

Between the Awakening and the Explosion: Yogis and Commissars Reconsidered, 1953–1956*

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I hope you will forgive me if I begin on a personal note, with a confession that may sound like an elegy: it is strangely mystifying and difficult to believe that twenty years have already elapsed since I last saw the landscapes of my native country, the streets of the city where I was born and grew up. But I have no intention of writing an elegy, simply because I do not feel elegiac: my participation in the Hungarian Revolution and in the intellectual movement that preceded it created the basis of an intellectual and spiritual development which, in turn, led me toward an experience and understanding I could not have reached without the initial impetus of the years 1953–1956.

The role and function of intellectuals, mainly writers, in the Hungarian revolt—in the revolt of the mind, if I may borrow a phrase from myself—has been extensively and meaningfully analyzed during the past two decades by numerous authors in many books, essays, articles, and memoirs. The nature of the revolt has become, in a sense, common knowledge, public property. So much so that, when the Prague Spring arrived in 1968, the world simply assumed that it was initiated, led, supported, developed, and spurred on by intellectuals, mainly Communist ones, whose disillusionment became the spiritual axis of that historical event. Far from taking the 1956 Revolution for granted, Western observers viewed our steps—tentative as they may have been, and uncertain as they surely were—toward some kind of understanding of ourselves and our historical situation, with suspicion and distrust. Their attitude was understandable for reasons that have been sufficiently analyzed, hence I do not propose to discuss them here. I wish, however, to propose a brief inquiry into the nature and meaning of Hungary's intellectual condition between 1953 and 1956, between the awakening and the explosion.

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The scope of various analyses, dealing with the role and function of writers in Hungary, (and, of course, in Poland and later in Czechoslovakia) has been wide-ranging; their works, their attitudes, their successes and failures as political or ideological leaders; their intellectual and theoretical contribution—or the lack of it—have been considered through different lenses of the political, historical, sociological, psychological, and moral cameras of the analysts. As a result, it is now generally agreed, that in their specific political situation the intellectuals behaved almost predictably, true to historical form. They were linked to traditions and expectations; they acted as social catalysts; they underwent deep psychological conversions; but most importantly, they created or, rather, re-created a morality that had been buried under the ruins of totalitarian dictatorships. According to a virtual consensus among observers, it was on the plane of morality, of moral rebirth, that Eastern Europe's intellectuals rendered their most significant contribution to human affairs: this seems to be their lasting achievement. By attempting to create a humane and moral society, a socialist society, if you like; by borrowing a great deal from the liberal and socialist conceptions of the 18th and 19th centuries, they succeeded in setting valuable historical precedents and guidelines for the continuing conflict between democracy and totalitarianism. In other words, their major achievement was their *return* to a traditional morality of self-imposed limits, responsibilities, and understandings away from the unbridled immorality of totalitarian violence; or—to use Michael Polanyi's expressive phrase—from the inverted morality of modern nihilistic fanaticism.

All this is true, of course. It is noteworthy, however, that no, or hardly any attempt has been made to analyze the writers' achievements from the purely literary point of view, as embodied so clearly and vividly in the poems, short stories, novels, and plays they had written during the period; that no, or hardly any attempt has been made to follow and understand their development, their evolution from an ontological-existential point of view as an effort to restore the long-lost balance and perception of the transcendental, the universal, the cosmic, and the archetypal.

In the widest sense, two major groups of writers can be distinguished during the years between war's end and the outbreak of the Revolution: the Communist writers and the non-Communists. In retrospect, however, it becomes evident that these groups were neither unified nor stable; that they carried within themselves the seeds of decay; and that their lines of loyalties, allegiances, ideological and intellectual commit-

ments were constantly shifting, changing, meandering, so to speak, as a narrow path in an endless desert. But apart from their instability and disunity, they also had another factor in common. Both had to live under a Communist dictatorship, which attacked their traditional standards of morality and spirituality. One has only to quote Gyula Illyés's poem, *One Sentence on Tyranny*, to understand the fundamentally common predicament shared by the two different groups:

Where there's tyranny
everyone is a link in the chain
it stinks and pours out of you
you are tyranny yourself.

