

Visions of Catastrophe in the Poetry of Miklós Radnóti

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**Zsuzsanna Ozsváth,**  
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**Abstract:** In her article "Visions of Catastrophe in the Poetry of Miklós Radnóti" Zsuzsanna Ozsváth proposes that the poet's work shows an evolution of a set of visionary images auguring the Holocaust. This development followed on the heels of the poet's earlier interest in the socialist, populist, and left-oriented movements and ideas that drove a number of Hungarian artists and young intellectuals of the time. Immersed in social-cultural activities during his university years in Szeged (1930-35), Radnóti underwent a significant change when he moved back to Budapest. He recognized the threat posed by the Third Reich and watched with great consternation the involvement of a number of Hungarian intellectuals and politicians in rightist and anti-Semitic activities and propaganda. Responding to this development, he started to warn of the impending catastrophe and suggest the breakthrough of previously unimaginable forces in the world. Ozsváth's study of Radnóti's work reveals a frequency and intensity of these visions, connoting more than the poet's disagreement with contemporary political developments and his foresight of destruction and mass murder.

**Zsuzsanna OZSVÁTH****Visions of Catastrophe in the Poetry of Miklós Radnóti**

Central to the late poetry of Miklós Radnóti is the evolution of a set of visionary images auguring the Holocaust. This development followed on the heels of the poet's earlier interest in the socialist, populist, and left-oriented movements and ideas that drove a number of Hungarian artists and young intellectuals of the time. Immersed in social-cultural activities during his university years in Szeged (1930-35), Radnóti underwent a significant change when he moved back to Budapest. He recognized the threat posed by the Third Reich and watched with great consternation the involvement of a number of Hungarian intellectuals and politicians in rightist and anti-Semitic activities and propaganda (Ozsváth, *In the Footsteps* 108-17). Responding to this development, he started to warn of the impending catastrophe and suggest the breakthrough of previously unimaginable forces in the world. Of course, at first sight we may identify his premonitions and images as poetic responses to the rising extremist political groups of his time. But a more careful study of Radnóti's work reveals a frequency and intensity of these visions, connoting more than the poet's disagreement with contemporary political developments; they reveal rather his foresight of destruction and mass murder.

Certainly, visions of catastrophe are not foreign to Hungarian poetry. Over the past five hundred years, Hungarian poets often bewailed the tragic fate that had befallen their country. But Radnóti's forebodings probably spring from other, older, cultural sources as well. They may be identified as part of the ancient Jewish prophetic tradition: warning of calamity, awareness of sin, retribution, fear, despair, and hope, a tradition that has become part of both Jewish liturgy and Jewish communal memory. Recast, reformulated, and reshaped to fit the circumstances of the time and place in which Radnóti lived, this commemorative material has created a subtext to the poet's uncanny visions of devastation, to his urge to chronicle and witness history, and to his repeated declarations of his passionate love for Hungary, including his self-projection as a true son of his native land, indivisible from the larger Magyar community.

That Radnóti felt passionate about his country and defined himself as a Hungarian poet above all else may be explained by a variety of reasons. The most obvious among them lies in the memorial tradition of Hungarian literature that has been shaped by a series of cataclysmic historical events. Indeed, ever since the Mongol devastation of Hungary in the thirteenth century, the Ottoman invasion and rule in the sixteenth, and the Austrian domination in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Hungarian poetic memory not only drew from the anguish of the past but also captured the country's present and future in somber images. With World War I and its aftermath, the Trianon Peace Treaty (1920), which erased the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, the greatest Hungarian poets (Endre Ady, Mihály Babits, Dezső Kosztolányi, Attila József, and Miklós Radnóti, just to mention a few twentieth-century bards) continued to reinforce Hungary's memorial tradition and struggled for what they felt constituted the soul of the Magyars. Thus, even while the new approaches and insights of modernism penetrated poetry and culture in Hungary, the literary tradition of the country, with its expectations of the rhetorical and oracular role of the great national poets, did not fade.

