

Anxiety, Density, Flight

An Introduction to
Contemporary Hungarian Poetry

Everything changed after 1989. As if by coincidence, the major poets of a period generally recognised to be one of the richest in Hungarian history, started dying off. Gyula Illyés had already gone, as had László Nagy. The most remarkable of them, Sándor Weöres, died in early January. Soon after that the political system started rolling down the hill and finally crashed. Within a couple of years two other very important poets, István Vas and Ágnes Nemes Nagy had gone. That most laconically poetic of novelists Iván Mándy soon followed. Remarkable figures like Ferenc Juhász, author of the poem W.H. Auden referred to as one of the greatest of the century, "The Boy Transformed into a Stag Clamours at the Gate of Secrets" (recently re-translated by Maurice Riordan) entered a twilight literary life. Political divisions blew the career of Sándor Csoóri off course (the same political divisions had swept the humorous writer, István Csúka, to the leadership of a neo-fascist party). My own generation (now in their late forties or early fifties) are in the process of being respected but reassessed in the post-1989 re-orientation. Reassessment is a normal part of literary life and moves with the generations, but post-1989 it has a different edge. The re-orientation goes on while the body politic is in an anxious, almost fraught state of transition.

The names above might mean little even to a sophisticated English- or Irish-speaking reader. Weöres was up for the Nobel Prize some ten times, it is said, but despite all the efforts of his publishers and translators, being the protean giant he was, he could never muster a wholly convincing English-language presence. The closest he came to such a thing was the Penguin Modern European Poets volume where he appeared with Juhász in the only Hungarian volume of that remarkably fine series.

There is a serious practical problem with translation from Hungarian: so few non-Hungarians speak it. The language is isolated, bearing no relation to other European tongues, except Finnish and Estonian, and even there the connection is tenuous. It is a vulnerable island in an intermittently hostile sea of Teutonic, Slavonic and Romance languages. Ironically, a country that had given so much to music, science, medicine and theory prides itself most stubbornly on its literature, by which it means, primarily, poetry. Few, however, outside the language community, have been in a position to vouch for its quality.

Beside Weöres, there are three vaguely familiar names. Through sheer luck János Pilinszky found Ted Hughes whose reputation underwrote the power of his odd Old English flavoured translations from the Hungarian (Pilinszky was in fact a kind of vestigial classicist), and poems like “KZ-Oratorio”, “Passion of Ravensbruck” and “Fable” are included in certain anthologies. Attila József has made various appearances in English, most effectively in Edwin Morgan’s excellent translations (the debt to Morgan is enormous in Hungarian as in a variety of other languages) but also via Zsuzsanna Ozsváth and Frederick Turner. Miklós Radnóti has also found a range of translators. Slowly but steadily he is assuming substance and definition through work by George Gömöri and Clive Wilmer, by Ozsváth and Turner, and by Francis Jones. Rightly, he has begun to assume the proportions of a figure like Paul Celan. Pilinszky, József and Radnóti are all, in their various ways, tragic figures. József, a desperately poor working class boy, committed suicide; Radnóti, a serious aesthete, was shot in a ditch during the war; Pilinszky, dying young, was an early witness of the concentration camp. Looked at in this way, it is as if suffering were the one valid passport to reputation. All three were marvellous poets at best, but they enter the canon, if they do, as witnesses and victims.

It may not matter. It may be, as Walter Benjamin believed, that constant re-translation is the life-blood of poetry, and that through sheer attention, and intense reading and re-reading, the energy of these poets might eventually enter the bloodstream of other languages; that, like Dante or Shakespeare or Baudelaire, they might become formative elements in a larger, supra-national humane culture. But the range of Hungarian poetry could not be concentrated in three poets: none of them would have been where they were but for the great inter-wars generation of

Kosztolányi, Babits, Karinthy, and before them the seminal figure of Ady. And then you would have to add others who have not yet attracted the quality or quantity of translation that might carry them beyond the limits of their language.

