

Miklós
Szentkuthy

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Miklós Szentkuthy

St. Orpheus Breviary, Vol. II
Black Renaissance

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Startling Dryness: Szentkuthy's *Black Renaissance*

by Nicholas Birns

The era in which Miklós Szentkuthy lived, an era which spanned the many lurchings of Europe toward barbaric self-destruction, the monstrous despotisms of Mussolini, Hitler, Stalin, and their epigones, gave a sense that Europe's seeming achievement of civilization was in peril. Indeed, one might say that European civilization was narrowly perched on a cesspool of barbarism into which it might relapse at any minute. Walter Benjamin famously remarked that there was no document of civilization that is not also a document of barbarism. The implied posture of Szentkuthy's narrator in *Black Renaissance* ramifies & complicates Benjamin's aphorism. He seems to be saying, there is a difference between civilization & barbarism, but that civilization is still on a trial run, still having its kinks ironed out. In *Black Renaissance*, the second volume of his massive treatise-cum-roman

fleuve called the *St. Orpheus Breviary*, Szentkuthy explores two infrequently examined but constitutive ironies of European civilization: that its sources are the only partially compatible legacies of Athens & Jerusalem (a paradox perfectly captured in the very idea of 'St. Orpheus'), that it originates equally in the Byzantine East and the Latin Catholic West, and that the very centuries in which European culture was solidified were also centuries of instability, barbarism, and histories that the mainstream Eurocentric generally prefers to avoid. What is perhaps associated with this is the observation, made by many postcolonial scholars, that Eurocentrism as we know it is something only for export, to a New World 'Creole nationalism' that needs a rhetoric of European superiority to intimidate the indigenous and non-white migrant populations. As someone situated in the heart of Europe, Szentkuthy can afford to regard the contradictions in the European legacy. Equally, thinkers in Europe who distance themselves from the nationalisms of their countries, like Heine, are often seen as toothless and overly cosmopolitan, the antithesis of a thinker too rooted in nationalism such as Herder. On the other hand, the unquestionably well-intentioned 'good Europeanism' of the later Nietzsche may well be seen as hyperbolic at best, however salutary it is in warding off vulgar interpretations of Nietzsche's late work. The contrast between the two attitudes — of nationalism on the one hand, & 'Europeanism' or cosmopolitanism on the other hand — is, as David van Dusen aptly points out, at the core of Szentkuthy's writing:

It is not accidental, then, that [Szentkuthy] was thrilled by the expression of the 15th-century polymath, Nicolas of Cusa — who is later echoed by German Romantics like Novalis, English Romantics like Coleridge — that the essence of things is a *coincidentia oppositorum*: a ‘coincidence of opposites.’ Szentkuthy is himself such a ‘coincidence,’ & for what may appear to be a perfectly banal reason. Early critics hissed that he was ‘non-Magyar,’ and with them, Szentkuthy regarded himself as a ‘European’ — by which he meant to say, and more on this shortly, a *contradiction*.¹

Van Dusen is pointing to Szentkuthy’s literal ancestry — that his father was from a German family, his mother from a Jewish one — and also the general cosmopolitanism of his outlook. Szentkuthy is incredibly cosmopolitan, and none of his highly-marked and specific attachments negate this aura of cosmopolitanism. He accepts and foregrounds the inherent cultural contradictions in the European heritage — the clash of Greek and Jew, East and West, passion and reason, elucidating their glorious beauty, & their apodictic discomfort.

1. David van Dusen, “All That Exists Is the Only True Luxury: Miklós Szentkuthy’s *Marginalia on Casanova*,” *Los Angeles Review of Books* (May 2, 2013).

II

The first paragraph of *Black Renaissance* throws down the gauntlet to the reader:

Saint Dunstan was a radiantly handsome young man, and his intelligence, his intellect, & his cultivation were just as far-reachingly radiant. That duality, the feminine charm of an Adonis and the mastery of the entire culture of those days (from Ireland to India), provoked very great & fateful inner battles within him. There was also another 'permanent crisis,' in his soul & politics, namely, a struggle of old Celtic Christianity, luxuriating in pagan elements, & of the Roman, imperial modern Catholic, almost legally mandated state religion, for more than once he had a more regal role than that of the kings in 10th-century England. And a third dizzying swing of the pendulum playing out in his soul, embracing virtually every possible role in itself: the role of emperor & dictator in contrast to hermitism, the solitude, art, his unquenchable love & yearning for romantic forests.

We must ask: why Dunstan? We understand the 'Saint' if we have read the first volume of the *Breviary*, *Marginalia on Casanova*, where Szentkuthy juxtaposes the libertine and the saint, the ascetic & what *Marginalia on Casanova* called the 'wandering' of the eponymous hero. Like Nietzsche,

Szentkuthy does not embrace historical Christianity, but unlike Nietzsche, he does not see it as superfluous either. But why Dunstan? As Szentkuthy says, Dunstan was a real historical figure in 10th-century England, someone who was in effect prime minister for a lengthy period of time, and who was the leading figure in the English (Anglo-Saxon) church of his day. The homosexual and Celtic elements are Szentkuthy's own innovations (albeit based on some historical evidence) and make Dunstan into a more sensual and rebellious figure, one whose relationship to the Christianity he so zealously espouses is filled with struggle & contradiction. But why choose this saint? After all, though reasonably well-known, he is not a household name, and lacks either the aura of the famous or the novelty of the totally fictional.

The answer is simple. The key date in Szentkuthy's eccentric historiography is 1000 AD — the year Hungary converted to Christianity under the leadership of its king, St. Stephen, and as guided by Pope Sylvester II. A later volume of the *Breviary*, the one that marked the resumption in 1972 after a twenty-seven-year hiatus, is titled *The Second Life of Sylvester II* and explicitly takes up the themes already evident in the Dunstan episode — as the Dunstan episode was appended to the edition of *Black Renaissance* Magvető brought out in the early 1970s, the two were written more or less concurrently. When as readers we encounter Dunstan, we should also think of Sylvester II. The key date is 1000 AD, and the elemental readerly move in the first section of *Black Renaissance* is to judge whether a reference made is to

1. *Vita* (Life of a Saint)

Dunstan (924–988)

Saint Dunstan was a radiantly handsome young man,¹ and his acuity, his intellect, and his cultivation were just as far-reachingly radiant. That duality, the feminine charm of an Adonis and the mastery of the entire culture of those days (from Ireland to India), provoked very great and fateful inner battles within him. There was also another 'permanent crisis' in his soul & politics, namely, a struggle of old Celtic Christianity, luxuriating in pagan elements, and of the Roman, imperial modern Catholic, almost legally mandated state religion, for more than once he had a more regal role than that of the kings in 10th-century England. And a third dizzying swing of the pendulum playing out in his soul, embracing virtually every possible role in itself: the role of emperor and dictator in contrast to hermitism, solitude, art, his unquenchable love & yearning for romantic forests.

He was descended from the family of the kings of Wessex; if you like, a Biblical or Donatello David — if that serves you as a reference aid: a male, Old Testament, pagan-mythological Artemis; an adolescent nymph as created by Thomas Mann, perfumed with Freudian psychology. It would not be a fault, of course, if those character traits were handled with a muffle, but for a more obvious understanding of the divine reading (“Black Renaissance”) this condensed intonation of ours is also necessary.

He received his religious education in Glastonbury, the setting for J. C. Powys’ monumental novel *A Glastonbury Romance*, and what is decisive (for both Dunstan & Powys): from Celtic Benedictine monks who had fled from Ireland and who had fused together the above-mentioned old pagan Irish myths with old Judaic and early Christian legends, and the motley, kaleidoscopic pantheon of the early or imperial Romans. In that Christianity there was more paganism than people might imagine, but there was nonetheless more Christianity than people might imagine. For pedagogical aims, therefore, on the left side of a highly simplified stage would stand Stonehenge’s gigantic prehistoric altar or temple stones, as stormily, all bones and dissection of the sky, as Constable painted them (1836) — whereas on the right side, Roman temples with Greek orders in which Christians were already saying mass.

In the huge baptismal basin at Glastonbury the noviciates always ‘bathed’ in new and freshly consecrated water, spiced with a few drops of martyr’s blood and a few drops of the

waters of the River Jordan (possibly with Mary Magdalene's scent and a relic of her "night and cold creams"). They stood with candles (including Dunstan), in halo-light headgear reminiscent of wandering apostles, wound around by disintegrating mignon-paper ivy leaves, flowing blond locks of hair — reviving snakes under the Madonna's trampling feet: angelic face, musing, Hadrian's lover and Good Shepherd, wavering breasts, cardinal's skullcap, a discretely protruding belly with the Oriental pasque-flower of the navel, candle in hand, a pigeon-quivering test idol of light, dropped out of the heavenly nest of "*fiat lux*" — his arms & thighs: adventurer delta-gambolings, straying velvet *canali giocosi* of heat sources.

