

## About Miklós Radnóti — for Foreigners

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### I

One thin volume suffices to hold Radnóti's entire life-work — and the most beautiful pieces of this oeuvre were found in a mass grave, during the exhumation, in the pocket of the poet's windbreaker. This tragic momentum of his biography marks all Radnóti's life and poetry. This much upsetting personal tragedy however need not be mentioned to magnify the artistic achievement: if we consider Radnóti a major poet today, it is not because of his martyr's death which he shared with so many victims of World War II.

A peculiar paradox of fate: Radnóti was to go through all the sufferings of humiliation and defencelessness to find his clearest poetic voice, to express his most important poetic message. It would be all too easy to conclude bitterly and cynically that fascism and inhumanity could sometimes benevolently foster pure, genuine poetry. However, the skeletons of Lager Heidenau, a forced labour camp were in no way Muses of poetry — their role and contribution and the encounter with fascism, in general, decided only one thing for Radnóti: the need to create the most emphatic poetic denial of their world. Those who have read Radnóti's poems in French translation know that the poet chose a very human, high and noble manner for this refusal. In his poems, written in the Lager for himself, in secret, without the hope and intention of publishing them or even making them known to anyone, we find no trace of hopelessness or despair — nor do these poems give voice to the combative political credo which could have served for the poet as one of the possible, adequate answers in his fight against fascism.

Radnóti chose quite another manner of refusal, denial and antagonistic poetic vision. His poems written in the Lager and, moreover, the poems found in the mass grave, do not picture the Inferno in which he lived his last year, but are about his love for his wife, picture his home, the orchards on the hillsides of Buda, the evenings spent with his poet friends sipping a glass of wine, the picnics in May, the hours of real and natural happiness. Among the poems found in the mass grave there are four which Radnóti called *Razglednitsa*-s (post-card). One of these poems, written under markedly tragic conditions, contrasts the brightness of love with war, the other calls our attention to the small shepherd

girl, grazing her flock among the flaming houses, and only the third and fourth *Razglednitsa* gives voice to the despair of death, describing the bullet in the back of the neck, just a few weeks before his own death, foreseeing his own doom. It is striking and shocking to see the objective, diary-like laconism with which Radnóti tells us the story of the execution of his neighbour.

Thus, a peculiar kind of poetry is born in Radnóti's last and, despite of all sufferings, most purified poetic phase. If we do not mean by *idyll* a sentimental game, we can call Radnóti's poetry born in the Inferno of the Lager *idyllic*: this is a purified poetry, breathing the air of real contentment, the deep joy of the soul, the consolation and strength of recognition and the humanity of morality. How easy it would have been to escape into an idyll from World War II — in a protected world. But the poetic sense and strength of Radnóti's idyll stems just from the fact that it was born in the state of being totally abandoned and thrown as a victim to others. Only by contrasting with the Lager Heidenau can be truly revealed the contents and value of this idyll. This idyll was both a refuse and a rebellion: the poetic greatness makes itself felt and partly arises from the victim's non-acceptance of what is imposed on him. In this struggle the last word is that of poetry and the murderers suffer their crushing defeat just when they commit the murder. Through Radnóti's poetic deed, through creating his individual idyll, freedom is attained: this captive has greater freedom than his guards, but not through the worthless freedom of dream and imagination, but through transforming his happier past into present, by being able to forcefully confirm the validity of his inner, purer and better world in contrast with the horror encircling him, and keeping something for himself which his enemies tried to take away both from him and the whole world. With this he did not build an ivory tower for himself, but he built a real tower, the fort of the unbending soul. This tower, this fort is called in other words: poetry. Poetry deserves its own name if it has the stability of the tower, the fort.

I feel that Miklós Radnóti is more Hungarian behind the barbed-wire fence of the Lager Heidenau than any of his contemporaries: at that time nobody had a more clear-cut and realistic poetic vision of his home, his country, and of the Hungarian land than he: in his poem *Nem tudhatom* ("I Couldn't Tell") he regrets most that the bombing squadron, though fighting for him as well, sees his country only as a map: the country which is his home, with the familiar people: the land of his forefathers in poetry. In poetry, Miklós Radnóti could win back all that was being taken away from him: his integrity, just as well as his Hungarian patriotism. This retrieval, moreover, this safeguarding, or even new creation was one of the greatest human achievements in 1944. This deed appointed his place among the great poets.

