ZSIGMOND MÓRICZ

(1879–1942)

"Small nations talk rather defiantly about their great men. They know that the world really has no time to discover them." So wrote the essayist László Németh in an article for German readers at the time of Móricz's death in 1942.[1] For Hungarians, Zsigmond Móricz is one of the outstanding authors of a period rich in good writing, a man with a profound knowledge of his country and its problems, both political and social. He entered into a literary tradition whose main aim was to serve the nation, a *littérature engagée*, in which it was seen as the duty of the writer to criticise and instruct rather than merely to entertain. He continued this tradition admirably, writing for a Hungarian public on themes concerned with the life of the country.

He lived through a period of European history that provided him with abundant material. He grew up during the rapid industrialization and sudden growth of Budapest into the brash new metropolis it had become in 1896, when Hungarians celebrated the first thousand years of their occupation of the Danube basin with great ceremony, including the inauguration of the first underground railway in the continent of Europe. By contrast, the mechanization of farming and the appalling social conditions prevailing in the countryside led to the mass emigration of agricultural workers to the United States as well as a rush to find work in the new factories that ringed the capital, whose suburbs rapidly evolved into slums. There was considerable unrest, and a succession of weak governments did nothing to alleviate the problem. On the surface there was relative

[1] László Németh, "*Móricz Zsigmondról, külföldieknek*". In: *Homályból homályba*, Budapest 1977, Vol. II, 420.

prosperity and security, at least for those in power, who saw no reason to tackle a question that had lain unsolved for generations. Then in swift succession came the First World War, the disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, the short-lived Hungarian Republic and the Communist régime of Béla Kun, and finally the Treaty of Trianon, which reduced the territory of Hungary to almost its present area and deprived her of vital raw materials. Then followed the Horthy régime and the clamour for revision of the Trianon frontiers, the financial crises of the inter-war period and the rise of fascism, which led inevitably to the Second World War. Rarely can a profoundly sensitive and critical writer have had so much contemporary material at hand. It was the unsolved and ever more acute social problem to which Móricz kept returning; nowhere in Europe was there such a huge gap between the privileged few and the deprived masses, the rich aristocracy and the poor peasants (and later the urban slum-dwellers), and it was to the accurate portrayal of the society in which he lived that he devoted most of his work.

Móricz was born in Tiszacsécse, a small village in north-east Hungary and a place he recalls with affection in *On the Willow-clad Banks of the Tisza, Where I Was a Child*.[2] His parents, in his words, "came from two different poles": his father was an ambitious peasant, all too ready to risk his money in enterprises that came to nothing, and his mother came from a long line of Calvinist ministers. His father's side of the family was on the way up, his mother's on the way down. 'Peasant' is an all-embracing term; in Hungary it refers to the agricultural population who happened not to be noble and therefore had no electoral rights. Some had land, others had none; some possessed flocks or herds, others lived as day-labourers; some were comparatively well-off, but the majority of them lived in poverty and virtual serfdom. The Móricz family, which eventually included six boys and a girl, seesawed between relative wealth and abject poverty. The ambitions of the father

[2] See p. 235.

pushed it up in the world for the first few years of young Zsigmond's life, but then he overreached himself: he invested in a steam threshing-machine which blew up before it could be paid for, whereupon the family was forced to sell up everything and drag out a miserable existence for some years until the father's industry put it on its feet again. The atmosphere of this period is well caught in *Judith and Esther*,[3] and indeed the ups and downs of his early life left a lasting impression on Móricz. He wrote an unusual autobiography entitled *The Novel of My Life*,[4] which covers only the first ten years of that life, since

> this was really the whole of my life. All that made me what I became happened during this period. More occurred to me up to the age of ten than during the succeeding fifty years.[5]

This is a pardonable exaggeration, but then the book itself is an unorthodox mixture of family history, local tradition, folklore and a lyrical evocation of childhood.

