

INTRODUCTION

Ferenc Sánta began his literary career in 1954 auspiciously with the publication of "Sokan voltunk" (Too Many of Us), a short story about a family's struggle against grave poverty. Neither its subject nor its compassionate treatment was new, of course, but according to many critics looking back on the event, the story's symbolic representation of reality marked a significant development in Hungarian fiction. The story was fresh because its narrative style differed from the critical realism of such influential predecessors as Kálmán Mikszáth (1847-1910) and Zsigmond Móricz (1879-1941) and even from the style of the novelists with whom he is still most often linked, József Nyírő (1889-1953) and Áron Tamási (1897-1966); moreover, the story did not follow the dicta of schematism being imposed on writers during the first half of the 1950's in the name of socialist realism. When called upon much later by his severest critics to defend his use of symbols in his novel *Az ötödik pecsét* (The Fifth Seal), he defined realism in a way that clearly showed where he placed his own fiction among the traditional forms of realism in Hungarian literature:

In my opinion, a work is realistic—in the ideal sense of the word—if it tells the truth. The writer must increase the tensions of situations to the extreme, occasionally even at the expense of verisimilitude. He must go all the way to absurdity to express his main point. Literature must not copy life. Instead, it must compress the most important matters into their purest and sharpest form, when symbols are required for their expression, so that the work will shock and lead the reader through a catharsis and thus mold him. Today we can no longer describe the problems of our times or the human beings of our times in the style of classical realism. We cannot narrate in the manner of Mikszáth; we have left that school. But we must learn the techniques of structuring used by the masters among the classical realists, so that we can amalgamate them with the symbols expressing our own thoughts. We must educate the reader to under-

stand this means of transmitting that is undoubtedly more difficult to accommodate and that demands greater intellectual exertion.

Sánta has used this symbolic mode through all stages of his development. His first short stories, collected in *Téli virágzás* (Winter Blossoming, 1956), are decidedly autobiographical; the best of them, deceptively simple and still among the most compelling he has written, use a first person narrator to portray critical episodes taking place in childhood and adolescence. These stories, many with a strong parabolic bent, describe the hard life of the Seklers of Transylvania, among whom Sánta grew up and whose folk culture contributed significantly to the development of his symbolic modes of expression. His deep immersion in the Seklers' folk literature imbued his style with the cadences and lyrical concreteness, the abrupt transitions, the taut sentences, the dramatic dialogue, and the sparseness of narrative detail characteristic of the ballad form. And he does not abandon these stylistic elements even when he leaves the world of the peasant for the excruciating and menacing ethical choices the characters face in his later, no longer autobiographical stories and novels.

The next stage of Sánta's development is signaled by "Az öreg ember és a fiatal" (The Old and the Young, 1959) and by a cycle of five stories that receive their title from "Olasz történet" (An Incident in Italy, 1959) and open his second collection of short stories, published as *Farkasok a küszöbön* (Wolves at the Threshold, 1961), together with seven stories still concerned with peasant life, including "Juli Bíró." The deliberate change in these stories is not limited solely to subject matter and motifs. Adopting the principle of creativity he found in Paul Valéry's *Introduction à la Méthode de Léonard da Vinci* (1895), Sánta undertakes writing tasks he found distasteful, even the least suited to his talents, in order to spur himself to new artistic achievements. Now, he says, he resists the power of emotions flowing from his own experiences onto the page almost without any intervention of thought; instead, he seeks out themes that grow out of his personal convictions but possess enough emotional potential to keep nourishing his creative powers, the major one being anti-fascism. He also presents the themes from a less personal narrative perspective than had

been typical of his technique to this time; now he learns to "invent with a consciously operative and functioning imagination those incidents and characters that are most suited to the projection of thought." The shift in point of view and the deliberateness of the creative process reduce the lyrical flow in his writings; now the language projects the intellect and not solely the main emotion, as his earlier stories had.

