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The light signals of István BAKA

Here in Australia a feeling of warm excitement always grips me as I open the literary journals arriving by mail from Hungary.

Those who have left their homeland, having packed into their bundle their love of words, and settled far from their native tongue are particularly sensitive to snippets of information that filter through from home. The panicky experience of words abandoning you can strike suddenly—with the force of a terminal diagnosis; an indication, one fears, of impending total disintegration. Therefore lucky is the one who, from the other side of the world, is illuminated by a line, a poem, a poet.

Here in Australia a feeling of warm excitement always grips me as I open the literary journals arriving by mail from Hungary, or perhaps a parcel of books, or, more recently, as I browse the internet. In the early nineties, while leafing through the poetry section of one of the recently arrived journals I was mesmerised by an enchanting image:

Shrouded in fog I trudged on
Streetlamps cast their light on me
Pallid frost-wrapped hortensias

I melted from the beauty of it. The poem, titled “Once more in St Petersburg” was the work of István Baka – a poet unknown to me at the time – who had attributed his thoughts to a fictitious Russian poet’s imagination (Sztyepan Pehotnij).¹ From then on I scoured the journals seeking out Baka’s poetry and on finding them my reading time—in fact my very days—were suffused with the rich glow of his words.

The Russian flavour of Baka's Pehotnij poems brought an unusual patch of colour to Hungarian poetry. I was not aware until later that the poet had spent time as a student in Leningrad (St Petersburg), where he developed a keen sensitivity to the conditions of then Russian life. The world of Baka's poetry mirrored many aspects of the experience of dictatorship in Hungary, particularly the threat to poetry, the vulnerability of poets in a society where culture is defined by ideologues, Hungary's fate in the world and, above all, the restlessness of spirit and the anxiety of living within the confines of one's prescribed place in the scheme of things.

These themes continued in poems after the Pehotnij cycle: in the great Széchenyi role-poem "Döbling", in "Yorick's Monologues", in the nightmarish atmosphere of "The Hour of the Wolves", the vexed lyrics of the love cycle "Winter in Alsósztrégova" and many other poems, all preternaturally entrancing and resonating profoundly within me.

I cannot possibly do justice to the man's entire poetic oeuvre but allow me, if you will, to be like a fisherman, dangling tempting bait on the end of his line, hoping for a catch, and let me lure you with a few images from István Baka's poetry:

A cold beauty wears her swirling
Tulle around her like a blizzard

* * *

Ocean! You perpetual tantrum

* * *

I am a forest – I lose my way within

* * *

The foxtail dusk

* * *

The discarded hassock
like an upturned inkwell
stains the room with its blackness.

* * *

God's ornamental sword silently gleams: the Milky Way.

* * *

... Clouds, like bloated angels' corpses, float ...

* * *

Towards the mid nineties, Baka's poems became increasingly about the approach of life's end and the struggle with Death. He had been diagnosed with an incurable illness and wrote, in his forties, the sort of poems with which older poets typically farewell the world after much longer and fuller lives. In these poems Baka reaches heights comparable with another giant of Hungarian poetry, Miklós Radnóti—presenting the unacceptable inevitability of death, the one-sided quarrel with God, the constant vacillation between resignation to one's fate and rebellion against it, and the final wish:

it may be good to stay alive but
what if I'm taken off the list
please put me in your book of words
then look me up and I'll exist.

These final poems are the work of someone whose formidable intellect and clarity of mind remained undiminished to the very end. In the last stages of his life he carefully collated his work and compiled a manuscript of his collected poems. "He tied up all the loose ends", as his widow Tünde put it. The resulting impressive volume, *Landscape with a Prayer*, was published posthumously by Jelenkor.

In 2003, the Szeged-based publisher Tiszatáj released *The Poems*: the first in what is to be an annual series of volumes encompassing the entirety of István Baka's life work. This book not only presents all his published poetic works, but also includes his notes, drafts, revisions, fragments of poems in the making, unpublished poetry and other poetic experiments, all of which provide insights into Baka's creative process. It is visually and typographically beautiful and has an epilogue by Attila Bombitz.

Around the time *The Poems* was published, a slim volume of Baka's poetry appeared for the first time in English. *Selected Poems* (published in 2003 by Abbey Press, Northern Ireland) was edited by London-based Thomas Kabdebo and contains thirty-three poems, translated largely by Peter Zollman but with contributions from Michael Longley, George Szirtes, Bill Tinley and John W. Wilkinson. While no doubt reflecting the personal tastes of the translators, *Selected Poems* succeeds in being a representative sample of István Baka's poetic works. There is an informative essay-introduction by Sándor Olasz and one of the book's patrons is Nobel laureate Seamus Heaney. Abbey Press was supported in its endeavour by the Hungarian Book Foundation and the towns of Szekszárd—István Baka's birthplace—and Szeged, where the poet lived and died.

Peter Zollman's masterful translations faithfully render Baka's musicality and rhythmic patterns into English. His translation of "Isolde's Letter"—a poem I have long yearned to introduce to my English-speaking friends—is as ingenious as it is simple. Here is the last stanza:

I cannot go I'm busy as you see
But heaven knows your wound torments me too
I'll fly to you as soon as I am free
And then my darling I will die with you.

Nem mehetek foglalt minden napom
De hidd el nékem is sajog sebed
Futok hozzád amint lesz alkalom
És akkor akkor meghalok veled

Selected Poems is the product of an international collaborative effort that may well indicate the growing importance of István Baka's poetry, extending beyond his significance in Hungarian literature to an increasingly interested international audience. I am reminded of an image I have nurtured over the years that illustrates for me the situation of Hungarian writers—expatriates and exiles—scattered around the globe: I picture these people as lone inhabitants of remote lighthouses, sending out their works like weak signals of light into the dark void, hoping that on the other side of the world they will be received and perhaps even answered. In István Baka's case the reverse image applies; the narrow beams emanating from his country may provide a channel through which lovers of English verse around the world might come to appreciate his poetic works. With luck, the signals will be noticed.

TRANSLATED BY ROBERT HANDELSMANN