

POETRY

Miklós Radnóti

Selected and introduced by Edward Hirsch

Miklós Radnóti's poems have an anguished intimacy and intensity as well as a profoundly humane spirit. This modern Hungarian poet, killed during World War II at the age of 35, clung with a desperate—and stoic—serenity to the classical values of the Western tradition at a time when those values were most imperiled, indeed, close to extinction. Radnóti's poems were both deeply felt and thoroughly modern—filled with his sense of anxiety, uncertainty, and fate—but their formal values tended to the classical. This makes him akin to his great Russian contemporary, Osip Mandelstam. One feels in reading him a growing level of despair countered by such aesthetic and moral ideals of antiquity as the clarity of poetic form, the virtues of reason, and the philosophical rectitude of Stoicism.

Radnóti's life was shadowed by tragedy. Born in Budapest on May 5, 1909, he was haunted by the fact that his mother died giving birth to him and his twin brother, who was stillborn (“Monster I was in my nativity,/ twin-bearing mother—and your murderer!”). He was 12 when his father died, and he was raised by distant relatives. Radnóti studied Hungarian and French literature at Szeged University, where he also joined the Art Forum of Szeged Youth, a group of talented intellectuals and artists with socialist leanings and a strong interest in Hungarian folklore. He earned his doctorate with a brilliant dissertation on the artistic development of the novelist Margit Kaffka but, because of his Jewish heritage, never received the university positions he deserved. He eked out a living as a freelance writer, translator, and schoolteacher.

In the early 1940s, Radnóti, a fierce antifascist, was drafted for hard labor into various work camps. The third and last time, he was taken to Bor, Yugoslavia, where he worked in a copper mine. He was taken from the mine and driven westward across Hungary in a forced march and there, near the town of Abda sometime between November 6 and November 10, 1944, was one of 22 prisoners murdered and tossed into a mass grave by members of the Hungarian armed forces. It was an unspeakable death. After the war, Radnóti's wife had his body exhumed and his last poems were found in his field jacket, written in pencil in a small Serbian exercise book. These poems display the classical poise of his art and literally rise from the grave to give testimony to his torment.

Radnóti published six individual collections of poems during his lifetime: *Pagan Salute* (1930), *Song of Modern Shepherds* (1931), *Convalescent Wind* (1933), *New Moon* (1935), *Walk On, Condemned* (1936), and *Steep Road* (1938). All the poems written during his internment appeared in a posthumous volume, *Sky with Clouds* (1946), which is one of the pinnacles of Central European poetry in this century. He also published a collection of selected poems (1940), an autobiographical novel, *A Month of Twins* (1940), and a volume of translations, *In the*

Footsteps of Orpheus (1942), which ranges across 2,000 years of European literature. He translated Greek and Latin writers, Elizabethans and English romantics, and German writers from all major periods. He was also among the first to introduce into his own language such modern poets as Guillaume Apollinaire, Blaise Cendrars, and Georg Trakl. Radnóti's sense of an ideal European heritage should be understood as a conserving stance—a humane action—against the destructive forces of European barbarism.

Radnóti's poems are filled with echoes of, and allusions to, classical literature even as they reveal debts to French poetry of the early 20th century. His youthful free-verse poems enthusiastically embrace an urbane pastoralism. These celebrations (pagan greetings) romanticize village life and endorse a natural eroticism. But as the 1930s progressed and the chaos of the times escalated, Radnóti responded by exercising more and more traditional formal control over his poems. The dreamy introspection of his early poetry gave way to the chiseled meters and crystalline precision of his later work. In a mad time, he was terrified of madness:

But don't leave me, delicate mind!
Don't let me go crazy.
Sweet wounded reason, don't
leave me now.

Don't leave me. Let me die, without fear,
a clean lovely death,
like Empedocles, who smiled as he fell
into the crater.