This change becomes even more striking in Sánta's three novels, which mark the latest stage in his technique and in his view of life. These parabolic short novels delve into ethical issues affecting present-day Hungary, probing them in a manner instructive to general humankind. *The Fifth Seal* (1963) explores the responsibility of all individuals, regardless of their position in society, to take action against power; *Húsz óra* (Twenty Hours, 1964) the political causes operating in a village to turn Hungarians against one another violently during the 1956 Uprising; and *Az áruló* (The Traitor, 1966) the value of revolution as an instrument of social reform. The extensive dialogue in these didactic novels pushes events and description into the background, in order to lay out ethical alternatives framed so as to shock the reader into a catharsis and mold his moral relationship with his own reality. Each work is, however, technically different: *The Fifth Seal* devotes itself mostly to a Socratic dialogue in a neighborhood tavern between four ordinary men struggling with the moral dilemma presented by the hypothetical choice of being an abject slave or an all-powerful pharaoh, thus providing through contrast a dramatic impact to the violence that overtakes the participants in the last section of the novel; *Twenty Hours* uses investigative technique to interlace events that took place over a period of two decades without becoming report-like or sociographic; and *The Traitor* resurrects from their graves four participants in the Hussite Wars, summoned by an author living in the atomic age to debate their past actions through their differing attitudes toward life.

In light of this growing emphasis on thought and didactic purpose and its culmination in the parabolic short novels, Sánta's view of life and concept of the artist's role in society become paramount. Frequent references to and occasional discussions of artists, philosophers, and writers in his fiction—as in "No More Dying Then," for example—offer clues to the sources of his thought; but

his extended comments on his readings make clear that his overriding compassion for the common man is ultimately based on the ethical principles of humanistic thought. Greek tragedians and philosophers, and Dante, Montaigne, Pascal, Byron, and Verlaine are among the authors who have influenced his outlook on life. At sixteen, he reports, he was mesmerized by Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, and he later judged Tolstoy to be the best writer of them all, calling him an almost perfect human being and the one from whom he gained the most. The character of his humanism is further suggested by his comments on other authors. For example, to him the satire of Erasmus is deeper and truer than Voltaire's because it rises from "depths where eyes have been wept tearless and only laughter is possible" and because the Christian humanist loves humankind; and he is grateful to Rousseau for helping him to see that education can spare children the evils that civilization brings to human beings. His concern for the inner needs of human beings is apparent in his thorough exploration of the literature of the French Revolution and in his rejection of Engels' view that human problems are to be approached through the materialistic world.

To Sánta humanistic thought is significant because he believes that new ethical criteria have not yet sufficiently emerged in the present age to replace the religious values swept away by the swift coursing of tragic historical events in the twentieth century. In the past, persons knew exactly what moral principles they were violating; today, they no longer do. For this reason, he tries to fill the void left by failed religious values with the following standard of humanity: "Anything that abases, injures, or destroys man is a sin." Seeking more to provoke the readers' thought than to supply them with answers, Sánta compels his protagonists—all of them committed to various ethical propensities or criteria—to confront this standard of humanity and judges their behavior by the rigor with which they measure up to it.

The humanist Sánta places characters in confrontational situations with optimism about man's native capacity to measure up to the edicts of what he calls "eternal ethical norms"; he is supremely confident that man's natural goodness can never be vanquished. True, the forces of evil, especially if they can organize themselves, may gain the upper hand, but, he insists, in the long run

they lack the power to cripple mankind permanently. The attribute of goodness is, he claims, so deeply ingrained and so ever-present in human nature that it unfailingly points to the solution of every ethical dilemma perplexing humanity. To bestir himself in pursuit of that clear dictum, man depends on the voice of his conscience, even as Socrates did on his Demon's. Silent when humans are performing acts of goodness, the conscience instantly protests when they are about to commit an evil act. The conscience intervenes in human behavior freely and independently, not instructed by a particular philosophical or ethical system or world view, for the laws of both good and evil are innate and man has only to pay attention to them. Entirely on its own authority, the conscience of an individual

can ... instantly distinguish and measure everything and unerringly determine our proper behavior on its own. Every response is within us, and therefore it is not true that a response requires constant speculation; instead, the issue is whether we dare to do what we instantly know, that which is alone worthy and honorable.

