



MIKLÓS SZENTKUTHY

HYPERION

On the future of aesthetics

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HYPERION

On the future of aesthetics



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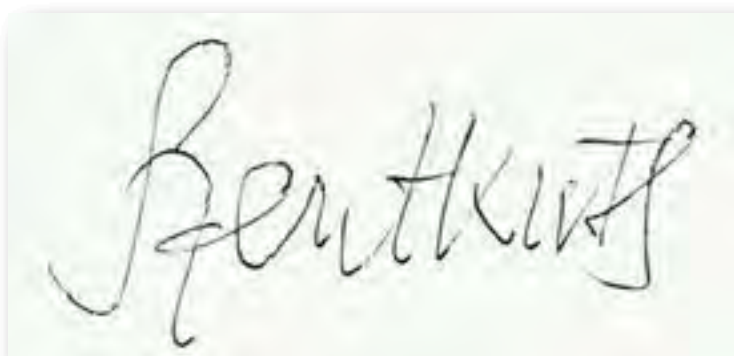
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On the future of aesthetics

The editors wish to express their warm regards to the following people: Mariella Legnani, Mária Tompa, David Brangwyn, Béla Fenyvesi, Kristof Fenyvesi, Frank Chouraqui, Pál Nagy, Gyula Sipos, Anikó Földi, Istvánné Horváth, and Tim Wilkinson.

A handwritten signature in black ink on a light background. The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style and appears to read "Szentkuthy".

Miklós Szentkuthy

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Towards the One & Only Metaphor¹



Miklós Szentkuthy, 1934 (Photo: József Pécsi)

Miklós Szentkuthy

¹ Miklós Szentkuthy, *Towards the One & Only Metaphor*, tr. Tim Wilkinson (New York: Contra Mundum Press, 2013).

(1)

In starting this book, what else can I take as my introductory precept (or desire) than this: I have no other aim than wild, absolute *imitation*; around me suffocating, swooningly torrid air, in this steamy yet nevertheless certain gilded death the warbling darkness of a pair of sparrow throats and, above all, these million lines, the analytical richness, of foliage, grasses, and nameless meadow flowers. These *lines*, the fantastic richness of this prodigal punctiliousness — *they* are what intensifies my desire for imitation into a mania. A *Catalogus rerum*, an ‘Index of Entities’ — I am unlikely to free myself of this, the most primitive of my desires.

(2)

The eternal game: *to get to know* the world — *to preserve* the world. When I am excited by imitation: is that a sentimental fear of death guiding me, I wonder, a grandpawish fondness for *bibeloterie*, or some desire for universal knowledge, a Faustian gesture? You, you little blade of grass, here beside my pen: are you the graceful seal of ephemerality of a selfish moment of mine, a small witness of my frivolity — or are you a secret of Nature that is to be discovered?

(3)

How interesting the chirping of birds when it sounds like this: when I am listening I ‘hear’ virtually nothing, I only *see*: the black throats of tiny birds, the swelling miniature yet nevertheless *quantitatively* tragic night of cuckoo lungs — those little midnight horns attacking in the trail of the chirping are the sole blackness in the morning light.

(4)

Two kinds of heat: the summer heat of the outside world and a sick person’s fever. Fight in the blue-grey daybreak of the bedroom! That, too, to the ‘imitation’: the lathes of the roller blinds, the moonlit, milky-blue leaves of the plant creeping onto the ledge (at 2:30 in the morning), the lightness of the

street, the gloom of the bedroom, the crumpled-apart eiderdowns, the visible nude-figure syllables — those impressions of mine are the most important, they are *everything* to me. My body's inner fever, '*paysage intime de la maladie*'² — and the summer heat fermenting at daybreak — fight it out. Which wins? Which is due to the girl and which is for the girl? Woman = I wonder, do you, too, come from the daybreak? Stars, flarings-up of marine horizons, your anatomical continuations of the birds and avian throats falling maturely to the ground among the loosening foliage hawthers of the trees; in short, the outside world, the Greek or Gundolfian 'cosmos'³ — or is my fever, my body's inner turbulence, your true brother; indeed, your identity? How gratifying both notions are — whether that is an inner hallucination of my heart, my gall bladder, my vagrant hormones ('myth secretions'), or also like a strange palm on some strange Riviera, an Artemisian, cruel 'objectivity.'

(5)

Can a hymnal life be separated from the analytic life; are a separate Pindar and Proust credible? That question of the two kinds of heat preoccupied me the entire night today: with the frantic persistence, the stubbornness of my half-asleepness, I sought an absolute discriminating definition, and at the same time the dream, the semi-reality carried me at a quite dizzying and irresistible pace towards the rich, swirling nullity of the dithyramb.

(6)

Before going to bed I read some poems by Goethe: perhaps the perverse marriage of banality and *rhyme* caused this thirst for dithyrambs. *Voyage curieux*: the *Spieß*-ness of the *rhyming* makes one more anarchic than the anarchy of the rhyming.

