THE POET'S INTRODUCTION

THE POEMS which follow were written by a Hungarian poet. This means that they were born in a rather special medium, that of Hungarian poetry. For though I consider world poetry today more or less uniform, I am nevertheless aware that the poetry of the various nations or groups of poets may be regarded as separate dialects of this uniform, universal language of poetry. Nothing is further from my mind than to theorize about the history of literature; I simply wish to make two observations about Hungarian poetry as a whole. The first is that Hungarian poetry – may God forgive me for the word – is *important*.

The disadvantage of being important

Hungarian poetry? Is it really important? I'm quite aware of the startling nature of this statement, though I did not make it to startle nor to seem ingenious. It was no mere coincidence that at an international convention a Canadian journalist said to me: 'Are you a poet? Really? I heard that poets in your country are important people.' I had to smile, the sentence summarized so well the sociological position of the Hungarian poet, and what is generally thought about that position. Unworthy representative of a favourable prejudice, I would like to add that in Hungary this sociological importance has been historically determined, and perhaps not only in Hungary, but also among other peoples who have had a difficult history, whose national consciousness and national existence were as often threatened as ours. Since the threshold of modern times Hungarian literature has been the literature of peril. Historical, social, and political role: the poet as commander, agrarian policy maker, dead hero, minister, prison inmate – for centuries, this has been regarded as natural in Hungarian literature. Thus, being a poet has its personal dangers, not to speak of the disadvantage that this all too conspicuous role could bring with it for poetry, sacrificing its actual starting point, poetic quality, for this same role.

Not that we have anything to complain about when it comes to poetic quality. We see poetry as the leading genre of our literature – *bélas*. Yes, this is a most unfortunate fact, since poetry lends itself least to translation. And to this I would like to add a second comment, something I hold to be fundamental for the entirety of Hungarian poetry, and that has to do with the problem of

language. This, too, is related to some extent to the importance of poetry as well as to the disadvantages of this very importance; at least, advantages and disadvantages are as indissolubly mixed in it as in the case of its conspicuous social role.

Every language is unique, the Hungarian language is even more unique. If I were a linguist, I would sing hallelujahs from dawn to dusk for having been born a Hungarian and having been given one of the unusual languages of the Finno-Ugrian group at birth. As a poet, however, I am not always rejoicing. The Hungarian language is isolated, the Hungarian language means certain death in world literature. But the Hungarian language lends itself extremely well to poetry. If I were to make a paradoxical argument in favour of this daring opinion, I would insist that Hungarian is so well suited to poetry *precisely because* it is isolated, because its existence in world literature is perilous, because a certain kind of hopelessness is part of its essence—which, of course, means hope *vis-à-vis* the ultimate problems of mankind, the constant, centuries (millennia) old experience of living through extreme existential situations. But I do not wish to force this subjective line of argumentation on the reader, I gladly forego subjective proof. Keeping in mind that existential experiences (of all kinds) can infiltrate the means of conceptual communication of a given group of people, here I merely mention a few of the characteristics of the Hungarian language, its agglutination, for example. This has far-reaching consequences in poetry, especially in the twentieth century. This is the reason (among others) why twentieth-century Hungarian poetry—taking advantage of the language's assonantal riches—is much more rhymed than is usual in most other literatures. As for rhythm, the sharp juncture of the syllables has made it possible for three rhythmic systems to live side by side in Hungarian poetry: one stressed, one quantitative, and one a combination of the two. This unusual feature of the Hungarian language proves without doubt its thorough prosodic sophistication, its rich poetic possibilities.

And this is what is scarcely translatable. So, here we have Hungarian poetry with its unusual features deriving from its unusual language (and cultural situation), characteristics that are generally untranslatable or even, should they be translatable, are unimportant in today's world poetry. All poetry is untranslatable, Hungarian poetry is even more untranslatable.

Towards the realm of the nameless

The poems that follow are by a poet, or so I hope. The medium in which they were born (the Hungarian language, Hungarian poetry) characterizes them, but not exclusively.