(*“Maybe. . .”*)

Radnóti's poems are filled with disquieting premonitions of the horrors to come. Characterizing the times, he wrote, “I lived on this earth in an age/ when man fell so low/ he killed willingly, for pleasure, without orders.” He was doom-ridden and had an uncanny sense of his own impending destruction. “I am the one they'll kill finally/ because I myself never killed,” he prophesied in 1939 for a new edition of *Steep Road*, the last individual collection of his poetry published while he was still alive. One high-water mark of his work is a series of eight eclogues, written in hexameters, that refashion the pastoral form to address an era when morality is turned upside down and right and wrong have changed places. He calls on the pastoral muse to assist him in trying to preserve the values of civilization. These poems sing to overcome terror, invoking the splendor of memory, the landscape of childhood, and the necessity of love at a time when “reason falls apart.” The eclogues affirm the redemptive powers of art as the highest human achievement.

Radnóti's descriptive powers never faltered, enabling him to characterize with poignant accuracy the horrors he experienced. His final poems—so immediate they are nearly unbearable to read—constitute a tremendous act of poetic witnessing. Here is a deeply compassionate poet whose lyrics honor human emotion, show the greatest respect for human intellect, and, above all, preserve humane values.

Clouded Sky

The moon hangs on a clouded sky.
I am surprised that I live.
Anxiously and with great care, death looks for us
and those it finds are all terribly white.

Sometimes a year looks back and howls
then drops to its knees.
Autumn is too much for me. It waits again
and winter waits with its dull pain.

The forest bleeds. The hours bleed.
Time spins overhead
and the wind scrawls
big dark numbers on the snow.

But I am still here
and I know why and why the air feels heavy—
a warm silence full of tiny noises circles me
just as it was before my birth.

I stop at the foot of a tree.
Its leaves cry with anger.
A branch reaches down. Is it strangling me?
I am not a coward. I am not weak, I am

tired. And silent. And the branch
is also mute and afraid as it enters my hair.
I should forget it, but I
forget nothing.

Clouds pour across the moon. Anger
leaves a poisonous dark-green bruise on the sky.
I roll myself a cigarette,
slowly, carefully. I live.

June 8, 1940



All the poems are taken from Clouded Sky, by Miklós Radnóti, published by Harper & Row in 1972, and are reprinted by permission of the translators. English translation copyright © 1972 by Mrs. Miklós Radnóti, Steven Polgar, Stephen Berg, and S. J. Marks.

The Terrifying Angel

The terrifying angel is invisible and silent
inside me, he doesn't scream today.
But then I hear a slight noise,
no louder than a grasshopper's jump.
I look around and don't find anything.
It's him. But he's cautious now. He's getting ready.
Save me, Oh you who love me, love me bravely.
He hides when you're here. But as soon as you leave
he's back. He rises from the bottom of the soul,
screaming. And screaming he accuses me.
This insanity works inside me like poison.
He doesn't sleep much, lives both in and outside of me,
and when the moon is out, in the white darkness,
he runs through the meadow in whistling sandals.
He searches my mother's grave and wakes her up.
"Was it worth it?" "Was it worth it?"
He whispers to her about rebellion, about giving in.
"You gave birth to him and died of it!"
Looking at me, sometimes he tears off
the pages of the calendar too soon.
"How long" and "Where to"
depend on him forever now. Last night
his words fell into my heart
the way stones fall into water,
forming rings, wobbling, and spinning.
I was just going to bed, you were already asleep.
I stood there naked when he came in
and started to argue with me quietly.
There was a weird smell, his
breath chilled my ear. "Go ahead!"
He urged. "Skin shouldn't cover you.
You're raw meat and bare nerves.
Tear it off! After all, bragging about skin
is like bragging about prison,
it's crazy.
That thing all over you is only an illusion.
Here, here's the knife.
It doesn't hurt. It only takes a second, there's only a hiss!"

And the knife woke up on the table and flashed.

