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The Private Self in Public Sorrow: On Sándor Csoóri

Before and after the Fall: New Poems (Lannan Translation Selections Series) by Sándor Csoóri. Translated by Len Roberts. Rochester, NY: Boa Editions, Ltd., 2004.

Before and after the Fall is a relief, finally, from taking the self too seriously and, at the same time, from taking the notion of self unseriously. This collection represents two of Hungarian poet Sándor Csoóri's books, *Monuments of the World* (1989), and *With Swans, in Cannon Fire* (1994). Len Roberts's exceptional translation earned him the Lannan Foundation Literary Translator's Award for this faithful conveyance of Csoóri's self-described "chronic memory of violence."

In the first section, Csoóri addresses his generation's struggle during World War II and the resultant repressions of the forty-five-year Communist regime. A sense of surreal dislocation and blinding illumination pervades. His identification of the self as inextricably bound to that of his country locates Csoóri, according to Roberts, within the mainstream Hungarian literary tradition known as Fate-literature. In this tradition, the poet manifests the conscience of his country, and records its struggles as human struggles so they might edify—not in naïve terms that such fates are redeemable, but that there is a "slow purification" by forgiveness possible.

In the second section, riddled with nightmares and survivor guilt, Csoóri describes the era after the fall, laying bare atrocities committed during the Communist reign. Unpublishable before the collapse, it illustrates the dangers Csoóri faced at the beginning of his career when a grant was revoked from him and he was banned from publication and public appearances for one year. Juxtaposing these two texts has the disquieting effect of fanning tributaries of complex and often contradictory emotional reactions over wide intellectual ranges, and re-routing the courses of grief and anger, guilt and national loyalty. Here is an evocative nightmare of brandished pitchforks in "the People's Park" by which one might learn a European meta-narrative micro-narratively.

Born to a peasant family in Zámoly, Hungary, in 1930, Csoóri writes a league of nobodies, ". . . the lost guests of the moon" to lay out public sorrow privately. And, it takes a league—a multiplication of shoulders to bear this brutal honesty. But, it is more than the first person plural (we) narrator that makes this text impossibly communal—impossible because suffering, like death, is never truly shared. Its unrelenting adultishness, of the kind unforeseen in innocence and glimpsed rarely in moments of intense grief or understanding, offers readers inclusion in the exchange that multiplies. Even we, the non-Hungarian readers experiencing Csoóri in translation, are allied against the "hardened-eyed people departing" because we are entrusted to suffer these poems our witness.

Translating poetry requires extreme subtlety, the ability to convey the music of the original language. Len Roberts's own ten books of poetry, for which he has been awarded a John Simon Guggenheim Award, two National Endowment for the Arts awards, and a Witter Bynner Award, have informed his ear's ability to replicate the quiet joy of rolling "hoar-frosted bell-peal and clock-stroke" against the palate. But, more important even than the conveyance of music is the translator's role as first reader/window into the text. As such, Roberts is unobtrusive and luminescently transparent. "Only smoke, smoke and crows in overcoats intercede," which is to say Roberts maintains the nonreciprocal nature or underlying foreignness of language, which Walter Benjamin advocates in "The Task of the Translator." Benjamin insists that the "kinship of languages" is manifested by a translation "far more profoundly and clearly than in the superficial and undefinable similarity of two works of literature." This kinship is revealed not by equivalency, but by preservation of that underlying disparity. Rather than cloak the original in a shroud of false affinity, a translator must acknowledge the disaccord. Here Roberts shines in his subtlety by letting go of personal ego, and denying the temptation to take over the text and mask Csoóri and his Hungarian tongue with his own relationship to the English one.

The essence is the thing—the difference between a translator and a poet translator, and Roberts conveys the essence of Csoóri. For, what is the meaning of a "ringing in the ear" if that effect is not reproduced in the reader by "such a clamor / in yourselves" as the universal rattle of keys? In "I'd Have to Go Blind," Roberts captures this elusive effect in the mind's ear that transcends meaning:

the glass-clodded field throbbed,
as if death had driven a black stud westward
at the hour of ghosts

Benjamin, speaking of the translator's need to render the sense of a poem, says he must carry "the original's mode of signification, thus making both the original and the translation recognizable as fragments of a greater language."

Coming together around a shared commonality, only to more vividly recognize the gulf of separation, is what enables Csoóri the effect of uncommon communion. He would consider it his populist responsibility. The "populist-urbanite debate" arose when *With Swans, in Cannon Fire* was originally published in 1994, according to Ervin Brody's article in *Literary Review*. Hungary's veneer of artificial unity, due to the merging of forces in an anti-Communist crusade, was peeling. Beneath lay a deep-seated ideological disparity between liberal and extremist points of view. Over time it became apparent that this cultural chasm prevented the joining of forces toward a unified national front, a tragedy of irony that contradicted the populist drive toward a national collective. Populist nationalism considers the service of one's people and country to be in the service of all people and all countries. We feel this cosmic patriotism reaching out in Csoóri's verse—that there is strength in suffering shared "the way prisoners of war share a lone potato."

The village serves the populists as a quintessential social archetype or touchstone. This microcosm is a stabilizing force against the macrocosm. "What's left of your endlessness still whirls" in the white-wash of morning walls, Csoóri writes, "as the morning light / whirls in a pupil strung tight." There is a difference suggested in the self-circularity of solipsism and the cosmic ethics of stoicism.

While the ancient stoics considered the human a small-scale manifestation of the universe, they also believed in the subordination of personal ends to meet the needs of society. Csoóri doesn't have the luxury of solipsism, to begin a poem as the poets of old with "IN THE JOYOUS MONTH OF MY LIFE," because the billowing of candle flames and squandered summers has him musing rather on the shadow swelling "an unredeemable skull upon the wall," asking not why he's been allowed to live, but how. His poems cannot contain leisurely lyrics about personal innocence or lost youth, for he must "write an entreating hymn / to the god of the country and the war."

But to portray Csoóri as a poet of conjunction would be to abbreviate him. His responsibility to his country and fellow citizens propels his verse, but the world it engenders is "born / from the pain" of collective grief rather than the triumph of community. The only healing offered is the dogged balm of individual acceptance. Forgiveness comes in "faltering anthems" sung side by languished side, but relief comes in the quiet recognition of solitude. "I don't need anything," Csoóri writes "that's not my own / miracle anymore." Here is the relief from taking the notion of self unseriously—an echo of Marcus Aurelius' stoic surety that "it is in your power . . . to exert your skill to control your thoughts, that nothing shall steal into them without being well examined." Instead of being crushed by inhumanity, Csoóri uses humanity to construct a sanctuary in the mind "of warm biscuits and hot spoons"—keeping vigil with tap water in a house too quiet with night.

Against the horror and violence of fear, he crafts a pure space for the self in solitude: "Alone at last. Nine in the morning. / In the world at last, myself a world, too."