

FOREWORD
SÁNDOR CSÓÓRI: WITNESS

Sándor Csoóri's poetry serves as a passionate mirror of post-World War II Hungary. It presents a world of toppled bridges, razed villages, the wounded and the dead, for above all, Csoóri is a witness, an unrelenting witness, to the turmoil of his homeland in recent times. Yet this witness keeps searching for answers, sometimes in the face of a beautiful woman, sometimes in an attachment to nature, and sometimes in the doggedly persistent belief in the value of the search itself. But he does not find answers usually, and most of his poems end with the speaker alone, remembering a past that had once held meaning, considering a future which, at best, will be filled with struggle. The present, under Csoóri's unrelentingly honest perspective, is one of lies and hypocrisy, a time in which the speaker is barely able to maintain his own integrity.

Yet that is one of the major strengths of Sándor Csoóri's poetry: there *is* an individual self who is able to exist, albeit with extreme hardships, in an age and society which values the depersonalization of man. Csoóri's speaker is always an identifiable person, one with a past (however horrific), a present (however despondent), and a future (however tenuous); this is the voice of a human being, presumably the poet himself, who is struggling to maintain his independent individuality. As Csoóri has said: "From the first there has been present in my work, in whichever genre, a general sense of unease. About how to maintain the existence of the human personality in the world amid the great campaigns of depersonalization." ("Autobiographical Note", *ARION* 12 Budapest, 1980.) Csoóri has refused to surrender this concept of selfhood, either to the "great campaigns of depersonalization" or to the abstractions of much contemporary poetry.

The voice of alienation and solitude comes from so deep within him that it is undeniable. When he writes of his own life, whether it be about an early love, or about a time when

he idled in the streets of Poland, or about the time when his generation was "good and obedient", there is no doubt in the reader's mind that the speaker has been there, that he has been true to Walt Whitman's words: "I was the man, I suffer'd, I was there". There also is no doubt that this man speaks for his countrymen and not just for himself, and that accounts, justifiably, for his great following in Hungary. Although many of his poems are very grim, indeed, nightmarish, Csoóri's poetry, in its best moments, is redeeming, for it represents man's spirit coming to terms with the hardships of his existence.

Whether due to his temperament, or to his times, or to both, Sándor Csoóri is a master of the elegy; indeed, his most powerful poems are about loss, poems in which the perishability of man is evoked so strongly that the reader often feels as though he is being smothered. In this world of transience Csoóri carves out small, illuminated moments in which the one who is mourned may shine. It is this lyrical intensity, this insistence upon certain moments as inviolable, which show most truly Csoóri's optimistic strain: in the midst of darkness, a loved one's face appears, and that moment must not be lost. These elegiac poems are simple and complex at the same time, for they deal with mythic death as it occurs in everyday existence. Again, he serves as witness and recorder to the lives (and deaths) of his friends and loved ones, as well as to his age.

Sándor Csoóri is also a master of the image, the sensual element which is consistently present in his poetry. His poems are about everyday experiences and thus he fills them with details from our common lives. The presence of these images give the poems their own lives, so to speak, for the poem becomes the world and the world becomes the poem. And Csoóri *does* love the world, no matter how harshly he criticizes it—espresso, a woman's fringed skirt, even the nightmarish image of a twisted automobile, they all show his love of, and commitment to, the world in which we all live. No wonder, then, that his poems remain in the reader's mind, for Csoóri creates a reality in which the reader may situate himself, a reality in which he may also come to see, to witness.

Lastly, and most importantly, both for the social and

poetical valuation of his work, Sándor Csoóri is, without any doubt, the most prominent artistic spokesman for the Hungarian people of his time. He has captured the hardships and struggles, as well as the accompanying sense of loss and guilt, of his generation. Without sacrificing his poetry to propaganda, he has been able, by absorbing the social and political turmoil of his period into himself, to digest these turmoils and re-create them on a personal, artistic level which is completely authentic. His are the masterful words of a man who was there, the words of a daring witness.

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Len Roberts