

# NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL IMPLICATIONS IN RADNÓTI'S POETRY

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„Durch sein Gedicht stiftet der Dichter Gedächtnis."  
(Hans-Georg Gadamer)

In a short article published in 1974 János Pilinszky, one of the most original Hungarian poets of the twentieth century, made the following claim:

"What I find unique in Radnóti's life can be expressed only with the help of the unfortunate expression 'situational congeniality.\* In his case talent - which is responsible only for a small part of the achievement of a so-called creative man - was supplemented by a tragic situation that was not foreseeable from the perspective of the beginning of the poet's career. His early verse contained some Surrealistic elements. The perfectly bucolic lyrics which followed were entirely unexpected. He seemed to be destined to compose idylls in a Latin tradition about a paradise lost and regained."<sup>1</sup>

There may be poetic exaggerations in this statement, but the problems raised by Pilinszky are by no means negligible. The questions as to how information about Radnóti's life may affect the reception of his works and how the avant-garde and Neoclassicism are related in his poetry are crucial for any historian of literature.

## 1. The impact of the poet's tragic fate on the perception of his works

Although no reader of Radnóti's verse can ignore the sad end of the poet's life, it is not the best idea to approach his works from the perspective of his death. While it is undeniable that in his posthumous volume the poems are arranged in chronological order and the date attached to each text has become a signature for the readers, as well as a metonymy of the speech situation and of some events in the life of its author, it is no less true that a biographical interpretation can hardly do justice to the specificity of the speech gesture represented by any individual poem, for it may conceal the fact that the lyric

self always belongs to a given text. In other words, it is no less dangerous to read Radnóti's poems as documents of the different stages in his life than to interpret the works of Petőfi in a similar way. In *Hesitant Ode* (composed on 26 May 1943) the speaker seems to warn the reader not to devote too much attention to the personal destiny of the poet, "for I'm worth no more than the value of the word / in my poem."<sup>2</sup> After Radnóti's achievement had become sanctioned as a monument of anti-fascist literature, scholars came to realize the drawbacks of such a canonization. As early as 1964 István Sőtér remarked in a lecture on Radnóti delivered in Paris that "not even the most moving tragedy can grant exceptional significance to a work,"<sup>3</sup> and some members of the next generation (Miklós Szabolcsi, G. Béla Németh, and others) made attempts at an immanent approach to the poems.

Those who ask how Radnóti's output is viewed in Hungary today may be confronted with several paradoxes. It is difficult not to see the discrepancy between works about Radnóti published in the West and in Hungary. On the one hand, during the last decades more translations of his verse and prose have been published than of works by any other Hungarian author;\* on the other, it would be almost impossible to name any middle-aged or younger scholar working in Hungary who could be called a specialist of his poetry. Since his name was hardly mentioned by the participants of the conference on Hungarian lyrics between the two wars held at Janus Pannonius University in 1991,<sup>5</sup> one may have the impression that Radnóti is not regarded by most scholars as one of those who revitalized Hungarian poetry in that period. In the last twenty years or so fewer and fewer undergraduates have chosen to write on his works at Eötvös University, and when I inquired at the other faculties of humanities, most of my colleagues spoke about a similar situation in Debrecen, Szeged, and Pécs. While in the 1950s Radnóti was one of the favourite authors of those who opposed the official literary canon, in the 1990s the young generation seems to have turned away from the works of the most significant Hungarian poet among the victims of the Holocaust. Neither the disciples of G. Béla Németh nor the youngest generation of critics have published any major essay on Radnóti. The interpretation of individual poems is lacking, the methods of structuralism or post-structuralism have not been applied to them, and no comprehensive appraisal of the historical position of Radnóti's verse has been made in the last decades.

It would not be a far-fetched conclusion to say that there is to date no adequate book on Radnóti. The latest and by far the most serious scholarly monograph was published in New York in 1986. The almost 800-page-long volume by Emery George<sup>6</sup> deserves the highest praise but mainly as a meticulous analysis of the foreign sources of Radnóti's poetry and only to a lesser extent as an interpretive and evaluative study of the original texts themselves.

It would be easy to continue the line of paradoxes. Most readers agree that Radnóti's best poems were written at the very end of his life, during the months spent in a forced labour camp, when he had no hope that the lines he jotted down would be read by anyone. Contrary to the expectations one might have, the tone of several late poems is idyllic rather than tragic. Because of this, it cannot be taken for granted that Radnóti's posthumous collection can be read as the voice of a collective fate. It is even more problematic to argue that the foreshadowing of the Holocaust can be glimpsed in his earlier volumes. While a canon of Holocaust literature has emerged as a result of several studies of the works treating the persecution of Jews during World War II, any attempt to interpret Radnóti's achievement as belonging to such an international canon might run the risk of excluding the majority of his poems.

