

Introduction

Hungary is a small nation. Historically, like other small nations, it has often been caught in the crossfire of great powers. Hungarian literature, in consequence, has always been preoccupied with political questions – with history and nationhood and liberty. In this respect, if in no other, the poetry of György Petri is typical. Before the astonishing events of 1989 – which have altered both Hungary and Petri's life almost beyond recognition – to write political poetry was (in his words) 'a moral obligation, because [under Communism] there was no normal canalization for the expression of political opinion'. Though some of the poems in this book are very recent, the time they record is already a past era; the advent of democracy means, for Petri, that he is 'not obliged to participate in political life any more'.

That era may be said to have ended in May 1989 with the removal from power of János Kádár, the pragmatic Communist leader who had ruled the country with Soviet support for more than 32 years. Less than two months later, Kádár was dead. Five months later, the Hungarian Socialist Workers Party was dissolved and the People's Republic declared simply a Republic. Behind all these changes, casting a long shadow over the history of modern Hungary, are the events and personalities of a single month in 1956.

In October of that year, the popular outcry against Soviet domination had overthrown the Stalinist regime and briefly brought to power the now almost mythical figure of Imre Nagy. A Communist of liberal sympathies, Nagy was committed to national independence; he had already been Prime Minister, from 1953 to 1955, but had been expelled from the Party by the Stalinists. The rebellion he now consented to lead was immediately followed by a Soviet invasion and armed resistance by the Hungarian people. By mid-November, the uprising had been crushed; Nagy was arrested by the Russians and subsequently hanged.*

The Soviet invasion brought to power a man as different from his Stalinist predecessors as he was from Nagy. This was János Kádár. Significantly, the prelude to Kádár's eventual demise was the official recognition by the Communist authorities that the events

* For a more detailed account of the uprising, see the notes to 'On the 24th Anniversary of the Little October Revolution', 'To Imre Nagy' and 'Cemetery Plot No. 301' on pages 77-79.

of 1956 had constituted a popular uprising. In June 1989, Nagy and his confederates were rehabilitated and, on the anniversary of their execution, solemnly reburied on a national day of mourning. Once this process had been carried out, the collapse of the HSWP and the general election of March 1990 were virtually inevitable. Hungary is now governed by a centre-right coalition that includes a party, the Independent Smallholders, which won the election of 1945, the last time Hungarians went freely to the polls.

Looking back over four decades of Communist rule, it is hard to say which is the more remarkable: the speed of change in 1989 or that things should have changed at all. What ought not to surprise us, however, is the fact that Hungary, long the forcing-ground of political experiment in Eastern Europe, was the first of the Warsaw Pact states to respond to Gorbachev and *perestroika*. Kádár was a paradoxical figure: overtly the creature of Soviet domination and widely regarded as a quisling, yet using his credit with Moscow to liberalise the economy and enlarge the scope of personal freedom in his country. So, in the year of his liberalising New Economic Mechanism – 1968 – Hungarian troops took part in the suppression of the Prague Spring. Moreover, in the early 1970s, when difficulties hit the reformed economy, Kádár rapidly retreated from liberalism.

To a dissident like György Petri, Kádár – ‘this Aegisthus, with his trainee-barber’s face’ – was even more contemptible than the hard-line leaders of other Communist countries. The Hungarian dictatorship, he says, was ‘more sophisticated...more clever’; the control it exerted, therefore, went deeper, so ‘the moral state of the people’ was more dangerously corrupted. As his tone indicates, Petri – despite his taste for flippancy and obscenity – is a rigorous moralist, like all true satirists. He was born in Budapest in 1943, just over a year before the Soviet liberation and five before the Communist takeover. He was 12 at the time of the Soviet invasion and 24 when Czechoslovakia suffered a similar fate. In fact 1956 and 1968 are among a cluster of dates, inescapable in modern Hungary, that punctuate his poems.