No one could question the impact of this tradition of anguish and struggle on Radnóti: he identified himself with it throughout his life. At the same time, we must take note of the poet's deeper and older cultural roots, the presence of yet another, perhaps less visible but massively powerful, ancient culture that influenced the ethos of the smaller world Radnóti was born into, a culture that had its own wide-ranging memorial tradition of suppression, anguish, promise, and nationhood. Indeed, Radnóti came from a Hungarian Jewish background with perhaps loose religious but necessarily significant cultural ties (Ozsváth, *In the Footsteps* 1-5). Besides his immediate family, the poet had a number of relatives and friends whose world was shaped, as was that of other Jews, whether strictly religious or not, by a specific set of experiences and beliefs, traditionally comprising the collective memory of the Jews regarding their history, religion, and culture. Based on issues such as the covenant, the Jewish

homeland, prophetic forebodings, persecution, dispersion, exile, return, and redemption, this Jewish cultural-religious inheritance was passed from generation to generation in the Jewish communities, from the ancient past to the present. The awareness of an impending calamity as one of its basic components, the destruction of the temples, the martyrdom of prophets and rabbis, the Crusades, and subsequent persecutions have become part of Jewish liturgy and have been commemorated over the ages by the Jewish community (Roskies 3-12). In fact, as Yerushalmi says, "only in Israel and nowhere else is the injunction to remember felt as a religious imperative to an entire people" (9).

In Hungary, after the defeat of the Turks and the subsequent Austrian domination of the country, concerns of nationhood moved to the center of the Magyar political development. The "Compromise" with Austria in 1867, however, not only brought growth to both countries but also held out the promise of a new homeland for the Jews in Hungary. Small wonder that by 1910, 75 percent of the nearly one million Jews, six percent of the population, most of whom had come from Poland and Russia, identified themselves as Magyars (Karády 164). Assimilating within a few decades, they became passionate Hungarian patriots, seeing themselves as part of Hungary's past, present, and future. During World War I, approximately 10,000 Jewish soldiers fell on the front (Braham 78-79) and tens of thousands were wounded in the battles they fought for their homeland. But after the armistice that ended the fighting in 1918 and the defeat of the communist government in 1919, the status of the Hungarian Jews changed significantly. Identifying them as enemies of the Hungarian people, the Regent of Hungary Admiral Miklós Horthy's counterrevolutionary army carried out massive pogroms, and his semi-fascist government, while courting rich Jews, resurrected the age-old animus. Yet the Hungarian Jews' devotion did not change toward their homeland; nor did they alter their identification with Hungary's tragic past. As a result, despite the *numerus clausus* law of 1920, which regulated the number of Jews in Hungarian universities (the first anti-Jewish measure in twentieth-century Europe), and despite the intense anti-Semitism of the rightist media, Radnóti's generation did not contemplate exile. Even during the pogroms of 1919, in which over 6,000 Jews were murdered by Horthy's army, only a tiny number of Jews left the country. In fact, most Hungarian Jews remained in Hungary and continued to identify themselves with the ethos of their homeland, mourning its losses and working for its future.

Singleed out as a Jew and thus denied admission by the *numerus clausus* law at Péter Pázmány University in Budapest, Radnóti enrolled in the fall of 1930 in the School of Arts and Humanities at Szeged University, where this law was perhaps less rigorously observed. In addition, he became a member of a political student organization, the Art College of Young Szeged, which grew out of contemporaneous populist-socialist ideas and was dedicated to the goal of creating a better economic, political, and cultural environment for the country's poor and dispossessed peasants.

Years passed before Radnóti's vision of persecution and catastrophe began to take form and eventually expand, recalling and recasting some of the ancient Biblical and post-Biblical responses to destruction, before he started to foresee devastating events and felt compelled to witness and record history in the fashion of prophets and rabbis, recounting the loss of their communities. The first manifestation of this process emerges in an early poem, "Like a Bull" ("Mint a bika; 22 August 1933), which projects a scene of atrocity and murder, while foreshadowing Radnóti's stance as a poet and seer in the time of destruction (Ozsváth and Turner 34). The speaker of the poem insists, as do later personae in a number of Radnóti verses, on both the need for resistance and the means of restoration. Instead of evoking divine power, however, as have the prophets of the Bible and even the chroniclers of later times, the "Bull" poem points toward the poet's task of opposing bloodshed. In so doing, it emphasizes a larger structure of meaning as a response to atrocity and murder: "but the bull snorts and doesn't flee as the deer are / fleeing ... / Even so will I struggle and so will I die; / still as sign to posterity the fields will preserve my bones" ("a bika ... fölszagal s nem menekül, mint menekülnek / az őzek ... / Így küzdök én is és így esem el majd, / s okulásul késő koroknak, csontjaim őrzi a táj"). There is no indication of the arrival of miraculous forces appearing here to stop the attack of the wolf

pack. But the fact that the speaker would resist rather than succumb to destruction demonstrates the living power of the Biblical tie between calamity and restitution.

