

# Dark Victory

By C. K. WILLIAMS

## Foamy Sky: The Major Poems of Miklós Radnóti translated by Zsuzsanna Ozsváth and Frederick Turner

(Princeton University Press, 128 pp., \$24.95, \$9.95 paper)

I fell beside him. His body rolled over,  
as tight as a string ready to snap.  
Shot in the neck. "You'll end the same way,"  
I whispered to myself. "Lie still."  
Now patience flowers into death.  
"Der springt noch auf," I heard someone  
say.  
Blood dried on my ear, and filthy clay.

On October 8, 1944, the Hungarian poet Miklós Radnóti watched as his friend and fellow labor camp prisoner, the violinist Miklós Lorsi, was shot by the s.s., then shot again—"Der springt noch auf" ("He's still kicking")—finally to death, as 3,000 inmates were being marched toward Germany, ahead of the advancing Allied armies, from the labor camp Lager Heidenau in Yugoslavia. This poem, the last of a series by Radnóti called "Postcards," which were all composed along that terrible trek, was dated October 31. The next to the last was from October 24:

Bloody drool hangs on the mouths of the  
oxen.  
The men all piss red.  
The company stands around in stinking  
wild knots.  
Death blows overhead, disgusting.  
(both translated by Polgar, Berg, and Marks)

The 6,000 prisoners in Lager Heidenau had been divided into two groups, and Radnóti had gone to great lengths to be part of the first. Perhaps he thought that he would have more of a chance to survive that way. Or perhaps, as some of his friends surmised, he was simply impatient to return to his wife, his high school sweetheart, on whom he doted and for whom he wrote some of his most moving poems:

I've been planning to tell you  
about the secret galaxy of my love for so  
long—  
in just one image, just the essence.  
But you are swarming and flooding inside  
me like  
existence, as eternal and certain sometimes  
as a snail shell changed to stone inside a  
stone . . .

(translated by Polgar et al.)

"I fell beside him. His body rolled over." There is an ambiguity in that last

"Postcard" poem. Is someone else dying, or is it, as it seems on first reading, that Radnóti is beholding and enacting and making poetry of his own death? I think both. His death, which came on November 8 or 9, was to be frighteningly similar, and even more poignantly absurd. Radnóti was part of a group of twenty-one exhausted prisoners who were put under the guard neither of the s.s. nor of their ferociously anti-Semitic Hungarian counterparts, the Arrow-Cross, but of a squad of Hungarian sergeants. The apparently uninterested soldiers twice tried to turn their wards over to crowded local hospitals but were turned away. Finally they simply shot the prisoners, and buried them in a common grave. Of the 3,000 prisoners in Radnóti's group who began the march toward Germany, only a fraction survived. The other 3,000 were soon liberated by Tito's partisans. Radnóti's body was exhumed eighteen months later. The five last poems, and five others as brilliant and as moving, which had been composed in the Lager and had already been delivered to his widow by a friend, were found in a notebook in his overcoat pocket.

Those poems, and the others Radnóti composed toward the end of his life, and the story of his outrageous death, have all become a part of the literature of evidence of the Holocaust. Our need for that evidence seems limitless. We read one poem or one book on the Holocaust, we read hundreds, and each, in its engrossing unlikeliness, in its terrible undeniability, seems as essential as the first. In some ways the Holocaust has become for us almost a convention. The cruelty, the murder, the blood, the fear, are like notes on a scale; what we hear are threnodies in an established mode.

At the same time, there is something about these liturgies of shame that isn't susceptible in any ordinary way to the imagination, in the sense that imagination is the fusion of the moral and the mental, of the mind as agent and the matter of the mind as subject; they simply won't allow the resolution, the solidity, the sense of being set, which is generally achieved by phenomena

imagination has confronted. We seem to have to begin our moral education again each time we encounter that history. This is reality, the gas chamber; this is truth, the perfectly arbitrary bullet. And so we read again, as though we would, if we could accumulate enough of the gruesome particulars, finally "understand," finally be allowed the kind of closure and consummation that our other histories bring us.

And yet, when we are dealing with the evidence left by an artist, there can be something unjust in all this. To define a dedicated poet like Radnóti merely, or primarily, or even partially as a witness is to violate the meaning that he gave his own life, and his own death. Radnóti was a poet. If, under the pressure of events, his pure and passionate poetry was forced to incorporate the horrors with which his world was afflicted, it did so resolutely in the context of his commitment to his calling to the lyric.

