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Tibor Déry by Béla Pomogáts

Review by: Mihály Szegedy-Maszák

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torians, linguists and theologians as well as for ethnologists. Their language has maintained an archaic purity by being closeted away from contacts with language reform and changes of fashion. Their astonishing mixture of elements—Christian and pagan, lyric and dramatic, medieval and baroque, Western and Byzantine, canonical and apocryphal—should reveal some of the dynamics of the slow transformations of a traditional society.

But most of all, the prayers are magnificent poems. Unlike the more familiar forms of oral poetry such as epic, ballad and folksong, the archaic apocryphal folk prayers abound with techniques we have grown to associate with contemporary poetry. Visionary symbolism, almost surrealist metaphors and associations, free declamatory construction and anachronistic dramatic twists in the archetypal story of Christ's Passion join a centuries-old folk tradition to our own modern literary tradition. It is difficult not to feel in these lyrics of great fear and great faith our own poetic concerns, composed of the alluvium of centuries and cultures, fascinated by the unfamiliar.

In *Hegyet hágék, lőtöt lépék*, with her extensive notes and scholarly introduction to her 137 selections, Erdélyi offers us a book equally valuable to the specialist and the lover of poetry.

István Csicsery-Rónay, Jr.
Princeton University

Győző Határ. *Az őrző könyve*. Munich. Aurora. 1974. 349 pages.

Győző Határ's latest published work, a strange and difficult anti-utopian novel, was written almost thirty years ago. Yet the author concerns himself in it with such currently fashionable issues as ecological suicide, the evils of a quantitative notion of progress and the ultimate vacuity of all ideologies. What is more, the novel contains stunningly accurate predictions about the state of war and peace in a post-modern world.

But acts of prophecy do not necessarily make for good literature. Neither does the claim that novels of ideas, of which this is supposed to be a contemporary example, are exceedingly rare in Hungary. Not even the observation that Határ's work is close in spirit to Orwell's *1984* seems that impressive. It is true enough that Határ, like Orwell, is interested in the savage consequences of political amorality;

but again we must be cautious, for an affinity with a well-known work is in itself no guarantee of success. What may have made *Az őrző könyve* sensational reading at one time—its devastating topical satire—has turned out to be its most evanescent virtue. One must be an expert on postwar Hungarian politics, as well as a specialist in a discipline labeled "Határology" by one critic, to be able to grasp some of the novel's more arcane allusions.

Az őrző könyve is a series of nightmarish visions and meditations about some future world where war has become a permanent reality. There are two giant groupings in this world: The Republic of United Empires (sometimes called The Empire of United Republics) and a pacifist army that "butchers for peace" (cf. the Party slogans in *1984*: "War is Peace," "Freedom is Slavery," et cetera). People don't exist as individuals any more; they join giant hordes to avoid being branded "tagless" loners. The anti-militarist "butchers for peace" are of course just as ruthless as their enemy and resort to the same tactics, which range from crude indoctrination to "refined" cannibalism.

Határ's book is not science fiction in the conventional sense; there is no coherent narrative, only disjointed episodes—Dantesque scenes of degradation and suffering, dramatized reflections on the debasement of culture and the usual Határian survey of unfamiliar linguistic terrain. But because the total work is less than the sum of its parts, these episodes are ultimately nothing more than trivial (and tiresome) diversions.

Complex literary works usually have different levels of meaning, some of them more accessible than others. *Az őrző könyve*, however, is unrelievedly dense, and its astonishing verbal riches often further obfuscate rather than illuminate its many obscurities.

Ivan Sanders
Suffolk County Community College

Béla Pomogáts. *Tibor Déry*. Budapest. Akadémiai Kiadó. 1974.

The long career of Tibor Déry can be of great importance for anybody interested in twentieth-century society and culture. Born in 1894, he came from a rich bourgeois family. In 1919 he joined the Communist Party. After the fall of the Hungarian Soviet Republic, he had to live abroad, where he became attached

to the avant-garde movement. His works written in this period have been underrated until recently. Pomogáts is far more perceptive in this respect: he points out that Déry's dadaist plays foreshadow the grotesque interpretation of human existence formulated in his late novel "Mr. A.G. in X."

