

Introduction

The poems of Ottó Orbán are instantly recognisable to a Hungarian reader: marked by a brisk, vernacular, apparently unliterary, unconfined energy, they carry an authority blended of the humorous and tragic, of the commonplace and extraordinary. Often they take the form of anecdote or comment. A voice buttonholes the reader, carries him along in its narrative sweep, then detonates a mine (or several mines) under his feet before returning to the texture of dialogue. The voice appears almost garrulous at first, afflatus and deflation quickly succeeding each other, seemingly engaged in some violent internal argument. The whole procedure seems to have a dizzy, scat quality about it which spins free of formal constraint.

Having been the translator of Allen Ginsberg's 'Howl' it isn't surprising that Orbán was for a while regarded as Hungary's own beat poet. This opinion had a pinch of truth in it but it was far from the whole truth: Orbán in his long career has also translated Chaucer, Auden, Dylan Thomas and Robert Lowell among many others, and is an acknowledged master-craftsman. His own poems too, on careful listening, are revealed to be highly disciplined. Under the unliterary tone lies a deep literary sophistication, a craftsmanship that diverts attention from itself to its subject matter. The field of reference is wide and rich, ghosts of English iambs and Latin hexameters hover about the verse. The mines however are real, and it is only Orbán's literary self-discipline and humanity that prevents them from blowing the poems up.

The texture of the dialogue is therefore vital: it is what most accurately defines him. This texture, as with most poets, is derived from the formative experiences of his life. If the inner argument is violent it is because life is perceived to be so. As he says in one of his later confessional "sonnets":

I'm of that parting generation whose baptism of fire
bequeathed them epilepsy and a sense of solid values.
The moderns in their screaming nosedive showered us
with cream-puffs that exploded. I tasted them
and have been this way since, standing by the cellar,
light, light, infinite light and a fluttering, the wrecked yard.

The baptism of fire and the wrecked yard belong to the war, but so does that 'sense of solid values' alternating with epilepsy. As an eight year old child in 1945 Orbán was living in central Budapest,

close to the river. He was the product of a mixed marriage, a Jewish father and Christian mother, both solidly middle-class, but rather on the slide since 1938 because of anti-semitic laws. The family had had an opportunity to emigrate to Argentina but a sense of obligation kept them in Hungary. The tenement block into which they had moved when Ottó was two years old was a social microcosm within which they found a respectable enough place and where life proceeded with a degree of regularity, or at least a show of comfort circumscribed only by increasing poverty. Then the air-raids started. Orbán vividly describes the braying of the sirens in one of his essays: it was a constant feature of his childhood. The Germans arrived in the spring of 1944. His father disappeared into a prison camp, the nearby bridge was blown up. Saturation bombing begot a cellar-based existence where each excursion into the daylight world became an exercise in surrealism. A woman on the third floor, a solicitor's wife, insisting on her daily bath took up a basin full of water from the yard. After a particularly severe raid in which nearby houses were brought down she returned to her bathroom to find an unexploded bomb. She screamed out in her terror, 'There's a bomb sitting in my tub!' The macabre and comic image of the sitting bomb provides an early key to the young Ottó's imagination.

The beginnings of his career as a writer are just as unusual. A bright, artistically-gifted child, his ability was quickly recognised by his middle-brow family. But in the spring of 1945 he learned that his father had died and that, being fatherless, he would be sent to live in an institute along with others in his position. In the meantime his mother took up with someone else and a half-brother was the result. The young talent of the family circle now became the prodigy of the institute. One of the teachers encouraged the traumatised children in her charge to write poems as a form of therapy. Within a short time some of them had managed to shape their experiences into poetry which was soon published and widely circulated. This was not the last time Orbán was to discover the therapeutic value of writing poetry. Part of the therapy lay in success. While still at the institute he was asked to edit an anthology of children's war poetry, was interviewed on radio and received by the Minister for Information. The success surprised his family and slightly frightened them. The prodigy had become public property: it appeared to Orbán's mother that she had lost not only her husband but her son too. Orbán himself does not have a particularly high regard for his poems of that period: he does not include any

in his collected poems, though he does quote a pair of lines in an autobiographical essay. Inadvertently he had created an expectancy and an audience without quite knowing what poetry was. He was, in his own words, 'an ordinary, scruffy, neanderthal child' with a pleasant sense of his own importance.

Since 1947 he had been making frequent visits home and there met the various men in his mother's life. One of these eventually married her. The early fifties closed about Hungarian society. A woman in the Orbán's block who was officially regarded as a 'class alien' turned to drink and threw up in the lift. A notice appeared there the next day saying: 'Whoever is sick in the lift is an enemy of the people'. The tenement block saw considerable movement: class enemies were exiled to the country and new lodgers were settled in. In the meantime, unlike his half-brother, Orbán was enjoying considerable academic success. Comparisons inevitably caused friction at home.