(Paul Tábori's translation.)

They were—to use Koestler's apt definition—the yogis and commissars living in the same cell, under the same skies, having to deal with the same power in almost identical straight-jackets. The results are well known. The commissars, having turned away from the mystery, lost their sense of the infinite; the yogis, having turned toward the mystery, lost their sense of the finite; the transcendent reality of the cosmos on one hand, and the everyday-reality of the world, on the other. For some, the equation may seem to be much too symmetrical and, of course, in historical reality it never worked that smoothly. Yet the evidence of those distortions in sense and perception can be seen in the fact that no Hungarian writer, be he yogi or commissar, or—for that matter—anybody *in between*—had succeeded in producing any piece of literature artistically, intellectually, or spiritually profound or significant during the years of Stalinist dictatorship.

But no man can live and no artist can create meaningfully without a sense of balance between Freud's *oceanic feeling* and ordinary reality, between the sense of wonder man feels at the sight of the mystery or, as Eliade would put it, the sacred, and the sense of absurdity and comedy man feels at the sight of himself and his fellow men. The sense of mystery guides the artist toward what Jung called the *numinous*, the spiritual, the divine; the sense of reality, of this-worldliness permits him to deal with human beings and human relationships as they appear, act and interact against the background of transcendental, universal and archetypal images. "Geometry," wrote Kepler, "existed before the Creation, is co-eternal with the mind of God, *is* God;" and Kepler, as we know, was a religious man, a believer in the existence, goodness, and omnipotence of God. "I must, before I die," wrote Bertrand Russell, "find some means of saying the essential thing which is in me, which I

have not yet said, a thing which is neither love nor hatred nor pity nor scorn but the very breath of life, shining and coming from afar, which will link into human life the immensity, the frightening, wondrous and implacable forces of the non-human;” and Bertrand Russell, of course, was an atheist.

It is obvious that the body of literature created by Hungarian writers between 1953 and 1956 is primarily and eminently political in its concepts, substances, themes, metaphors, and symbols. But it is equally obvious—a glimpse convinces us—that from the very first moment of release from under the heavy clouds of Stalinist violence, Hungary’s poets had tried to find, and then express, Russell’s “essential thing,” Kepler’s “geometry,” Freud’s “oceanic feeling,” or Jung’s evasive “numinosity.” It was not an easy task. What they were trying to find and assert was not a political report, a historical metaphor, or an ideological symbol. Nor was their quest simply a search for moral principle, an ethical concept, or a conscious definition of the Categorical Imperative, though it included all that. It was much more.

As early as October 1953, the poet Lajos Kónya posited a conflict between “the mind and the heart” in an article about the existence—or non-existence—of literary freedom in Hungary, and he indicated that whereas his conscious mind was in error, his subconscious, emotional affinities were correct. This, of course, is no great wisdom, no revealing insight. If, however, one is willing to understand that in that world of allusions, metaphors, secret literary and political codes, “mind” represents the pure and unadulterated *reason* of the Party, of history, of history’s quintessence, and that “heart” represents all the dark, irrational forces of society and human beings that the Party considered philosophically “idealist” and politically “counter-revolutionary,” one can easily understand his thrust.

About the same time, another poet published a poem that became, almost overnight, one of the most significant symbolic expressions of unrest, confusion, disillusionment, and longing for something—some hidden order, perhaps—as yet not quite perceived. His name was Péter Kuczka and the poem was *Nyírség Diary*. *Nyírség Diary* may not be the greatest poetic achievement in the Magyar language, but it is certainly an interesting political signpost on the road toward the rediscovery of the “essential thing” in Hungarian literary life. It is a thoroughly political piece, more journalistic than poetic, a little clumsy perhaps in its metaphors and metrics, yet its depiction of an old peasant woman, lost amidst the raging storms of her age, social condition and historical situation, gray, abandoned, exploited, misled, deprived of her social

heritage and religious tradition, is certainly one of the earliest attempts to create an archetypal image against the background of a system which denies the existence of such images politically and philosophically. But it is Kuczka's main attitude that interests us: he holds the system responsible for the condition of the old woman not merely *politically* but also *existentially*: the "comrades" in those "northern villages" are the ones who denied her "the kind words and deeds" that are more important than material reality: what she needs is "*human light in place of electricity.*"