Dunstan was the best Latinist and the best Hellenist in the monastery. He knew Tacitus off by heart — the politics, style, sex dreams (those are certainly unavoidable, and we should neither bless, nor excommunicate, even less analyze them), the life of Tiberius, characters in life and literature, the diversity and the secret common denominator of divinities, the rationality, love, & 'statelessness' of decadent Greeks, the intellectual utility of old age as yet unknown to him, his siding with politics as opposed to paranoid 'ivory towers,' — and he nevertheless learned from them the (at first *con grandezza*) surrealist consequences of solitude — do read with zealous attention the "Anthimus" chapter in the divine lesson below: "Anthimus in the Empress' Park," for example: poetry, philosophy, Garden of Eden, solitude, imperial majesty — is anything more needed? Is that not a pipe-dreamer's dream?

It would be senseless to talk about truly, generically classicized mystery or Passion games in Glastonbury, because everything there was a pantomime of games, dances, dramas and stained-glass-window-puppets, nobly mixed up with everything mixable from the Old Testament and essential-intuitive Celtic foolishness through Greek *Legenda Aurea* down to the four pretty-protagonist Holy Gospel books. In the darkened, *one-lamp* church on Maunday Thursday evening Dunstan was the despairing Christ on the Mount of Olives (the altar a whole mound of leaves, Dunstan in his pain lies on his stomach as in a Dürer woodcut) who in his passion sobs the words of Euripides' *Iphigenia* into the hayrick, as if "Lord, Why hast thou forsaken me" were the next to come in the wail: "Who knows what kind of destiny befalls him? The ways of heaven are unknowable. No one will either dis- or recover them, and man cannot evade Evil's hideaway. The ship of fate has a single funeral port: the Unknown."

Naturally, he became a professor at the Glastonbury 'university' at quite a tender age, and expounded on Lucretius' native Roman-language work; he proved ultimate meaning & interpretability precisely from the word's un-interpretability, transparent truth born peremptorily out of absurd nature and nonsense history. With his students he descended daringly (some of them were nuns) to the bottom of such 'theses' — embodying a more precise version of Samuel Beckett — as can be seen in the Table of Contents to our "Brunelleschi" chapter: 1) disenchanted

æsthetics, disenchanted logic, — 2) conflict of the struggle for complete *truth* and the struggle for perfect *form*, — 3) toward unsurpassable relativism, — 4) both reality & its interpretation are nonsense, — 5) there are only directions without a goal, 6) hatred of names concealing facts, — 7) there is also a romanticism-free, stone-cold sober irrationality, — 8) physical Eros and spiritual Eros lead equally to fiasco (oh, that is not what a girl student felt under the drapery of the candidate's brushing garment). Only a rationally certain, all-solving Absolute can be behind so great a nihil — and what's more, Dunstan unraveled it rationally, and the nun, deathly pale, was led on Dunstan's arm to a father-confessor after she had changed dress and perfumed herself — that was compulsory for female students on those certain days of the month.

In the Middle Ages, as is truly common knowledge, mathematics & music were incestuous twin subjects, which of course was not the slightest bit of a detriment to music's sensual and emotional passionateness, and still less to the blissful, indeed salutary rigor of numbers — a listless after-scent of that is, perhaps, the *musikalische Mode* connected to the name of Arnold Schönberg. Dunstan was an excellent musician, a singer with the voice of a female soprano. On the day of the Beheading of St. John the Baptist the dance of Salome was also performed (why on earth not, when in the East a dancing *Christ* was also known and that manner of worship of course found its way to even the most westerly shores of Ireland “within minutes” on Roman ships and

roads), with Salome being played by Dunstan on the shores of a lake, because the dance figures were mirrored in the green basin and thus he could best illustrate the musical themes' simple inversions, retrogrades, and the simple inversions of their retrogrades.

On the other side of the lake the male & female students noted down musical scores, graph-like lines and cardiogram choreographs, onto parchment rolls spread out left and right of their thighs, with connecting arrows in green, red, and blue, but all that went with great difficulty: Dunstan was just too good-looking (in those days there was no question of priesthood or a monastic life; for a long time Dunstan remained a worldly person). After the dance 'Salome' lay on his belly in the grass, legs drawn up (the triangle for Pythagoras' theorem perhaps being the model), his hollow barely-stomach panting from weariness like polyps or flatfish in an aquarium when they breathe or whatever else they do. The Buddha-bowls, the calices, of water lilies were never so drifting while fixed as the eyes of girls regarding Dunstan's *corpus Christi* and begging him almost in chorus to sing. Dunstan sat among them (oboe? lute? flute? guitar or Vivaldi mandolin?), and the unsuspected confession aria sounded from his Adonic-hedonistic body with shockingly unexpected tragedy:

My Ego-fate is darkest, its face & reverse but a poltroon;
 Like a scruple-dry soul, it drifts between life and work:
 Startled by work in life, my fate in work is: being —
 My epitaph be this: "no heavenly work, nor earthly life."

Now that we are at the subject of Dunstan's musicianship, one must pedantically record another anecdote from Dunstan's subsequent life. By then King Æthelstan ruled in England — Dunstan survived many kings — and at that point in time England also strictly recognised the appeal of the Synod of Carthage in 392, according to which Christian newlyweds should abstain on the first night, because the *jus primae noctis* was the due of Our Lord Jesus Christ, who was the First Heavenly Bridegroom (husband) not only of favoured saints and nuns, but of every Christian woman. When Æthelstan was wed, his wife spent the night in a separate bed, in a separate room, and Dunstan sang and made music before the closed door; inside, just one lady-in-waiting attended the queen (for protection). While the music was playing, and in the intervals, Dunstan and the entire courtly household heard such ecstatic vocalizations, sobbing, sighing, and laughter, as though Dunstan's songs had supplanted the queen's consort; in the morning Satan was seen frantically escaping in the form of a fiery horse. Drunk on rapture, the consort only sent the heavenly flute player away from before her door a week later; then Lent ensued, but we have no record of how the rest of the forty days were accounted for.

A third musical legend: when, under the influence of various vile informers, spies, back-stabbers, and the truest holy-intended saints, King Æthelstan kicked out Dunstan (perhaps out of certain justified feelings of guilt?), the most beloved of his men at court, thus fell seriously ill in

2. *Lectio* (Divine Reading)

(I) TACITUS

Tiberius and waters.⁹ Rivers. Lakes. Seas. But first & foremost islands. Islands of exile; little islets of Greek snobbery; and islands of delight. Sometimes of voluntary solitude & guilty conscience. Bays & riverbanks. Tiber and Tiberius. How fitting the name, how fitting the Triton. Tiberius' marble statue before me is always *watery*, muddy, glittering with Nile-bottom or a shower in the Paris *Concorde*.

Roman waters: adolescents splashing in the swimming pool; bathhouses of perverse repute; old *roués* among sun-kissed statues of Apollo and terry towels smelling of sweat. I can never imagine Tiberius as a senile sodomite of that sort; he is always adolescent, an Oxford student, rough with sirloin-red cheeks. Sporting even in his debauchery, Spartan even in his procuress' slyness, or in his neurotic, baroque-embellished death fears, stoic as the reliefs on Trajan's column.

9. Detail from a letter by Monteverdi (1640) in which he recounts to an English friend how he was looking in the works of Tacitus for a subject for his new opera. The section of the letter presented here comprises three parts: casual fragments of impressions of Tacitus' text, Byzantine topics, and finally (since priesthood became the culmination of his life), portraits of two theologians.

The contrasts of water: glistening port, swaggering health (Floridian or Californian) — and the mystical elementary material of the earliest life. But Tritons are Cantabrigians, not Freudians.

In a French film magazine I saw two photographs juxtaposed: a 'white' and a 'black Venus.' The white was a naked girl — her breasts, stomach, & hips were all empire-psyche, full of classic translucence, slimness and rustling parabolicity, with a sensuality more elemental than anything. Next to it, what a clumsy lump of wood the thousand breasts, resembling a bunch of bananas, or the puff-ball hips of an Astarte. Then on that body an Anglo-Saxon head. Eyelashes and rouge. Beside that the 'black Venus': that was Tiberius! A bronze statue that in reality was only dark *green* and could stand in the middle of a well. The wind splashed water on it, so it seemed black.

That sparkling bronze-bald, hollow bronze-ringing, bronze-liar belly with the puritanical, Euclidean, fingerprinted umbilicus in the center: for me it is Rome, the glittering sobriety of '*ius*,' the bitterness & perversity of humanism — though it is the undulating helmet of the female womb, it is a memory of Tiberius' boy lovers. Yet I am also fond of the true portrait, that quintessentially non-Jewish, adolescently-fringed London head *par excellence*, with the toga pulled over it. Like a vestal virgin or the mother of the Gracchi. He roamed in Tiber-bank gardens.