It was not by pure chance that he reached this point. His poetic career would not necessarily have led to this climax—though this career did not lack

the promise and possibility of such a zenith, either. So much is certain that Radnóti's poetic career comprises much from the beginnings of the Hungarian and European poetry of the 30-ies and 40-ies. These beginnings help us to understand much from the great achievements of his last poetic phase, yet do not explain all that was accomplished in that phase.

## 2

Miklós Radnóti was born in Budapest, in 1908. He studied at the University of Szeged, and the life of this university is worthy of our attention here, because the literary and political trends prevailing there considerably affected the forming of Radnóti's poetry. Szeged, then the second largest town of Hungary, on the far end of the Great Plain, on the banks of the river Tisza, introduced to Radnóti a world totally different from the one he had known in Budapest. Szeged is one of the large, Hungarian country towns in which the development of the bourgeois mentality had started in the 18th century and stopped right during the evolvement of capitalism. This town could pass as the symbol of old Hungary: a modern inner town built in the architectural style of the late 19th century; the dainty bridge spanning the river Tisza, built by Eiffel; the university laboratories with all their modern equipment (one of the biochemists of the University, Albert Szent-Györgyi was awarded the Nobel-prize in 1937); in the teaching staff of the Faculty of Arts there are professors of international fame (the head of the Department of Mathematics exchanged letters with Paul Valéry). In the town there live lively people, proud of their cuisine; Hungarian cookery books separately list the food-specialities of Szeged. Markets are picturesque on the main square and in the ringroads, but in the outer parts of the town, peasants live a secluded life, preserving their ancient customs and superstitions; the inhabitants of the *Alsóváros* [down town] wed only among themselves, and if we stop in front of the Gothic church of this peasant quarter, we are willing to believe the legend that György Dózsa's head — he was the leader of the Hungarian peasant war in the 16th century and was burnt alive — is buried here, and we also remember that the town was held in suspense by witchcraft trials and the burning of witches in the 17th century. Further away, round the town, in the lowland plains, on the farms live the agrarian proletarians, whose life was described with touching lyricism by one of the greatest Hungarian short-story writers, István Tömörkény, at the end of the last century.

In this environment, Miklós Radnóti becomes more and more subtly sensitive to both social questions, as well as to the features of rural Hungary and her archaic beauty. Yet the lectures he attends at the University develop his sensibility in two opposing directions; to classic Latin verse and to the

most modern French poetry. In other words, we could say that Radnóti has two poetic ideals: Horace and Apollinaire. His favourite professor at the University of Szeged is Sándor Sík, a Piarist monk, one of the most appealing figures of Hungarian catholic poetry. One of the students of the University was — not long before Miklós Radnóti — Attila József, the greatest Hungarian revolutionary poet. We have to bear these biographical data in mind to understand the intellectual climate in which Radnóti's poetry developed.

In the poems written in his last years all the ideas and literary trends he encountered during his life are present, distinctly and in harmony. We find in these poems a distilled version of the antique poetic diction, as well as the heritage of Apollinaire and traits of the themes of folklore, too. Yet all these elements in Radnóti's early poetry appeared in a rather disparate way, like attempts at various poetic voices and, not rarely, this gave the impression of mannerism. Comparing Radnóti's above-mentioned last poetic phase with his earlier poetry, we see a fundamental qualitative difference between the two.

The young Radnóti's quest for an archaic, folklore-like theme and voice stems from the same desire as the wish to return to the antique forms. In the poems of his first period, this archaizing style sounds today as antiquated manner, yet in his last poems — like in the one entitled *Hetedik ecloga* ['Seventh, Eclogue'] — it serves as a device which, through the classical purity of the form, underlines the Kafkaian absurdity of the concentration camp even stronger. Radnóti always had an inclination to classicism — but he became a real classicist only in his last poems. The perfection of the proportions of these poems came into being sometimes independent of the classical form, in other words: the perfection of these proportions is fostered by both the antique form as well as that of Apollinaire's.