Indeed, calamity has remained a threat of Jewish existence. Its role is well-documented, as David Roskies maintains, partly in the "immutable texts" themselves, partly in post-Biblical history and in its chronicles (4). It emerges in the liturgy of the service and in the Book of Lamentations, a body of writings which gives account of both ancient and newer events of catastrophic Jewish history in the words of the prophets or poets, in addition to the community's response to the ongoing devastation. Yet no matter how vividly described and how graphically presented, catastrophe has traditionally been depicted as retribution for the sins of the community, reminding the Israelites of both the covenant and God's promise to return them to the Promised Land (see *Yerushalmi* 9-10). For the message has been clear from the beginning: If the Jews observe the laws of God, their redemption is granted; if they don't, catastrophe follows. It is this ancient tradition, then, or, as Roskies calls it, "this archetype," that has been evoked by Jewish prophets, poets, and artists to illuminate every phase of Jewish persecution. Hence, as Roskies argues, "no matter how long the list of martyrs grew to be, and no matter how many disasters crowded the memorial calendar, they ultimately confirmed the covenantal relationship between the Jews and the God of history" (4). With this belief persisting over the ages, catastrophes, however devastating, did not overthrow the order of the universe. Encountering them, the community followed the rituals of mourning, but it did not give up its hope for restitution. Not even the massive secularization processes or the philosophies of recent times have changed "this archetype" over the centuries.

But after two millennia of ongoing persecution and calamity, the possibility that the Jews could live as fully as everybody else became a reality. Indeed, with emancipation emerging as the path of their future, some of them started to grow weary of waiting for the fulfillment of the ancient promise. And as time went by, and the ideas of the Enlightenment gained ever wider assent over the continent, many Jews turned to what Roskies calls, "the competing covenants of the time under the terms of which ... [they] could hope for an end to the terrors of history" (5). That is, as the times changed, "Jewish socialists fought for political sovereignty and the rest looked for civil equality within democratic states" (5). By the middle of the nineteenth century, as elsewhere in Europe, Jews in Hungary started to reach toward one of the most effective "competing covenants": they reformulated the ancient promise of "homeland" and became, as already mentioned, enthusiastic Magyar citizens.

The collapse of the country in World War I, however, created significant changes. Reinterpreting the ancient call to help save the world, some intellectuals of Jewish descent became involved in the "secular covenant" of the socialist movement. In fact, a group of Left-radicals, many of them of Jewish background, formed with Béla Kun, himself of Jewish origin, a communist government in Hungary in 1919. This government failed miserably, within a few months, however, and what took its place was Horthy's right-wing, anti-Semitic leadership, which encouraged ardent nationalism and perpetuated Hungary's semi-feudal tradition. In response to the regent's policies and the blows Hungary suffered, a number of young Jewish artists and intellectuals of Radnóti's generation turned toward the search for new solutions, new ideas, and new movements. Some of them found in socialism a potential for healing the wounds of the world. Others discovered the answer in Hungarian populist patriotism, in aesthetic Catholicism, or in the realm of pure aesthetics. While the goals these groups tried to achieve varied, their belief in their homeland never wavered. Identifying with the world of the Magyars, most Hungarian literati of Jewish origin considered themselves to be deeply rooted in the country just as their nineteenth-century ancestors had been grateful for having found the Promised Land in Hungary.