Zsigmond received a good education, as indeed did all his brothers and sister. His father held strong views on the subject, and even during the worst misfortunes of the family the education of the children was never neglected. Zsigmond was a bright boy and went first to the prestigious Calvinist college in Debrecen, one of the foremost schools in the country; he revelled in it, despite the handicap of being a poor pupil who had to earn money by tutoring. When the family moved to Sárospatak, home of another, equally famous Calvinist college, he was transferred there, but failed to settle down in what he felt was too cloistered an atmosphere. He finished his schooling in yet another Calvinist school at Kisújszállás on the Great Plain, where a maternal uncle was headmaster. Here he quickly recovered his spirits and gained a reputation for scholarship. He had access to the staff library and was able to indulge his passion for reading, which led him to history and philos-

[3] See p. 31.
[4] *Életem regénye*, Budapest, 1939.
[5] *Op. cit.* 372.

ophy in particular. He also enjoyed walking the flat countryside and meeting people; this was something he maintained throughout his life, and helped to develop his sharp eye and keen ear not only for dialects but also for the nuances of expression and behaviour that can be seen throughout his work.

After school he first followed his mother's advice to study theology, and went back to Debrecen. But he soon gave this up in favour of his father's recommendation to study law "to win back all the money those sharks of lawyers have wrung out of me."[6] This did not satisfy him either; he had already decided to become a writer and after moving to Budapest in 1900 he gave up law for literature. His maternal uncle helped him to obtain a post as a clerk and indeed encouraged him considerably in his efforts. It was a lonely and dismal period, relieved briefly by a return to teach temporarily at Kisújszállás. In 1903 he was offered a job with the new daily *Az Újság* (The News), for which he wrote short reports of cultural events in the capital and edited the children's column. It gave him the opportunity to write, but he found it difficult:

> I felt the empty, facile contortions and the superficiality of what I was writing and I simply could not change it... I felt compelled to write and neglected my studies for this... but it wouldn't work. I wrote day and night, pouring out words—but I had nothing to write about.[7]

Then his sympathetic uncle died, and he bought a revolver to end his life, convinced that he had come to the end of his resources: he had no qualifications as a scholar and could not fulfil his ambition.

This romantic gesture on the part of a young man in his twenties may appear strange towards the end of a century in which creative artists have often made their mark later in life, as did T. S. Eliot and Ralph Vaughan Williams. But in Móricz's youth the legacy of the nineteenth century

[6] Tamás Kiss, *Így élt Móricz Zsigmond*, Budapest, 1979, 58.
[7] Zsigmond Móricz, "*Jókai: Jegyzetek a belső fejlődés történetéhez*". In: *Tanulmányok I*, Budapest, 1978, 436.

was still strong, particularly in Hungary. That had been a time when a vast host "clambered up Olympus in school uniform; throughout the world the poetry of the first half of the century was that of callow youth, almost of child prodigies," as one writer put it.[8] Keats, Shelley, Byron and Petőfi had shown the way, and the pressure to produce a masterpiece early in life was intense. Móricz was not alone in his sense of failure; the novelist Kálmán Mikszáth (1847–1910) had gone through a similar black period, and his contemporary, the poet Ady (1877–1919), always felt that he was old because he did not produce a worthwhile volume of verse until he was in his twenty-ninth year. Fortunately Móricz overcame his impulse. He courted a young teacher he had met and married her in 1905. Eugenia Holics, or Janka as he called her, became the model for several of his female characters as well as an indomitable critic of his work. It was not a happy marriage; they were both demanding personalities, and Janka found it increasingly difficult to accept her husband's frequent absences and flirtations, for what he failed to find in her he sought in other women. They remained together for twenty years, but then she committed suicide. It is no surprise that one of Móricz's recurrent themes is conflict between man and woman, often based on sheer lack of comprehension. And one of his favourite characters is a man who is worn down by two women, one who is happy and the other beautiful. Something of this tension can be seen in such tales as *It would Make the Tower of the Big Church Fall Down*, *The Doctor* and *Geese*.[9] Móricz's second marriage to the actress Mária Simonyi was no more successful and broke up after ten years, by which time the daughters of his first marriage had grown up and he was able to share some of their family life. Between 1903 and 1907 he at last found congenial employment. He was engaged to collect folk tales and verse in the region he knew and loved best, his home county. This he did systematically and thoroughly, tramping from

[8] Gyula Illyés, *Petőfi* [English edition], Budapest, 1973, 64.
[9] See pp. 59, 207 and 214.