To be sure, some of the usual objections raised against the concept of Holocaust literature are irrelevant for readers of the Hungarian author. "There is no such thing as a literature of the Holocaust, nor can there be. The very expression is a contradiction in terms. (...) A novel about Auschwitz is not a novel, or else is not about Auschwitz."<sup>7</sup> This statement made by Elie Wiesel or the even more familiar remark that "nach Auschwitz (...) unmöglich ward, (...) Gedichte zu schreiben,"<sup>8</sup> can apply only to post-Holocaust works which cannot claim the kind of authenticity of texts written by victims during the persecution. The diaries kept by those who suffered have a documentary value that is absent from the memoirs called eyewitness, or survivor accounts. Post-Holocaust literature may have a degree of illegitimacy, since there is a danger of pretense in the exploitation of others' pain. Only those texts of unquestionably high aesthetic quality may be exceptions representing a departure from the traditions of imitation or *Erlebnis* by creating a poetics of remembrance. In such cases it would be misleading to speak of an imaginative misappropriation of atrocity. The works of Celan or Pilinszky are obvious examples.

The poems composed by Radnóti in the forced labour camp are less rich in connotations than Celan's *Engführung* or Pilinszky's *Apocrypha*, highly cryptic texts in which ambiguities, sudden shifts, enigmatic discontinuities, and the polyvalence of words create difficulties for the interpreter, but they have an additional documentary value by representing an unexpected legacy to us from the dead. This aspect of Radnóti's late works gives them a significance supplementing and possibly even surpassing their contribution to Hungarian literature.

Before placing these poems in the larger context of Holocaust literature, several distinctions can be made. First of all, some texts were written in Hebrew or Yiddish, others in some languages used by assimilated Jews. A third

type is represented by Celan. In the majority of his works he used the language of Hölderlin, Nietzsche, and Heidegger - whose works had made a decisive impact on his idiom -, thus proving that the German language was not irreparably polluted under Hitler,<sup>9</sup> but occasionally he mingled German with Hebrew and/or Yiddish, as in such pieces published in the volume *Die Niemandrose* (1963) as *Die Schleuse* or *Benedicta*.

Radnóti did not possess a poetic idiom comparable in strength to Celan's. Although it is undeniable that their works belonged to different paradigms - the Hungarian author worked in a historical context characterized by the conflict between avant-garde experimentation and Neoclassicism, whereas the younger poet lived in an age dominated by Neo-avant-garde and Postmodernism -, this cannot explain the discrepancy between the output of a good minor poet with a handful of fine texts and the works of a major artist whose stylistic originality represents a landmark in twentieth-century poetry. Another difference between their works is that while Radnóti put a heavy emphasis on Classical prosody, Celan relied on the long tradition of Jewish lamentation. The artistic goals and the conceptions of language of the two poets were poles apart. While Radnóti set himself the task of glorifying language by reworking traditional forms, particularly such genres as eclogue, verse epistle, or hymn, Celan's ambition was to deconstruct and even eliminate language and conventional forms of structural organization. The Hungarian poet's desire was to purify the diction that had been violated by some of his predecessors; his German-language colleague viewed accepted usage as a veil that had to be torn apart in order to get at things (or Nothingness) behind it. For the former expression meant the recreation of the past, for the latter the undermining of rhetoric. These two possibilities also preoccupied other writers and were defined by Samuel Beckett in a letter written in 1937. The first he called "eine Apotheose des Wortes"; the second he characterized in the following way: "Grammatik und Stil. Mir scheinen sie ebenso hilflos geworden zu sein wie ein Biedermeier Badeanzug oder die Unerschütterlichkeit eines Gentleman. Eine Larve. Hoffentlich kommt die Zeit, sie ist ja Gott sei Dank in gewissen Kreisen schon da, wo die Sprache da am besten gebraucht wird, wo sie am tüchtigsten missbraucht wird. Da wir sie so mit einem Male nicht ausschalten können, wollen wir wenigstens nicht versäumen, was zu ihrem Verruf beitragen mag. Ein Loch nach dem andern in ihr zu bohren, bis das Dahinterkauernde, sei etwas oder nichts, durchzusickern anfängt - ich kann mir für den heutigen Schriftsteller kein höheres Ziel vorstellen."<sup>10</sup>

This description anticipated a later paradigm in the history of poetic diction than the one Radnóti represented. Post-Holocaust literature at its best is related to a poetics of silence. The following untitled piece from *Atemwende*

(1967) clearly shows how an allusive treatment of the Holocaust may go together with a cult of the unspoken:

STEHEN, im Schatten  
des Wundenmals in der Lull.

