

## *The romantic character of Miklós Radnóti's love poetry*

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Miklós Radnóti may be best defined as a modern poet whose cultural and psychological roots are deeply embedded in the soil of nineteenth-century Romanticism. He exemplifies the image of an authentic idealist faced by a reality which is simultaneously the source of inspiration and the cause of his obsessive search for an alternative level of being. He himself provides his own definition, based on the identification of the man with the poet. His own nature is poetic and there is nothing else for him to do than to produce verse. The act of being and the act of writing are immediately understood as variants of one unique phenomenon. It is only through poetry that he can come to terms both with himself and with the outer world. There may be existential reasons to account for such an attitude, but needless to say, the historical environment in which he found himself must have presented such a vision as inevitable.

His fundamental statements about life can be traced back to some of the more essential aspects of nineteenth-century pessimism. Life itself is an imposition and man has no choice but to accept it. Departing from principles which are typically romantic, he gradually develops traits which are subtly identifiable as existentialist. Sentiment, however, is the only means whereby he may detect the real essence of existence, since reason has been easily overwhelmed by facts. His rebellion is defeatist, paradoxically both sterile and fruitful: like Attila József, whom he evokes in the *First Eclogue (Első ecloga)*, he reacts against the dictates of his own destiny, but through the realisation of such a predicament he embarks on his own poetic project. Such a contradiction is eminently Romantic: in admitting defeat he proclaims moral victory:

Had you but asked me in my seedling age...  
Yes, I knew, I knew!  
I don't want the world! It's rude! I shouted in rage.  
(...)  
And I survived. My head is long since hard.

*Fourth Eclogue (Negyedik ecloga)*<sup>1</sup>

I was born. I protested. And yet I am here.  
I am grown. You ask me, To what end? I just don't know.  
Always I would have wanted to be free...

*Fourth Eclogue (Negyedik ecloga)*

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<sup>1</sup> All quotations are from Miklós Radnóti, *The Complete Poetry*, edited and translated by Emery George (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1980).

The discovery of the inevitability of his situation immediately leads him to recognize himself as a poet, namely as an ethically superior being. Poetry is the sublimation of crude reality, a sort of alternative to what is in itself an unbearable condition. Through poetry he can redeem himself from his own awareness of life, his world view:

I write – what else? And how filled a poem is with danger,  
if you knew: how delicate a single line is, what a stranger  
in its moods! this too takes courage.

*Second Eclogue (Második ecloga)*

Yet even his being a poet is not enough for him to be a free person. If theoretically poetry is a source of liberation from existence itself, the historical situation renders poetry almost futile and useless. Even the myths of Romanticism, which have made so many poets survive through distress, are reducible to a mere illusion. Radnóti is fully aware that the historical era he was born in will eventually deprive him of his right to exist. His Romanticism, therefore, is directly derived from his own awareness of how tragic it was to live at that particular point in time.

If Radnóti persists in writing verse of an autobiographical, confessional nature, this is all due to the fact that he felt his age needed poetry all the more, and that it had to be poetry of a highly personal character. Loss of self is the major threat, and his efforts are directed towards its restoration. Experience itself assumes a profoundly lyrical nature and must be expressed through imagery, that is to say, it must be reconstructed in the imagination, the remotest corner of the self in which one could find refuge. He describes the landscape with love and delicacy, and handles every creature with equal respect. The objects of his perception, whether animate or inanimate, are all humanized, and they eventually constitute the ideal family within which he can now calmly insert himself, deprived as he is of his own original surroundings. What is apparently descriptive poetry is nothing but the expression of a particular state of mind, a psycho-physical sensation wherein empirical data and inner feelings blend to form a new awareness. Radnóti is actually in search of a different world. Memory is consequently put to the test, made to play a fundamental role, eventually to force him into forgetting whatever is immediate. It is all a process heading towards the transcendence of experience. His romanticism is also therapeutic.