In Hungary, the 30-ies, during which Radnóti's poetic career started (his first volume was published just in 1930), brought on a breach with the expressionism of the 20-ies. The whole poetry of this period can be characterized by the quest for simple and compact forms. Folk-poetry becomes something to be imitated again; the lyrical poetry of Gyula Illyés is an example. This turning away from expressionism meant also breaking away from German poetry, the impact of which had been extremely strong during the 20-ies in Hungary. The younger generation, round the end of the 30-ies, found the new model in Apollinaire, and Radnóti, together with István Vas, published the first translations of Apollinaire in 1940.

But this new poetry, breaking with expressionism in quest for simpler and compact forms, can find resources not only in folk-poetry, but also in the poetry of the antiquity. Radnóti's inquiry into Antiquity was promoted by two intellectual trends. For Radnóti was seeking the archaic features in Antiquity — and in many of his poems breathing the air of archaic features of the peasants' life, which he had got to know in Szeged, he turns to the antique forms

as if to archaic forms. In this endeavour, paradoxically, he was encouraged by Bartók's music. In Bartók's music, of course, there is no trace of classicism, yet all the more stronger is the quest for archaic elements. In Bartók's pieces, folk-music itself also appears as an archaic element. The antique form in Radnóti's poetry has the same kind of archaic element. However, what Bartók could successfully implement in music, was a failure in poetry: archaic qualities could be achieved only in forms of folk-poetry in Hungarian poesy.

We mention Bartók's name here because, in his conviction, ties with the archaic folk-world was the discovery of the only source of purity. He professes this in the *Cantata Profana*, in which the young men, changed into stags, do not return to their fathers' home because their antlers would not come across the door way, their mouth would not drink from glasses made by human hands, only from the clear spring. Bartók's view, expressed in the *Cantata Profana*, is also characteristic of a group of Hungarian artists and poets before World War II. The young people, with whom Radnóti made close friends during his years in Szeged, turned to the archaic world of folklore following Bartók and Kodály; they turned to folk-tales, to the tools of old trades, in which they were searching for the last traces of the aesthetic quality of folk art which was falling into oblivion. The nostalgia for the archaic leads Radnóti also to Negro poetry, he is to be the first Hungarian translator of this poetry. This atmosphere of the *Cantata Profana*, the quest for the archaic, was augmented by the upward trend of classical studies in the 30-ies in Hungary, just as by the exceptional influence of the works of Frobenius, as well as by the emergence of that new branch of ethnography which confronted Hungarian folk-poetry with the theme-structure of international poetry.

### 3

If we assess the results of the wide intellectual movement in which Radnóti also took part, we should say that these results were rather fragmentary and, in character, remained mostly on the level of curiosities. The *Cantata Profana* is an important milestone in a great career, but Bartók was to surpass folklore just as powerfully as persistently he remains adhering to some of its elements all through his life. For Bartók, folk-music is always the starting point, but his music, without showing any traits of the archaic, will get far from folk-music. For Bartók, folk-music fosters only the revealing of the elemental forces and emotions, the most ancient human and natural symbols and situations — but as soon as this goal has been attained, the means become of secondary importance. The primitive folklore form does not remain exclusive in poetry, either: Illyés puts it to use to establish a predominantly intellectual poesy. Those who get stuck on the level of folklore, are sure to become eccentrics

in the end. But the enthusiasts of classical forms will achieve even less: the most devoted ones will themselves retract from the verbosity and pseudo-elegance of the juvenile style. We must also add that the fashion of the antique poetic forms at the beginning of the 30-ies was sometimes an awkward attempt to repeat in a more strict form the free verses of the most eminent poet of the Hungarian avantgarde movement, Lajos Kassák; thus this fashion had the characteristic marks of epigon poetry twice over.

Thus young Radnóti identified himself with a poetic trend that soon proved to be a dead-end. We can only repeat here that if he had not written his last poems, we could only consider his early period as an expression of mannerism of a certain kind. But in his last period this manner gained actual meaning: the poetic presentation of the idyll, contrasted with the presentation of Lager Heidenau, was decisively fostered by the superb mastery of the archaizing technique.

Miklós Radnóti developed not only a new poetic voice — or rather, sometimes, a new manner — in Szeged, but there he also encountered the social tensions so characteristic of Hungary before World War II. It should not be overlooked that Radnóti gave lectures to the workers of Szeged regularly, and he visited farms; thus he was one of the intellectuals who felt responsible for changing the unbearable social situation or, at least, for unveiling this situation.