He was seventeen and still at grammar school when he discovered the poetry of Dezső Kosztolányi, and became intoxicated by its music. Having grown accustomed to producing 'free verse' based entirely on content he was suddenly seized by the delights of pure form. His first attempts at it were disastrous, and one of his teachers, the outstanding, but at that time still banned, poet Ágnes Nemes Nagy, told him as much. Nevertheless, within six months he had written the poem with which his collected poems were later to open: his subject, the war. Rimbaud lurks in the background, the ghosts of *Le Bateau Ivre* lurch through Orbán's own quatrains. He was still naive. As he was later to say, he had written poems but was not yet a poet. Despite his prizes and commendations, the university refused Orbán's application. His stepfather objected to his further attempts to enrol, and even more vigorously to his poetry. Eventually he was thrown out and resorted to sleeping on benches or at friends' flats. At the same time he received his first official translating commission. By 1956 he had been taken on at the university, and could return home to live. Then came the doomed uprising which marked a rapprochement between Orbán and his mother. His half-brother emigrated after the defeat of the revolution. Orbán himself was not an actor in the events, merely a witness. In 1957 he broke down from nervous exhaustion. Soon after his recovery he married and became a father. His mother was shortly to die of a brain tumour.

Such potted lives inevitably leave out the present and the immediate past but sometimes they may serve to annotate one or other

tendency in a writer's work. The breakdown interrupted Orbán's education but also saw the publication of his first volume of verses. The immediate result of this was that Orbán moved from *wunderkind* to *enfant terrible* in critical opinion. Some time later, in reviewing his 1972 volume, *Emberáldozat* (Human Sacrifice) the critic Balázs Lengyel was quick to point out – lest the reader should imagine Orbán to be gripped by some sort of terminal infantilism – that the poet had grown up, and that he had done so within the framework of confessional verse. Lengyel suggests that the young Orbán was attempting a synthesis of Pilinszky and Ginsberg, a suggestion which Orbán himself confirms, in one of his later poems, 'Egyéniség' ('Individualism', included in this selection). But Dylan Thomas, Garcia Lorca and Attila József were also early influences. The poets commonly referred to as confessional, such as Robert Lowell, came later.

War has been an abiding theme for Orbán: whatever the subject he demands it be tested in the crucible of his wartime experience. As he has become a much travelled writer, the encounter with other cultures has become more important, as has the question of art itself, particularly the conflict between the beatific and the terrible. The visionary element reappears with great regularity in his work. He begins his poem, 'The Apparition' with an assertion:

Yes, an angel has summoned me too,
though not just like Blake or Weöres:
kindling a freemasonic burning bush in my room
or dictating lines to me over the phone...

The continuation defines his own spiritus mundi:

'Come on,' the voice said, 'there's no one at home.'
The shoddy victory among ancient furniture
was outlined sharply in the cigarette-smoke:
there we lay on the World War I family bed,
like monumental sculptures bathed in sweat.

And ends with a typical defiant rhetorical gesture.

'O shaggy mustang, O fiery youth!
plunging in Professor Piccard's live bathyscaphe
into the abyssal wheezing I again fell asleep.

Formally, he is extremely versatile, and has written with some virtuosity in a variety of styles, but arguably his greatest achievements have been within the realms of the prose poem and the fourteen-line unrhymed, often dactylic, "sonnet", in which he freely admits his debt to Lowell and to a lesser extent Berryman

though the reference to 'Mr Bones' derives not from him but from Marcel Aymé's *Le passe-muraille* – and from the poet's own illness. These two forms have persisted through his work over many years. The prose poems came first, the earliest appearing in 1961, but he has continued writing them into the present day. The sonnets begin some twenty years later but in recent years have been taking over from the prose poems, as a form of spiritual diary. These work through the ghosts of classical metre and seem to be capable of infinite extension. It is in these that Orbán has become the leading commentator on the politics and social life of his times. Berryman and Lowell put the form to the same kind of use but Orbán never really sounds like any other poet: he is always precisely himself, mannerisms, mines and all. The idiom he speaks is characteristic of Budapest. The ironies are close in tone to the notorious black jokes of the fifties. If Orbán brings a current British poet to mind at all it is Peter Porter. There is a likeness in the apparent garrulousness, in the range of reference, even in the ironic yet questing attitude to experience.

The *enfant terrible* is not totally buried. He is the one who lays the mines in the busy streets of Orbán's verse, the one whom the older poet looks back to and trusts. Now in his fifties, and subject to attacks of a debilitating disease, Orbán's work has gathered a devil-may-care air of freedom. Paradoxically the poems have grown graver and more human.

Despite the earlier avowals of poetry as therapy there is another process described by Orbán in one of his marvellous prose poems, 'A Small Country 1':

I don't believe that poetry is a care package dropped from a helicopter among those in a bad way. The poem, like a bloodhound, is driven by its instincts after the wounded prey. But the latter will change form and essence on the run... It cajoles, with a reasonable image of the future, a passion for gambling.

It is the gambling, and not the care package, which invests his own poetry with danger, humanity and his own inimitably grim high-spirits.

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