For most of Petri’s childhood, Hungary suffered under the Stalinist dictatorship of Mátyás Rákosi. From the literary point of view this meant that, for most of the 1950s, such distinguished and largely non-political poets as Sándor Weöres and János Pilinszky were virtually unable to publish. By the time Petri’s first books appeared, well into the Kádár era, such restrictions had all but vanished. *Explanations for M.* (1971) and *Circumscribed Fall* (1974) were issued by a state publishing house; yet both would have been

unpublishable less than 15 years before, and both contain poems that would still have been banned by most of Hungary’s neighbours.

Given such freedoms, Petri’s handling of his later collections may seem capricious. In Hungary, official recognition brings a poet prestige and privilege of a kind unknown in the West. But in the early 1980s, Petri turned his back on such success. On submitting a new book to his publisher in 1981, he was informed that thirty of the poems were politically unacceptable, though if they were cut, the book could still be published. He refused. The following year the book, *Eternal Monday*, appeared in *samizdat*.

With *Eternal Monday* Petri had, in effect, exposed the limits of Kádarian liberalism. For most of the 1980s he was excluded from the literary magazines and treated as an unperson in the world of official literature. But what he lost in worldly success he made up for in artistic independence and authenticity of social vision. The evidence is to be found in *Eternal Monday* itself and in its *samizdat* successor, *What They Think...* (1985).

A little before the fall of Kádár, however, all this began to change. Petri’s poems began appearing in magazines again and in 1989 a selected poems, *It Exists Somewhere*, was legally published. An unofficial publication, *What They Left Out*, is (as its title suggests) a collection of all the poems not selected – an indication of Petri’s innate non-conformity perhaps. Early in 1990 he was awarded the prestigious Attila József prize and a volume of *Collected Poems* is currently scheduled.

Many of the poems published in the 1980s are savage attacks on the political system of the Warsaw Pact as it then was. That being the case, the language is obscene and vituperative, and *samizdat* was the obvious solution to a publishing problem. But it was more than that: it was also in some sense a deliberate choice and, as such, Petri’s declaration of independence. This is not to say that Petri now stood alone. In the late 1970s, as the government showed signs of retreating from liberalisation, an unofficial opposition began to appear; but the crucial event that drove Petri and others towards dissidence was the emergence of Solidarity in Poland – and Hungary’s decision to ignore it. The satirical squib, ‘The Under-Secretary Makes a Statement’, written before General Jaruzelski’s imposition of martial law in 1981, reveals a profound identification with the Polish cause. During this period, Petri not only demonstrated his support for Solidarity in innumerable ways; he also edited an underground newspaper, helped set up a fund for the families of the unacknowledged poor, signed a public

statement in support of Czechoslovakia's Charter 77, and so on.

But there remained a strongly personal element in Petri's dissidence, and this emerges clearly in his poetry. From the outset, ideas of freedom have been central to his concerns. When at the age of 23 he went up to university, it was to study philosophy, and there is a marked philosophical element in the early books. The conception of freedom that runs through both of them smacks of the existentialism then widely fashionable. 'This Square', for instance, strikes me as owing a good deal to Jean-Paul Sartre's phenomenology, the alien otherness of objects compelling the poet to recognise his freedom. And in 'Marriage' we have a Sartrean vignette of emotional inauthenticity, the sexual act becoming for both partners a joyless duty.

Sexuality is often the glass through which Petri discloses the nature of freedom. The same is true of death. As the final limit on freedom, death is evoked by Petri with a morbid physicality and black humour that recall the medieval world. His view of sex is more ambivalent. It focuses the bleakness of the human condition: the temporary nature of our attachments, failures of communication, the mutability of the body, our ultimate loneliness. But it is also an instance and emblem of personal freedom: an activity pursued for its own sake, necessarily private, which no authority has power to control.

Through sexuality, in short, Petri stresses the continuity of the public and private spheres. In 'Gratitude', perhaps the finest of his early poems, the poet (or his persona) wakes to the noises of an enforced public holiday after a night of love-making. His contrast of 'collective idleness' with the intense particularity of the sexual encounter confers on the latter a kind of gratuitous grace to be set against the compulsions of Church or State. Obscenity too has political significance. 'My use of language,' he says, 'was partly a provocation against the unbelievable prudishness of socialist realism and state culture. There's a great silence about sexual life and bodily functions. There's also a sociological prudery, a refusal to talk about the disturbing facts of social or private life.'

