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## Literature As Resistance

THE DEATH OF THE NOVEL, should it ever finally happen, would bring not just cultural loss, but moral and ethical impoverishment as well. Milan Kundera noted in *Testaments Betrayed* that fiction, as an essential shaper of our moral imagination, is indispensable to our conception and defense of rights. “Western society habitually presents itself as the society of the rights of man,” Kundera explained, “but before a man could have rights, he had to constitute himself as an individual, to consider himself such and to be considered such; that could not happen without the long experience of the European arts and particularly the art of the novel which teaches the reader to be curious about others and to try to comprehend truths that differ from his own.” That tradition of European letters was a life raft to many writers behind the Iron Curtain and the Great Wall. Two of these, the Hungarian novelist Péter Nádas and the Chinese writer Gao Xingjian, have anatomized the individual threatened by the greater good and were, of course, censored for the greater good.

In their often highly autobiographical novels and stories, Nádas and Gao have portrayed the accommodations, adaptations, and evasions necessary for the self’s survival under the pressures of living in a totalitarian regime. Yet their themes expand well beyond the parameters of political repression to address the contradictions and fickleness of memory, the fluidity of identity as it is buffeted by internal compulsions and external forces, and the necessity of facing and acknowledging the past. Both have recently published essay collections in English translation in which they reflect on their own writing, on the role of literature as witness, and the incompatibilities of ideology and individual voice.

The twelve essays in Gao Xingjian’s collection, *The Case for Literature*,<sup>1</sup> amount more overtly to a manifesto than Nádas’s more personal and more broadly political essays in *Fire and Knowledge*.<sup>2</sup> Nádas is at ease in the European High Modernist tradition. He is a refined, elegant stylist, and his grand, sweeping novel, *A Book of Memories*, earned him deserved comparisons to Musil, Proust, and Thomas Mann, the last of whom

<sup>1</sup> THE CASE FOR LITERATURE, by Gao Xingjian. Trans. by Mabel Lee. Yale University Press. \$26.00.

<sup>2</sup> FIRE AND KNOWLEDGE: Fiction and Essays, by Péter Nádas. Trans. by Imre Goldstein. Farrar, Straus and Giroux. \$30.00.

Nádas has written about with acute sensitivity. He has interspersed short stories among his essays as if to illustrate the points he makes in them. Gao is edgier, more abrupt in his pronouncements. In his essays, Gao returns again and again to his two basic artistic credos, elaborating, explaining, and examining them from different angles. The first is that the true artist must be “without isms,” able to rise above ideology and say no to “power, custom, superstition, reality, other people and the thinking of other people.” And the second is Gao’s belief in “cold literature,” literature written out of the writer’s inner need and only for its own sake.

These are not the abstract pronouncements of an idealist, but a hard-won position. In his title essay, his Nobel Prize acceptance speech in 2000, Gao points out that the “revolution in literature and revolutionary literature alike passed death sentences on literature and the individual. The attack on China’s traditional culture in the name of revolution led to the public prohibition and burning of books. Countless writers have been shot, imprisoned, exiled or punished with hard labour over the past hundred years.” More than once, Gao narrowly escaped such a fate by fleeing into the countryside where he could not be traced.

When the Cultural Revolution was launched in 1966, Gao was twenty-six years old with a degree in French literature. While working as an editor and translator for the Foreign Languages Press, he had written a suitcase full of manuscripts. But since he refused to follow the Chinese Communist Party’s socialist realist guidelines, he destroyed all of his writings before any Red Army Guards could find and use them against him. He survived by his wits, initially leading a Red Guard group of his own, then, when under suspicion for that, by living with peasants in a remote province for five years. He was able to return to Beijing and the Press in 1975, a year before Mao’s death and the end of the Cultural Revolution. Throughout it all, Gao had kept writing, but in the strictest secrecy.

