

**WORLD
LITERATURE
TODAY**

A LITERARY QUARTERLY
OF THE UNIVERSITY
OF OKLAHOMA
NORMAN, OKLAHOMA
73019-0375 USA

FROM THE WINTER 1997 ISSUE

István Baka. *Tájkép fohással: Versek 1969–1995*. Pécs, Hungary. Jelenkor. 1996.

Perhaps the most painful loss to Hungarian literature in 1995 was the death of István Baka at the age of forty-seven. Born at Szekszárd in the Transdanubian region and later making his home at Szeged by the River Tisza, Baka grew from an epigone of Endre Ady and the Russian poet Esenin into a major poet of his generation. While his debut in 1975 was noted with interest by some critics, it was really in the 1980s that his poetry blossomed, and in the last few years he has received nearly all the recognition that a person writing poems can get in Hungary (a notoriously poet-rich country). These have included prestigious awards such as the Attila József Prize (1989) and the Déry Prize (1993). It is not clear whether the present book is his “Collected Poems” or just a generous selection; at any rate, it comprises the best of his verse.

The leitmotiv of Baka’s poetry is existential loneliness in a world deserted by God. In his early work the poet’s deep-seated anxiety is partly expressed in gloomy imagery, partly papered over with a pseudoreligious (and often bombastic) terminology: “világ priccsén felébredek / Sátán és Isten foglya” (I wake up on the world’s plank-bed / a prisoner of Satan and God). Elsewhere he talks about “Istenszemét es Sátán-limlomok” (God’s garbage and Satan’s odds and ends). Eventually Baka found a voice, or rather several voices, authentic in their diversity—poems “acting out” historical situations, Pessoa-like “impersonations.”

Baka’s first truly accomplished poems were inspired by music, by such composers as Mahler, Liszt, and Rachmaninov. His macabre “Trauermarsch” pays tribute to Mahler’s genius, and I find the poem “Franz Liszt Spends a Night Above the Fishmarket” also very moving, with lines such as (Liszt talking to Hungary) “I have scored you into / the Grand Hotel d’Europa and failed to note / your place has been prepared at the kitchen table” (tr. George Szirtes). This piece is followed by several poems composed to somber piano pieces by Liszt such as “The Mephisto Waltz” or “Funerailles”—Baka seems to be obsessed by the circumstances and physical aspects of death.

It is partly this obsession (somewhat better understood in the light of the poet’s untimely death) that is behind the intriguing 1990 cycle “Yorick monológjai” (Yorick Monologues). Here Baka assumes the role of the dead

jester turned into living gravedigger in poems such as “Yorick monológja Hamlet koponyája felett” (Yorick’s Monologue over Hamlet’s Skull), though his play-acting is colored by historical anachronism: “senkise kapott kardjához ha dánul mondtam vicceket / persze a svéd is igazi kultúrnyelv nem úgy mint a dán” (nobody reached for his sword when I told jokes in Danish / of course it’s Swedish that is the real language of culture unlike Danish). Now, although Helsingör is in present-day Sweden, Fortinbras came from Norway, where the language spoken at the time was quite similar to Danish; this is not to mention the fact that in 1600 Danish had a considerably more sophisticated literature than did Swedish. One might ask on what Baka’s resentment is based: perhaps English is the “Swedish” of his Yorick poems, and he resents its unusual popularity in the Hungarian media and among the technical intelligentsia of the 1990s?

In the seventies Baka invented an intriguing alter ego called Stepan Pehotny (a literal translation of his name), supposedly a contemporary Russian poet who writes naturalistic, colorful verse peppered with irony—a cross between an updated Esenin and Gumilev, perhaps. (Baka also translated Sosnora and Brodsky into Hungarian). Pehotny’s “Testament,” consisting of three exercise books, is a remarkable sequence of poems in which Baka tries out a new, irreverent voice. It works extremely well in poems such as “Hodaszevics Párizsban,” “Oroszország asszonyaihoz,” and “Immanuel Kant,” to name but a few. Pehotny/Baka’s critique of Soviet realities is immediately quotable: “Nálunk bírálata a tiszta észnek; / Nem komplikált—se több, se kevesebb: / Ki tiszta ésszel él, bolond vagy részeg, / S legjobb kritikák a lágerek” (With us the critique of Pure Reason / is not complicated: neither more nor less / just this: whoever uses pure reason is a fool or he’s drunk, / and our best critique is the camps of the Gulag). But even after the Pehotny cycle, Baka was mesmerized by the fate of the best Russian poets of our century; so in 1994/95 he composed a “Russian Triptych” consisting of silhouettes of the arrested Gumilev, of Esenin before his suicide, and of the desperately lonely Tsvetaeva in Yelabuga. Apart from empathy with the suffering of fellow poets, it is the presentiment of impending death that makes these poems curiously memorable. The one devoted to Tsvetaeva ends on the words “Hurokká megkötöm a horizontot, / S föllendülök tehozzád, Istenem” (And I tie the horizon into a loop / And I swing high up to you, my Lord).

*George Gömöri
University of Cambridge*