Hungarian poetry, from the earliest, has always contained a Romantic element. There is no real equivalent for Dryden, Pope or Johnson. In a country as unstable, so prone to invasion and revolutionary change, the poetry of stability has remained just out of reach. The history of its vernacular poetry begins after the catastrophic defeat of the renaissance kingdom at the hands of the Ottoman Turks in 1526, so it develops in adverse circumstances, in a rump state, almost as an act of survival. Like most vernacular literatures, it started with the translation of sacred text but moved quickly to classical literature, for which the language was peculiarly well fitted. It lent itself easily to both stress-based and quantitative verse: there was fluency and grace in Hungarian hexameters. Poets could also draw on a tradition of song and rhyme too came easily to a highly inflected language. The first great poet of the vernacular, Bálint Balassi, is a late-sixteenth century soldier and fugitive. The next, Count Miklós Zrínyi, was also a soldier and died in battle. The Turkish occupation lasted a hundred and sixty years and was followed by Austrian hegemony, which entailed wars of independence and revolution. In the late eighteenth century. Csokonai, a marvellous rococo-romantic poet spent much of his time on the road. The major poet of the early nineteenth century, Mihály Vörösmarty, wrote the first national epic and lived to see the revolution of 1848, after which he too became a fugitive. The great Romantic poet of the revolution itself, Sándor Petőfi, died on the battlefield.

The danger of a lightning tour like this is that the reader is confronted by a tide of unfamiliar names. The advantage is that it draws together something these writers have in common, which is a continuing history of anxiety and instability. When stable values arise they immediately assume a numinous quality and become objects of desire or nostalgia. The one period of power and stability, following the establishment of the Austro-Hungarian empire in 1867 to the end of the First World War, offered a time of recuperation and expansion: it also offered, for following generations, a focal point for troubled nostalgia. The inter-war period in the twentieth century is no less problematic, tinged as it was with authoritarianism and guilt. In many respects

this makes Hungarian a fit poetry for the late twentieth century and beyond, especially perhaps for readers in post-imperial societies: the realm of feeling reaches across barriers between occupier and occupied. Perhaps it is one of the reasons why Hungarian poetry has flourished so remarkably in this restless period. It had both a psychological and political function in that it articulated anxiety and aspiration equally.

Great insecurity and revolutionary intensity combined with troubled nostalgia is a powerful combination for the imagination but it's not easy to live with. The inheritance of the post-1989 poets is fraught with problems. I am writing this in late April, a few days after the Hungarian general election, which was fought with venomous fury between the governing party, to the right of centre but willing to embrace extreme nationalist views, and the left of centre party, more European and internationalist in outlook. The turn-out was very high. As one might expect, the governing party (a narrow loser in the event) found its chief support in the rural areas and the provinces, the winning opposition in the capital and the major cities. This nationalist-provincial / internationalist-urban division has a long history in Hungarian culture, specifically in poetry. The division is almost seventy years old. It loomed large in 1989 and the years immediately following, so that the entire political map has been coloured by it. It is not so much the policies, in other words the traditional economic left-right tensions, of the main parties that divide them, as the kind of deep instincts to which they appeal.

This is not an article about politics, but it is about the conditions in which poetry operates. One could argue that the major achievements of Hungarian poetry in the twentieth century were mostly the achievements of urban, internationally-orientated poets: the various generations nurtured by the seminal magazine *Nyugat* [West], whose very name is significant. The major figure of the Hungarian symbolist-secessionist movement Endre Ady, was the figurehead, but Mihály Babits, Dezső Kosztolányi, Gyula Juhász, Milán Füst, and later Frigyes Karinthy, Margit Kaffka and even the early Sándor Weöres were closely associated with it. Weöres, carried the tradition over the war, to poets like Nemes Nagy, Vas, Pilinszky and László Kálnoky, poets who after the war and the end of *Nyugat*, grouped around magazines like *Újhold* [New Moon], which was suppressed by the Stalinist Soviet regime, and whose authors were regarded as *urbánus* or urban,