Political uncertainty coupled with metaphorical darkness was creeping in slowly where once there was light and almost absolute certainty. It may have been difficult to comprehend, but there it was:

I'd trusted, hoped and now I look around
hesitantly—something's utterly wrong.
Amidst my gathering anxieties I walk in circles
like an innocent hostage in a blind, closed cell.

István Simon wrote these lines expressing a common puzzlement, a general sense of loss, of unease, about the disappearance of perspectives and hopes, about a climate of "defeated armies and bold hopes," as Vörösmarty had put it more than a century earlier.

Among the writers of the left—radical or moderate—this was the first phase in an important evolutionary process which, in tragic literature, is known as the first step of the tragic hero on his way to victory and defeat: *Poiema, Pathema, Mathema* — *Purpose, Passion, Perception*. In the *Purpose* phase the recognition that "*something's utterly wrong*" is coupled with a commitment to assume its challenge, to understand it and—perhaps—even to fight it. The commitment may come late or early—with Prometheus and Antigone early, with Hamlet late—but it involves the hero in social action. The underlying element in this phase of his evolution is the *feeling of guilt*, its dynamic is *suffering*. The case histories of Kónya, Kuczka, and Simon are indeed textbook cases. Overlapping, the second phase set in almost simultaneously with the first.

In January 1954, Gyula Illyés published an essay in *Irodalmi Újság* about "doubt and pessimism" in poetry, and what was even more important, in contemporary Hungarian poetry, from whence doubt and pessimism had long been banished by various Party decrees and pronouncements. What should a poet do if he feels "sad," has "doubts" about "certain things," or feels "pessimistic" about the future that has been officially designated as rosy, indeed, paradisiac? Illyés' advice is both dubious and ironic: "Perhaps it is best if the poet does not even

write down a poem like this,” he intones, no doubt, tongue-in-cheek, “or if he cannot resist his creative urges, let him write the poem, but not publish it.” This is amusingly sarcastic, almost comic. But then, he changes his tone. “Either way, he mutilates himself, makes literary life colorless. This has already happened. It is the reason why the eternal rhythm of life sounds so empty in our volumes of poetry.” The implications are clear. The attack is two-pronged: one is directed against literature, or rather, against a system of ideological, political, and police methods that excludes human suffering from the pages of books or magazines; the other is an attempt to re-establish the connection between life’s “eternal rhythm” and literature, restore the role and function of rite and ritual—the perception of the sacred—in social and individual life. In his poem, *Doleo, ergo sum*, Illyés asserts the significance of suffering in human life and consciousness by translating Dostoyevsky’s injunction that “suffering is the whole origin of consciousness” into the interestingly political-ontological language of a new poetry.

Sacred is the advice I can give you now and forever
Leaders of peoples be always living nerve-ends!

This is the second phase of our development, the *Passion*. The commitment, which may have been vague or tentative in the first phase, is now fully understood, accepted and seen, moreover, as an inevitable head-on collision with the forces of oppression, political or metaphysical.

Easy or difficult . . . and I may even die
no matter now, I shall bargain no more,

writes Lajos Tamási. Even if one is “frightened, frightened,” as Zelk writes, it is not the *political situation* but the *existential condition* that determines one’s fundamental response:

I am but human, live like humans do
How could I be brave?
I fear, I fear only more
that I could be worthless
more than from death.

The moral conflict between escape and compromise is resolved, but on an ontological plane, and the result of accepted suffering and commitment is a new, yet old perception of existence, of suffering, love, and hope; an awareness, as in Jankovich’s poem, that “*where there’s pain, there is hope*,” or a desire to present the resolved conflict in quasi-religious, universal, transcendental images, as in the direct words of István Vas, an otherwise irreligious poet, to his Creator:

Thank you for having created me
Oh Love, and having put me here
to be a man amidst
stars, mists, mountains.

