excellent film histories by István Nemeskürty, of which the first was published in 1968 and the second is already 20 years old (1985). With justified pride we can find a source for more recent sociological, historical etc. reports in *The Hungarian Quarterly,* and also its predecessor, *The New Hungarian Quarterly,* as well as the English-language articles on film from *Filmkultúra* accessible on the Internet. In this sparsity, the quality of the book becomes all the more

important, as from now on it will become a basic source for researchers abroad.

Cunningham's work is so well written that—with a few changes—it would be worth publishing in Hungarian too. A recent, comprehensive history of the Hungarian film written for the general public simply doesn't exist. I don't mean to say that Cunningham has made any startling new discoveries. He is working with information and conclusions that Hungarians have already collected, written about and published. For the most part at a high standard. Cunningham, on the other hand has written a readable, enjoyable book for the layman interested in film and in Hungarian culture.

It's surprising how well he finds his way among questions which here at home arouse fierce arguments, such as the so-called "rural-urban" conflict, assessment of the 1919 Council Republic, or the Jewish question. Perhaps here in Hungary we judge such matters from two extreme points of view: liberal and conservative. Cunningham quite naturally turns an Anglo-Saxon liberal eye on, for instance, the Jewish question, only to take up the cause of our national wounds inflicted by the Treaty of Trianon with the greatest empathy. The historical and film periods are discussed in chronological order, but he divides the chronology into three chapters. It's perfectly reasonable that he deals separately with documentary, animation and experimental films, but rather odd that he devotes a separate chapter to minority themes (Jews, Gypsies and others) and to football (Foci, Fradi and the 'Golden Team'). Coming face to face with what we look like from the outside and learning what people consider important or remarkable about us is interesting and edifying. As for the minorities, we are given further evidence that "the eyes of the world" are on us. Whereas in the football chapter—which includes wonderful films like Fábri's *Két félidő a pokolban* (Two Half Times in Hell), or Sándor Pál's *Régi idők focija* (Football of the Good Old Days)—only goes to strengthen our experience that in the most unexpected places from the Scottish Highlands to New Zealand we come across people who may not know exactly where Hungary is on the map, but they can list the tricky names of the players in the Golden Team. I'd like to note here that this excellent book could have done with a Hungarian editor, because the writer or the publisher is frequently in trouble with the spelling of countless Hungarian names, titles and expressions. Some of the data on Gypsies is faulty or out-of-date (though that's not just the writer's fault), but apart from that I didn't find anything to complain about in John Cunningham's book: our country and our culture appear in a most favourable light in the mirror he holds up to us. ❧

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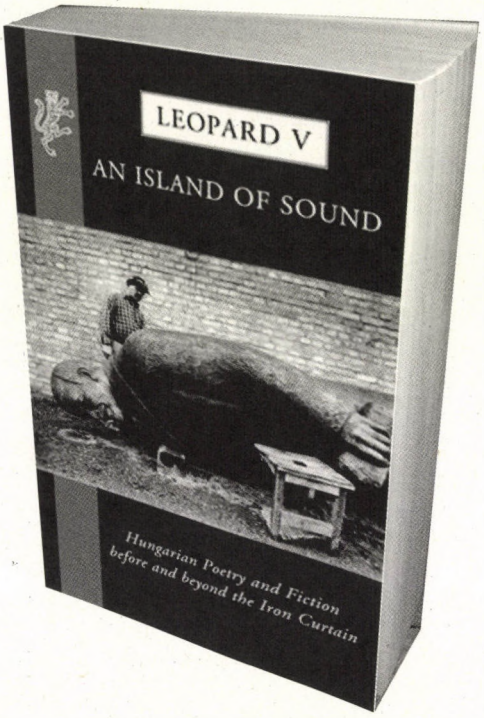

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Apart from my Hungarian, I can read and write in French and German,

correspond in Hungarian and French, and I am an accomplished touch typist.

I was also able to do shorthand, and I could brush up that knowledge

with a month's practice. I know about newspaper printing technology,

and I can word documents correctly. I consider myself to be an honest person,

I think I am quick on the uptake and an assiduous worker.

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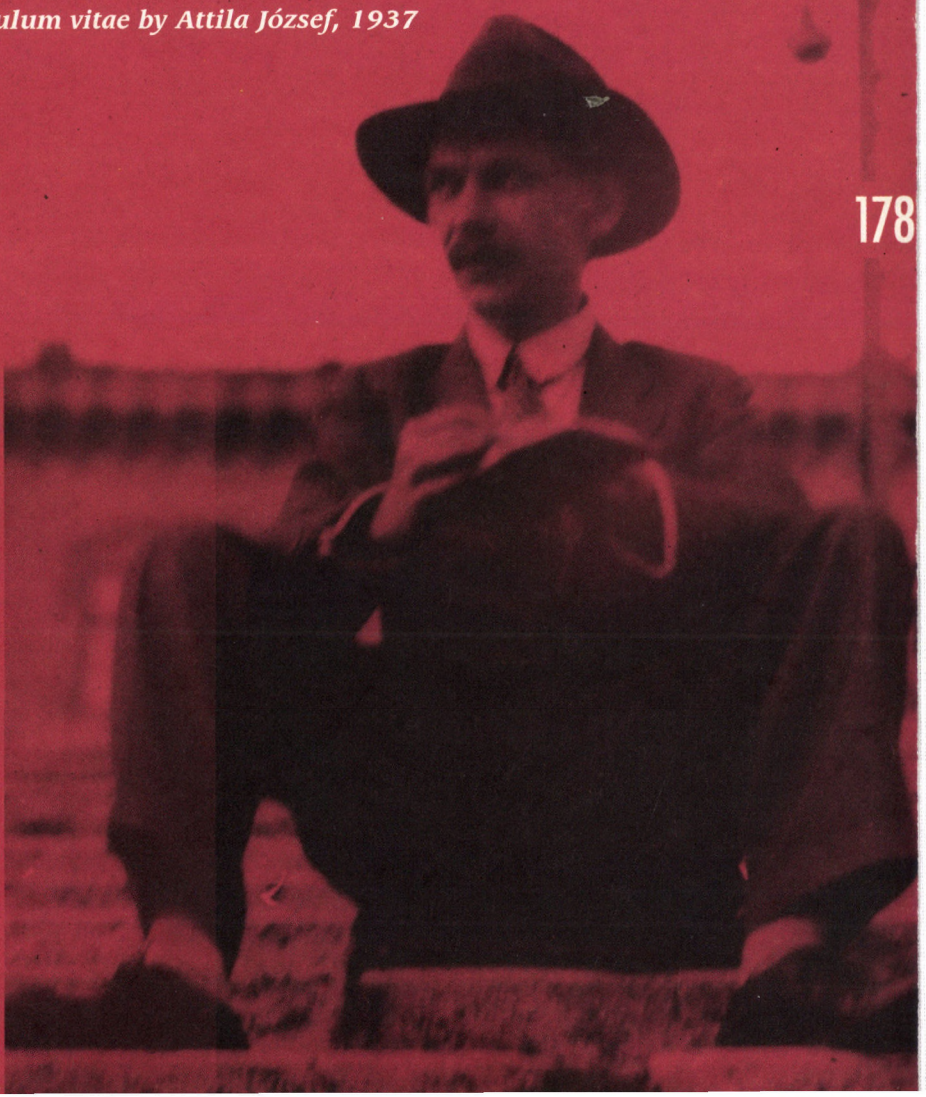

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