The gardens of Rome! Here they are more gardenlike. Were there any gardens in Egypt? In Babylon? Bungling

jungle: tigers, deities, and some sort of cabbalistic monumentality. Semiramis is powerless; her garden appeal is nil. In China? The landscapes in the paintings are lovely — the smoking, tea-steamy Buddha-nothing and pages, silks of true, intoxicated analysis. But too nihilistic or too realistic. Full of bad resonances of fate and impression. Japanese? Undo the cherries, dear, since there's no help, undo the cherries...¹⁰ The Greeks? There I can only see chalky walls, the sand and white of Arabian villages. A Greek flower? Nonsense. An olive tree? Of course: white, silvery, cold, abstract, with some nauseating fragrance. As if Diogenes were to perfume himself in his barrel. In short: every fishpond surrounded by lilac bushes is nonsense, except for the Roman ones, the Tiberius, Sallust, Lucullus variety. Parks: full of urbanity, half-credited formal deities, in a scrumptiously swinging balance between Rousseau and Voltaire. English gardens? French gardens? World-rule syntheses? Persian oases? Teutonic druid-laube? Sicilian orange-fireworks and Senecan sanatoria? Marble and cypress, lakes and gravel paths, carbon dioxide-rivaling trout and the quartz mask of Divus Augustus in wonderful harmony.

Tiberius rambled in such things. How many gods he'd had: whisking fish, shades, and blades, bubbles or peeled-off lipstick that retain the shape of the mouth. Fishes, fishes! Trans-illuminated roses, or just another green undulation. Delicacies at the banquet; gourmandize. And the tragically simple sigils of the Christians — a semi-political, semi-death-poetic omen daubed on the wall by fanatical cellar

peoples. The 'true' gods are, after all, somehow gods: Jupiter, there, at the turn in the road, between two naked calla lilies.

An undressed woman or boy is not naked; they are still all body, all Turkish-delight-sticky humanism, anatomy, copulation, and disease. But a calla is the *shell* of a nude without the nude; vestal porn. But what is the echo of this bureaucratized Juice-Pitar in Germania, Tiberius considers among his dancing fish diadems, whom a pair of Greek gibe-Platonists have enticed to the black Narcissus sin of contemplation. Three demonic steps of the worship of Jupiter: in Hellas, the mythic moving-spirit of a snob-æsthete world; in Rome, a gentlemanly lawyer of a *Rechtsstaat*; in Germania, tossed there by centurions, a tough-as-nails, pasta-hard-muscle, tragic, gigantic, diabolical Falstaff.

The gods migrate like birds, and even the halcyons of Spanish élan look like harpies in marshy lakes. Fish, deities. But the most exciting gods are the cæsars. The *divus Augustus*. Tiberius: *ultimus deus, divus nullus*. Yet the world is god. Here everyone is a pantheist. God is the boy for whom he is waiting. A bunch of Greeks spoke to him about doubt, though nothing of the sort exists — we believe in everything. From what are religions born there? From nature: from fish, from callas, from eclipses of the moon, from boy hetæras of the thermal baths. And then from death: the Carraran marble ghost-deity of *divus Augustus* is indissociably connected to death. A god: because he is absolutely dead. The whole apotheosis is attributable to the fact that the Romans were the first to notice that if a Roman dies, then he is dead.

This deification is a spiritual embalming, mythicizing mummification. How often Tiberius shuddered at the thought of that: he got goose flesh, and his chilled blood rustled through his skin like the sestertius leaves of birch trees in the moonlight. Death masks. Is that a pose? An Oriental influence? Death? Neuraesthesia? Delirious humanism? A thirstily slurping, resigned pseudo-theology? What is this deification? The being-statue of a statue? Oh, we have plenty of scales, gamuts of them, *les gammes, les gammes*: a statue, the living body, the dead body, a wax mask, the gods. Those all prowl about in the park, that is all obviously reflected in Tacitus' sentence when he writes that Tiberius visited the gardens by the Tiber.¹¹ *Sine ira et studio*.¹² But with Delacroix et les paradoxes de Saint Augustin; the little hypocrite. Yet riparian solitude is different from that by a lakeside or mid-sea. A river is all lapping, evanescence, time & onward, non-returning, history's lyricism, death's menstruation. The unattainable, unique. At times slower than the great proconsul river of Isis and Osiris, Serapis and Anubis in Egypt, on Anthony's Dionysian theater stage; at other times enigmatically, camiknicker-chafingly, cash-rubbingly like this Tiber, with dolphins snooping under a pseudonym; a boyish, babbling, Puck-like river. Tiber-Tiberius. There is no god, only wordplay. The sole thing that is a better religion and more philosophy.

What about lakes? Fakir water, lotus-Onan water, Chaldean water, Jewish Dead Sea, Dodonean water, Delphic water? Isn't life typically a rushing river? Isn't it pan-

Tiber-pan-Tiberius? Isn't life typically a monotonous *lake*, a sterile lake, a stagnant stretch of water choked with seaweed? 'Soul' and death: that is, stagnant water. Stagnant water reflects; stagnant water is choked with seaweed. That's it — stagnant water is 'soul,' stagnant water is death. But then Tiberius sailed on fast boats to islands, and then the sea came, the salty infinity, the azure, more azure, even more azure, the most azure, the very most azure. And the very, very, very azuremost? By now that is his senile mouth: his cracked, chapped, flat-toned flute-mouth on the body of some smuggled-in Matisse boy or aristocrat. The blue of the gentian-whelks of the Adriatic and Tyrrhenian Seas always becomes more intense, perpetual enhancement, as if its horizon were continually racing like the edge of wine while it is poured into a glass. Here he is: Old Tiberius, already unable to distinguish a tinge of conscience from a tucked-up boy — an old body in the Capri spring. Skin-and-bone hands & mimosa shrubbery. Blue-purulent eyes and white spume shivering onto a rock. Lengthy wheezy coughing & dark green leaves which flutter as they sprout; the wind casts them around Tiberius' sporulating lungs with a crack like a juggler does knives. Solitude.

Solitude at night, in a confined room, in a curtained-off bed. But solitude on the springtime island, exposed in the space of spaces, above seas & hills, stars & triremes, Greece and yet more early summers. That, too, is solitude. *Paradoxon insulare*. The eyelashes of that Parisian, petal-chested, and Modiano-wombed girl¹³ (a Tiberius pendant)

are like triremes. Like the caterpillar-keyboard of oars at sea. Or the black bone of Tiberius' god-fishes. Sex is not good for marveling at, not for myth or anti-myth, not for psychology or the proliferation of the herd, but for games. And not bodily games either: the body is something a lot clumsier. For intellectual games. Tiberius games. For a Tiberius portrait. In Capri Tiberius *plays* and has *played* sodomite adolescent physicalities. Boy with boy: oh, *principium identitatis*. I am unable to separate the emperor from that female portrait. Neither from the watery-green bronze belly nor from the palm tree of ice made of pliant glass. Where is the boundary of academic 'sérieux' and Giraudoux-style buffoonery here? A pedantic question. Where is that unearthly strength of a senile, demonic-Shakespeare Tacitus, that with him for the first time a river will be a river, a mask — a mask, Capri — Capri, a boy — a boy, an old man — an old man? The simplest words become filled with themselves like the sails of the treacherous warships of Ravenna & Byzantium fill with vigorous winds.

The two types of Tacitus: that of the late *Annals* & that of the early *Histories*. At the end of the *Annals*, admittedly, a Stoic philosopher (at least the semblance of one) and a Cynic feature on one page: the two passport-portraits of the *Annales* and the *Historiæ*. The *Annals* is stoic: classic melancholy, Satanic pessimism between colonnades. A Stoa Poikilé.¹⁴ The *Histories* are cynical: Tacitus is a 'dog,' yelping, mongrel, Grecian, romantic, moralizing, *la Rochefoucauld*, replete with Augustinian stylistic tricks and ever-so-big

(II) BRUNELLESCHI

Young Monteverdi's interest in Brunelleschi is linked to a stroll in Venice. His father once went near the Chiesa di San Moisè to visit a patient, and left little Claudio in the square in front of the church — he would come back for him in half an hour.

