

Kövület. By Ferenc Fáy. Toronto: Vörösváry Publishing Co., 1977. 131 pp. \$10.00.

“You went off to bring back from the blossoms of the Black Rose the dew, which sustains others forever, and in which you too may beautify yourself.” With these words Ferenc Fáy launches the Prince on his journey in his most recent book, *Petrification*. Will the Prince succeed in his quest? “The Treasure? -- Your Treasure? — You are too late.” The poet does not blame somebody else for what he considers his own failure: “It is your own fault if you live like a prisoner in a cage of petrified faces. And you don’t see beyond the hedge of your fingers, where people live.” Although he is stuck fast in “the petrified, cruel picture frame,” those who until recently had been unsympathetic, now gather round him “that they may see in the transparent firmament of your face, the disintegration of their own faces.” The words of the poet had petrified. Hence the unusual title, *Petrification*. Is his voice indeed frozen into stone? Will his lines of rare beauty and uncommon depth remain sealed in the slowly yellowing pages of his books, because future generations are not interested in reading them? Many of his readers firmly believe that his words will continue to be read. The torments of exile, centuries from now might be a thing of the past, but that pain will always be understood, because it is eternally human. Although most of his poems are permeated with sorrow and loneliness, he is not forsaken. Many of his fellow immigrants share his suffering, and like him, for years have been going through the pangs of hell, and there is no Beatrice for them to bring blessing and relief. They can never forget their birth-place, friends, family and the culture which even in unfavorable times still keeps thriving in the fertile soil of the home country. In Fáy’s village, Pécel, the well-to-do villagers, his beloved parents, the respected Uncle Batár, and others as well, who were so full of vitality in his other books, here appear as mere shadows: “Their faces like larva, muddy remembrance.” Here his village does not emerge in its pristine beauty. He himself has “to dig the street out of the dust.” And the poet-child of yore is “a skeleton, a boy dressed in a blue sailor’s suit.” As he tries to resurrect his dead, he keeps seeing their decayed bodies, and only the shadows of their spirits are sensed by the reader. Still, how mighty are those shadows. In the “Miraculous Fishing” his net shows wear and tear and “from his crushed fingers drips the wounded sky’s blood.” “. . . Dying student heroes of Corvin Street, workers’ mangled bodies from the Csepel plants, them I see,” says Fáy, “when I cast my net to fish out the young heroes of October from the currents of deep waters.” “And

now," continues Fáy, "at night, when the cemeteries take a seat at your bedside, and the dead of the past question you, can you answer them, or have you already been assimilated, and just stand there without understanding them? . . ."1

The poet seems to be gradually losing his formerly firm contact with God, who used to be his refuge and a source of strength. The Almighty, not Fáy, started the process of separation. The poet sighs in desperation: "How desolate is the land without you." Nevertheless, he tries to contact Him. In "Rövidzárlat" (Shortcircuit) he dials in vain, for the Lord is constantly on another line. It seems to him, in his bitterness, that the longhaired, marijuana smoking members of fanatical religious sects have appropriated God for themselves: "While they disgrace Him in the churches and in public, the Lord in seeking their favor," says Fáy, "takes drugs and plays the guitar."2

Is there a way out of this "world without a doorhandle or key?" Although the poet "is nowhere" and "is nobody" and cannot reach the Lord who seems to be dwelling in the immeasurable distance, still, perhaps he is also "so near to us, that his breathing can almost be heard."3 Indeed, such nearness seems to have been necessary for writing the most gripping work in the volume: the "Keresztút" (The Way to the Cross). The writing of this poem was not the result of a sudden inspiration, but rather a slow ripening process. The third, fifth and final parts of this work were published several years ago in one of his former volumes of poetry, and only now we see it completed. In the introduction to this poem Fáy writes: "In the 'Keresztút' I endeavor to tell about that God who is in every wound of my life." This is a most unusual allusion to the stigmata. In this writer's opinion Fáy sometimes uses too much figurative speech, but here it does seem excessive. Nature not merely takes part in the events, but fuses with the tragedy. Like Frigyes Karinthy in one of his stories about Christ, Fáy also sees the masses lining the Way to the Cross as a gigantic, bloodthirsty Monster, in whose shapeless form thousands of individuals unite to demand the release of Barabbas.