connoting “bourgeois-individualist-pessimist”. This group would be drawn to the centre left: those of the opposing group, the *népies*, or folk-song based, rural-nationalist writers, who would naturally, and probably rightly, claim a much longer deeper tradition, and whose sense of themselves is derived from Herder’s theory of the *Volksgeist*, would swing to the right. Illyés might be numbered among them, as would, more certainly, later twentieth-century poets like László Nagy and Sándor Csoóri. The great struggle for the soul of the country after 1989 re-opened these divisions, with new magazines and organisations embodying the often destructive polar energies set free by the breakdown of the system. Willy-nilly, poets like Csoóri were dragged far to the nationalist right, where, perhaps they had no real wish to be. Writers like the equally significant György Petri, who, together with Csoóri had been the major political poet of the “underground” resistance, were drawn the other way, to the liberal left. First-rate major poets of their generation, like the late Ottó Orbán tried for a while to maintain bridges between old friends, but found themselves deeply alienated by the young nationalist government that came to power in 1998.

Poets have been important people in Hungary. Either they could articulate the feelings of their natural constituency directly, in which case they found themselves in the front-line, like Petőfi, or, like Pilinszky, Weöres and Nemes Nagy, they could resist through a form of hermeticism that would also be taken for a political gesture. Behind the Iron Curtain literary resistance took cryptic forms; as the Iron Curtain rusted and finally fell to pieces, a more overtly political writing emerged. By the mid-90s, Orbán, who had always been something of a chronicler of his times, was making ever more dramatic literary interventions in the political climate.

I have not so far mentioned the two dates that György Petri in his poem “On the 24th Anniversary of the Little October Revolution” regards as pivotal, 1956 and 1968. The great trauma of 1956 has cast such a long shadow on Hungarian consciousness ever since, that it is impossible not to take it into account. The thirteen-day failed revolution created its heroes and its conflicting martyrologies. The events of 1989 involving, as they did, the reburial of the prime minister of 1956, Imre Nagy, are incomprehensible without the background of the revolution which assumed an almost religious significance. After 1989 competing

political forces sought to possess it and use it to their advantage. Those who were alive in 1956 were still very much around, some in power, some abroad, but those abroad were coming home. The battle for possession turned into a dirty propaganda war and alienated many people in the process. The young grew sick of hearing about the revolution. They were not alive at the time, and were too young to feel the impact of 1968, when, with the invasion of the then Czechoslovakia, the death of “socialism with a human face” removed the last vestiges of idealism in the body politic, leaving it prey to cynicism alternating with a vague flickering hope of something better elsewhere.

Those writers who grew up with some direct memory of 1956 and could clearly recall 1968 were in mid-career in 1989. The world that seemed so permanent in 1985 was gone by 1990. Sensibilities are formed over a period and the manner in which people comprehend the world is slow to adapt. In fact it is still adapting and will continue to do so for some time, perhaps for an entire generation. One could argue that, for Eastern Europe, 1968 marks the onset of the post-modern mind-set, but it is only after 1989 that it finds full expression. Until then things still mattered, or at least had to be seen to matter: words and actions could change circumstances. Resistance could still assume a downbeat heroic form: intellectuals lived among solid bodies not simulacra. It is not so much that the post-1989 world crashed through the roof onto an unsuspecting household, but that the holes in the roof become unavoidable and vast.

Recently, I asked the young poet Monika Mesterházi in what way she thought the temper of her generation differed from the previous one. She talked about, “denser texts, music, form—not the looser language of conversational poetry (Petri diluted). And, yes, less philosophical, less articulating thoughts”. It is difficult to judge the universal validity of any view, even this one. Mesterházi is one of the young poets, along with András Imreh, Krisztina Tóth, András Gerevich and Anna T. Szabó, mentioned by Győző Ferencz in a valuable article on Hungarian poetry in a recent *Poetry Wales* (vol. 37, no. 4). Ferencz himself is an excellent poet, one of the leading figures of that previous generation, who forms a kind of bridge to the present one in that he is scholarly, complex, formal, ironic and deep feeling. He springs out of the *Újbold* generation, and was in fact one of the young writers instrumental in re-establishing the title as an annual anthology. Some of his

