

PRAE



Szentkuthy

MIKLÓS SZENTKUTHY

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VOL. 2

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TRANSLATED BY
ERIKA MIHÁLYCSA



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Selected Other Works by
Miklós Szentkuthy

Prae, vol. I

Towards the One & Only Metaphor

Chapter on Love

St. Orpheus Breviary, vol. I: Marginalia on Casanova

St. Orpheus Breviary, vol. II: Black Renaissance

This book is dedicated to the memory of TIM WILKINSON (1947–2020),
who first brought Szentkuthy to the Anglo-Saxon world.
Without him, this adventure would never have begun.

VOL. 2





PRAE



Bentkitt

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≡ Table of Contents ≡

IX.

- 756 *problems and possibilities of figure description; Leatrice as nobody & as everybody; first as 'nobody': theme for a fantastic short story*
- 764 *Leatrice as 'everybody'; excerpts from a typologia universalis: description of four women in swimsuits*
- 769 *what are love's two concretenesses? couldn't Leatrice be built from them?*
- 771 *absolute externals (shoes, stockings, shoulder-straps): shoes*
- 776 *the stocking*
- 790 *another entry to absolute externals: the shoulder-strap*
- 799 *(introductory simile: the design of the 'Double Face Theater, pp. 770–771); the relation of individual and average in female beauty*
- 803 *after absolute externals, absolute pain; example: the fear of lovers from an illegitimate child*
- 808 *ramification of projects and realizations*

X.

- 810 *Leatrice by the sea, morning. Description of the morning*
812 *the morning's intellectual laboratory (schism of contents and forms, etc.)*
816 *analogies to dawn: modern architecture, glass civilization*
819 *Touqué's caricature of the psyche*
820 *the struggle between dream, thought, thinking, action, language*
824 *thinking and feeling are identical movements (pp. 826–827),
lead theme: remembering the glasses of yesterday*
827 *remembrance of combing*
829 *absolute feeling and 'homo'*
830 *two kinds of 'human being' emotion: naïve-concrete and
dizzy-empty; mirror*
834 *Fourth Non-Prae diagonal; the diary of an adulterous princess*
of lying
rhetoric and posture
at night in the deserted home
Moon and space
remembrance of afternoon naps
lies and secrets, freedom and guilt-feeling
night at the villa
happiness and nothing
beauty and 'humanity'
the annihilation of the 'human being'
bad counterparts to suffering and pleasure
fear
should she return to her husband?
her husband falls victim to a misfortune
company: a madman, a corpse, a fictive character
& a lied-about figure
two conclusions to the question of 'humanism'

- 856 *bath and body-consciousness (etherealness and hall)*
- 860 *grey skylight*
- 864 *associations: winter afternoons; to snowfall: the design of a
parenthetical church*
- 866 *confession*
- 867 *skyline and kiss*
- 867 *associations: clockface on a winter afternoon when her uncle is late*
- 871 *Leatrice's 'Europeanness': blend of hypochondria and beastliness*
- 874 *the carillon*
- 878 *once again that clockface*
- 879 *two types of representation of the psyche*

XI.

- 882 *return to yesterday's champagne glasses (see pp. 872–873); a ship
ashore at dawn*
- 885 *remembrance of her uncle's loves*
- 886 *the concept of 'sickness' in childhood*
- 888 *the concept of 'loneliness' in childhood*
- 891 *simile: a landscape on a German postcard, and a corresponding simile:
the Berlin performance and stage setting of Kabale und Liebe*
- 895 *Fifth Non-Prae diagonal: the diary of the scholar-teacher of a noble
family's children*
- truth and moment*
- two plans: De Incongruentia Criteriorum;
De Vacuis Perspectivis*
- absolute emotion-life*
- intellect, emotion, objectivity*
- comparison to the lover: 'Diana-statue under water*

the problem of reality in absolute only-emotion life
the dichotomy of body and sensuousness
the love letter, a melody fragment
the lover: will, therefore evil
annihilating objectivity
an evening walk, death
the theme project of The Honeymoon; the lover is will,
 therefore evil
the above illustrated by shopping for a bag: example of will
imagined happiness: the woman doesn't want him
the epistemology of happiness
sipping tea alone in the dark: philistinism and mysticism
ethical qualms
example of a short story for contrasting pleasure and moral
Sancta Immediata
the ethics of action
dressing up the terminally ill cardinal before the evening
 sermon
by car to the church, rain, crowd
pro domo: why is it that in this work a cardinal is found so
 often in the company of sin?
 — *childishness*
 — *the reduction of the whole world to some abstract*
 ethical absolutes, temptation as foundational
 experience
the cardinal's counterpart: the little proselyte

XII.

- 945 *Leatrice's uncle (Peter) visits a female acquaintance. He waits*
 for the ferryman in a tavern
 948 *about the difference between dream and reality in parenthesis*
 949 *about a beautiful woman's beauty*
 952 *the sacristan's character*

- 956 *view from the sacristy window*
 958 *the relation between action and conscience*
 964 *two kinds of shadow*
 965 *'Peter's hypochondria, virtue, connoisseurship of women*
 969 *Sixth Non-Prae diagonal: Chinese marriage, Christian love*
 fish and river
 the river at night
 the fisherman and his daughter
 the fisherman's daughter plots to kill the Chinese princess,
 but the princess changes into the double of the fisherman's
 daughter; she has the fisherman's daughter tortured
 the bridegroom, a prince comes on a ship
 the old inquisitor and his adoptive son
 landscape under the volcano
 the love of the fisherman's daughter and the adoptive son
 the Chinese wife tortures her husband but he doesn't harm
 her, regarding his wife as a force of nature
 'human being' and irreality in love
 logic and church plan
 suicide and hymn to 'nameless forces of nature'

XIII.

- 986 *the influence of Peter's sin-snobbery on Leatrice; sin and elegance*
 987 *to the scheme of sin and elegance: Leatrice's acquaintance with*
 Zwinskaya. Zwinskaya's character: morphine and peasant
 994 *Zwinskaya and the officer*
 995 *love and etiquette*
 996 *love and metaphorizing biology*
 997 *the 'grownup' meaning of 'simplicity'*
 999 *the concept of 'simplicity' and the trees and leaves of the gardens*
 *of W****

- 1001 *æsthetics and the stylistics of nature*
- 1003 *Zwinskaya's hat; woman as landscape*
- 1005 *female beauty as the Manichean model of good and evil;
about mystical and analytical expression on the side*
- 1007 *the detective novel as the perfect image of the moralizing beauty-
concept discussed above. Example: the violet glove; Halbert's
detective novel: The Blessed Practical*
- 1011 *the reciprocal influence of naturalist dramatic roles and chic on
Zwinskaya's manner; her movements, play of muscles*
- 1014 *the difference between girls' and women's vanity*
- 1019 *one of Peter's novelistic themes set against mundanity:
the vision of moral scrupulousness (Scarpellino)*
- 1024 *Leatrice and the 'anti-tragic'*
- 1025 *Leatrice's body and 'Romanesque (eros and Ghibellinism)*
- 1028 *the relation of the two worlds of over-the-top self-consciousness
and over-the-top caritas in Leatrice's life*
- 1032 *dream and church plan*
- 1035 *Touqué and waves*
- 1037 *chaos and order*
- 1038 *bathing woman comes ashore*
- 1039 *reason and unknown in nature*
- 1042 *the sienna swimsuit*
- 1043 *'I' and perception in love*
- 1045 *against analyzing the soul*
- 1046 *the 'second precision' and an example of it: a mystical story of
Tyato and biologized dogma*
- 1053 *the example of the 'second precision' continued; the image
changes: greyness first, then a red flower on a salon table.
Comparison with the red flower*

- 1056 *Tilia Parvifolia's salon: the squat furniture*
 1058 *the armchair; Tilia and her son*
 1063 *morning shadows*
 1066 *the relation of speech and the female body*
 1070 *Tilia's essence: the alien vase*
 1071 *this is the foundation of 'anti-tragic' thinking, that is,*
 of the greatest conceivable opposite to Peter's thought
 (cf. pp. 1020–1024)
 1073 *Tilia speaks*
 1076 *theme for a short story (a fastidious bishop and the girl who*
 fled to the woods)

XIV.

THE MEDITATIONS OF HALBERT'S FATHER, AN ANGLICAN VICAR OF EXETER.

