

Modern Hungarian Poetry in Canada

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It is a pleasure to write this paper on Hungarian poetry, not only because I am myself of Hungarian origin but also because there exist outstanding achievements in this field. Contemporary Hungarian literature in Canada is in its flourishing state. Magyar authors are active in literary groups and authors' associations across the country, publishing their works in anthologies, annals, literary magazines and weekly newspapers within and outside this country. Indeed, the comprehensive bibliography on ethnic and native Canadian literature, recently completed by me, also includes about 350 citations of Hungarian reference material and books of poetry, prose and drama.¹

Dr. Watson Kirkconnell, the late student and mentor of ethnic Canadian authors, stated in one of his last papers:

. . . But an up-to-date literary community really materialized after the great migration of 1956, and the founding of *Kanadai Magyarság* and *Magyar Élet* as vehicles for the outpourings of that community, presently gathered up in book form. Preeminent in this new wave in Toronto were Ferenc Fáy, with several volumes of distinguished verse; András Tamás, whose *Öröm a házat* is masterly and mature and Márton Kerecsendi Kiss, whose *Hetedhétország: Mesejáték* is alight with imagination. . . . The laudable growth of a whole circle of Magyar poets came with the founding of the *Hungarian-Canadian Authors' Association* (Kanadai Magyar Írók Köre) in 1969, with a series of striking books of poetry and prose entitled *Antológia: a kanadai magyar írók könyve*, edited by János Miska of Ottawa and Lethbridge. All contributors deserve to be cited, but under pressure of space I shall mention only Ernő Németh, Sándor Domokos, Ferenc Fáy and György Vitéz. . . .²

Indeed, our ethnic and native Canadian bibliography deals with 57 authors of Hungarian descent, 47 of whom have published, within the last two decades, 86 volumes of poetry, prose and drama. According to these figures, the over 100,000 Magyars in Canada encompass 57 writers: one author for every two thousand Hungarians — quite an impressive figure by any standards.

What are the reasons for this mushrooming in creativity? First of all,

Canada received a host of Hungarian intellectuals, teachers, research scientists, lawyers, and authors, following World War II and the 1956 uprising in Hungary. A more tangible reason than this, however, is that Hungarians, as do many others in east Europe, tend towards emotionalism, inclined to give vent to their innermost feelings in rhyme and rhythm. The Magyar language, owing to its agglutinating structure, lends itself to the interpretation of fine intricacies which are so much a part of lasting poetry. Poetical expansion is an organic part of Hungarian artistic traditions. Hungarians consider poetry a sacred art and those who practise it are almost looked upon as Old Testament prophets.

This projection is not quite so absurd as all that if Hungarian literature is examined in the light of the past. Hungarians, throughout their long history, have often lost confidence in their politicians, their military leaders and even their *literati*, but they have retained relatively unshakable faith in their poets, and not without foundation. It was the "initiated" poet who kept up the spirits of his people when times were hard. Therefore, the poet sought to provide leadership even during the nation's attempts to effect escape from four centuries of foreign oppression. He was the seer who raised his voice against the futility of war yet he provided the slogan "freedom" in 1956.

The expatriate Hungarian poet hopes to continue as a "champion of freedom," in the memory of the "Old Country." Many of his followers in exile consider him a source of spiritual inspiration and a saviour of the traditional culture. These self-imposed crusading functions reflect the heroic-emotional aspect of Hungarian Canadian poetry.

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Of the many talented authors writing in Hungarian perhaps Ferenc Fáy is the most exciting poet. At 56, Fáy has authored several volumes of outstanding poetry, including *The Writing Will Be Discovered*, *A Song of Indebtedness*, *The Lamentations of Jeremiah*, *Crying for Myself*, *The Flood*, and *Petrification*.³ He also contributes regularly to leading Hungarian literary periodicals published outside Hungary.

Writing in the tradition of the "Occidentalists" (Nyugatosok, Mihály Babits, Dezső Kosztolányi, Árpád Tóth, and Attila József) Fáy occupies the void existing between two worlds: the world of rural existence, experienced in his childhood, and the urban way of life. His wide scope extends from the parched land of Pécel, his hometown near Budapest, to the asphalt-milieu of his acquired home, Toronto.