Für-niemand-und-nichts-Stehn.  
Unerkannt,  
für dich  
allein.

Mit allem, was darin Raum hat,  
auch ohne  
Sprache.

Radnóti seems to have been the only important poet of the Holocaust to distance himself from the traditions of Jewish culture. Yitzak Katznelson used hexameters in his *Song of the Slaughtered Jewish People*, but his long poem was composed in Yiddish. While in most Post-Holocaust works there is a profound dissatisfaction with non-Jewish culture, no such alienation or devaluation can be felt in the works of Radnóti. He never cut himself off from the Latin authors he studied at school, but relied upon them even after his tragedy had liberated him from the modish eclecticism to which several members of his generation were attracted.

The growing awareness of the threatening impact of the Third Reich made its influence felt in at least two ways on Hungarian culture. Writers and artists looked for accepted forms of expression with the aim of trying to reach a wide audience. At the same time, they wanted to rely on well-established traditions, which individuals could find helpful in their defense of the human personality. Both tendencies contributed to the rise of Neoclassicism. Besides Radnóti, Zoltán Nadányi, Jenő Dsida, Sándor Weöres, and Zoltán Jékely are generally regarded as the main representatives of this trend in the 1930s.<sup>11</sup> The Populists also turned to the past, but they drew inspiration mainly from the songlike short lyrics and *Lebensbilder* of Petőfi, in contrast to Radnóti, who studies the Romantic recreation of Latin idylls and found a justification for his eclectic approach to culture in Biedermeier art, the topic of several books published by Béla Zolnai, one of the professors whose lectures the poet attended at Szeged's Ferenc József University in the early 1930s.

The poetry of Radnóty's formative years is usually considered to be mediocre. One perceptive critic of the older generation described his first response to it in the following terms: "What I saw in it was studied unease, (...) a mannered approach. I was made nervous by (...) the constant idyllic

pose, the loud smacking kisses and even more so the acting (...). Who could have imagined that it was possible to arrive from this stage at greatness in poetry?"<sup>12</sup> Radnóti himself was aware of his limitations. As late as 1939 he made his fictitious *Doppelgänger* Jean Citadin emphasize the gap between his ideals and practice: "No, I am not a poet yet (...). I am still very much preoccupied with language; it rolls obstacles in my way; it is ill-disposed and stubborn. You can still feel that the poem was written by someone. It is still too much of a performance by a conjurer. I do not like shows. A poem is supposed to express feelings like whistle or cry, or a hiccup after drinking wine. You should not be made aware that it is constructed of some material. Are you aware of stone in Strassbourg cathedral?"<sup>13</sup>

## 2. From eclecticism to maturity

No matter whether one's focus is on the Surrealistic images, the references to Biblical prophecy, or the collective voice, *Pagan Salute* (1930), despite the qualifications made by some critics, is not an insignificant collection. Sometimes the pastoral mood, combined with a neoprimitivism somewhat reminiscent of Francis Jammes, whose verse Radnóti translated, is in conflict with the interpretation of the story of Cain, full of autobiographical implications, but the overall impression is one of variety. Contrary to a widespread opinion, the weaknesses of the young poet's eclecticism were less apparent in his first volume than in its immediate successors. Both the tone of pastoral elegy and the Biblical allusions were continued without much improvement in *Song of Modern Shepherds* (1931). Occasionally social criticism made itself felt, thus anticipating the dominance of working-class ideology over poetry, which became so conspicuous in *Convalescent Wind* (1933), published by the Szeged Youth Arts College. As for the political verse not included in this collection, George Gömöri has called it "embarrassingly poor."<sup>14</sup> Whatever the intrinsic value of Brechts's ballads or chronicles, their influence on Radnóti's verse proved to be detrimental. Both the sequence *Male Diary* (between 19 April 1931 and 6 October 1932), incorporating newsclippings, and the *Song of the Black Man Who Went to Town* (20 March - 3 April 1932) are mediocre. It is quite understandable that Babits used *Convalescent Wind* as an example in his attack on the revival of populism.<sup>15</sup>

Radnóti's interest in oral literature was due to his close friend Gyula Ortutay, a folklorist who was a member of the illegal Communist Party. Left-wing political views went together with a cult of non-European culture. The poet had no first-hand knowledge of the folklore of black Africa; his

reading of anthologies by Blaise Cendrars and Yvan Goll was undoubtedly related to the avant-garde cult of "primitive" art. In fact it was the leader of the Hungarian avant-garde movement, Lajos Kassák, who drew Radnóti's attention to the activity of the two poets. The French translations of African songs were reshaped by the Hungarian poet; they were subjected to yet another stage of textual processing. Some of these adaptations were included in *New Moon* (1935), but their significance was historical rather than aesthetic. In any case, it would be difficult to find any major poem in Radnóti's fourth collection of verse.