² 'Intimate countryside of disease.'

³ Friedrich Gundolf (1880–1931) was a German-Jewish literary scholar and poet and one of the most famous academics of the Weimar Republic. *Shakespeare und der Deutsche Geist* (Shakespeare and the German Spirit), which Gundolf wrote to obtain a university lectureship in 1911, was a turning point in German language and literature studies.

(7)

The most brotherly brothers, the sole relatives: they are here beside me — sleep and precision, the feverish fiction of possibilities and imitation.

(8)

Drawings cool one: if I look up at the optical mosaic of trees, the sharpness of a million contours is cooling.

(9)

Two female gestures. One of them, really petite but, in terms of her curves, a relatively skinny woman (fairly elderly), adjusts her dress in the street — but how? She *picks at* the silk on her shoulder blades with the thumb and index finger of her right hand — on precisely the part of the body which is par excellence the place for being caressed by a man's hand, a broad and wavy *planar* sensory area (in itself a constant curved Minkowski erotic *space* or *plane*⁴): the woman picks at *points* there just like a bird with a sharp beak picks at a cherry. Of course, it is all much more unashamedly provocative than if she would smooth her dress by stroking it. Elderly woman — girlish figure — silk dress: good.

The other: a woman on Gellért Hill in Budapest is cutting her toenails in the sun. That, too, is 'coquetry,' there is no doubt about it. The vulgar intimacy is erotic. Go your double route, Eros, on the high-minded ways of geometric metaphors and facts — go on the kitchen-smelling pathways of vulgarity and demotic sloppiness.

⁴ Hermann Minkowski (1864–1909) was a mathematician who used geometrical methods to solve problems in number theory, mathematical physics, and the theory of relativity.

(10)

Eros: something geometric, something ethical, something demotic, something natural. — The two kinds of primitiveness: demos and nature.

Demotic = the *animal* part of love.

Natural = the *floral* part of love.

It is also evident here that animal and flower do *not* denote the same nature — two different worlds.

(11)

A little *moral philosophical* (yes: moral philosophical) typology: from the portrait gallery of plants =

a pine: each cone a brown central point around which the needles branch out like a porcupine or star, with each such star ball sweetly taking up position next to another — they barely bump into or intersect with each other;

a young acacia: pure half-light and half-shades, in point of fact, optical hypotheses incarnated as lamellae. What a significantly different *moral* physiognomy from the pine tree. How different the deer-paw graphology of the branches, the Io-embracing with the winds, the swaying, skirt-like rubbing against themselves.

When they turn out in the wind and suddenly display their silver reverse sides; pine needles are unable to turn out like that (another psychological temperament).

The 'monotony,' the fact of the repetition of forms with the pine-tree and the acacia — there are *many* pine needles, *many* transparent acacia leaves, but how fantastically *differently* many those two manys are;

unknown bush: Corot-like, it reaches into the picture from the side of the picture — its branches

are some kind of aquarium-like guards and display a nostalgic horizontality, the leaves are also sparse, resembling samples of bridge cards and amazingly flat. Full of waving horizontal silhouettes as if one were looking from the bottom of a lake at lotus leaves swimming on like embodied shadows over one's own head.

Are these not world historical profiles, the teachings of saints, the victories and fall of politicians, the 'grand' style & petty mannerism of poets =

pine needles
acacia ovals
lotus shadows?

Or if you prefer it, the reverse — hence a little *botanical* (yes: *botanical*) typology — from the human portrait gallery: St. Francis, Hitler, Rabelais, Lincoln, Jacob. (Composition, *ad libitum*.)

(12)

'Form' and 'order': different entities.

The nature of 'form' will perpetually have light cast on it by *plants* (conformation of leaves and flowers; clustering of leaves and flower; relationship of leaves and branches; wind and resistance of foliage; directions of roots).

On the nature of 'order': consistent Freudianism = *botanical* harmony (conformational harmony).

(13)

Foreignness — *sibship*
Motherhood — *lover*

— An auburn-haired woman is stretched out before me on the hillside. She is lower down, I am higher up (who is below and who above is just as decisive an issue as it is for an army at war): when we look at each other and our eyes meet (how plastic and precise an 'encounter' like that, excluding any misjudgments — when one can sense fancying a person more objectively than the most sensitive physical sensor). I wonder what causes the pathos: one another's human *community*, our biological *sibship* — or the *foreignness*, the

space between our 'individualities'? Can it be determined which sensation is the 'more justified': animal attraction to a fellow animal or a burning isolation from the eerily other and *different* ego? How do both simultaneously have an influence on Eros: it is the biological common denominator at the bottom of the entire human race yet equally the most fiercely *personal* thing, the individual's chief individualizing and isolating factor. This woman: how absolutely familiar, familiar to a *cosmic* degree, we have between us an acquaintance going back millennia, dating to Paradise, our 'geological' memories are shared — the natural history epic of the Homo animal makes its mark in every urban nuance and 'flirting' dodge, "... when we were as yet still *fish*, on the third anniversary of the Creation — Do you remember?" — And at the same time how *alien*: how rigidly, fatefully, and furiously, how impossibly alien.