Claudio could not have enough of the beauty of the façade; he had once heard something about it to the effect that it was "crowded" and accumulated senseless Spanishness, but he could see that those words, when all was said and done, had no meaning there. True, the neighboring house had flat walls, and the church was full of flourishing protuberances, but those were rather for touching, and the rendering of a bunch of baroque thingamajigs with the word "crowded" was valid more for the blind who worked only with their fingers (it may even have originated from them) — the eye

could hardly believe any of it. Claudio raced to the right in order to inspect it from there; then up onto the bridge, down the steps to the lagoon; he could not have enough of the perspective games; he even darted over into the next street so as not to see it and that way perhaps enjoy it more. He lost his way when hiding in one such side street and all of a sudden found himself in front of San Salvatore.⁶¹ The main gate was open; a breeze was blowing the red curtain into big bulges; little Claudio could squeeze through without having to pull the seemingly hundredweight of drapery to one side with his tiny hands. He was just able to reach the font of holy water, but his fingertips could barely touch the water because when he traced the cross on his forehead, all he could feel was his own familiar warmth, no whiff of the water's musty cellar odor hit his nose. He slowly crept inwards, and after the initial customary church murkiness & tomb mustiness (*divinissimo glorioso imperatorium illustrissima optimo maxime celeberrima unica div. reg. sien. venet. MMCCCCXXXIII.*), he landed in a strange enchantment of lightness: in a yellowish-grey and alchemical atmosphere coming from very high and from afar. He looked up. An oval cupola of unknown shape circled above his head with the speed of a swelling soap bubble.

In the egg shape there was a perpetual carbuncle composed of some mystic, wild yeast; he fancied he could see vases going round between the knees of potters. Their color was also alluring; a sick butter-yellow & candle-tallow grey; without any fresco, sketch, or internal division — only the lower edge was drawn with a dark greyish-green shading into quite black.

Three cupolas came like that, one after the other, & when little Claudio, his eyes twisted up above the crown of his head, tarried beneath them, he felt the same magnetic upwards giddiness that a person feels in looking downwards from endless towers: there was something nauseating in the twisting of the cupolas, in the color of withered grapes, the relentless alternation of black and white bands, the floating obscenity and unctuous nude-likeness. What was that? Was that simplicity? Puritanical form? Pure structure annihilating everything Gothic and baroque? Was that (he added fearfully, as if he were uttering the name of the Antichrist in a spirit-summoning séance), was it — Florence? He immediately sensed the discomfort that he had felt in front of San Moisè. In the way that the ‘Spanish madness’ had shrunk there into mignon, jewel-like, medallion-idyllic harmony (like a flower which, by virtue of the cleanness of the weather and the magic prismaticism of the dew, appears to have a million components, although it remains just a naïve dot in a meadow, its thousand pollen- and vein-reliefs notwithstanding), here the opposite happened: these candle-colored, revolving ovals in pursuit of one another, the naked and distant cupolas, the black pillars supporting them and the movements of arcades more arrogant than the face of Colleoni,⁶² were not brought into harmony, a transparent mood of arithmetical crystallinity, but into the realm of violence, a Byzantine ascetic’s pose, dark Syrian sadism, and eternally reverberating cabalistic diagrams.

That is what Florence would be — he stammered to himself with superstitious certainty, feeling the muddle of animal

longing and frantic fear that a child feels in front of the first woman he desires. He knew nothing of Florence, only the name Brunelleschi, about whom his father had spoken more than a few times.

At that time he did not as yet suspect that something other than Venice could be so heart-stoppingly, stomach-churningly different. He staggered out one more time, his head swirling, under the three cupolas: there was something wonderful in the fact that those three globular forms followed one *after* the other, in a straight line, above the squared base of the floor, and they did not intertwine into a grapey, Byzantine-Slavonic cluster of circles like the three Graces on their every statue: they were not carried along in a collective circulation by that profusion of curves, embraces, & hint of rings that emanates from such a cupola like a gentle but constant eddy: they revolved separately, self-seekingly, in cold isolation, the snail dynamics of their independence cooled and enhanced by the consecutive soberness of the straight line. How nice the three degrees of glimpsing them while passing underneath: first of all the lower, drawn outline with its huge dash, its vaulted freedom, its mirror-spaciousness reminiscent of lakes in a park — then a step further on already, the wall of the cupola leaning inwards and running round and round, as if one's eyeball were the lost stone of a catapult speedily swung into action, and due to the rotation I were to become flattened into the form of a pebble; then finally, when one has ended up right beneath it, one glimpsed the pinnacle of the cupola, a tiny geometrical bud where the

outside light spatters in. At that point Claudio saw *nothing* of the neighboring cupola any longer, and he had to move on for everything to start all over again. He had never felt that in the Byzantium of San Marco's: there the globular spaces of the cupolas streamed into the lower regions of the church to such an extent that he had occasionally had the impression that beneath his feet was not a floor, but hemispheres inverted to the vaulted cupolas like glasses, as if the upper ones were being mirrored in dark water.

Here though the church was strictly double-storied: for a start, the world of columns and semicircular arches, and above them, quite unexpectedly, alien, like a marvel without any forewarning, the abstract-magical world of cupolas almost not made of stone, nor even belonging to God. San Marco was a single big dark gold bough, an antediluvian fern with not a stem or flower or root anywhere, only tautological vegetation; here the column part was a trunk, the cupola an *exotic* flower, an incomprehensible transparent marvel on the black body of the trunk. Naïve Claudio sensed in it something that was almost mockery, cynicism, heresy.

Hardly had he met up with his father than he immediately began pumping him about Brunelleschi; at first he thought he had also made the cupolas of San Salvatore; he asked for woodcuts, gossip, everything. His father promised that that very evening they would take a stroll over toward the Jewish quarter, and then he could point out one or two things in connection with Brunelleschi. Claudio settled down in his room with an even greater chaos in his head than before.

What could Florence (because for Monteverdi, as we have already said, Florence was both a proper name and the name of Brunelleschi's city) have to do with the Jewish quarter in Venice? He sought out woodcuts of Florence in his own books but found none. But time passed quickly: before he had even put his books back on the shelf his father called in.

... Brunelleschi spent his childhood in the house of three aging women; his parents neglected him. The architect, reticent to the point of gloominess, always referred to them as the "three Parcæ." The young child did not make the acquaintance of adult men or girls; only the three crones. He actually made polychrome statues of them; virtually no one knows about those, they are in the possession of a wealthy but totally reclusive Venetian Jew; Claudio's father only knew about them because the old fossil was once a patient of his. He was now taking little Claudio there, so he could see the group of statues for himself. Claudio could scarcely contain his excitement — he would never have imagined that the "Renaissance" would irrupt into his life in this way: magically revolving cupolas, a secret treasure of the Jewish quarter, & old dames.

The first of the Graces was the embodiment of puritanism; young Brunelleschi lived like in a Carthusian monastery. One knows this and that about the families of such wealthy traders, at whose home every column is marble, every spoon pure gold, and the lady of the house does not sleep in anything but Belgian lace schmattahs, whereas the way of life, timetable, recreations, and relaxations pass by with such dreary

mechanicalness from one day to the next that one feels one is constantly at a funeral. There was never a smile, never a superfluous word, nothing but measured paces — everything was just a number and a business profit turned into an abstraction. That is how he got to know the cold demon of money, the involuntary fakirism of bank materialism within the pomp: the lady of the house was always calculating — never greedily like an avaricious second-hand dealer's wife about the bridges, nor even calmly like a feudal count doing his totting up with nonchalance, but with a cold unemotional obsession the way only women can, and even then most likely when the possibility of love has deserted them with a twilight flutter of wings.

How many times did young Brunelleschi creep into the black bank boudoir of the first Parca in order to examine the invoices, bills of exchange, and letters of credit: he understood not a word about them, of course, but he did know that those numbers were sources of life and death: due to those numbers the palace was so Veronesean-illustrious, and owing to those very same numbers every female in the rooms, every single one, was world-weary, dead and menopausal. In that way, already in his childhood, Brunelleschi became 'materialistic': to his dying day he was afraid of money, got goose bumps if he had to walk in front of a bank because he knew that the life-consuming prime mover of life was there. Naturally, he himself was never able to handle money; he was poor and had no business sense, but he inquired continually about prices, currencies, and credits as his most feared

3. TUSCAN ARIAS

(MONTEVERDI)

I.