Perhaps the Messiah is never seen to be more human in suffering than when "his swollen blue tongue, like a piece of rag hung out from his mouth," and when "he lay down as tired men lie in the dust everywhere in the twilight of all times." Thus we are in him, and the Savior is in us. We see his painful progress. He falters under the weight of the cross, while the Hill of Golgotha towers high above the soldiers, priests, wailing women, the mocking, rowdy crowd and the Via Dolorosa. The Hill, in its inevitability, is the Destiny and Fulfillment. Fáy sees in it Pécel's Road to the Cross too. No doubt, there are many thousands of

poor villages like Pécel, scattered from Kamchatka to the Tierra del Fuego, but Fáy is Hungarian and therefore he immortalizes the Hungarian village on the eve of the Second World War.

Could an immigrant ever feel at home in a foreign country? Lajos Kutasi answered this question when he wrote, "The first time a man finds a favorite place in the world outside his homeland, to which he can return without losing his way, where the buildings and the faces of the people somehow are familiar, without being closely acquainted with them, in that place he won't feel himself a stranger any more."⁴ Although such a well-liked and familiar place never can make one forget the country of his birth, still it may serve as *terra firma* in which to sink his roots. Is it possible for a writer, who is the living conscience of his people, to accept another country as his second home? Can he pursue a "two-hearted" existence? Tamás Kabdebó, a librarian and writer in England, proves in his own life and works that this is possible. Tibor Flórián after thirty years of wanderings finally found his place. He writes: ". . . For a long time I wandered in desperation, until I found a place in New England with an atmosphere akin to Transylvania. There, in a forest in Connecticut the trees of Transylvania were whispering in the wind. The hills and lakes reminded me strongly of the country of my youth. Thus I sank my roots into the New England soil, but remained Hungarian and European."⁵ If the poet, or any immigrant for that matter, refuses the friendship of his new country and its people, how will he ever be able to open the barred window of his life and to step out — to quote Fáy — "Into reality which can be opened only from the inside." He writes in the poem, "Egy hazaindulónak" (To One Who is Returning Home): "Here every branch mocks me . . .," but elsewhere he describes the beauties of the Canadian countryside and warmly and exquisitely sketches the seasons in the Canadian forests.

In this writer's opinion Fáy's further progress will largely depend on whether he succeeds — if he is willing to try — in finding his emotional balance between his motherland and Canada. Those who think that such a change so late in life is not possible, should consider Tibor Flórián, the thoroughly Hungarian writer who after thirty years found his second home, which he does not think of any more as a foreign land. Fáy says in "Sütkezés" (Sunbathing): "And you are listening to the walnut-brown silence breaking open its green outer shell and how it falls and rolls among the chairs in the dust. And there is nobody for whom I can crack it open." In this, to a great extent, he is mistaken, for there are thousands of fellow immigrants who eagerly wait for his cracking the walnut-brown silence and will be happy to feast on what he offers for the

sustenance of their spirits. There is a future for Fáy's poetry. The promise of this can be seen in his "Mese a tavaszról" (A Tale About the Spring), whose optimistic mood surprises the reader who has become accustomed to his beautiful, but self-tormenting poems. The sarcastic and self-critical "Halotti maszk" (Deathmask) foreshadows works of a new thematic and stylistic approach. Most of his poems in the volume have a uniformly high quality but the "Keresztút" rises above them all. In it the poet seems to have successfully met the challenge presented by the theme.

László Buday, who so ably illustrated *Kövület*, writes in *Krónika*: "A deep-seated sorrow chokes us. . . . In vain we search for words to express it. How comforting it is to see those words coming from Fáy through the beautiful epoch of the Keresztút. Your past is revived, and now you can progress and continue to believe in the wonders of Fáy's poetry."⁶

Perhaps here we find the key to the continuing existence of Hungarians scattered in the world — a Future growing out of the sterile soil of the Past.

Maxim Tabory

NOTES

1. Ferenc Fáy's words, quoted from a taped discussion with the author in 1978.
2. *Ibid.*
3. The quotation is from a poem by this reviewer.
4. *Szabadság* [Liberty] (Cleveland) 88, no. 40 (October 6, 1978): 12.
5. *Krónika* [Chronicle] (Toronto) 5, no. 3 (March 1979): 8.
6. *Ibid.*, 4, no. 1 (January 1978): 13.

44 Hungarian Short Stories. Budapest: Corvina, 1979. 733 pp.

This volume has been published in the series of translations of representative works, European Series, sponsored by UNESCO.

The *44 Hungarian Short Stories*, the most ambitious of its kind ever to appear in the English language, follows in the footsteps of the earlier *22 Hungarian Short Stories*, published jointly by Corvina and Oxford University Press, back in 1967.

It is quite understandable in one sense that the editors deemed it necessary to double the selection of the earlier collection. In its excellence the short story in Hungary is only second in poetry. Although