The land and its people constitute the main themes of Fáy's poems together with a personalized, anthropomorphic God and the image of a subjective universe in the background. But these concepts appear to be

only tools wherein Fáy provides the most suitable metaphors through which to project his image of the world onto a canvas larger than life. In the poem *Batár bácsi* (Uncle Batár), an old man with bearded wheat growing over his eyes rocks the sun on his knees, while the trees sit intent, like amused dogs, in a circle around him. In another poem, *Isten* (God), the Lord ripens fruit of the field in his huge peasant palms and treads on the earth with unseen footsteps. In the poem *Pécel*, Fáy's father sticks the sun to his hat as one would a rose, and cheerful stars shine on his sun-tanned forehead.

In his earlier poems Fáy appears to nurture an almost compulsive homesickness for Pécel, a town he describes in his poems as a speck of dust that he was at one time eager to shake off his shoes. His self-inflicted torture is somewhat more comprehensible in the light of his personal tragedy. Here is an educated person who, having given this country thirty of his best years, is compelled still to support a large family by scrubbing the floors of Hungarian churches and prosperous community halls in Toronto.

But the main reason for Fáy's devotion to his native town Pécel is his awareness of the historical role played by the Hungarian rural society in general. The Hungarian village has been regarded as the source of national consciousness over the centuries. The Magyar language and cultural heritage have managed to survive — in a homogeneous peasant society — the systematic onslaught of Latin, Turkish, German, Russian and other alien influences. The impact of a dynamic *népi kultúra* (folk culture) has resulted in a national revival through the work of such authors as György Bessenyei, Mihály Csokonai, and Sándor Petőfi or through the work of our contemporaries, Gyula Illyés, László Nagy and Ferenc Juhász, in addition to the influence of such composers as the nation-minded Ferenc Erkel, Ferenc Liszt, Béla Bartók and Zoltán Kodály.

In this country, the countryside plays a minor part in the development of Canadian identity. This may be attributed to the fact that the relationship to the land tends to be an economic one without much emotional attachment. Farming in Canada, unlike that in Hungary, is regarded as only an occupation, rather than a vocation. Occupations as such lack any meaningful permanence as far as social or national continuity is concerned. In Fáy's poetry the images of Pécel, of Uncle Batár, and of the parched land of the town are regarded as symbols of Hungarian identity, without which no meaningful poetry and, consequently, no worthwhile human existence can be posited.

Some of his reviewers note Fáy's emotional inclinations. The fact is,

however, that the Fáy approach is based upon the personification of the universe and — as Fáy has demonstrated time and again — the most effective way of implementing that technique consists in presenting a subjective world in emotional terms.

Another equally talented member of Fáy's generation is the priest-poet Tamás Tűz, whose real name is Lajos Makkó. Born in 1916 and educated in Roman Catholic seminaries, Tűz has published ten volumes of poems, including *Angel, Say it in Half, On the Threshold of a Country, On Restless Wings, Fingerplay in the Mirror, Selected Poems, and I have been there*,⁴ as well as a book of short stories and literary essays. He has resided in Canada since 1956.

In contrast to Fáy's naturalistic-realistic approach to poetry, Tamás Tűz is a student of the surrealist and metaphysical schools. He has a philosophical mind; the stoic outlook is integral in Tűz's poems.

His career falls into three distinctive phases covering the period between 1940 and 1970. The early poems are a manifestation of his innocent faith in man. Despite his reservations about the then existing social and political order, these poems radiate warmth, self-assurance and a sense of personal and national identity. Because this is the age of the great populist movement in Hungarian literature, Tűz has not remained indifferent to the dominating philosophies of leading Magyar authors of the day as for example, László Németh, Gyula Illyés, Lőrinc Szabó, László Mécs.

The second phase marks a deviation from the early idealized representation of man. This is the period of devastating war resulting in destruction, mass-migrations and other human misery. Man, according to Tűz's biblical-surrealistic analogy, has fallen from his Creator's grace and finds himself in total isolation in an alien environment.

The final phase completes the cycle: man comes to terms with his fate and, in a higher, metaphysical state of mind, makes peace with his Creator.