But by the early 1930s, the world grew more threatening than it had been before. First, the Great Depression spread and intensified. And while the number of breadlines multiplied everywhere, in Germany, Hitler took over. In Hungary, Gyula Gömbös, one of the most notorious anti-Semites of the rightist counterrevolutionary movement of 1919, became prime minister. Tying his concept of Hungarian political evolution to the country's economic progress and support of the Third Reich, Gömbös

started to prepare Hungary on the path that would lead to the country's alliance with Hitler. And while the voices of the Hungarian rightist parties resounded ever louder and ever more passionately anti-Semitic, by the early 1930s, those of such popular writers and poets as Áron Tamási, Gyula Illyés, and László Németh waxed shrill when directed against the Jews (Ozsváth, "Can Words Kill"? 79-116). Amid periodic outbreaks of hatred, Radnóti started to envision bewildering portents.

Some of his poems indicate the poet's concern about Hungary; others are laced with premonitions of a dark future. His sinister vistas crystallized by 1936. On 8 January of that year, his "War Diary" ("Háborús napló") appeared, mixing among its wistful, melancholic images and tunes, apparitions of war and massacres (Ozsváth and Turner 44-49). In fact, the poem captures heaps of desecrated human bodies that indicate the arrival of a world previously unknown to poets, may we even say, to humankind. Looking back at the mid-1930s, we must note that this poem is a watershed. Written months before the Spanish Civil War, it emphasizes essential changes and gestures toward a heretofore unimaginable future, one in which millions of people would die senseless and meaningless deaths. Of course, after the slaughterhouse created by World War I, images of distortion, fragmentation, and violence emerged quite frequently in European discourse, including the arts and literature. And the vision of apocalypse, repeatedly projected by the far Left in the form of a bloody war initiated by the capitalist state, preoccupied a number of intellectuals. But this poem is different from the rest. With prophetic power, it calls attention to aspects of a realm in which death takes over.

"War Diary" is divided into four sections, each of which presents foreboding vistas, auguring catastrophe. In the first one, the heart-wrenching portent of a coming war emerges twice: "The mornings suspect, the nights horrible omens, / half your life you've spent between a war and a war" ("Gyanakvó reggelek s vészes esték között, / háborúk közt élted le életed felét"). And in the last stanza, the same threat reappears: "So time and tide turn over into a new war, / hungry clouds eat up the gentle blue of the sky" ("A világ új háborúba fordul, éhes / felhő falja föl egén az enyhe kéket"). But there was no war in Europe as yet. What Radnóti saw here involves an uncanny glimpse into Europe's tomorrow. Hidden, distorted, and disguised, the seers of the Bible appear behind the speaker of these lyrics, raging against evil, foretelling the future. In the second section of the poem, concrete acts of destruction emerge: "They prepare against me -- gas, bomb, plane" ("gáz, gép, bomba készül ellenem"). And as the poem continues, the speaker captures a scene of abandonment and death, which simply foretells Radnóti's last days and hours, in the fall of 1944, when he was chased in rain and cold and mud across the roads of Yugoslavia and Hungary. The persona is lonely and desperate, hoping to come across a human being, just "one soul": "so I too think I see the land, and I call \ A Soul! / my voice white, white as the whitelight's flare" ("úgy vélek én is, mégis partokat és / lélek! / kiáltok fehér hangon én is"). And the quiet pastoral of the beginning of the poem's third section is suddenly obliterated by a stanza that projects murder: Radnóti's own brutal execution: "I will lie broken, out of sight of men, / in the mouth and in the eye the wormed earth will lie, / roots will transfix my body then" ("törten heverek majd, senkise lát; férges föld fekszik szájamban és szememben / s testem gyökerek verik át"). This scene is followed by the horrific image of mass deaths: "all through the fields the worms beslither the ground, / gnawing and gnawing away without a sound / the endless rows of dead" ("férgék másznak szét a messzi reteken / és lassan szerterággják a végtelen / sort fekvő holtakat").

Radnóti's ominous gaze into the future calls attention to the wounded world at a time when just a very few Europeans were able to recognize the coming disaster. Capturing what Roskies terms the "remarkable continuities in the Jewish response to destruction" (5), it also reveals the poet's growing understanding of the development of his own exile. What now starts to take shape in Radnóti's lyrics involves his vision of a catastrophe of Biblical dimensions and the apocalyptic consequences of exile.

