

Miklós Radnóti: Learn... To Write Upon The Skies

Translated from the Hungarian & edited by Thomas Ország-Land (March 2016)

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ENCHANTMENT

We're sitting in the brightness

and scowling in the glare,

a rosebush is leaping

over the hedgerow,

the light leaping also

as the rain-clouds gather,

lightning streaks by

and the lash of thunder

clashes with thunder

again and again, high

high up in the sky,

below them the blue

of the lake is withering,

its waters rising –

come into the house
and take off your dress,
out there it is raining,
and take off your blouse
and let the rain, the rain
wash our hearts together.



LITERARY LOVERS: Miklós Radnóti and his wife Fifi

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YESTERDAY & TODAY

Yesterday two sizzling lovers with peach-ripe lips
emerged from the kneeling shrubs in the cooling
drizzle and, leaning each to each,
walked past, proceeding across the meadow;

and today, ferocious cannon with muddy wheels
emerged at daybreak with steaming soldiers –
grey combat helmets protecting their skulls,
strong, heavy odours dragged by their bodies:
the flags their of urgent, male loneliness.

(Oh, seedling blond childhood, how far you have passed!

oh, dove-white old age, I shall never reach you!

the poet stands knee-deep in slippery blood

and each song he sings is always his last.)



BROTHERS-IN-CRIME: Hitler and his Hungarian ally Horthy

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IN YOUR ARMS

In your arms I lie, you rock me

quietly.

In my arms you lie, I rock you

quietly.

In your arms I lie, an infant,

silently.

In my arms you are a child, I'm

hearkening, watching, sensing you.

In your arms, I'm locked embraced

when I'm alarmed.

In my arms, when I embrace you,

I'm not alarmed.

In your arms, the great, the final

stream of silence

will not frighten me.

In your arms, death will arrive –

light and graceful

like a dream.



GROUP PORTRAIT: Hungarian Jews at Auschwitz

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THE FOURTH ECLOGUE

The Poet:

No! – You should have asked me before I was born.

No! – I knew the answer. I knew, I knew.

No! – I screamed my retort to this brutal world:

No! – Its darkness pounds me! Its light cuts me through!

...All that howling only strengthened my lungs.

I've survived. My skull has only hardened.

The Voice:

The crimson waves of measles and scarlet-fever
both tossed you safely ashore. And once a lake was
about to swallow you – but it spat you out.
So why do you think that time has embraced you, why?
And why do your lungs' great wings, your heart, your liver,
your moist, mysterious, entity serve you, why? –
And even cancer, that deadly, fearful flower,
may not have spread its roots within your flesh.

The Poet:

I was born, protesting. I'm alive.
I've grown up. What for? I do not know.
All my life, I have desired freedom.
All my life, I've been escorted by guards.

The Voice:

You have ascended to wind-worn, radiant, peaks.
You have beheld a kneeling, humble doe
at dusk among the shrubs of the mountain side
and watched a tree-trunk's resin drop in the sunlight
and seen a naked woman emerge from the river...
A stag-beetle once alighted on your palm.

The Poet:

Even such visions disappear in bondage.

Would I were but a bird, a word or a mountain,
just a fleeting, consoling thought or a gesture
momentarily, boastfully mimicking God –
Liberty, help me at last to find my home!

Give me the peaks, the wood, the shrubs, the woman!
Show me the blazing wings of the soul in the wind!
Let me be born anew to a better world
where the rising sunlight heralds a promising
day emerging through the golden vapours...

Silence prevails. But I sense the breath of a storm.
Ripening fruit are swaying from the branches.
Lightly tossed by the breeze, a drifting butterfly
balances. Death is whispering in the garden.

Now I can see: I'm too maturing for death.
Soon the waves of time that bore me high must
plunge me down. My captive isolation

slowly grows, like the crescent of the moon.

I shall find my freedom. The earth will unbind me
while, above me, this routed world is finally
burnt away. The writing tablets are shattered.
Soaring imagination, spread out your wings!

The Voice:

The fruit of the garden must sway and ripen and fall.
Your pain will end in the deep earth steeped in memories.
Till then, let the smoke of your anger rise, and learn
to write upon the skies, if all else be broken.

Miklós Radnóti (1909-1944), probably the greatest among the world's Holocaust poets, murdered by the retreating Hungarian Army at the close of the Second World War. His poetry has won a robust international reputation and made him a beloved figure in Hungarian culture despite the current resurgence of antisemitism in his native land shamefully exploited by the ultra-nationalist government.

✘ Thomas Ország-Land (b. 1938), a poet and award-winning foreign correspondent writing for New English Review from London and his native Budapest. His last

book, *Survivors: Hungarian Jewish Poets of the Holocaust* (Smokestack/England, 2014) includes English translations of some of Radnóti's most moving poems recovered from a mass grave after the war.

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