Tamás Tűz, owing to his experimental poetry and to his willingness to give preference to the global rather than the national, has become a poet of consequence on both sides of the Hungarian border. His creative genius lies in his talent for giving vent to his emotional and intellectual self in terms of universal techniques. The Hungarian clergy of all religious denominations have given the world a host of outstanding poets. Tamás Tűz is one of these.

A second group of poets is represented by members of a younger generation who left their native land at a tender age and spent their formative years in Canada. A few who have made English their creative

language, such as George Jónás, György Porkoláb, and Steve Buri, are not discussed here, while others — quite a few of them — have decided to make good in Hungarian.

Perhaps the most gifted in the latter group are László Kemenes Géfin and György Vitéz (real name György Németh), both of Montreal. Kemenes Géfin (b. 1937) has published three volumes of poems: *Frost-works*, *Zenith* and *Pagan Diaspora*.⁵ An experimental poet, he finds it inconceivable to express two ideas in identical forms. He has shown much talent combining the modern with the traditional by means of expressing up-to-date, complex ideas in archaic idioms.

György Vitéz, a clinical psychologist, has been published in literary periodicals within and without Hungary. He has also translated Allan Ginsberg's *Howling* into Hungarian.⁶ Kemenes Géfin and Vitéz are equally familiar with their native Hungarian traditions and their acquired English and French Canadian cultures. Although they are urban and cosmopolitan, themes of Canadian nature are favoured subjects for them. Vitéz appears to be the more conservative of the two, yet the other strives for greater simplicity. In Kemenes Géfin's estimation pure poetry is the highest achievement attainable by a poet. His poetry, with its strict economy of words, is somewhat akin, in its simplicity, to Bartók's experimental music. Some of his short poems called "songs" have a chance of becoming folksongs; this eventuality is considered by most Hungarian poets, since the poems of Sándor Petőfi more than a century ago, as a great honour and achievement.

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There is something courageous in someone's pledging loyalty to his mother-tongue in an alien land. He is likely to find himself isolated, cut off from the mainstream of society in a cultural world of his own. He might also be caught between countries, and he may exist in the possibility of belonging to neither. Life in such a cultural vacuum might also have an adverse effect on the creative growth of the individual. Yet, a considerable portion of world literature has been created by authors living abroad, as is the case with Herodotus, Ovid, Dante, Hugo, Rákóczi, Joyce, Hemingway, not to mention our own Livesay, Laurence and Richler.