In 'Gratitude', Petri's political concerns are heard as noises off, but in the *samizdat* books existential freedom and political freedom are indistinguishable. In the mordantly ironic epigram 'To be Said Over and Over Again', for instance, Petri 'proves' that Hungary is not after all a prison. Kádár's Hungary had all the appearance of a free society, all the trappings: a relatively unmuzzled press, economic enterprise, consumer goods, no obvious restrictions on artistic

expression. But these things were there to buy off potential dissent. In reality the country was an open prison. The state granted the individual the right to exist and lead a normal life, but as a privilege that – like an exit visa – could easily be withdrawn.

In the background lies Petri's awareness that the government was itself the beneficiary of such "privileges" – and that in 1956 they had been withdrawn. This preoccupation accounts for the uncharacteristically sober tone of his elegy, 'To Imre Nagy':

What we can do, though, is remember
the hurt, reluctant, hesitant man
who nonetheless soaked up
anger, delusion
and a whole nation's blind hope,
when the town woke to gunfire
that blew it apart.

Petri's attitude to the political class, however, is better represented by the words of his Electra:

Because of disgust, because it all sticks in my craw,
revenge has become my dream and my daily bread.
And this revulsion is stronger than the gods.

As the tone here suggests, Petri is not to be co-opted as pro-Western or anti-Communist or democratic Marxist. This is not to say that he rejects engagement; like many figures from what was the unofficial opposition, he now gives his support to the radically liberal Alliance of Free Democrats, since April 1990 the main opposition party in Hungary. But as a poet his position is essentially and fruitfully negative, which explains why *samizdat* became the *sine qua non* of his poetry's authenticity.

It is Petri's tone, typified by 'Electra', that makes his work so strikingly original. His use of myth and irony will not be unfamiliar to the reader acquainted with, say, modern Polish poetry, but it is hardly typical of Hungarian. Irony is of the essence, and he learned the use of it from foreign poets: from Eliot and Cavafy. The radical tradition of Hungarian poetry, descending from Petőfi and Vörösmarty, the hero-poets of 1848, through the Symbolist Endre Ady, to the modernist and Marxist Attila József, is nationalist, libertarian, Romantic and anything but ironic. Though anxious to suppress the nationalist overtones, the Communists tended to claim this tradition as their own. Thus, its rhetoric of justice and freedom – which Petri finds sympathetic – is no longer available to poetry, as he sees it.

What Petri picked up from Eliot in particular was a mode of

indirection, a means of bypassing such rhetoric, undermining state-imposed obligations and rediscovering the roots of human responsibility in the particulars of relationships. The invention of the staircase, he wittily declares,

showed wingless man
the modest trick
of the detour, when he'd
try to jump
in vain after his glance.

He is wary of the ideal and on his guard against verbal inflation of any kind. This may recall other poets from Eastern Europe – Holub and Herbert, for instance, accomplished ironists of the previous generation – but there the similarity ends. Petri is very much of his own generation in his awareness of language as an independent force that can construct reality in its own way. His addiction to word-play, for instance, makes much of his best work untranslatable. Often the full meaning of a poem resides in metalanguage, to be inferred by the reader, because not to be confined within the range of rhetoric the poet is prepared to allow himself. For instance, much of his poetry, like Eliot's, is refracted through the limitations of a pose. The persona seems to owe something to the 'rogue and vagabond' tradition associated with François Villon; he characterises himself as the poet born to be hanged. And yet this self-consciously anti-social stance conceals the severity of a moralist. Petri differs from Herbert or Holub in the peculiarly all-out, unchained quality of his language – whether he broods on the intimate details of sex or verbally flays some swinish secret policeman. In this salutary vigour, Petri is reminiscent of the great satirists of the past – of Juvenal, say, or Jonathan Swift. He is perhaps the outstanding verse satirist of his generation in any European language. As with his progenitors, his bile is the product of injustice and moral outrage.

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