

Preface

THE reader has before him a book with a curious history, and he might well want to know something of the background of such a book, a volume comprising translations and adaptations of the work of Hungarian poets. The editor is qualified only by his capacity to be moved by the life and work of these men; he has done little more than commission translations and act as a clearing-house agent. And properly speaking, Robert Bly (who has worked closely with some of the translators) and Donald Hall (who began collecting the American poems on the Hungarian Revolution with a different book in mind) deserve credit for most of this work. We all have in common the experience of getting to know Tibor Tollas, the exiled poet who edits *Nemzetőr* (Guardian of The Nation), a journal devoted to the work of a group of writers associated with the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. Some of the poets in this group are dead; others are known only by letters of the alphabet so their anonymity will be protected in Hungary; the identity of still others in exile is not known. Tollas himself—as he describes in the moving essay printed in this volume—has suffered both imprisonment and exile; he spent several years in Soviet prisons in Hungary before escaping to the West.

An account of the Hungarian writer's situation in the late forties and fifties can be found in Andor Heller's *No More Comrades*. According to Heller, many writers who attempted to turn their work into acceptable party mythology were unable to provide the convincing tone and were consequently punished along with rebels. I cite Heller's account because it agrees in substance with other available descriptions of this period preceding the 1956 revolt:

Able writers—often those who spoke several foreign languages—were suddenly arrested in their homes, places of work, or even

the street, and imprisoned without any hearing. Their families would not be notified, and could only guess what had happened when the police came to search the apartment, or cancel the lease. In most cases even the police didn't know the reason behind the order, which came from higher up.

Many writers spent years in various prisons, without ever getting a hearing or receiving a court sentence. They were never told why they had been jailed. Years later they might be suddenly released without explanation. Sometimes on release they would be "rehabilitated," and given money and a new apartment. But even after years in prison many of the writers refused to jump on the Party bandwagon.

The government was so hard up for talent and training that sometimes it had to appeal to the writers in prison for help, and to get them to make translations of Party speeches and documents.

It tried to suppress other writers altogether, by forcing them to do heavy physical work. But it is not so easy to bottle up true talent. One of our poets, well-known abroad, spent his prison years in the Recsk coal mine. Yet even in the midst of his mine work, he continued to think and create. He was not allowed any paper, so he memorized his new poetry. He completed what amounted to a volume, and then got his fellow prisoners to memorize the individual poems. In this way his poems were published.

Tollas and the special group of poets represented in this volume are of the order described above. In the political prisons of Vác and Márianosztra, where tortures were common, the men turned the prisons not into weeping chambers but into a kind of subversive Black Mountain College. Using paper stolen from garbage wrappings and thread removed from clothes, they stitched books together and hid them in the walls; they held seminars in whispers, pooling what they knew. Tibor Tollas kept from the prison of Vác several books which the prisoners made of the poems they knew. Their favorite poems for these anthologies turned out to be not always those they had admired as litera-

ture but those they could remember, and they stumbled as we might if we were to write "Annabel Lee" into our own journals, slipping into the transcription lines from other poems by Poe.

And though they reflected, through the works of others which they chose to write into these books, the tensions and concerns of men in great anguish, their most moving poems were of course their own, created out of these very conditions. Tollas turns to address the spider he would not have noticed elsewhere; in the prison the spider becomes the only companion to his loneliness. Here is poetry of physical suffering and of philosophic complexity. Even the light of the sun is a reminder of betrayal, as in "They Block Every Window":

The West is dancing. Maybe they have sold us then.
And they've blocked every window tight with tin.

Angus Fletcher, in his recent book *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode*, provides what I think is an insight into the reasons why prisoners are able to turn a situation structured for suffering into a positive spiritual experience. He alludes to the end of Book VII of *The Peloponnesian War*, where Thucydides "provides an archetype of such places": "Those who were in the stone quarries were treated badly by the Syracusans at first. There were many of them, and they were crowded together in a narrow pit, where, since there was no roof over their heads, they suffered first from the heat of the sun and the closeness of the air. . . ." Fletcher goes on—in his section entitled "Allegorical Causation"—to discuss the psychological transmogrifications which make of such a place of suffering a sacred place, in which the poet almost inevitably gains in his power to symbolize, to allegorize, to find meanings that approach the sublime in his squalid surroundings. In short, though history provides what we commonly call "hell," art frequently turns this hell into a place of fascination in which isolation and

"alienation from the comic world of love, marriage, dance and merriment" operate on the mental faculties to develop "a sort of mental space, in which by concentrating the thought of the hero on a given object that hero seems to be placed in a symbolic center." Much of his surroundings, either of the poet or of his imprisoned hero, takes on the nature of "consecrated, talismanic objects; or consecrated moments of time" in an environment ironically turned into a sanctuary. The poet creates a cosmos of such a hell; he becomes obsessed with "the sacred detail." There is "an increase of historical intensity."