The poem "Just Walk On, Condemned to Die" ("Járkálj csak halálraitélt!") was composed in 1936 (see Ozsváth and Turner 50-51). Perhaps more than any of his earlier poems, this piece may be seen as the poet-prophet's call for hard resistance in the name of human life and goodness. In a world,

where "hunchbacked with fear the road turns pale" ("a réműlettől / fehér és púpos lett az út"), where "cold hisses from the sky" ("az égről hideg sziszeg le"), the poet must "live as clean as those / hill-dwellers in their windblown snows" ("tisztán élj te most, / mint a széljárta havasok / lakói") and "as free of sin / as baby Jesus in / an icon where the candle glows, / as hard as the great wolf who goes / wounded and bleeding through the snows" ("és oly büntelen / mint jámbor régi képeken / pöttömnyi gyermek Jézusok. / S oly keményen is, mint a sok / sebtől vérző nagy farkasok"). No matter the destruction, the poet must remain as strong as the "great wolf" that walks wounded across the snows: "Guard and Protect Me" ("Őrizz és védj") of 1937, too, attempts to fight against the rising threat, resounding the voice of the prophet (see Ozsváth and Turner 70-71). Despite images of mass destruction, the last stanza of the poem reveals the speaker's belief in human dignity and transcendence. "Guard and protect me ... / let not the brownly-burning smoke of fear / soil or besoot my word's white purity!" ("Őrizz és védj ... / tiszta szavam sose kormozza be / a barna füsttel égő félelem!"). Although the persona knows that he lives in times in which poems have lost their meaning -- "what worth am I? when bombs are everywhere / in hands most lunatic and fatuous?" ("s mit érek én ... hogyha ostobán / bombát szorongat minden kerge kéz!) -- he still believes in the power of his word's "white purity." But no verse expresses more Radnóti's vision of the dark times casting their shadow over the world, no lyrics of his make it clearer what the poet's task is in those times than the "First Eclogue" ("Első ecloga") composed in 1938 (Ozsváth and Turner 72-75). As the exchange between the shepherd and the poet shows: "Shepherd: ... how do you live? does the age give an echo at all to your words? / Poet: ... I write on, and live in the heart of this crazy world like / the oak in the forest" ("Pásztor: ... Hát te hogy élsz? visszhang jöhet-e szavaidra e korban? Költő: ... Írok azért, s úgy élek e kerge világ közepén, mint / ott az a tölgy él")

And to the pilot's question in the "Second Eclogue" ("Második ecloga"), composed in 1941 (see Ozsváth and Turner 106-09), "Friend, did you write since yesterday? " ("Irtál-e tegnap óta?") the poet replies: "Write -- what else could I do? ... Of everything I write ("Irtam, mit is tehetnék? ... Mindent megírok én"). Also Radnóti's "Third Eclogue" ("Harmadik ecloga"; 12 June 1941) reveals the poet's faith in the redemptive power of poetry (see Ozsváth and Turner 114-15). It revolves around his need for writing and holding onto what has now become his life; it points toward the ways in which he still can record his experience: "no gravemound will mark the place of our dust, no / arched and beautiful Attic krater shall keep it, but perhaps / one or two poems shall remain" ("nem jelzi halom porainkat, / sem nemesívű szép görög urna nem őrzi, de egy-két / versünk hogyha marad"). Also, the ending of the "Fourth Eclogue" ("Negyedik ecloga"; 15 March 1943), demonstrates the poet's belief in the transforming power of words; in fact, it hints at Radnóti's hope for a divine restoration of the earthly realm (see Ozsváth and Turner 150-53). Composed in a labor camp, where the young man lived amid hunger, intimidation, torture, and threats, the poem ends with Radnóti's visionary lines: "the remembering earth will rock your lullaby. / But let your wrath, in smoke, fly up among the stars / and write, though all is broken, on the sky" ("elnyugtat majd a mély, emlékkal teli föld. / De haragod füstje még szálljon az égig, / s az égre írd, ha minden összetört!"). Despite everything, the words of the covenant may perhaps still be pieced together. Radnóti's vision of the broken tablets sways beyond the earthly; he sees them above this realm, as the source of meaning.