She is feeding the child cherries, drupe by drupe: the child cannot even be seen, it's lying in the grass, hidden by green — it's as if the woman were throwing the fruit on to the ground. Whether she, a woman or *Fräulein*, I do not know. But there is something uneliminable in that feeding cherry by cherry, something elementarily *amorous*. The most coquettish, shallowest dodge, it seems: maternity.

(14)

The biggest and most important liaisons of my life were these: at certain intervals to see the same female face in the same surroundings without our ever having met before. For instance, at the opera: the girl has a ticket for the same performances as I do. At times like that there is something dream-like, a silent confidentiality between us: the infinite richness of time, the past, of memories, which is to say the principal nutrients of love, and all the same I don't even know the girl's name; we are strangers. Is this not the chief charm of holiday places: the *familiar* unknown? That is why they are the greatest *loves* (the word can never be written down with such total justification as in precisely these situations), because in that kind of liaison truly the *only* thing which plays a part is the essence of Eros: a lovely portrait and passing time: the *nude* figure of Venus being born from the billows of time, which reimmerses into time — 'out of which you have sinned.' What fantastically unsettling moments those

are when, years later, one again meets such a pseudo-acquaintance: greet, no, not just greet, but hug and kiss her, and only at the last minute is one able to hold back one's pathos, reminding oneself that one is not meeting an old acquaintance but, quite the reverse: an old unknown.

(15)

How many forms 'seduction' takes:
cutting corns from unwashed feet,
feeding flipped cherries to children,
stretching out lazily, eyes closed on the grass:
animal nonchalance, playing mother, playing death.

(16)

The strange situation of the woman's body: both the woman and the man 'ogle' — meanwhile a three-year-old girl is combing, or, to be more accurate, she is pulling a comb through the woman's hair, and the woman is lazily letting her. What meandering paths nature introduces the body to ("*tiré pas les cheveux*"⁵ — once in earnest!) as an indispensable character figuring in the eyes' flirtatious Platonism. Laziness, vanity, game, a touch of idyllic sadism, Narcissizing, pose, desire, blasé indifference — for how long is it possible to string more nouns onto this auburn-hair?

(17)

Is any game in the world more refined or verity more poetic and live than the underlying tone of Goethe: the *West-östlicher Divan* = sobriety and banality, triviality and an eastern story-setting which is as colorful as *A Thousand and One Arabian Nights*. Is it not *immoral* to awaken one's desire at one and the same time for a peasant-axiomatic, level-minded 'common sense' talking in adages — and also for the night, for the Orphic mystery, and the anarchically kitsch (i.e., true) East?

⁵ 'Don't pull the hair!'

The prologue to a summer morning: the agony of the bedroom at daybreak — the secret of dreams, the secret of *raison*, the secret of infiltrating flowers, the secret of secrets. And the epilogue in the boiling southern heat? Conversation with a tram driver: he had drunk no beer for two years as that made him fat; he preferred a pint of wine (“if it is good,” he emphasizes) with soda water. Beer is dreadfully expensive here; the big heat wave had arrived quite unexpectedly. Am I reading the *W.-Ö. Divan* in a fitting manner: is that not what I am experiencing? The eternal duality of banality and demonics (never its *battles!*).

I like a bedroom at daybreak; there is something universally human about it, a laboratory and fate simultaneously. The laths of the roller blinds: with their blackness, their complicated systems of filtering light, and their even more complex reflections on the open panes of glass — those laths are symbols, realities, of line, geometry, form, dramatic monotony, baroque simplicity, satisfiers of an autumnal instinct of mine. It’s the same as the keyboard of a piano: at home I keep the lid of the keyboard constantly open in order to see the sensuous abstraction, the amorous cubism, of the white and black lines. Just as non-linear black roses of music grow into the air out of the primitive linearity and numericalness of the keys — so here the billowing, highly non-orderly paradoxes of the lighting propagate out of the fairly cheap physical orderliness of the roller blind. Every parallel, refrain, and repetition excites me: the rings of ripples on lakes, the escaped powers of ovals on branches, of acacias, fence laths, etc. *Un poète des parallèles*: that poet is *not* classical and does not write rhyming couplets, that is for sure. From the bedroom can be seen the Moon, stars, flowers, every muscle, mask, and *décolletage* of the atmosphere step by step. ‘Garden’: that is some magnificent middle way between biological wildness and scientific laboratory, resembling the old pieces of the ‘goldsmiths’ art on which crystal, a diabolical ‘libertinage’ of precious stones, and the pedantic ordering business of a working craftsman and artist are brought together. The tree that happens to be overlooking the window and is in keeping with it is quite different from trees in general.

