

## REVIEW ARTICLES

# The Poetry of Contemporary Hungary

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*Modern Hungarian Poetry*. Edited, and with an Introduction by Miklós Vajda. Foreword by William Jay Smith. New York: Columbia University Press, 1977. 286 pp.

This anthology, comprising nearly 200 poems from forty-one authors is, on the whole, the best collection of Hungarian verse available in English. The translations are enjoyable as English poetry while they reflect accurately the original. In most instances, the problem of recreating the meter and rhyme is handled in a logical rather than pedantic fashion: the English verse aims at capturing the essential sound and feel of the original without trying for precise equivalencies which might have led to distortions of sense or of the modern American idiom into which it is rendered. The success of this approach was reflected in the warm reception of the parallel readings held by four of the poets in the anthology (Ferenc Juhász, Amy Károlyi, István Vas, Sándor Weöres) and two of the translators (Daniel Hoffman and William Jay Smith) at the Library of Congress. Even those in the audience who understood no Hungarian could appreciate the poetry in both the original and the translation as they listened, because the tonal qualities *were* reproduced.

Such accuracy is understandable if the genesis of these translations is considered. They are the result of ten years' work and are culled from the pages of the *New Hungarian Quarterly*, the English-language journal whose literary editor is Miklós Vajda. Furthermore, the work involved close cooperation between poet and translator, achieved through both extensive correspondence and personal meetings. The use of literal prose versions and of well-marked texts and tapes of the original to ensure proper sound-qualities, is one that has been found the most effective for verse translations. Thus, in the "Foreword," William Jay Smith stated, "I firmly believe that only poets should translate poets, but

how does one translate from a language of which one knows not a word? It may seem madness, and probably is; but poets are not to be put off by madness." Yet, he could conclude: "Although after several visits I still know little Hungarian, I do have the mad confidence shared by the other poet-translators of this volume that most of the poems assembled here by Miklós Vajda are of a rare beauty in the original and deserving of the best life they can be given in English."

The organization and purpose of the volume is given in Miklós Vajda's "Introduction." This clearly demonstrates the limits and even shortcomings of the anthology: all of the poems having been culled from the pages of the *NHQ*, they reflect a certain propagandistic stance. Vajda's introductory survey of the last 500 years of Hungarian history and poetry is naturally guided by these same principles. Yet, it would not be fair to condemn the book for failing to be wholly representative when such is not its ultimate aim. Nor would it be fair to condemn Vajda for a too-simplistic view of Hungarian letters since, obviously, he could not give a detailed survey in the approximately fifteen pages allotted for the introduction. On the other hand, the essay serves its purpose and does not only place the various poets in an appropriate tradition but also shows the affinities between these contemporary writers and those of the past.

It is most enlightening to become acquainted with these poems in the framework provided by Vajda. He groups the poets into four generations, though it is clear that the generations overlap considerably. Lajos Kassák (1887-1967) and Milán Füst (1888-1967) are labelled the "great forebears who were followed by the poets who began publishing before or during World War II. Still strongly socialistic in their themes are those who, though born before the Second World War, did not begin to publish until after the conflict. The political concerns of these poets (at least as exhibited in these poems) are intense and personal. The "poets who grew up under socialism" are not apolitical, yet the difference of their experiences and expectations clearly marks their poetry.

The forerunners, Kassák and Füst, are represented by both personal and political poems. "Craftsmen" (1918) from the former looks forward to better times; later poems capture personal moments. "If my Bones must be Handed Over" (1933) and "Old Age" (1940) represent the poet's attempt to come to grips with cosmic forces: life and time. Lőrinc Szabó, who died in 1957, might best represent the next group, and the poems included in this collection suggest a highly personal poet. Thematically, however, the majority of the poets included in the anthology belong here. Many wrote both before and after the war, and their themes,

outlook and preoccupations reflect the changes in Hungary during these last fifty years. It would be inaccurate to classify Gyula Illyés strictly as a poet representing the revolutionary socialism of the 1930s or to consider István Vas *merely* as a representative of a new cosmopolitanism. Above all, the selection makes no claim to being representative of the work of the individual poets, and so the generalizations stated in the Introduction should be taken with more than the usual grain of salt. These should, in short, be interpreted carefully.

To mention briefly the poets represented by one or two works, Zoltán Zelk experiments with verse forms and sounds: his free-associative verse is among the most interesting in international terms. Anna Hajnal, who died in September of 1977, responds sensitively to both exterior phenomena and her rich inner life; Amy Károlyi, an admirer and translator of Emily Dickinson, shows similar concern for symbolism and meaning in ordinary things in "The Third House," while László Kálnoky and György Rónai are represented by poems wrung from personal despair.

The nineteen poems from Gyula Illyés span a broad range of themes and represent a career of half a century. "The Wonder Castle" (1937) is a low-keyed yet all the more effective commentary on social injustice, but "Aboard the Santa Maria" suggests disappointment with the "new order" and a deadening loss of goals. The more recent "Tilting Sail," on the other hand, suggests hope sprung of compromise or adaptation. His tribute to the Hungarian language, "A Wreath," is one of the most memorable poems in the anthology.

The cosmopolitanism of István Vas and the linguistic virtuosity of Sándor Weöres are equally representative of modern Hungarian poetry. "Budapest Elegy" (1957) is a poignant tribute to the city just emerging from the aftermath of the Revolution. In "The Etruscan Sarcophagus" Vas gives a sensitive and personal reaction to an ancient work of art which means to him the eternal validity of human values. This is the theme of his personal reminiscence, "Boccherini's Tomb" and even of the pseudo-historical poem, "Nagyszombat, 1904."