He was born in 1909. Hungary, "that little country ringed by fire," as he would call it in a late poem, was already, by the time he reached maturity, in a state of incipient explosion. Radnóti's life wasn't particularly unusual for those years. Born into a non-observant Jewish family, his early years were marked by tragedy that was personal rather than public: the death of his mother and a twin brother at his birth, and of his father when he was 12. In *Under Gemini*, an autobiographical memoir, he recounts the shattering experience of discovering that his mother was his stepmother and his sister his half sister. (In all of Radnóti's books in English, it is remarked only in one edition, in a footnote to a poem from the '40s, that the stepmother and half sister both died at Auschwitz. Radnóti never knew it.)

Hungary in the '20s and '30s, traumatized by the disastrous peace treaty after World War I and an unfortunate period under a "Soviet" government, was undergoing, like much of Europe, a period of intense anti-Semitism. The country was, if anything, ahead of Germany, at least early on, in promulgating racial laws, with the result that Radnóti was forced to attend university in Szeged rather than in Budapest, where the Jewish quota had already been filled. He studied Hungarian and French literature, became active in leftist university politics, and had already published three books of poetry by the time he received his doctorate in 1935. By then any religious interest he may have had seemed to have been directed toward the Catholicism that attracted so many intellectuals during the '30s, but his Jewish origins proscribed him from the teach-

ing positions for which he was qualified. He tutored instead, taught in his father-in-law's stenography school, translated, and generally lived the pinched but not yet desperate existence of a writer in the thriving cultural life of Budapest *entre deux guerres*.

He was in Paris in 1931, then again in 1937, when he was a spectator at a literary congress in which the participants included Neruda, Brecht, and Langston Hughes. Paris remained a powerful lure for him; he used it often in his poems as a symbol of "elsewhere." He was there again in 1939, and must have considered staying or fleeing further. He had already written, though, of the risks of exile. "In a cheap New York hotel / T tied a rope around his neck. / He walked around homeless for many years. / How can he go on?" "T" was Ernst Toller, the German playwright.

**H**ungary threw in its lot with Germany in 1939, and Radnóti's situation became much darker. Before his fatal exile in 1944, he was sent away in 1941 to clear mines and barbed wire from areas that Hungary had reacquired from Romania, then again in 1943 for a period of brutal labor in a sugar beet refinery. His poems were no longer published after 1938, although he continued to translate, and to compose at an ever more intense pace.

Radnóti's early poems were heavily influenced by various avant-garde movements, particularly the French. His political leftism also left its mark: many of the poems from his first books enact a self-conscious, almost programmatically "proletarian" sensual openness. But there is always something good-tempered and large-spirited in the work. It almost echoes Whitman in its insistence on an open sexuality, in its attempt to fuse the spiritual and the frankly erotic. This was not the sort of thing to please an authoritarian, puritanical regime, always on the lookout for a Jew to scapegoat. Radnóti's second book was confiscated, and in 1931 he went on trial for "effrontery to public modesty and incitement to rebellion."

Although he received a sentence of only a few days, this was a matter of moment, because it further threatened Radnóti's already precarious professional prospects, and he fought to have the verdict reversed—successfully, as it turned out, mostly because of the influence of a Catholic priest who had been his mentor at Szeged. Radnóti afterward toned down direct sensuality in his poems, but he was the kind of poet anyway whose successes have less to do with the material of the poems than with their poetic and lyric intensity. From his earliest work,

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Radnóti was primarily a pastoralist, a love poet, a singer. Even during the earliest experimental period, the poems usually work through the protocols of nature consciousness, of an ecstatic voice moving through orthodox landscape, in conventional protestations of passion. Although his work was informed from start to finish with a deep moral generosity, when he allowed his political concerns to come openly into his work, as in the poems he wrote about the Spanish War, they usually sit awkwardly:

Freedom men cry about your fate!  
This afternoon, they sang for you.  
With heavy words, the wet-faced poor  
of Paris sang about your battles.  
(translated by Polgar et al.)

