

Erik Lynch

Film & History

Prof. Kiss

8 March 2020

“Your impressions on the poem(s) of Miklós Radnóti, one of the greatest Hungarian poets”

The famous Hungarian poet Miklós Radnóti was born on the 5th of May 1909 in Budapest, then a capital of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Radnóti was born into an urban Jewish family. He was orphaned as a boy and went to live with his uncle. After graduating gymnasium, he worked for his uncle's company for a short time before attending university and embarking on a successful literary career. During the Second World War, Radnóti was conscripted into a labor service detachment three separate times, despite his 1943 conversion to Catholicism.

Radnóti's work before the war and during the war have very different themes and tone. Radnóti's poetry in the 1930s is concerned primarily with affairs of the heart and his emotional inner life. Radnóti's conception of himself is expressed well in “A „Meredek Út” egyik példányára,” an excerpt from a 1939 poem in which Radnóti casts himself as a stalwart truth seeker, one who calls things as he sees them, but also predicts his eventual murder at the hands of Nazi collaborators. Radnóti's reference to certain colors in intentional, as the red, white, and green he observes give the poem a political element, situating it as a, if not outwardly critical, wary perspective of the politics of Horthy era Hungary. Radnóti is a peaceful man, one who has never killed, which was perceived as a sign of weakness or cowardice in the martial and revanchist culture of the Horthy era. Radnóti's prewar work also dealt with romantic pursuits, such as in the amorous “Áprilisi eső után” and the self-indulgent “Arckép.” These poems show that, like many young men, romance was at the forefront of Radnóti's mind in his youth.

Radnóti was not necessarily an optimist- pessimism seems as Hungarian as goulash- but his prewar poems did have a certain vitality to them, a healthy and vigorous presence in one's own life. During the war, however, Radnóti's confidence was dulled considerably. Where in “Arckép” Radnóti was bold and proud, 1944's “A bujdosó” shows a scared, corned Radnóti. This feeling of being hunted, of malevolent forces hemming ever closer in was sadly prescient, as Radnóti would be set to death less than half a year after penning this piece. The year previous, 1943, Radnóti had expressed some of the same themes in “A félelmetes angyal”, imagining a great and terrible angel ready to carry him off of this mortal coil in every quiet moment. A pervasive sense of paranoia accompanies Radnóti's wartime work. Years before they took his life, Nazis, their collaborators, and their enablers took the light from Radnóti's eyes, a little death that dragged on for years before those hateful men, the type whom Miklós Radnóti cast himself as opposite to in 1939's “A „Meredek Út” egyik példányára,” purged from the world a gentle man who did not fit in to the violent world of their ideology.