- 1081 *Exeter, 1933, on absolute individualism*
 1083 *suffering, distance from God*
 1086 *about the concept of 'complexity'*
 1088 *7 o'clock bells, subjectivism*
 1094 *moral*
 1095 *politics and morphinism*
 1097 *moral and problem*
 1099 *childhood fairy-tales and 'grownup' materialism*
 1100 *his wife's castle park*
 1101 *toward the most perfect pain-formula; logic and dream*
 1103 *defending himself against the accusation of 'materialism' and*
 venality; asceticism and private property

- 1108 *whatever he touches becomes an ethical question. The theme of
Juanus Ethicus*
- 1110 *the park's solitary gate*
- 1113 *once again about private property; aesthetics*
- 1116 *'universals': non est*
- 1118 *pain, dream, architecture. Project for a bedroom*
- 1120 *musical plans*
- 1121 *landscape fragment and private property*
- 1123 *against certain kinds of paradoxes*
- 1124 *silence*
- 1125 *the relation of truth and language, the dilemma of identification
or fiction*
- 1128 *theme for a short story: the vision of fastidiousness (Avido)*
- 1130 *problems and possibilities of editing; novel structure and ground
plan of a villa*
- 1134 *landscape around the wife's castle*
- 1136 *theme for a short story about the beautiful woman, the
psychology of temptation, and the Garden of Faithfulness*
- 1141 *the lake's transparency and non-transparency; two kinds of
landscape: infinite transparency and finite localization.
Their connection to love*
- 1143 *object before the human being. Its cause; an example: a Stuttgart
film about the gloves, titled Adam and Eve*
- 1146 *analysis of the stairs*
- 1150 *finite and infinite; the relation between medieval allegory and
'sachlich' emblem*
- 1153 *explaining the catechism in the church*
- 1155 *the atmosphere of damnation and idyll*

- 1157 *to the above, a childhood memory: description of a castle's interior (low ceiling room and coat-of-arms; history; portraits and gnome; the position of the chairs; mossy pond; tapestries, nudes; enfilade and love; Tudor roofbeams)*
- 1166 *to this, a further example of idyll: a banker and his wife (the wife in the car at night in front of the bank; telephone call; metaphysics of grids; the connections of money and rococo; woman, value, and purchase; money clinic; the porter's wife and death) — the end of the two themes attached to 'damnation and idyll'*
- 1179 *ontology and masquerade*
- 1180 *the irreality of female beauty*
- 1186 *the masked woman; still, the most ancient human inclination is goodness*
- 1194 *hatred of the woman*
- 1196 *theme for a short story on the eternal relationship between death and idyll (interchangeability of kiss and murder)*
- 1198 *microscopic threads of faithfulness; fear from damnation*
- 1201 *utopia of absolute sorrow; hysteria and Satan*
- 1204 *prayer in the church*
- 1206 *description of a church; metaphor and Cubism, church plan*
- 1209 *one needs to die with all the memories, not just those of the last few days; about great unfaithfulnesses after 'microscopic faithfulness' (see pp. 1198–1200)*
- 1212 *the mutual exclusion of love and the human being; two lovers; their psychology, moral, connection to *Juanus Ethicus**
- 1214 *the ugly women*
- 1216 *the heresy of identity (the bending of 'parallel' lines)*
- 1217 *senses and intellectualism*

- 1219 *æsthetics; dream as producer of categories; category as producer of beauty*
- 1221 *biology and mathematics*
- 1222 *experiment: a peculiarly quaint, pedantic style elicits the absolute experience of beauty in the author of the Meditations*
- 1227 *beauty*
- 1229 *about the styles of the different epochs; the different epochs' view of themselves*
- 1230 *in connection to the number of styles, games about numbers in general; what is true structure? About the swapped letters à la 'Bernouilli*
- 1235 *three editing techniques*
- 1237 *woman and beauty, 'Bernoulli permutations and 17th-century 'Baroque or modern Surrealism; experiment for analyzing beauty: woman at night in the hotel hall*
- 1239 $n = n + q$
- 1242 *visuality and reason*
- 1243 *another experiment for the analysis of beauty: project for a consciously over-the-top 17th-century horror drama: Night of Innocence*
- 1246 *parenthesis: the lurking homage to the Catholicism of the author of the Meditations*
- 1248 *sensuousness toward relations: the outcome of the second experiment*
- 1250 *the clergy: the relation of the author of the Meditations to sin and God*
- 1253 *his intellectual life, ideas, and the place of ideas*
- 1256 *action; the struggle of moral value and dehumanization*
- 1261 *the dilemma of identity: tautology or otherness; its significance in the investigation of beauty*

- 1265 *alienness of woman-image and desire-image*
- 1268 *imago habet suam essentiam in non esse imago*
- 1270 *incandescing self-identity amounts to self-estrangement; to this,
the lesson of a glass mural (the two kinds of stars)*
- 1272 *self-doubling*
- 1274 *about the nature of goodness*
- 1276 *types of virtue; ontologizing ethics and action-ethics*
- 1278 *virtue and damnation*
- 1280 *variation on predestination; thinking in moral absolutes*
- 1282 *remembrance of a 'sinful' kiss*
- 1284 *night in the Swiss hotel; he goes for a walk*
- 1289 *the basic difficulties of virtue*
- 1291 *the painted-over clothes of the kissed girl: from beige to green;
their analysis. In the meantime, the wife's modified clothes*
- 1301 *the paradox of 'infinite' temptation*
- 1302 *the creation of numbers and moral*
- 1305 *problems of the analytic style, its nature of leading outside itself;
the part of something and otherness*
- 1310 *the color green and a comparison to it, of a fictitious green plant*
- 1311 *association with the color green: meadow between Cambridge
and Ely, where he met a half-idiot girl; landscape and caritas*
- 1315 *the infinite love of Christian love*
- 1318 *about the so-called 'contradiction' of emotions, example: he is
going to meet a girl in snowy weather*
- 1320 *there are no 'emotions,' only one basic psychic intensity*
- 1322 *description of the half-idiot girl; her caress: absolute caritas,
perhaps more absolute than a charitable deed; what is the
surplus here?*

- 1326 *absolute love and the psyche; personality is the death of caritas*
- 1331 *face mimicry, perception, and pan-love*
- 1332 *the half-idiot girl's mention of violets, analysis of the violets*
- 1337 *absolute love's relation to 'homo' and 'humanum': body, soul, artificial body, artificial soul*
- 1339 *the difference between moral act and moral Sache*
- 1344 *the visible end of love (the opposite of caritas); analysis of the speech of women from this perspective*
- 1351 *speech and action are things outside love; example: with a woman at dawn (the color blue); other example: Dialogue with the Undialoguable (impossibility of love 'life')*
- 1354 *in parenthesis: new thinking technique; contrast between thought and thinking*
- 1355 *love and inescapable lie*
- 1357 *continuation of the analysis of female speech*
- 1360 *a Magnasco reproduction as the illustration of love's 'impossibility'*
- 1362 *two pseudo-expressions; ideal: absolute gesture (dance?) and absolute mathematicalization*
- 1364 *against 'nuance'; for the kaleidoscope*
- 1366 *dance and politics*
- 1368 *return to the color green (Cambridge meadow: the painted-over dress of the girl 'sinfully' kissed in Switzerland): the Elizabethan lady-in-waiting symbolizing Cambridge*
- 1369 *studying and fugitive impressions (truth and moment); green grass*
- 1374 *lack of precision and caritas*
- 1377 *the outcomes of the half-idiot girl's speech; first conclusion: identity of modern architecture, caritas, and the syntax of madness (architectural example)*
- 1380 *second conclusion: detailed orchestral score from landscape scores, the identity of music, caritas, and the syntax of madness*

- 1384 *third conclusion: the moral significance of perspective, the
identity of painting, caritas, and the syntax of madness*
- 1386 *with the half-idiot girl by the evening water and enveloping trees*
- 1387 *the fusion of private property, caritas, and nature in ultimate
happiness*
- 1393 *the analysis of lovemaking*
- 1396 *the identity of natural forms (leaves) and metropolitan
mirror reflections*
- 1398 *the relativizing of order and disorder, the seceding of forms
and contents*
- 1400 Endnotes
- 1420 Afterword: Dogmatic Accidentalism, Miklós Szentkuthy's
Prae and the Chaocosmic Novel

PRAE

II

IX.

*problems and possibilities of figure description;
Leatrice as nobody & as everybody; first as 'nobody':
theme for a fantastic short story*

— Excuse me, but is there something with Leatrice? — someone asked.

The other answered in his turn with a question:

— Leatrice? — and then fell silent. The first sentence's "is there something" hazily returned into its own tunnel, like a giant double blue fox behind a glass door; the woman stands too far to be seen, but the fur's gliding Simplon-brush casts a large shadow-blot on the glass as it curls up around the two invisible, but naked shoulders, like those rings thrown about on the playground that little boys catch in flight with their sticks: is there something?, followed by the bare name, Leatrice: by accident one clacking ring fell on a swimming pool tin slide and is now rolling, tripping on itself, toward the water. Both men enjoyed the benumbed existence of the third person; the "is there something" rocked them into the skyblue siesta of discreet gossip, & the name's loneliness shone like a daytime star on the Riviera. No more about Leatrice. Invisible, but naked shoulders behind the glass door: gossip ("is there something": it is so positive that it barely qualifies as gossip, rather as obloquy) in fact plays a double chemistry with its prepared victim — turning the victim both into a nude and into nothing, and this is as pleasant for gossipers as Hag-coffee for the cardiac patient.²¹⁴

Some story is woven around Leatrice, which lines her in front like the five-line staff does the treble clef, while in the back it soaks off her clothes, like hot water the old posters from a billboard — something is happening with her, due to which something will finally transpire about her, moreover, we'll come to know everything, and when all knowledge will be in our hands as a wax-weeping, candlestick-less candle, then it will cast such light on the surrounding people, motor boats in repair, artificial flowers, seas, everything, that nothing will be visible and comprehensible anymore — the whole Kursaal or 'humana conditio' will be one unmoving blank reverberation.

All this is in broad outlines the birth of Eve: the shoulders' cottonwool-lined golf putters tumble forth from among the leaves' green stamps, the first scent of positivity stretches along the nearest breeze-ribbon's rolling stairs & sketches a long, faintly cynical perfume graphics around Adam's nose. And when Adam starts on the scent, like foreign tourists' indexes on Paris subway maps, the garden is suddenly flooded by light, from Eve's nakedness every single leaf, flower, and blind rapture-aspic turns into scintillating gnosis, and now it's too late to clarify whose eros it wanted in the first place, that of light, or that of the lamp?

This could be Leatrice's sole Shakespearean dramaturgy: "is there something," and this could be Leatrice's sole philosophy: 'Leatrice,' her name. Small nominalist plug on the sea's marginal waves, on those waves that gravity's undeliverable and unabortable weight renders so clunky on the inside and so elegant on the outside, like a top hat's arched brim: Leatrice, Leatrice. Around her, time — the diligent cosmetics of hours, as the minute hand's slender brush paints the minute-soul's quivering lashes long and sharp around time's Longines iris — the seasons, life's colorful large veils, peeling coats-of-arms for another, unknown time, which is approaching us, we signal to it with the garish semaphores of spring, summer, and autumn to get out of the way, for the lane is taken.

