

A Selection from the Poetry of György István Gyékényesi

OCCIDENTAL CANTATA

György Gyékényesi

I.

Rain drizzled on the rosetrees
white yellow
an abundance of colors springing into red
a tiny moment of life from fleeting time
the gooseberry flashed like veined pearls
the blue glass globe
and a chubby polka-dotted ball
a short toy gun hung on the tree
wet and cold like its owner
ten years later
in his soldier days

in what do you seek the soul
in colors like Augustine
in the form like Thomas
in the character like Ignatius the saint
who came from Loyola
in what do you seek the soul

by Gmunden¹
mountains tramped in the lake
guardshelter chapel
thorn-crowned Christ
somewhere a jagged cliff
notched steeple
western tale
Sleeping Beauty
and I
and I was the king's son
the poor man's son
the poor woman's son
my wood-steepled village's globetrotter son
on hill's ridge or dale's bottom
at the foot of rocking firwoods

gentle Francesco saw soul
and thus he spoke to the birds
in doe-eyed frescoes frater Angelico
mixed an enchanting dream

rain sprinkled on the rosetrees
open
open wide the small gate
my grandfather whistling strolls
home from the Carpathians ²
down on the Nagy Alföld ³
in the Hortobágy ⁴
and in his leather spats a bayonet
with a rosewood handle from the Piave ⁵
heigh-ho we never die
only his gait is more measured
like the old parade horse
harnessed to a carriage

Margaret still guards the Nyulak Szigete ⁶
but Elizabeth went to Thuringia ⁷
hey, up, up, raise our May Queen
may your hemp grow this high ⁸

and I still see them
the unbridled fiery-eyed lads
preening in gray uniforms
as they marched into the rising sun
arms
arms
arms
the wild pear trees bloomed
in the wake of our grim Hunyadi's troops ⁹
and the highway carried them
roads of strange foreign lands
oh how the milestones fell away before them
oh how death clung to their fate

Trakl sang at the foot of haystacks
and Hesse the bookbinder journeyman
and Rilke
at the threshold of death being lies prone
Weinheber entreated with a crystalline voice

rain sprayed on the rosetrees
Pista Szemes ¹⁰ dug a trench
out there
by the steep bank of Zákány ¹¹
and look there is the cellar
green
green

green is the shutter
and red red red
wine pearled in my uncle's glass
but he drank from a pitcher
from a green glazed pitcher
for he'd been through Vásárhely¹²
he toasted
and in his roguish eyes
Transylvania gleamed brownly towards us

from Zágón to even Rodostó¹³
but I also understand Kőrösi already¹⁴
quaking sea and Csángó song¹⁵
flood the waters my Lord my God
let it carry me to my father's gate

spear-like poplars along the border ditch
a starling chatters in mulberry leafage
below the stone Christ's feet
always a bouquet of flowers
and today you see there
a rude barbarian soldier
with a machine gun
in a shirt jacket
as he stares out over the landscape
and watches
the forest
the field
and in the distance the whitely gleaming village

hey Federico García
this is not Andalusia
Castile lies far away
the plane trees and the Moorish minarets

rain trickles on the rosetrees
oh pearling old time
the hooves of Turkish Tartar horses
pounded here
after the clatter of eagled legions' sandals
Huns Avars and the rest¹⁶
but the earth remained
but the land remained
the church burned midst the flames of Bulgarian tanks
and they shot the priest through the nape
like a mad dog
but the earth remains
but the land remains
because the land is
eternal

and now say after me
Maikäfer flieg
Maikäfer flieg
dein Vater ist im Krieg
dein' Mutter ist im Ungarland
Ungarland ist abgebrannt
Maikäfer flieg¹⁷

II.

A procession of pilgrims reciting the litany
under the tents of unfurled holy flags
and behold I find you my beautiful Magyar land
bathed in celestial color my gentle Pannonia¹⁸
in Gyüd or in Segesd¹⁹
where the rustling mantles
of royal ladies
swished between nitrous walls
where the iron gloved weighty fists
of falconer lords
softened into child's palms
there in the hyacinth perfumed stillness
in the murmur of the rosary
in the pealing of the bells
in Segesd

a flowery garden was
famous Pannonia
this garden faithfully watered
by the Virgin Mary

initials in metal clasped books
sea blue sky
what do you make of the pious
bent monk
the nun transcribing unto the point of blindness
and MS the master
who up there in Selmec²⁰
painted a picture
of the pregnant Mary
or Margaret the Virgin²¹
or Ladislaus Mary's Knight²²
oh how Vásárhelyi entreated²³
the Lady of the angels
the Mirror of women

gracious provider for orphans
patroness of widows
enricher of the poor
consoler of the banished

hey our Mother our sweet Virgin Mother
fate has turned against us
and destiny's hand plays
with our children's bones
with pink gristly fetus bones
while above our ancient lands
even the heavens weep
a steep grave pit that reaches the soul
is every abandoned village
every church nailed shut
every voiceless steeple
every
every
every
the whole everything

the angel of the Lord greeted
the Virgin Mary
who welcomed from the Holy Spirit
into her womb her Holy Son