The role of the poet as a speaker for the world community appears dramatized again and again. It was 1 June 1939, three months before the outbreak of World War II, when Radnóti wrote "Lines Written in a Copy of *Steep Road*" ("A Meredek út egyik példányára"), the piece which foretells the horrible fate of the martyr-poet of our time "whom they will kill, all right, / because he did not kill" (kit végül is megölnék, / mert maga sosem ölt") (Ozsváth and Turner 88-89). In the world of destruction, the poet must be killed, gestures the speaker, because he is "a witness to the truth" ("mert az igazra tanu"). In Biblical terms, as long as the prophet is alive, he will speak up so that the community will always be aware of both what takes place in the world and what the word of God means. But what happens when he is murdered? With him, God disappears, and so does hope in the world. (Of course, it is es-

sentential to remind ourselves that Radnóti did not die "because he did not kill," but rather because he was sentenced to death and executed as a Jew.)

In "Spring Is Flying" ("Száll a tavasz"; 11 April 1942), the speaker fears that now "the ancient angel of freedom" is sleeping "in the deep" ("a régi szabadság angyala ... alszik a mélyben") (Ozsváth and Turner 140-41). Opposing the wicked here means calling on nature to wake up and struggle against oppression. As God's creation, nature can, says the voice, resist, bear out the retribution of, and thereby save the world. In this way, as the voice says, it would pass down the higher order: "Shriek out, O root though wordless, shriek out you manifold treeleaves" ("Néma gyökér kiabálj, levelek kiabáljatok éles / hangon").

Also, in "I Know Not What" ("Nem tudhatom"; January 1944), the poet appears linked to ancient prophets whom he defends, and who are, as the lyrics insist, undeserving of God's wrath. Foretelling the catastrophe, he argues with the Divine: "but working people live here, poets in innocence, / breast-feeding infants with their dawned intelligence" ("de élnek dolgozók itt, költők is büntelen, / és csecsszopók, akikben megnő az értelem"). Reaching back to what Roskies calls "the archetype of Jewish responses to catastrophe" (5), the speaker warns the community of imminent destruction. He also affirms his love for his homeland in passionate words: "I know not what to strangers this dear landscape might mean, / to me it is my birthplace, this tiny spot of green; / ringed now with fire, it was, once, my childhood rocking me" ("Nem tudhatom, hogy másnak e tájék mit jelent, / nekem szülőhazám itt a lángoktól ölelt / kis ország, messzeringó gyerekkorom világa"). Recalling the lush greenery of his native country, he also notes that the pilot of an airplane could never perceive the hues and sweetness of that landscape because he only sees the targets of his bombs. Clearly, Radnóti's reaction to the beauty of the Hungarian landscape is partially rooted in the writings of the famous Hungarian patriotic poets. But on another level, it springs from the deepest layers of the prophets' words reminding the anguished community of the Promise (Deuteronomy 30: 1-20). Speaking in the voice of his Hungarian co-patriots, Radnóti confesses, "For we are guilty too, as others are, / we know how we have sinned, in what, and when and where" ("Hisz bűnösök vagyunk mi, akár a többi nép, / s tudjuk, miben vétkeztünk, mikor, hol és mikép"). This is a remarkable statement, however, which makes sense only if we project it on the background of the ancient Biblical archetype of sin and retribution, for the date of this poem is 17 January 1944, composed during the sixth year of World War II. Also, it is important to remember that the destruction of the Hungarian Jews did not start with the German occupation of Hungary in March 1944. The Jews had already been identified as Jews long before the arrival of the German army. In fact, their status had been determined by the anti-Jewish measures decreed by the Hungarian government between 1938 and 1941. Many of them had been impoverished for years, humiliated, and brutally treated, as was Radnóti himself during his drafts and in the slave labor camps. As for their murder, the Hungarian Jewish community had already been shaken to the core by both the mass killing of the 20,000 "foreign Jews" in Ukraine, in the summer of 1941, and the murder of the Jewish community -- altogether 1,000 Jews -- in Novi Sad (Ujvidék), Yugoslavia, in the winter of 1942. This massacre, as well as the murder of 42,000 labor servicemen on the Russian front, was carried out by the Hungarian armed forces. While the deportation of Hungarian Jews would only take place some four to six months after Radnóti composed this poem, in January 1944, the cruelties enacted by the law of the country and executed by its army, gendarmerie, and police forces had damaged the Jewish community long before the German occupation. By 1944, most Hungarian Jews would hardly have had a sense of the security in their homeland. Even if earlier some might have hoped to survive the war, by January 1944, the future of the Hungarian Jewish population could hardly have depended on the beauty of the Hungarian landscape or on the "innocence of its poets" but rather on the courage of the Allied fighter pilots involved in a murderous war. Thus, the statement uttered in the name of the community: "For we are guilty, too, as others are," must not be understood in any other terms than the prophet's vision of sin and retribution and his desire for restoring divine justice.



