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### Book Review: "Unknown Places" by Péter Kántor

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Péter Kántor, "Unknown Places." Translated from the Hungarian by Michael Blumenthal. New York: Pleasure Boat Studio, 2010. 86 pages.  
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The "unknown places" in Kántor's poetry are not far away countries in travel brochures, but rather the innermost recesses of the soul. The aim of the journey "is to surprise yourself, supposing/ you can still find some unknown places in yourself,/ supposing you can find some way to wander them at all" (56). The paths taken are mysterious, hiding both origin and destination, the past and the future. The self seems to be a prisoner of fate, "hanging from a sky-blue thread,/ back to the wall, with blindfolded eyes" (17). The image suggests elements of danger, terror, and uncertainty in this journey, both a universal experience and one designed by place.

Péter Kántor is a Hungarian poet, born in Budapest in 1949, who grew up under the Russian occupation of his country, which ended in 1989 with the fall of the Iron Curtain and the liberation of Hungary from the Communist régime. His memory of history and politics is extended by that of his ancestors, like his grandmother, who used to take him to school on the streetcar and spoke English and French and used to own a house before the war, "...and later, she had to share a flat in that same house" (19) seized by the Russians and transformed into communal property. In "learning to live," Kántor comments on the end of "the war between the two world systems" (57) and the freedoms connected with the new consumer society in Hungary, which have not created a "better world," because the generations who grew up with Communist ideology know no other way, in spite of "having been liberated from it all,/ from our cross,/ from our dictatorship,/ from half our lives" (57). Now there is a need to adapt to the new political system, a need to learn to live again "with a mixture of ecstasy and fright," the confrontation of the old and the new undermining all certainties.

It isn't surprising that the self is split in two, as expressed in the poem "on the curb," where the self and an alter ego sitting on a bench "just don't feel like getting up,/ just don't feel like going home:/ Where? What for? Why?/ to end it all, to begin anew" (27). The present situation creates nervous tension, paradoxical understanding and not understanding: "he doesn't get it, he gets it,/ already mentally in flight, /running helter skelter,/ he's rummaging for cigarettes and a lighter" (27). Fear of the unknown creates anxiety, because "At times like these there are no referees," and the rules of the game are not clear.

Identity of the self is inevitably connected with place and identity of the country of birth and residence. In "struggle," the poet moves from the statement, "I don't know who you are/ I don't know what moves you/ I don't know the weapons/ I don't know who wins" to the observation, "O I know who you are/ and I know what moves you/ and the weapons, they always change" (18). Attached to that is the big question of the self, "But who is me? Who am I?" In a shape-shifting environment, the experience of the self is unsettling, in constant transformation, rebelling or adapting, depending on the occasion.

Public and private spaces merge in a poem like "This is the Danube," where childhood memories of drowning connect with the memory of the river police

station because of a swim in the dirty waters which are the essence of the river. It reflects the passage of time recollected in images of the natural beauty of the unfolding day, but also a sense of sadness, year following on year and “weeping on weeping” (37). In “little night prayer,” the poet requests, “Place a net into my hands/ to fish with, in the past/ and in the present” (31). For the “river poet” the Danube becomes a metaphor for the passing of time, transitoriness and eternal flux, but also for the continuity of past and present, “flowing permanently,/ uninterrupted farewell and arrival,/ unbroken coming and going” (69). He is a “prisoner of memories” (70) both sweet and bitter, because his unifying vision “contains the seeds of separation,” his creation carrying within it the potential for destruction, every beginning harboring the end. Notions of time and teleology in this poem evoke the ideas of Heraclitus, Bergson, and Heidegger, philosophers of Being and Time. As the poet and critic Dana Gioia observes, “Kántor is an existential poet passionately yearning to live an authentic and humane life in a crazy stretch of history. The poems bristle with the big world of politics, culture, and history without ever losing the personal world of love, memory, and regret.”