If someone is made up solely of a first name and 'is there something,' then their life-story, should we summarize it for school textbooks, can only look like this:

In Venice a cardinal is celebrating mass. On the church's porch a red hat with multi-story tassels whose triangles flare ever more outward, down into the water, like fish to be multiplied. The cardinal is saying mass for his younger sister, believed to be dead. In front of the church the stairs rock like a soaking book, only two gondolas stand fixed, as if outside the water, their haughty dented prow-heads locked into one another like the rotating radio condensers with which they are perhaps cherry-picking the dead girl's soul.

Then a third gondola arrives. The water is so transparent that boats look like mirages or suspended bridges, the inventory numbers daubed on their underbellies can be read more clearly than the lyrical names plastered on their bows: instead of Nymph, Azure Bird, Eel, we can read X^2 . — *Com. Venez.*, 112–33. *Mun. Adr. Hydr*; when the water turns truly crystal-clear, then bureaucracy finds its moment to triumph.

The new gondola is nothing more than a long, long charcoal line coming after a wave, but sometimes it's the water that turns black and above it the gondola's infinite oarlock is a glaring white blotting-paper edge, while at other times it is the water that becomes nothing and the gondola above, nothingness' untuned-haughty string: the one is the 'position zero' of rational functions, when the numerator's profile is suddenly annihilated without dragging the denominator along into nothingness, and the 'pole' is the other, when it's the denominator's turn to disappear, while the numerator continues to poke its nose into the shiny canal of existence. So the guest arrives at the crossing between pole and nil, neither on water nor on boat: the masked muse of function mathematics, to a funeral mass.

All of a sudden the church's mouth grabs the gondola (when it happens to exist), like a giant flat piece of bait. The other two stir, the boatmen sitting on the bank grumble something, from the gondola a woman jumps out and as soon as she gets ashore, she accidentally pushes her boat off the bank, it makes a huge turn, like a compass whose needle we trapped with our finger, but now, released, it clanks with wild momentum onto the black *N*. Inside chanting and the organ resound like the wind entangled in tree-crowns. Now the function graph of boat and water is the following: a taper placed on a glass sheet and its shadow, that is, two intersecting circles, which nevertheless run into different worlds.

The girl is mad & believes that she is the cardinal's sister. She doesn't know that everybody believes the sister to be dead, so she doesn't know that the funeral mass is held for the one she believes to be. There are few people in the church, she fearfully fits her body into the general piety like one sticking a little finger into the right sheath of the glove, after first pushing it into the place of the ring finger. She asks her neighbors who the requiem is for. They tell her. Is she then dead? — she asks herself in surprise. What is in the place of the real sister, what error-graphics does the unexpected cross-section of superstition show? The cardinal believes her to be dead, the madwoman believes her to be herself, while having to imagine her living self dead: prayer, imagined death, real death, madness, real life — all possibilities of the cardinal's sister. Where is she in truth?

Across from the church, recently a man had a luxury villa built, which is watched over by detectives. The police suspect that the sister is not dead and her disappearance is connected with this man. One of the rooms overlooks the garden. Thick glass walls, white furniture, mercury-color statues and lamps, blond plants, blond fish; luminosity lies about here in such bars (no artificial light but daytime's whisked color) as gold in the banks' cheek pouches. The entire room testifies to the fact that the beamless clarity of the

day is a far greater crime-backdrop than the night or electric light. In the room one sole white flower is repeated in the statues, food, chastity-sheaths: a large petal that forms a candy-stencil cone from which one thick stamen mace juts out, on its end a short wick. On the walls greyish sinks in which the morning's disinfected clarity of perception sits like holy water; large floor mirrors collect the sky's morning whiteness into consciousness-bleaching pools. (Invisible, but naked shoulders!)

The detectives are watching this room. A courageous one has got quite close to the glass wall and sees dimly (the glass is not wholly transparent) the following: a man holds tight a goldfish-haired woman, one can hear the dry, soapy stages of lovemaking, the woman resists, the man hoists her up (the cardinal's sister had goldfish hair) and with the same momentum pushes her down on a divan and struggles with her. Suddenly there is silence. Does it mean murder or love-making?

Now the mad girl comes out of the church. She pries on the cardinal as he leaves the sacristy and stealthily follows him. The cardinal feels unwell, the woman runs to him, but too late — he collapses dead next to a small bridge. This catastrophe shakes the woman so much that she realizes she is not his sister. Alone in front of the church entrance is her gondola, the other two have left like a pair of skis on a Murano vase-slope. On the gondola the coat-of-arms of the cardinal's family, turned senseless; in the cardinal's head, the obsessive thought of the dead sister — at this moment the detective breaks the glass wall. He finds nothing but a large, goldfish-color bathrobe thrown on the divan. He runs with it from room to room, down to the cellars, but finds no one in the house. He wants to go back but cannot, he's been locked in the cellar.

The comedy concludes with a conversation of angels from where we learn that the cardinal has never had a sister, only a younger brother who escaped from home to become a sailor, and

this brother is the detective himself, down in the cellar with the goldfish-color bathrobe that he took to be the cardinal's sister. The detective doesn't know of course that the brother he left behind turned into a priest. He dies in the cellar, after consummating in an agony-dream his nuptials with the Lido bathrobe come to life. But the cardinal had prayed for his sister with such robust devoutness that the angels ask God to shape a truly living woman from the requiem prayer's material. Final scene: in the restaurant 'To the Goldfish' a man and woman get to know each other — their child is going to be the belatedly supplied sister.

This could be Leatrice's life-story, summed up with a school manual's aridity: the guignol-dogmatism of the complete irreality of individual life and of personality. There is something with Leatrice, someone said — but is there a Leatrice? When Leatrice's chapter begins, isn't this the most positive horizon for a starting point: the thousand-curved nonexistence, nothingness' infinite color-notch? When I watch her face, or her rubber-heels trembling on the springboard, or the poisonous-virginal slovenliness of the evening flower jutting from her shoulder, her individual presence presses against time's net with such mordant clarity to become nothing, luminosity — filling all the hidden, small hollows of existence with glaring convexity, the verb 'is' fills up to such an extent with the molten metals of precision, that it nearly topples from the shopwindow of grammar & life into the forms of a divine future.

What is her instep's angle of arching from heel to toes? Modesty, pretense of wobbliness, boyish prank, carbolic hygiene, spitefulness, buckled naïveté, tangential evidence: these innumerable possibilities prove that it's something exceptionally addressed to me, an acquaintance, inner relative, but an exceptionally selfish, closed thing, none of the inventory above — beauty grabs at once our innermost dream-routine and the furthest limits of the intellect.

Pure 'is,' the content of the radical present tense is always this: we can feel the dream-light taste of our innermost interior as it crosses over into a territory unavailable to reason but nevertheless felt to be pure reason. That's why a Leatrice narrative has to start from nothing as the first concreteness, absolute, dream-deep dream-vortex and inexpressible intellectual tension. Here dream doesn't mean dream-images, phantasmagorias, or the unreachable, but the pure rhythm that is suggested by the drowsy body's inner nerves; the waves of 'states' when consciousness has well-nigh left us.

This is the kind of dream that uses only a meremost minimum of the outside world, while using the utmost of the body's interiority (blood rhythm, lung movement, the shades of digestion). In fact it is no dream at all but studying a dark night lake's rhythm of rippling with the help of twine imbued in phosphorus: a 'key' is enough, for instance, to observe with it as with a minimal imagination-torch, the most varied internal states of our body, their tastes, movements, colors and weights. And when Leatrice or any extremely beautiful woman drives her barbed arrow very deep into the heart of praesens, then this dream-stage of ours reacts with all its anonymous forces, with our unknown self.

Here the most naïve paradox can best express truth, however loathsome the form of paradox may be for the ease with which it is churned out: it is our 'most unknown most well-known' dream-layer that incandescens every great sensation to the point of turning into our absolute kin and absolute not-I. Leatrice's walk (the walk is a woman's most inexpressible part) instantly becomes the expansion of our lungs, the opalescent sheen of chyle or our gullet's swinging hammer, but this turning-interior is at the same time a becoming-nothing, because our lungs, nurturing liquids, larynx, are only present under the form of blind sensations, however much they are ours. In the first moment we think we know everything, only in the second moment do we realize that we only feel everything.

But we want to know by all means. Of course the thing that falls the closest to the senses is the thing that is the most distant from reason: woman's beauty as possibility to intellectualize is obviously the most extreme liminal case of the intellect, lying at the greatest remove from us. Strong impressions always bifurcate. A swimsuit, for instance, is in a state between tightness and slackness above a woman's knees; that which we design with the nondescript, inexpressive word 'between' is felt a thousand times more precisely by impression — apart from seeing it, impression also feels it inside, and this inside feeling is not simply the imaginary carrying-forth of palpation but the immediate adjustment of the dream-layer to the shade of slackness — lungs, chyle, and gullet align to it with the precision of one thousandth of the vibration rate.

One prong of impression is this entire interior mimicry, the elastic imitation of the biological state sedimented into a dream. The other prong is the opposite of elasticity, the reason-prong: there is not a single concept in our consciousness that could in the least resemble the swimsuit's tight or slack state. But we can grasp it only logically — although we react to it with our most animal layer, still, our reaction to it is a reaction to the logical, we feel with ineradicable certainty (the lungs, chyle, and gullet feel so!) that the degree of slackness is a stern thesis, not an accidental blot, not an indeterminate possibility, but something as definite and unequivocal as a number.

So the first graphic is drawn under the sign of irrationality: *Leatrice* is so much, her erotic praesens-string stretches the two poles of dream and reason to such extent that she is annihilated. Is there something with *Leatrice*? Yes. No.