After the Germans occupied the country on 19 March 1944, Radnóti first poem, "O Ancient Prisons" ("Ó régi börtönök"; 27 March 1944) "gestures" toward the ultimate failure of both words and culture: "What is his fate who, while he breathes, will so / speak of what *is* in measure and in form, / and only thus he teaches how to know? // He would teach more. But all things fall apart. / He sits and gazes, helpless at his heart" (Ozsváth and Turner 174-75) ("Mi lesz most azzal, aki míg csak él / amíg csak élhet, formában beszél / s arról mi *van*, -- ítélni így tanít // tanítna még. De minden szétesett, / Hát ül és néz. Mert semmit sem tehet"). But then Radnóti's belief in the possibility of resistance recovers. Bound to the archetype of punishment and destruction, the "promise" of redemption did not fade. In fact, as late as 30 April 1944, less than three weeks before he received the draft card for his last labor service, less than four weeks before he was locked into a boxcar and transported to Yugoslavia, he composed "Neither Memory Nor Magic" ("Sem emlék, sem varázslat") (see Ozsváth and Turner 178-79). Fully aware of his ill-boding future, the speaker of the poem foretells his fate: "Turn from me when you see me, friend, throw up your hands. / Where once an angel with a sword stood guard, / now, perhaps, no one stands" ("Ha megpillantsz, barátom, fordulj el és legyints. / Hol azelőtt az angyal állt a karddal, / talán most senki sincs"). And yet, despite the hair-raising visions of the impending catastrophe, Radnóti's poem, like the words of the prophets, again and again refers to the world beyond. While strained to reassert the concept of restoration, even here, even now, the speaker-poet portends a future of renewal and reconstitution: "always the world rebuilds; though they forbid my song, / in the new wall's foundations my word will sing and be; / now it's for me to live out what there's left to me" ("a világ újraépül, -- s bár tiltják énekem, / az új falak tövében felhangzik majd szavam; / magamban élem át már mindazt, mi hátravan"). There can be no doubt, despite the threats on his life and future, that Radnóti's gaze at the world beyond did not weaken. Even under the extreme stress of his impending labor service, the lyrics of "Fragment" ("Töredék"), composed in Budapest the night before he left his home forever (Ozsváth and Turner 186-87), refer back to and evoke directly the brother-prophet Isaiah: "for none could here pronounce the dark, demanded, verse / but that Isaiah, master of the fitting curse" ("mert méltó átkort itt úgysem mondhatna más, -- / a rettentő szavak tudósa Ésaías").

In the last ten poems, composed during the time of his slave labor and on the death march from Yugoslavia to Hungary, Radnóti's vision of meaning, even though hidden and at times almost incomprehensible, remained tied to the ancient pattern. He kept on composing poetry on the edge between life and death, dignifying thereby (may we say sanctifying?), his own and others' humiliation and suffering. But he also revealed a sense of urgency for witnessing and testifying to the horror and insanity that were at work to eliminate the world as he knew it, demonstrating again and again his belief in the sacred power of poetry. The "Seventh Eclogue" ("Hetedik ecloga"), written in the labor camp Heidenau, in Yugoslavia, still relies on this belief (see Ozsváth and Turner 188-89): "Say, is there a country where someone still knows the hexameter?" ("Mondd, van-e ott haza még, ahol értik e hexametert is?"). And the next poem, "Letter to My Wife" ("Levél a hitveshez") evokes the beloved as well as demonstrates the confluence of love and poetry (Ozsváth and Turner 193-95). The third poem, "Root" ("Gyökér"), composed in Camp Heidenau, where Radnóti was forced to live under the control of both Hungarian and German armies, returns to the role poetry plays in times of destruction (Ozsváth and Turner 196-97). It intertwines the drive of the plant with the drive of the poet, who composes the verse: "Root is what I am, rootpoet, here at home among the worms, / finding here the poem's terms" ("Gyökér vagyok magam is most, / férgek között élek én, / ott készül e költemény").