The world-wide economic depression of the 30-ies made its effects strongly felt in Hungary; the relations of class-forces became strained, and poetry and science could not keep silent about the misery of the majority of the population. Social matters were brought to the foreground at the beginning of the 30-ies in Hungary, and there are a few significant literary pieces written about the life and state of the industrial, but chiefly the agrarian proletarians. In the series of these works Gyula Illyés's book *Puszták népe* ("The People of the Pusztas") is now considered a classic piece. In fact, a kind of sociographic movement starts in literature; the country must be discovered, because the public mind has no idea about its real state. The Hungarian sociographic movement of the 30-ies in many respects, reminds one of the efforts of the Brazilian intellectuals, whose prototype can be found in the person of José de Castro. But while the Brazilian movement had, in the main, sociological, statistic and scientific aims, the Hungarian efforts were rather of literary, or even poetic character.

#### 4

Important as it is to take note of these influences on Radnóti's development, we would greatly exaggerate if we considered the poetry thus influenced, revolutionary. His increasing awareness of social problems and his contacts with the revolutionary movement do not show their effects primarily and di-

rectly in Radnóti's poetry; they have rather an indirect role in the shaping of the attitude that created the poetry of his last period. Being leftish has several varieties in poetry, progressiveness does not necessarily require bellicose poems, and can be present in the "softest", "most private" love-poetry, too. This, of course, does not mean that the poet's conviction is of no consequence. Radnóti needed the moral strength arising from progressiveness, the working-class movement and the communist ideas: in the tribulation awaiting him.

This is why we have to consider important the liberating effect of his short visit to Paris in 1937. The period of the Spanish Civil War deeply influenced his poetry and inspired the most beautiful pieces of Hungarian antifascist poetry. The moral and human value of Radnóti's antifascist poems is further increased by the fact that Hungary was drifting towards fascism. This process was opposed by the best part of the Hungarian intelligentsia, which could, naturally, deny fascism only in an indirect way. Yet this indirectness also created a great intellectual power. The antifascist method of the Hungarian intelligentsia was characterized by standing for moral and artistic ideals contrary to those of fascism; it would be vulgarizing to say that fascism could be fought off effectively only with programmes, slogans or perhaps firearms. Fascism was a kind of infection, which could have infected large crowds of people. The human mind had to be rendered preventively immune from contagion, human nature had to be protected early from becoming inclined to accept the ideology of fascism giving free vent to bad dispositions, or even to remain in guilty indifference, in the indolent complacency of the accomplice. To strive against the stream of fascism, refusing surrender to the misled public opinion, to secure human values — this mission and effort cannot be depreciated. The poetic programme that considers this kind of opposition the most important must not be overlooked; the one that professes humanity and an ideal of life, contrary to the ideas of fascism. And that was just the conscious programme of Radnóti's poetry towards the end of the 30-ies. Radnóti becomes a member of an intellectual front in which, among the Hungarian artists, writers and scientists, we find communists just as well as catholics; believers just as well as atheists. And, most importantly, with rare exceptions, it was the elite of the Hungarian intelligentsia which formed this antifascist front. There are some views belittling this front, this power, because it could not become a military force or a political movement. Truly, poets, historians and musicians could not hold up Hitler's war machine or alter the decisions of Horthy's government. But without them all that fascism was striving for: the depravation of the country, the corruption of human minds would have taken place to a greater extent and perhaps beyond redemption.

The antifascist conviction was an important element in Radnóti's poetry, but this factor showed its effect in a complex manner. From the end of the 30-ies, the most important theme in Radnóti's poetry will be death as expressed