It would be another five years before Gao’s work began appearing in print regularly, but the risks were far from over. He was first noted and then notorious for two plays and a book of literary criticism. Officials of the Chinese Writers’ Association had appointed Gao resident playwright of Beijing’s People’s Art Theater in 1981. Despite the privilege, he still refused to write uplifting and moralizing “literature as a vehicle for the Way.” Gao’s plays were formally experimental, heavily influenced by the theater of Artaud, Beckett, and Brecht, and, to the outrage of the Ministry of Propaganda, they were also morally ambiguous and flirted with the absurd. In *Bus Stop*, for example, a line of people stands talking while waiting for a bus. Years go by as buses pass without stopping. Finally the character Silent Man joins the queue but waits only briefly before walking away. One Party official declared this Chinese answer to *Godot* to be the most pernicious writing in the history of the People’s Republic. It was banned after ten sold-out performances. His other play from that period, *Alarm Signal*, about a train robber’s change of heart,

was also closed after a few performances. Gao's book of criticism, *Preliminary Explorations into the Art of Modern Fiction*, published in 1981, was proscribed during the "Oppose Spiritual Pollution" campaign, despite the courageous support of a few prominent Chinese writers. In this book, Gao critiqued various techniques used in Western literature and film but virtually unknown in Chinese literature, like flashbacks and stream of consciousness, and suggested they could enrich the Chinese novel. He was blacklisted as a reactionary promoter of the capitalist West's decadent modernist literature.

Again, fearing imprisonment or worse, Gao escaped to the countryside in 1983. He spent five months traveling along the Yangtze River. This 15,000-kilometer journey would be the source of his 1990 novel, *Soul Mountain*, in which the narrator's pilgrimage mirrors his explorations of his psyche.

The translator's introduction to *The Case for Literature* and the essay "Wilted Chrysanthemums" recount the treacherous, labyrinthine politics Gao was forced to navigate until his 1987 emigration to France. There, in 1989, in response to the Tiananmen Square massacre, he wrote "Fleeing," another political lightning rod of a play for its explicit treatment of the bloodshed and of sexual desire. All of his work was banned in China as a result. Not even the Nobel Prize could redeem Gao's reputation there; in fact the international acclaim hardened the nationalist resentment against him.

The Swedish Academy has long been partial to dissident writers and has particularly favored satirical dramatists in the last few years, crowning Dario Fo, Harold Pinter, and Elfriede Jelinek as well as Gao. But Gao's novels, *Soul Mountain* and *One Man's Bible*, are dead earnest, occasionally to deadly effect. They are complex, expansive, and stylistically innovative works, but they offer only a partial sense of his literary ambitions. Even the "linguistic ingenuity" of his prose, which the Swedish Academy praised in their announcement, survives only sporadically in translation.

The lavish praise Gao has received for his stylistic innovations can appear rather extravagant to readers limited to English translations of his work. Yet his dedication to revitalizing and transforming his native language is clear in *The Case for Literature*. In his essay, "The Modern Chinese Language and Literary Creation," Gao analyzes how the simplification of Chinese characters begun in the 1950s and bad translations from Western literature have harmed Chinese literary language. By incorporating spoken forms of the language and avoiding grammatical structures grafted onto his language by zealous translators, Gao tries both to return to a pure form of modern Chinese and to use the versatility and concision of that language in articulating his perceptions as fully as possible. He observes that the "Chinese language does not precisely distinguish tense. In fact, the past, present and future, memory and imagination, feelings and reflection, reality, possibility and fantasy have no morphological indicators," but can fuse together in direct

speech. He brings this indeterminacy to the narrative voice of *Soul Mountain*. This voice mirrors the fluidity of identity and psychological perceptions by shifting between and sometimes blending points of view. The pronouns I, you, she, and he appear as distinct characters, although they are all attributable to transformations of one consciousness.