"A la Recherche" (17 August 1944) echoes some of the heart-breaking recollections of the past, conjuring up a peaceful world in which order, friendship, and art were parts of reality (Ozsváth/Turner 198-201). And then again, the "Eighth Eclogue" ("Nyolcadik ecloga"; 23 August 1944), recalls the Bible. Both of its speakers, the poet and the prophet, rage against evil, bewail the loss, and point to the chaos taking over. Yet by recalling the ancient text and images, by intertwining past and present, the voice of Nahum, the prophet, recalls the world of the divine. As he says, echoing Job, "wickedness

flourisheth more than before, and / what is the purpose of Elohim no man hitherto knoweth" ("De a bűn szaporább, mint annak előtte, / s hogy mi a célja az Űrnak, senkise tudja ma sem még"). He also evokes Jesus, referring to him as "the young disciple, the / rabbi who came to fulfill the Law, to fulfill our prophecies" ("amaz ifju tanítvány, / rabbi, ki bétöltötte a törvényt és szavainkat").

In "Forced March" ("Erőltetett menet"; 15 1944), composed in Yugoslavia a day or two before Radnóti was sent on the death march, the reality of another world is quite dim, almost nonexistent. It is his homeland, his wife, and his former life, the speaker recalls, only faintly hinting at the possibility of survival (see Ozsváth and Turner 208-09). Still, his sheer tenacity, his decision to choose life over death, suggest the possibility of a new beginning: "but still it might yet happen! The moon's so round today! / Friend, don't walk on. Give me a shout and I'll be on my way" ("de hisz lehet talán még! a hold ma oly kerek! / Ne menj tovább, barátom, kiáltás rám! s fölkelek!"). Even in the first two poems of Radnóti's last cycle of lyrics, "Razglednicas" (see Ozsvath and Turner 210-13), there are moments which allow the other world to glitter across the dark images. In number one, the crowded landscape of prisoners and refugees is lit up by the picture of the beloved: "And you're the only constant in the changing and the mess: / you shine on eternal beneath my consciousness" ("Te állandó vagy bennem e mozgó zűrzavarban, / tudatom mélyén fénylesz örökre mozdulatlan"). And in number two, down by the lake, "a tiny shepherdess" ("apró pásztorleány") appears, "where a white cloud is what the ruffled sheep / drink in their lowness" ("s felhőt iszik a vízre ráhajolva / a fodros birkanyáj"). Remote and barely perceptible, the other world appears for a second from afar, but it has no redemptive power. And "Razglednicas" numbers three and four are bereft of the world of hope and restoration. The poet wrote them toward the end of one of the most brutal death marches during the Holocaust. Trekking for almost two months through mud and rain and snow, in summer clothes, hungry, thirsty, and crippled by the tramping, Radnóti fell ill. He also started to lose both his strength and his will to live. Small wonder that his last two poems evince no hope for divine justice or any promise of redemption. The third stanza's last lines note that the "squad stands about in knots, stinking, mad. / Death, hideous, is blowing overhead" ("a század bűzös, vad csomókban áll. / Fölöttünk fú a förtelmes halál") and the fourth foretells the poet's own execution: "Shot in the neck. And that's how you'll end too, / I whispered to myself; 'Lie still; no moving'" ("Tarkólövés. – Igy végzed hát te is, -- / súgtam magamnak, -- csak fekjüdj nyugodtan").

The poem closes with the image of the speaker's murder, "Then I could hear / 'Der springt noch auf,' above, and very near. / Blood mixed with mud was drying on my ear" ("Der springt noch auf," – hangzott fölöttem. / Sárral kevert vér száradt fülemen"). These lines point to the poet's own grave, a mass grave, in which his decomposed body was found one-and-a-half years after the murder -- a mass grave filled with the desecrated corpses of twenty-two innocent men. During his last few days, the concepts of restoration, redemption, regeneration, and "God's promise" no longer seemed to illuminate the way of the poet. Yet even the last two "Razglednicas" use rhymes and meter and both carry out the task and responsibility of the prophet turned poet-witness to record and give account of the devastation of the community.

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