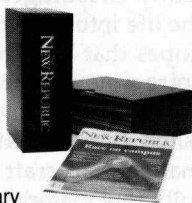
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This isn't at all to say that Radnóti was ever less than a single-minded, self-conscious artist. He studied assiduously in the literatures of the several languages he knew, and translated extensively, from French (Ronsard, La Fontaine, Apollinaire, Cendars, Larbaud) and German (some of the classical poets, Rilke, Trakl) and English (Blake, Wordsworth, and *Twelfth Night*). He was working on his translation of Shakespeare when he was sent away for the last time. He read Whitman; he knew, intensely admired, and wrote several times about Lorca, whose work he read in English. More openly in the early work, but later on as well, there are traces of many of these poets. Even the harrowing "Postcards" have their genesis in experiments by Apollinaire and Cendars.

Radnóti's most admired translation is the "Ninth Eclogue" of Virgil, which was also important in the development of his own work. After it he began his own series of eclogues, and they are among the most masterful of his poems. Working in a form so closely associated with the pastoral seems paradoxically to have released him into more encompassing poetic reflections. "The First Eclogue," a dialogue between a poet and a shepherd, written in 1938, is also the first of his poems in which the horror of contemporary events comes into the poem without feeling forced or intrusive. The shepherd says:

What I heard is now certain: amid corpses  
stiff with blood,  
On the ridges of the wild Pyrenees, red-hot  
cannon wrangle ...  
In flocks, with knotted bundles, flee old  
folk, women and children,  
Throwing themselves on the ground as  
Death starts circling above,  
And there are so many lying dead ...  
(translated by Wilmer and Gómori)

"The Second Eclogue" is a dialogue between a poet and a pilot, both of whom are stoically aware that they will probably soon die. "Will you write about me?" the pilot asks. "If I'm alive," the poet responds. "If there's anyone left." It is hardly surprising that the premonition of violent death should be such a prominent theme in the poems of this period. "I am the one they'll kill finally, / because I myself never killed," one says. But right to the end there is still always something wonderfully pure about Radnóti's work. The character of the poet in the work is frank, open, essentially healthy. Even in the poem called "Maybe," in which the possibility of going mad is meditated, there is a "palinode":

Don't leave me, delicate mind!  
Don't let me go crazy.

Sweet wounded reason, don't  
leave me now.  
(translated by Polgar et al.)

And in a poem even more grim, "Terrifying Angel" (which echoes Rilke's *Duino Elegies*), a poem on suicide in which the madness, driven by a reality itself demented, seems much closer, the power of the poetry still sublimates the sentiments of death, so that the speculation, though driven and desperate, still has nothing of the neurotic about it:

Here, here's the knife.  
It doesn't hurt. It takes only a second,  
there's only a hiss ...  
And the knife woke up on the table and  
flashed ...  
(translated by Polgar et al.)

It is its lyric power that makes much of the later work's intense confrontation with the dismal actualities Radnóti was living so effective. The poems become more and more formally intricate, rhymed and metered; this, combined with the way he charged them with both general and personal anguish, gives them the feeling of being almost driven out of their own definitions. The pastoral is forced to the very limits of the serenity to which it still stubbornly bears evidence. A love poem can become study of violated consciousness, of mind hounded to the state at which it is tempted to try to escape itself. In another poem addressed to his wife, he writes:

Do you see night, the wild oakwood fence  
lined with barbed wire,  
and the barracks, so flimsy that the night  
swallowed them?  
Slowly the eye passes the limits of captivity  
and only the mind, the mind knows how  
tight the wire is.  
You see, dear, this is how we set our  
imaginings free ...  
(translated by Polgar et al.)

Toward the end, the poems become ever more conflicted and anguished. The anger that Radnóti was so conscious of keeping out of his work—"There's no anger in my heart right now, I don't think about revenge"—emerges despite him, and a prophetic note begins to inform the work:

I lived on this earth in an age  
when man fell so low  
he killed willingly, for pleasure, without  
orders ...  
... Drunk on blood and scum, the nation  
went mad  
and grinned at its horrible fate ...  
(translated by Polgar et al.)

Or:  
There are boys crouching. Awkward pretty  
words  
stick to their lips like embers.

Their bodies swell with many little victories.  
Calmly, when they have to,  
they kill.

(translated by Polgar et al.)

Radnóti composed poems, astonishingly, all during his last term in the camp, sometimes in despair, sometimes in resignation. In a poem called "Root," he says,

I am a root myself now,  
living among worms.

This poem is written down there.

(translated by Polgar et al.)

