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## Heirs and Heretics

László Kálnoky: *Összegyűjtött versek* (Collected Poems), Magvető. 1992, 727 pp. • István Baka: *Farkasok órája* (The Hour of Wolves), Tolna County Library—Szekszárd City Local Government, 1992, 75 pp. • András Visky: *Hóbagoly* (Snowy Owl), Pesti Szalon, 1992, 72 pp. • Angela Molnos: *Waiting on Wonder*. Circle Press Publications, 1992, 160 + 156 pp. • Thomas Land: *Free Women*. N.P.P. Publications, 1991, 35 pp.

The oeuvre of László Kálnoky (1912-1985) was one of the richest of his time, even apart from the imposing quantity of his translations, that are also among the very best. Indeed, it is scarcely fair to discuss him in these few paragraphs only. This great poet was undervalued throughout his life. For some reason or other, his soberly tradition-bound and prudent, somewhat Victorian personality, his unfaltering moral bearing, and his strong points as a poet have always been considered as outdated; some of his other qualities accorded well enough with the various periods for his image to be merged into the current average, which he surpassed by far.

The generations in twentieth century Hungarian literature are counted from 1908, when *Nyugat* (West), the most prestigious of the literary periodicals, was launched. The first generation, born in the 1880s, was of

genius calibre the world over; the second was born around 1900. When the third generation, born in the 1910s, began to emerge around the mid-thirties, it was no longer possible for them to ignore the crisis of outmoded means in poetry. The not expressly avant-garde poets among them responded in two ways. Some of the second generation were marked by a certain degree of obscurantism, with varying justification, and tried to find new ways while employing a deliberate slovenliness in form. (The best known of them was Gyula Illyés.) The great figures of the first generation (despite a period when they too attempted to loosen form) opted for overtly spectacular formal means, mannered rhymes and similar devices. This was carried on by the third generation, proud again of their learning and tilting radically to a classical style; nevertheless they felt weighed down by the poetic achievement of their forebears and the idiom they had developed. At the time, although the talent and technical accomplishment of the young Kálnoky (and of those closest to him, István Vas and Zoltán Jékely) were ac-

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known by readers and critics alike, they missed the quality of surprise, considered their traditionalism as a new epigonism, and were critical of the relatively pale personality that emerged from their poems. This latter, however, was a symptom of a transitional age, since the next generation would deliberately avoid direct presentation of the specific personality.

The gap between expectations and their artistic intentions made a sharper than ever irony and self-irony of great importance to the third generation. This is particularly true of Kálnoky, who (a lawyer and the son of the mayor of the city of Eger) still looked on Baudelaire as *the* poet. His early poems register external experiences (provincial tedium and embarrassment associated with his tuberculosis), but they even then include some of his stirring "exaggerated" images. Studied symbols and rhymes (in the original Hungarian), occur and they are splendid: "I wish I were an autumn cloud, whose bottom / is licked by wind dogs to the colour of raw meat" ("October",); "The great conjurer, silence, gives birth through its nostril / to black hares and velvet rats" ("In the Circus of the Night"). (Quotations are literal, rough translations throughout.) He accords his reader a wink (look, poetry is being made here!), and thus offers free play to the non-naive effect of the image. For these are serious images, almost never lacking a tragic element in their comic effect.

Kálnoky is, despite all appearances, one of the most unrelenting of rebels; he is a gnostic rejecting creation as a whole. His illness brought this quality to extremes. "I have seen a chest in which, in way of a valve, / there was a rubber pipe. I saw how man is turned into / a live bacterial culture. / I saw what, out of caprice and ennui, / a hostile reason beyond the earth conceives against us." ("Sanatorium Elegy".) István Vas described Kálnoky's poetry as vengeance taken on the world, a feature it retained throughout. But later, and particularly from the