It is debatable whether Radnóti's apparent pessimism, so akin to Leopardi's and at times Shelley's and Baudelaire's, emanates from a strictly existential standpoint. Radnóti's evious Romantic poets were, in different degrees, inclined to melancholy, even to depression. In Radnóti's case this pessimism which derived from historical circumstances acquired an objective relevance both for him and for his contemporaries. In any case, Radnóti arrives at the same conclusions through different paths: he is forced to identify an existential attitude with a directly experiential one. More than in the case of previous poets, Radnóti is led to agree with Bergson that being is actually suffering, and that the degree of suffering is further heightened by one's own degree of sensibility. Hence he discovers the need to revolt against existence and to strive for a state of awareness in which salvation, or resigned acceptance, can ultimately be found. Reality can be overcome through subjectivism.

Eros and Thanatos are the two component parts of his dualistic idealism: love enables man to realize himself fully in the midst of all obstacles ("Naive Song About the Wife", "October, Afternoon"), whereas death constitutes a perennial threat ("Foaming Sky" [Tajtékos ég], "Picture Postcards" [Razglednicák]). Both are typified in the mythical figure of a female; both are omnipresent, powerful, overwhelmingly influential in all respects. Both will necessarily determine his own future and are his only points of reference. They constitute the horns of a dilemma: death can actually redeem a person from his own unfortunate situation, since it means the cessation of awareness; a woman is the source of a man's fulfillment. While searching for a way out of his predicament, Radnóti realizes the figure of his own partner, who eventually assumes the dual role of mother and lover. Love guarantees security and permanence, of which he is equally deprived, whereas death signifies annihilation and oblivion. Life being utterly unacceptable, Radnóti strives to feel the spiritual presence of his beloved more than ever before, discovering in her the epitome of whatever is good, gentle and permanent, a true alternative to reality.

In this respect he is most faithful to the Romantic tradition. The woman he loves gives meaning to everything and can be related to the rest of creation. She is actually the unifying essence of existence, and all things, whatever their nature, are a sort of extension of her spirit:

As she steps in the door clicks,  
 the many flowerpots start up tiptoe,  
 and in her hair a little sleepy blond  
 spot speaks, chirping, like frightened sparrow  
 (...)  
 She just got home, was far away all day:  
 in her hand a huge poppy petal,  
 with it she chases death away from me.

*Naive Song (Együgyű dal a feleségről)*

The whole world is reduced to a mere sensation, and of whatever remains it is only woman that has not lost her original meaning. Radnóti is seeking protection; he has grown up into a child who needs a woman to mother him. Her presence is always put in sharp contrast with the environment, always threatening to disrupt this relationship:

Earth whirls into new war; up in its sky  
 the gentle blue is food for a hungry cloud,  
 and as it darkens, fearfully your young wife hugs you and weeps aloud.

*War Diary (Háboris napló)*

On the other hand, he himself tends to father his wife, treating her as a special object, the only possession he is allowed to have. He guards her as she sleeps and makes himself believe he can provide her with the security he himself lacks:

You sit on a cliff top and on your knee sleeps, ripe  
 for you, a young woman; behind you bearded combat

deeds; careful! it would be a pity about your life,  
for your world, which you yourself have grubbed  
with ten hard fingernails around your life...

*Before a Storm (Vihar előtt)*

In some respects Radnóti is also a surrealist; he is a compulsive day-dreamer fully conscious that his deep love for a woman is necessarily derived from his sense of insecurity. His is a typical state of suspended animation, mid-way between life and death. His real woman is almost unreachable, phantom-like mysterious. She actually lives within him.

He simultaneously expresses his desire to make love and affirms that he is waiting to meet both her and his death. This is a blending of two different levels of consciousness: the dichotomy between whatever is ideal and whatever is real reduces itself to a complex feeling, apparently self-contradictory and consequential on his state of suspension:

...come on inside take  
off your clothing  
look and it's raining  
shirt skin feather  
rainwater wash our  
hearts together.

*Charm (Bájos)*

"his wife is waiting back home, and a death, more beautiful, wiser.  
(...)

Oh, if I could believe that I haven't merely borne  
what is worthwhile, in my heart; that there is, to return, a home"

*Forced March (Erőltetett menet)*

Three major lyrics help define Radnóti as a Romantic poet more than any other, "October" (Október), "Afternoon" (Délután), "Letter to My Wife" (Levél a hitveshez) and "Hesitant Ode" (Tétova óda). In the first one the poet acts as the guardian of his beloved, admiring, idealizing her in her sleep. Describing her in every detail, as an integral part of a whole innocent landscape. His description is deceptively objective and photographic; it is actually a subjectivized version of an extra-personal scene, a psychological rendering of a deeply shared empirical experience. Fanni is noticed as she sleeps and wakes, which only serves to make him understand that the outer and the inner worlds interact to produce his own stone of awareness.