In the bedroom is the clock and a sleeping woman’s body, there are morality, death, and Eros. Human beings in a bedroom are *ethically* rather

than physically naked. A bedroom is simple; smooth walls, hygienic. And between hygiene's nurse-like walls the poppy of dreams grows: dusted with poppy seed, sooty, rancid, opiate-dosed, cyanic blue, and with a black calyx. A wife: a marriage's morality. A dream: the freedom of nullity, its all-toppling anarchy, its orgy of problems. That is all *together* in a bedroom — hence all the great big room.

I grasp this arch, shall kiss it to the day I shall die: woman, garden, time, dream, morality; from the daybreak pillar of geometry to the tram driver's noonday pillar ("A pint with soda"? *Benedicte!*⁶).

⁶ A grace word meaning essentially *Benedictus benedicat* ('May the Blessed One bless').

(19)

Huberman⁷

From the moment the first notes of the F minor Adagio sounded the violinist could not be seen, all the more the violin: it suddenly appeared, as in a vision, in a pale Moon sheaved in chandelier-light, with infinite tenderness and energy as it were cast into the air, just like a long-lost jewel that is now thrown up at the head of a suddenly breaking high wave (not like an opening-mouthed sack but one forcibly slit at the side) or a communion wafer waved towards a packed church congregation — the violin's greyish-brown wood: whereas most musicians had a bright yellow, vividly blackish-red colored violin, this one hovered in provocative neutrality between sky and earth in front of the half-built organ.

The vibration of the initial notes and the drawn-apart slow rain of the light were in the closest relationship (the individual rays twisted and the solitary sparks drew apart as when someone stepping through a vertically hanging curtain composed of strings of pearls is forced to deflect the vertical strings slightly to the left and right). The voice was so precise and soft, so airily dreamy and Annunciation-style dogmatic, that the choir and the rest of the audience thought that it did not derive from the flying violin suddenly thrust into the air but from somewhere else, and the arrow-shooting of the body of the violin into this agonic high was just a mysterious semaphore signaling that one's strings and bows should be sent away, all earthly violin playing should come to an end and one should listen to the celestial philharmony.

The notes were so gorgeous that there was something perverse, an immoral 'negativity,' streaming out of it: as if I were surprising from behind the bars of the cadence, plastic in their uncertainty, like the elders spying on Susanna⁸ — in itself it was a bathing of notes which had been stripped nude, chastity in a crystal-clear ethereality, with her provocative, unmistakably whorish gestures. The dead-beat choral singers closed their eyes; with a helpless smile of awe the conductor chewed the tip of his baton as if he wanted to play flute on it. With a curious, ornate Moon round hand, the tones

⁷ Bronislaw Huberman (1882–1947) was a celebrated Jewish Polish violinist of the first half of the twentieth century.

⁸ The reference is to the painting of *Susanna and the Elders* by Il Tintoretto (1518–94), a work that also figures prominently in Szentkuthy's *Marginalia on Casanova*.

inscribed into intoxicated souls; there with a harpoon of melody at its edge while others, coming directly afterwards, paraded with their golden surfaces among the foliage of their dreams to build a triumphant, reverential-coquettish nest.

In the subsequent minutes the violinist, too, became visible under his crookedly hovering violin: the instrument continued to rock like a gold-leaved branch in the wind, with the violinist virtually hanging from it like a sleeping bird, a hanged man, or black rag dangling on a branch. He threw the violin so high from his shoulder that his head slipped right underneath it, and for a goodly time it pitched and rolled there in the shade. The contrast between the sloth, so to say, clasping to the violin from below and the inhuman sweetness of the music was marvelous: it was evident that, out of asceticism, virtuosity, and lust, he was tossing his soul, his pathos, and his instrument too far and too high from himself, and now only, with distorting grimaces of fingers, arms, and face, was he able to catch up with himself and completely cover his own melody shadow again with his body.

When the orchestra began to accompany him with a quite soft pizzicato, the violinist's pose suddenly changed: within a trice the violin swooped into the depths, as if the unexpected weight of the bubbling passages had carried him down from on high and he was now struggling under a hailstorm. At that point the violinist's face could be seen well. An enormous skull was placed above a short, flat-footed, rickety-kneed hunched body. The size of the skull is to be understood as residing in its width: there was a horizontal, virtually flattened monumentality about it; even his 'lofty' forehead was somehow 'spiritually' lofty, though in reality it was rather broad. On certain Aztec idols, on the slightly puffed-up belly, drooping to left and right, of statues of Buddha, and on the lazy and tragically melting diadem of archways of Babylonian gates, one can sometimes see this paradoxical melting into each other of domed height and the flat sprawling and slipping to the ground of swelling, half-leavened dough. Mind and animal bone, artistic Gothic and mineral Romanesqueness are good expressions of the fundamental problem of art: sentimental transcendentalism and material dormant-swirling mass, which predicate, murder, and demand each other. The brow was pale, combining the tints of the Moon's Astarte silver and a nervous *Schwächling*⁹

⁹ I.E., 'weakling.'

standing outside life (mystery and bad neurasthenia — is there not something *par excellence* 'artistic' about this fist-mimicking head?); shades of ash grey 'secondary planets' spread across these pallidly gleaming fields, especially two large bumps, with those pale-strong contours that snails usually leave as a trace on green leaves if they slide further.