I hope that the degree of their untranslatability does not exceed the rather serious difficulties of human communication in general. I hope they have levels of meaning which can be understood in other languages, or—and this would be great luck, indeed—in the prelinguistic or translinguistic domain of human consciousness, the dimension of phenomena as yet unnamed, though similar in all of us. This zone, being significant in itself, is even more significant for me with respect to poetry. When I am sometimes asked what I consider to be most essential for the craft of poetry, I usually answer more or less in these words:

> The poet is the specialist of emotions. In practising my craft, it has been my experience that the so-called emotions have at least two layers. The first layer carries the known and acknowledged emotions; these have names—joy, terror, love, indignation. There is mutual agreement about their meaning, they have a past, a science, and a literary history. They are the citizens of our hearts. The second layer is the no man's land of the nameless. If I stop at six o'clock in the evening on the corner of Kékgolyó Street (it means, literally, 'blue ball') and see the sunlight's edge falling at a certain angle on the Castle, and the olive trees of the Blood Garden cast a shadow a certain way—I am always seized by emotion. This emotion has no name. Yet everyone has stood at some time or other on the corner of Kékgolyó Street. How often I am forced to give a conventional name to nameless emotions! And not only to oil the pedantic logic of mutual agreement. No. I ruin things myself with my uncomprehending perplexity, and spill the nameless something of Kékgolyó Street into a puddleful of autumn melancholy or a vat of historical enthusiasm. And no wonder, for autumn melancholy and historical enthusiasm are citizens of our hearts.
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> I think it is the duty of the poet to obtain citizenship for an increasing horde of nameless emotions.

By and large, I used to say things of that sort about the nature of poetry, because, by and large, that is what I think. But then it is hard enough to recognize our thoughts and emotions, much less find the appropriate name for them. Nevertheless, I think it may be wise to examine more closely, and perhaps add to, what I have already said. Like the railway mechanic who at intervals taps the entire underframe of a long train with a hammer, it is not a bad idea to check from time to time our own convictions.

About the emotions

The first sentence of my statement already gives rise to serious suspicion. I assert here that the poet is a specialist of the emotions. Is that so? Is he a specialist, and of the emotions? Let's allow the poor poet to call himself

a specialist; there are so many specialists of this and that, why not the poet? After all, he has a certain manual dexterity, he can do tricks with language, he knows about the anapest; what is more, he can create a whole series of much more complicated Greek metrical feet in his own language if it is suited to such meters; he can translate tens of thousands of lines of verse, if need be, from ancient and modern poets, *et cetera, et cetera.* He certainly knows as much about the language of poetry as a cabinet maker knows about wood. But whether the word *emotion* may be employed to accompany the above requires mature consideration. The word itself is taboo, it has long since gone out of use; we fear nothing so much as that caricature of emotion, sentimentality. Twentieth-century poetry, the avant-garde and recurring waves of avant-garde revivals, the various fads and schools, attacked not only the intellectual faculty, questioning the rational layer of poetry, but in a less spectacular manner also attacked the emotions, the most characteristic aspect of poetry, whose decisive role in lyric poetry went undisputed from time immemorial till the end of the nineteenth century. It is all the more disputed today. For nearly eighty to a hundred years we have been safeguarding our vocabulary against pathos. Not that emotion does not sneak back into the poem under various excuses and guises: instead of private emotion collective emotion, instead of manifest emotion suppressed emotion, instead of 'beautiful' emotion 'ugly' and 'true' emotion, instead of a complex of related emotions fragments, allusions, visions; instead of pathos irony, and so forth. The most diverse schools of poetry in all parts of the world give some scope to emotion, rather like the schoolmaster who makes allowances for petty mischief or impropriety. In the course of the great devaluations of our age, emotion in poetry has become improper, not only emotion but also the very conception and nomenclature of emotion. There are profound reasons for the anti-emotional, anti-lyric poetry which we twentieth-century poets practise, and these reasons point far beyond the field of poetry itself.

And yet, I am not afraid to call the poet the specialist of the emotions. In spite of what I have said above, I consider the domain of lyric poetry to be not unlike the occurrence of the antelope on the earth. Antelopes may roam far from their native ground, but wherever they occur most densely statistically, that is their homeland. The homeland of lyric poetry is the emotion.

