

## Gyula Illyés' Poetry of Hope

Károly Nagy

Gyula Illyés is only two years younger than the twentieth century, yet ever since the mid-1940s he has been considered one of the "Great Old Men" of Hungarian literature. His immense prestige and increasing world renown is due to his abilities to integrate within himself the philosophies and traditions of the East and of the West of Europe, the views and approaches of the rational intellectual and of the lyric dreamer, the actions of *homo politicus* and *homo aestheticus*. In an interview Illyés confided: "With all the literary genre with which I experimented I wanted to serve one single cause: that of a unified people and the eradication of exploitation and misery. I always held literature to be only a tool." Five sentences later, however, he exclaimed: "I would forego every single other work of mine for one poem! Poetry is my first, my primary experience and it has always remained that." (Edit Erki, ed., *Látogatóban [Visiting]*, Budapest: Gondolat, 1968). The committed, the engaged spokesman of his people coexists in Illyés with the poet. It is, therefore, the concerned intellectual leader as well as the artist who has to be considered when Illyés writes, when he articulates some vital issues in his poems.

One of Illyés' important themes since the mid-1960s has been the redefinition of human weakness as potential strength. There may be strength in the weakness of individuals, small groups, and communities. This apparent drawback may yet provide mankind with the hope of surviving absolute powers, impersonal and dehumanized institutions, even atomic annihilation. The title poem of his 1965 volume, *Dőlt vitorla* is a first attempt to define this hope of the weak:

### Swaying Sail

The yard, the long sailyard  
crackles and sways,  
it almost mows the foams  
while the bark — dashes ahead!

Look: when does the mast  
and sail fly forward  
most triumphantly?  
When it heels the lowest!

The ancient Aesopian parable about the reed which bows to the wind and survives, while the proud oak tree breaks and dies, is given an extra dimension in this poem: the boat flies forward while it heels low. Relating to the ruling power structure, surviving sometimes unbearable dictatorial pressures, being able to fulfill oneself in spite of authoritarian inhumanities, is a traditionally significant problem in Hungary, where there have been so many foreign and domestic despots to relate to, survive, and spite throughout the centuries.

A further, fuller, lyric unfolding of the theme: strength in weakness, is Illyés' *Dithyramb to women*, which first appeared in the June 1967 *Kortárs*, and then in his 1968 volume, *Fekete — fehér* [Black and white]. In this poem he contrasts the hard, enduring, sharp, monumental, and fiercely strong and proud forms of being and behaving with the fragile, the yielding, the small, the simple and softly opening forms, and finds that the latter are stronger.

### Dithyramb to Women

(excerpts)

1

Not stone and not metal.  
Not those which can weather the storm of times!  
But rush, reed, bark.  
Not the accomplices of the  
eternal-life-promise. Not the reserved ones.  
But the fragile, the yielding:  
grass, loess, sedge  
became the protest.  
Those which disappear when they've done their work.

2

Not stone and not metal.  
Not the Assyrian, not the Sumerian columns,

measuring millennia with their ringed base,  
not the basaltic pyramid roofs,  
but the dried leaves, the underbrush, wood:  
those who wave yes, already from afar.  
Not those which are hard  
but those which can be spun and woven,  
those watching the working hand  
with the eyes of a dog, —

Long, long ago  
even before all the gods —

4

The perishable ones. Seaweed, moss.  
The passing ones. Pellicle, Flax twine.  
Not the original somebodies but those who break  
yet laugh in a moment  
because they can be put together again,  
those who thus endure and do not yield.  
The peel of the branch, goat-hair, raffia  
became our fellow travellers  
Harboring, by the destiny of some distant  
— how should we say — ideology?  
future itself.

5

Long before metal and stone  
took power.  
Those who can be bent, flexed,  
the tenaciously gentle,  
the answer-giving-soft to the finger,  
those who never strike back  
gave a quiet signal — hand to the hand —  
the Earth is with us!

9

Not the fortress, built of rock blocks  
tied together only by the mortar of sheer weight.  
Not the gates of pride  
but chaff, wicker, fluff,  
the strength of the twig, wax, pen  
carried us so far —

Yes, these:  
the softly opening became the strongest.  
Like the loins and breasts  
in the bone and muscle castle  
of your bodies, women.  
Like those who overcame time.

10

Not the angles, not the edges,  
not the piercing and shooting weapons,  
not the kings and military leaders  
but the clay-mud, which became  
smarter sooner than the dog,  
fur, and hide  
became leaders, shaping the hands of  
— not the men, but those  
who have eyes everywhere:  
the women.

14

.....  
Not the thunders but the songs,  
not the swords, the sheaths, the armour,  
but the shirts, the kerchiefs, the garters,  
not the lightnings, not the volcanos,  
glowing roaring light through reddened windows,  
spitting the fury of the depths onto the skies,  
but the heroic nipples,  
protecting those running to them for safety  
bravely  
stiff, inflamed.

#### Dedication

Not the curb bits, the clangors  
but the handle on the basket;  
not the assaults, the encirclements  
but the coral chain around the neck  
and the chairs around the fireplace;  
not the storms, the stallions, the cries of victory,  
but the pats on the sieve  
when the flour curdles,

but the wordless looks through the  
wintery window from behind a curtain;  
not the snow-capped alps, icy abyss  
but the embroidering green crops on the land,  
but those who are spinning even on Sundays,  
but the swaying of infants,  
but the chattering rivulets,  
not the commands: "Charge!" and "Attention!"  
But the turned-over pillow.