Why that, after all, flat hunk of a head, inclining to left and right into the depths, nevertheless created an impression of 'loftiness' was easily explicable by the fact that bodies rising on high from the depths usually display those kinds of arched forms, and willy-nilly one saw in the material the strength which was pushing it towards the spheres; an arc of distant hills which just managed to rise up at the edge of a desert: it was a ribbon which was still half-submerged, but one could sense that a big internal spasm of the earth had squeezed it out of the darkness into the sky; the backs of seals and whales popping up for air from underwater; the rising sun's horizontal yet nevertheless tower-spined arc: the whole enormous skull was, in point of fact a parallel band above barely curved eyebrows, which stretched from the nose practically to the ears.

The gesture was the most congenial gesture of art: the amorphous, barely analyzable big mass, rigid rather than waxily melting, sheer weight, dream, slow-breathing, nervelessness and pulselessness, but the whole was nevertheless raised and driven by something, a hidden divine leaven, ferment and flood-tide. How much more intellectual is a head like this, resembling a sea-rounded egg-stone like a so-called Gothic truly tall and therefore 'intellectual' head, towering like a cone set on its apex.

The geological strata of horizontality were repeated right through the head: the gigantic (but only occasionally presenting) furrows of the forehead, the eyebrows, the eye movements, the frames of the nostrils, the black continuo of the lower jaw, and the closing curve of the chin all ran from right to left. The eyes were narrow and, as has already been pointed out, reached back all the way to the ears. At times two dark cavities were apparent like the ineffective channel of a reed cut lengthwise in two — an expressive, unrepentantly melancholy blindness emanated from them: while the diluvial globes of the brow shone their sporulating whale's belly in the moonlight, ghostly spaces under the eyes gaped a demonic night with the slogan of 'not worth looking at, no need to look, the color and form sick heresies vis-à-vis the tone — a night which, besides all its mystic nihilism, seemed to be a concrete,

slightly dirty, gummy eye disease: chaos and trachoma simultaneously.

One of the eyes had an outward squint: this alternatively dancing pupil at once intensified the protozoon-style amorphousness of the whole face and look running across it, continually recapitulating the horizontality of the earth's surface. The pupil sometimes raced lightning-quickly from the nose to the ear with the muscular freedom of a sick patient the whites not even evident at such times, and with a dark spot filling the eye. On other occasions, in sharp contrast, the eyes grew totally confused, darting frantically here and there in the huge eye area, hummingbirds in their cage, so to say. The eyes slipped almost into the forehead so that they had to be jerked back into position with the butterfly net of the upturned eyebrows; on other occasions they sank behind his cheekbones so that they had to be spooned to the surface by the elevators of the neck muscles, then again lose their way in the whites of the eyes, and the eyelids tormented them with all manner of painful, eelish waves; in the end, it often happened that the eyes more or less catapulted the pupils from the corners of the eyes, over and beyond the ecstatic boundary — the *limes* — of *strabismus*, among the choral singers or the audience.

His nose, in relation to the archaic plasma tempi of other parts of his skull, accommodated to clichés: it was hooked and at the lower end a swollen printing error in the text of the alluvium. The lower lip detached from the face like one side of boiled fish from vertically placed fish bones: drooping, curled, twisted under itself, like a black scroll of papyrus, or stretched nostalgically forward, like Oriental vases or the rim of a well. The sometimes gigantically dilated eyelids, the black fins or leaves of salad on these, followed a uniform rhythm as they were also uniform in their lobular outsizedness. It was also obvious that there was a close agreement of muscle between the shadow flesh of the mouth and the nose, constrained as it had been into a hook by all the horizontality: the lower jaw was gratifying with its endless straining forward and its rolling-up under itself to pull apart the nostrils in the 'maelstrom' of horizontality, to annihilate the entire nose — or *vice versa* to tuck an enormous plinth from the mouth, after a brief drooping, beneath the flattening nose.

How much more expressive, more defined, and more analytical a mimic is that pair of hawser-thick wrinkles on the brow, the sick and 'senseless' cross-eyedness of the eyes, each sudden sea-swelling on the chin of a lower jaw provocatively fattened into a caterpillar, the movements of the head clumsy in an octopus fashion — like a confused and indiscriminately psychologized and

humanized play of features of a professional actor able to control every muscle and nerve. That head and rhythm were the true, the sole possible parallels to the string of tones, uniting as they did every bestiality and mathematical character, which beaded out, crystal-clear, from the violin. The enchanting '*dulcor*'¹⁰ of the Adagio did not call for a portrait of a transfigured seraph but this sort of sloth-bodied and moldy-skinned Caliban above the bone cushion of the violin.