*Leatrice as 'everybody'; excerpts from a typologia universalis:
description of four women in swimsuits*

But the matter can hardly be laid to rest with this, we must pursue it with a different technique — we must capture impression through thick and thin. This is the point when what might, with playful medievalism, be called the method of *typologia universalis*, suggests itself as a necessity (albeit far less as a possibility). Herod put all the babes to death to make sure that Jesus would die too: we must describe every imaginable woman, so that from the whole some Leatrice be born, from the totally catalogued-up society, one imprecise watercolor.

After the guignol story a chapter in this style follows — description of women at the seaside (many superficial descriptions): blond girl with violet maillot; every detail smacks of biedermeier naiveté and yet the whole is frivolous almost by the chronometer — the ground color is a bashful light violet, but the fabric is color-changing like the Victorian-age evening taffetas on our grandmothers' pictures; the belt is a wide silk ribbon that has nothing to do with sports, looking far rather like an old-fashioned curtain tieback near the window, with a sizable bow behind; on her head a scalloped cap with imitation lace. Snub nose, even snubber mouth, and snubbest of all, a blue gaze: it stipples in the air like ink on waxed paper. The walk is shy and hesitating, picking with her sandal from the sand the footprints that were mentally prepared well in advance as though poking at a currant with a fork whose gap between the prongs is wider than the currant's diameter. Her skin is so white that it brings to mind not nakedness but the bed, continuous paling under the duvet. Her maillot is as tight as on a blade of grass, its grass-blade-ness: indeed, the identity is even a few millimeters thinner than 'the.'

The second: goldfish-color swimsuit. A massive woman, muscular, robust, but not fat. The skin is not as white as on the previous one, but not yet skin-colored either: the feeling is not that she is wearing a sports trunk but only, that she has undressed, she has taken off her stockings. She keeps tugging at her swimsuit with unsuitable movements that look rather like the laid-back housewife's touches: this teaspoon a bit further from the cup, the croissant tongs not on the plate but next to it, touch the teapot with your palm to check if it's hot enough, etc. In her bun an enormous bone hairpin, around which her hair is wet despite itself. Her hips are infinitely barely-concave, there the swimsuit is very tight, but tight on so wide a plane that it no longer conveys body plasticism but merely the goldfish's color-surface. She speaks with men in a deep voice and only in deep leather armchairs is she liable to seduction.

The third: glaring white sawtoothed swimsuit with white knitted belt and short white jacket. Not girl, not woman, not sport, not salon, not coquette, not respectable, but only an elegant, anonymous point origo above the waves' glup-glupping hooks. Blond undulated hair cropped short, dry rubrics of courtability. The white color is more towel-like than amazone-sadistic or provocative Lesbos-glove to the sea's bourgeois nymphs. The small jacket 'suits her,' but stops short of flaring her body's potential into genuine beauty — her arms, legs, back a pristine candle's untouched wick.

The fourth: dark blue swimsuit, very tight, but originally made of such thick spongy-fluffy material that it mirrors forms not in their lifelikeness but, let's say, on their third asymptotic curve — on lacquered surfaces we can observe that the circle-shaped wood-knot's second frame is already a narrow ellipsis and its third 'imitation,' one straight line. (The 'tight' swimsuit has these two variants: adherence in one resembles a blizzard [from lance points easter eggs are rounded], and in the other, a soaked napkin,

which excels mostly through the creases' Seurat punctiliousness. What is more, to complete this textile-typology, the latter tightness has no less than two subspecies — one is the 'sporty' tightness, when the maillot is a Cubist muscle-metronome, while the other, the 'rag' version, when the maillot looks old, crumpled, and dishevelled, simply a grown-out or too small piece that sticks to the skin here and there like four or five leaves from different trees: Siegfried-emmenthaler.)

The dark blue swimsuit has a low-cut back, down to the hips: the chief sensation being, that here the white-blue dotted thread-belt vacillates like the physicists' ball placed on a roof ridge — there's no telling if it will roll down to the left or right. So the belt appears like a bridge arching above a dried-up river: everybody crosses under it, barefoot in the riverbed. This acute-angled, evening-dress-ish low-cut is perhaps more important than the fantastic omissions, for in it coquetry's classicism finds an apt expression, the cold tradition of 'décolletage.' The swimsuits leashed together from a red bra and two thigh-pockets are no longer coquettish but the geometric diagnoses of nakedness: they lack any social feature.

There is a certain conversational flirtatiousness, bon-mot impudicity, that always presupposes a salon commedia dell'arte around it — so was that blue swimsuit. And there is the other case, when swimsuits are cut in a manner reminiscent of Hebrew script, where only the consonants are marked with large figures: only the con-muscular muscles get a colorful stamp, the mono-muscular are left bare — they can also be compared to the housepainters' overholed templates: love can only color our skin where it's left bare. The latter lacks any social character and brings to mind Mallarmé's *Hérodiade*.

The girl in blue is muscular, not from the official and club-donné sports but rather, from pubertal romping; at twenty-eight she will still enjoy such games as grabbing with her teeth a hidden

sugar-cube from her husband's palm or a kiss-bout, when the husband doesn't let himself be kissed on the mouth and is not allowed to use his arms in defense, only to twist his head in every imaginable direction. When she has been at this game for two hours and is flame-red from laughter, she splutters, "Once more, once more." These forms of play can be clearly read from her knees and elbows. Creole face with elongated, far-set eyes. At the nose's base there's a thick blue vein, as if the organism has secured turquoise-heating, because the skin gets very taut and cold from the distance between the eyes.

Extremely small and thin mouth, which, however, carries out the most colorful articulations both in form and color. The mouth's mauvish wristwatch-spring sharply contrasts with the blizzard-swimsuit's standard-frivolous simplicity. The mouth is so vivid (and not heart-shaped!) that it appears to belong not to the earthenware amphora-color face at all, being rather a pinkish-violet curlicued silk pattern tossed there by the wind, the kind that cloth merchants snip off with medieval scissors from the rolls' ends, so that women can take them home to make up their minds. The lips are not so much horizontal as vertical strips — not the sepal's outward-leaning ledge that leans out of the face, but the cross-section of the petal (that is, the tanned complexion): its nervousness comes from its being not an anemone at the end of a sponge-blue underwater plant, but an as yet unscarred cut on the plant. There are flowers with sticky thorns, comb-foot beetles and worms, crumpled-up metal threads or ribbon candy stencils, which, wherever they fall, will only touch the surface with a tiny part of themselves, while the rest continues hovering in the air: this mouth hovered like this, barely hooked onto the taut little coffee skull. Above it, like peach fluff platinumed by hydrogen's albula rain, an infinitely flexible kiss-moss, which further enhances the mouth's ring-rippling that appears forever receding.

The main trick of this mouth is in the kind of line-drawing that we can observe in Wilhelm Busch's sea caricatures: a dense mesh of semicircles of variable size.²¹⁵ How did this mauve 'xyz' (for this is its official name) end up on this pubertal body? Her thin black hair is flattened to her pin-head, only one or two zigzags stick out from under the cap. Water trickles from her face, in contrast to the mouth's bluish-rusty color stains and the eyes' Zeiss eroticism: water trickles down from the homely, non-plein-air slopes of make-up and frivolous gaze like a shower from the windows of a café — one centimeter inward you can quietly continue reading your paper and sipping your coffee. We got used to imagining a horizontal, flat ellipsis for a fish-shape, so any ocean creature whose horizontal position is a vertical oval must come as a ticklish surprise — the fish is 10 cm long, but 25 cm tall, something that is given of course by the giant, multi-story and transparent veil-fins: the fish was squeezed together at the nose and tail and so forced to trickle its vacuumed²¹⁶ flesh upward & downward. Just as the exotic-tall golden wings of these fish to the common fish-template, so did the Oriental nose of this girl (transparent from sunshine, akin to an October yellow leaf) relate to the strand's banal snub-noses: the snub nose is the denial of intellect that goes back to the age of the great migrations, the aquiline nose is the slightly naively-haughty aquarium advertisement for *raison*.

How did these three zones come together: the pubertal gymnastics of the whole body, the mouth's scintillating-tired zigzagging, and the nose's barren logos-fan? The moment the kitten reaches with its paw after the twine ball, the soul's great worry-weaving begins (just as reportedly one can buy not only ready-made stockings but also stocking fabric in rolls, to have their stockings tailored to size, so behind the blue swimsuit's alexandrine-embraces, too, worry wove not completed events, but manufactured its shapeless fabric rolls: the mouth's continuous quiver is the obvious indicator of the loom), only for this, too, to be annihilated by

some womanly-superstitious faith in 'objectivity' and truth (whose headquarters is the nose). She had a high-heeled walking shoe, as if the whole metropolitan life were nothing more than a shabby husk of indigo-bulla nakedness. She had two shoes on, and yet three heels clicked distinguishably behind her on the porcelain stairs — the third was her name without a rubber heel-cap: Doll.

And so forth: to describe the difference between the striped and monochrome swimsuit, that between the two-piece and one-piece, the 'robe enroulés' uniting an evening dress with a sailor caricature, the various ways of producing 'demons,' starting from the blond terry-fairy through the dancer to the bediamonded doyenne of harems; their gestures in water, on the still rings, in courtrooms and in sleeping cars: this would be the second epic possibility for Leatrice. (How distant are the boundaries that this complete typology could bring together is humorously suggested by the names of two Paris salons: *Hermès* and *Tao-Tai*.)