[http://web.me.com/pleasureboatstudio/Books/P%C3%A9ter\\_K%C3%A1ntor.html](http://web.me.com/pleasureboatstudio/Books/P%C3%A9ter_K%C3%A1ntor.html)

Hope and disillusionment are recurring themes in this anthology, the memory of how things seemed in the past by contrast with the present, the juxtaposition of then and now, as in the poem “once I thought.” These ruminations about ideal love for another human being could very well apply to love for the homeland as well: “Once I thought there was only one love, as there is only one life” (22). The uniqueness of love is an enigma to be deciphered like Morse code or “moss on trees” (22) in the Hungarian Pioneer Movement during the Communist era. In this poem, youthful idealism and adventure in the exploration of unknown territory and, by analogy, the quest for true love is nostalgically referenced in the past. Optimism and hope of ever attaining the distant ideal is expressed in the subjunctive mood, hypothetical and contrary to fact.

In “an old chinese saying,” Kántor finds an affinity with Yang Tse Yün, [http://classiques.uqac.ca/classiques/wang\\_chung/lunheng/lunheng\\_pt1\\_extrait\\_09.html](http://classiques.uqac.ca/classiques/wang_chung/lunheng/lunheng_pt1_extrait_09.html) who teaches that to meet with what one desires, or not to meet with it, depends on fate rather than individual effort or merit. “That means that opulence and nobility may turn into indigence and humbleness, and that indigence and humbleness may be changed into opulence and nobility,” a reversal of fortune made possible by the events of history in Kántor’s own lifetime. The poet evokes the wisdom of the Chinese sage, who lived so long ago “that even the oldest trees could not have seen you walking,/ even the oldest strings cannot recall the touch of your fingers” (28), and yet his teachings are relevant in the present, encapsulated in the imaginary encounter of their “horses,” rubbing their muzzles on their respective journeys “towards either good or evil” (28).

In his poem, “If you want to travel somewhere,” Péter Kántor defines his project of writing poetry by allusion to the Greek poet Cavafy (Konstantinos Petrou Kavafis, 1863 – 1933), who writes about a seemingly outward journey which stimulates the imagination, bringing alive the ancient myth of Odysseus returning to his homeland:

As you set out for Ithaka  
hope the voyage is a long one,  
full of adventure, full of discovery.

.....  
Keep Ithaka always in your mind.  
Arriving there is what you are destined for.  
But do not hurry the journey at all.  
Better if it lasts for years,  
so you are old by the time you reach the island,  
wealthy with all you have gained on the way,

.....  
<<http://www.cavafy.com/poems/content.asp?id=74&cat=1>>

Kántor's poems are enigmas which invite contemplation. Their apparent simplicity hides deeper meanings in language and imagery which needs to be deciphered and decoded. The Poet Laureate of Hungary takes the reader along on outer and inner journeys to "unknown places," tantalizing the imagination and arousing curiosity by inviting further exploration of undiscovered territory. Regarding his style, one critic notes, "He is renowned for his original tone, his expression of irony and the grotesque, his fanciful language with its unexpected and irresistible twists and turns. His poems read easily, but ... he mocks our expectations which tend to be guided by logic and the force of habit'. Not many succeed in creating mature poems with such childish innocence and such gallows humour."

<<http://home.luna.nl/~poetry/part/51/index.html>>

A self-professed Hungarophile, Michael Blumenthal, who spent several years in Budapest as a Fulbright scholar, faced the project of translating Péter Kántor's poems into English with some trepidation, "even with the poet's own able assistance" (85). In his book, *When History Enters The House: Essays from Central Europe*, the translator comments "On The Loneliness of Hungarians" with a quote by Sándor Márai, who wrote "that the Hungarian language was incomprehensible and unrelated to other languages" (42), resulting in a sense of isolation for Hungarians even from neighboring countries who shared a long history with Hungary. With this volume of Hungarian poetry in English, Michael Blumenthal breaks the language barrier, so faithfully rendering the originals in translation that Dana Gioia remarks, "Reading Péter Kántor's *Unknown Places* in Michael Blumenthal's translation is an uncanny experience. Blumenthal's versions are so natural and powerful that Kántor seems to be writing in English." Even Hungarians, who believe that it is impossible for foreigners to learn their complex and fascinating language, would have to admit that in his translation, Michael Blumenthal has captured every nuance, ambiguity and paradoxically startling image in these poems while adhering to their economy of expression and their profound simplicity of style.

Edith Borchardt