And in "A Letter to My Wife," he cries out, "I know you are my friend, my wife ... you are three wild borders away!" If Radnóti was ever tempted by the consolations of religion, it shows hardly at all in his poetry, and yet he turns, in the last and eighth eclogue, to the Old Testament as a source for what has now become spiritual fury. In a dialogue with the prophet Nahum, the poet says:

... Whole nations scramble to the slaughter,

And the soul of Man is stripped bare, even as Nineveh ...

... Of all beasts, Man is the basest!

Here, tiny babes are dashed against walls and, over there,

The church tower is a torch, the house an oven roasting  
own people.

(translated by Wilmer and Gömöri)

He is being worn down, the poet says, "like a round stone in a wild stream," and the prophet, in a kind of pardon, or a kind of condolence, answers:

So you may think. But I know your new poems. Wrath nurtures you.

The poet's wrath, much like the prophet's, is food and drink

To the people ...

(translated by Wilmer and Gömöri)

Even after that, though, with only weeks to live, it is the lyric to which Radnóti returns. The first two of the terrible "Postcards" reaffirm the humility, the power, and the unlikely formal calm of Radnóti's lyricism. This is the first:

From Bulgaria the huge wild pulse of artillery.

It beats on the mountain ridge, then hesitates, falls.

Men, animals, wagons, and thoughts. They are swelling.

The road whinnies and rears. The sky gallops.

You are permanent within me in this chaos. Somewhere deep in my mind you shine forever, without

oving, silent, like the angel awed by death,

or like the insect burying itself in the rotted heart of a tree.

And the second:

Nine miles from here  
the haystacks and houses burn,  
and on the edges of the meadow  
there are quiet frightened peasants,  
smoking.

The little shepherd girl seems  
to step into the lake, the water ripples.

The ruffled sheepfold

bends to the clouds and drinks.

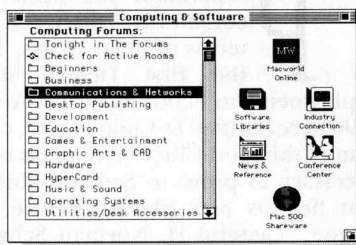
(both translated by Polgar et al.)

What exactly is the poet doing when he inscribes those last postcards from the provinces of death, when he wills himself to impose form on a reality as close to chaos as anything ever inflicted on our sad planet? Common knowledge would say that art serves something

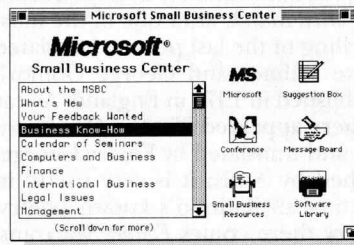
beyond itself, that it is an implement, of morality, of belief. But for the artist it is actually everything else that serves art. This is the wisdom of art, the knowledge that beauty perhaps is the one undeniably unique attribute of the human. That a man, already condemned to an abyss of ferocious irrationality, should will his soul toward the seemingly gratuitous beauties of precision and form is metaphysically ludicrous, but it is exalting.

When we read Radnóti's poems, we sense all this, the struggle with form, the dedication and the affirmation, and we are reflected back to ourselves out of the graceful and still serene whisper-

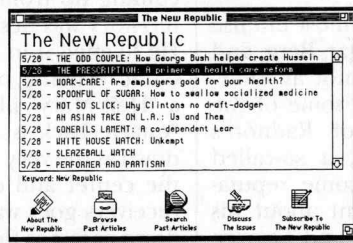
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ings between consciousness and its medium. The blood is drying on that dying, or already dead, ear; but the ear still hears the music it is making for itself and for us. Radnóti is a great poet, and his work brings us moving witness of courage, tenacity, and spiritual defiance. But the real triumph of his poetry is the way that it constrains the appalling evidence to work for its own purposes, the way that it testifies to the redemptive resources of the poetic imagination. Its triumph, finally, is itself.

There have been a number of serious attempts at bringing Radnóti into English. *Clouded Sky*, translated by Steven Polgar, Stephen Berg, and S.J. Marks, which first appeared in 1972, is a free-verse version of the last book, that is, of all the posthumous poems. An unfortunately short selection, titled *Forced March*, after one of the most compelling of the last poems, translated by Clive Wilmer and George Gömöri, was published in 1979 in England. A year later there appeared *The Complete Poetry*, edited and translated by Emery George, published by Ardis; it is very useful in presenting all Radnóti's known poetry. And now there comes *Foamy Sky*, translated by Zsuzsanna Ozsváth and Frederick Turner.