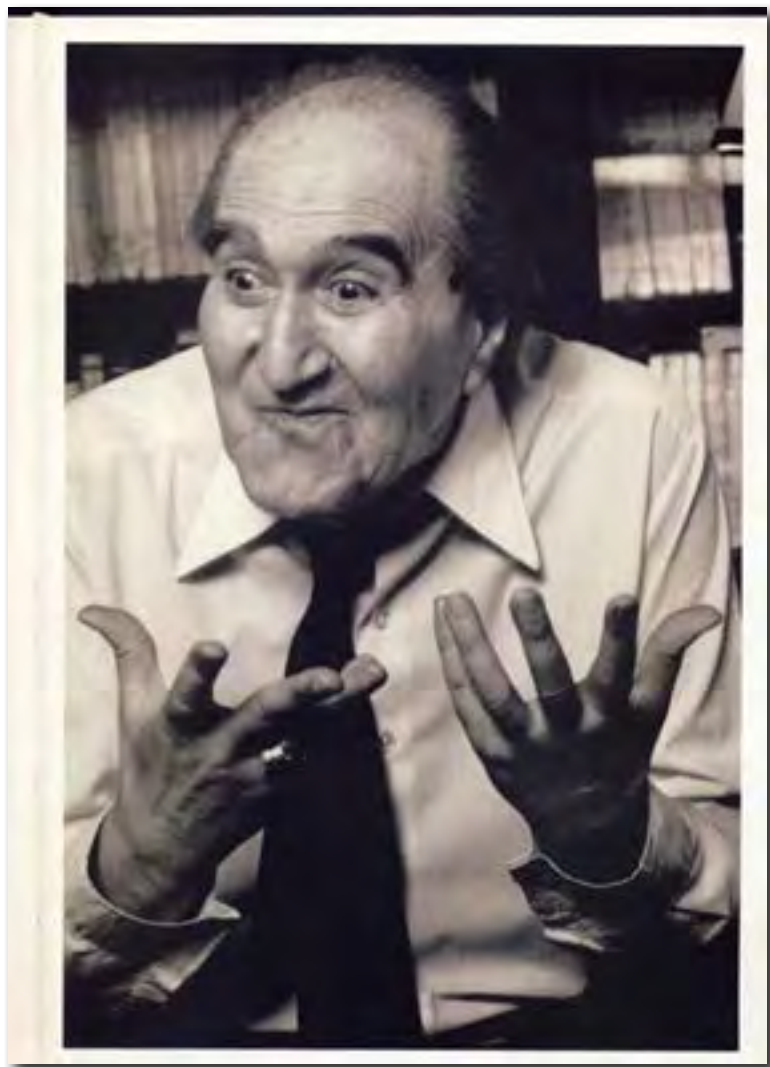
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¹⁰ *Dulcor* is the Latin for sweetness.

HYPERION

On the future of aesthetics

MASKS BEHIND MASKS:
A PORTRAIT OF
MIKLÓS SZENTKUTHY



Miklós Szentkuthy, 1984 (Photo: Albert Kozák)

András Nagy

The name is already a “mask,” a metaphorical incognito and a personal statement, the composition of *Szent*, “holy” (sacred, saint), and of *kút*, “fountain” (source of water, well), with archaic Hungarian orthography (“*th*” at the end instead of a simple “*t*”) and with a reference to noble origins (the “*y*” instead of a common “*i*”). The somewhat grand pen name was to be a substitute for the family’s German-sounding name Pfisterer (hard to pronounce in Hungarian due to the two consonants in the beginning), while its meaning had lost its concrete reference to its ancestral identity, which was not of noble origin either. This statement however created a very meaningful identity from the very first steps of the author Miklós Szentkuthy, one of the greatest in Hungarian literature and certainly one of the most original, most challenging, and most productive writers of the 20th century, with many aspects still to understand, to reveal, and to come to terms with, both in Hungary and beyond.

Relatively or absolutely “small” nations — like Hungary — can and do produce great works of art that make significant contributions to their self-esteem, in aesthetic and spiritual dimensions, often opposing the turbulence of national history. This may also serve as “secret” knowledge about the real wealth of a nation deprived of material wealth. It may be even more important in those countries that were denied freedom and independence for a long time in history, thus their accumulated political frustration could have been compensated for in more abstract or more sophisticated ways. Szentkuthy’s magnificent oeuvre is a perfect example of a genius living through the most difficult and often highly tormenting historical times of the 20th century yet remaining untouched by the different totalitarianisms, by wars, and by revolutions; and it is his oeuvre that emphasizes the importance of ideas, values, and achievements that are far beyond everyday crises and conflicts, whether they be social, political, or economic. It recalls the archaic and paradoxical Epicurean wisdom that “they” can kill him but can’t really cause any serious harm to him.