(Did I say I was not afraid to pay homage to emotion? Of course I am afraid. I am very much afraid, I shudder to think I might be misunderstood. I am not thinking of *that* emotion, but of *this* one, not the obvious but the controversial one, not the *pre-*, but the *post-;* post-illusion pockets of emotion, typically twentieth-century ones as they appear in our poems, because—*malgré tout*—they must make an appearance. Besides, I may not even be thinking of emotion. What I *am* thinking of is merely coloured by the word *disillusion,* but the seed of doubt does not lie in this time-determined colour but in the concept itself. If we call that existential tension of which a poem is born and which it must contain, emotion, then we might as well keep the time-worn adjective, *emotional,* as the adjunct of lyric poetry.)

Layers

It is a lucky thing that the concept of emotion thus safeguarded, or circumscribed with an unsure pen, has several layers. This gives me more scope. Yes, I believe without a doubt that our emotions have at least two layers, known and unknown, inhabited and as yet unconquered provinces. I consider one of the most important tendencies of twentieth-century poetry—manifest in so many schools—the intention aimed at the domestication of the realm of the nameless emotions of all kinds. If I understand my own striving well, for me—in poetry today and always—the most essential thing is the epistemological campaign we conduct in the domain of our own unnamed emotions in order to enlarge our awareness. As Rilke wrote, we stand arrested at our borders and grab at things Nameless. Not that I underestimate the importance of the known, more or less available, contents of our awareness. I merely find them inadequate. Our century, this painfully complicated century, has taught us, among other things, that many of the crucial things in our lives happen in domains beyond the senses, among atoms and solar eruptions, nucleic acids, and ozone shields. The significance of what we are incapable of seeing through, in the usual meaning of the term, of what on the anthropomorphous level of our lives *we do not know,* has greatly increased, and this is as true of scientific knowledge as of the knowledge of self which may be (also) acquired through art. The two of them jointly—knowledge of the world and knowledge of self—dispatch poetry on its difficult twentieth-century voyage of discovery into the land of the nameless ones.

But I do not mean to equate poetry with epistemology. By knowledge I mean subjective knowledge, tension, shock, recognition, and if we are lucky, catharsis—all those things that the arts can provide. And if they are incapable of providing this, well then, no reasoning and no ideology on earth can excuse them.

Kékgolyó Street

That nameless power source which is the essence of a poem can be approached in various ways. Surrealism approaches it differently than visionary poetry, Rimbaud differently than Eliot, inflated, loud-voiced evocation differently than

poetic signals reduced to a minimum. Personally, I like to follow the guidance of objects. Objects carry 'news', *sunt existentiae rerum;* if we try to enclose in a poem the being of an object that has somehow touched us *as it is,* then—perhaps—we may capture a corner of a *Ding-an-sich* world sufficient unto itself. And where is the poet to find objects for this purpose? In Kékgolyó Street, for example.

Kékgolyó is a most unusual street. It has houses. Small ones and big ones. While I lived there I was convinced that it lay at the crossroad of enormous powers. Perhaps I was wrong here. Perhaps I was right. If the latter is the case, then we must take it as proof that every (Kékgolyó) street in the world lies at the crossroad of huge powers. I can safely say that I found and experienced wonderful things at this particular location in the world. On one side of the street there was a café with a neon sign, on the other, a blacksmith's shop. The owner of the shop was also a farrier and coachsmith, perhaps the last in the city (the world); they brought the last horses in the city (the world) to him for new shoes. The light-maned draught horses passed by there, among the tall, modern houses, and went through the gate of a crumbling eighteenth-century stone fence into the yard of an eighteenth-century manor-house which persisted adamantly among the big city edifices, like a nest in an asphalt jungle. Five small one-storey houses, as they enclosed their own separate intimacy with the help of the stone fence, with the blacksmith's fire in the centre—this is what we saw, the inhabitants of the surrounding big houses, from above and in reduced scale, as in a Brueghel painting. And we saw, besides, the Blood Garden, one-time scene of executions, today a park, with the Castle above, eternal reminders of the transmutations of history. Our history, that is, difficult Central European history; yes, we saw the Castle in flames, we saw the bowl of Blood Garden overflow with the ravages of war. And there was much else; I could talk about the small railroad station, a cat's leap away, from where the train leaves for Venice on dark, rainy mornings; about the sycamores, the trams, the clouds, the Buda hills on the horizon.