Despite this emphasis on innate good and evil and self-sufficient conscience, Sánta assigns reason an essential role in the creation of moral behavior. If man was born with intelligence, then he was also born to carry out acts of judgment. Accordingly, judgment is, like the conscience, natural to man. Indeed, to judge is "the most natural of [man's] rights," and if he cannot freely exercise that right and meet its own requirements to uncover truths in all areas of existence, then he cannot experience good health any more than he can without food and drink. Sánta's humanism leaves no doubt about the sanctity of every man's right to use his personal judgment in heeding the voice of his conscience.

These claims for the supreme authority of the individual conscience and the sovereignty of the individual judgment take on even greater import in Sánta's concept of the writer's role and the function of literature in society, one which his own fiction reflects substantially, especially from the late 1950's on. He elevates the writer to the level of Shelley's "unacknowledged legislator of the world" by contending that the writer is the supreme judge of his times. First expressed publicly in 1962, this view of the authority

of the writer was developed more extensively in a 1967 interview. It is even more important for artists and writers than for other beings, he then asserted, to preserve "their independence of thought against the extremes of alluring and revolting passions" and to guard constantly "their freedom to strive for the act of rational and correct judgment." Writers must not succumb to the temptation of comfort extended them by easy substitution of "a particular prescript based on blind faith for a concept founded on balanced and open-eyed reflection." The burden on the writer to use his judgment impartially in service to truth is made heavy by the fact that man's world is in a state of constant flux. In his view, "every great piece of literature is a metamorphosis," because it represents the writer's personal confrontation of a perpetually changing world. Because the purpose of the writer's quest for truth is to defend man against the fanatical extremes contending for control over his judgment, his task is necessarily an importunate one and thus must be conducted relentlessly:

We must weigh the changing issues of this changing world again and again against the norms we writers personally hold to be true and to render a judgment about our own actions... If we don't write with undivided attention to this endlessly moving acceptance and rejection, then our talent becomes moldy or it devours us, or, at the very best, it turns into mere exhibition.

These speculations are grounded on the conviction that humanity can be spared the calamities that extremism continuously threatens and, when unchecked by conscience and reason, inflicts upon all epochs. Sánta finds this peril more portentous today than in any earlier period of history because of the growing inclination of social systems to seek refuge in the over-simplifications that infatuation with opposing ideologies encourages in man as he faces urgent moral issues. Maintaining that the mission of literature is one and the same regardless of the time in which it is written, he states that

between its two fundamental functions—to delight and to create doubt—we are compelled to consider the latter function to be the more important. To awaken doubt most

responsibly about the bases for the existence... of that most dangerous stupidity of all—fanaticism. [Emphasis added]

Consequently, the most pressing function of writers is "to curb —while we still can—the opposing animosities." With passionate urgency he points the way to the writers' indispensable role in the abatement of the dangers in today's world:

We must find partial truths, force ourselves to find them; we must try to reconcile them and make them bear fruit through our mutual endeavors. Our age not only carries the greatest danger of being destroyed; more than all earlier times, it created its own conditions and demands a *synthesis*. This is the greatest imperative of our age, and anyone who shirks it is guilty. We must stand in the way of the obsessed who don't want to acknowledge this fact, ... we must discredit the hideous, degenerate, and sick logic of the accursed. The light of reason must be shined upon them, for they shall be destroyed by it even as poisonous vegetation is destroyed by the sun.

