

## JENŐ J. TERSÁNSZKY

(b. 1888)

A tall gaunt figure, a bony hawk's head on a thin bird's neck, with ever watching, wise, blinking eyes. His gestures are sudden, unexpected and irregular, and his manners never lack the cocky pertness of the French *gamin*. Even today he is like that, though he is hard upon eighty. No doubt, among the Hungarian writers, he seems to be least of all a writer. He is the man who has never "made sacrifices on the altar of Art" and never adopted the rituals of the "trade." He placed himself beyond literature, or at least beyond the hierarchy of literary life, with the same ease, nimbleness and agility and enjoying the same indestructible health, as did most of the heroes of his novels—who have, since, become classic—when they outlawed themselves in society. While other people discussed the problems of poetry, or of the world, he arranged floor-shows or variety turns; while his companions—writers and critics—tried their hands at the new forms of prose or discoursed on the revolutions in novel-writing or the revolutions of our modern times, he sang, jested, and played on many instruments. He played his role so merrily, so perfectly and with so much ingenuity that his audience, in fact the general public, did not believe for a long time what the critics were beginning to voice more and more frequently and more and more convincingly—that Jenő J. Tersánszky is one of the greatest writers of present-day Hungarian literature, one of the greatest story-tellers of our period.

Nor was it easy to believe all this of Tersánszky, for he himself gave cause and pretext for being identified with the most popular hero of his stories—Marci Kakuk (Martin Cuckoo). Who is this fellow? According to his creator "a market citizen, that is, a

tramp"; a sort of Till Eulenspiegel, a blood relation to the great Picaresque heroes of world literature, such as Simplicius Simplissimus, Gil Blas and the others, a character of whom Aladár Schöpflin, an eminent historian of contemporary Hungarian literature, said not without some middle-class irony: "He lives on the dust-heap of society, this depraved scion of a good family, this carrier of gipsy double-basses, this cocky lad who undertakes the most despised jobs, who exploits even the sluts and is a master of petty swindles and thefts. But even if he is a tramp," Schöpflin adds, taking the author's side, "he is not such a depraved character after all. He is not a real thief, not even a drunkard, in fact you cannot say that he is a shirker or an idler. And as to his heart—Marci Kakuk's heart is by no means more wicked than that of others. Only that he seems to have been destined to be a tramp by the Most High."

At first reading this, too, appears to be a Tersánszkyan joke—but it is advisable to take it seriously. Marci Kakuk, and with him many other heroes of Tersánszky's novels, are predestined social outcasts, as are the other flotsam and jetsam beyond the pale of society, as is Nela, the heroine of his novel *Good-Bye, My Dear*, in other words Marci Kakuk is no more depraved than the "depraved" of society. That, in fact, is one of the basic tenets of Tersánszky's. For though it is true that in Marci Kakuk he discovered the lowest stratum of society and portrayed its typical character, yet at the same time, seen from the vantage-point of Marci Kakuk, he rediscovered and exposed the "decent" bourgeois society as well. Marci is amorality personified, as are many other heroes in Tersánszky's novels, but the society in whose deepest waters Marci frisks about like a parasitic fish is no less immoral, only it disguises its immorality with sham morals. In this case, is it not better to take on amorality—which may be no more than nature (with Marci), or destiny (with Nela)—unless society turns it into a sin with lies about keeping up moral appearances. Marci Kakuk's heart is blissfully innocent when compared with social hypocrisy.

This, then, is one of Tersánszky's tenets: the hearts of heroes and heroines, "depraved" according to the bourgeois morals, are no more depraved than those of other people; the harlot is no more depraved than the virgin, in fact the virgin is depraved rather than

the harlot. The second "tenet" is that there may be, after all, such a thing as predestination. "Marci Kakuk has been destined to be a tramp by the Most High"; Nela is trampled down and depraved by history, by the war. Can she help it? What can an abandoned girl left on the trail of a hungry pack of males do? Can Marci Kakuk help being born such as he is? Can they do anything against their destiny? Indeed, maybe that other force—the World, Destiny, or Society—is responsible for having set a trap for them!

Tersánszky's characters know nothing about the tragic struggle against Destiny. They never go against the current; they let themselves be carried along by the stream. They are witnesses rather than "heroes," though sometimes, as it happens in Nela's case, such everyday witnesses are more accusing and distressing than anybody else. Nor does the writer want anything but "truly to interpret them." He does not comment on their attitude, on their words or thoughts because he feels they can speak for themselves and can accuse as well.

Naturally, we are aware of the consummate artistry required for this: no comment, only interpretation, with the most realistic portrayal of the characters, watching out even for the slightest cadence of their speech, and forgoing all literary tricks and ornamentation, in short being an artist without the semblance of artistry.

The manuscript of *Good-Bye, My Dear* was sent home by the author from the trenches of World War I. *The Harlot and the Virgin* first appeared in 1924. Both are very popular and widely read short novels; reviewers reckon them among the best stories of the Hungarian prose of the century.

György Rónay