Before Déry all Hungarian novelists drew their characters from the landed gentry and the peasantry, for the simple reason that until the end of the nineteenth century the bourgeois class had been relatively small in number in Hungary and progressive-minded high-brows of noble origin served as political and cultural leaders. Besides, both the bourgeoisie and the working class were of foreign origin. Thus, when in 1933 Déry began to compose a long novel called *A befejezetlen mondat* (The Unfinished Sentence) about the Hungarian bourgeois and working classes, he broke away from the tradition of the Hungarian novel. Pomogáts is absolutely right when he observes that with this work Déry meant to go beyond the avant-garde, aiming at a combination of documentary character and post-realistic style.

Somewhat less convincing is the critic's assumption that this combination is an unqualified success. We find the result a little more uneven: sometimes the naturalistic conception of plot is at variance with the highly metaphoric style; occasionally the metaphors tend to be ornaments without much organic connection with the outer or inner events related. The critic himself admits that the work consists of a series of short stories which do not quite form an integrated whole. The conclusion seems inescapable that Déry broke fresh ground in the field of subject matter, but the esthetic appeal of the novel is probably not of the same intensity as its documentary significance.

While writing "The Unfinished Sentence," Déry had not the slightest hope of its publication, and it did not come out until 1947. After 1945 he began to meet with general appreciation. Most of the plays written with propagandistic purpose in the later 1940s are rejected by the critic as badly written. Pomogáts puts special emphasis on the fact that they follow the decidedly bourgeois tradition of the well-made play. Déry's idyllic short stories get no better appreciation either. After these shorter pieces Déry started to compose another long novel about the social changes in Hungary from the early 30s to 1948. Because of unjust ideological attacks upon the work, the author published only two volumes, and so the

planned tetralogy "The Answer" was left unfinished. Pomogáts proves to be a critic who does not overly simplify things when he sets out to analyze this fragmentary novel. On the one hand, he recognizes that in "The Answer" Déry moved away from the dogmatism of "The Unfinished Sentence" in making the relationship between social movement and personal aims more complex; on the other hand, he claims that the fates of the bourgeois and working-class characters are less interconnected than in the earlier novel.

Pomogáts gives a tenable characterization of Déry's third creative phase when he describes the writer's keen interest in the philosophy of history. Is history teleological? Can it realize liberty and order, the ideals of mankind? These questions are asked in "Mr. A.G. in X.," Déry's masterpiece and a book of international significance. The genre of this polemical, anti-utopian work written in prison and published in 1964 has been called parable, Menippean satire, anatomy, roman à clef and novel of ideas. Déry's book is different from most twentieth-century anti-utopias, for its target is not centralized planning and the enslavement of man by his own technology. In X, too, mechanical civilization has destroyed nature and made both people and their surroundings uniform, but Déry presents a much later phase in social regression, a period when industrial civilization has undermined itself.

The works following this novel treat similar themes. In the best of them, *A kiközösítő* (The Excommunicator; 1965), the relationship of idea to realization is examined through the fate of St. Ambrose of Milan, who, like Golding's Jocelyn (in *The Spire*; 1964), hates skepticism and pays attention only to future aims, while he disregards existing reality.

The critic's final conclusion is thoroughly convincing: Déry gives an elegiac interpretation of existence. He is troubled both by mechanical civilization which violates nature and by some uncontrollable defect inherent in human nature, but he does not accept tragedy as inevitable. "Why do I write?" Déry asks in his autobiography *Itélet nincs* (No Verdict; 1969; see *BA* 44:4, p. 163), and he gives the following answer: "If I only knew! Probably to ask questions which cannot be answered. A struggle for answers which we cannot give: that may be a definition of culture."