*what are love's two concretenesses?
couldn't Leatrice be built from them?*

I was at a dinner somewhere and saw a woman whom I liked very much. I walked home to be able to relish her memory in calm, that is, in the non-calm of the walking. This is the beginning of love: what do I have in my hands? Two things: the woman's outward appearance, first and foremost her dress — then the fact that she is not with me, I miss her, long for her, and that is bad. All of a sudden I'm more of a tailor than her tailor, I know every crease, seam, buckle and button, and on the other hand I'm palpating the void of sadness, of loneliness velvety into dream: there is no connection whatsoever between the two, they are like a violinist and a pianist who just found out from the impresario that in two

months they have to play in Buenos Aires but have never met & rehearsed together.

So is the foyer of the *Double Face Theater*: a circular, windowless hall, there's not one nook or ornament on the ceiling, the whole room is pitch-black velvet. Its only oddity is that the floor (entirely covered with thick sound-absorbing carpet) is not flat but bulging: halfway on the radius the arch reaches its highest point, then slopes downward again and ends in a calyx-shape hollow in the center. From this hollow a gold-pink, scaled-creased lamp-post or lamp-stamen rises almost to the ceiling — the glass is uneven, so here and there light comes redder or more yellow from behind certain fircone facets.

On entering one sees nothing but this autumnal-bronze electric reel that shows the hall's blindness even blinder, but the wadding-muffled floor rises steadily and barely perceptibly, and all the more unnervingly, that is, rather noticeably. The only statue, mural, & piece of practical furniture that the architect employed in this stifling hall is the very fear rising in one's legs, this discreet seasickness from the tilt — its style consisting in eliciting voluptuous vertigos with invisible not-nearly-forms; not plasticity but on the contrary, a tickling of the nerves that can hardly be distinguished from drugs. Its device is not form and not space, but the disturbed space-perception of the man walking in the 'building': he couldn't report what he saw, all the account he could give being utterly interior, absolutely of 'disposition.'

Loneliness is a gallery built in this style — a giant black petal slope, on which one walks dizzily, not feeling his footprints, for the moment he places his foot on the incline it immediately turns aside, so he no more knows, where is the ground, where the foot-sole, and where the footprint, or what combinatory sequences of those three feature. And in the middle stands the evening-gowned woman's bow-shaped, alien lamp with virginity's acute angle stuck into it, glistening but not illuminating.

Dress & loneliness. Leatrice was adored by many, so wouldn't it be likely that she featured in many heads only as clothes and 'is-not-here'? In vain a woman gives herself with abandon from the first, and any time, even then the ancient component 'is-not-here,' some lack, some longing is felt like a loose but unlosable pajama cord, some thought of the future which, even if realized, is still in the future, and this is enough to replace the saucer with the black umbrella of 'is-not-here' in the mismatched tea-service of the kiss.

absolute externals (shoes, stockings, shoulder-straps): shoes

There are immovable forms of female clothing that mean love more than any love-making or didactically regulated liaison — such are shoes, stockings, & shoulder-straps. Three figurations: the shoe is a sharp wave-line, at its end an energetic Cyrillic diacritic (is there such a thing?), the stocking is a thousand geometric squares or hearts, a thousand parallels, a mist of proportion-fugues, whereas the shoulder-strap is a biologically whimsical, lonely vein, now taut, now wilted. It is only natural that, since they are the average love-nurture from morn to night (being to woman what air is to bread), our souls and muscles are somehow molded to them — kiss, marriage, lies and compliments follow the suggestions of shoe-slide, stocking-meter, & shoulder-strap-vein.

The shoe's line is first of all a dramatic glissando: from the culmination point to the tip of the toes one breathless plunge, like the line that stands for a tragedy's synopsis in school manuals, which at the fourth act soars to an apex and from there falls, with an avalanche's dopiness, to the tearful and hygienically too-hollowed sink of the fifth act. Such is ski jumping: a superb arc, melodically polished drawing above snow and fir-trees — constant death-fear and, eventually, too short time by the chronometer. Every female

shoe brings these three as its sine-qua-non dowry the moment it alights on the horizon of a bus step: melodic arch, tragic free fall, & time's odd jolt, as if two successive seconds piled up in panic, like a pair of too tightly connected rail ends in the heat. It is worth poring over the shoe, for nowhere else can we relish melodic plentitude and deathly derailment at the same time.

If we examine the slope from the sole's end, then the smooth part under the toes harmonically concludes the downward momentum, but if we switch to the upper part, then on the contrary, we will enjoy the ironic or downright burlesque suspension of this sloping descent, for in the 'arch' there is always something humorously chubby and childishly snubnosed that suspends the affected, sporty, and arioso-dolente coming down from the heels. This willy-nilly farce can in fact be observed not only in the toecap but in the shoe's role at large (its role, not shape) during the walk (and only during the walk): human walk, the movement of placing one foot in front of the other, does not resemble in the least the elegant seagull flight of the footsole's line, and in comparison can indeed be called a maimed hobbling. In sports magazines we can often see photographs of divers hovering between the springboard and the pool with delicately arched back and arms stretched outwards: let's imagine such a body, in this pose, on a village cart jolting along on a dirt road — this is the situational comedy of the female walk.

Perhaps nowhere else is it more clear than in the shoe, how much the fantasizings of love revolve around an article of clothing, not the real female foot. Of course there are many shoe-personalities, but here we will confine ourselves to the two extremes: the laced one made of animal leather, with a separate tongue, and the seamless, buckle- and strapless silk evening pump. The former reminds us of those old children's drawings that depict three-year-old mouseys in the adults' crinolines, low-cuts, and towering wigs, when they are barely yet 'human': the lace shoe is far too clothes-like and complicated to cover the foot's primitive shapes.

Is there a more animal, indeed minerally dumb part of the female body than the foot's upper part with its protruding Neanderthal bones and counter-intricity? And should this part receive button-holes, ribbons, buckles and a vest made of a different material? The simple, low-cut evening pump brings to mind the difference between hands and feet (should we have forgotten it): the hands of children are gauche because they are stuck into one bag instead of a glove, while the female foot, on the contrary, acquires a razor-sharp attractiveness by squeezing all its toes into one narrow sheath. The dull foot-bones become an elongated oval jewel from the thin sides of the evening pump: so does the part immediately above the ankle, the flesh right before the toes, and perhaps even a part of the toes themselves (in this the stocking obviously plays a part) suddenly join the short territory of the foot-bones, and form one long silken gradient, as if the foot were no separate anatomical unit and there were one sole incline in the world that starts at the knees and ends at the toe-cap.

One of the main virtues of the shoe is precisely this exiling of the foot: there is no more rewarding and more piquant geometrical task than to isolate one, relatively small surface of a polyhedron, so as to obliterate the fact that next to that small lot, another meaninglessly glued-on surface protrudes, and instead create the optical illusion that our small surface continues with a marked bend into infinity; so does the earth's impudic bulging go on well past the insulating ring of the Verona amphitheatre. The narrow evening pumps cast in oblivion the toes' zoological blunder.

If we watch a naked female foot, the toes' length shows a 1:3 proportion to the foot — but in such picture frame-like evening pumps (a mystery!) that proportion is 1:20, or even, 0 to infinity: shin, ankle, knee and arch mean one eternal slope with no beginning or end. At such times the sole's incline gives the impression of undeviating obliqueness, as against the other shoe's reclining S-penchants. Just as the toes (1:3!) can now mystically fit under the black strip of a few millimeters, in the same mystical way the

foot, at a 30° incline, appears to glide from heel to floor at an 80° angle; shin and foot create almost no angle at all but continue seamlessly: the whole is dizzyingly vertical, only on the spot immediately above the ground is there a microscopic black horizontality, the shoe's toe-cap. Let's imagine an infinitely elongated and slender cone set on its apex, and cut out of it an oblique segment (ellipsis) whose one end-point is almost level with the cone's base, and the other almost reaches the apex (being almost the cone's vertical halving plane): female foot and black frame-like evening pump relate to one another like this cone and its cone section. There are two, almost vertical slopes: one belongs to the stocking, the other is of the shoe's imaginary halving plane, and these two slopes stand at an angle of at most 3° to each other — this is all that's left from the drab forms of shin and foot.

So this is the root of woman. Best is to look at their footprints on the tarmac: one small tilted trapeze-plaster, then empty space, then the dot imprint of the heel. The most important of course is the empty space in-between, one feels above it the foot-sole's Icarian parasailing jump, just as one can feel in the trapeze imprint the friction with the ground and on the heel, the vertical puncture; that's why the heel is usually printed blacker than the sole. Emptiness, two different forms striped with varying intensity: so indeterminate, self-contradictory, and secessionist is the base of the female body. Nowhere can it exercise a definite pressure on earth: the intercourse between sole and tarmac is merely an occasionalist parallel, not a force — the heel's injection-glitch is fumble by necessity, rigid stoppage rather than dynamic work — women are left standing on earth merely by accident. What if statues were erected on pedestals the way high-heeled shoes elevate women: tilted? They elevate but in the same act also make them glide down: women always propel themselves from the floor at the heels with fierce rearing, and drop back to it at the toes like the prodigal son.

In addition, the hard organ of this half-apotheosis always creates the impression of weaponry: when a woman crosses her legs and one heel dangles in the air, it appears entirely like a rhinoceros' horn or some Babylonian spur. Its bellicoseness is further enhanced by the fact that even the most elegant evening pump's heel and sole will be dirty: the only splendid piece of female apparel on which dirt is a tolerated component. When a shoe is lifted into the air (for instance in the wardrobe when the galoshes are removed), we pry on its underside with some excitement, for that's where woman begins — we are local, or rather, geopatriots to such extent that we will consider more important that part of each material which communicates with the earth, and how curious to see right by the silks and gold ringlets the serrated whitish-green dirt of floors and streets, without any right to it — the right a flower would have, for instance, which, after all, grows from the earth; here it's merely gravitation's unjust and perhaps bogus seal.