hey our Mother our sweet Virgin Mother
the old king implored your patronage
neighing festive geldings
zig-zagged on bloody fields
throughout a thousand years
and the soldiers called to You
the tormented people
the defending shield
that they should survive and multiply
and cover your garden with flowers
the famous Pannonia

hail Mary
grace sheds to fill you
the Holy Spirit is with you
blessed are you amongst women
and blessed is the fruit of your womb
Jesus

hey our Mother our sweet Virgin Mother
repugnant is our crime
every Magyar is the murderer of his own blood²⁴
in the perishing villages
in the childless towns
and out in the wide world
we all
who swaggeringly recite the rights of man
and build the new pyramids
murderers
murderers

murderers
oh our Mother our sweet Virgin Mother
 blessed are you amongst women
 Blissful Lady Virgin Mary
 who embodied the Divine Spirit
 pray for us fallibles
 now
 and at the hour of our death
 amen

litany filled May evenings
in abundant lilac blooming season
and behold I find you my beautiful Magyar land
bathed in celestial color my gentle Pannonia
and behold I find you
in the old women's
rosemary scented prayerbooks
in the old men's
leisurely steps
in Gyüd or in Segesd
in Csurgó or in Atád²⁵
in the pealing of the bells
in the murmur of the rosary
in a child's tranquility
in my soul

III.

For Csaba and Zsolt Veress

Child's fingers on the piano
one scale and soon
 stork stork turtle dove
I can be a man only
if I am Magyar first
 why is your leg bloody
I can be a Magyar only
if I see myself
 the Turkish boy cut it
 the Magyar boy is healing it
in the name of Jesus
because he brought faith
and love
simply
 with a whistle
 with a drum
 with a cane fiddle²⁶
chain chain ringing chain

to what does this chain bind
 ringing chain's thread
the thread breaks
 it would be thread it would be silk
Ariadne winds it
 it would still wind its way out
on the starry way²⁷
 jump here my partner
in whomever broke out
the fires of Saint Ivan's night
he will not remain alone
never²⁸

 the Danube is wide
but wider is the windy sea
 its banks are narrow
but narrower is old Europe
you would jump over it
over
follow Gyurka
because
 Gyurka Géczi
 jumped over it
your foot will hit Cologne's dome
you will knock your knees in the Alps
and in gondola filled Venice
you'll stumble over the tourists
 the boots' heels
 became muddied
he would scrape it out
but isn't able
 yet this is a man

 I don't feel any losses
in whomever the watchfires of fortresses' bastions
burn
he will not numb himself into fear
never

 rise and shine sun
the moon has a sickle
the sun's edge forms a sickle
 St. George's Day
let's drink on the years
my dear Father
 below the gardens
 the little lamb
my sons are hopping around
 is almost freezing
and their mother

come in right away
because you'll catch cold²⁹
 roll ring roll
 golden ring
magical ring
turn it once
and an old man
clings
to your neck³⁰
child's fingers on the piano
one scale and soon
 to where are you going little bunny
man
but after all in what is man a man
 ingyom-bingyom táliber
 tutáliber máliber³¹
I can be a man only
if I am Magyar first

IV

For Kinga Illyés

Along sheltered woodbridges
shrieks the pheasant heathcock
sleep old Boston
in New England
there's loud merrymaking
and an auction of the old colony
the silver pines nod
the bark is white on the trunks of birches
lawn-aproned little houses
peer out at the road
from behind the trees
as we rush against the setting sun
through towns and villages
and through time
oh Europe
we left you somewhere on the eastern shore
there by the gigantic torchbearing woman's
stone corned feet
 and now read the lines of Dante
 before me only such things were created
 that were eternal and I endure forever
 leave all hope behind you who enter here

how flutter-eyed was Dohnányi³²
and Dvořak the Czech trumpeteer
I have seen Bartók
as he noted down the robin's song
in the Carolinas
hey robin don't fly up the tree³³
and the hand swung in rhythm to the New Orleans' beat
hey
hey
the saints go marchin' in
hey
hey
the saints go marchin' out
while the Mississippi whirled
and the song stuck in the throat
of the nightingale from the Tisza's bank³⁴

carried
carried
carried me the train
towards San Antonio
yellow blooms the Texan rose
but here cool Scandinavia
doesn't vibrate a Grieg melody
in place of haybarns
hot deserts
rolling succory
and dust
and buzzing causeways
eastward westward
northward southward

pound the stake John Henry
pound the damned stake
you have the devil in you John Henry
from Mother Poland Zelenski

pound the stake John Henry
pound the damned stake
pound the stake John Henry
your help will be Medgyesi

pound the stake John Henry
Lafko Kukta Zaremba
pound the stake John Henry
the bill will be paid by Ramsey

along sheltered woodbridges
shrieks the pheasant heathcock
in Pennsylvania
in creaking mine cars swung being

while in the smoggy factories
 littered lap
 the churches grew
 the homes the taverns
 the streets shone
 the stores
 and the children's hair glistened
 like the fields
 after a fresh May shower

