

RACHEL TZVIA BACK

POETRY IN THE 21ST CENTURY
AND RADICAL FAITH

The story is well-known: on a forced march from a labor camp in eastern Serbia toward northwest Hungary in October 1944, Hungarian poet Miklós Radnóti continues to jot down poems in a small exercise book he carries with him. In these short and darkly lyrical texts, Radnóti records the devastation all around—the blood, stench, death and despair that are everywhere, even as love abides within him, “a beetle hiding in the heart of a rotting tree” (“Razglednicas/ Postcards III”). In the last poem he would ever write, the fourth of these “Postcards” from the edge of the literal abyss, Radnóti records his own death, as he imagines it and as would indeed transpire shortly thereafter.

I fell beside him and his corpse turned over,
tight already as a snapping string.
Shot in the neck. “And that’s how you’ll end too,”
I whisper to myself; “lie still; no moving.
Now patience flowers in death.” Then I could hear
“Der springt noch auf,” above, and very near.
Blood mixed with mud was drying on my ear.

(Translated by Zsuzsanna Ozsváth and Frederick Turner)

The poem is dated October 31st; in early November, together with 20 other prisoners, Radnóti is shot to death and his body is thrown into a mass grave. His last poems, written in pencil in that small cross-ruled notebook, are buried with him.

But the story, we know, doesn't end there. Eighteen months later, the mass grave is opened, and Radnóti's remains are exhumed; it is then that the coroner finds in the back pocket of Radnóti's trousers his notebook of poems—poems which no one knew existed, poems that Radnóti wrote with no reason to believe they would ever be read.

I think of those poems in the months they lie buried there in deep earth silence; I imagine the individual scribbled words carrying the poet's last thoughts and images, his human spirit crafted into poetic lines, there in the dark, waiting. I envision the paper stained with dirt and blood, slowly disintegrating. And I wonder at the poet who, despite every indication otherwise, apparently continued to believe that the slender poems on the fragile page may, somehow, survive the darkness all around and emerge into the light.

To continue to believe thus is unexpected and extraordinary; to continue to believe thus is a reification of radical faith.

* * *

The story I open with is extreme, I know. But we feel ourselves in these still-early days of the 21st century in an era of dangerous extremes, as expressions and incarnations of fascism have once again gained power and governing control. The feeling is not misplaced; nationalistic fervor based on rabid exceptionalism and rampant hatred of the other have become, again, accepted and even openly celebrated. And accelerating our seeming free-fall into black vortexes of division and violence—in the US, across Europe, through the Middle-East—is how those in power have altered language usage itself. The bond between signifier and signified has been severed; words may mean whatever the speaker wishes them to, or nothing at all. Language in the era of “post-truth” and “alternative facts” seems to no longer know itself, its function or its truth.

This has happened before, more than once, but we never imagined it could, it would, happen in the broad day-light of democracies exalted the world over. And so we are stunned and shocked.

* * *

Acknowledge the shock. Allow yourself to feel all the sorrow that surges now to the surface. Don't pretend you aren't afraid for your children and the world that unfolds darkly before them. Hold close those who mourn most deeply because they have fought for so long and are weary and it seems now as though it was for naught. Don't lose sight, for even a moment, of those caught in the cross-fire with no zone of safety to which they may retreat.

But refuse despair, the despair that makes one mute. Resist the desire to slip into silence. Remember the words that lifted you up, though their writer couldn't know they would; remember the words that, against every odd, endure. Know that you can't possibly know what work your own words might do in the world.

Proceed with radical faith.

* * *

What makes this faith radical? It is radical because it is the faith of the unbelieving believer. She is the one who *lives* in the limits and failures of faith, and yet continues her work, though it is work wholly propelled by and dependent on faith.

* * *

Radical faith. *Faith*, from the Latin root *fidere*, “to trust”—as one must trust in something one believes to be true though there is no empirical evidence attesting to its truth. *Radical*, from Late Latin *radicalis*, “of or having roots”—for the way the radical changes something from its roots, advancing instead in the direction of the unexpected and the extreme, unsettling the customary and the known.

At the root, the poet crafts his poems so they may impact on minds and spirits, nurture and sustain the imagination, and also translate into actions that may contribute toward society's well-being; he proceeds *trusting* in this possibility. When trust in this possibility lapses, and still he goes on writing—because *not* writing is surrender to the barbaric taking residence within his city walls—then he has entered the realm of radical faith.

Now more than ever, I write poetry from this faith.

* * *

There is no reason to believe that the work I do, the poetry I write, matters. Poems are small in the world; the forces propelled by money and control, in the interests of attaining more money and control, ever-thriving on deceit and demagoguery, often driven by retrogressive religious ideologies—those forces are large and powerful. Still, I write poetry; still I teach and translate poetry. This is the work I do, firstly, because it is my work to do: as Emerson famously framed it, “The eye was placed where one ray should fall, that it might testify of that ray.” But I do it also because I have seen how poetry’s aspiration toward language accuracy and precision offers a repair of the maimed language usage that reigns supreme. I have also witnessed the fashion in which poetry, through its own inhabiting of a space between speech and silence, teaches the lost art, and the ethics, of true listening, so desperately needed. And amid all I do not know, I can attest with certainty to the way poetry’s address of the unknown “you” forges bonds across great divides, evokes compassion even in cold hearts and creates community in ways we hardly imagine possible.

Thus, through a prism of unbelief, I keep acting as though believing—that poetry has the potential to lift us above our weaker and baser selves and, through an offered relationship with both the transcendent and the other’s unknown heart, heal some small part of our brokenness.

* * *

I close with the final poem from my collection titled *What Use Is Poetry, the Poet Is Asking*; the book’s titular question reverberates in every poem I now write, it is the chord that keeps vibrating.

LIKE THE BELIEVER

Like the believer who wakes
into faithlessness

his mouth unexpectedly
refusing the morning prayer:

*modeh ani, grateful am I before
thee—* unuttered. But

who will he be
without prayer framing

morning noon and night—
what had been spoken

light through his days. So
in steady faithlessness he

keeps praying. And she—
disbelieving

poet of fallen faith—
suspecting the word is

barely if ever heard
in the clamorous, the

screaming world, wakes
to another day of

brokenness and praise—
modah ani breath to my body restored

so compassionately—
and there as another

unbelieving believer
at prayer, she

puts one more poem
on the page.

Singly and all together, in words emerging from the dark earth of this world, the letters still covered in dirt clods, slivers of light quietly glistening from between the lines—we sing on.

* * *

This piece is informed by Michael Palmer's essay "On Sustaining Culture in Dark Times," *Active Boundaries: Selected Essays and Talks* (New Directions 2008) and by Junot Diaz's article "Under Preseident Trump, Radical Hope is our Best Weapon," *The New Yorker*, 21 November 2016. The Ozváth and Turner translation of Radnóti's poem "Postcards IV" is taken from Forrest Gander's "Hungary: Don't Look Away," Poetry Foundation blog, 2008. The quotation from Emerson is from his essay "Self Reliance." My term and idea of "radical faith" is an adaptation of Jonathan Lear's notion of "radical hope."

Modeh ani are the first words of the morning prayer the observant Jew speaks upon waking. These words mean literally, "I give thanks" (in the masculine verb form). The full prayer goes as follows: "I give thanks before you, living and eternal King, for compassionately restoring my spirit to me, your steadfastness is great." *Modah* is the female verb form of the same.