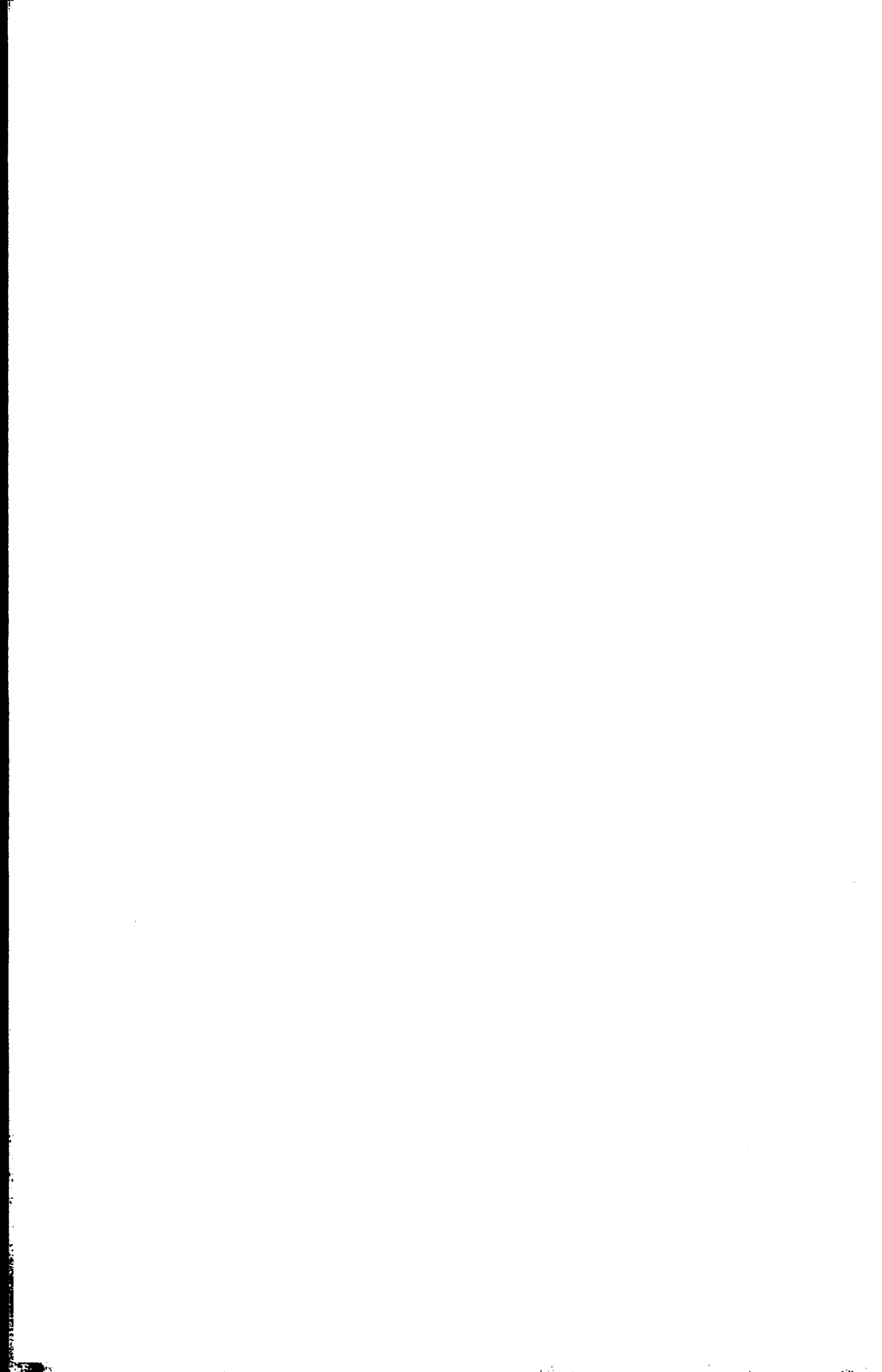
These Hungarian-language authors, like their colleagues writing in others of Canada's unofficial tongues, must have weighed the odds against their decision before preparing themselves for long, solitary lives. The shortcomings arising from being a member of a minority group notwithstanding, the poets represented above are doing remarkably well. Some literary experts in Hungary, a country formerly so

anxious to write off her expatriates, and where literary competition is really fierce, have lately come to the conclusion that these Hungarian-Canadian poets are capable of adequate literary expression. They have even gone so far as to encourage poets resident in Hungary to study the forms and techniques developed by these authors. It is hoped that Canada also will take a close look at the works of Fáy, Tűz, Kemenes Géfin, Vitéz, or for that matter at the works of Iwaniuk, Jávör, Bauer, Betanzos Santos, Viirlaid, and a host of others. Our cultural lives would be much poorer without them.