Not all survived, but the strength of the fallen somehow fired those who lived, and it continues to fire them in their spirited exile, an exile devoted to continuing efforts to remind the West of the Hungarians' right to Hungary. If the great powers someday demilitarize part of Europe, perhaps these efforts will become history; otherwise they remain the quixotic, admirable work of men who refuse to shrug or flee or be silenced simply because the rest of the world has; in short, their efforts will remain poetry.

Many books in our time have as their role the stimulation of awareness and individual conscience in a world in which passivity means involvement in evil. *The Deputy* is a reminder of what happens when men keep silent. Whatever individual fates are concerned—Freedom Fighters before the Soviet tanks, Jews before the Nazis, Negroes against Klan—the poems in this book are meant to be songs in praise of the refusal of men to accept or permit suffering in silence.

Unlike the poems represented in the English volume, *Back to Life*, the work in this book is not culled from poetry printed behind the Iron Curtain. It is for the most part manuscript work smuggled out of Hungary by Tollas, some by men now dead and by men who cannot use their correct names. Editorial sacrifices had to be made, in fact, to protect this anonymity. The American poets who worked

on these poems—absorbing the meaning and music of the original through literal translations, through discussion provided by Hungarians, and through hearing the unpublishable accounts of the backgrounds of the individual poets—came to have a special identification with poets like Tollas, Sulyok, "C," and Lökkös. Watching these poets respond as they did, I came to realize that the Hungarian Revolution has become a metaphor for the American poet's own experience of disenchantment and exile, an experience he suffers much less dramatically, much more inwardly. Many of the guilts he bears may, in fact, invite identification more with the drivers of tanks than with the flingers of homemade bombs; nevertheless, if he has won or escaped his battles in the street, he must acknowledge his defeats of the spirit.

"All my poems are about the Hungarian Revolution," John Logan wrote, explaining why he did not want to write a poem about the specific occasion of Budapest, 1956. Many of the poets who worked with editions other than the Hungarian (and who were careful not to claim a knowledge of Hungarian in their statements of the provenience of their versions) nevertheless asked for the Hungarian poems. They had the poems read aloud if only to hear the voices behind them, to catch in them some spirit they might dutifully echo. Regardless of the language texts or editions he chose to work with, none of the poets showed an indifference to the single, Hungarian original, or to the fate of the poet whose words had, by historical accident, now come into his own mouth. It was as if the American poet had been handed a mask to speak through; in the best of these poems I think he accepted the tragic mask and spoke with presumptive eloquence, forgetting the false claims of his ignorance of Hungarian or his failure to share the destiny of a man fallen in street-fighting, forgetting the usual shy, apolitical understatement in which the American poet has so often decided to speak. The best of these poems are acts of collaboration; the American worked as if he knew and could talk to the Hungarian poet,

and he worked with a special humility before the rich texture of the original poem because he could not. As a matter of fact, only two of the Americans translated poems directly from the Hungarian; in the text, the word "adapted" is meant to acknowledge that the poet makes no claims as a linguist and has worked with one or more Hungarians in coming to understand the original as fully as possible. My own work might serve as an example in that I am indebted to Zeno Vendler, Tibor Kelemen, and Peter Gregory for their patience and help. Other poets were assisted by George Sebestyén, Péter Erős, and John Fodor, as well as by Hungarians who have requested anonymity. Several poets are indebted to the English transliterations provided by Watson Kirkconnell, or to translations by Hungarians whom they consulted before going on to attack the subtler problems presented by a phrase or a metaphor. Many benefited from the public readings given by Tibor Tollas and from his personal assistance.