August 4, 1943

The Fifth Eclogue

Fragment

To the memory of György Bálint

Dear friend, you don't know how this cold poem made me shiver,
how afraid I was of words. Even today I tried to escape them.
I wrote half lines.

I tried to write about other things,
but it was no use. This terrible, hidden night calls me:
"Talk about him."

Fear wakes me, but the voice
is silent, like the dead out there, in the Ukrainian fields.
You're missing.

And even autumn doesn't bring news.

In the forest
the promise of another furious winter whistles today. In the sky,
heavy clouds filled with snow fly past and stop.
Who knows if you're alive?

Even I don't know today. I don't shout
angrily if they wave their hands with pain and cover their faces,
and don't know anything.

But are you alive, wounded?
Do you walk among dead leaves, circled by the thick smell of
forest mud,
or are you a smell too?

Snow drifts over the fields.
He's missing—the news hits.

And inside, my heart pounds,
and freezes.

Between two of my ribs, a bad, ripping pain starts up.
It quivers, and in my memories, words that you said a long time ago
come back sharply and I feel your body just as real
as the dead—

And I still can't write about you today!

November 21, 1943

Fragment

I lived on this earth in an age
when man fell so low
he killed willingly, for pleasure, without orders.
Mad obsessions threaded his life,
he believed in false gods. Deluded, he foamed at the mouth.

I lived on this earth in an age
when it was honor to betray and to murder,
the traitor and the thief were heroes—
those who were silent, unwilling to rejoice,
were hated as if they had the plague.

I lived on this earth in an age
when if a man spoke out, he had to go into hiding
and could only chew his fists in shame—
drunk on blood and scum, the nation went mad
and grinned at its horrible fate.

I lived on this earth in an age
when a curse was the mother of a child,
when women were happy if they miscarried,
a glass of thick poison foamed on the table,
and the living envied the rotting silence of the dead.

I lived on this earth in an age
when the poets too were silent
and waited for Isaiah, the scholar
of terrifying words, to speak again—
since only he could utter the right curse.

May 19, 1944

Forced March

You're crazy. You fall down, stand up and walk again,
your ankles and your knees move pain that wanders around,
but you start again as if you had wings.
The ditch calls you, but it's no use you're afraid to stay,
and if someone asks why, maybe you turn around and say
that a woman and a sane death a better death wait for you.
But you're crazy. For a long time now
only the burned wind spins above the houses at home,
Walls lie on their backs, plum trees are broken
and the angry night is thick with fear.
Oh, if I could believe that everything valuable
is not only inside me now that there's still home to go back to.
If only there were! And just as before bees drone peacefully
on the cool veranda, plum preserves turn cold
and over sleepy gardens quietly, the end of summer bathes in
the sun.

Among the leaves the fruit swing naked
and in front of the rust-brown hedge blond Fanny waits for me,
the morning writes slow shadows—
All this could happen! The moon is so round today!
Don't walk past me, friend. Yell, and I'll stand up again!

September 15, 1944

Postcard

1

From Bulgaria the huge wild pulse of artillery.
It beats on the mountain ridge, then hesitates and falls.
Men, animals, wagons and thoughts. They are swelling.
The road whinnies and rears up. The sky gallops.

You are permanent within me in this chaos.
Somewhere deep in my mind you shine forever, without
moving, silent, like the angel awed by death,
or like the insect burying itself
in the rotted heart of a tree.

In the mountains

Postcard

2

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.

Cservenka
October 6, 1944

Postcard

3

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.

Mohács
October 24, 1944

Postcard

4

I fell next to him. His body rolled over.
It was tight as a string before it snaps.
Shot in the back of the head—“This is how
you’ll end.” “Just lie quietly,” I said to myself.
Patience flowers into death now.
“Der springt noch auf,” I heard above me.
Dark filthy blood was drying on my ear.

Szentkirályszabadja
October 31, 1944