In view of the ideologically conservative patriotism of his late poetry, it is safe to assume that after a brief association with Communists his main goal became to be fully assimilated to non-Jewish Hungarians. As is well-known, in 1934 he applied for a legal change of name from Glatter to Radnóti, and in 1943 he and his wife were baptized in the Roman Catholic faith by Sándor Sík, one of his former professors, a Roman Catholic priest and poet of Jewish origin. These were symbolic gestures. Except for *Marginal Note to the Prophet Habakkuk*, composed in 1937, and a few other poems, the impact of the Jewish visionary tradition was marginal on his work; that may have been the reason why not a single example of his work was included in what is probably one of the most comprehensive collections of Jewish poetry edited by Jerome Rothenberg, a vast anthology including texts by such avant-garde authors as Gertrude Stein, Max Jacob, Yvan Goll, Tristan Tzara, and Edmond Jabès.<sup>16</sup>

Having renounced Judaism, Radnóti turned to the cultural legacy of his country, Classical antiquity, and Christianity. His growing attachment to the Hungarian past can be seen in *While Writing* (17 March 1937), a poetic "hommage à Kazinczy," the organizer of Hungarian literary life and language reform in the early 19th century; in the essays; in the great joy he felt when Northern Transylvania was returned to Hungary;<sup>17</sup> and even in his dismissal of the readaptation of a nineteenth-century novel by Zsigmond Móricz. Traditions have to be preserved, and the most severe criticism is justifiable if someone tries to violate the past by reinterpreting it from the perspective of the present. "He should be punished, his work has to be confiscated and banned," Radnóti wrote about Móricz in his diary on 4 January 1941.<sup>18</sup> In sharp contrast to the Expressionist Gottfried Benn, who drew a clear-cut distinction between culture and art, Radnóti viewed the former as an indispensable precondition of the latter. The late poem *Root* (8 August 1944) suggests that the creative process is incompatible with being uprooted. The speaker is an artist who is indifferent to the outside world. For him culture is comparable to the root nourishing a plant from below; "there, I am building the poem," he says.

"Wozu Dichter in dürftiger Zeit?" The question asked in the seventh stanza of *Brot und Wein* made both Radnóti and Celan reassess the function of poetry. The Hungarian poet translated and his German colleague often cited Hölderlin. While the author of *Wie wenn am Feiertage...* seemed to suggest a critique of the highest traditional values of Western culture by emphasizing the ambivalence in the relationship between the Classical and Christian worlds, Celan reached a more radical conclusion. *Zürich, zum Storchen*, an imaginary dialogue with Nelly Sachs, is a harsh attack on God:

Vom Zuviel war die Rede, vom  
Zuwenig. Von Du  
und Aber-Du, von  
der Trübung durch Helles, von  
Jüdischem, von  
deinem Gott.

The rage against the Creator is replaced by the interpretation of God as unnamable and unidentifiable in *Psalm*:

Niemand knetet uns wieder aus Erde und Lehm,  
niemand bespricht unsern Staub.  
Niemand.

Gelobt seist du, Niemand.

This is a far cry from Radnóti's growing fascination with a Christian God. The Hungarian poet found relief in the New Testament, having reached the conclusion that what seemed absurd from a human perspective had a deeper meaning for God. This paradox is the key to the understanding both of the peculiar place of Radnóti's verse in the canon of Holocaust literature and of his later influence on Pilinszky, the leading Catholic poet of the subsequent generation in Hungary.

The realization that for a Christian there is nothing surprising in the Sermon on the Mount appeared in Radnóti's work at precisely the time when his language became less turgid. The first signs of a stylistic development can be seen in *Keep Walking, Condemned to Death* (1936). It is perfectly understandable that for his fifth volume Radnóti was awarded the Baumgarten prize by Babits, who was the most severe critic of his earlier work. This collection is marked by images of winter and death, as well as by an interesting discrepancy. While there is a growing emphasis on the preservation of poetic conventions, some of the imagery is highly innovative. The short lyric *Praise* (27 January 1936), consisting of two four-line stanzas, can be taken as a



characteristic example of this ambiguity. The title refers to the pieces of the section supplementing the psalms in the official song-books of the Hungarian Reformed Church, but the closure is in conflict with the archaic style characteristic of Protestant songs:

Ha meghalsz, meghalok; porainkból  
egyszerre sodor majd forgó tornyot a szél.

