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Volume 14

Issue 2 *Spring-Summer: Writing From the World:  
Selections from the International Writing Program  
1977-1983*

Article 6

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1984

## Where Does the Poet Come From?

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### Recommended Citation

Orbán, Ottó. "Where Does the Poet Come From?" *The Iowa Review* 14.2 (1984): 20-25. Web.  
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.2999>

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WHERE DOES THE POET COME FROM?

“You are so Anglo-Saxon,” said the tall, Swedish blonde. She was young and bright, her longish hair shimmering in the Finnish midsummer sunshine. She was a reader of a Stockholm publishing house hunting for East European authors in the mob at the Lahti Writers’ Reunion. She was obviously proud to find a Westerner among the writers of the East.

Mr. Ottó East-West faintly smiled. He was doubtful about his Anglo-Saxon attitudes. He was even doubtful about his Eastern attitudes. He was even uncertain whether his attitudes, if he had attitudes at all, could be connected with any of the four cardinal points. Being a damned realist he was after a certain story, a sort of mystery that started to happen to him in the least Anglo-Saxon place in the world: a dark, noisy and stinking cell under a heavily bombed Budapest apartment house.

There were, however, Anglo-Saxons in his story. During the shorter and shorter intermissions between two air raids he usually sat on the yellow pavement of the ground floor and anxiously listened to the heavy silence falling like rain from the sky-high battlefield. Up there just a few minutes before the Anglo-Saxons were circling with their eagle-like, silver bombers; every time they came the sky was going to blow up because of the thunderstorm of barking machine guns and roaring engines. Not to mention the London Symphony Orchestra of falling bombs. “EEEYOUUU,” they started to whistle somewhere in the high regions, and then came the down-the-earth contrabass of thundering explosions.

It was the fourth week of the siege and he was used to all these sorts of things. His natural instincts more than his mind figured out the obvious explanation. It was just the normal war-routine, the only possible way in an impossible life. He was already a well-trained survivor. He tasted roasted horse; its meat, too sweet, could however be eaten. He heard the crazy shouting and screaming in the dark cell after the Chain Bridge was blown up. The Chain Bridge was—when it existed—just two blocks away. It was detonated by the retreating Germans. Explosion, the unearthly mixer started to shake the old

apartment house as if it had wanted to invent a new kind of cocktail, Blood on the Rocks. Nonetheless it failed, nothing out of the ordinary had happened. Just candles fell down, and people, mostly women, shouted and screamed. Him not at all. He was too tired to be upset. Really, in his own rather exceptional way he was not only Anglo-Saxon, he was also Danish. He wanted to die, to sleep, the same thing Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, did centuries ago. He was an old, old man. He was nine.

Not that one could say the war didn't have its own humor. It was rather cruel, but it was humor anyway. Perhaps that was what saved him from falling into the deepest depression. In spite of being an old man at nine he—or somebody else, a different person hiding in him—desperately wanted to live. He was stunned but listening. Listening all the time to what was going on—it was the mood of the would-be poet, an unconscious way of survival.

And nobody could say he didn't have material enough for a lifetime. On the third floor was living an upper middleclass woman, a sort of a lady, a lawyer's wife. She was accustomed to having her daily bath, which was a rather luxurious demand considering the circumstances of war. To mention just one of the numerous difficulties, there was no water on the third floor at all. She was, however, stubborn and rigid in her customs, and conceived of a rather risky bath operation. She took a big pot and went downstairs. On the ground floor there was a water tap, and sometimes water came out. This time she was lucky. At a painfully slow pace she filled her pot with water. She was in a hurry to get back to the third floor. Somehow she made a fire in her kitchen and waited for the water to get warm. Finally she poured it out into her bathtub. That was the moment when one of our daily air raids began. The sirens started wailing crazily and she escaped to the cell.

By that day our apartment house had already been hit by two bombs. Magically, both of them failed to explode. In our apartment house there were two courtyards. One, the bigger of them, on the front side, the other in the back. It was ordered that both be kept filled with piles of sand in case of fire. The bombers both times took off from Alice-in-Wonderland Airbase, and the fairy-tale bombs hit only the piles. First they were whistling and then came an unexpected silence. It was a famous story. All the neighboring buildings were in flames or in ruins; we escaped unhurt. Obviously and simply we were lucky. And lucky again on the day of the Lady's Bath. The sirens were already wailing the off-sign; it was the shortest raid in four weeks.

The lawyer's wife ran upstairs; she strongly hoped the water would be warm enough to take a bath. She threw open the bathroom door and found a third bomb in the bathroom, comfortably situated in the more or less warm water. For a life-long second she simply could not move, then she panicked, and ran out of her apartment to the open corridor of the bigger courtyard.

"O Jesus, a bomb is *sitting* in my bathtub!" she screamed, and fainted.

Perhaps that was the moment when I became a man of letters, if not more correct to say "a man of words," because this impossible word, the erratic usage, was what I never could forget after that. A bomb *sitting* in a bathtub. It was not the lawyer's wife who had said something wrong. It was human language that went bankrupt after not finding a correct expression for a totally inhuman situation. Language is simply not made for that. There is not a word for a bomb in a bathtub. There are not words for wars. Of course there are, studied and pious ones without any reference to the hidden and destroying essence that was in that very case a bomb in a bathtub, an iron symbol embodying the frightening fact of basic uncertainty in human values and moral standards, since almost everyone of them proved to be too fragile. Even the most ordinary people easily changed from one day to another into either monsters or victims, often both at the same time, among the extraordinary circumstances in the fiery wartime hell. The explosive Christmas gift—it was late December—failed to explode. It didn't fail, however, in putting the most uncomfortable question to me. That was—and always is—the question of the human condition in this humanized-to-inhuman world. As a survivor I inherited two things, memory of a dead father beaten to death with rifle-butts near the western Hungarian border, and an urgent pressure to answer the question that had been put to me by the wash-it-yourself bomb in a middle-class woman's bathtub. Trying to figure out what to answer I had become interested in everyday life. Then I became interested in contradictory philosophies. All in all I became interested in history.

