TEXT review

A tiny light in the terrible night

review by Kevin Brophy

Lajos Walder
Become a Message
Agnes Walder (trans with a foreword by Don Paterson)
Upper West Side Philosophers, New York 2015
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Lajos Walder (1913-1945) was born in Hungary of a Jewish mother and Jewish father. He had two books of poetry published in his life, under the name of Lajos Vándor (Lajos the Wanderer). Though his father served in the Austro-Hungarian army during the First World War, he was forcibly retired in 1919 without a pension because he was a Jew. He died when Lajos was eleven years old. Lajos was a brilliant student, passing his baccalaureate with straight distinctions, and becoming one of a handful of Jews allowed to study law in Hungary. He supported himself as a law student by writing plays, fairy tales, short stories and poems, by editing a literary monthly, and by working as an announcer on a children’s radio program. By the time he obtained his law degree in 1937, no law firm in Budapest would hire a Jew. He worked as a labourer in a stocking factory, and had a business card printed that announced he was a ‘Factory-Hand and Lyric Poet’. He married in 1939, and spent the war years as a slave labourer, dying most likely from Typhus after surviving a death march, shortly after his release from the concentration camp at Gunskirchen.

His first book of poetry, Heads or Tails, was published when he was twenty, and his second six years later (Group Portrait). There were no further publications because after 1938 works by Jews could no longer be published in Hungary.

Walder’s poetry is fiercely anti-fascist and anti-communist. This is one reason, perhaps, why his poetry could not be published until after 1989 in Hungary. Lajos Walder’s poetry is also anarchical, funny, tough, intimate, theatrical, earthy, and vividly alive with the energy of an irrepressible
young man. This book is his daughter’s translation of his published and unpublished poetry.

Why might we want to read these poems from a young poet of the 1930s in Europe? Firstly, we have a chance to hear the voice of a poet apparently too dangerously outspoken to be allowed to be heard in his lifetime. What was it that his country was so afraid of for fifty-six years? But most importantly, Lajos Walder’s poetry, modern and urgent, committed to its craft, written against its own times, composed on the run, touched by personal and larger histories, is an example of the white-hot way poetry can emerge from a life. This is an exciting book to read.

The book begins with a series of youthful self-portraits, putting on display a poetry that is remarkably close to what young poets now call ‘spoken word’. These are wry, rueful, teasing monologues on what a self might look like as a museum display, how one might become a modern monk, or present one’s self as seducer and lover of the sun, the moon, the clouds. Lajos Walder explored two main poetic techniques in this early poetry: the scope of personification, and the possibilities of the extended metaphor. Always, these were at the ruthless mercy of his wit. His early poem that gives a voice of solidarity to the letters of the alphabet, announcing they are going on strike, is a wonderfully provocative example of this:

We, abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz,
the twenty-five letters of the alphabet,
sadly draw our conclusions
about the current turn of events in Europe
and are willing, if need be,
to proclaim a general letter strike
even on to the forty thousand letters
of the Chinese alphabet –
if the European nations do not alter
the top-secret foreign policy directives
handed to their ambassadors.

(from ‘We, the twenty-five letters of the alphabet’: 24)

His poetry is no stranger to satire and irony, in fact it seems to me this was a fundamental impulse driving him to poetry:

… when your conscience,
having risen above sly tax evasions,
commands you to stop
for a little chick ambling across the road,
then you have arrived at your Lord,
and you may celebrate the Human Being
in yourself ….

(from ‘Ten commandments’: 65)

He sees the venal in us, he sees the herd working its dull way into the individual’s psyche, the materialism around us (‘You who are a role model for the middle class/and will go to Heaven by car’) and he manages to capture lively images of all that disappoints him, enrages him or amuses him. His portrait of a reporter, Miss Mabel Faithful, is pricelessly funny and deeply disturbing. In part, it goes,

I’ve done a report on Hitler,
The Duce gave me an interview;
This morning my chief editor asked me
To write on ‘what is love?’
(from ‘Report’: 87)

Her diligent inquiries on this topic are hilarious and finally land somewhere between a joke and despair.

What Lajos Walder missed, as a poet, was mid career fame and perhaps a late career freedom. In his book on late style, Edward Said commented that it is the prerogative of late style to have the power to render disenchantment and pleasure without revoking the contradictions between them. Stripped of hubris and pomposity, late style can operate unashamed of fallibility or self-assurance. It strikes me that the poetry of the young poet can also enjoy this freedom, unencumbered by a career or a reputation. There is a freedom and a polished carelessness to Walder’s poetry that might have soon been lost if Lajos Walder had been recognised for the original, incisive voice that he was. He had nothing to live up to, and everything to say. And he said it. He had, for instance, no trouble identifying himself as a human being against the rising numbers of Nazis in Europe, though still with a mordant wit. At the end of the poem, ‘I was About Fifteen Years Old’, he writes,

And wherever I go
the old gas lamps look gratefully
up to the sky
and give thanks
that after so many brown shirts –

a human being has finally
walked by. (136)

Many of these poems are the poems of a young man in love, falling in love, wanting to be in love, feeling lustful, and at the same time fearful of venereal disease, pregnancy, abortion, marriage, commitment. Even in one of his most powerful political poems, this fear comes through:

I spit in your eye, my purulent Europe,
and ask the question:

What are you so proud of?

Is it your sanatoriums in the mountains,
crammed full of tuberculotics
or your brothels
in which hundreds of thousands are infected?
Is it your coal mines,
where men suffocate from gas
or your war industry,
which is truly developed, first rate?
(from ‘Delicate Question’: 91)

There is also a widely empathetic poet who wants to imagine himself into the shoes of a salesman, a clerk, a factory hand, the unemployed, or those soldiers who are lost to history as individuals and only remembered under the heading of a battle or a Division. There are more mysterious poems of love, such as the ‘Key Poem’, which seems to open on to the possibilities of a love that encompasses suffering and commitment beyond youthfulness. ‘Expedition’ is another extraordinary love poem worth the price of the book.
There are many encounters with God, who seems to be a Christian God (three of his half-siblings were brought up Catholic). In one poem he manages, as a reporter, to interview God briefly, and in another he reflects upon the ease of God’s life, for God is as we know a bachelor. God always brings with ‘him’ the question of what might be the meaning of life.

This is the kind of poetry that resonates with some of the work of Jacques Prévert, with America’s Charles Simic, with some of the early Don Paterson, with the gutsy sonnets of Trastevere’s Giuseppe Belli, or with the later Adrienne Rich. There is a Swiftian disgust with humanity in tension with a powerful love for life at work in this poetry.

Lajos Walder’s message, finally, is ‘Become a message’: ‘Be a tiny light in the terrible night.’ When a young writer in one of his poems bangs away all night on his typewriter in a rented room,

at such times, the neighbours
object furiously
to the nocturnal disturbance of peace

but a girl who
is in love with him
says of him

that he is writing poems
    (from ‘Typewriter’: 94)

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