village to village, visiting some fifty places in all. The collection of folklore material in Hungary had been in progress for over half a century, but there were still gaps to fill. Moreover there was a new interest in it from the musical side: it was in 1906 that Bartók and Kodály produced their pioneer collection of Hungarian folksong settings.[10] Móricz recalls this time as one which restored his confidence in his future: "These four or five years spent in travelling round these districts became my university."[11] More important, he found here the material for his first successful writing. He experienced village life in the raw, a far cry from the idyllic village of the nineteenth-century romantic novel or the operettas then fashionable, and distant enough from his own childhood recollections of Tiszacsécse, where he was protected by the family.[12]

> I was young, and I felt indescribably happy that I was able to walk around this glad and shining world. But one winter day I happened to be sitting in a dark little peasant house. It was stuffy, smelly and gloomy. Outside the snow sparkled like a fairy-tale, while inside people lived like polecats in lairs. Some young girls came over from next door and three or four of them began to dictate song-texts all together so that I could hardly manage to write them down... All of a sudden the door was flung open and in rushed a young man with a knife in his hand; he grasped the throat of an old woman sitting by the stove and screamed at her in a wild, inhuman screech, 'I'll kill you, you old beast, you're not my mother: I disown you, you bitch...' Everyone froze. The man looked at me and, confused at the presence of a stranger, let go of the old woman and slunk out of the room. I was terribly shaken by this scene.[13]

This was when Móricz began to carry a small notebook with him wherever he went, to record what he saw and heard—a conversation, an anecdote, a family scene, a

[10] *Magyar népdalok*, Budapest, 1906.
[11] "*Népköltési gyűjtő*". In: *Tanulmányok* I, Budapest, 1978, 756.
[12] See p. 235.
[13] *Op. cit.*, 758.

dialect word—for use in his writing. Thus one of his short stories is little more than a dialogue overheard at a railway junction between trains and another is the result of listening to fellow-travellers talking in the railway carriage. For Móricz was a good listener; he had the ability to make others talk to him. Many photographs of him show him sitting with someone, writing down their words in one of his many notebooks. Here a more extreme English example comes to mind—that of Arnold Bennett sitting beside his father's bed recording the approach of death, a scene he used later in *Clayhanger*. Or there is Ronald Blythe, listening to the villagers who appear in his classic *Akenfield*.

Móricz was able to win the confidence of his informants by his approach. Walking was not only a favourite pastime, but an invaluable asset. In later life one of his slogans was "It's good to walk" *(Gyalogolni jó)*, and it was a practical piece of advice. Gyula Illyés records how some socialist leaders once visited a large estate to investigate the real situation of the farm-workers. They made the fatal mistake of arriving in a carriage, whereupon the labourers immediately classified them as gentry and answered their well-meaning queries with the deference and total lack of frankness appropriate to their betters, so that they never discovered the truth.[14] This recalls the scene in Howard Spring's *Fame is the Spur*, where Pen Muff refuses to go home in a carriage from a socialist meeting. Móricz insisted on walking even in his later years when he was troubled by a bad leg. Shortly before his death in 1942 he visited Transylvania, eager to see how folk lived in the Székely region; to the surprise of his hosts he insisted on walking or at most travelling third class or even on the back of a lorry.[15] And some of his experiences moved him very greatly indeed. Shortly after he had made his name, in 1910, he was invited to tea by a Countess Teleki, who recounted an appalling disaster that had just occurred in Eastern Hungary. A big dance had been held in a barn at the

[14] Gyula Illyés, *People of the Puszta*, Budapest, 1967, 228.
[15] György Bözödy, "*Móricz Zsigmond a székelyek között.*" In: *Móricz Zsigmond közöttünk*, ed. L. Kántor, Bucharest, 1979, 122.

village of Ökörító, and the doors had been locked to prevent intruders. The barn caught fire and 325 young men and women from 18 villages died in it, while 99 were injured. Móricz was so distressed that he took down the story in his notebook as it was related, then forgetting his hostess and his tea hurried away to write about it in one of his most powerful reports.[16] Thereafter he often used the theme of fire as something at once good and bad; one of his most effective novels is entitled *A fáklya* (The Torch; 1917): it concerns a young Calvinist minister who arrives in an East Hungarian village full of plans to improve the lot of his flock. He is determined to be a torch to light the way for them, but all he succeeds in doing is to burn himself out wastefully, unable to achieve anything in the face of the apathy and ignorance he encounters there. It is, incidentally, an accurate reflection of Móricz's own state of mind at that stage of the First World War.