Still, his confidence in modern Chinese is limited. "I believe that the existing Chinese language cannot adequately represent all the feelings of modern man, but I also believe that it is possible to enrich the existing language." Gao occasionally writes in French, but he believes a writer's first loyalty is to the language he writes in primarily, and that is Chinese.

Language, for Gao, is the "ultimate crystallisation of human civilization," and, tempered by the cultural traditions of its speakers, it can, through a writer's creativity, be adapted to articulate human feelings that it has not adequately expressed before. In order to safeguard this creative freedom, writers must resist the seductions of being a spokesman for political, social, or cultural causes, in other words for any "ism." "The writer would do well to revert to the role of witness and simply put effort into presenting the truth"—the truth of his experience, that is, not some objective idea of the truth. So, while Gao advocates "a return to the individual" and individual perception, he is careful to warn against the "unrestrained bloating of the self." He has seen an entire generation of Chinese intellectuals misled by "Nietzsche's German philosophy of the Superman," who, instead of developing a sense of true individualism, "gravitated toward a tragic belief in the supremacy of the individual."

Gao's essays, while occasionally repetitive, do provide a full and nuanced picture of the breadth and depth of his writing, which is inevitably flattened and impoverished by translation. But they also show how much is at stake for Gao in following a literary vocation. Literature, particularly 'cold literature,' beholden to nothing beyond the writer's vision, is a lifeline for the writer as well as his readers. "It may therefore be said that cold literature entails fleeing in order to survive; it is literature that refuses to be strangled by society in its quest for spiritual salvation. I also believe that if a race cannot accommodate this non-utilitarian sort of literature, it is not merely a misfortune for the writer but also an indication of the utter spiritual impoverishment of that race." This is cold truth indeed to Party officials who would limit literature to serving the state.

Péter Nádas, born in 1942 in Budapest, two years after Gao, wrote that kind of 'cold literature.' When the secret police pressured him to inform on friends and colleagues in exchange for lifting the publishing ban placed on his writing, he pretended to be unaware that there was a ban. He had neither the inclination, nor, he suspected, the strength for heroic resistance. So he chose guile, however ineffective it might prove. He continued to write for himself with little or no hope of publishing and was even able to travel abroad without overtly compromising

himself for the privilege. Still, outwitting the authorities does not absolve him from complicity in supporting the system. “[J]ust because it can be very expedient to pretend to be more stupid than one is, this does not make one’s behavior ethical.” By continuing to play the game, however subversively, or by buying into the conditions for “peaceful coexistence” with the authorities, Nádas says, his “practical victory becomes [his] moral defeat.”

Guile and dissembling dominate the thirteen essays and ten stories in *Fire and Knowledge*, not as a strategy, but as a subject. Nádas presents them as prominent characteristics of Eastern Europeans that have survived the collapse of the Soviet Union. First developed as defensive mechanisms, over the generations they hardened into reflex.

The essay “A Tale of Fire and Knowledge” is a witty meditation on the deformation of language under totalitarian systems and the cognitive disconnect that results from reality’s inconvenient triumph over euphemism. Decades of ruthless utopianism had eaten away at any common sense in his country, until the gap between language and a mutually agreed upon meaning could no longer be bridged. This became particularly evident in 1986 when fires were set simultaneously in four distant corners of Hungary. News reports dismissed these acts of arson as insignificant, claiming instead that they were large-scale fire drills. But the public, in their forced ignorance, nonetheless knew better or at least thought they did.

Although everyone knew the news did not mean what it meant, as a public they all pretended not to know what it meant. In the Hungarian vernacular of the time, “significant” meant “insignificant,” for example, and “insignificant” stood for “significant,” but since words had not completely lost their original meaning, there could be no consensus on just what they really meant. . . . As a result, every word of the language—now according to people’s individual knowledge, now according to their common ignorance—meant something other than what it once had meant, and people had to look for the word’s meaning by alternately considering the speaker’s situation and the word’s new meaning relative to its original one.