Can song bloom in the absence of these two Muses
In the golden midnight of Tuscany?
Was not *Landscape* the source of all music?
Did not sylphic *Time* carry it to me?
Space's secret is now lasting made,
The earth and all distant: enclosed in paradox,
'Here' and 'there' around me: senseless, tinged with black;
And from my home town I fell into the dust
As the wretched fruit falls from a tree.
Landscape: Giorgione shape for where and for nowhere,
Striding and running, tree-crowns and town gates —
Wish there were a sundial in my mountain-water chaos,
And in this blind silence somewhere, a North den;
A star that did not tack in haste in hellish zodiacs,
Somber cypress, which to me beckoned with its shade —

But no: than spaceless wormwood, there's no more bodiless orphan.
 Every horizon has faithlessly taken wing.
 And with it, *Time*, more heretical yet, inquisitive devil-angel,
 Bodiless and aimless, nameless and storm-raging;
 One moment by sword it ousts me from my instant-Eden,
 The next, it's an annunciation drowsy from peace-moss:
 If *Space's* many mourning figures accused me only,
Time as shrieking Cherub has me already condemned;
 If by a green bay's apology I was appeased,
 In an instant, Time opened a blood wound.
 Where is the naïve age which knew past and future,
 Yesterday's waters on a twin day's step,
 The sleepy ship, 'one year,' and the whistling heart-slayer:
 The Minute, turning on partitioned time's clever wheels?
 'When' has fallen out of my soul forever —
 The bud of the moment shot a century's apple,
 And I don't know: was it infinity, or fleeting need,
 That on me the gates of this landscape opened?
 I saw many gods, giant myths, and puny flies —
 White-bosomed cities, the real shredded into bits —
 I could gaze at them forever (rich memory-catafalque),
 Like my proto-picture, the girl Lot begets for me.
 But in vain did the beam, like death's liana, on Marian shoulders glint,
 In vain did the lido's foam wither at my feet:
 As a final lesson, only midnight-lapped *Space* and the slender
 Puzzle, chameleon-souled *Time*, were left;
 In my wanderings, at one weary threshold or other
 I would sometimes chide myself for them,

Saying: How come, thou masked Fate-siren,
 That this lute only for abstractions sounds?
 Ragusa's Venus-valleys, ascetic Tuscan soil,
 Blood-colored goldfish that in nymph-thermæ swim,
 Ornate sculpture bigotries of aged Saxons,
 And the bubbling chanting of castrati choirs:
 Did all that merely tempt me, latter-day St. Anthony — the *concrete*?
 Deceptive dew, that fever-lipped South steams on its own lips?
 Did fate sketch its anguish-atomed portrait in vain:
 For the face — is dead? While the two mænads, *Time* and *Space*, thrive?
 The Mænad-Muses answered me in canon;
 Landscape, this Danaë combed to horizon, responded;
 Time, too, answered, two-faced procurer of seraphs,
 Yet I don't know if ever such a cynical whoop of joy
 Resounded on earth, on this suspect thicket of gods and flowers.
 What did I hear then, subdued, pillaged pupil?
 "You no longer have a home, a mother and family hearth,
 And misty remotenesses are not magic groves either:
 From your worshipped home my treacherous love expels you,
 You're also bored with this fairy tale realm: your weary hand;
 The earth is finished, the concept of 'place' by now a ruin:
 Neither home nor Asias will bewitch you any more —
 Every pose of creation is a market junk heap,
 From wonder to habit Fate has plundered you outright.
 You are bored by every terrace on Florence's jaunty branch,
 Disgusted by the Alps' Artemis snows:
 Only *Space*, pure Here, blind, unfleeced Jason,
 Haunts you in your Lent-soul, from this Tuscan today on."

As in a watermill blade falls on blade,
 So did *Time's* girlish curse fall on its heels:
 "The calendar can burn in delusion's bad fire,
 Sages and star-gazers can all go by turn;
 If for our soul's inner secret, or for the outside Time
 Chants: on it I will quarrel no longer.
 Eternity? A moment? Memory? Soothsaying from dreams?
 Old age? Centuries? *Perdu* or *Retrouvé*?
 What is your future in the stars? Where's the earthly offset?
 You never know, because, like my sister Danaë:
 I am a riddle, blue-boughed anonymity entrancing,
 In whose rumbling shade Zeus himself is a dumb beast;
 Deaths and strokes of luck come to me in a tangle,
 And to measure long or short for lessons: I haven't the power."
 That is what the canon voiced, and I lost heart
 To attempt to caress Tuscany's body in verse —
 When lizards, Marks, and Byzantiums,
 Arab garden lairs and frayed papal ramparts
 In their wilder-than-abstraction canons called down
 Curses on watery *Space* and still waterier *Time-IO*,
 Asking for form, for the kiss-shackling word.
 Thus, like an apostle, who whisks from his head the Soul,
 The paths of inspiration to seek at brushwood fire:
 So did I secretly sorcer a Tuscan garden,
 Cheating on the philosophical Muses both.

2.

Oh, beauty-torment and wonder-command:
 When will this curse of sight come to an end?
 When will it be that I am not I, yearning for tree-being,
 But all the cypresses will be just amiable friends?
 How many times did we laugh at the Titans of romance,
 For not sniffing out Iris' wild hila:
 They would rather themselves turn into gods,
 Thus into pushy Pride's altars they turned their lives.
 The curative silk lament of scent
 Never again touched their mournful nose;
 Desire to be deified is only poor wretches' dream,
 Never yet carried anyone into the skies.
 What a pack of buffoons is every gang of Titans:
 Here the flower threads spring into a pearl,
 There a god clouds over his snow-silver chest —
 Tow-haired Titan perceives neither wonder nor smell.
 And yet, in vain: when before my eye Lake Garda
 Her azure and her needle-leaved bayonet stretches,
 I feel, straining in labor, that she alone exists,
 And all humanity and poetry is but a trashy mask.
 In vain does a crummy Titan saunter on kitschy bridges,
 Morbid Romanticism's Breughel priestlet —
 Neither Christian scripture nor Olympic lyre will sound:
 He has no dogma or victor's law — the tree alone has.
 Just once, oh, Fate! *To be* just once and not express:
 Could I but rustle as a masked bird on bounteous branch-slings;

Could I but be the crystal ring on the garden pond's belly,
 I, a shadow shaggier-coated than a sick dog;
 In Ravenna's quiet me, and me the stray comet Cain;
 To be a razor-necked swan on Venice's waters;
 I, the strict, semi-circular Florentine Marian thesis:
 In Ferrara to not peek at the Borgia grave's hushed secret —
 With Realized Object Reality my poetic delusion.

3.

As Jesus (Apollo!) into the depths I, too, have descended:
 A Satanic porch awaited me: my 'individuality,' my ego, my soul —
 The blue clovers of solitude: a selfish end-in-itself pulled me down,
 And like the Count of Orgaz in my I-silence's lap I lay.
 I knew there was but one damnation: the *Self*,
 That no word would throw a shadow on someone *else*;
 No kiss could sketch me on a stranger's face,
 No *Kharis* hug will be fruitful in *another's* hands.
 That was why I, drunken daredevil theologian, descended,
 Thinking some petal-sprouting miracle I could make:
 All that *for me* is merely reason and Eros color
 I shall redeem: let there be law *outside me* as well.
 How that limbo rejoiced in its cliffs and strumpets,
 Mud-splattered qualms, pagan cæsars, stray birds!
 I was offered blonde-haired love, a snake-head crown:
 For escape from the *Self* life was not too wild a price.
 As this parrot panorama scampered into view,
 My hand unthinkingly clasped the 'way back' handle —
 On the old Psyche swing of yore little did I suspect

That under a gentle wave it was all: drunken corpse cauldron.
 But instead of a handle a Magdalen hand
 Coiled round my bone-wrist, like a feline-supple ray;
 In her eyes a hummingbird dream, in her ears a Capri conch,
 All that allure-whole: frothy over-promise and intimation of love.
 In her hair a Cyprus dawn spotted wheat;
 On her brow glided a Byzantine Moon;
 The dew on her arched breasts had a Siena glitter —
 And my redemptive intent died a double-quick death.
 Had I come to redeem my Ego, or for a wedding feast?
 For male order, where female chaos had narcissized in its own mirror;
 To be a triumphant Orpheus— or an oafish bridegroom,
 In adversity now choking, like a hunchback Icarus?
 But all these thoughts straightway took flight
 Like a breeze-tickled shadow on a garden path.
 “Thank goodness you’ve come down (Christ mask or Apollo’s runaway?);
 For your fate-cast muscles in limbo I would forever wait:
 Take me by flight from this accursed marshland,
 Where Lethe deathly crabs sires from its blind loins —
 Let not green ashes sodomize in the wake of my kiss:
 Let my desire reach goals *outside* me: give me over to being.”
 Around her lap rosy and golden fumes whirled
 (Buoyant flowers rebelling against their stem) —
 From her eyes a request pined like a faintly sloping stairway,
 And I was expected to win over ‘soul’ or Ego’s filth.
 But, alas! Instead of taking her body, in gold weeds, to wing
 And ripping open a door, as a surging well, on poem-hell:

4. PALAZZO GRIMANI

The longing awoke with irresistible intensity in Monteverdi: to go to Venice, his native city, to go to himself. He was well aware what that sort of thing betokened. Those highly strung, agonizingly hare-brained hankerings tended to obliterate themselves: a person inclined ever so little to thinking or spleen never fulfills them, since he is scared of them, and a thousand other things. A sunflower turning to the sun has a big shadow. Nothing in the world can be worth us hankering for it so much. Since he therefore knew that the longing would be a wilted lunacy before long, a bad mush of guilty conscience & phobia, he jotted down in his notebook, in inventory fashion, what it was that in those moments, after the disappearance of the Nike-girl, and on the eve of All Saints' Day, what it was that had attracted him to Venice, according to the humiliating scheme of "above all else: thus, in vain."