He came to fame suddenly, as the result of one short story, *Seven Pennies*,[17] a simple, unembellished tale of mother and son who spend a whole afternoon trying to discover seven pennies to buy a bar of soap. The search is turned into a game, and when all attempts to find the final penny have failed, it is a beggar who provides it. This would have made a dramatic end in itself, but Móricz goes on: by now the whole exercise is proved fruitless, since it is dark and there is no oil for the lamp. At this the mother chokes with laughter and the boy has to support her; as he does so, her blood drips on to his hand. The story, told by the boy, is not autobiographical. The evocation of poverty is certainly true, but Mrs. Móricz did not die of tuberculosis in Zsigmond's boyhood. *Judith und Esther*,[18] written at the same time, is much more concerned with real events and again shows Móricz's love of a startling ending. He always possessed a strong sense of drama, but in these early stories he also demonstrated something unusual in

[16] "*Ökörító*", Nyugat, 16 April 1910; also in *Erkölcsi sarkantyú (Tanulmányok II)*, Budapest, 1982, 232–40.
[17] See p. 25.
[18] See p. 31.

Hungarian writers—an ability to treat his readers as adults who can draw their own conclusions from the evidence he supplies. But if this beginning points to the making of yet another East European peasant-writer, Móricz's subsequent career belies it.

Having achieved immediate recognition with *Seven Pennies* and the volume that included it, he became absorbed in writing. He produced altogether 36 novels and novellas, some 600 short stories, a few plays, a large number of so-called reports and literary studies and some poetry. Of these, the novels, novellas and short stories are the most important—and so are some of his reports which are difficult to distinguish from the short stories. His plays can be discounted, despite his fondness for the stage.

> All his life he struggled to write for the stage, and indeed he wrote a great deal from cabaret via opera libretti and adaptations of his novels to major dramas, but he could never produce dramatic form and his works were almost all unsuccessful or else hardly lived beyond the day of their birth—writes his biographer Péter Nagy.[19]

As for his literary studies, they cover a wide range from Greek drama, Shakespeare and Molière to modern Hungarian literary problems and indicate the scope of his reading and scholarship. The reports and short stories show him at his best, and often use the same material. There is little difference in style, and a lyrical note is liable to appear in both; moreover the volcano that smoulders in Móricz can erupt with equal violence in them. Thus *Sullen Horse*[20] has much in common with *The Breath of Spring on the Hortobágy*,[21] and the directness with which he reports the election at Szeghalom[22] is paralleled in many of his stories.

A survey of the whole of Móricz's work reveals first that he wrote almost exclusively about contemporary Hungary.

[19] Péter Nagy, *Móricz Zsigmond*, Budapest, 1975, 91.
[20] See p. 156.
[21] See p. 225.
[22] See p. 181.

True, he wrote a vast historical trilogy on Transylvania (*Erdély*, 1922–35), painstakingly researched so that every detail should be historically correct, and started on another about Sándor Rózsa, a swashbuckling bandit who fought in the 1848 revolution (*Rózsa Sándor a lovát ugratja*; 1941, and *Rózsa Sándor összevonja a szemöldökét*; 1942), but these works contain more than a hint of contemporary social attitudes and problems. This does not imply that he was uninterested in the world outside Hungary—indeed he revealed himself as very much a child of his age in some of his comments on the Europe he knew. And though he wrote primarily for Hungarians, it is interesting that he financed the translation of some of his work into German and tried hard to interest North American publishers in his books.[23]

Secondly, it is clear that at some stage in his career he set himself the task of writing about the whole of Hungarian society as he saw it. No other writer gives such a complete picture of it between 1909 and 1942. In the main it is a sombre picture, based on his own observations of life in both country and city, but it is tempered with compassion for his fellow human beings—and not only the peasants and slum-dwellers. There is the occasional glint of humour, as can be seen in *Evening by the Fire*[24] and *The Ram*.[25] After his first success as a short-story writer he produced a long novel. *Sárarany* (Pure Gold), originally written in instalments in the journal *Nyugat* (West), was revised extensively before it appeared in book form in 1911. It concerns the fate of an ambitious peasant who cannot find room for his talents to flourish; he has plans to improve his standard of living, obtain more land and grow better crops, but he is ground down between two women, a faithful wife and an attractive mistress, and is frustrated by the general immobility around him. All his energy—and Móricz firmly believed in the idea of 'primeval strength'—goes to waste and finally he commits murder. It is an extreme picture:

[23] *The Torch*, translated by Emil Lengyel, was published in New York in 1931.
[24] See p. 84.
[25] See p. 210.

the language is deliberately coarse and the erotic scenes are overplayed. Yet in the inevitable comparison with Zola and Maupassant Móricz scores with his knowledge of the different castes among peasants and their reactions; moreover the tragedy arises from a genuine desire for improvement, not from innate conservatism or national causes. Nevertheless this is the kind of novel that positively invites a Stella Gibbons to go to work on it—some of the descriptive passages and conversations would not be out of place in *Cold Comfort Farm*. It is not surprising that Frigyes Karinthy, whose parodies exposed the weaknesses of many of his contemporaries, wrote a merciless brief parody of *Pure Gold*.[26]

Móricz moved on to small-town society in his next novel, *Az isten háta mögött* (Behind God's Back; 1911), which contains not a single peasant character. An elderly schoolmaster marries a young wife who tries desperately to find some pleasure and excitement in the utter dullness of the town in which she is forced to live—incidentally the kind of environment from which Janka had come. She is trapped there, and driven mad by frustration attempts to commit suicide by jumping out of a window. But even this fails: she merely lands with a bump in the mud. Her husband is totally uncomprehending, nor can he understand why one of his companions can never seem to get his name right. "He always called me something like Bóvári, though I've told him often enough that my name is Pál Veres, and that's very different."[27] And at the end of the book, unashamedly inspired by *Madame Bovary*, but compressed into a mere 48 hours, nothing at all has changed. *The Torch* introduces the clergy and at the same time continues the idea of the struggling hero already seen in *Pure Gold*. This theme, the fate of a man of ideas whose reforming zeal is quenched by the apathy around him, is often found in the bitter novels of the nineteenth-century author Lajos Tolnai (1837–1902), a writer Móricz much admired. It appears

[26] *Így írtok ti !*, Budapest, 1912.
[27] *Az isten háta mögött, Móricz Zsigmond regényei* I, Budapest, 1975.

again in *Úri muri* (Gentlemen Having Fun; 1928), whose hero is a progressive landowner and an eccentric; at the height of a huge party he sets fire to his house to provide more light for his guests and then commits suicide. The book is much more subtly written than its predecessors; the anecdotes which appear frequently reveal the characters of the merrymakers and carry the plot forward to its dramatic conclusion. Moreover there is a splendid mixture of gaiety and gloom, mud and paradise, and the gentry in the midst of it all are not condemned outright by the author, as some critics try to make out. For at least until the last decade of his life Móricz believed that the key to the future prosperity of Hungary lay in the hands of the authorities and the gentry. György Bözödy stresses the point that he was an objective observer of the whole of society. Some of his friends,

> who could not see the whole of Zsigmond Móricz but only the side that pleased them, could not reconcile themselves to the fact that he occasionally expressed a good opinion of 'officials'... They would like to have made him belong to a party, in literature and public life alike. But he did not belong to any 'side'; he belonged to Hungariandom as a whole.[28]

Criticism of the gentry does appear very forcefully in the last of his novels on the theme of the struggling hero. In *Rokonok* (Relations; 1932) the nepotism and corruption of small-town society overwhelm the central character, who is driven to attempt suicide. But here he is himself a weak and vacillating person, as grey as his opponents and relatives who weave the web of corruption around him. It is a bleak novel with no dramatic conclusion; we do not even know whether the hero dies or returns to his problems.

If the picture of these novels is sombre and serious, this is explained in a letter Móricz wrote to his eldest daughter, Virág, in 1930. Recalling his early attempts at writing, he states:

[28] *Op. cit.*, 125–6.

> I wrote and wrote, but each of my efforts was worse than the last. I did not know what I ought to describe. Here was life, and everyone talked in the same way, in Hungarian: how was it possible to characterize people, to differentiate them? And what was there in a person's life that was worth describing and had to be described?
> It took me a very long time to learn this thoroughly. It was very late indeed, after the age of twenty-eight, when I realized that in reality you can only describe what causes you pain. What wounds you. And what is revenge.[29]

This is certainly true of many of the short stories, like *Tragedy*,[30] the tale of a man whose name ('John Little' in translation) is as insignificant as his life and unnoticed death, or *Barbarians*,[31] with its grim depiction of greed and meaningless brutality in peasant society. And at the end of these stories there is no suggestion that anything can or will change. But the letter continues:

> And then at the age of forty-eight I learnt that it was possible to write something else that was not an individual affair—something that can give delight.[32]

This new ingredient is best seen in one of his most unusual books, *A boldog ember* (The Happy Man; 1935), in which a distant relative tells the story of his happy life from childhood through early manhood before the First World War to the present. It is based on a real account, but the hand of the experienced author guides it. The tale is told naturally, with a gentle humour and no trace of complaint or rebellion. All the hero does is to work hard and try not to make any enemies: he is a survivor, and content with his lot.