They had learned that collective ignorance was the best protection against individual folly, so they went about their business, ignoring rumors that the fires might, in fact, be fires.

At the time, newscasters were considered more equal than others as they were privy both to exactly what the news meant and what it did not mean. But one newscaster’s slip of the tongue nearly toppled the country’s shaky epistemological edifice. Reporting on the National Cartographic Institute, this newscaster, until then trusted for her ability to reconcile the actual and the apparent in her reports, made “an irreparable mistake.”

The sheet before her said that the long-obsolete maps of Hungary had been burned, but what she said aloud was that the maps of the long-obsolete country had been set on fire. Which in fact almost meant what in fact it meant.

The shock of this candor brought the country to momentary stop. But the Hungarians soon returned to the comfortable habit of collective ignorance, since they could afford to, as long as the water in the wells held out.

Such loss of common language, or at least common meaning, are for Nádás not the only barriers to complete European integration. He points to fundamentally different mindsets between East and West. In "Fate and Technique," he notes that Europeans from the former Soviet satellite countries tend to consider themselves at the mercy of fate; Western Europeans incline more towards belief in personal agency. Across this divide, the simple question, "How are you?" amounts to an existential challenge. Those at the mercy of fate, even if they feel good at the time, feel compelled to answer with the litany of woes their collective identity demands. Those who feel they can shape their futures, even if miserable, feel compelled to answer positively so that they are not seen as having failed to shape their lives properly. These chronic habits of simulation and dissimulation come at great ethical cost for both sides. And he judges both East and West harshly: the former for its reluctance to raise its political institutions above self-interest and corruption, the latter for keeping its universalistic ideals of fraternity and human rights only for themselves. Instead of working to establish and strengthen democratic traditions in the new Europe, the nations more experienced in democracy and freely elected governments have opted to protect their own interests with "controlled separation." Jacques Chirac confirmed Nádás's analysis a few years later, when he castigated Eastern European countries for missing "a good opportunity to shut up." "There is only one Europe," Nádás declares, "that of the injured," of history's casualties, but neither side is willing to incur the costs of admitting this.

Péter Nádás's first distinct memory is of the glow of a burning building across the street from his home, ignited in a bombing raid in 1945. The sight of so much death, he says, predisposed him to an almost morbid fascination with death and the physical body. Nádás "was devastated into life," and life continued the devastation. Nádás's father served as a state prosecutor under the Communists despite his bourgeois origins. He committed suicide in 1956 after the Soviets quelled the Hungarian Revolution. Nádás's mother died of cancer when he was young, so he was orphaned at the age of fourteen. Until adolescence, Nádás had no idea there could be "another, gentler and more innocent, more enlightened world in which people didn't have to have several dead relatives and friends all at once—heroes, martyrs, hangmen, and victims."

Due in great part to this baptism by fire, nothing human is alien to Nádas. In fact, his imagination seems irresistibly drawn to the borderline between taboo and convention, where he gathers material for his fiction. He opens this collection with the essay "The Great Christmas Killing," an account of his reaction to the amateurish videotape of the Ceausescus' execution by a band of vigilantes. All pity, mercy, or horror he believes appropriate is subsumed by the desire for revenge. The unlawful, undignified murder of the dictator and his wife is the logical conclusion of tyranny: nothing is sacred. There is no mercy. But the moral fog thickens as Nádas considers the similarity between physiological reactions to "base enjoyment and the more noble kind." Nerve endings do not discriminate between political excitement, religious ecstasy, or arousal. That depends on a fragile membrane of moral judgment and inhibitions.