1. St. Mark's Basilica — a copy of a church in Constantinople. Thus the city's essence is another city: what is the most personal in her is yet not her. *Raffinement*, eh? Vulgarity? Affectedness in dizziness? Delight in history's inexhaustible games? It doesn't matter: the blood of one thousand and one nights in the heart of Italian culture, a Latin-devouring Byzantium on the Italian peninsula, and above the corpse of an Orthodox apostle every drawing of the 'heretic' Paris. There is no city in the world, no focus, the *essence* of which is not something *foreign*, something utterly hostile to it. The apple of the Greeks' eyes is Egypt. The ethos plinth of the warriors of the Golden Fleece is Palestine. China's root is India. The foliage and *raison d'être* of the Nordic Reich is Sicily. So will it be forever. Venice is Constantinople, and Constantinople, Mecca.

2. St. Mark's dead body was 'stolen' to reach Venice. Culture and theft are synonyms. Who did the 'stealing'? Two merchants, Levantines. Although a monk and a priest were also present when the sarcophagus was opened, the two Venetian merchants no doubt hoped to make a business transaction of the matter. If I go into the Basilica (Monteverdi writes), I adore stolen goods. Roving Mercury and masked Hermes guided the body there. When the body was smuggled through the streets of Alexandria in a basket, the grave-robbing Argonauts called out, "Pork! Pork!" — so Mohammedans avoided the impure meat. The customs and excise men tapped all over the consignment and the body, failing to find it, just as they failed to find smuggled perfume and

*crepe romaine*¹¹⁷ in the trunks of ships from the Orient. That was destined solely for a Tuscan princess. This? For a republic, for history, the orthodoxy of a whole millennium!

3. Among the reliefs that run in Romanesque semi-circular bands above the gate, there is one that represents May: a gentleman is being garlanded or crowned by two girls. We have grown accustomed, in the imagination or in reality, to the scene when a pope or Holy Roman emperor is crowned: it will be like the magic circle inside a *nymphæum*, with the pope a budding young man, the crown, profligate Ophelia foliage, as if it was not a matter of politics but of young girl aesthetics. Here the reverse is the case: the topic of “May” itself is idyllic — yet the whole is like a Roman legal ceremony: the man is old, his knees dodder, the coronation girls are Germanic vicars or Frankish bishops, and the crown is also heavy like a chunk of congealed European history. That will perennially attract me: that Romanized May, that non-aesthetic rigor of ceremony.

4. “August” is also wonderful. A young man rests in his armchair (almost an archiepiscopal throne). I don’t know whether he is a weary peasant or a hypochondriac castle seigneur. And I don’t know whether he is weary or sad, musing or awaiting his death. This notion of eternal “melancholy”: where death & thought, intellect & respectable impotence, so self-evidently run into one another. A resigned prince? Is that August indeed? After all, could burning-hot summer really be this philosopher, this decadent, sick man? ... Or a drowsy peasant?

5. One mosaic in the Zeno Chapel¹¹⁸ shows the capturing of St. Mark by the Saracens while he is celebrating mass. And yet, one of the most lovely ornaments of the basilica of his body is an Arab "*archivolte*"¹¹⁹ — and here I have to use the French term because there is none finer or more expressive: one takes it to mean a bouncing archangel, leaping into the heavens. Was he killed by a Saracen? Then nothing could be more natural than to have Saracen motifs decorate his tomb and to make its name.

6. A French friend, in a letter recounting his impressions of Venice, once wrote the following genial sentence to Monteverdi: "*Cet ensemble ornemental a une certain charme, mais est un peu tourmenté.*"¹²⁰ "*Charme*" & "*tourmenté*" at one and the same time: is not that the classical formula for life? Beauty? Delight? Dionysiacs and art? Those are long gone. There is only "*charme*" — that is all we have, which somehow still resembles impossible beauty and even more impossible delight. But pain, death, apocalyptic damnation, and absolute sickness are likewise exaggerations — nowhere on earth do you find such great wrong and hell: instead of it, just "*un peu tourmenté.*"

7. In the same style of flattened embossing in which coin-minting lambkins symbolizing the apostles press to the wall, there is an image of Alexander the Great raised into the sky by two griffons or winged lions. How odd you got together! Gentle lambkins of the Jewish Holy Land and a megalomaniac despot. Out of the diminutive Oriental animals, a

whole culture, a whole mythology sprang up — and from that Macedonian tyrant, a saint rising skywards, a ceremonial ascetic. How many actors there are, how many roles.

8. In the atrium, mosaics of the Creation. First and foremost, the marvelously true and sculptural representation in which the days of the creation are symbolized by angels (cf. St. Augustine's *De Civitate Dei*, Book II, Ch. 9, concerning the creation especially of unfallen angels): the first day — one angel, the third day — three; the seventh — seven. For Monteverdi there was no other reality in the world than 'one' day.) That time, too, he wished to travel to Venice for *one* day in order that the inter-growing of time and space should at last be mystically fulfilled: every single hour with a stone of the church, every single minute with a wave of the sea. Just as one day an angel embodied Creation, so Venice would become embodied time. Leaving aside the intention to be there on All Saints' Day, since All Saints in its wild 'polytheism' is in any case an accumulating triumph of sculpture, of the figure, of physical concreteness over everything abstract, all psyche-futility. One day — one angel: a Byzantine girl, togaed, with legs and a crown of hair. One hour — a toga on her knees. One minute — an eyelash. Yes, that is time: space becoming ever spacier, simply the best perspective from which to view objects. Perhaps a bit of semi-cheap eroticizing does not unduly spoil the matter: time & the nude are one. Accordingly, to play the chain of equations right out: one day — one angel — the whole of Venice.

9. A young, almost feminine Christ instead of the old Father — Lord God. In Byzantium the world is not created by a nonagenarian Jewish sage or a nepotistic Colonna pope¹²¹ but a young poet, almost a girl. As in the Good Shepherd of the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia,¹²² in Ravenna. How senile Adam & Eve are next to the otherworldly freshness and youth of Christ the Creator. How angelically transparent and breath-like Jesus is in his toga; what clod-hopping peasants are the first human couple in their nakedness. This marks the break-up of the Byzantium superstition: of the “rigid icon,” “hieratic gold,” and other such nonsense. Maybe only in Byzantium was Christ & the ever-living God-wind-wing since time immemorial a Mediterranean angel.

10. Here, too, the soul is a butterfly-winged embryo in the Greek manner. This *awkward* notion of psyche is the sole thing that was worth anything over the course of time. ‘Spiritual life’ — could it be that? Something embryonic, foetus-like — and then a butterfly. Is that too much or too little? ... ‘Soul’: the missing bridge between life’s pathological roots & free illusions, between the foetus & the butterfly. *Laissons...*

11. Human forms stand for rivers just as much as they stand for time, the days. Why is the river so important as to be symbolized by a figure of equal size and weight as God and the first human couple — to be one of the *dramatis personæ* in the same vein as the other three? The water in Ravenna is also ‘divine’; the water in which Christ is baptized is bigger than Christ himself. Water and time thereby

become kindred. That is a tad more important than mere Neptune routine or decoration.

12. In the interior of the church, on the cupola depicting the Ascension, the four rivers of Paradise — according to the French tourist guide: *le Guihon, le Pischon, L'Euphrate, le Tigre*.¹²³ Each of those words bears a resemblance to something: the first — a giant, the second — lowly nature, the third — a fellow, and the fourth — a tiger. Those are generally written off as doltish associations, and most probably, indeed certainly, they are. But anyone who has only clever associations will not know till his dying day what history is and what its main driving forces are. Outdated gods, empires, myths, and physical humans sprang from little else than “doltish associations.” For the time being, not even the remotest possibility suggests itself that one day we might yet be able to reconstruct or otherwise produce such things. It is another question, of course, whether there is any necessity for myths & living people. But then, on the other hand, what did clever associations ever give rise to? Modesty forbids me from writing obscenities.