In short, Kékgolyó Street had everything, and I saw many things in time and space if I stopped to linger on the corner at six p. m. Even the Kék Golyó was here, the inn sign of the previous tavern, in front of a new tavern. I often scrutinized this old inn sign, if indeed it was the same, for the blue ball had disappeared time and again. It was found each time, if indeed it was the same, and was hung above the tavern door like the badge of some medieval ball-game, if indeed that is what it was. In any case, it is painted a pleasing blue with a touch of gold here and there. If you squint as you look, it appears ocean-blue with continents scattered here and there. I sometimes think that this may be the proper way of looking at the lost, then found, Kék Golyó.

So then, if you pick up a piece of the world—a pebble, a leaf, a discarded distributor plug, a more or less important fragment of the environment—this something may become a transmitter in your hand which broadcasts an unexpected programme. It broadcasts the world, the known and also what is unknown, what is behind our knowledge. This latter channel we do not understand clearly, or else not at all. We have trouble hearing it, like radio stars amidst ordinary radio waves. But poetry is about this before (or after) all; a poem is not exhausted by its content or formal characteristics. Something is left in it which makes it a poem, something it seizes upon from—as I believe—the unknown realms of the psyche. The known components of poem do not explain its ability to radiate.

That is why a poem is such a fascinating object of investigation, much like pitchblende was for Marie and Pierre Curie, because pitchblende's ability to radiate could not be explained by its known components. Though I do not believe that the unknown agent of a poem could be isolated even through the most thorough scientific procedure, I do think that we can regard as a favourable outcome the ideation of what we do not know. The enormous changes and experiments of twentieth-century poetry have this as an aim: not only to portray our age but also to get to know its own nature as poetry. And, getting to know poetry (art) is one road to the knowledge of self. Poetry knows something that we, who make poetry, do not. Perhaps it is no more than the effect of the complete as opposed to process, the effect of the ordered as opposed to the unordered, the effect of being raised above time as opposed to being contingent; a certain proportion, a rhythm, an inner state *(Gestalt)*, which are, however, able to communicate something previously unknown.

This unknown is communicated to me mainly by objects; that is why I try to relay objects to the reader: a geyser, a branch, the fragment of a statue, a tram, which may bring with them memories of war (war: the fundamental experience of my generation), or the experience of nature (living with nature: one of the threatened nostalgias of modern man), perhaps the myth of an Egyptian pharaoh (the modern myth: a model of our awareness of life). It would therefore be easy enough for me to say that I am what is called an objective lyric poet, in the sense that objects attract me and also in the sense that the objectivity of the lyric tone attracts me. At the same time I could also say that I am attracted by the intense tension which is generated by these objects at the moment when they rise above the general feeling of peril, as expressions or perhaps counterpoints of that endangerment. Because, when all is told, I love objects. Even the threatening ones. How could I put them in my poems otherwise? Objects have a comforting force-field.

However, I wish to stop here. I might say that I hold poetry to be one of the great roads to human cognition, of recognition through the emotions, that I consider our poetic campaigns into the land of the Nameless crucially important, a factor in the spiritual survival of twentieth-century man. Furthermore, I might conclude that in getting to know the Nameless, I was principally helped by objects, and that these objects – for this reason, too – are attractive, I might say radiant, in my eyes, like the above-mentioned materials containing radium. But I can go no further. There is a limit to poetic awareness. This is like a dead-end street in a village. Not a dead end in a city, but one by the outskirts of the village when the asphalt road turns into a rocky road, the rocky road into a mule track, and the mule track simply comes to an end. There is no more road. But though the road is no more, the countryside continues: there are bushes, groves, hills, fields. A lovely wide panorama stretches before us, and the smallest country rabbit, or even a grasshopper, can leap into this roadless panorama: we alone, bipeds that we are, are left stranded at the end of the road and cannot go on. Our reflection does not go on, but the poem does. Reconnoitering the roadless terrain is its speciality. Let us allow the poem to take the leap forward.

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