

The most mysterious thing in life

In the first pages of a notebook he kept in the summer of 1934, Miklós Szentkuthy lies sweating in bed. He stares at “the lathes of the roller blinds” in his bedroom, the spreading “milky-blue leaves” of house plants. Budapest is hot, “fermenting at day-break”, but it is not just the city’s heat that makes him sweat: he is also sick with fever. Waves of ultra-hot particles blast out of the sun, loosening the “foliage hawwers of the trees” in Budapest; a wavelet of toxicity is excreted by Szentkuthy’s gall bladder, heightening and disordering his sensations. The sphere of outer heat is nothing less than the world; the sphere of inner heat is little more than a sickbed. Yet both types of heat are physical, primordial, real. Which, then, is more essential: the sun over Budapest or his distempered gland? By which he means, metonymically: the outer perspective, the “not-I”, the systematic; or the inner perspective, the “I”, the impressionistic? Szentkuthy pursues this question with inventiveness and flair over the 300-page notebook he published in 1935, in 112 numbered sections, as *Towards the One and Only Metaphor* (Az *egyetlen metafora felé*).

Szentkuthy’s title promises a reduction – a *reductio ad unicam formulam*, in his Latin phrase – but he delivers a series of experiments. Section 11 sketches a “philosophical” typology of plants (“Young acacia . . . optical hypotheses incarnated as lamellæ”), while section 36 is a masque played by Szentkuthy and his wife Dóra in the guise of King Charles II and Queen Catherine of Braganza, probably inspired by the “Bedchamber incident” at Charles’s court (and featuring T. S. Eliot as a footman, Stearns). In section 45, he analyses Béla Bartók’s transcription of a fugue by the Baroque composer Girolamo Frescobaldi (“When the first contrapuntal harmonies appear, I cannot imagine anything more sensual . . . and more mathematicized”); in section 67, he appropriates the conversion of St Augustine (“Augustine got up from the hetaeras’ table the way a blackbird will suddenly

moving – and not towards the One. He urges himself later to “be drilled into the absolute foreignness of something, not ‘towards the one and only metaphor’ but out, out of the world of metaphors, impressions, fate, the world of life, into a radical, eternally heretical not-I”. This “not-I” is the language of J. G. Fichte and Novalis – though Szentkuthy is writing, as he stresses, “after every romanticism” – and it is this “not-I” that saves him from J.-K. Huysmans’s dandyism, André Breton’s automatism, and James Joyce’s “involuntary muscle language”. (On Joyce: “such *only-language-language* is no longer language but something else.”) Szentkuthy is abreast of Hermann Minkowski’s spacetime and Bernhard Riemann’s number theory – “the most sadistic objectivity” then current – and incorporates the “dehumanized true” perspective of mathematical physics into his own intensely lyrical project. The question remains, however: which perspective is most essential?

Szentkuthy neither resolves this question nor abandons it. For him, “the grandest and most mysterious thing in life is that it is capable of producing such opposed perspectives”; and accordingly, “the maximum . . . of which the human brain is capable is precisely the description of the domains of questions”. Szentkuthy devises a method of writing compressed but expansive descriptions of rag-and-bone objects and the drift of sensations, moods, encounters – “outprousting Proust” is his own English phrase – using the terms of incommensurable discourses (lyrical, metaphysical, clinical, etc). Contradictory description provides a flash of conflict that satisfies the minimal requirements of “plotting” within the space of a paragraph or a page. This is how he describes his technique: I may write down, for example, the particular shape of a woman’s lips, and the even more particular lipstick taste on them, and I load the apparatus necessary for that description with the . . . more generally interesting facts and problems of life and death, organs and blood pressure, love and artifice Rather than ten

characters in a novel, I describe a single person, and [thereby] narrate ten novels in parentheses. If the extreme hybridity of the modernist novel is held in view, “novels in parentheses” is a passable description of what we see in many of Szentkuthy’s entries.

A specialist in seventeenth-century English literature and a translator of Joyce’s *Ulysses*, Szentkuthy never wrote in English. Before he died in Budapest, in 1988, he produced a colossal Hungarian oeuvre, alongside the “mega-journal” from which he extracted *Towards the One and Only Metaphor*. Since 1989, his most notable reception has been francophone. His first English title, *Marginalia on Casanova* – a rhapsodic commentary on Jacques Casanova’s memoirs – appeared in 2012 in a sensitive, annotated translation by Tim Wilkinson. *Towards the One and Only Metaphor* is Szentkuthy’s second English translation – also by Wilkinson – and will be followed by his architecturally inspired debut novel, *Prae*.

Szentkuthy is a refractory, unassimilated figure, but he appears to be a modernist – or as he put it, a “hyper-Baroque” – of the first rank. He mocks himself as a bourgeois loafer with “a certain amount of haphazard cultivation”, but his erudition is astonishing. He draws on Lucian and Apuleius, no less than Rabelais and Joyce. He produced a free-form biography of Cicero and a volume of marginalia on Augustine’s *City of God*, fantasies on the lives of Albrecht Dürer and Joseph Haydn, critical essays on Thomas Mann and partisans of the *nouveaux romans*. The titles of two of his novellas, *Wittenberg* and *Byzantium*, indicate his reach. As he confesses in section 1 of *Towards the One and Only Metaphor*, his “most primeval” desire is to produce “a Catalogus Rerum, an ‘Index of Entities’”. His chosen material is – impossibly – “the all”. In section 28, he then bisects his index into entities that “time beautifies, crystallizes” and entities that time “distorts and spoils”. Miklós Szentkuthy is still crystallizing.

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Miklós Szentkuthy

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