

Ödön von Horváth, *Youth Without God*. Translated by R. Wills Thomas. Reprint. Brooklyn: Melville House Publishing, 2012. 165pp. \$15

The Austrian writer Ödön von Horváth died in 1938, the victim of a falling tree branch. An outspoken critic of fascism, his reputation likely would have grown if he had lived long enough to face stronger political persecution, and his denunciatory novella *Youth Without God* (*Jugend Ohne Gott* [1937]) might have enjoyed a healthy reputation in English. Instead, Horváth is virtually unknown, and *Youth Without God* fell quickly out of print after its initial appearance in a 1939 translation by R. Wills Thomas. Melville House's recent reissue of the Thomas translation does a service by making a significant work of fiction available to English-language readers. However, the edition also raises difficult questions about translating work from one culture of hatred to another: Horváth's work evades the rhetoric of fascism by writing in allegory, but his chosen allegory, African colonialism, creates serious difficulties for an American translation, whose racial vocabulary must deal with the legacy of slavery and Jim Crow. By abstracting from the particular social and linguistic trappings of a political ideology, allegory can present oppression as a universal affront to human dignity, but in universalizing it also leaves the reader less able to understand persecution as a trauma of word and deed that happens in a specific political context. The specific linguistic trappings matter for how we understand literary representations of that experience, especially as the historical distance between author and reader grows.

*Youth Without God* centers upon the life of a teacher at a boy's school located in an unnamed fascist country whose leaders appear only at a distance through radio broadcasts and memoranda on curricular reform. The teacher, also unnamed, wrestles with his students' enthusiastic hatred. The conflict between teacher and students begins in one of the book's early episodes. A student writes in an assigned composition that he does not care if the people living in the country's African colonies live or die, claiming they are "dirty, cunning, and contemptible." The teacher responds that the people living in the colonies are humans, too. This simple assertion of humanity loses him the respect of many of his students, and creates trouble with administrators and parents. Worse, it is his weakness and discomfort with his own authority that earns the scorn of his students, who only respect force.

Horváth stands to the side of this conflict. Though he is known as a worldly, cynical writer in the Viennese tradition, Horváth allows his provincial, conservative, and ineffectual narrator to tell the tale. The teacher cannot understand his students' hatred or violence, but neither can he understand modernity in general: he tries to make sense of the present through his

knowledge of the classics, speaking ponderously of the timeless indifference of God, and he feels at a relatively young age that he cannot keep up with the pace of life. The book's obvious target is fascism, but it is also a criticism of tepid opposition to fascism: the opponents fail because they cannot think their way into the fascist mind or match the brainless courage of its fervent supporters. This second criticism does not quite succeed, in part because *Youth Without God* remains allegorical, attempting to substitute one specific set of circumstances for another.

By using black colonial subjects as a stand-in for the more proximate targets of fascism, Horváth creates a lexical problem for himself. Nazism invented extraordinarily hateful and dehumanizing rhetoric to refer to Jews, Communists, Slavs, Roma, and many other European groups. Although scientific racism was a central part of the Nazi ideology, hatred of Africans did not have a central place in this rhetoric, in part because the number of Africans living in Germany has always been very small: in the book both teacher and students refer to Africans as *Neger*—at the time a relatively neutral German word, though now considered derogatory. In the context of fascism's elaborate language of supremacy and hatred, these divergent political sentiments should lead the characters to speak virtually distinct dialects. That the two sides share a vocabulary, when they do not even agree about the humanity of Africans, threatens to render the novel's political language inert. At the very least, their use of the same, neutral-sounding words serves to make the teacher's shock and befuddlement less convincing as an ethical stance.

Horváth's use of African colonialism as a failed proxy for fascist speech poses a specific problem for anybody attempting to render the text into American English: America's own racial history is long and shameful, and its racial language is therefore highly politicized. There is no easy rendering, but since the word *Neger* appears more than thirty times and is central to the plot, it is important to make a considered decision. One could perhaps mark the age of the work by translating the word as "negro," or seek to preserve the feeling of neutrality by updating the language to read "black." The Thomas translation, rather than doing either, translates selectively: when a character mentions Africans in a positive (or at least human) light, Thomas renders *Neger* as "negro"; when a character mentions Africans negatively, he renders the same word as "nigger." For a contemporary American reader, this induces a cringe from the start: "niggers" is the first word in the book. This translation can make clear what Horváth's characters only imply in the German, but it also misleads the reader about what the characters are actually saying.

This mistranslation inadvertently calls attention to the basic defect of Horváth's book. Though he wrote nothing that would make a reader cringe,

he should have. The discomfort induced by the translation conveys something of what the reader might feel if confronted with the true nastiness of fascist language, which was personal, intimate, and dehumanizing in its hatred. Yet it is important to understand that Thomas has erred: the United States and Germany have different histories, and their vocabularies of hatred cannot be simply equated.

In the twentieth century, countless writers have replaced these and other specific politics with universal stories of extremism or hatred. When the allegory speaks to a current conflict, this may call attention to the basic violence that rests beneath the particulars of a political discourse; this is certainly what Horváth wanted readers to understand about fascism. Yet because allegories enable writers to keep the ugliest language off their pages, in time the political stakes may become obscure. If we did not remember Nazism so vividly today, *Youth Without God* would be a closed book—it tells us nothing about where fascism happened, how it arose, or who it victimized, though Horváth, unlike his narrator, did have insight into these questions.

Similarly, political allegory allows the point of many works to become blunted. Only the most conservative or censorious Americans would object to *Animal Farm* or *Fahrenheit 451*. An accurate translation of *Youth Without God* might belong alongside these works or Arthur Koestler's more introspective and less read *Darkness at Noon*. One can imagine what a more successful and troublesome version of Horváth's book might have looked like. An obvious point of reference for an American reader is *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, a book that also deals with the cruelty of the young, but has retained a broad power to offend. Huck continues to bother us because his moral sense sometimes rises above his racist language, and sometimes leads him to stoop in the most squalid ways. Horváth's teacher does not stoop, but by keeping his head in the clouds he denies us a clear view of his world.

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Peter Gizzi, *In Defense of Nothing: Selected Poems, 1987–2011*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2014. 244pp. \$26.95

Peter Gizzi is a central figure in American poetry. He is the author, most recently, of *In Defense of Nothing*, a vital new selected that highlights almost twenty-five years of work. His earlier achievements include five volumes of poetry, editions of Jack Spicer's collected poetry (2008) and lectures (1998), *The Exact Change Yearbook* (1995), and the stunning journal *o-blek* (1987–1993). From 2007 to 2011, he was poetry editor at *The Nation* and,