The evening pump gives the same effect of deep & frivolous low-cut as décolletés over the breasts used to give in olden times — and how odd it would be to see large mudstains under the low-cut bodice. Of course it's easy for the breasts' V-nakednesses and their kiss-bridled U-s to be frivolous, for breasts are banal old bait — but it's all the more interesting that the dull shinbone can convert its sudden protraction into infinity to such frivolous denuding: there where no one would look for anything, suddenly an occasion for joy presents itself: the provocative act of unveiling with vertical audacity. And we can see in all its crudity the age-old maxim, that we dote on the unveiling more than on the unveiled itself. And there where from the foot a second woman was created — what is more, a fictive nudity-paradigm more nude than nudity itself — mud and dirt lurk. This non-anatomical but formal, almost merely-conceptual nakedness (the image of the abstract sense, and not of the content, of 'nudity') leads us to the stocking, for this is one of the stocking's prime tricks.

the stocking

If there is nothing else to cover them but the skin's rosy and coffee-color luminosity, female legs, as everybody knows, are far from being naked: in order for them to be truly nude-like open and provocatively flayed-onto-themselves, they have to be dressed — in order for them to be less, something will be added. This is easy to observe in dressing women: as they sit on the swimming pool's bench with naked legs crossed, we can see where flesh ends and where the sand or the floor's yes- and no-color tile-variation begins, but the legs' shape doesn't fall out of the sequence of objects, like a small mourning envelope from the pack of like-size bridge cards — in fact they have no shape.

When we look at naked female legs, we always see the territory between the contours, the differing thickness of matter, its transfigurations, the bubble bath of imaginary and real resistances, weight-lampions on the dim path of eros. If these legs were worshipped in some pretentious mythology as *Venus Contenu*, whereas the stockinged legs as *Venus Ligne*,²¹⁷ it wouldn't be easy to tell which of the two was the more materialistic. The desire directed at the mere-flesh (where there is no stocking) is in fact seeking an all too abstract pleasure: the eternal, sea-like changeability, indeterminacy of forms; it wants no fixed forms but rather, the everlasting beginning phase of 'formation.' This is another of the naked legs' double-edgednesses: they are positive matter, exact amount, which we love not because they are complete, like the statue of an acquaintance, but because they are palpable and restartable with every caress, erased with every kiss, interchangeable. It is when the body is literally naked, itself only, that it becomes the most-anything: the dispelling, unconnected thread of hypotheses.

The naked body and thus the naked leg has no autonomy among the other objects of the world, and this takes us by surprise: the white flesh-color and the motley Persian rug merge much more readily into some indistinct homogeneity than the leg half-tightly covered with a Persian rug and next to it on the floor, another Persian rug. The naked body is merely 'there' among the objects, neither contrast nor component nor neutrality. In *Venus Contenu* one will hardly find any matter — how little man counts the body as matter can also be seen in the fact that they see the same forcible, what is more, incomprehensible contrast between a woman's physique and her weight: when he hoists her up he believes that there must be some lead attached, that weight cannot be hers alone. It is strange that, following a medieval tradition, many people still regard carnal love as 'materialism,' and are able to imagine a common denominator between 50 kg of silver and 50 kg of nude, not realizing that the ambition of the silver is to immediately fill its weight, while the objective & method of the female body is to reach those 50 kg by the longest, indeed infinite detour.

In our childhood they used to pull our leg with the question, what is heavier: one kg of iron, or one kg of feathers? If we think about the (naked) female body's materiality, then in place of feathers we should imagine some infinitely volatile, shape-shifting gas that expands in space and time and its sole constant is that it has weight, let's say, 50 kg. Or, what a strange impression of equipoise would the following give: in one balance, a 50-kg silver ball and in the other, another such 50-kg silver ball hammered into an infinitely long and thin thread, so that only a small bit is visible in the balance, its two ends undetectable even with a binocular, for it goes on and on; and yet the scales don't tilt, they're perfectly balanced. So *Venus Contenu* has two theological attributes: the one is weight, mere-weight — the other is the eternal changeability, dissipation from love-making. What happens if we pull stockings on it?

Little by little, every moment the leg becomes more naked, as the thick veil of the stocking stretches above the heel, the ankle, the knee: as if one slowly poured a thick black liquid into a transparent communicating tube of indeterminate shape. How beautiful is this movement of reverse, 'multiplying skinning': the woman holds the two upper edges of the stocking in her two hands and pulls them like reins that are tugged by wild horses toward the netherworld. The two forces are here in sweet balance: the leg presses like an eternal night-bound chariot rushing to death on Orpheus' path, and at the same time also rushing into the naked body's opalescent, eternal spring. And the sign of triumph over the netherworld is precisely the fact that the thighs' May lard is gradually blackened by the pulled-up stocking.

Does form thus simply replace matter? No, because thick, non-transparent linen stockings have nothing erotic in them, while being the form-most form. Is this a compromise between flesh and net, matter and shape, that is, the scheme of piquancy? But does then flesh play a part in enjoying the impression? Aren't we closer to truth in saying that flesh serves only as ad hoc custom-last to the beautiful stocking? We are well aware that a stocking lying about is nothing more than a meaningless, flaccid rag of which we can at most enjoy the strange transparency if we stretch it between our two hands: in part the geometrical squares of its weave, in part the typical moiré circlings projected above the squares by the tripping-up light.

Three data: the inert rag, the delicate heap of squares, and the vegetal growth rings. All these precede the leg. When the stocking stretches upward on the swimming-pool bench, like the commiserating mercury in a thermometer, we first imagine that the piece of rag had mysteriously carried within itself the regularly arched shape that it creates with the leg. And yet neither the leg nor the stocking had been form: the first because of its infinite changeability, the latter because of its rag-ness. The stocking is made into

a sharp crystal by the shapeless flesh, while the flesh is rendered snobbish-Greek 'morphé' by the black swamp-clot-like stocking.

And so a form emerges that is perhaps of two or much rather, of none, and that's all desire needs. But *Venus Ligne* is an extremely crude name, for here the stress falls not on the silhouette or contours, however much at first sight those may appear the most striking novelty. Leatrice had a dress made of silver lamé-tulle that was basically a magnifying of the stocking weave: medieval chain mail. This dress was body-tight everywhere, but the fabric fell from her shoulders, freely floating, in two straight ribbons of 30 cm width. If Leatrice absent-mindedly leaned against the table, the dress became even tighter under her hips, but the two independent nets pendulated away from her shoulders, stretching in the air under their own weight.

With the stocking these two situations can't be realized simultaneously, but the tendency is the same: the serrated silk net runs around the leg with such geometric momentum that we feel it to be a snail-spiraling plane that continues its ever-bending folding-screen trajectory in space. This it achieves mainly with its novel shadows: the muscle-shadows are replaced by cylinder and cone-shadows, which are rendered sensuous not by the fact that spectrally, the form of living flesh, or at least its memory, is boot-legged here and there, but by the tiny geometrical elements (the small squares of the weave, its loops: eyes) in their unexpected monumentality, the infinite Archimedean momentum.

Sometimes in utterly open, plate-like Murano vases a spiraling line starts from the thin base, which then goes over into an unbelievably dense lining, and yet after a mere few centimeters one can measure a one-meter radius — so does the stocking unite the miniature condensedness and the infinity it generates. It started out as a vase and immediately flared out into a plate: this can be only the result of its ever-denser spirals — here the line is not an ornament but everything, and it was the line that drew to itself the

vase's glass. Women often call such vases with linear decoration 'delicate,' and so they are for sure, yet in the sudden petal-plateau, in the rotation-induced openness we feel the presence of crushing forces, for only such forces could have distorted the vase that startled like a flower into an inside-out, mutilated cyclamen. In schools they demonstrate on revolving electric copper circles the phenomenon by which at great speed the revolving circle is elongated into an ellipsis: these Murano vases flattened into a plate, too, make us suspect such forces. The shape of the female leg resembles such revolving because of the transparent silk stockings: its shadows are not static but the quivering radial triangles seen on running wheels — on express trains the signal of higher speed is the turning of the engine wheels into a compact silvery plate, on which a slender grey triangle sways like a flower in the breeze. Minimal swaying indicates highest speed: the stocking's gliding geometric shadows, too, indicate such rush.

The naked leg's shape is given by the contraction of various muscles, without resulting in an impression of complexity — even if it tautens (as in the anatomies of Renaissance painters' sketches), every flesh-ribbon stands out individually, a medley of waves without the image of sea and water. The stocking modifies it in two directions: it simplifies the shape of the muscles into Platonic idea-masks, while at the same time generating cunning crossovers from bone to flesh, from flesh to vein, from vein to garter-tension.

The naked body has neither forms nor summings-up; in the stockings leg both are rampant. The ankles heave individually; they receive a truly egoistic profile by losing their bodily personality and are neutralized into "some hard little spherical cut of space" behind the silk net, but the moment they are individualized, they immediately tumble over into the valley between the heel, the back of the calf, and themselves. Where is that dizzying moment in the living (and good-for-nothing) body, when something towers into blossoming-egoistic shape, and the plenitude of form itself will be

the first slope of running-onward, gliding passing-on? And that small valley (between ankle-bone, the muscle-thread rising from the heel, and the beginning of the calf-cushions) becomes, thanks to the stocking, at once undefinably polysemic and geometrically precise — neither body nor plane nor valley nor ‘hic et nunc,’ but it radiates such impeccable abstraction, such discipline of precision, non-allusiveness, but perfect intellectual solution, that we feel moved to found a new mathematics on it (or, failing that, the old mathematics). Perhaps a similar thing can be experienced in fountains of intricate engineering and mechanism: the water springs with such pressure, beats against such surfaces, is lit from within with such beams of light and crisscrossed by such alien water-jets as to just about reach in the air some motley flower shape, petals, foliage or branches, that last for a fraction of a second (when they are at their most perfect, but can be easily observed), and then melt away, ebb, but this transience is no crude annihilation, nor the flower’s death into ‘sic transit,’ but on the contrary, self-refuting continuation, soft and tickling variation, the liberation of form into the directions it carries within itself — the downward-bending petal turns into a downward-bending arch, from the rose’s ever-foaming pistils an ever-expanding central mist-ball rises; the statue is replaced by a pantomime of directions.