13. Those two point-like nothings, candles or lamps that are lighted every evening on the southward-looking side, by way of appeasement, in memory of a young man who was innocently executed. That bit of rural humanism is so unexpected and so touching in the huge chaos of history and its almost caricature, danse-macabre self-contradictions (which is what Venice is in essence): unexpected in principle & unexpected for the eyes, formally. Venice is by excellence

5. REVELATION

Snow was gently covering the branches, as the wakeful gaze of a boy does the lashes of a slumbering girl; in the kitchen the melting fat sizzled one last time under the turkey's ruddy body; on the velvet dress that you were given for Christmas, the last wrinkle under the bosom trains the way you wanted, and the last cassock-style button has also found its own little toggle-eyelet: nature, kitchen, tailors glance with mute consent our way, we priests and scholars — God can be born.¹³³ We all prepare for an idyll, for some ultimate intimacy, an innermost innerness and warmth, *non plus ultra* dream and childishness; we are preparing for the complete forgetting of history, truth, and love, for forgetting God, for ostentatious indifference toward theology: from the first, and now decisively triumphant-looking reality of the *home* — and thereby we supplicate the Madonna to not bring Christ into

133. Passage from a letter (from between 1545 and 1550) by the learned tutor of Elizabeth Tudor to the young princess. Its author is a young Cambridge don in whose soul, nervous & prone to immoderation, branches of Reformation that were either overblown, overcritical, or romantically overphilosophized, blossomed into wild flowers. He tries to look more heretical than the heretics since, being in love with the princess, he thinks that in that role he will better stir the imagination of young Elizabeth.

the world: let the idyll beyond God and man carry out the satanic strangling: let nothing remain apart from the essence — in other words, the air steams around the nostrils of cattle and horses, the quiet intestinal rumbling of ruminating goats, and the glittering Arabian Nights gifts of the three magi (magi or kings? politicians or opium dreamers?). Lay people now finally want to have flings — not in the form of a Dionysiac frenzy, nor a passionate heresy or militant atheism. No: with bed feathers, with challah milk loaf, hot coals, and money. Knowing that I must deliver a Christmas talk to you, young princess, I gave a lot of thought to whether I should leave you in the greatest poison and greatest tenderness of evanescent time, or else stir you in line with the perennial indecorum of theologians and show that what is settled here is the no longer separable unity of tragedy and life. Like orthodoxy has done so many times before, I think I shall choose some middle course.

I shall give you a commentary on Ch. 1 of the *Revelation of St. John the Divine*. I shall do that so you can see in the idyll's denial of faith, more fateful than every open conciliar rebellion, the impossibly great tussle of divine things, the eternal strife & metaphysical enmity of God & humanity; the entirely incalculable struggle of nature and the supernatural; suicidal deities and deifying atheists — and I also picked it because (you will perhaps be surprised that after this flaunting of demons I suddenly refer to such a gentle reason), while your eyes fall on snowy forests, icy lakes, and clock hands tripled by icicles: your imagination will

go around the islands of the Ægean Sea, the parrot-garish Archipelago, the palms of Asia Minor, the red-sailboats of Lesbos, the white-leaved olive trees of Corinth that chirrup more marvelously than birds — the whole mood of Asia Minor, whose minor fills the soul with as melancholy a sweetness as the minor-key variations of music. Those two starting-points will lead to what is nowadays usually referred to on the continent as the “Reformation,” but which both politically and theologically is just a vulgar caricature of what I understand by it, and that I (despite my knowing that this might lead to fateful misunderstandings on the part of a rather young girl) am going to impart to you, Princess.

Who are the two protagonists at the beginning of Revelation, before even John appears on the stage at Patmos, which is so characteristically a “minor” stage — half ascetic-karst, half orange-smirking tropics, an idiosyncratic mixture of European ‘southernness,’ rigor, and vegetation at one and the same time, as in Sicily, Portugal, or Avignon? But more about that later. The two heroes: Jesus, whose badge is blood, the dead, nails — and God the Father, who is first and foremost the basic principle of all basic principles, the Alpha & Omega, and besides that a creative source, such a demonic life (how, siding fully, he shouts out, making it even more conspicuous with a broken rhythm at the start of Verse 18: “*I am* he that liveth...”) that one can sense anger in the creation of lilies and hummingbirds, in the blowing of spring breezes, so unbridled are his energy, creative *furor*, and his vegetation insatiability. My pretty, auburn-haired girl,

there is plenty for you to contemplate in this beginning of all beginnings. Jesus the victim, suffering, melting for others, infinitude of *Kharis* — in short, all that is moral: identifying with blood, with the dead (he is “the first begotten of the dead”!), with complete annihilation. That passivity, that perpetual offering of the self for sacrifice, that perpetual powerlessness against all: a ceaseless solitude & barrenness of every moral feeling or thought, a state dreamier than any dream.

Morality seems to be the sole practical earthly thing, the sole important and true lay religion: when I look at that first Jesus *introit* in Revelation, I see morality as being forever outside the world, a dream condemned to die — drunken slaves (by that, to be frank, I mean the whole of society, along with its feudal cream), flourishing nature, and the demon creator by the name of Alpha and Omega himself will uniformly wreak destruction & pose the greatest impossibility.

It can find no shelter anywhere; by its very nature morality cannot be expansive — it is the amorous mirage of secret silence, fantasy’s most self-consistent zone for living things through. There was a heretical sect somewhere between Attica and Syria (the sole human soil on earth, mark you, Queen of England), that the Byzantines called the Theopaschites, who held that with the crucifixion of Christ the divine nature was also crucified and, bloody & nailed, God also died inside him. An understandable heresy — in the way in which the surest criterion of a dogma is: if orthodox — incomprehensible, if heretical — then understandable.

Christ is at one and the same time God and morality, and therefore God also had to die within him, because morality is condemnation to death *in excelsis*.

Morality is the quiet incandescence of poetry and enchantment, somewhere clouded through the mirror of tears: you, too, felt that, when you kissed your mother, or when you gave a gift to a child, or prayed for English soldiers, or invited the poor to a banquet: you, too, undoubtedly felt filled by something endless, a *melancholy* ranging beyond all horizons, by spleen and by renunciation of life, you felt that here was something impossible, something heartrendingly frightened & deforming that would otherwise be so magnificent if something was to be added to it, but that unknown something would be missing forever. That almost cosmic depression is your solidarity with Christ, your instinctive feeling that morality is powerless, that there can only be sacrifice, the first begotten of the dead.

Therefore when now, at Christmastime, you pass before the manger & you see the infant Jesus Christ's curly-locked wax head, think of this: something that was the greatest was born there, and he came into the world only in order to be annihilated with mathematical completeness. How many thousands of times does one say with one's bit of housekeeping pessimism: we are only born in order to die. There, by the manger, it truly is a matter of that; one bears witness to morality, being the first impossibility, really is an impossibility, & murders even God: "All kindreds of the earth shall wail," John writes: & truly — dogma is one thing: the non-entity

of Christ (i.e., the earth did *not* want the life of Christ) and the liturgy to go with it is another: endless mourning. Let that be the first topic of your Christmas self-searching: in Jesus' place — a "*lacuna sacerrima*," as a scholarly friend of mine from Flanders put it. Picture a park with a marvelous well in the center; then the same park with no well. From one moment to the next. That is how crudely real the annihilation of divine morality is in Christ, in the most complete sacrifice. It exists not.

Now raise your eyes to the Father — what was it one said about him? He has two features: first, that He is the reasonable cause and goal of everything, the philosophy of philosophies; secondly, that he "liveth," & is so much alive that He appears to be destruction, the most extreme romanticism of energies. As a matter of fact, here too for the human brain it is a question of some kind of renunciation. The "Alpha and Omega" quality compromises Plato and Aristotle alike, every church father & Parisian skeptic alike — in any case God knows everything better, anyway, and on high roars with laughter about 'thinking.'

It remains an eternal secret whether this Semitic primordial-principle was born in such a way that a people thought right through the last still possible thought and, in the end, found that thought-annihilating 'One,' or whether a people, living in the most hysterical thinking phobia, were covering up their cowardice & intellectual impotence with this 'One.' I always felt that that identification of God with a prime mover was something like lumbering troglodytes in the history

of thinking & life as Stonehenge-style Cyclopean stones in the history of art. God as Alpha and Omega: that is a logical monolithic style and more idol-like in its overblown abstractness than a bunch of leaping Venuses (in accordance with my own English sobriety and my own hyperbolically inclined games of poetic playfulness). It seems there is just as little place in the world for thinking thought as for loving love (morality): for I never felt worse anywhere than in the company of thinkers, big & petty intellectuals, skeptics and atheists, scholasticists and logicians jumping from one idea to the next — on the other hand, that haughty, tableau-like, Semitically simple counter-poison, that “Alpha and Omega,” trampling everything with its mammoth clomping, is likewise foreign. But *hic, hic, semper hic incipit metaphysica, pietas et deus*.¹³⁴

What about the other side? The *creative* destruction, how to put it, is the perennial source of fear, the constantly glittering keys of hell and death; the chill of a wraith in the May sunshine, the infinite proximity of damnation in forest kiss-clicking, the flowery mimicry of death in birth. About vegetation, people were never wrong: now in the form of kitsch-myth, now as medical-dryness, but they always knew precisely that where big stores of vital energy lay, it was pointless talking about anything but death.