The desire to break through the narrow confines of political or ideological boundaries becomes apparent in Illyés's beautifully evocative archetypal imagery in "*Oceans*," where "*limitless space and limitless courage*" open and merge in an "*infinity of blue-tinged distances of green forests*," leaving behind "*our small fatherland's narrow borders of dust, wires and stone*," in the cosmic journey. A political allusion, easily understood in contemporary Hungary, it becomes the stepping stone to the stars.

We are now in the third phase of development, *perception*, when "*the re-acceptance of an ancient order*" (János Pilinszky) becomes imperative, and "*the hope to stand in our winter without sin*" (Zelk) is both the punishment and reward of the poet. It is the "readiness" of Hamlet, the final moment of King Lear's translucence.

For I have caught success's butterfly
and became not happier but more cowardly
its scale turned into dirt on my fingertips
all that wasn't born of torment turns into torment.

This is Benjamin at his best and most moving: I can only apologize for the inadequacy of the translation:

Mert fogtam én a siker pillészárnyát
s nem boldogabb, de lettem tőle gyávább
maszattá rondúlt ujjamon a himpor
mind kinná torzul, ami nem lett kínból.

This is also the moment of change, together with the discovery of a new vision, of an order behind the immediate disorder of the world, an ontological identification with "*the early morning light*" in Lajos Kassák's poem:

I don't have to be loud since the smallest leaf of grass
would understand my joys, my sorrows
just as I can understand everything and identify with everything
. . . walking down on the other side of the hill
so that I'll see new and unknown landscapes on this beautiful day
enchanted by all those millions of little miracles
of reality.

The central theme of freedom regained, resides precisely in Kassák's simple metaphor.

In a celebrated passage, inspired by Edgar Allan Poe, Baudelaire reveals the importance of “an immortal instinct [in man] for the beautiful which makes us consider the earth and its various spectacles as a sketch of, as a *correspondence* with, heaven,” and which enables us to experience that “insatiable thirst for all that is beyond” which is no more or less than “the most living proof of our immortality.” Even such a demonstrably programmatic “anti-metaphysical” poem as Illyés’ *Mors Bona Nihil Aliud*, which sets out to prove that “*there’s no other-world, no Damnation, no Grace,*” ends with an elevated ode to “*beauty, justice, goodness and freedom,*” and with a suspiciously religious warning about “*fear and cowardice*” being the “*roots of sin.*”

The commissars and their friends, and very often their enemies, have all apparently undergone a transformation which is not simply a moral change. They have reached a conclusion which is not simply an ethical concept. Yet they did not turn into yogis on the “ultra-violet” end of Koestler’s spectrum; they have continued—and still continue—their actions for social justice and the betterment of man. But the new perception which completed their developments both on the social and ontological-existential planes, was not—could not be—their individual affair. Their changes, their new insights, the balance they have managed to restore, however tentatively and temporarily, between the sacred and the profane, between the oceanic feeling and the ordinary reality that surrounded them, had a profound impact on society, on the leaders of society and Party, on the social fabric, as well as on the individual’s consciousness. In their quest for meaning, the poets suffered symbolically for man and society; man and society accepted them as their *prophets*, and, quite naturally, used them as *scapegoats*. The wheel which had come full circle, began turning again.

One final word. My description of the evolution of some of Hungary’s poets and writers, my comparison between the development of tragic man and that of my friends, should not be construed as an attempt to elevate them (or, by some mischief, myself) to the tragic magnificence and translucence of an Oedipus or a Hamlet, though their road approached, and often paralleled, the road travelled by tragic heroes. But they were also close to the comic, especially in their innocence, naiveté, gullibility, and it may be—just may be—that their profoundly human oscillations between tragic grandeur and comic absurdity was—and will remain—their most memorable achievement.