An American poet frequently found himself working with a theme closely akin to concerns already his own. Hayden Carruth developed a powerful sense of identification with "C." James Wright dealt, in "Creatures of Land and Water," with the vast, delicate problem of the way the poet moves down into the sea searching for his language and wins and loses in the effort. Forrest Read, though concerned primarily with the meanings already contained in György Nagy's "The New Age," had no trouble recognizing a universal portrait of a certain kind of man, not merely of quislings and Stalin tanks:

It's here: the age of monsters, a brain of dwarf.
History's back to a time without man.
Steel-hosed giants swing and shuffle and snout
through dust that their half-tracks flatten.

Sometimes the translator's job was to remain true to a certain purity of vision in poems so straightforward and

artless that they lacked what we ordinarily call style. Robert Bly brought to English an exquisite version of the "Fragment" by a Hungarian student who died on November 5, 1956, merely by refusing to corrupt it, by stating it in the same clean bewilderment that has been captured by translators for German, Norwegian, Spanish, and other foreign-language editions of these poems. Considering the poems that fit this category one is tempted to say that certain poems are international; they await only that act of borrowing, and they come across as intact as a borrowed word. There are other poems, however, that are more elusive, and that invite the adapter to tint them with his own vision. Because so many different methods were employed in this project, the task of choosing the single version that would represent the original poem in this volume was not always a simple one. If this book in any way contributes to the forces working today to direct readers—presumptuously—humbly—toward originals, it may be through the open confession of this final editorial dilemma.

Though the Hungarian Revolution has become a metaphor for the American poet's inner life, to most Americans (and even, according to the *New York Times*' descriptions of Budapest today, to many Hungarians) the memory of the event, and efforts to keep it alive, seem merely the embodiment of a suspect idealism. Some of my students at Cornell University attacked the Cummings poem in this book as "adolescent bitterness"; and, speaking of poets like Tollas who lectured about Hungary, another student remarked: "Aren't they capitalizing on their experiences? After all, it's been nearly ten years since all that." The academic intellectual, adult and responsible, and even liberal by contemporary standards, also seems eager to polarize the possibility of what we might have done to help Hungary, thereby letting the issue dissolve in a fog of impossibility and helplessness: "Do you really think we should have gone to war over Hungary?" Anybody who has read an account like

that of G. Gaskill in the Spring, 1958, *Virginia Quarterly Review* ("Timetable of a Failure") would, I believe, come to the conclusion that we would have had to do nothing more than talk. Political questions aside, we find it difficult to understand an idealistic constancy that makes a man dedicate his life to promulgating a literary event that in effect has already happened—the explosion of emotion and poetry in prisons and street-fighting. Lászlo Beke, speaking of a friend who died as a Freedom Fighter, wrote in *Diary of a Student*: "If I could only speak to Bertalan now, to tell him I am keeping the promise I made to him. I'm telling the West about the magnificent Magyars—and their fight for freedom." These men feel that, if they ever stop talking about what happened on the streets of Budapest, they can no longer justify their leaving, and not dying there; they left only because of their conviction that carrying word to the West was of greater value than their deaths. And of value only if the West listened.

Tollas and his fellow poets admit they have only one story to tell: what happened on the streets of Budapest, in the prisons of Vác and Márianosztra, and on the carts and ships carrying men to exile. Perhaps our adults—so resistant to these impressions—have become like the college generation W. D. Snodgrass describes in "The Campus on the Hill":

No; my little ones lean not toward revolt. They
 Are the Whites, the vaguely furiously driven, who resist
 Their souls with such passivity
 As would make Quakers swear. All day, dear Lord, all day
 They wear their godhead lightly.
 They look out from their hill and say,
 To themselves, "We have nowhere to go but down;
 The great destination is to stay."
 Surely the nations will be reasonable;
 They look at the world—don't they?—the world's way?
 The clock just now has nothing more to say.

The poems in this book are American only in that they have been felt by American poets. In that the poems embody a vision, a set of ideals, and a commitment to struggles belonging to no single nationality, the American poets have presumed to share in an experience many would deny them. And though only those who have suffered repression and created a literature from it can speak with the full authority of the oppressed and the dying, these poems provide, if we want to accept it, a focus desperately needed if we—though supposedly strong to the point of invulnerability—are either to comprehend or to deal with problems that are indeed our own. Like Budapest the names of the cities where our inadequacies explode can be exclaimed like the titles of complex and ambiguous poems: Hiroshima, Birmingham, Dallas, Saigon. We, like the Soviets, create and conduct our laboratories of human suffering, and we should at least hear the voices of our poets describing them, if they are willing to speak.

DAVID RAY

Portland, Oregon
January 1, 1965