 swallows perched on the roof's edge
 in Capistrano
 go
 go out to the western bank
 to the smiling seashore
 indeed Mignon
 wo die Zitronen blühn
 go
 go out to the western bank
 where brown skinned girls' water pearl covered bodies
 crest in the whirling foam
 go
 go out to the western bank
 where the rapid life
 sweeps you away
 and carries
 carries you out into the world
 of the never have beens' tomorrow
 when your past remains behind
 and the present offers its sweet delight

 so now you understand the banished Mikes'
 playful sigh
 I love Rodosto so much already
 that I couldn't forget Zágón

 along sheltered woodbridges
 shrieks the pheasant heathcock
 sleep old Boston
 in New England
 there's loud merrymaking
 and an auction of the old colony
 the presses rumble in Detroit
 the somber headed buffalo thundered away
 the wheat waves on the prairie
 you can write a hundred songs about Europe
 but this country tempts you in your son
 when he utters his first word
 in an alien tongue
 oh Europe

we left you on the eastern shore
there by the gigantic torchbearing woman's
stone corned feet.

*Translators: Gy. László Gékényesi and
Katherine Gyékényesi Gatto*

NOTES

1. An Austrian city on the Traun See (Lake).
2. Mountain range in central and eastern Europe.
3. The Great Hungarian Plain, covering the central and eastern parts of Hungary.
4. The most impressive and celebrated part of the Great Plain, covering some three hundred square miles east of the River Tisza.
5. A river in northeastern Italy. The Austro-Hungarian forces fought a major battle here during World War I.
6. St. Margaret of the Árpáds, youngest daughter of Béla IV (1235-1270). She lived her life out in a cloister on an island in the Danube River, voluntarily sacrificing herself to God for the liberation of Hungary from the Mongols.
7. St. Elizabeth of Hungary, daughter of Endre II (1205-1235), married the Prince of Thuringia. After her husband's death, she dedicated herself to the care of the poor and the sick.
8. This line of ritual poetry comes from the custom of electing a Whitsun Queen and accompanying her from house to house throughout the village. Upon arriving at the front door, two girls lift the Queen high into the air, snatching the veil from her head and shouting: "May your hemp grow this high," that is to say, may you have a fruitful and prosperous year.
9. János Hunyadi (1387-1456), Hungarian soldier and national hero. This brilliant general took part in the Hussite Wars and defeated the Turks in several battles. His greatest achievement was the defeat of the Turks at Belgrade in 1456.
10. A lad from the village of Zákány.
11. A village in southwestern Hungary.
12. A city in Transylvania, formerly a part of Hungary, now part of Rumania.
13. Zágón is a city in Transylvania, and the birthplace of Count Kelemen Mikes (1690-1761), chamberlain of Prince Ferenc Rákóczi II (1676-1735). Rodostó is a city in Turkey and provided a haven for the Hungarian freedom fighters in the 18th century, led by Prince Rákóczi.
14. Sándor Kőrösi Csoma (1784-1842), the brilliant Székely scholar, went to explore Central Asia in order to study the origins of the Hungarians.
15. The Csángós who live in seven villages in Rumanian Moldavia and Bukovina are Székelys who migrated there in the 18th century.
16. The Huns occupied the Carpathian Basin in the 4th century. The 6th century marks the arrival of the Avars from the Caucasus area into the Basin. Before that time, during the first centuries of the Christian era, semi-independent tribes lived under the erratic rule of the Romans (in certain areas) or of the Celts.
17. A children's song in Austria and Hungary.
18. Pannonia was once a province of the Roman Empire. Encompassing the area enclosed by the Danube and Dráva Rivers and the foothills of the Alps, today it is known as Transdanubia.
19. Two pilgrimage centers paying homage to Mary.
20. The greatest master-painter and wood carver of the Hungarian High Gothic period (late 14th, early 15th centuries), who only signed his name with "M.S."
21. See Note 6.
22. King Ladislaus (László) The Saint (1077-1095), son of Béla I, a heroic and popular figure, who represented the highest virtues of the medieval knight.
23. András Vásárhelyi, composer and author of a hymn to the Blessed Virgin, contained in the 15th century Peer Codex.

24. Hungary has one of the highest abortion rates in the world.
25. Towns in southwestern Hungary.
26. Hungarian child's song, "Gólya, gólya, gilice." Throughout this part Gyékényesi utilizes lines from well known Hungarian children's songs.
27. "Lánc, lánc, eszterlánc." Children's song.
28. Here Gyékényesi is referring to the ancient ritual tradition of lighting fires usually held on the eve of June 24th, St. John the Baptist's feastday.
29. "Süss fel nap, Szent György nap." Children's song.
30. "Csön, csön, gyűrű, arany gyűrű." Children's song.
31. "Hová mész te kis nyulacska?" These two lines make up the refrain of a children's song.
32. Ernő Dohnányi (1877-1960), composer, piano virtuoso. Presents elegant, romantic themes in modern orchestration with a marked influence of Hungarian folk music. Emigrated to the U.S.
33. Line from a Hungarian folksong.
34. Next to the Danube, the most important river in Hungary.