

Hungarian Poetry in the Diaspora: A Symposium

On May 16, 1980, a symposium was held at the University of Toronto which examined the issue of writing poetry in one's native language while living in a North American cultural milieu. Four noted Hungarian poets expressed their views on the issue. The symposium was conducted in Hungarian, however, the statements of the four poets are printed below in English translation with slight modifications. The poets were all born in Hungary; they left their native country following the Revolution of 1956; all but György Faludy came directly to Canada. The poets were introduced by George Bizstray, who also acted as moderator during the symposium.

GYÖRGY FALUDY (1910-) has had an eventful life which is summarized in the appendix to a collection of his poems entitled *East and West*, published in English translation (Toronto, 1978). Canada has been his country of permanent residence since 1967. In 1978, he was awarded an honorary doctorate by the University of Toronto.

LÁSZLÓ KEMENES GÉFIN (1937-) has been a resident of Montreal since his arrival in Canada, working there first as a translator for several years, then initiating a career as a man of letters. He has a Ph.D. in English and is currently teaching at Concordia University.

TAMÁS TŰZ (1916-) is a Roman Catholic priest, who already had two volumes of poetry published by the time he fell into Russian captivity during World War II. He has written over ten volumes of poetry and prose since, one of which is in English: *On Restless Wings* (1966). English translations of his poems were also published in the anthology *The Sound of Time* (Lethbridge, 1974).

GYÖRGY VITÉZ (1933-) began his university studies in Hungary but was arrested and sentenced to hard labour. Upon arriving in this country following the Revolution, he completed his studies. He presently works as a clinical psychologist in Montreal and is on the faculty of Concordia University. Some

of his poems have appeared in English translation in the anthology *The Sound of Time*.

FALUDY: In discussing the Hungarian poet in the diaspora, we have a very general topic to cover. I just hope that all four of us will be able to shed light on one or other major aspect of the topic.

I emigrated twice, once in 1938 and again in 1956. The two cultural milieus which I encountered before the war and after 1956 were entirely different. The first time abroad, I spent one and one-half years in Paris, one in Morocco and the rest in the United States (as a member of its armed forces). The second time, I spent half a year in France, nine years in England, one in Florence, eighteen months in Malta, and the rest here in Toronto, with some stopovers in the United States as well. What was the essential difference between my first and second "emigrant experience"? I feel that I cannot answer this difficult question right away. Instead let me ask whether Hungarian prose—mind you, not poetry, but prose,—has reached the West, or is better known throughout the world presently than it was in the beginning of this century? The answer to this question is unfortunately, negative.

In 1905, Theodore Roosevelt's favorite writer was Kálmán Mikszáth. Does the present president of the United States or, for that matter, the Canadian Prime Minister, have the faintest idea about Mikszáth, Jókai or Móricz? Again the answer is no. This also applies to the public, that is the educated, English-speaking, widely-read public. We have not achieved much in this respect recently, and in the case of poetry the situation is even more critical.

We have, however, made progress in other respects. I remember, when my Hungarian passport was issued in 1938, I was asked about my profession. I said I was a poet; after all, anyone could claim that. Upon arriving at the French border, the border guard looked at my passport and asked, as he spat sideways, "Poète?" The guard repeated this action again when he noticed that I was also Hungarian. This was the general feeling about Hungarian poets.

In another instance which took place eighteen months later, I arrived in the United States with the same passport, which had expired in the meantime. There was no longer an Hun-

garian embassy in Paris where it could be renewed. Fortunately, the Hotel Hungaria had a very nice rubber stamp with the Hungarian coat of arms, complete with the crown, angels and everything; for one dollar, the receptionist renewed my passport for fifteen years. The American immigration officials could not tell the difference. I also had a telegram from Franklin D. Roosevelt, inviting me to come to the United States. Despite this, we had to appear at a hearing where a judge deported my wife and I from the country at our own expense. This occurred when he noticed that I was a poet and a Hungarian one at that. "What are you going to do here?" he said. "You'll die of starvation! I'd better send you back home." As I have already indicated, this was the general feeling about us.

No amount of ignorance could take away or change our shared love, namely that of poetry and literature, which is presently much more prevalent in Hungary than in any other country. If we are invited to Chicago or Los Angeles to speak to a Hungarian-American audience, fifty to one hundred people always attend. If six or eight of the best Canadian poets have a joint program, maybe twenty to thirty people will come.

This still does not change the fact of our isolation. It is almost impossible to translate Hungarian poetry to English. Many are working on it with much ambition, but mostly without success. I haven't seen any totally successful translations since László Gara's French ones, and the bad translations are doing us enormous disservice! It may sound too severe, but we should really apply the highest expectations in spite of the immense difficulties. Some examples of these difficulties are that most Hungarian poems are still written in rhymes while in modern English this is impossible to accomplish. Also, it takes a long time to understand that Hungarian literature is like a river which bends differently and has a different stream and color than English.

