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Nász és pofon by István Csurka

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István Csurka: *Nász és pofon*. Budapest. Szépirodalmi. 1969. 468 pages, ill. 28.50 ft. There is no doubt that Csurka is one of the most talented Hungarian prose writers of the younger generation. His moral honesty is exceptional: he is never concerned with pseudo-problems. He sees, for instance, that there is a gap between country life and town life which, for the time being, no one can bridge. Some of his short stories are scenes from provincial life, and their subject is innocence vs. experience, provincial vs. more sophisticated moral values. These stories present young peasants as having an undeveloped emotional life ("Vasérmnap délután"), and emphasize the complete lack of understanding between the world of the village and that of the town ("Nász én pofon," "A rádiótól vagyunk"). The author points out that people living in the country regard people from town as their superiors and often fall victims to them ("Tüzugratás," "A harmadik"). Another story "Metamorfózis" makes an ironical comment on the distortion of history by simply placing two scenes one after the other: first the tragedy of some highwaymen who fought for the Hungarian peasants and against the Habsburgs' army in 1815, followed by a scene in which the same incident is put on the stage with a happy ending. Still another story ("Rác meg Varga") shows the nouveau-riche imitating the earlier bourgeoisie and opportunists who serve all sorts of bosses without any personal conviction. The underlying tone is always ironical, and the purpose of this irony is, in most cases, to emphasize the difference between appearance and reality. Thus, in a series of interior monologues we are shown people who, in a state of drunkenness, reveal their real selves; and so it is proved that they merely pretend to have been changed by a new society, in the depth of their souls they are still living according to the standards of an earlier society. Sometimes the author comes near to realizing the necessity of raising the theme of innocence vs. experience or appearance vs. reality to the symbolic level. In some of the best stories ("Az utolsó cím," "Riport délelőtt") he makes the grotesque the dominant tone.

In one of the longer stories this tendency is combined with another gift of the author's: the ability to dramatize a state of mind, in this case that of a man who bets on horses ("Egy fogadó lelkivilága"). The stories in which ordinary people suddenly try to change their lives ("A csillár"), break a leg from mere ennui ("Nyilt törés"), or would move

into the dream-like world of phantasmagoria ("Lakók és ripacsok") are the most successful, because their structure is dramatic and tightly woven. In these pieces the author is really concerned with the development of his artistic medium—which is the main concern of all major artists. One hopes that Csurka will go on in that direction.

Mihály Szegedy-Maszájk
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György Konrád. *A látogató*. Budapest. Magvető. 1969. 272 pages.

An old woman goes to a municipal welfare organization for help. The gate has a powerful new spring for keeping it shut, and the old woman is not strong enough to open it. The porter watches her attempts from his cubicle, but his apathy is not stirred. The little old woman gives up, goes home, and, after putting down on a piece of paper how she was barred from entering the office, she hangs herself on the curtain rod.

This is one of the startling stories narrated by a social worker who tells us about his daily routine. The stories sometimes take just a few lines, sometimes are longer, and some of them are told in bits. One of the latter slowly appears to be the central story: it proves to be a test case for the social worker's endurance, for his faith that he is dealing with people, however deformed by natural, social, and historical conditions they may be, and for his determination to find solutions. Not ideal solutions, but solutions that are the best under circumstances that cannot be changed. To connive, for instance, at the incestuous relationship between an idiot boy, who wants to rape women, and his sordid but loving mother who gives him her own body because she wants to deter his lust and because she has nobody else.

The test case nearly breaks the social worker by forcing him into a paradoxical situation in which he is obliged to give up society because he wants to be faithful to it, to one of its products and members, a retarded boy, and, through this boy, to his own faith and determination.

This is an excellent first book, written in a language part sinewy and sober, part beautifully, if sometimes excessively, laden with a literary montage, which alone would attest to the power of its author's singular vision.

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