most succinctly by his poem *Járkálj csak, halálraítélt* . . . ("Walk on, Condemned"). In his last poems we find almost a cycle dedicated to the sense of, and the awaiting for death; while in his early period the theme of death was rather a matter of coquetry, this theme becomes later depressively exclusive. Radnóti, as translator, turns now to Hölderlin and Georg Trakl besides Apollinaire, and Chénier will gain a special meaning, while Valéry Larbaud's *Orient-express* becomes a symbol of the unfulfilled strivings of a generation. Even his translations of La Fontaine gets a special colour: behind the neutral charm and serenity of the classic text a few hints, with their intentional inaccuracy, slip in the theme of death which is recurring, with obstinate persistence, in all his writings. In his love poems there is no trace of the Tristan-like ecstasy of death; death appears as a consequence awaited with cool objectivity, as the logical result of the age and the personal condition determined within the age. This sober, dispassionate presence of the theme of death lacks all romanticism, and all stoicism, too. This is neither the philosophy, nor the poetry of death: Radnóti presents death as the most characteristic trait of a whole period — he states this fact like he once discovered a certain landscape or an emotion. Death as the central object of poetic awareness this is Radnóti's most precise testimony of his own age. Is this an acceptance? Is this an obedient submission to the role assigned to him by fascism? Or is this perhaps simply going to meet his fate beforehand, a kind of identification with the role of martyrdom enforced by despair and anguish?

Radnóti does not speak about the pangs of death, but states the fact of death: his whole poetry is getting acquainted with death, making friends with it, a kind of day-to-day coexistence with death. There is only one among his poetic phases from which the theme of death is missing: the last one. Moreover, the last *Razglednitsa*, from among the poems he was to be buried with, ends with the, though humiliating and ruthless, gesture of returning to life. Radnóti's poetry of death ends in the death camp.

In Lager Heidenau he seems almost to start a new life. His poem, *Erőltetett menet* ("Forced March") expresses life, joy, peace and harmony more intensively than any other of his earlier pieces. A superficial observer would think that Radnóti, once "scared" of death has found finally the "meaning of life". What happened, actually, between the poem *Járkálj csak, halálraítélt* . . . ("Walk on, Condemned") (1936) and the one *Erőltetett menet* ("Forced March") (1944, 15th of September)?

In his last months, bringing him to the peak of his poetic career, Radnóti finishes with the marvels he and his generation were once so much preoccupied with, and summoning up all the power reserve of his life, he, totally abandoned, starts almost to build up a new self, to create a new poetry. This new creation of his self, this revival was such a great human achievement, such a great moral undertaking that it necessarily had to bring about great poetry. I have already



mentioned that I think the Radnóti of the last months was free — only a free man can create a poetry which is represented by his last poems.

This renewed mind became invulnerable to horror, even to death. In a sense, he defeated death — he was so sure of its coming that he lived on as if he had already died. This kind of state could open a new phase in his poetry. This rebirth also meant that he abandoned all that was superfluous, and retained all that was important — either memory or experience which nourished him during his life. He must have been conscious of this metamorphosis, for we find this profound line in his poem entitled *Levél a hitveshez* (“Letter to the Spouse”): “*valóság voltál, álom lettél újra*” [you were reality and have become a dream]. This line became valid for his whole life.

It was not time that separated him from his life until then; his poem *A la recherche* had a different sense from that of those who started their travel back to their past in their hearts and imagination. What he became detached from was not the past, but the present — his detachment took place not in time, but in space, in body, in mind. But this detachment at the same time revived in him all that had ever given strength to him: his love became now a new love, and he could speak about it more profoundly, in a more captivating way than in his first love poems. His amazing mastery of poetry was no longer a burden for him — he did not need to look for poetic inspiration to match his poetic form: his whole being, his very existence was a beautiful, crushing defiance of formlessness. His antifascist conviction could be realized now best matching his personality, his temperament: with summoning up all his moral strength, with the establishment of his integrity, with the making of his new poetry, he gained his own victory over fascism. This was the victory of poetry, and therefore, in a sense, is imperishable, unlike military victory. The less this victory counted in his personal, future life, the more significant it is today and also in the future. Who could be then more invulnerable than this poet, sentenced to death? We feel he is “condemned to die” only when writing his poem in 1936.

Miklós Radnóti became a major poet, because with all the greatest emotional experience of his life, with his erudition, his conviction and morality, yet in total desolation, he saved his integrity, his humanity. He saved it at a time when a great part of mankind was about to annihilate humanity both in himself and in others. Of course, man can get lost in different ways, also among other historical circumstances than the ones that threatened man's existence at that time. To save man, to find him again, either among tragic and humiliating, or untroubled circumstances: this is the only worthy poetic enterprise to undertake; and as there is such an example, perhaps it is worthwhile to poets of all peoples to study the work of this Hungarian poet, who died forty years ago.