What signifies a great change is the support of the state, especially here in Canada. Multiculturalism has helped the development of Hungarian literature in this country. What would happen if I went to the French ministry of culture in Paris and asked for assistance in publishing a volume of poetry in Hungarian? Loud laughter would be heard throughout the office, after which I would be ushered out. This multicultural spirit is alive only in North America and is reminiscent of feudal

times when princes and counts were the patrons of literature. Now the state has taken over this function.

I am leaving some difficult issues to my fellow poets and friends to discuss. I don't like to talk about politics. Personally, I regard my presence in the diaspora as a positive thing. I can write what I could not had I stayed in Hungary. I came out to write on behalf of those who cannot do it. I have tried to write what I felt was true. I feel I have done a service by this to Hungarian literature.

(Following his presentation, Faludy read the following poems: "Honvagy", "Amerikai állampolgárságot ajánlanak", "A kilencvenedik szonett", all published in *Összegyűjtött versei*).

KEMENES GÉFIN: I will attempt to answer two questions related to the central topic, namely: why do we write at all; and secondly, why do we write in Hungarian, but in a manner which is different from the way poets write in Hungary.

We write because we are Hungarian poets. This is simple. A poet is neither a gland in the body of a nation which altruistically gushes out the fluids which move the body, nor is he a vital organ which, similarly to the lungs or the liver, keeps the whole organism functioning. The poet is a metaphysical being, and is therefore able to exist outside the body of the nation, that is, outside the geographic boundaries.

We have brought something with us which we have preserved and even enriched with our experiences outside of our native country. The fact that we live away from our birthplace also serves as a clue to answering why we write differently. We write differently than our counterparts in Hungary because of distancing, which intends no disrespect for noble feelings of patriotism or to the memory of our ancestors and national heroes. But we must view ourselves from a distance and only we, those of us who live outside the physical and metaphysical body of the nation, can do this.

Hungarian poets are being reproached for writing in their native tongue abroad. While James Joyce was living away from Ireland for forty years, no Irishman ever reproached him for writing about Dublin in English. Ezra Pound, Ernest Hemingway and Gertrude Stein wrote abroad in their native language; why is it that we Hungarians cannot? Alas, we are reproached by those who feel that we are challenging the wonderful, perennial

Hungarian falsehood: that there is no life outside of Hungary. We have shot a hole in this lie, because there is existence outside Hungary, existence which is perhaps even more truly Hungarian than in the homeland! Because the distance, the view from afar affords not a loss of contact but a more realistic perception. We look at Hungarian-ness through bifocal glasses, that is what we see is the same but from a different perspective.

This also explains why we write differently from poets in Hungary. We try not to think in terms of the “Hungarian wasteland” and we try to live without the unconditional acceptance of sentimentalism, Hungarian mannerisms, and the Hungarian historical past. This is the first time that a generation of poets grew up in the West who regard not only traditional Hungarian poets as their mentors, but others as well, such as Pound, Breton, Yeats and Neruda.

It is impossible to predict what influence this hybrid-poetry will have on Hungarian poetry. I definitely feel that it is a positive contribution. Distance, perspective, an existence removed from one’s native culture results in a type of freedom which we all realize. These factors are, as György Faludy just remarked, the main reason why we live abroad.

They have started writing about us in Hungary. They have also discussed the problems of Hungarian poets living abroad on radio programs. They never ask the real question, however, which is: why do these poets live abroad? We could live in Hungary comfortably nowadays, as do many pseudo-poets who earn about eight forints per line for their poems. We believe that the contribution we are making is more valuable than any promise of an easy income.

(To complement his speech, Kemenes Géfin read the following poems: “Megtérés” and “Metafizikusan,” both from *Pogány diaszpóra*; and Part 30 from *Fehérlófia*).

TŰZ: I believe that none of the Hungarian poets who live outside of Hungary can think of changing the mainstream of Hungarian poetry from abroad. We cannot reverse trends, nor can we redirect them. What would be needed for this to occur is for people in Hungary to be familiar with our work and aspirations. This has not happened thus far, although some promising initiatives have been taken already. Increasingly, literary periodicals publish writings of Hungarian poets who live abroad;

thus Hungarians are gradually learning about us. This means that we must not only take into consideration Hungarians living in the diaspora but those living in Hungary as well. Above all, we should consider our fellow poets who are watching with great interest what directions we are taking. Thus, the idea that we can eventually influence Hungarian literature is not unfounded.

Writers and poets in Hungary are especially curious about what novelty we can offer and in what ways the years and decades spent abroad have enriched our insights. The old traditions of Hungarian poetry are alive in our native country. On the other hand, literary tendencies from the West have always reached Hungary with some delay. Until now, Hungarian literature absorbed these tendencies mostly from translations, which is a slow process. Now, however, the emigrant poets, provided that they belong to the literary vanguard, can mediate these tendencies in our native language. We can help our fellow poets in Hungary to incorporate new trends into literature. At the same time, our fellow poets and readers here in the diaspora can also invoke inspiration from this vanguard, since, due to material difficulties, language erosion and disinterestedness, emigré Hungarian literature is perhaps even slower to perceive new developments, and is even more conservative, in the foreign language milieu.