> I stayed in the village. Now I've got eight acres of land there. I've brought up five children. I've given away two

[29] Virág Móricz, *Apám regénye*, Budapest, 1963, 34.
[30] See p. 39.
[31] See p. 63.
[32] Virág Móricz, *loc. cit.*

of my daughters. One of my sons is apprenticed to a master tailor. And the others are healthy and good children.[33]

Here Móricz's technique has altered; instead of leading the reader into a dark and brutal world that demands reform, he leaves him to the disturbing realization that the hero's happiness is based on an absolute minimum of demands from life and a total lack, indeed ignorance, of the benefits of modern civilization. *The Happy Man* is a mixture of novel and report. The naivety of its central character recalls that of the child-hero of one of Móricz's most popular works, *Légy jó mindhalálig* (Be Faithful unto Death; 1921). Móricz relaxes when he writes about children and young adults; he understands the problems of growing up and treats them with sympathy and gentleness—characteristics not associated with much of his writing. *Be Faithful unto Death* describes the vicissitudes of a small boy who arrives from a peasant home to study at the Calvinist College of Debrecen. Misi has been brought up in a loving home, and believes that the adult world is good. His faith is shaken by his experiences in Debrecen, but not broken, and his character is strengthened as he endures life at school. Certainly there is much autobiographical material here, but the book was not intended to be a straightforward school story. Móricz was surprised at the reaction of a public that normally read between the lines but totally failed to do so on this occasion. He later declared:

> In the tragedy of Misi Nyilas it was certainly not his sufferings at Debrecen that I was describing, but the things I suffered during and after the Commune... At that time I was the victim of a terrible storm. I experienced a kind of naive and childish suffering that could only be demonstrated through the mysteries of a child's mind; but there, the whole world accepted and saw in it the fate of a child.[34]

[33] *A boldog ember, Móricz Zsigmond regényei*, IV, Budapest, 1976. 311.
[34] Letter of 12 December 1930 to Olga Kardos, née Magoss, quoted in Péter Nagy, *op. cit.*, 213.

So Móricz, like many of his contemporaries, had to write out of himself the emotions aroused by the cataclysmic events of 1919 and their aftermath. But he continued the story of his young hero in two other books, *Kamaszok* (Teenagers; 1928) and *Forr a bor* (Wine in Ferment; 1931), though neither of these reached the standard or popularity of *Be Faithful unto Death*. The little boy in *The Ram*[35] demonstrates something of Móricz's lightness of touch when writing about children, but where they are victims of cruelty his anger is uppermost, as in *Little Orphan Annie*.[36]

It was in Budapest that Móricz began to study young folk. The lad and girl in *Angels of Little Wood*[37] are portrayed with sympathy and understanding; both the girl and her father have much in common with the hero of *The Happy Man*, making the most of life and helping neighbours in the shanty-town that did indeed exist on the south side of Pest. Gitka, with her ready tongue and obvious delight in cheating the tram-company, is an example of urban youth encountered later in the orphan heroine of *Chicken*[38] and *Lodgers*.[39] These tales are based on the stories of a slum girl who entertained Móricz with her apparent naivety and fertile imagination, and introduced him to a new section of society. He eventually adopted her, somewhat to his family's consternation, and she took his name.

The blurred distinction between report and story is evinced in many of his shorter pieces. He wrote on all aspects of contemporary Hungarian life, and one of the most pressing problems of the inter-war period was the single-child family, which is the background to *The Flock and its Shepherd*.[40] It was not poverty alone that caused parents to have just one child, but the law of inheritance,

[35] See p. 210.
[36] See p. 219.
[37] See p. 129.
[38] See p. 188.
[39] See p. 199.
[40] See p. 88.

according to which inherited land was divided equally among a deceased parent's children. So if the first child was a boy, it was common, particularly in Protestant communities, to have no more children; girls could be married into other families. In Móricz's story the minister, like the teacher in *The Scholarship*,[41] has no answer to the arguments advanced by men who know more of life than he does. Nor does the author; all he does is to pose the problem and show how absurd it is to expect acceptance of a particular solution, however rational it may appear. The same kind of situation occurs in *The Swineherd's Filthiest Shirt*,[42] where there is no 'meeting of cultures', as Móricz puts it; medical science and folk beliefs simply collide and the victim dies.

