Introduction

‘WORDS’

The Poetry of István Baka

István Baka was born in Szekszárd, Hungary, in 1948. He left the small provincial town to study at the University in Szeged and lived in that city until his death in 1995. His life was short but even in the grip of his excruciating cancer, he went on working to the end. He had left a rounded, comprehensive ouvre behind, which is an amalgam of most schools of Hungarian poetry from the populist to the objective and, as a consequence, it defies narrow categorization of any kind. As a twenty-year-old he was already a mature poet, a master of form, with a polished, finely crafted poetic voice. His early poems show a profound commitment to the tradition whereby the poet identifies with his nation’s destiny. The evocation of history in a language of metaphors was clearly his way of addressing the world that surrounded him. But István Baka was in conflict not only with despotism and its representatives. He was up against human existence. He became more and more convinced that true reality lay outside the bounds of concrete space and time. In his earlier poems, this interest in existentialism is evidenced by his bitter disputes with God. This is where Baka parts company with the inherited traditions of Hungarian lyric poetry. As one of his last poems, ‘Message from New-Hooligania’ shows, he could not isolate himself from his age, from East-Central European history at the end of the millennium. But the words of an important Kosztolányi character are also valid in Baka’s case: ‘I want to be a writer who hammers on the gates of existence.’

     It seems that a fundamental part of Baka’s existential experience is the realisation that our everyday time as well as historical time are but recurrent cyclic phenomena. The same events are repeated day after day, from one century to the next. The humdrum repetitiveness of our everyday lives in the foreground, set against the backdrop of the grim soulless time of the cosmos. This relationship throws light also on the significance of the God-*motif* that appears so frequently in Baka’s poetry. The God of the poems, he explains in an interview, ‘is the sum total of those irrational forces which give direction to our lives and to history. Accordingly, God symbolizes destiny, irrationality. The individual is impotent against these forces.’

     Battling with his disease, tormented by physical suffering, István Baka moulds the individual's tragedy into a generic protest against the mercilessness of time. The poet of universal existential correlations, by the time his late poems are written, discovers a world hostile to man and sees the absurdity of destruction, from the spine-chilling vantage point of an existence beyond existence.

     We read in 'János Háry's Drinking Song': 'When in a heavenly vineyard / Leaning against the marble-hard / White table of the harvest moon / The earth will serve as my spittoon…' A prisoner in the condemned cell of time, armlocked by his dwindling weeks and days, aware of the approaching Nothingness, the poet re-lives the full measure of his experience but he is also confronted with the absence of those he was not allowed to see. 'When they have sealed off every road outside, / my inner spaces grow, intensify' we read in 'Ivy', a keynote poem, a paradigm of the Proustian creative memory. Baka writes: 'I'm… held together by my memory' and his subject is remembrance, the sustaining power of memory, which like some overgrown Ivy is able to hold up a crumbling edifice and save it from collapsing.

     Important among the poet's fortunate encounters is his acquaintance with the Russian-American Joseph Brodsky, whose poems too dazzle the reader with their role-acting tendency and their astonishing wealth of self-stylization. Well known emblematic figures rooted in Hungarian or international culture are often employed in Baka's poetry. In his 'Yorick Soliloquies' he wears the mask of Hamlet's jester. A mighty question: Why and how does literature need Shakespeare? From his lowly, marginal position Yorick, the familiar icon, is able to expose the protagonists of the tragedy both in a deadly serious and in a vulgar manner. Then again, the resistance innate in Yorick's conduct must have fired the poet's interest. The character was made to articulate – as an outsider, as an outcast – the thoughts of men jealously guarding their autonomy. Thus, through Yorick, Baka had found a way to express himself. Another deeply personal sequence is 'Stepan Pehotnij's Copybooks of Verse'. The author invents a Russian samizdat poet together with the Collected Poetry of a fictitious lifetime. To crown it all, he includes the 'original' Russian titles too, unnecessarily, because the atmosphere of the poems is unmistakably Russian or East European anyway. Baka succeeded perfectly in transplanting himself into the world of the invented poet. Expressing himself – his many selves – became less difficult when he spoke as János Háry, Tarkovsky, *Carmen's* Don José, Pygmalion and Imre Madách, the Hungarian playwright-poet of the great Faustian

drama: *The Tragedy of Man* or, for that matter, as the inmate pacing Van Gogh's prison-yard. There are many subjects in this multiplicity, but only one, unchanging voice. The polyphony of Baka's poetry lies in its various concrete subjects and not in the variety of tones and accents. Tarkovsky in 'translation' sounds much the same as Pygmalion or Yorick. The Háry cycle, his *Drinking Song, Farewell Cup* and *Vineyard Ranger's Song* are outstanding among the role-playing works. They are so closely linked – by way of Kodály's opera – to János Garay's 19th century epic, *The Sergeant-Pensioner,* that we can read them as modern versions of the originals.

     In the volume *To the Angel of November* (1995) István Baka arrives at an existential barrenness, a state where the tragic has been finally cleansed, which is reminiscent of Attila József. The 'poem-like poem', a commitment to the constraints and supporting framework of traditional forms, demonstrates the survival of this poetic heritage. 'The kind of poem I like, does not just tell something. It is a thing in itself, or to quote József: it is a worldview in its totality' – said Baka in an interview many years ago. The ideal of the Imaginist [not Imagist] poem, evoking Yesenin and Lorca, is rooted in other lyric traditions. Baka's verse is also influenced by musical forms, as it reminds us of the logic embodied in the alternation of movements in works of music. The author of *The Nights of Franz Liszt* openly admits this musical lineage, in that the subtitles of particular poems refer to the Liszt compositions, which inspired them. Furthermore, in many instances the kernel of a poem is a phonetic element of musical quality and this stored acoustic experience is resurrected in the text. The rhetoric, the phraseology of the poems is profoundly influenced by this musicality.

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*From **Selected Poems** by István Baka*

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