Almost ten years later I came across T.S. Eliot's poem, "The Waste Land." Reading through the second and third sections, entitled "A Game of Chess" and "The Fire Sermon," I was simply shocked. I felt as if I had read them before. Everything was so familiar. It was like our life in the cell, the same mixture of banalities and pathos with one minor exception—that the characters were not identical. Nevertheless their style was the same. Enobarbus, a character in Shakespeare's *Antony and*

*Cleopatra*, appears surprisingly on the earthly stage of Eliot's poem to recite a crazily high-spirited love-monologue that seems absurd when juxtaposed with the copulating clerks; two days before my father had started to march on a long route for a concentration camp (which he never reached because he was killed), we got a desperately pathetic postcard from him. "Sure," he wrote, "God is good and will take care." He mentioned several times "our lovely little son": it was me. On the same postcard, however, he wrote that he was concerned about some pieces of textile and asked my mother if she could look after them. Previously he had been a high-ranking employee in a textile factory. Business and religion on the same postcard. Say poetry instead of religion, commonplace instead of business and you are coming to the studied and elegant world of Mr. T.S. Eliot. That was what I did. And doing so I was caught by an invisible trap. Sooner rather than later, I had become interested in learning the most different kinds of poetic methods. I was going to become a translator. And becoming a translator, I obviously had to have as many differing personalities as national identities. Phony ones, of course, just to smuggle some foreign poetry into Hungary. From time to time I changed to an Anglo-Saxon, a Spaniard, a Russian, a Czech, an Icelander, sometimes even a Chinese. However, among my several national identities, the Anglo-Saxon was dominant.

There is a press clipping on my desk. A letter to the editor was published on January 14, 1976, in Paris by the *International Herald Tribune* under the title "Laurels to Swift."

Dear Sir,

A couple of weeks ago, while I was writing an introduction to an English-language anthology of modern Hungarian poetry to be brought out next fall by Columbia University Press, I came across Waverley Root's piece on the laurel. It contained a quotation—allegedly by Swinburne—which came very handy in my essay: "Say Britain could you ever boast/  
Three poets in an age at most?/Our chilling climate hardly bears/  
A sprig of bays in fifty years"—which I used to point out that in our historically and geopolitically much chillier climate we have always had an abundant and continuous crop of poetic laurels, at the expense of other genres—whereas Britain could also boast of the novel and the drama, to say the

least. Introduction finished, I showed it to a friend, Ottó Orbán, not only a brilliant poet but, as most of our best poets in the last four hundred years or so, also a prolific and excellent translator. "Wait a minute. Nonsense: that's not by Swinburne," he exclaimed when he reached the quotation. He got out his own volume of selected translations and showed me the quotation—in his own Hungarian. It was in "On Poetry—A Rhapsody," by Jonathan Swift.—Signed: Miklós Vajda.

Nice guy, nice story. The Case of the Brilliant Poet and the Alleged Quotation.

Really it wasn't so nice. It was a long, long day. It was cold, the wind blowing heavily, and the Army wanted to see me. Just to see how nice a guy I was. Spending a whole day in the open air is fascinating for impressionists; I wasn't one of them. Back at home I felt like frozen chicken in a huge refrigerator. By the way, I had a strong headache. I took a bath, drank half a bottle of vodka, and got slightly drunk. It was 9 p.m., time to sleep for all brilliant drunkards who had not arranged an appointment for nine-thirty. Unfortunately I had. The matter was urgent, one of my friends needed some philological help or whatever to complete his English language anthology of Hungarian poets. He needed to post the proofs for America on the next day; our meeting couldn't be postponed. Screw all the poets, I thought. Screw all the proofs, footnotes and publishers. That was the moment when the doorbell started to ring.

After working at least an hour I became tired of dates of birth and volume titles and decided to read his introduction. On the very first page I reached the quotation. Something had moved in me, a sort of beast of prey. It was the same old monster I felt living in my body the first time when the lawyer's wife found the fabulous bomb in her bathtub. Just to listen, that was the beast's ethic. And in fact it was listening even beside my dying mother's bed. There was nothing to be done, its nature was the old wartime blend of human and inhuman, identical with my character, formed by those months in the cell. Even drunk I was a professional criminal, a poet. "Wait a minute," I moaned faintly. "Nonsense: that's not by Swinburne."

Soon after, the answer came. The *International Herald Tribune* published Mr. Waverley Root's reply; he was apologizing. Justice was done to

everybody: Jonathan Swift was given back his laurels; Swinburne was free again to deal with ancient Greek metres recited by the ebbing sea; and as for laurels I succeeded in getting my own too. Only one person involved in the case wasn't named. It was, of course, the lawyer's wife; even I forgot what her name was. After those unhappy months she disappeared; I never met her again. During the war she was about forty. Perhaps she is not alive anymore. One can easily imagine her as taking her bath in the infinite black bathtub and switching the faucets of uncertain stars.

Now we have the moral. It's not Anglo-Saxon at all. It's not even Hungarian or, in a more general sense, East European. It is the moral of suffering mankind facing an unrecognizable yet desirable future. It is just human, if such a shaking moral can be called human at all.