In his essay on Thomas Mann's diaries, published in an expurgated translation in Hungary, he notes that one of the sources of Mann's greatness was his willingness to face all of his impulses, no matter how taboo, and work through them, sublimating and refining them into art. The most charged passages cut from the Hungarian edition of Mann's diaries were those in which he dispassionately observes his growing infatuation in and desire for his fourteen-year-old son Klaus, and then transforms such "negative psychic contents into positive, meaningful ones" by refracting them through the magic lantern of literature. Cutting these passages not only shores up the superficial view of Mann as the representative man of cultivated, liberal, bourgeois humanism, above inner suffering and vulnerability, but also smoothes over passages that confront disturbing currents beneath cultural relationships that shape our lives.

Squeamishness of this sort is more than a failure of nerve. It is a moral failure. Nádas judges the literature of the past century quite harshly, finding that it has abdicated its essential role of exploring and portraying the human condition in its tawdriness as well as its nobility, through the lens of the personal condition. Many of the best writers were seduced by the call of *littérature engagée* or of empty stylistics.

The concept of artistic responsibility, which along with the concept of humanism perished in the ashes of the crematorium, was cleverly redeemed in the postwar skirmishes with the political concept of artistic commitment. . . . The role of the human person has been taken over by political or artistic formulas, and in this sense, the person no longer has interrelated qualities but rather is made up of emotions and opinions, or as a countereffect to the brutal changes, a provocative stylization has appeared that hopes to bypass everything political and ideological by replacing the depiction of human traits with the channeling of creative passion into the *means* of depiction.

What emerges most strikingly from reading these two writers' essays

in conjunction with their fiction is the urgent sense of moral obligation to face up to one's past. The unnamed narrator of Gao's second novel, *One Man's Bible*, whose life parallels the author's in many particulars, struggles to recollect and to portray the madness that infects and thwarts individuals under totalitarianism. The narrator alternates between the present and a past he thought he had decisively put behind him. He returns to his memories at the urging of his lover, a German-Jewish woman who had suffered rape as an adolescent. The narrator makes an implicit comparison between her being raped and the invasiveness and psychological coercion he suffered from his countrymen. In his essay "Without Isms," Gao notes that "by failing to conform, one is consigned to the ranks of those to be criticized, banned, exterminated, purged, killed, or destroyed." And he balances that pressure to conform with various forms of resistance and self-preservation throughout *One Man's Bible*, from internal and physical exile, to playing along with the public criticism while creating a secret refuge of words at night behind locked doors.

Nádas's novels and his stories are haunted by variations on several characters: a grandfather who has retreated into silence upon learning of his son's collaboration with the authorities; a taciturn and forbidding father who has earned Party privileges but is driven to suicide as a result of his compromises; a fragile, ailing mother whose lover, her husband's former friend, may have been betrayed by her husband; and their son, both devious and naïve, seething with adolescent ambivalence towards his father and a political system that lags far behind the ideals it forces upon him.

Proustian in length, in intricacy of style, and in sensitivity, Nádas's novel, *A Book of Memories*, delves deeply into the inner life of *l'homme moyen sensuel* in that particular twentieth-century human genus, the *homo sovieticus*. He charts the minute fluctuations in identity, as the self absorbs and reacts against the atmosphere of suspicion and dread imposed by the regime. The very fineness and subtlety of his psychological dissections, however, transcend the particularities of the personal, elevating the memoir to mythic proportions.

Along with the seductions and dangers of pretense, the stories in *Fire and Knowledge* paint the cooption of selves by the political system and the corrosive effects of disillusion. In the "The Bible," the son of cadre officials torments a peasant girl brought in to work in his parents' home, incriminating her and causing her dismissal. The story's central totem is a family Bible that the boy has, in his shame, given to the religious and naïve young woman before she left. When his mother, who, as a Party official, is meant to have moved beyond such superstitions, witnesses the girl's sincere piety, she is brought up short by the hollowness of the ideals for which she has sacrificed so much. In "The Lamb," the narrator reflects on his childhood in a small Hungarian village. He recalls the anti-Semitic poison fed to them daily along with their buttered bread and how he joined other boys in taunting the only

Jewish resident. They goaded Rezso Róth, under the not disapproving eye of the neighboring adults, to suicide. Only the boy's mother, beaten down by her drunk of a husband, makes the slightest gesture—furtive and ineffectual—towards Mr. Róth. The delicacy of feeling and balance Nádas brings to his characters suspends easy judgment. In "The Lamb," the narrator's self-awareness sets him apart from the other villagers, but only slightly. "The reverse side of the hatred they felt for Mr. Róth was marked by compassion and anxiety—all their feelings had a reverse side—and now they were rotating the leaves of their feelings on the stems of their habits. And I could feel this all the more because I was no different from them."