The verbal economy is new in Radnóti's verse and dependent upon the grammar of a non-Indoeuropean language. Accordingly, the degree of translatability is rather low. The first three words make two ways of reading possible: "If you die, I shall also die" and "If you and I perish." No less compressed is the meaning of the next sentence: "our ashes are suddenly, simultaneously and violently transformed - literally 'twisted' - into a tower or spire that is turned around by the wind." The emphasis is on an adverb suggesting temporality and modality ("egyszerre") that is lost in the English translation:

When you die, I'll die; out of our dust the wind  
will twirl a single spinning tower.

Experimentation with imagery and intertextuality was continued in *Steep Road* (1938). Once again, if the original poems are read side by side with the English versions, it is difficult not to observe that not all of the complexity is preserved in translation. Here is the crucial passage of the *First Eclogue* (1938) as rendered by Emery George:

Still, I write, and I live in the midst of this mad-dog world, as  
lives that oak: it knows they'll be cutting it down; that white cross  
on it signals: tomorrow the tree men will buzz-saw the region;  
calmly it waits for that fate, yet it sprouts new leaves in the meantime.

In a few cases the English text is somewhat mannered: for the adjective "kerge" - usually associated with "sheep" - the compound "mad-dog" is substituted. In the version by Emery George the original understatement is replaced by an exaggeration; in the other translations the solution is even less satisfactory, because the allusion to the world of animals is missing from such words as "insanity," "frenzied," or "crazy." On other occasions the grammatical value of the English word is too weak: the rhetorical strength of the verb "fehérlik" is absent not only from the simple adjective "white" used by George

and Wilmer-Gömöri, but also from the genitive "of white" in the version by Ozsváth-Turner or the paraphrase "that cross blazed to its trunk bleaches" substituted by McRobbie and Kessler.

However impressive Radnóti's last volume, in which the language of the seeker of home is afforded a deeper significance, the continuity of his style is more than apparent. Metonymy and simile are still frequently used. In *New Moon* the first poem starts, the second ends with a comparison, and *Foaming Sky* has a piece entitled *Similes* (16 November 1941). Between 1933 and 1941 the poet relied systematically upon explicit metaphors. Gottfried Benn insisted that the use of the word "as" (or "like") was incompatible with modern poetry, for it was "immer ein Einbruch des Erzählerischen, Feuilletonischen (...), ein Nachlassen der sprachlichen Spannung, eine Schwäche der schöpferischen Transformation."<sup>19</sup> It is conceivable to relate this stylistic ideal to a paradigm shift in the interpretation of the world: such explicit metaphors as simile and apposition may be regarded as elements in a system of poetic conventions closely tied to religious language. If it is legitimate to see a connection between the two spheres, it is possible to argue that only godless poetry could be called modern: "Il est aisé d'être poète parmi les dieux. Mais nous autres venons après les dieux. Nous n'avons plus le recours d'un ciel pour garantir la transformation poétique, et il faut bien que nous demandions quel en est le sérieux de celle-ci."<sup>20</sup>

If one chooses to adopt such influential views, Radnóti cannot be called a modern poet in the historical sense of the word. It is more proper to read him as one of the representatives of the Neoclassicism predominant in the interwar period. His systematic reliance on intertextuality can only confirm this judgement.

In his voluminous monograph Emery George maintained that Radnóti's work as translator was so closely related to his own verse writing that in some cases the distinction became blurred. This was a logical consequence of the poet's firm belief that the writing of poetry was an intertextual and perhaps even interlingual activity. Accordingly, some of his best work can be seen in his *Nachdichtungen*. This is by no means exceptional in twentieth-century poetry, as the examples of Ezra Pound, Yves Bonnefoy, or Sándor Weöres may testify. Miklós Szabolcsi has discovered allusions to poems by Petőfi, Verhaeren, Ady, Kosztolányi, and Attila József in *Restless Turning of Fall* (10 October 1941), and traces of Tibullus, Virgil, Hölderlin, Babits, and Kosztolányi in *End-October Hexameters* (between 28 September and 14 November 1942).<sup>21</sup> *Only Skin and Bones and Pain* (August-September 1941), the poem on the death of Babits, starts with the first word of the *Funeral Oration*, an early

