

Neither Memories Nor Magic by Miklós Radnóti

Translated from the Hungarian & Edited
by Thomas Ország-Land (May 2015)



1.

BEFORE THE STORM

You sit upon the peak and on your knees asleep
that youthful woman ripened for your love; behind,
the bristly deeds of war; beware! hold dear and keep

your life, hold dear your world that you with hardened hands
have built around your life while all about you death
in circles hovered around and around above the lands –

behold, it has returned! the garden's nests from the high
treetops come plunging down in terror stricken flight...
all things are about to break! and keep an eye on the sky

because already lightning shakes the firmament;
wind tussles, drags the cradles as the menfolk whimper
asleep as weakly as the helpless innocent;

the wind blows on their dreams, they grumble and turn around,
they wake with a start and stare at you who's been awake
and sitting up amid the fleeting thunder, the sound

of roaring future battles being prepared; above,
the splendid wind speaks of the storm and so do the clouds;
it's time to wrap your woman warmly in your love.

(1934)

THE PROTECTOR

Concealed, my many angers lay in my heart before
this hour as brown seeds ripen within the apple-core,
and I was always certain that, sword in hand, a friendly
strong angel followed behind me, an angel to defend me.
But when, one wild dawn, waking, you see your whole world
crumbling
to dust and must go forward confused, a phantom fumbling
and all but naked, your few belongings left behind,
then you will find arising in your lightened heart, a refined
and musing, humble yearning, laconic and mature –
if still you can rebel, it's not over your own sorrow
but for a glowing, distant, sweet freedom for tomorrow.

Positions and possessions I've never held and won't,
but spare a moment's thought for this wealthy life: I don't
concern myself with vengeance, my heart is free of rage,
the world will be rebuilt – and, although this ugly age
has banned my words, they will yet ring out beneath new walls;
alone I must live through all that in my time befalls
me knowing that neither memories nor magic can defend me;
I will not glance behind me – above, the sky's unfriendly,
and should you see me yet, turn away, my friend, and go on.
Where in the past a mighty protector stood behind me,
the angel might be gone.

(1944)

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THE EIGHTH ECLOGUE

Poet:

Greetings, handsome old man, how swiftly you climb this rugged
mountain path! Are you lifted by wings or pursued by an army?
Wings lift you, passion drives you, lightning burns in your
eyes –
greetings, grand old traveller, I comprehend that you must be

one of the ancient wrathful prophets – but, tell me, which one?

Prophet:

Which one? Nahum am I, from the city of Elkosh, who cursed the lewd Assyrian city of Nineveh, chanted the holy word with a vengeance. I was a vessel brimming with rage!

Poet:

I know your ancient rage as your writing has survived.

Prophet:

It has survived. But evil multiplies faster today, and the Lord's purpose is still unknown to this very day; for clearly the Lord has said the majestic rivers would dry up, Carmel would weaken, the flower of Bashan and Lebanon wither, and mountains would tremble and finally fire consume it all. It all came to pass.

Poet:

The nations rush to slaughter
each other;
like once Nineveh, now humanity's soul is degraded.
Did proclamations and ravenous, hellish, green clouds of locusts
serve any purpose? man must be surely the basest of creatures!
Tiny babes smashed to death against brickwalls in many places,
church towers turned into flaming torches, houses turned
into ovens, their residents roasting. Factories go up in
smoke.
Screaming, the streets run with people on fire and stumble and faint.
Stirring, the heavy door of the bomb-bay opens above, leaving
corpses on city squares lying shrunken as cow-pats on meadows.
All you have prophesied is fulfilled again. So tell me,
what made you leave the primeval vortex again to return
to earth?

Prophet:

My anger. That humans should remain so utterly lonely
all this time while surrounded by armies of human-shaped
heathens –
Also, I'd like to behold again the fall of the sinful
cities, to see and to tell, to bear witness to future ages.

Poet:

But you have spoken already. The Lord has said through your
words:
*Woe to the fortifications laden with loot, to the bastions
built of corpses!* Tell me, in all the millennia, what
has fanned your anger to rage with such obstinate, heavenly
burning?

Prophet:

Back in ancient times, the Lord touched my mis-shaped lips
with his burning coals (as He also touched wise Isaiah's),
thus He
searched my heart; the embers were hot and glowing, an angel
held them with tongs. *Behold, I cried to the Lord, I am
waiting,*
ready to go out to spread Your word. Once sent out
by the Lord, one neither has age nor peace ever after;
the fire of heaven burns in one's lips through the ages. And
how long
is for the Lord a millennium? Only a fleeting instant.

Poet:

You're very young, I envy you, father! How could I presume
to measure my life by your awesome age? Already, my time
wears me down – like rushing rivers wear down the pebbles.

Prophet:

Only you think so. I know your latest poetry. Anger
keeps you alive. The rage of prophets and poets is similar,
food and drink to the people! It will sustain those who want

to survive till the birth of the kingdom promised by that
disciple,

by that young rabbi who came to fulfil the law and our words.
Come with me to announce that the hour is already near,
that country about to be born. What might be, then, the Lord's
purpose?

Now you can see that it is that country. Let us set forth
and gather the people, bring your wife and cut two staves,
for staves make good companions for wanderers. Look, I'd like
that one,

I like a firm, knotty hold on a staff... gnarled and strong and
uneven.

(1944)



Miklós Radnóti (1909-1944) was perhaps the greatest poet of the Holocaust. More of his poetry
in Thomas Ország-Land's English translation appears in