work is found in English, chiefly so far in anthologies, including the one I co-edited with George Gömöri for Bloodaxe, *The Colonnade of Teeth*. His generation, if you spread it wide enough, includes other poets available in English translation, such as Péter Kántor, Zsuzsa Rakovszky (who both have their own volumes), the post-modernist Endre Kukorelly, and, a little older, Ádám Nádasdy, Szabolcs Várady, the late István Baka and Transylvanians like Géza Szőcs and Béla Markó.

It would be hard to bring all these together under any kind of generalisation, but for the fact that their reputations were made before 1989. Their work ranges from surrealism-modernism, through urban irony and lyrical, but politically-aware, personal verse. In so far as the poets succeeding them have passed through university, or, more particularly through the university in Budapest, they are likely to orientate themselves in some way around the qualities Mesterházi mentions: denseness, musicality, formality, and a kind of hermetic, apolitical narrative. Gerevich's apparently crystal clear poetic narratives pick up from Nádasdy's in that they are erotic, elegant and a touch detached even in their passions. Mesterházi herself relates more clearly to Rakovszky, who is also an influence on Tóth and Szabó; in fact, as Ferencz in his article points out, her poems (like his, as he is too modest to remark) are possible points of contact between the pre- and post-1989 generations.

I could add a number of names here, such as Krisztián Peer, the late Balázs Simon (another very early death—Hungarian literature, unfortunately, is full of them), Gábor Schein, János Térey, János Lackfi, G. István László, Noémi László, István Kemény, Júlia Lázár, Zsófia Balla and Eszter Tábor. All are conspicuously intelligent writers, often with highly refined technical skills: none of them could be described as an avant-garde modernist or an experimentalist but they all carry the paraphernalia of colloquial diction and complex emotional engagement much as do Don Paterson or, Paul Muldoon or, say, Carol Ann Duffy (a direct influence on Rakovszky). One might even say that the respect in which they differ from the previous generation is the same respect in which they come to resemble us; that one could find soul brothers or sisters for, say, Jamie McKendrick or Kate Clanchy or Michael Hofmann or Ciaran Carson, if not so much for Jo Shapcott or Kathleen Jamie on the one hand, or Tom Paulin or Sean O'Brien on the other, which suggests that the voices now

refining themselves around the Hungarian stretch of the Danube are less likely to take polemical, socially critical or high-profile performance positions. Their intensities are, mostly, inward, delicately bladed, almost gentle in manner but deeply streetwise. They wish less to say something about something than to proceed to the heart of saying, if only because public modes of saying seem, for the time being, to have been corrupted. After the simpler antithesis of state and sensibility, a cruder more divisive politics has taken the field. The holes in the roof have let in not only the stars but the bellowing of loudspeakers.

After the terrible external pressures on the public imagination, after the centuries of expectation where the poet played an important moral and political role, where, as in the story the great Russian poet Anna Akhmatova tells as an epigraph to her "Requiem",—the one where she is standing in a prison queue in Leningrad and is asked by a woman standing next to her (the woman has to whisper) whether Akhmatova can "describe this" and Akhmatova answers in the affirmative—the period of cohesiveness is over, and major energies are still noisily shuffling across the landscape, settling themselves in. It is too early for poetic stridency: the job of the poet is to keep the machinery of poetry itself clean and fit for honourable use. The explosions are internalised and crafted.

Being a 1956 refugee, born at the end of 1948, I write this from the pre-1989 side of the mirror, but being in England, my journey in many respects has been in the opposite direction, from denseness towards an attempted clarity. The anxieties and neuroses I carried over from Hungary passed through the same inwardness that I now see in the younger Hungarians. The fugitive Romantic poets have metamorphosed into poets of transition but it is in flight, and in climates of violent psychological loss that they have their origins. It is in these conditions they develop their intelligence and grace.