Hungarian text composed around 1200, and continues with an explicit reference to *Supplication to Saint Blaise*, a poem on death by Babits himself. In *A la recherche...* (17 August 1944) the Proustian title is coupled with an *Auftakt* reminding the reader of *Zalán's Rout*, the long epic poem by Mihály Vörösmarty. The first stanza continues to imitate the Romantic work, so that the nineteenth-century text seems to be hidden behind Radnoti's poem of remembrance. The similarity of the metre creates the impression of a palimpsest, and the speaker is making a point of recalling the epic about the Hungarians' ninth-century conquest of the Carpathian basin in a forced labour camp in Serbia. The discrepancy between the two situations underlines the speaker's attachment to his homeland. Indirect generic or prosodie forms of intertextuality are no less obvious in other poems: *In a Restless Hour* (1939) is an Alcaic ode, and the versification of *Forced March* (15 September 1944), one of the poet's last and finest lyrics, is heavily indebted to the form of Walter von der Vogelweide's elegy *Oweh, war sint verschwunden*.

The original meaning of the generic term eclogue has a deeper significance in this context; it is related to Radnoti's idea that poetry is "selection" from earlier texts rather than the creation of something strikingly new and original. This conviction is in harmony with the poetics of Neoclassicism represented by the later Babits, author of *The Book of Jonah*, who viewed poetry as recreation. It is an open question whether the eclogues, these utterances of self-encounter and self-reflexivity, represent Radnoti's finest achievement. Some readers may prefer the more innovative short lyrics in which the tradition of German Romanticism and Expressionism is continued. *The Ragged Robin Opens* (26 August 1943), *Dream Landscape* (between 27 October 1943 and 16 May 1944), *May Picnic* (10 May 1944), and *Root* (9 August 1944) are characteristic examples of this generic type, evincing Radnoti's gift of pure line and tone. The antecedents of these poems can be found in some late poems of Dezső Kosztolányi and Attila József, written in the 1930s. Together with these they were to make a major impact on Pilinszky, who drew inspiration from them in his effort to hide conceptual meaning behind the description of natural phenomena.

### 3. The translatability of Radnoti's poetry

"Is it possible to translate Radnoti's poetry? In my view Sylvia Plath could have been fit for the task."<sup>22</sup> Why did Pilinszky believe that the author of *Ariel* could have been an ideal interpreter of *Foaming Sky*? One possible answer to this question is that, except for Pilinszky, the American woman poet may have

been the most imaginative non-Jewish artist to identify herself with the victims of the Holocaust. At least two pieces from her posthumous collection could be mentioned in this context. The following lines are from *Lady Lazarus*, a poem about suicide:

A sort of walking miracle, my skin  
Bright as a Nazi lampshade,  
My right foot

A paperweight,  
My face a featureless, fine  
Jew linen.

The other poem entitled *Daddy* is addressed to a dead father who was German. The awareness of this ethnic origin gives a special emphasis to the speaker's assumed identity:

An engine, an engine  
Chuffing me off like a Jew.  
A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen.  
I began to talk like a Jew.  
I think I may well be a Jew.

How far have the translators succeeded in rendering what Pilinszky thought only Sylvia Plath could have recreated in the true sense? Understandably, Emery George, who has translated and analysed all the texts by Radnóti, paid special attention to the intertextual aspects of the Hungarian poet's output. On many occasions he even did justice to the visionary and grotesque imagery of the late pieces, as in the following two lines of *Columbus* (1 June 1943):

Wind turns the pages. He leaves it, has other thoughts,  
above him there purrs a wild, taut sky with giant claws.

The same translator emphasized the limitations of his work; for example he admitted that "in 'A la recherche...' the polysyllabic internal rhymes are all but untranslatable."<sup>23</sup> In fact much of what is remarkable in the late verse may be lost in translation. The very titles of the posthumous volume seems to have been mistranslated by some. "Clouded Sky" and "Sky with Clouds" are literal, whereas the Hungarian phrase "Tajtékos ég" is metaphorical. The adjective derives from the noun "tajték" meaning "foam" or "froth." "Foaming Sky" seems the best solution. The verb "tajtékszik" stands for the state of mind of someone who is very angry. Thus, the secondary meanings of the original title

are lost in the translations by Emery George and Stephen Polgár. The menacing connotations are quite obvious if one remembers the last stanza of the title poem, composed on 8 June 1940:

A holdra tajték zúdul, az égen  
sötétzöld sávot von a mérég.

These two lines are rendered by the two translators as follows:

Clouds slide down on the moon; on the sky  
poison draws a dark green shape.