"Letter to My Wife" (Levél a hitveshez) is a typical Radnóti poem. It is a personal statement in the form of a passionate reconstruction of personal events. The leitmotif is the poet's chronic solitude, now aggravated by Fanni's physical absence. This state of affairs is paradoxical: the more Radnóti feels the real absence of his wife the more he idealizes her. to the extent that she ultimately becomes a permanent sensation. She is immediately transformed into an archetypal model, a perfect image embodying whatever is lacking in the poet's own psychological condition. This is again a typically Romantic approach to the problem of solitude. The absence of the beloved produces a bitter-sweet feeling, an emotion

which is actually a source of poetic inspiration. Radnóti is somehow faithful to Shelley's belief that "Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought". He is consoled by the idea that Fanni is both his "bride" and his "friend". The poem is remarkable for the way Radnóti assumes the roles of both lover and husband:

for you, I have walked the Spirit's full length as it grew,  
and highways of the land.

"Hesitant Ode" (Tétova óda) is another poem in the form of a letter. In actual fact, most of Radnóti's poetry takes the shape of a diary. Each poem being easily relatable to others. Fanni is again the justification for him to go on living. She is again idealized into an archetype of permanence:

Still, in me you're tumult, and flooding, like life,  
and at times you're as secure and as eternal  
as a fossilized snail shell in a stone.

He declares his inability to put his feelings into shape and to express fully what he actually feels for her. His challenge is equally psychological and poetic, since he can only define himself as a poet, and to Radnóti a poet is essentially a lover; his handling of words is equivalent to his own awareness as a full person:

And, come morning, I'll start it all over again,  
for I'm worth no more than the value of the word  
in my poem, and because this will have me worried  
until nothing is left of me but tufts of hair and bones.

As in so many other instances, love and death are interrelated, exemplifying the necessary coexistence of happiness and uncertainty. The presence of Fanni gives meaning to the whole environment, of which he considers himself only one component; it is woman who gives significance to the parts constituting the whole. Objects are again treated as humans. As in "Naive Song About the Wife" (Együgyű dal a feleségről), things assume a personal function and help the poet conclude that there is actually a unifying factor in existence. In search for his own teleology, Radnóti looks for a hidden relationship with whatever falls under the sense, be it an inanimate object, a landscape, an animal or a human being. What puts all elements together and gives them unity is woman, his own Fanni, summing up the whole universe, almost assuming the identity and the role of Mother Earth. Radnóti is seeking the sense of otherness. There is enough evidence in the poet's work to make one conclude that even in normal circumstances he would have arrived at the same conclusion, namely the identification of otherness, as a man's source of inner peace, with a woman. The specific tragic conditions in which Radnóti's life was spent further strengthen this supposition, perhaps rendering it an absolute necessity, much stronger than Radnóti's own strength of will. The poet's Romantic disposition only makes it sound like an obvious conclusion.

Radnóti's typical tonality is that of a discreet – albeit sincere and uninhibited – diarist.

His poem is always some sort of letter addressed to a person, either a figment of the imagination or his own Fanni, the towering figure providing him both with the possibility of engaging in a dialogue and with the certainty of being listened to and understood. His inner speech takes the shape of a conversation. Hence his poetic diction is systematically animistic, metaphorical and allusive, and his essential lexical stock is all chosen from the realms of vegetation and animal life. Contrast and parallelism, paradox and pathetic fallacy, are some of the more important literary devices he resorts to.

His romantic identity is most forcefully evinced by the fact that everything in his world vision is human or humanized, to the extent that even common material objects play the role of persons in the midst of a devastatingly solitary ambience ("Hesitant Ode" [Tétova óda]). Radnóti is an excellent example of a great poet departing from a 19th century tradition and inserting himself harmoniously in his own age within the mainstream of neo-Romanticism. In the midst of such cross-currents he imposes himself as an authentic modern Romantic striving to assert basic values in an era which had already reaped the fruits of whatever is disastrously anti-Romantic. His Romanticism, therefore, is significant in terms of both its universality and its historical import.