As my small contribution, I would like to emphasize subjectivism as a dominating characteristic of contemporary poetry. Hiltrud Gnüg, the young West German critic who teaches at the University of Cologne, wrote that the self-discovery of poets has opened a new period in lyric poetry. Evidently, this is not such a new phenomenon: the discovery of nature and individual freedom are two poetic motifs which we can find throughout the history of poetry since Eichendorff. But by the time of Goethe, landscape appears as an internalized, subjective object which unites nature and spirit. Poetry opposes its transcendence to the existing order, poetic language diverges from colloquial language, and lyrics expressing a human experience taken on a symbolic character.

A new lyrical universe arises only when the sensuous experience refers to itself and nothing else. This is precisely what happened in modern lyric poetry in that it has abandoned symbolism completely. It has also put an end to the gap between the language of hermetic poetry and the language of everyday

communication. Since the sixties, common everyday experience and language have characterized lyric poetry. Despite this, we should keep in mind that in Hungarian poetry, to write about the ego was frequently regarded as something condemnable. Consider Sándor Weöres' voluminous oeuvre: we hardly find any poem in this piece written in the first person. In the poems of the relatively younger generation, however, the "I" is once again emphasized. In the poems of László Nagy and Sándor Csoóri, the poetic ego is strongly influenced by the Hungarian lyric tradition, whereas in Pilinszky, subjectivity appears, similar to Western European poetry. In the diaspora, we face the great problem that a wide gulf separates the avantgarde aspirations of the poets from the reading public's background, taste, and expectations. This is where I attribute a great role to that young generation of Hungarian poets, who may have started encountering problems with the Hungarian language, but continue to write, while living in the mainstream of a "foreign" literature. They have something to offer us, as we have something to offer them. There are no "lost" generations, for if there were, our symposium would be pointless.

(At the end of his presentation, Tűz read: "Helyzetjelentés," from his volume *Elraboltam Európát* and "Síró szelek," "Magasabb fokon," "Menni vagy maradni," "Keresztút magánhasználatra," and "A Bárány vére, második rész," from *Égve felejtett álmok*).

VITÉZ: I feel that my colleagues have already talked about everything worth discussing. This is the time when one can only make others either laugh or upset; I'll try both.

First, I'd like to make some observations with regards to the "foreign cultural milieu." As is commonly known, Beethoven and Smetana were deaf, they could not hear music of any kind, be that the compositions of others or their own. This demonstrates that the quality of artistic work does not necessarily derive from constant feedback from other people. It may enrich and help some artists but is by no means an absolute necessity. The creative process may take place in a foreign cultural context even if one cannot hear the echo of the mother tongue which he utilizes as the language of his creation. The poet may occasionally feel as if he is in a padded cell or in a room where all the walls echo his own voice, but after a while you can get used

to this and whatever occurred earlier as a frightening hallucination becomes an integrated part of the creative process.

The other day, I was looking at a book about Piet Mondrian. When he was still young and wrote his name with two "a"-s, he painted marvelous landscapes in the style of the great Dutch masters. After 1909, he started painting church facades, and it is obvious that his interest in architecture guided him to the adoption of an abstract style. After he arrived in the United States, he continued in this style. Numerous individuals thought that he had gone crazy and wished that he had continued his earlier style. My opinion is, however, that the world lost one Dutch landscape painter but gained a true modern master.

A Hungarian poet who begins his artistic activity here in the West instead of arriving with considerable experience in writing, passes through some typical developmental stages. The first stage, after the initial cultural shock, is characterized by nostalgia. The poet writes about what he left behind in the Old Country, and tries to relate this in a favorable light. Then, as he looks around in the new world, the past begins to fade and within a few years, the formerly idyllic image is replaced by a completely different one. The latter is usually much less idyllic, the images of the poems reflect something unpleasant. At an even later stage, the poet directs his attention at the language and its elements; what he discovers is that the words often have more than one meaning. In the Hungarian cultural milieu, the spoken language develops a static meaning for each word. Living in another language area, we discover that words not only have a primary but also a secondary and tertiary meaning. Words may even have one or more individual meaning, that is, one which is not generally shared. All these meanings can be integrated into poems, they give the poetic text an entirely new tone and texture. In other words, at least some of us have undergone a process of development in our works, not unlike that experienced by Mondrian. I chose the poems I'm about to read to reflect this process of change.

Before that, however, one final point. Poets tend to return to certain Hungarian topics. They are in our blood, or at least in the cultural "baggage" we carry with us. We are not writing and cannot write the way they do in Hungary. Why should we retell here what poets are relating in the homeland? We must

look at the world and listen to it from another side, from another angle.

(To complement his speech, Vitéz read the following poems: “Tollrajz” and “Jégvilág” from the volume *Amerikai történet*; and “A kentaurak,” “Erről újólag kellene...,” and “Millennium,” from *Jel Beszéd*.)