Clouds pour across the moon. Anger  
leaves a poisonous dark-green bruise on the sky.

Clouds are not even mentioned in the original, and the English verbs are much weaker than their Hungarian equivalent, which is suggestive of violence.

Emery George did his best to find the equivalents of Radnoti's verse forms. In some cases, however, a few stylistic devices may have escaped him. He argued that in his translation of / *cannot know...* (17 January 1944) he succeeded in rendering the phonic correspondences of "ők felelnek (...) éji felleg" in English by way of sound repetition.<sup>24</sup> In fact not two but four words are linked together by alliteration:

s fojtott szavunkra majdan friss szóval ők felelnek.  
Nagy szárnyadat borítsd ránk virrasztó éji felleg.

Not only the four alliterations but also the archaic connotations of "felleg" are lost in the English version, and the contrast between the two adjectives is weakened. All in all, the formal closure is hardly perceptible in the translation:

and they will answer our checked words in phrasing clear and loud.  
Spread over us your great wing, vigil nocturnal cloud.

Needless to say, it is easy for a native speaker of Hungarian to miss stylistic components in the English version of any piece of his own national literature. My last example is to show how translation may open a gap between the interpretations of the two texts. A highly original structure of an inner debate makes *Forced March* one of Radnoti's most remarkable poems. The opening of the poem is a fragmented sentence:

Bolond, ki földre rogyván      fölkel és újra lépked

In the complete English edition this first line reads as follows:

The man who, having collapsed,      rises, takes steps, is insane;

This is less close to the Hungarian than Markus Bieler's German version:

Narr, der, zu Boden sinkend,      aufsteht sich neu entlangbringt,

The key word is "insane." In Hungarian it is possible to have an adjectival predicate without using the copula, whereas in English no such omission is acceptable. As a result, there is no way of making the violent contrast between the fragmented syntax of the first and the elaborate sentence structure of the second ten lines, so the reader of the English text cannot be made aware of the structural originality that gives an extra dimension to the antithesis between the Surrealistic vision of a tragic form of existence in which death can be the only form of liberation and the deliberately artificial evocation of an idyllic return to man's archetypal unity with nature.

The first and last words are highly emphatic: "bolond" (crazy) is opposed to "fölkelek" (I will rise). This fundamental structural principle is respected by the German interpreter, who starts with "Narr" and ends with "ich stehe auf!" The fact that all the English translators had to sacrifice this important correspondence makes one wonder whether it might be easier to translate Radnóti's verse into German than into English. The Classical metre is preserved by several translators, but the archaic verbal and adjectival forms in the opening and closing lines of the first part ("fölkel" and "honni") are absent from all the English versions. In the original these elements represent a stylistic domain which is in striking contradiction with the following images:

(...) ott az otthonok  
 fölött régóta már csak      a perzselt szél forog,  
 hanyattfeküdt a házfal,      eltört a szilvafa,  
 és félelemtől bolyhos      a honni éjszaka.

(...) over the homes, that world,  
 long since nothing but singed      winds have been known to whirl;  
 his housewall lies supine;      your plum tree, broken clear,  
 and all the nights back home      horripilate with fear.

The question is not how far the highly visual imagery is preserved in the translation. What is lacking is the stylistic tension between archaism and innovation. Since this tension may be the distinguishing feature of Radnoti's style, the loss cannot be called negligible.

In view of the fact that Radnoti's works have a relevance beyond the boundaries of Hungarian literature, it is quite understandable that they have been widely translated. The studies of his poetry written and published in the West are remarkable and should inspire Hungarian literary historians to reassess his achievement. Still, the interpretation of his verse depends largely on how his poetry has been received by Hungarian readers. Paradoxical as it may be, his artistic development was closely tied to his growing attachment to the culture of his country. The poems of *Foaming Sky* are strongly intertextual, and a whole body of Hungarian literature underlies their poetic diction. The ultimate test of the understanding of these lyrics is the reader's ability to identify himself with a lyric self who has a large body of texts in his ear. No translation can do justice to the wide range of intertextuality, since most of the earlier poems used for the purposes of direct or indirect quotation belong to the collective memory of a Hungarian-speaking community. As one of the more recent interpreters of Radnoti's work observed: "During his life he found himself in conflict with his ethnic origin, his education, and several social forces including the working class. What he never found problematic was his sense of being Hungarian."<sup>25</sup>