And this is one of the stocking’s prime love-techniques on the female leg: it creates hyper-forms only in order to immediately dissolve them, to gather the dissolved somewhere into a new knot, and dissolve them again, and so on up to the hips. Which could the fountain’s pre-programmed water-flower be, and which its even more flower-like dehiscence into directions, we can hardly know; we feel merely that these two situations keep alternating from the heel to the waist. Is the knee a crystal of all the straying waves or, on the contrary, only a leftover of one of the calf’s many form-stations? It is hard to tell. But it is doubtlessly form, and doubtlessly transitory, transmitting & transferring form.

That's why caressing the leg is best, for the leg is geometrically prepared for this dramatization. How complex and how smooth it is: the ankle, a jutting-out desire-threshold; above it the whole elastic pillar suddenly contracts like a sucked-in, hollow cheek, then swells to fish-shape, is distorted at the knee in the front into a knot, getting an indeterminate fissure at the back, then quickly thickens, no longer with the fish's balanced forte-piano, but in one direction only, like an irresistibly opening crescendo-hairpin in the musical score, one cannot conclude it logically, merely discontinue it: the stocking's cut-off upper fringe indicates the torso exactly — the leg has amassed form upon form, like the fountain's water falling through various artificial terraces and electric-hued filters, which can likewise only fall into a 'Gordian' pool, cannot receive an organic ending that would geometrically belong to its structure.

Ankle, rubber fish, knee, thighs: with what melodic neutrality do these utterly alien forms merge into one by way of the stocking, as if it shaped the god-effigy of paradoxical transition on the female leg. The sudden cut-offness marked by the stocking well above the knee belongs organically to the leg's form-undulation, just as one-time short-circuiting, plastic paralysis, belongs to the end of winding and twisting horns and trumpets: even if the living body continues the leg toward the hips with petit-bourgeois clumsiness, that is no more than a plastering of forms, practical joining, not the geometrically predestined avenue of form.

The leg's beauty consists in this openness above the knee (here it's not about two legs but only one, and that in any imaginable posture) — here the stocking is folded back doubly, a dark strip marks the need to discontinue, for the only thing that could follow is infinite monotony, as if a cone were set on its top and its sides were prolonged beyond its base. But this interruption confers on it a substance of hypothesis: the forms (ankle, calf, knee, thigh) that are juxtaposed in such order do not lead to a well-defined result, but instead proceed into the infinity of numbers. (Thigh: riding-glove cuffs reaching up to the elbow [= infinity].)

The stockinged leg is of a nature entirely different from 'man,' it is entirely independent from the latter and indeed stands in no relation whatsoever to it. The head is mere-psychology, the trunk, mere internal organs, clinical physiology-case, the arms are poor in form. In the leg there is no soul and no noble organ, but in comparison to the whole body it is disproportionately large. Here we speak of the stockinged leg again, for the naked leg merges into the body and is blunted into humanity-poisoning: the skin and blood circulation smuggle it into the trunk's nobility as almost its equal in rank. The transparent silk stockings thwart this. The leg is one of love's favorite islands precisely because it is the most absolutely body: neither character nor biology tamper with it. How clumsy the arm looks next to the leg — let's just imagine a silk stocking on a female arm, what deplorable shapelessness it would display. The arm is a conformist, unlike the leg, which achieved an autonomous and independent form for itself. That such anti-humanism had its first germs already in the naked leg is shown by the fact that it gets not clothes but a transparent net. The net signals that from foot-sole to hips there is a single unified territory: its variance is only formal, not lyrical or pertaining to the realm of internal medicine.

The leg only walks, is not used to anything else — when we sit it dangles, inert, disconnected from life. The hand performs a thousand tasks and games, while the face is the potpourri-nest of our entire life: among these preoccupations the leg walks virginally. From the hips upward the body is so analytical that it ceases to be body — the flesh's animal synthesis is found in the legs alone. The mermaids ending in fish-tail are not at all prodigious creatures: the tall and slender daughters of Monday or Tuesday are precisely such nereids by virtue of their legs. It is the legs that sustain the human being, so they should be solid foundational institutions, yet this very base happens to be the most alien, ethereal, and paradoxical.

endnotes

214. A brand of decaffeinated coffee produced by the Bremen company Kaffee HAG (*Kaffee-Handels-Aktiengesellschaft*) founded in 1906, the first to produce and promote decaffeinated coffee.
215. German caricaturist, illustrator, painter, and poet Heinrich Christian Wilhelm Busch (1832–1908), whose *Max und Moritz: Eine Bubengeschichte in sieben Strachen* (*Max and Moritz: A Story of Seven Boyish Pranks*, 1865), written & illustrated by Busch, is a classic of German comic literature, many of whose satirical passages became dicta in colloquial usage.
216. The frequent English-language phrases have been set in both translated volumes in Scala Sans. All further instances of Szentkuthy's use of English will be signified with the same font.
217. Lat., 'Content-Venus,' 'Form-Venus.'
218. Lat., 'the two-eared chalice of the moving.'
219. Presumably a reference to the experimental biplane designed by Ambroise Goupy and Mario Calderara, known as "Goupy 2" (1909, Blériot factories), a successor of Goupy's earlier biplane & tri-plane designs in the first decade of the 20th century. Known for its distinctive & highly unusual design, the "Goupy 2" had an uncovered box-girder fuselage & a biplane tail unit, lending it a skeleton-like appearance.
220. The work of German humanist, mathematician, astronomer, & theologian Nicolaus Cusanus (1401–1464), *De Coniecturis* (*On Conjectures*) advocates for the use of presupposition and conjectures for a better understanding of truth.
221. Zeno was a member of the Eleatic pre-Socratic philosophical school founded by Parmenides in the city of Elea, in Magna Graecia.
222. Andrea Verrocchio's monumental equestrian statue of condottiero Bartolomeo Colleoni (1400–1475), Captain General of Venice, erected by the city in the latter's honor on Campo SS. Giovanni e Paolo ranks among the chief works of Renaissance sculpture.

AFTER WORD

Dogmatic Accidentalism.
Miklós Szentkuthy's *Prae* and the Chaocosmic Novel

ERIKA MIHÁLYCSA

Preparing for exile in protest against Hungary's slide into fascism under Horthy, Béla Bartók allegedly recommended one recently published book to his friends: "Keep an eye on this chap."¹ The chap in question was a schoolteacher of English in his 20s writing under the flamboyant pen name Miklós Szentkuthy — meaning, "of the holy well" — whose two-volume doorstopper, *Prae*, was seen sprawling in Bartók's home, weighed down by a few wooden flutes. The image of the folk instruments on top of the daunting novel has a charmingly surreal quality, but there is something to the connection: after music, experimental modernism made a none too timid entry into Hungarian fiction.

The book starts with Leville-Touqué, one of an eccentric group of characters of the author class, summing up the problems of expression, of bringing fashion, cosmetics, mathematics, psychology & philosophy to a common denominator, in a formula he dubs Dogmatic Accidentalism:

Leville-Touqué wrote an article on the subject of 'Outline of a Starting Point, or New Composition,' for his periodical *Anti-psyche*. In this he had advanced the case of an imaginary novelist, or maybe a philosopher who assumes the role of a novelist purely in order to gather arguments

1. Miklós Szentkuthy, *Frivolitások és hitvallások* [*Frivolities and Confessions*] (Budapest: Magvető, 1988) 348.

for his new logic from another field, and he gets that character to observe the point before which there was not yet a logical or artistic inspiration to write a new system or a new novel, but at which point the first germs of inspiration were already present; and with the help of the very first germ and its immediate continuations, he attempts to investigate the nature of the new compositional fashion, the special relationship of analysis and unity, fortuitousness & regularity. After the 'Outline of a Starting Point' he had provisionally summarized his conclusions in a second article entitled 'Toward a New Culture of Wordplay, or Concerning the Rules of Dogmatic Accidentalism.' (*Prae I*, 3)

The theory, occasioned by spotting a hat in a shop window, & one of hundreds of theories that litter the pages of this quixotic novel, is pursued with less than dogmatic zeal, and in fact falls much closer to the leg-pullings in the early novels of Beckett or Flann O'Brien than to Stephen Dedalus' aesthetic ruminations. Yet, even though Dogmatic Accidentalism, trumpeted in a spoof manifesto in a student magazine in orthodox avant-garde fashion, is soon ousted by the next fruit of the group's spare-time literary activities, the novel playfully attempts to put it into practice. Leville-Touqué's coterie of like-minded friends includes an Englishman, Halbert, and an industrial designer and *femme fatale*, Leatrice. The latter's portrait starts, jocose-laboriously, from a postcard and soon morphs into a passage that reads like the literary equivalent of a crossbreed of a Cubo-Futurist study of movement and Surrealist collage, culminating in the candid appraisal, "Her brow was not big and, seen from the front, it was shaped like the white bone handle of a moustache brush — an anonymous oblong oval" (*Prae I*, 69). Nearly 600 pages later, at

the second volume's beginning, the aborted description is taken up again; this time Leatrice becomes the image of "everybody" that has to be assembled, with the methodology of a medieval *typologia universalis*, from the chance impression of four women in swimsuits, and further still, from the absolute externals of fashion: shoes, stockings, and shoulder straps. The latter passage, a veritable tour-de-force, runs to hilariously over-the-top analyses, in the course of which the female leg, a geometrical cross between sphere and cone, is described through the analogy of a corkscrew and macaroni. The incipit of the shoe's description well illustrates Szentkuthy's method, of conjunction through an apparently endless chain of striking visual, verbal, & conceptual associations, tongue firmly in cheek:

The shoe's line is first of all a dramatic glissando: from the culmination point to the tip of the toes one breathless plunge, like the line that stands for a tragedy's synopsis in school manuals, which at the fourth act soars to an apex and from there falls, with an avalanche's dopiness, to the tearful and hygienically too-hollowed sink of the fifth act. Such is ski jumping: a superb arc, melodically polished drawing above snow and fir-trees — constant death-fear &, eventually, too short time by the chronometer. Every female shoe brings these three as its sine-qua-non dowry the moment it alights on the horizon of a bus step: melodic arch, tragic free fall and time's odd jolt, as if two successive seconds piled up in panic, like a pair of too tightly connected rail ends in the heat. It is worth poring over the shoe, for nowhere else can we relish melodic plenitude and deathly derailment at the same time. (*Prae II*, 771–772)

The book ends with the diary-cum-manuscript of Halbert's father, an Anglican minister in Exeter; in its closure, abruptly following an ecstatic epiphany of love where eros and agape merge in love-making with a "half-idiot" girl (a love-making that can't be safely told apart from rape), another hat is spotted in another shop window, and the thesis is re-orchestrated that mathematics & fashion, absolute order and "elementare Unordnung," are facing pages of the same book.