The most readable and most intense of these versions is the Polgar, Berg, and Marks. The others, while not as forceful, all attempt to capture some of the intricate formal power of Radnóti's poetry. Although Turner, a so-called "new formalist" poet of some reputation, is the most confident about his translations, both Wilmer and George come up with versions that give more of a feeling of the music of the originals while still being acceptable poems in their own right. Turner's work is infected with a combination of hubris and carelessness that contaminates nearly every one of his attempts.

He makes many claims, the most fatal, I think, when he admits that although sometimes his versions "may sound very strange" they are actually "expanding the very notion of what is 'natural' in English." What is "natural" to Turner are lines like these:

... I'll lay me down and labor when I wake,  
thy sunglow hangs already on the vine,  
and night begins the hills to overtake.

Or, "The poppies' fuzzy-wuzzy stems are green." Or, "The missing/ belovedest friends ..." Or, "I, fecund only of flowers ..." Or, "... The brilliant pee-wee ray of sunshine." Or:

He knows now how the pen is a weapon

and a tool,  
how back-breaking the task is to fitly twang  
the lyre.

"To fitly twang the lyre"? To treat Radnóti's poems in such a way is appalling. It violates the very qualities that make him great: his moral serious-

ness, and the formal majesty that reflects it.

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## Between Iraq and a Soft Place

BY LAWRENCE FREEDMAN

### It Doesn't Take a Hero by H. Norman Schwarzkopf with Peter Petre

(Linda Grey/Bantam, 530 pp., \$25)

Preparation for warfare is commonly discussed in terms of team sports. Thus the first Desert Shield deployments to Saudi Arabia in August 1990 were justified by Colin Powell, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, as being necessary to prove to Saddam Hussein that he was now playing in the "big league." General H. Norman Schwarzkopf's strategy for retaking Kuwait by coming up from the west though Iraqi territory was described as a "left hook." He likened it in his celebrated "how we did it" briefing, on February 27, 1991, to a "Hail Mary" play in football—when a "quarterback is desperate for a touchdown at the very end ... he steps behind the center and every single one of his receivers goes way out and they all run down as fast as they possibly can into the end zone, and he lobs the ball."

Now, there are obvious similarities between a general and a football coach. Both need to grasp the competition's strengths and weaknesses, as well as their own. And the genius of both may lie in knowing when to use sheer power to push through enemy defenses, and when it's time to try a tricky variation on an old tactic. In a tight game, the morale, the cohesion, and the sheer professionalism of the team may make all the difference. Brilliant individual performances may do no good unless they enhance the performance of the team as a whole. And media commentary from a safe distance on the twists and the turns of a war, even when it is a desperate and vicious struggle, can soon make it look very much like a spectator sport; the score is tallied in casualties, the battle-field successes are cheered.

But war, of course, is not a game. Even at the most superficial level of comparison, the difference is critical. Games

depend on agreed rules enforced by a referee. War, too, has its code of ethics, including the Geneva Convention, which the International Committee of the Red Cross does its best to sustain; but a game's structure puts limits on its location and its duration, and dictates the composition and the equipment of the opposing sides, whereas wars are won through exploiting advantages in all of these areas.

The Gulf war was won because the forces of the American-led coalition had the mobility to extend the battlefield to catch the Iraqis at their most vulnerable; because they could pace the war to suit themselves, choosing the moment for the opening shots, then shifting to a land campaign and determining the eventual cease-fire; and because they could draw on sufficient reserves of manpower and first-rate equipment to overwhelm the enemy at the point of contact. As a result, few engagements were anything other than one-sided. The coalition won command of the air and the sea with barely a fight. This was hardly the "mother of all battles"; in fact, it was a rout. As a game, Desert Storm would have been a promoter's nightmare—a prizefight that ended abruptly in the first round.

The title of Schwarzkopf's memoir, *It Doesn't Take a Hero*, allows for a variety of meanings. It actually comes from a post-war interview with Barbara Walters: "It doesn't take a hero to order men into battle. It takes a hero to be one of those men who go into battle." My own first thought on hearing that "it doesn't take a hero" was to complete the thought with "but it helps." Or with "especially you're fighting the Iraqis."

That, of course, would be unfair. Some sort of victory was inevitable, but there was still plenty of room for things