So, you saw Christ as ever-annihilating morality; you saw the Father, in part, as a chaos-era lump of logos; in part, as a dreadful death-fermenter in the vastness of vegetation: that is to say, three excruciating apparent negativities, which

ENDNOTES

The work of classical scholars Péter Somfai & Ábel Tamás has been invaluable in elucidating and translating the Latin and Greek quotations in Szentkuthy's novel. Pierre Senges had a fair share in throwing light on one particularly obscure reference. The translator & editor wish to express their gratitude for everyone's generous help.

1. Osbern of Canterbury, an 11th-century Benedictine monk who wrote a *Life of Dunstan*, fixed the date of his birth at "the first year of the reign of King Æthelstan," 924 or 925, which cannot be reconciled with other known dates of Dunstan's life. Historians therefore assume he was born c. 910 or earlier.
2. *Bloody Ass*, or *Bloody Donkey* (*Véres számár*), is the title of the 9th volume of the *St. Orpheus Breviary*, which was published in 1984. It received an Excellence Award from the Hungarian publisher Magvető.
3. *Edgarius Cæsar*, Augustus of the Albion of Anglia, patriarch, patron & consul of Britain, the kings of the Saxons ...
4. *Exekias* (active in Athens between ca. 545 BCE–530 BCE), famous ancient Greek vase-painter and potter working in the black-figure technique, one of the first major representatives of that art, whose prestige is corroborated by the fact that fragments of several of his works were found on the Athenian Acropolis. His best-known extant signed works had been exported to Etruria and were found in the Etruscan tombs of Vulci & Orvieto, hence the reference to his "Etrurian" cup.

5. Viz. Edward the Martyr (974–978).
6. Æthelred the Unready (circa 968–1016), King of England 978–1013 and 1014–1016.
7. In English in the original. All further words, phrases, or sentences in English in the original will be set in Legacy Sans. This passage is seemingly a quotation from “Elves’ Hill,” a lied by Carl Løwe (Op. 3, № 2, ed. 1825): “One fondled my white chin, / one whispered in my ear: / ‘Merry young man, arise, arise, / let there by dancing here!’” See *The Fischer-Dieskau Book of Lieder*, with English translations by George Bird and Richard Stokes. Løwe used Johann Gottfried Herder’s translation from the original Danish.
8. Mihály Vörösmarty (1800–1855), one of the foremost Romantic poets of Hungarian literature, creator of influential national myths of romantic inspiration, of several verse epics and verse dramas, histories and romances. He was also the author of the canonical translations into Hungarian of Shakespeare’s *Julius Cæsar* and *King Lear*.
9. Author’s note. See p. 24.
10. Source not verified.
11. Cf. Book 6 of *The Annals*: “Et sæpe in propinqua degressus, aditis iuxta Tiberim hortis...” “He would often come to the neighborhood, visiting the gardens by the Tiber...”
12. Without anger & partiality — a phrase used by Tacitus in the introduction to his *Annals*.
13. Presumably a reference to a now vintage Art Deco graphic style developed by Franz Lenhart in commercial posters (e.g., for Modiano brand cigarettes) during the 1920s & ’30s.
14. A porch on the Agora in Athens from where the philosophy of stoicism (derived from the Greek word *stoa*) is said to have been expounded. Zeno lectured to his followers from it.

15. To each his own.
16. To shower them with glory.
17. From the Latin text of the Creed: "was made man."
18. Desecrated pen, ungodly speech.
19. The novel *I, Claudius* by English writer Robert Graves, which uses Suetonius as a source to tell its story, was first published in 1934 and almost certainly known to Szentkuthy, who actually met Graves in the Sixties.
20. Marcus Salvius Otho was Roman Emperor for three months, from January 15 to April 16, 69 AD; he was succeeded by Aulus Vitellius Germanicus, who ruled for eight months from April 16 to December 22, 69 AD, but here the reference is probably to Lucius Vitellius the Elder (before 5 BCE–51).
21. Ah! let's leave it ... freeborn youths.
22. Defiled with perversity.
23. Nor was it only the figure and the beautiful bodies [to kindle his desire.]
24. The effigies of the ancestors.
25. According to regal custom.
26. Tag end of a quote (the phrase is given in English in the original) from Act V, Scene ii of *King Lear*: "Men must endure / Their going hence, even as their coming hither: / ripeness is all."
27. The *Iliad* records Patroclus, the son of Menoetius and the grandson of Actor, as being honored in death by his friend Achilles, who organized an athletic competition including a chariot race.
28. "Christus, from whom they take their name, had been executed in the reign of Tiberius by the procurator Pontius Pilatus." Tacitus, *Annals* (15.44).
29. The original sculptures on the Harpy tomb (5th century BCE), which overlooks the modern-day town of Kınık, Turkey.



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Robert Musil, *Thought Flights*
S ndor Tar, *Our Street*
Lorand Gaspar, *Earth Absolute*
Josef Winkler, *The Graveyard of Bitter Oranges*
Ferit Edg , *Noone*
Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Narcissus*
Ahmad Shamlu, *Born Upon the Dark Spear*
Jean-Luc Godard, *Phrases*
Otto Dix, *Letters, Vol. 1*
Maura Del Serra, *Ladder of Oaths*
Pierre Seneg s, *The Major Refutation*
Charles Baudelaire, *My Heart Laid Bare & Other Texts*
Joseph Kessel, *Army of Shadows*
Rainer J. Hanshe & Federico Gori, *Shattering the Muses*
G rard Depardieu, *Innocent*
Claude Mouchard, *Entangled, Papers!, Notes*

SOME FORTHCOMING TITLES

- Adonis, *Interviews with Pierre Joris*
Pierre Seneg s, *Ahab (Sequels)*
Carmelo Bene, *I Appeared to the Madonna*

THE FUTURE OF KULCHUR

A PATRONAGE PROJECT

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With bookstores and presses around the world struggling to survive, and many actually closing, we are forming this patronage project as a means for establishing a continuous & stable foundation to safeguard our longevity. Through this patronage project we would be able to remain free of having to rely upon government support &/or other official funding bodies, not to speak of their timelines & impositions. It would also free CMP from suffering the vagaries of the publishing industry, as well as the risk of submitting to commercial pressures in order to persist, thereby potentially compromising the integrity of our catalog.

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Black Renaissance, the second volume of the *St. Orpheus Breviary*, is the continuation of Miklós Szentkuthy's synthesis of 2,000 years of European culture. St. Orpheus is Szentkuthy's Virgil, an omniscient poet who guides us not through hell, but through all of recorded history, myth, religion, and literature, albeit reimagined as St. Orpheus metamorphosizes himself into kings, popes, saints, tyrants, and artists. At once pagan and Christian, Greek and Hebrew, Asian and European, St. Orpheus is a mosaic of history and mankind in one supra-person and veil, an endless series of masks & personæ, humanity in its protean, futural shape, an always changing function of discourse, text, myth, & *mentalité*. Through St. Orpheus' method, disparate moments of history become synchronic, are juggled to reveal, paradoxically, their mutual difference and essential similarity. "Orpheus wandering in the infernal regions," says Szentkuthy, "is the perennial symbol of the mind lost amid the enigmas of reality. The aim of the work is, on the one hand, to represent the reality of history with the utmost possible precision, and on the other, to show, through the mutations of the European spirit, all the uncertainties of contemplative man, the transiency of emotions & the sterility of philosophical systems."

In *Black Renaissance*, the dramatic scenes & philosophical passages (never a fog of abstractions, more the world and tone of Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*) parade before the reader ostensibly as three characters, by way of three Orphean masks: Renaissance & baroque composer Claudio Monteverdi, architect & engineer Filippo Brunelleschi, and a tutor to the young Elizabeth Tudor. From Monteverdi's impassioned search for an opera subject in the works of Tacitus and his meditations on divinities, to Brunelleschi's diving into the works of Herodotus so as to illustrate Greek history, Szentkuthy veers through the Renaissance, sounding a pessimistic '*basso continuo*' on psychology, sin, metaphysics, truth and relativism. Through Orpheus' final mask, that of the tutor of Elizabeth, it is eros and theology, two of Szentkuthy's fundamental concerns, that receive yet another complex and engrossing dramatization. Metaphysics, Rationalism, & existentialist despair all spin through the author-narrator's kaleidoscope as he closes his *Black Renaissance* by discoursing on the *Revelation* of St. John the Divine. A thousand attempts at defining physical & spiritual, heavenly & earthly love all fail.