Thus, Déry's mind appears to be diversified rather than unified. Its brilliance is more in its critical, unprejudiced tolerance than in its imaginative, constructive character. This explains his oscillations of sympathy, his fluctuating

tuation. He looks at both sides of the same thing. In time his personality may prove to be even more significant than some of his works, for his moral honesty, his great sincerity, are exceptional. As Pomogáts writes: "His revolt often seemed to be spontaneous and anarchistic; in fact, it was necessitated by rational insight and moral conviction."

Mihály Szegedy-Maszák
Budapest

György Somlyó. *A mesék könyve*. Budapest. Szépirodalmi. 1974. 191 pages. 24 Ft.

"Alles ist ein Märchen," wrote Novalis.

Hungarian poet György Somlyó some years ago decided to illustrate, if not prove, the above contention by writing over a hundred poetic "tales"—some of them dubbed "anti-tales," presumably because they are texts without a proper narrative—out of which, after their publication in Hungary, several were selected and translated by the French poet Guillemic under the title *Contrefables*.

Somlyó has several books of poetry and essays to his credit, and technically "The Book of Tales" is certainly highly accomplished—the problem lies elsewhere. While the majority of Somlyó's texts are informed by cleverness, resourcefulness and good taste, his verse lacks the power to take us either by force or surprise. He fails to impress with the cohesiveness of his language; indeed, he believes in a "paneclectic" approach to poetry, and in certain texts romantic clichés coexist with scientific formulas or mathematical equations. The effect is predictably mixed. Somlyó "feeds" much heterogenous information into his poetry, but this stratagem does not always enhance the modernity of his tone.

Reading some of the longer prose poems (e.g., "Tales about Paris"), it is difficult to suppress the feeling of *déjà vu*; in my opinion those "tales" work best where Somlyó imposes upon his material the discipline of a more traditional poetic form such as the sonnet, or where behind the poetic message the glow of genuine personal experience can be felt. Perhaps we are not far off the mark in thinking that Somlyó is more convincing as an erudite follower of the traditions of the kind of poetry represented by *Nyugat* than as a quasi-international poet trying to codify anew "the laws of the Universe."

George Gömöri
University of Cambridge

Latvian

Arturs Baumanis. *Grāfa kunga sūtis*. 3 parts. Ann Arbor, Mi. Ceļinieks. 1975. 263, 312, 230 pages.

———. *Saderinātie*. 2 parts. Ann Arbor, Mi. Ceļinieks. 1975. 317, 274 pages.

———. *Hernhūtieši*. 3 parts. Ann Arbor, Mi. Ceļinieks. 1973 (released 1975). 250, 283, 280 pages.

It is an understatement to describe as "monumental" this trilogy in eight parts, each of which can be considered—and is treated as—a novel in its own right. The sheer size of the production will astound even those who knew that Baumanis had been working on a "Herrnhut novel" for a long time and who have read published and unpublished excerpts. Except among these people, Baumanis was not even known as a creative writer; his previous output was restricted to a couple of monographs and essays on Latvian literature. Now, shortly after his seventieth birthday, comes the unveiling of a life's work that surpasses in quantity and quality some of the most important in Latvian prose. Instant collected works.

And yet the work tries to deny its own monumentality through deliberate understatement. It has no overall title. Baumanis himself talks only about his "Herrnhut series." Though the term "historical novel" is appropriate, this is not a novel of great events but of their faint reflection. The time described is 1730–31. The place is the Latvian part of the then new Russian province, Livonia. The Great Northern War that touched and shaped the country and its society is only a memory. Important political events are seen from the distance of the province and through the eyes of those who hardly have a voice in shaping them: the Latvian peasants who are at the nadir of their existence as serfs, the German barons and clergymen of the Baltic who are more worried about their personal privileges than great political and moral issues, representatives of the standing Russian army whiling away their unexciting existences, former officers of the Swedish king reminiscing past glories. And then there is Brother Christian David, the founder of Herrnhut, now the envoy of its master, Count Zinzendorf, whose activities—with the help of several pious noblewomen of the area—resulted in the founding of the first Latvian congregation. But even Brother Christian, the "German Broth-