Having first linked realism with truth and not with verisimilitude, Sánta now openly confronts the inescapable question: the kind of climate the writer needs to create high art. He focuses squarely on the writer's inalienable right to the untrammelled but responsible pursuit of truth in keeping with his personal vision and in fulfilment of his duty as the sovereign judge of a world constantly unfolding before his eyes, especially during a historical time when the writer "must shoulder responsibility for this most natural of his claims before the official judgment of the human community." Any social order that fails to provide this climate only hinders its own development and courts disaster. Any restriction of the writer's autonomous conscience and judgment means that the citizenry, unprovoked by doubt to a catharsis within the bounds of their individual consciences and powers of judgment, inevitably grow increasingly infatuated with fanatical solutions to social and moral issues. To the extent that a writer compromises himself in the face of restrictions on his freedom, to that extent does he fall short in his responsibility to his readers.

The selections in this edition display the depth of Sánta's com-

mitment to these didactic tenets of the writer's role and the function of literature. More often than not, their characters are ordinary human beings coming face to face with material and moral trials during the course of their daily existence in a village or urban setting. "Too Many of Us," "Little Bird," "Fairyland," and "The Initiation," chosen from his earliest stories and told as recollection, mark significant stations in the growing comprehension of life by a boy growing up under conditions of poverty in a village, with each story adding a new dimension to his awareness of reality as his experiences with the adult world intensify. "Juli Biró" and "God in the Wagon" still transpire in the world of the peasant and the village, but the first, using the conventions of the folk-tale, recounts the events rising from the vanity of a beautiful maiden and the outcome dictated by village mores, while the second portrays an initially sceptical peasant's encounter and tender response to the "Lord God," whose sojourn on earth has left Him weary and despondent. The remaining four stories turn to a larger sphere of human involvement. "The Old and the Young" is concerned with the transmission of values by the older generation to the younger and "An Incident in Italy" with the revolution power induces in human beings who resist it. The last two stories focus on Santa's anti-fascism. "The Pail," its profusion of details aiming for the special effects of a slow motion camera, explores the paralyzing rigidity of the fascist temperament, and "No More Dying Then" celebrates the triumph of humanistic values over the ultimate weapon of fascism against the human conscience and judgment: Death.

A. T.

We had gone hungry for three months, and for two whole weeks we had eaten only once a day. Mother was doling out the cornmeal a handful at a time. One handful, two gulps, then nothing until the next day. We four children lay in bed under a large blanket. That kept us warm and out of the way. Father could no longer find steady work to meet our daily needs. He tried very hard, but since the poor were many and employers few, there was no job for him. He just sat all day on the little stool beside the stove. Once in a great while he would come over to us and start telling us a story. But he'd stop as suddenly as he had come over. At times like that, he'd say: "I'll tell you the rest tomorrow," and lose himself in his own thoughts. He never finished the story. We didn't mind. He was quiet for such long spells during the story-telling that, really, he might just as well have stayed at his place beside the stove.

Being hungry is a terrible thing. Anyone who hasn't actually lived through it can't imagine what it is like. After we got our ration of cornmeal and bolted it down hot, we leaped out of bed, straddled our laps with the large board mother cut up the portions on, and then, with fingers and knives, scraped off every bit we could find, and ate it, though it consisted of splinters more than food. In times of famine every mouth counts, and the more there are, the greater the trouble. There were too many of us.

One night my grandfather, who was already past seventy or maybe seventy-five, didn't eat his share. Instead, he brought it over to our bed. With his big wrinkled hands he tossed it to us, and we fought over it like chickens. We couldn't imagine what on earth had come over him to give away his food. We gaped at him and ate. Only father spoke up. He looked at grandfather with sunken gray eyes. Then he turned to the heat of the oven and said: "You did the right thing." I thought so too. Though it wasn't enough, the unexpected morsel felt good, and I thought nothing more about the matter. Grandfather kept scraping the bits of cornmeal off his palm, and he said quietly, as if to himself:

"You think so, Ferkó?"

"Yes, I do," father replied.