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### **Miklós Szentkuthy – Between Hungary and Europe**

My research on Miklós Szentkuthy's novel *Prae* and the Finnish writer Volter Kilpi's novel *Kirkolle (On the Way to the Church)* is part of a larger project carried out at the Department of Hungarian Studies at the University of Helsinki. The aim of the project is to study changes of identity in Hungarian and Finnish literature. When does a modern novel become a classic? When does the transition from unreadable to readable take place? One aspect of such change is of particular interest to me: the poetics and the textual structure of the two novels in question. In other words, what kind of features make a text readable/unreadable etc.?

This leads me to the question of musicality of a literary text, the concept firmly connected to avant-garde literature. The concept of musicality has been meandering along throughout the history of literature, and after many years of development and standstill, it remains a quasi-concept balancing on the brink of falling back into the domain of poetry or that of over-poetised research. Useful as a metaphor that is always near at hand it can easily become the weak point in research and in the logical development of ideas, and eventually turn into a bridgehead from which the critics can launch their attacks. Nevertheless, we should ask: even if the musicality of literature is a metaphor, what is its foundation and why does it keep reappearing?

My hypothesis is that avant-garde texts *are* musical because the structure of their subject is engulfed in music, and the social function that the avant-garde texts assume has always been fulfilled by music. Avant-garde literature and music are parts of a larger process, but there must be some resemblance between them also on the level of poetics. So what are the poetics of a musical text and how can they be compared with a musical piece? I have decided to look at the question from Julia Kristeva's point of view of psychoanalytical poetics and her theory of signification; and also, as far as music is concerned, I want to consider the issue in the light of psychoanalytically-orientated musicology.

My main areas of interest are the paradox concerning Miklós Szentkuthy, avant-garde literature, and the question of musicality. According to Kristeva's theory of the subject being in process, I will regard literature as movement. Thus, literature, and avant-garde literature in particular, is always a particular and singular event. On the other hand, theories with their generality and stability are (usually failed) attempts to pin down the movement. Generalisation and stabilisation are by definition not movements. A paradoxical task emerges: how to form a theory of something general by using examples that are by nature singular? Even if we should succeed in it,

as Kristeva perhaps did, can such a theory be applied to anything outside its own area of interest? This transition from the particular to the general is the question I am interested in.

Kristeva's work *Revolution in Poetic Language* provides examples of the possibilities and failures of such passage. In her thesis Kristeva analyses the works of Mallarmé and Lautréamont but only part of her work has been translated into English. The practical application of her theory can be read only in the original French. And no wonder, as it contains profound and exhaustive analyses of phonetic, morphologic, syntactic and semantic structures of French avant-garde texts. Translating them into English would mean providing the text with equally long footnotes and explanations. Thus, we face the following problem: how can we transplant the theory into the tissue of Szentkuthy's language if it is based on French literature, history of social changes in France, and above all the phonologic, morphologic (etc.) system of the French language?

The same ambiguity can be felt when dealing with Szentkuthy's text. Even such exterior factors as his biography and subject matter of his books bear the traces of conflict between the particular and the general. On the one hand, Szentkuthy is said to be one of "the least Hungarian" Hungarian writers. In his works he hardly ever deals with Hungarian matters; on the contrary – he is a real cosmopolitan writer, perhaps one of the greatest European writers of the 20th century. On the other hand, apart from the ongoing French translations, works of Szentkuthy have hardly been translated, so he is relatively unknown in the history of European literature. But why? The reason why Szentkuthy seems avant-garde (and hence somewhat untranslatable) is his particular use of language. When investigating Szentkuthy's use of language, we find that his experiments on Hungarian make him perhaps one of the most Hungarian writers in Hungary. Thus, we are faced with two facets of avant-garde novel: it can be extremely national linguistically, and at the same time overwhelmingly general when seen in the light of universal processes such as writing, production of signification, etc.

Thus, we have the following three pairs of oppositions:

- 1) Theory applied: Kristeva's signification theory; its practical realisation (Mallarmé & Lautréamont) vs. possibilities of transplantation into Hungarian.
- 2) Material analysed: linguistic dimension of Szentkuthy's works ("Hungarian Szentkuthy") vs. their place in the history of European literature ("European Szentkuthy").
- 3) My hypothesis (avant-garde literature can be regarded as musical): musicality of literature as a phenomenon that is always singular and manifests itself through language which is always different vs. bodily roots of music and language which exist in every culture and are universal.

Nevertheless, I hope we are not dealing with a researcher's cul-de-sac. Multi-faceted movement from the particular to the general should be possible, and I will try to demonstrate this through examples. My analysis relates primarily to the text at hand, but I will also try to draw some more general conclusions. With the help of these three pairs of oppositions, I will try to spot the meeting of these lines. We could look at this movement as three lines inclined against one another at a 60 degree angle forming a star, similar to an asterisk. My main interest lies in the nodal point, but I will also deal with avant-garde literature, Szentkuthy's novels, and the musicality of literature.