If any one poem in the collection can be called representative of the variety that is Sándor Weöres', it might be "The Lost Parasol." Through this ordinary object, Weöres creates an image of change and evolution that encompasses life, and which is, in fact, life itself. Narrative and lyrical passages alternate in this "song,/ sung for my only one." "Monkeyland" and "Variations on the Themes of Little Boys," display mastery of words: in both poems the music of the words carries more import than their meaning. It is interesting to note that even a

predominantly non-Hungarian-speaking audience at the Library of Congress was able to respond to such verbal tricks when Mr. Weöres regaled them with a selection.

Zoltán Jékely, László Benjámín, Gábor Devecseri, Imre Csanádi, György Somlyó, Sándor Rákos and János Pilinszky belong to the generation that reached manhood shortly before or during the War. Each is represented by several poems, but for once, in "Holiday-Afternoon Rhapsody" by Csanádi, the translator seems to miss both the poetry of the first stanzas and the accurate rendering of the imagery. Csanádi can also be regarded as the spokesman of the new generation who, in his "Confession of Faith" gives a somewhat grudging and reserved tribute to socialism. Metrical innovations are represented by György Somlyó. János Pilinszky is the most mystical of the poets in this book. A Catholic, he approaches the great medieval mystics in an international or supranational spirit: sin, suffering, love, grace, and eternity are his themes.

Ágnes Nemes Nagy, another important woman poet, exhibits some of T. S. Eliot's intellectuality in her poetry. István Kormos' (1923–1977) poetry is more personal, and in these selections, he laments the lack of hope in a future. This theme forms an increasingly important motif in the poems of the younger generation, and even in the more recent work of the older men. The "chroniclers" of the postwar years, Mihály Váci, István Simon, József Tornai, Gábor Görgey, Gábor Garai, István Eörsi, Ágnes Gergely, Márton Kalász, István Csukás, Dezső Tándori, István Ágh, Miklós Veres, György Petri, and Szabolcs Várady, each represented by one or a few poems, show a candid view of contemporary Hungary as they see it. László Nagy is a master of this in poems such as "The Coalmen" or "The Bliss of Sunday," in which everyday life is captured in easy pentameters ably translated by Tony Connor and Edwin Morgan respectively.

Richly imaginative poetry with no obvious "ulterior" motive is found in the selections of Margit Szécsi and Sándor Csoóri. Mihály Ladányi's poetry contains some interesting observations with a skeptical motif, yet he seems unaware of the challenge these doubts could pose to the socialist system he does endorse. Ottó Orbán recalls the war years in vivid imagery ("Gaiety and Good Heart" and "Concert"), and Judit Tóth comes closest to representing an important segment of Hungarian literature — that written abroad.\* Married to a Frenchman, her home is in Paris, and her Hungarian poems represent a gentle sensitivity which touches the essential yet small things of life. The poems included here spring from personal experience, yet they are concerned with universal

values: childbirth and children, infant death (through abortion or miscarriage), new beginnings — these are the themes ably interpreted by Laura Schiff.

Ferenc Juhász, whose highly allegorical and symbolic poetry is represented here by “Power of the Flowers,” “The Boy Changed into a Stag Cries out at the Gate of Secrets” and several shorter pieces, shows the power of Hungarian poetry when welded to Hungarian folklore. The poet’s peasant background allows him to feel the traditions yet he can also recognize the need to accept the changes which have come in the life of the village. Tradition and technology clash in these poems — yet in the end, a *modus vivendi* emerges. Because he accepts the benefits of industrialization as well as the need for it, Juhász leaves the reader with a positive attitude. Without sacrificing depth, he makes a positive statement on the emergence of a new, industrial society in a traditionally rural culture.

Several themes can be isolated by way of summary: loneliness, despair, a sense of isolation, the futility of goodness or of steadfastness to an ideal, even the vanity of suffering under a senseless horror which can be discerned in Pilinszky’s poems. There are, on the other hand, few direct references to the explicitly Hungarian themes of earlier poets (the guidelines of the selection as well as the policy of *NHQ* might have influenced this). The tone is modern, however, and historical-political concerns are obliquely treated. Often there is a sense of *déjà vu*: the injustices invoked have happened before. The poets’ reaction to these concerns, however, is one of calm resignation and pity. While anger might be expressed, hate seldom is.

Other poems reflect the beauty of life, of the landscape, or of special moments. They are intensely emotional, regardless of the particular feelings expressed. Finally, while many of the poems reflect a quest for peace, few find spiritual solace, though some of the poems hint at an eternity that is peaceful. This should not, however, be interpreted as a traditional Christian theme. Nor is it necessarily a religious Eden that these poets seek; yet, the poetry can not be called irreligious: it reflects the questioning of modern man. Above all, these poems reflect a desire *to be*. The restlessness and the individualism of modern existential man can be seen in these selections.

The supplementary material contributes to the usefulness of the book. Miklós Vajda’s introduction is generally helpful, though some of the more rabid propaganda statements (*e.g.*, a paragraph on p. xxviii) are unnecessary. The “Biographical Notes” following the text give important information on the poets’ backgrounds and interests and helpfully

cite their international achievements as well as translations of their works. Finally, both the twenty translators and ten co-translators (who supplied the literal versions to the American, Canadian and English poets) are remembered. The portraits of the poets represented enhance the reading of their works.

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\* The literature of the emigré authors, or of authors living outside the borders of present-day Hungary are not included in the anthology; this is not a shortcoming so much as a result of the editorial policy of the *NHQ* and the aims of the anthology.