volume *Lángok árnyékában* (In the Shadow of Flames, 1970), his poetry at its peak, there came a sharper distinction between the criticism of everyday life and that of life on earth in general. For the first, Kálnoky set down in minute detail the changes in public mood; he never stood in favour with officialdom (despite his almost pathological respect for the law, on which Vas includes splendid anecdotes in his memoirs), and he never sought this favour. After the war, it was not until 1957 that he was able to publish his poems. The criticism of life in general he continued to enclose in classical form, though form grew somewhat looser, until it was enriched in the 1960s by what was then a playful stylistic innovation, namely an emulation of the manner of Trakl and Keats. However, in content the poems more and more confined themselves to symbolic acts, symbolic landscapes (desert, island, a city in ruins) and symbolic characters. "The wind scatters time shreds, / and the timeless cauldron is simmering / with fresh bone-marrow and blood boiling in it, / while I am being castrated by / the rigid, silver-faced, sexless angels." ("For My Birthday").

Thus he had managed to overcome to some extent his gravest shortcoming, excessive transparency and rationalism. (He was always inclined to say too much, leaving the reader to dig out, as it were, his most valuable visionary images.) This is why in the eyes of many he seemed basically nineteenth century, or as he himself put it with his sharp clarity, a "parrot speaking Etruscan". His sceptical view of the progress of mankind, the meaning of life, and the lasting value of works, also strengthened that impression. Indeed, in his most philosophical poems ("Atonement for Blasphemy", "Torn Off Masks") he spoke with a modicum of optimism on the Promethean principle of bettering our existence by the power of reason. His last, posthumous, volume had the typical title of *Deeds of Valour in the Hip Bath*, this at a time when no one was any longer interested in deeds of

valour, not even on the battlefield; its irony has thus been wasted: a slap to a shadow. By then, in 1986, valour meant to be able to shut oneself up in one's private life and preserve the intellectual freedom of reflection. This (equally transient) ideal was represented by György Petri, the young poet who learned the most from Kálnoky, and was forced into samizdat publication.

Kálnoky himself reacted to the narrow-mindedness of the time—following his cycle *Egy magánzó emlékiratai* (Memoirs of a Rentier)—with a verbosity characteristic of another younger contemporary, Dezső Tandori. “The fire ravages only in the mirror, / the walls, the furniture remain unimpaired. [...] This is why from its gloomy workshop there emerges / indifference sealing up the orifice.” (“In Roundabout Ways”). And should this mouth still open, the most sincere thing it can do is to relate the insignificant. His long narrative poems recall his legal training in their use of a precise, prosaic idiom, producing an irony that is quieter in its serenity than hitherto. In terms of their subject matter, these reminiscences and observations do not always reach beyond the level of journalism; indeed, the reader sometimes doubts, or rather feels the poet's own doubts, as to whether writing them has been worth the effort. Not, perhaps, for the poems themselves, but certainly for the way they pointed out the current limits of poetic freedom and undermined pathos in poetry, so pervasive before. It is another question that today, when irony reigns supreme and pathos is out once and for all, it is more difficult to notice their originality than it was ten years ago, when Kálnoky achieved his greatest ever success with them.

At the same time, he wrote splendid poems in the style he had perfected earlier: “Towards Seventy”, for example, and in his final years, “In a Sick Bed” and “Unbidden Visitors”. Such too is the cycle “Winter Diary”, which condenses tiny experiences of a Japanese delicacy into allegorical pictures; promise of a final synthesis and renewal

emerges but unfortunately, no time was left for its realization.

**K**álnoky's ironic self-criticism and his criticism of the age have been inherited by Petri and others, while the passion in his gnostic criticism of existence has been continued by István Baka (born 1948). Baka, despite being of a different generation, has not received his pessimism ready-made. Ancient disappointments, an ever renewed struggle with himself are behind his feeling that the world is irredeemable, a view which he strains to force on his readers with a painful effort. He, too, has a fondness for cosmic panoramas, outlined with a broad sweep and constructed out of somewhat mannered metaphors; he, too, frequently employs the image of a universe devouring human flesh and, conversely, mankind preying on the universe. “The soft parts have been chewed off by the angels: / as by a chalky-white skull, we are enveloped / by the sky [...] / and its brain, spilled and rotted away, / leaks up from the ground by dawn, — / we get lost in its eddies of mist, / and feel: we have inherited this world; / let us gobble it up then, until we are saturated by the poison.” Some elements in his poetry have invited the comparison with literary populism. (His poems first attracted attention in an anthology of populist writers.) Of the three levels of discontent with Creation he does indeed stress the middle one: apart from the adversity faced by the individual and by mankind, he laments the misfortune of the nation as well. Hungarian history, with its numerous disasters and tragic figures, offers ample material for works of this type. However, it would be wrong to mistake him for one of those whose sole interest lies in the tribal legendary for its own sake. Baka would not dream of truncating national tradition by excluding “alien” features and (unlike those who are ultimately the present-day followers of Rousseau) he does not discard a large part of the inherited forms and motifs in the name of “instinctive creation”.