NOTES

1. John Miska, *Ethnic and Native Canadian Literature, 1850-1979: A Bibliography of Primary and Secondary Materials* (Lethbridge: Microform Biblios, 1980), viii, 355 pp. The compilation includes 2,921 entries relating to primary and secondary publications in any language including English and French.
2. Watson Kirkconnell, "A Canadian Meets the Magyars," *The Canadian-American Review of Hungarian Studies*, 1, 1-2 (1974), 1-11.
3. Ferenc Fáy, *Áradás*, "Flood" (Toronto, 1972).
 Ferenc Fáy, *Az írást egyszer megtalálják*, "The Writing Will Be Discovered" (Toronto: Magyar Kultúra, 1959).
 Ferenc Fáy, *Jeremiás siralmai*, "The Lamentations of Jeremiah" (Toronto: Magyar Helikon, 1956).
 Ferenc Fáy, *Kövület: versek*, "Petrification: Poems" (Toronto: Vörösváry Publishing Co., 1977). Dust jacket includes letters by Gy. Határ, P. Ignó, and Gy. Rónai.
 Ferenc Fáy, *Magamsírató*, "Self-pity" (Toronto: Magyar Helikon Társaság, 1967).
 Ferenc Fáy, *Törlesztő ének*, "Reducing My Debts with a Song" (Toronto: Magyar Figyelő, 1963).
4. Tamás Tűz, pseud. Lajos Makkó, *Angyal, mondd ki csak félig*, "Angel, Say It Without Words" (Toronto: Amerikai Magyar Írók, 1975).
 Tamás Tűz, *Aranyrét utca*, "Aranyrét Street" (Toronto: Amerikai Magyar Írók, 1978).
 Tamás Tűz, *Egy ország küszöbén*, "On a Country's Threshold" (Los Angeles: Amerikai Magyar Írók, 1966).
 Tamás Tűz, *Hova tűntek a szitakötők?* "What Happened to the Dragonflies?" (Toronto: Amerikai Magyar Írók, 1977). Includes poems, essays and autobiographical writings.
 Tamás Tűz, *Jelen voltam*, "I Was Present" (Toronto: Amerikai Magyar Írók, 1977).
 Tamás Tűz, *Nyugtalan szárnyakon*, "On Restless Wings" (Cologne: Amerikai Magyar Kiadó, 1959).
 Tamás Tűz, *Tükörben játszik a kéz*, "Fingerplay in the Mirror" (Toronto: Amerikai Magyar Írók, 1970).
 Tamás Tűz, *Válogatott versek*, "Selected Poems" (Toronto: Amerikai Magyar Írók, 1972).
 Tamás Tűz, *Harmincnapos nászút, elbeszélések*, "Thirty-day Honeymoon: Short Stories" (Toronto: Amerikai Magyar Írók, 1973).

5. László Kemenes Géfin, *Fehérlófia*, "Son of a White Horse" (Montreal: Amerikai Magyar Írók, 1979).
László Kemenes Géfin, *Jégvirág*, "Frostwork" (Paris: Magyar Műhely, 1966).
László Kemenes Géfin, *Pogány diaszpóra*, "Pagan Diaspora" (Montreal: Amerikai Magyar Írók, 1975).
László Kemenes Géfin, *Zenit*, "Zenith" (Munich: Auróra Könyvek, 1969).
6. Vitéz György has also published a collection of poetry under the title *Amerikai történet*, "An American Story" (Montreal: Amerikai Magyar Írók, 1977).



Concluding Remarks

Americans and Canadians of Hungarian descent, as a rule, are not indifferent to the culture and history of their 'old' country, which fact often shows up in their reading and research interests. Thus, two papers represent the study of Hungary or, rather, two important aspects in the shaping of recent Hungarian society. The studies also help to throw light on the causes of newer waves of immigration from Hungary to Canada. While Professor Dreisziger's paper is entitled "The Hungarian General Staff and Diplomacy, 1939-1941," it also deals with broader aspects as well as some incidental processes that contributed to Hungary's gradual drifting into the War.

One obvious factor that emerges is the woeful inadequacy of the Hungarian General Staff of the time as regards its difficult tasks. The higher ranks included officers who were well past their prime in terms of age and military strategy, being still permeated with loyalty to the "*K und K*" (*Kaiserlich und Königlich*: Imperial and Royal) spirit of the defunct Austro-Hungarian Empire. They lacked experience with modern weapons and had been trained to keep away from politics other than that based on the status quo. On the other hand, the younger ones, owing to their quick promotions, possessed insufficient military knowledge and experience. While those in command were understandably still influenced by the traditions of German scholarship and strategy, also the more junior officers found it difficult to resist tradition. The unspoken conclusion wants to be stated that many, or perhaps most, of them suffered from a corresponding lack or ignorance of British and American political views and methods. Another point that emerges was the apparent endeavor of the military (and the one-time Hungarian government) to divert attention from social, economic, and political weaknesses by the stressing of irredentism.

Professor Blumstock, in his study "The Irrelevance of Ideology: The Fall of Marxism and the Rise of the Last Man," gives some hints of the vast changes that have taken place in Hungary in the last few decades and shares some of his apprehensions concerning the present and future. Blumstock manages to condense to a few pages his own insights combined with the impressions of authors of publications on post-1956 Hungary. He skillfully paints the picture of a growing conflict there between the Marxian "new man" and the Nietzschean "last man." He