Nádas's urgent call to face up to one's own past does not extend to condemning others. "I must put more pressure on my own pen, because I cannot imagine starting a self-examination with the examination of someone else." He has serious reservations about the process of using secret police files to expose people's past. The environment was so toxic, it was impossible for anyone—accuser or accused—to remain uninfected. In September of 1957, barely a year after the Soviets' brutal crushing of the Hungarian Revolution, he joined the Young Communist League. Although he resigned vociferously a few months later, he refuses to look about for mitigating factors. "Was I ignorant of the arrests and the executions? It would be absurd to make such an excuse, and my age was also not an excuse." He wavered in and out of the Party until his final and much more discreet break in 1961. But for seven more years, until the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, he continued to hope that "socialism could be reformed because it did not necessarily have to lead to dictatorship. Oh, how I hoped."

Both Péter Nádas and Gao Xingjian provide interesting counterpoints to Günter Grass, who after decades of hectoring others on their obligation to come clean about their involvement in the War, recently admitted to serving in the Waffen SS as a seventeen-year-old in the final months of World War II. Grass's memoir, *Peeling the Onion*, plays on the slipperiness of memory and how it colors one's identity, but not to clarify his past. Instead he exploits these uncertainties, under the guise of literariness, to avoid giving specific information or clear answers on what he did or knew when. Gao was quoted in the German press this summer. "I am less interested in what Grass, the person, did. It is more important to discuss how the system changed him—and other people." In China, he explained, everyone took part; they behaved like wolves. "As long as we in China are unable to discuss the social and political origins of the Cultural Revolution, there will always be the danger that it could recur."

Nádas's essays were written between 1986 and 2000 and occasionally show their age. The barriers to Eastern and Western European integration, while real, did not prove as insurmountable as he feared. His warnings about the excesses of lustration, the exposing of state collaborators through the highly unreliable security archives, however, are just

as valid today, as lives and reputations are still being destroyed, not always with justification, in Poland today. Yet Nádas's reflections on the incompatibility of mindsets developed under tyranny with those in countries with a history of self-rule are relevant today, perhaps with even higher stakes than after fall of the Berlin Wall. The friction between old and new or potential democracies has grown even more heated in the last seventeen years.

Gao Xingjian and Péter Nádas have elucidated in their fiction and their essays the convoluted relations that bind the personal, the literary, and the political. Nádas is in no doubt about their interdependence. "Legitimized power is merely a precondition for political morality; the only guarantee of political morality is personal responsibility. But personal responsibility does not have different levels that can be gauged by usefulness or necessity. I am its sole custodian, and only I can represent it." Literature is essential to that custodianship as a means of self-knowledge and exploration of the ways any historical situation's "unavoidable logic" affects the self.

The more inward-focused Gao approaches that complicated triangle from a slightly different perspective. "For me, literary creation is a means to salvation, it could also be said that it is a means to life. It is for myself, not to please others, that I write. And I do not write to change the world or other people, because I cannot even manage to change myself." But, as a preserve of individual consciousness, literature can provide resistance to the deadening forces of society whether they come in the form of political ideologies, social pressures, or rampant consumerism. "I regard literary creation as the individual's challenge to society for the right to exist, and although this challenge is insignificant, it is nevertheless a gesture." In this case, both authors would agree that the very insignificance of the gesture imparts it with significance beyond itself.