In his latest collection, Baka shows that other cursed histories can likewise provide him with excellent raw material. A cycle of biting humour, "The Monologues of Yorick"—who outlives Hamlet—speaks of what is typical of a foreign occupation anywhere and in any age: general decline and the grotesque strategies of adaptation which history's victims are forced to learn. There is another cycle which he has written under the name of Stepan Pehotny, a fictive Soviet-Russian poet, (the name is a straight translation of Baka's name into Russian). Indeed, the experiment could easily have turned into one of the more successful literary mysteries, had an indiscreet editor not revealed the identity at the very outset. Russian poets have deeply influenced Baka's style: he is perhaps the best living Hungarian translator of Russian poetry.

His daring images of nature do not necessarily point to Yesenin (the fantastic having long-standing traditions in Hungarian poetry as well), but Mandelstam and Brodsky could well have contributed to his elegant neo-classical verse and clear conceptual sequences, through which he formulates his expressly romantic visions. Duality of romantic content and classicist form is again a feature that is found in, among many others, Kálnoky as well. At this point, however, it is the difference between the two that is more important. In Baka, the blank spot in his view on humanity is precisely consciousness, the area explored so widely by Kálnoky. In Baka, suffering is still either a concrete torment of the body and of the instincts or, by omitting sentiments that can be directly formulated and attempts at rational explanation, it means nothing less than the failure of the cosmos. "Fire is blaze but gives no warmth, / It only grows at one like the beast from its lair. / The soul is ablaze in the battered fireplace, / Abomination bubbles and boils on it. / [...] The sky is the colour of tar and smells of a lavatory. / Close the window of the century! Enough!" ("Hodasevich in Paris", by Stepan Pehotny).

Elementary force, however, is linked to refinement through music, for music as subject, metaphor and linguistic device is of central significance for Baka. The poems which recall Liszt and (as Pehotny) Rachmaninov, are fine examples of an individual, creative use of national mythologies.

One, which brought him the Robert Graves Prize in 1985, (Hungary's premier poetry prize) is "Franz Liszt Spends a Night Above the Fishmarket", and he has indeed written a whole cycle on Liszt. Here, too, he avoids intellectual reasoning as something which goes ill with his style. Yet the knowledge he makes use of here of what Liszt's music meant to Hungarians in the latter part of the last century could fill an excellent essay: it was a proof and illusion of belonging to Europe; an undeserved reward and a pain-killer, a prophecy not listened to... It is not surprising that the best sequence in the cycle is "Mephisto Waltz," with its wildly apocalyptic tone: "like the canal with swan carrions, / the ballroom bubbles and seethes / with ice-cream-coloured dresses". Other poems in the cycle are adroit references to Liszt's time and witty comments on the poet's, without any of this spoiling the recreation of the mood of the music.

**A**ndrás Visky is a Hungarian mechanical engineer, living in a hideous panel-built block in a hastily industrialized Transylvanian town in Rumania. On his poetic debut, Visky evoked an age of which he could have been the "hero"; he employed many of the poetic techniques of futurism. He inserted mathematical formulae and typographical tricks into his irregular lines.

These tricks certainly can have their function, for instance in the way the unexpected view-points they produce bring a new intensity to the poems of Géza Szócs, a fellow-Transylvanian. However, Visky received lukewarm recognition for his first collection: the insincere poems of a sincere man, wrote his first critic in Hungary. His second volume shows Visky turning towards classicism.