The “secret” knowledge of national greatness is particularly true for Hungarian literature, as it is a basic ingredient of the national identity and self-consciousness (contributing greatly to national pride of the “Magyar” people), while

it is nearly impossible to “communicate” it to those living outside its linguistic borders. The language is ethnically isolated, not Indo-European in its origin, hard to translate faithfully to any other language, however extremely fit for artistic use. All these difficulties become nearly “visible” in Szentkuthy’s texts, for in his oeuvre language includes everything, even if narration, metaphors, description, reflection and all possible (and translatable) poetic and rhetorical categories are substantial in his novels, yet the real medium is Szentkuthy’s language, used and paraphrased in an poetically original way, which is deeply rooted in his knowledge and in his experience of the philosophy of language, while applied with a very personal and playful emphasis of artistic communication.

Thus Szentkuthy’s literary individuality is created and presented by his characteristic use of Hungarian, deeply rooted in his own history, both in the given (inherited) and in the chosen (willfully obtained). He was born into a family in which significant ancestors on the father’s side already paved the way toward artistic sensitivity, mainly in the world of theater; that later also shaped Szentkuthy’s rhetorical patterns and helped in *per-forming* his texts, which sometimes were composed as “staging” different characters, conflicts, ideas, with their typical voice, role, influence. His artistic identity beyond writing was often manifested in theatrical features; once, for example, while dressed in a cardinal’s robe, Szentkuthy blessed Budapest, the sinful city; while in social situations, when arguing, talking, and entertaining friends, he was a remarkable master of performance. These ancestors were followed by Pfisterers who represented a typical Central European bourgeois life, based on modest professions that excluded any kind of “extravagance,” art included. In the case of Szentkuthy’s father, this resulted in the lack of appreciation of literature in general, as practically useless and uncertain for making a living. However, once his son showed signs of his enormous talent, this paternal rejection turned into an absolute devotion to the young Pfisterer’s ideas, wills, and choices, even if contradicting the ones the father shared. On the mother’s side, the Jewish historical and spiritual tradition was transmitted probably on a more subtle and suppressed way than the father’s inherited identity, influenced by the mentality of a lower middle class ancestry, thus religious and “racial” differences were further deepened by a social abyss. Finally, Mrs.

Pfisterer represented the nearly maniacal “Victorian” avoidance and negation of anything sensual, erotic, thus absolutely excluding sexuality. Both parents were “madly” and unconditionally loved by their only son, prodigious in the respects mentioned above, and the offspring’s love accompanied his elders far beyond their presence in this world.

The schism between devotion to and negation of the family’s values, the ambiguity of unconditional love for the parents versus unconditional rejection of their mentality and preferences, created a tension that proved to be highly inspiring for the young writer, who soon devoted himself mainly to art, literature, and aesthetic joys; jointly and sometimes un-separately with his sensual “intoxication,” which included a constant and insatiable longing for pleasure, should it be carnal, aesthetic, physical, or spiritual. It originated in his extreme sensitivity, expressed also in Szentkuthy’s overwhelming eroticism, yet in the archaic sense of the word: Eros being the ultimate driving force for all that moves in nature, as those are being driven by pure desire. This schism soon concluded in his works with the simultaneous presence of polar opposites, in the constant oscillation of extremes, a dynamic switching between the two mutually excluding *Weltanschauungen*. All that became determinant for the author in his works to follow, in all levels of his production, from composing metaphors to building characters, from forming sentences to drawing conclusions, providing one of the most typical features of Szentkuthy’s oeuvre.

The sacred connotations of the pen name referred to the author’s chosen identity concerning both the nation (Hungarian) and the religion (Catholicism) that pre-determined the texts flowing from the “holy fountain.” The ethnic and linguistic identity was expressed by the use of the language, extremely “flexible” on the one hand, yet focusing on the difficulties of communicated messages, resulting in a distinct and highly recognizable style. The “holy” mandate and the erotic motivation were permanently confronted in the young mind by *all* the challenges of life, serving as a permanent source of temptations, usually successful, thus concluding in failures and in sins that inversely demonstrate the power of pure and unconditional faith. *All* in this case reveals the somewhat encyclopedic approach of

the author who, by creating an immense body of texts, was consciously focusing on the reinvention of a *Catalogus rerum*, an *inventory of all things*. The emphasis on the fullness and the “Gargantuan” drive behind embracing totality was modeled more on medieval monks and on patristic and scholastic thinkers (hermits, heretics, saints, church bureaucrats, etc. — all familiar to Szentkuthy and often presented in his novels) than on the encyclopedia-champions of the Enlightenment, as for the author, unconditional faith was needed, expressed also by daily rituals and supported by theological and philosophical revelations. Szentkuthy was one of the few great religious authors of the 20th century of striking originality, while his sincere and ardent Catholicism included attending ceremonies as well as being absorbed in solitary prayer, obtaining contemporary theological and philosophical knowledge to face the immense contradictions of the contemporary world. Augustine and Pascal, Heidegger and Nietzsche, medieval mystics and contemporary physics contributed to the forming of Szentkuthy’s religious *Weltanschauung*, which did not exclude closely observed dogmas and the continuous study of the Bible, accompanied by the biography of saints — but also demanded regularly committing sins of different types, so as to repent afterwards and to have first-hand familiarity with the challenges and torments of the unconditional faith of a fallible human.

