

A European with a Hungarian Passport

Toward the end of his life István Orkény (1912–1979) enjoyed the satisfaction of seeing all his books sell out in a matter of days and all his plays fill theaters to capacity. In each of the Eastern-bloc countries a small group of writers enjoys a similar satisfaction. They are writers who have had to wait for more liberal regimes to see their works in print, and their extraordinary popularity stems from their integrity as well as their talent, since in countries where literature is a component of public policy, integrity is maintained at considerable cost: years in labor camps or prison, years of humiliation, years of silence.

Of course, the point of departure differs from country to country and individual to individual. In the case of Orkény, who might be called a European with a Hungarian passport, it lies squarely in the humanist tradition. Like Chekhov, Orkény was more interested in identifying and formulating pertinent problems than in proposing solutions. Solutions invariably enlist the latest ideology, and any ideology, with its patent on the truth, tends to emphasize the end at the expense of the means. Perhaps that is why, again like Chekhov, Orkény preferred compact genres like the novella and the play. And perhaps because both genres provide an evening's entertainment with roughly the same amount of material, he chose to dramatize several of his own novellas. Two of the resulting plays, *The Toth Family* and *Catsplay*, have had successful runs throughout Europe and America and been made into equally successful films.

Orkény was also a consummate practitioner of the short

story. He even devised a miniature genre all his own, the "one-minute fiction," and published several collections—short collections, needless to say—illustrating its virtuosity. Ranging from several lines to several pages, the tales encompass whole lives, whole epochs, but in the last analysis their goal remains modest: to pinpoint the absurdities of modern life we have come to accept as normal.

If we examine Orkény's work as a whole, however, we find a more ambitious goal. His ultimate concerns are universal; they include morality, loyalty, alienation. But even these are secondary to his concern for freedom. Orkény is obsessed with freedom. "How much freedom does a man have?" he asks in ways that vary skillfully from work to work. How is he to hold onto it? How can he make the best use of it?

Given recent Central European history, Orkény had ample opportunity to ponder the issue. No sooner had he begun to earn a name for himself as a writer than the war broke out. First he was drafted into the army; later he did time in a Soviet POW camp. Between his repatriation and the imposition of Stalinist norms on Hungarian literature he managed to publish a few volumes dealing with his war experiences. Then he fell silent for a number of years. By the time *The Toth Family* appeared, in 1964, he had regained enough freedom to write about freedom, and his outlook is typically Central European.

Fifty years earlier that quintessential Central European, Kafka, jotted a casual one-line entry in his diary about the declaration of another war, the war that became World War I. By treating it so blithely—it is all but lost in his description of a day spent pleasantly by the river—he was indirectly expressing the helplessness that he, a member of a small nation, felt in the face of world history. Orkény felt it too. (Not surprisingly, he once said in an interview that he "learned from Kafka as a son learns from his father.") He was constitutionally incapable of seeing war in heroic terms, in the style of, say, contemporary Soviet literature. For Orkény, war was the ultimate grotesquerie.

In *The Toth Family* he shows war at one remove in the person of a half-crazed major on sick leave. The Toths welcome

him and even kowtow to him in the hope of helping their son, who is supposedly serving under him at the front. Unbeknownst to them, however, their son is dead. They are demeaning themselves for nothing. The major is a perfect illustration of Hannah Arendt's theory of the banality of evil, and the Toths are perfect targets for his inane brand of oppression. They rush to pledge devotion when submission would suffice. Toth is one of the most common Hungarian names, and Orkény is doubtless making a reference, none too veiled, to his compatriots' double capitulation: to fascism during the war and Stalinism after it. Like the Hungarians, the Toths revolt in the end, and the why and how of their revolt supplies the novella with a satisfying finish.

While acknowledging a debt to Western literature of the absurd, Orkény never entirely identified with it. Indeed, he differed fundamentally from the absurdists in that he believed in a way out. He did not claim to know the way out—the denouement in *The Toth Family* is as grotesque as the incidents leading up to it and has no validity as a practical solution—but he so structures his works as to give the impression that somewhere, somehow it exists. For all the absurdity of the characters and their antics, Orkény places them in history, in concrete situations that move forward instead of coming full circle.

If *The Toth Family* demonstrates Orkény's penchant for the grotesque, *The Flower Show*, first published in 1977, shows him equally at home in the realist tradition. Although the scene and characters are those of Budapest, the idea behind them came to Orkény in New York. Switching on the television set on the last day of a visit to America, he happened to see a documentary on death and dying. It set him thinking. How would an analogous program look in Hungary? And what if instead of merely interviewing the mortally ill the up-and-coming young documentarist contracted to film his subjects while they died and catch the actual moment of death, the transition between life and death?

Orkény chooses the subjects carefully: a professor of linguistics, a woman who works packing flowers, and a popular

TV news commentator. Each represents a different segment of society, a different frame of reference, a different set of prejudices. The role of the news commentator is particularly telling because in him Orkény makes most explicit the issue he raises in one way or another on every page: how the very fact of reporting the news influences the news, that is, how it alters what actually happens. By severely limiting the number of factors involved, he throws the issue into sharper focus than many of the recent non-fiction articles and books that have tried to account for it.

But he does more. By implication he is also examining the relationship between art (represented here by the contemporary "genre" of the television program) and life (represented here by death). The irony implicit in both does not detract from the resolutely humanist conclusion: that art can and does influence life and, consequently, that the artist must answer for what he creates. By no means did Orkény wish to place strictures on the artist's freedom; he suffered too much from them himself. He was simply reiterating in modern terms the age-old message that freedom without responsibility or, at the very least, freedom without accountability is tantamount to tyranny.

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