How does this issue look in practice? Szentkuthy's *Prae* (1934) is a turning point in the history of Hungarian literature. It is a book that questions everything: existence of literary heroes, plot, time, and space, possibilities of expression, meaning, and finally even its own existence. Szentkuthy's *Prae* was also a revolution in terms of language which lost the stability of denotation and meaning; instead it became a dynamic process extended in time. Kristeva regards this process as a signifying practice of the writing subject. Due to social changes at the end of the 19th century the subject found its way of expression in texts we call avant-garde. However, they are not really *expression* but channels in which the subject who is always in process realises himself. The language became charged with drives, and it became a vent of the bodily processes that form the subject. The eruption of drives was the revolution in the poetic language, a twilight of one meaning, pulverisation of morpho-phonetic, syntactical, and logical structures. In addition, Kristeva points out that the same revolution took place also in other countries and cultures, e.g. in Joyce's prose. But the revolution included also the *musicalisation* of poetic language. The process that the social revolution enabled in language had been always present in another communication channel, namely music. It is in the avant-garde that Nietzsche's prophecy regarding the advent of Dionysian art was fulfilled. Literature became Dionysian, dynamic, and musical because it adopted a social function which had long belonged to music. Thus, we can never overemphasise the concept of musicality in 20th century literature.

But what is the role of musicalisation in Hungarian literature? I have chosen to study one path out of thousands in the long text of *Prae*, the concept of a flower. What is a flower? A flower, or *virág* in Hungarian, is a word-concept pervading the *Prae*. Whatever happens, it always appears as an explanation, example, or metaphor. The transformations of the concept show that it has no stable meaning; on the contrary, its meaning is always lost, the flower always leads us somewhere else, into the unknown. The concept of a flower is built on metaphor and movement. A flower is an axis around which the text circulates. The text can only touch it gently but the meaning of the flower is never found, as if the whole *Prae* was going "towards the only metaphor" (this is

the title of the book Szentkuthy wrote after *Prae*). What makes the identity of the flower so nebulous? I have found the following structures:

- 1) The concept of a flower works as an ultimate metaphor; there is nothing beyond it. The flower is “a mask”, but even this identity is questioned when we read further, “the flowers are not masks ... but bridges, passages”. Masks of what? Bridges to where? It replaces logos: “in principio erat flos” and threatens subjectivity which becomes “virág-én” (flower-I).
- 2) The concept is open to interaction with other concepts; once the flower meets reason, they become “floraison”
- 3) The lexeme tends to mingle with other lexemes; its borderlines are open and active, e.g. “félelem-virág”, “inertia-virág”, “virágliszt”, “virággondolat”, “fényvirág” (fear-flower, inertia-flower, flowerflour, flowerthought, flowerlight).
- 4) The morphologic possibilities of the lexeme are explored: “virágnál is virágabb” – the substantive is in the comparative degree, structure unknown to Indo-European languages.
- 5) The phonic guise of the concept comes into play. In some places “virág” is gently juxtaposed with “világ” (world). However, this similarity has been known to Hungarian literature ever since. Thus, the concept is embedded in the broad intertextual field of the whole history of Hungarian literature.

This short list contains only a few examples of Szentkuthy’s floral logic. An exhaustive analysis would take much longer. We can see now that the concept of a flower is quite complex and although sometimes it appears as “flos” or “fleur”, it is still deeply rooted in the Hungarian language and its literary tradition. In *Prae* meaning is shattered, words and concepts are liquified; the text explores the possibilities of language and transcends them. This is due to the change of the function of literature. Since it became the channel for the bodily pulsions to pass through, its structures grew musical (e.g. similar to the structures of music), as the process in question had always been present in the domain of music. So, there is a great resemblance between the text of *Prae* and the structures of music, but a closer analysis is beyond the scope of this study. I shall only mention them in passing: impossibility of definite meaning and identity, instability of signs and their borders (and hence, continuity, free divisibility), iterability (the meaning of a lexeme or concept changes with its each appearance), infinite network of correspondences, mistiness of the subject, metaphoricity, to name a few. All these features in Szentkuthy’s novel can be compared with musical examples, but for the purpose of this study such analysis does not seem very important.

As a musical text *Prae* explores language in its infinity and is deeply rooted in the tissue of the Hungarian language (its phonetic, morphologic, and syntactic structures) and culture.

However, as a manifestation of the avant-garde, as a signifying practice typical of all human beings, and finally as a Nietzschean, Dionysian and musical literature, Szentkuthy's novel is a very general phenomenon. Its general importance may be much broader than its importance in the history of the Hungarian literature. In that sense Szentkuthy is a European writer, and even more: to study *Prae* is to study the conditions of language and meaning in general, perhaps not only within the confines of Europe.

And what about the question of musicality in literature? Perhaps it can never be completely answered, or at least it will be difficult to create an all-embracing theory because with avant-garde literature, its escaping movement is its *raison d'être*. But in order to keep the equilibrium, we must mediate between the individual and the universal. A limited theory is still possible; after all, it can be transplanted in the same way Kristeva's signification theory can be modified and applied to a Hungarian text. But we are also dealing with a question of national and above all of linguistic identity. Even if Szentkuthy's novels should become well-known, the number of researchers who can read (and understand) them in Hungarian will be very limited. To conclude, Szentkuthy is at once an extremely Hungarian and an extremely European writer. It seems that this is true of anything avant-garde: as universal as the origins of language and at the same time as strongly and untranslatably individual as the style of each avant-garde writer.

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