What Móricz shows throughout his work is that the lowest strata of society are not to be regarded as stupid. They have brains and use them, though their logic may appear strange to the educated. So the old peasant in *The Scholarship*, already suspicious of the young teacher when he arrives at the school, simply regards his proposal as a trick to take away what is his by right. He is not concerned that his grandson is the bright hope of the school and deserves a good education; he is merely a unit of labour, and as such must be replaced if he goes away. The teacher cannot understand this attitude, like the patronizing gentleman in *It's Incomprehensible*,[43] whose offer of help is so decisively rejected, or the kindly sister at the old people's home in *Celestial Bird*.[44] All of them believe that they are doing good to those less fortunate than themselves and they cannot understand why their offers are rebuffed or how they have offended against human dignity.

This does not imply that Móricz has a nostalgic view of the past or believes that society is static. He looks to the future and enjoys the challenge of the new, as can be seen

[41] See p. 151.
[42] See p. 78.
[43] See p. 99.
[44] See p. 178.

in his sympathetic portrait of the boy in *Sullen Horse*[45] who is determined to escape from the traditions of the Hortobágy. This is paralleled by his marvellously lyrical account of the arrival of spring in the same region, where the introduction of rice, a totally new crop, offers hope for the future. *The Breath of Spring on the Hortobágy*,[46] one of Móricz's last pieces of writing, is a masterpiece of description. It is to be compared with *Sullen Horse*: in the former the author is the only human being in the scene, listening to bird-song and observing nature in detail, while in the latter all is noise and human life with nature in the background. Both read like filmscripts.

Móricz wrote little about his attitude to writing. In a radio talk of 1930 he declared that he saw himself as a sentry on the watch. "If I do say anything, I feel a sense of responsibility—what is it that I must say to all Hungarians?"[47] That feeling was and is shared by most Hungarian writers, who believe that it is their responsibility to point the way to a better future. He carried this sense with him when he was invited to join the editorial board of *West* after the death of its editor-in-chief in 1929, and he tried hard to widen the horizons of what was already the most influential literary journal in the country. When his efforts failed, he took over another journal *Kelet Népe* (People of the East), in 1939, in order to write as he wanted and to suggest practical ways of ensuring a better future for the country. "Stop playing politics, just build!" was one of his slogans, and one that he himself put into practice at his country cottage at Leányfalu, north of Budapest, though typically he employed labourers who were good talkers and would often entertain him when he went to supervise operations. He also advocated cottage industries, which seemed an intensely practical plan to bring life to the countryside at a time when raw materials were in short supply. And by this time his own observation of Hungarian

[45] See p. 156.
[46] See p. 225.
[47] Virág Móricz, *op. cit.*, 496.

society, and more particularly of the situation of the peasants, had been corroborated by the disturbing mass of evidence collected by the so-called 'village researchers'; their statistics and photographs revealed a situation just as grim as Móricz had painted it in his reports and stories. One of his last ventures was concerned with the dissemination of culture. He compiled a cheap paperback anthology of Hungarian literature, mainly poetry, entitled *Magvető* (Sower; 1940) and in a brief foreword emphasized the role of literature in national life, indicating that he had chosen living works that would inspire particularly the youth of the country.

Móricz was a passionate observer of the human scene and a skilful portrayer of its follies. What he saw was bleak and sombre, and he conveyed this with dramatic intensity. But he can be properly accused of merely posing problems and offering no solution; he has no redemptive or reforming message, no glorious future to proclaim, and he rarely probes below the surface. Yet it is precisely his capacity to disturb the conscience of the reader that is his strength. "A real writer," he declared once, "can only discover, communicate and recreate life."[48] This is what he does for Hungarian and foreign readers alike.

George F. Cushing

[48] "*Vallomás az íróról*". In: *Tanulmányok I*, Budapest, 1978, 771.