When *Prae* appeared in 1934, its author was barely 26 and known only to a small coterie of literati. Printing the book privately obviously didn't help its visibility much, but as Szentkuthy's further volumes followed in quick succession — the diary-like volume of numbered reflections, *Towards the One and Only Metaphor*, the novel *Chapter on Love*, and from 1938 on, the monumental 10-volume series *St. Orpheus Breviary*, a playful *catalogus rerum* of meditations on history in the disguise of pseudo-historical fiction — it may well have saved Szentkuthy from persecution for blasphemy and obscenity, charges that could have threatened his teaching position and resulted in worse consequences.

Known as Miklós Pfisterer in civilian life, the young bookworm and polymath allegedly acquired his pen name from a train directory, when his eyes fell on a lackluster village outside Budapest, Szentkút. The only son of a high-ranking civil servant, he chose to study English and French at university at a time when both countries and cultures were viewed with hostility in post-World War I Hungary, not lastly by his father, a jingoist nationalist. Yet it was that same father who took the young Szentkuthy on a classic Grand Tour in 1928, and who would indulge his son's passion for books, buying him everything from the classics to botanical atlases and contemporary art books. And even if the son looked on his parents' petit-bourgeois tastes & social snobbery

with bemused horror, one can detect a residual guilt feeling at having let down their expectations. As the writer recalls in a series of marathonic late-life interviews, the unsold copies of *Prae* were piled up high in the room where his father lay dying: “My father’s last glance, imagine that disappointment... Even on his deathbed, with his last glance he can see, that’s all his son ever accomplished.”²

The quixotic novel was written in 1928 as a young man’s response to receiving the shock of Europe seen during his travels with his family and during his one-year scholarship to England in 1931, spent between Bloomsbury and Exeter — and to contemporary modernism spanning everything from German Expressionist theater & fashion photography to Joyce’s *Ulysses*, read in 1931. The ghostly bookshelves that can be discerned behind the book would be loaded not only with the works of the usual culprits — Joyce, Proust, Gide, Valéry, T.S. Eliot, Huxley, et cetera — but much reading from his beloved Baroque period, from the Metaphysical poets through Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy* to Ben Jonson, on whom he would write his dissertation, and whose *A Tale of a Tub* provided him with a template for viewing human affairs in terms of puppetry. Equally importantly, *Prae* playfully digests a potpourri of modern physics, mathematics, and biology, ranging from Schrödinger, Einstein, or the brothers de Broglie to Brown’s description of molecular movement, and Bernouilli’s mathematical combinatorics, all of which underpin the text’s self-definitions as organized around the principle of chaos, entropy, and absolute contingency. The latest additions to the book were the “Non-Prae diagonals,” partly tongue-in-cheek aesthetic theories & self-commentaries,

2. *Frivolitások és hitvallások*, 85. The father’s only reaction to the book, which he never touched, was, “You should at least have written something patriotic at the end!”

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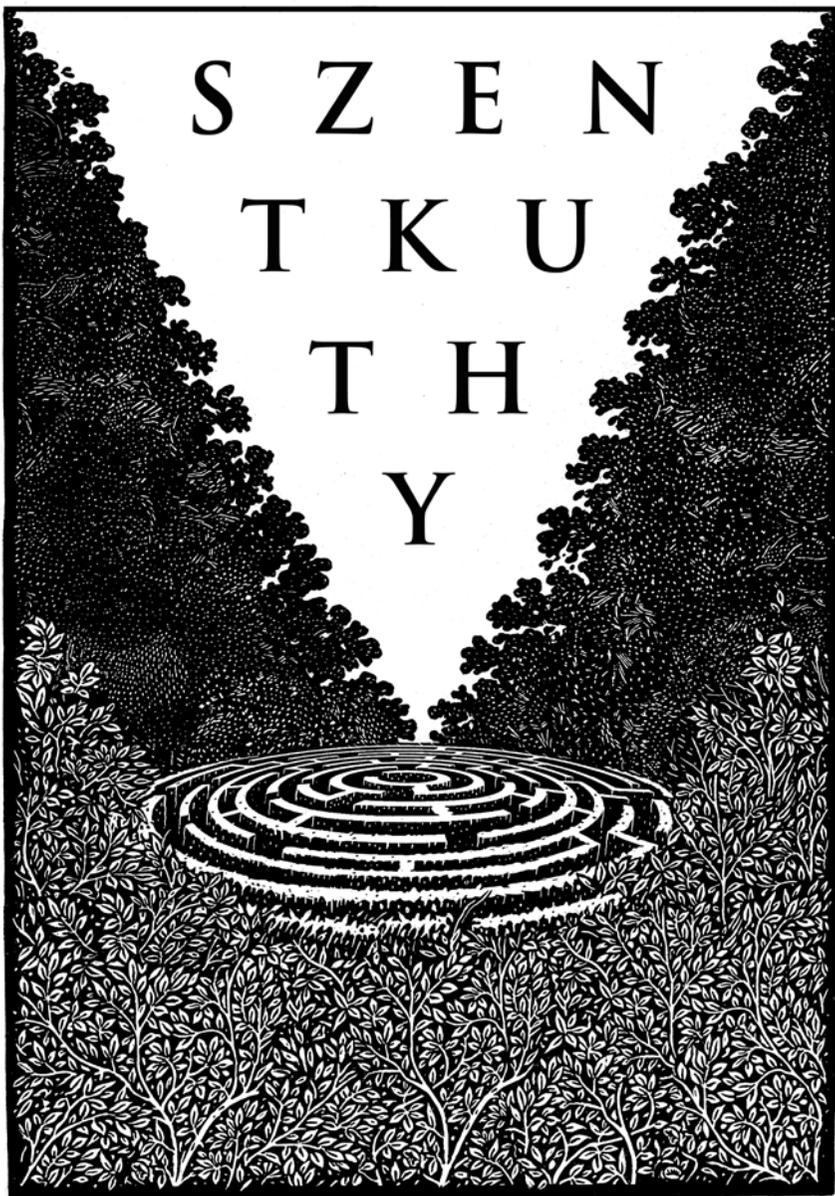
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S Z E N
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☞ Considered an eerie attack on realism, when first published in 1934, Miklós Szentkuthy's debut novel *Prae* so astonished Hungarian critics that many deemed it monstrous, derogatorily referred to Szentkuthy as cosmopolitan, and classified him alien to Hungarian culture.

Incomparable & unprecedented in Hungarian literature, *Prae* compels recognition as a serious contribution to modernist fiction, as ambitious in its aspirations as *Ulysses* or *À la recherche du temps perdu*. With no traditional narration and no psychologically motivated characters, in playing with voices, temporality, and events, while fiction, *Prae* is more what Northrop Frye calls an anatomy (à la Lucian, Rabelais, & Burton) or Menippean satire: the basic concern of the book is intellectual, its pervading mood is that of a comedy of ideas. As a virtual novel that preempts every possibility for its realization, it is a novel but only virtually so, a book which is actually a præ-paration for an unwritten (unwritable) novel. In this, it maintains the freedom and openness of its potentialities, indicative for instance in the Non-*Prae* diagonals, a series of passages that intercut the novel and continually fracture space & time to engage in what one of the figures of the book calls the culture of wordplay or dogmatic accidentalism. "The book's title," said Szentkuthy, "alludes to it being an overture. A multitude of thoughts, emotions, ideas, fantasies, and motifs that mill & churn as chimes, an overture to my subsequent œuvre."

By challenging the then prevailing dogmas and conventions of prose writing, Szentkuthy was said to have created a new canon for himself but later derided

as insignificant for supposedly not acquiring followers. Largely unread at the time, *Prae* eventually gained cult status and would be reprinted in 1980 and 2004. To some critics, the book is not only one of the representative experimental works of the early 20th century, but in its attempt to bring 'impossible literature' into being, it also presages the *nouveau roman* by almost 30 years. And in its rejection of sequentiality and celebration of narrative shuffling, long before Burroughs & Gysin, *Prae* enacts what is conceptually akin to the cut-up. Few of Szentkuthy's contemporaries would reveal with equal bravura & audacity the new horizons that were opened up for narrative forms after the era of realism. In *Frivolities & Confessions*, Szentkuthy said that his goal with *Prae* was "to absorb the problems of modern philosophy and mathematics into modern fashion, love, and every manifestation of life."

Translated for the first time since its original publication in 1934, upon its 80th anniversary, Vol. II of this legendary & controversial Hungarian modernist novel is now at last available in English.