In a 1972 poem about Hungarian language, the language of the faithful and the free, but also of the trembling, the old, the fearful, the oppressed, and the beaten, titled *Koszorú* (Wreath), he talks about the enduring, the "stone-biting force" of the root hairs of his beloved mother tongue. In still another poem: *Hunyadi keze* (The Hand of Hunyadi) he emphasizes:

Declare: cowardly is the people  
which is protected by martyrs alone:  
not heroic deeds, but daily daring,  
everyday, minute-by-minute courage  
saves men and countries.

This motive of quiet everyday courage and work gives new dimensions to Illyés' theme of strength in weakness, it provides content to the idea, it almost furnishes instructions on how the weak can be strong. This new dimension is further developed in another long poem, written in 1967, entitled *Az éden elvesztése* (The Loss of Paradise). This poem is a modern oratorio, a moral-political passion play about the chances of the average, weak, and powerless human individual to avoid the impending atomic cataclysm.

#### The Loss of Paradise (excerpts)

40

.....  
Exactly the unavoidable of trouble calls for a struggle against it, a struggle to the degree of self-sacrifice if needed: that is the final chance. And just because a bad power is tremendously high above me, it doesn't mean that I can't attack it, can't get to it. True: I cannot reach the top of the tower by my hands, but it's not true that I cannot get there by climbing up the stairs inside it, for example. Every power is a human creation, and is continuous. It is in human hands, in our hands too, even in the most modest of hands.

41

You are in our hands,  
conceited powers over our fate!  
It isn't true that we can't  
get to you to bend your knees,  
to ground your shoulders,  
to strike on your mouths  
to step on your fire  
to save our roofs.

42

To reach from Somogyjád, even if only to the degree of a protesting waving finger, to an all-generals committee of the U.N. in New York?! Of course it sounds absurd. But even more absurd — and inhuman — is the thought that anyone, anywhere, from any heights could decide about the fate of just one man in Somogyjád against his will. And they want to decide! Millions of wills are circulating in the World, faster than the millions of drops when the water begins to boil. Not only from up to down. Also from down upward.

48

.....

The day of fury may come,  
the atom may explode:  
but exactly in the knowledge of our fate  
let us, faltering people down here,  
do resolutely  
that more and more human work of ours  
in this wide world

because our gods are dying.

And exactly because every power  
when it petrifies into a formidable rock,  
can be broken only my miniscules  
drop-by-drop edging into the cracks;

and exactly because miniscule villages  
may have to perform divine tasks:

49

As Jonah from the innards of the whale  
we are stepping forth from death

58

from death's alarming embrace,  
and exactly because we speak  
from the wavering barge of a  
bloodlost, forsaken little nation  
do we roar an ancient message:

50

The day of fury may come,  
the atom may explode,  
but exactly because its horror  
subdues the little as well as the big  
and because pine and weed,  
the beautiful and the ugly may collapse together,  
the good and the bad may die together:  
it all comes to the same thing;  
so honor and faithfulness almost  
becomes our shelter, indeed,  
stealing a smile unto our bitter lips  
it can even be our weapon:

52

.....  
When the day of fury comes  
because it may come,  
when the atom explodes,  
because piled in stacks it waits  
for a hand here and there,  
although the atom explodes,  
on that final day,  
before that terrible tomorrow  
people, let us dare to do the  
greatest deed:  
let us being here, from the depths  
by the strength of our faith,  
step by step as possible  
but up, up, upward,  
let us begin life anew.

To offer hope to a small, "bloodlost, forsaken little nation" is a conscious act on the part of Illyés, the poet-statesman. He views his role as that of a researcher of the future. He professes allegiance with those creators, who are groundbreakers, those poets, who research with "an

ultraviolet light that will be the imperatives tomorrow.” He does this in an “ars poetica” written around 1965, titled *Óda a törvényhozóhoz* (Ode to the Lawmaker).

### Ode to the Lawmaker

(excerpts)

The Law would be good and equitable  
if we the people would be manufactured  
like brick which is turned out  
by the machines uniformly every time.

But that cannot be.

Every heart has a different will.

And since long ago we are not merely  
clay or matter!

I will be exact as the writer always is  
when the scientist or the judge writes the poem.

This is our new song.

Make laws, but living laws so that  
we wouldn't constantly collide,

so that everybody would fit his  
part-truth into the collective truth,  
and yet: so that we would stay human  
without stiffening into clay and bricks,  
without circling like atoms or nuclei;  
so that we would stand fast yet run free.

Let life, not death create order!

Give rights, therefore, to the shadings  
in which, maybe, our future is drawn  
and to the exception  
which may be the rule tomorrow;  
rights — so he could experiment —  
to the poet, the chief researcher.

Because it doesn't take greater talent  
or zeal to find the cure for cancer,  
to harness the strength of the atom



to fly through space,  
than to show what the future ripens  
in the hearts,  
than to uncover with an ultraviolet light  
what will be the imperatives tomorrow  
among us, people;  
what is that which approaches in our nerves  
from the distance of aeons  
toward the distance of aeons.  
Rights to the dissectors!  
The surface-, the epidermis-, the appearance-destructors  
who separate, minute by minute, the bad  
from the good;  
the constantly correcting reconstructors  
who show, minute by minute: from what point is  
the murderer a murderer,  
the thief a thief,  
already grotesque what's beautiful,  
beautiful which was grotesque before,  
the hero: a henchman,  
and: who really is the one who leads —  
because there is no free pass  
to progress correctly with your era;  
because there are times — and we have seen it often —  
when the mute speaks,  
the one who chases really flees,  
the harlot is immaculate,  
the virgin: filthy.  
Not every creator is such but  
they who work thus — the progressive,  
the fighter, the ground-breaker —  
are the ones I profess as examples!  
They are the ones who signal  
the direction toward a tomorrow!  
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\*translation by Károly Nagy