### Notes

1. János Pilinszky, "Radnóti Miklós," in *Tanulmányok, esszék, cikkek* (Budapest: Századvég, 1993), II, 265-266.
2. All translations are by Emery George unless otherwise specified.
3. István Sőtér, "Külföldieknek - Radnóti Miklósról", in *Gyűrűk* (Budapest: Szépirodalmi, 1980), 333.
4. The English translations mentioned later in the essay are as follows: *Clouded Sky*, trans. Stephen Polgár, Stephen Berg, and S. J. Marks (New York: Harper and Row, 1972); *The Witness: Selected Poems by Miklós Radnóti*, trans. Thomas Ország-Land (Tern Press, 1977); *Forced March: Selected Poems*, trans. Clive Wilmer and George Gömöri (Manchester: Carcanet, 1979); *The Complete Poetry*, ed. and trans. Emery George (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Ardis, 1980); *Under Gemini: A Prose Memoir and Selected Poetry*, trans. Kenneth and Rita McRobbie and Jascha Kessler, with an introduction by Marianna D. Birnbaum (Budapest: Corvina, 1985); *Foamy Sky: The Major Poems of Miklós Radnóti*, sel. and trans. by Zsuzsanna Ozsváth and Frederick Turner (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992).
5. Lóránt Kabdebó and Ernő Kulcsár Szabó, eds, "*de nem felelnek, úgy felelnek*": *A magyar líra a húszas-harmincas évek fordulóján* (Pécs: Janus Pannonius Egyetem Kiadó, 1992).

6. Emery George, *The Poetry of Miklós Radnóti: A Comparative Study* (New York: Karz-Cohl, 1986).
7. Elie Wiesel, "For Some Measure of Humility," *Sh'ma 5/100* (October 31, 1975): 314. Quoted in Alvin H. Rosenfeld, *A Double Dying: Reflections on Holocaust Literature* (Bloomington-Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988), 14.
8. Wiesel's argument is only one of the many observations that seem to echo Adorno's *Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft* first published in 1949. The penultimate sentence of this essay reads as follows: "Kulturkritik findet sich der letzten Stufe der Dialektik von Kultur und Barbarei gegenüber: nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben, ist barbarisch, und das frißt auch die Erkenntnis an, die ausspricht, warum es unmöglich ward, heute Gedichte zu schreiben." Theodor W. Adorno, *Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft, I. Prismen - Ohne Leitbild* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977), 30.
9. "Celan war offenbar an die deutsche Sprachheimat, die ihm keine Heimat bot, tiefer gebunden, als jene anderen Dichter waren, die sich gelegentlich auch in einer anderen Sprache noch versucht haben." Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Gedicht und Gespräch: Essays* (Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1990), 97.
10. Samuel Beckett, *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment* (New York: Grove, 1984), 52.
11. G. Béla Németh, "A halálhívás és az életremény vitája," in *Századelőről - századutóról: irodalom- és művelődéstörténeti tanulmányok* (Budapest: Magvető, 1985), 383.
12. Aladár Komlós, "Radnóti olvasása közben," in *Kritikus számadás* (Budapest: Szépirodalmi, 1977), 161.
13. Miklós Radnóti, "Ikrek hava," in *Radnóti Miklós művei* (Budapest: Szépirodalmi, 1982), 520.
14. George Gömöri, "Miklós Radnóti: The Complete Poetry," *World Literature Today*, 55, no. 4 (Autumn 1981), 706.
15. Mihály Babits, "Népiesség," in *Esszék, tanulmányok* (Budapest: Szépirodalmi, 1978), II, 382-384.
16. Jerome Rotherberg, ed., *A Big Jewish Book: Poems and Other Visions of the Jews from Tribal Times to Present* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1978).
17. Miklós Radnóti, *Napló* (Budapest: Magvető, 1989), 95.
18. *Ibid.*, 129.
19. Gottfried Benn, "Probleme der Lyrik," in *Gesammelte Werke* (München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1975), 1068.
20. Yves Bonnefoy, "L'acte et le lieu de la poésie" (1959), in *L'improbable suivi de Un rêve fait à Mantoue* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1980), 107.
21. Miklós Szabolcsi, "Radnóti Miklós halálós tájai," in *Radnóti tanulmányok*, ed. Edit B. Csáky, (Budapest: Magyar Irodalomtörténeti Társaság, 1985), 105-107.
22. János Pilinszky, "Radnóti Miklós," in *Tanulmányok, esszék, cikkek*, II, 266.
23. Emery George, *The Poetry of Miklós Radnóti*, 487.
24. *Ibid.*, 426.
25. Tibor Melczer, "Radnóti Miklós nemzeti klasszicizmusa," in *Radnóti tanulmányok*, ed. Edit B. Csáky, 78.