This dynamics of the heavenly and of the infernal often served for Szentkuthy as synopses for novels as well as for individual chapters, for shaping characters to present and for episodes to demonstrate, influencing metaphors, images, aphorisms — providing a complexly epic interpretation of his very own experiences, doubts, and revelations. His extensive knowledge and his intense religious belief together with his very special angle of observing the world, however, seemed inadequate in comparison to the inherited conventions of late 19th-century/early 20th-century Hungarian novel-writing, which was still dominated by realism and by psychology, even if more and more often questioned. While using a narrative structure for the novel was central for the young Szentkuthy, its dominance seemed to be somewhat dated when it came to writing about his experiences and his ideas, not to mention his overflowing erudition of story-telling, offering dozens of epical directions, angles, and scenarios, all leading to the

same conclusion simultaneously. The complexity of the composition together with doubts about the linear and causal logic of narration, the questioning of the exclusive role of psychology, culminated in Szentkuthy's radical renewal of the epic form, as expressed masterfully in his first break-through novel, *Prae*. The landmark book, published in 1934 (at the author's own expense, or rather at his father's) was preceded by shorter and less ambitious works of the adolescent writer (published mainly posthumously). These texts already revealed the author's originality and his artistic power, together with the search for a method of writing which, in its extensity and dynamism, recalled a historical type of identification, expressed in the title of the novel written when Szentkuthy was a teenager, *Robert the Baroque*. The time of his shaken and then renewed Catholic faith, the recreated totality of the world in the Baroque "passion," with the universe permanently in motion described by overflowing metaphors, adjectives, events, and references remained characteristic of Szentkuthy's prose in the decades to come.

Prae was incomparable, unparalleled, and unprecedented in Hungarian literature, and probably beyond. The inspiration for writing the novel came on a trip the Pfisterers, Sr. and Jr., took together in 1928 and had a fundamental impact on the author's imagination, creativity, and writing method for years to come. *Prae* took the form of a monologue mainly, in thousands of pages, playing with voices, times, characters, identities, and events, enough for dozens of novels, in a text flowing without any interruption (avoiding any typographical or "formal" structure as well), reshaping the form and the very meaning of the novel for the 20th century. European culture and history was infiltrated through the mind of a highly cultured and visionary youth, applying masks as characters and as incognitos, focusing on the dual character of mind and body, of soul and flesh, of desire and fulfillment. The novel served also as an immense "inventory" of the intellectual sensitivity of the young Szentkuthy, filtered through an extensive knowledge obtained by every possible book he could lay his hands on and through the no less enormous amount of sensual experiences he had had by that time. The novel has no traditional narration, no psychologically motivated characters, and applies the most incredible settings, which seemed to be "monstrous" to some critics and to many readers as well, challenging the dogmas and conventions of prose-writing, creating a

new “canon” for himself. Even if the book did not sell and remained unread for years to come, few contemporaries of the author revealed the new horizons that were opened up for the epic forms after the era of realism. *Prae* was a contemporary of Musil’s *The Man without Qualities*, not much “younger” than Joyce’s *Ulysses* (to be translated later by Szentkuthy himself), and it came on the heels of Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time*, published less than two decades before. The Hungarian author could have been inspired by the renewal of the novel as demonstrated by his European contemporaries, yet his version of redefining epics, prose, and narration was different from the aforementioned writers. Easy to read and yet profound in its conclusions, *Prae* overflows with stories, ideas, and dialogues yet is strictly and masterfully composed, playing with the different layers of history, art, and culture, just as with various traditions of literature — despite appearing chaotic, it remains homogeneous as an entity. It is an early *chef d’oeuvre* while being “only” a draft for the “real” novel to be written afterwards — as indicated by the title *Prae*.

It is part of the ill fate of Hungarian literature rooted in the artistic and intellectual traditions of Central Europe that Szentkuthy’s novel remained substantially unabsorbed in its time, unappreciated, and sometimes ridiculed, even if the best minds and the most sophisticated literary critics understood the magnitude of the undertaking and the importance of the originality of the novel. The lack of substantial coming to terms with *Prae* has a lot to do with the Magyar difficulties of collective identification, with the problems of national and literary self-consciousness, with the hopeless making up for lost historical time — and with many more factors that determined the fate of the novel and of its author in a country where literature was considered more than just one form of art. Szentkuthy fully understood the ambiguous critical responses, together with the basic indifference of the intellectuals, which was often emphasized by the sharp and often vitriolic criticism of colleagues, even of friends. He had to realize that the traditions of the novel in Hungary would strongly resist his efforts to change the genre; that his renewal of the language, his method of composition, and the whole idea of the novel as redefined by him became more of an isolated episode than a new trend that others would observe and perhaps follow. It must have been a bitter pill to swallow, particularly for an ambitious and talented young writer