

## BOOK REVIEW

**Ferenc Barnás** (1997). *The Parasite. The eschatology of physicality* [Az élőködő. A testiség eszkhatólógiaja] Pozsony: Kalligram.

Reviewed by *József Szili*\*



Original publication in Hungarian © 1997 Kalligram, Pozsony

Republication in English © 2021 Akadémiai Kiadó, Budapest

It is rare indeed to be able to thank a living author for an extraordinary textual experience. For this kind of textual experience, I require a certain sort of linguistic intellectuality, modelled most closely on the logical cohesion of philosophical texts. Here, the way this is achieved is that while the object being expressed is absolutely complicated, and the language used to express it is not simple either, it nonetheless goes through, piece by piece - or possibly through several, criss-crossing strands - the thought that is thus transformed into image; it does so with a linearity that never frays and is interwoven from object to object. It is not extrapolation, as it would be in its philosophical counterparts, but only guidance, always guidance. It is drawing a line. At one and the same time, there is linguistic sampling, (taking a sample from some transcendent model and its creation in the here and now), and its translation into a linguistic barcode in such a way that this is a complete visual transposition (couched in a metaphor, a METAPHOR SYSTEM, a *conchetto*); *translatio*, translation, or rather in another sense, a metaphor. Which of course will not be a copy of the transcendent model, but does present a copy, and what *that* copies is the transcendent “model”. An entire novel’s worth of metaphor.

The basis of an extraordinary textual experience is thus first and foremost *technical*, and I am perhaps most interested in the second instance also in the modelling of transcendence, which may be considered a technical accomplishment. I consider the direct and transparent (in vulgar terms: allegorical) relationship between myth and transcendence to be the least bearable. The ideal case - the other extreme - is when the philosopher expresses themselves through the short story (*Diary of a Seducer*).

*The Parasite* is an example of the latter.

### 1.

The strange thing is that myth, in this textual construct, eventually disappears and is absorbed into something else. The threefold division of the story, the linear presentation of events, is

---

\* József Szili (1929–2021) was professor emeritus at University of Miskolc, poet, translator. He was between 1986 and 1999 head of the Department of Literary Theory at the Institute of Literary Studies of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. This essay originally appeared on first publication of *The Parasite* in Hungarian (Kalligram, 1997), in the September issue of *Kalligram* literary magazine. It is being republished on the occasion of the novel’s recent appearance in English (Seagull Books, London, 2020, trans. Paul Olchváry).

presented more or less without any complications, in a purely linear fashion. Which is to say that there is no exposition: the knots merely break up the linearity and the lines that come together in the knots and cross are more or less only the outside lane of the line, the *linea*, the border lines, the ever-present *limes* on either side, and not a different direction. In essence, the story, the story of L., the parasite, is uncomplicated: the binding and unifying functions of the threads are taken over by the close, proximity of the links of the chain, and their - as it were - fraying, as well as their interweaving, thanks to their strong coherence. This interweaving, which in the case of the individual threads, is nothing other than their fraying, and then their forming of a strong weave free of complications thanks to their similarity and closeness, proximity, is in the novel, too, the transformation of the genre from a sort of weave into a kind of non-homogenous weave, which is to say, with the preservation of the fundamental linearity. The genre here that fundamentally creates space and arranges it is the *encyclopaedia*, in the Northrop Frye sense. It is favourable to linearity, the sort of lists that appear, for instance on pages 28–30. The very word “classification” features (pp. 28, 30). But even the beginning of the novel is a list (it is a vast opening, and even says ‘everything was perhaps decided right at the beginning’ - p. 11). The principal motifs are enumerated - the power of language, state of mind, illness/health, truth/lies, and the theme of transcendence appears as early as page 13 (but let us call it, for the sake of order, the eschatological theme). There is also communication by bodily odours, that ‘different gravitation’ (p. 14), and the linear interweaving I referred to earlier. This is the parallel between “physical meaning” and textual meaning: for it is “words. . .” that brought the “debris of the fear lurking in the cells and tissues” to the “surface” (p. 15). The linear presentation of episodes and their characters, their coming and going one after the other, is also a list: the first part is a list of the experiences of the narrator-hero, while L.’s fictitious story is also a list of experiences and episodes. Part III is, meanwhile, a veritable craft checklist (a summary that is both at the level of, and has the meaning of Apocalypse - as the Book of Revelations also “summarises” after the four Gospels). It is here that eschatology is fulfilled as a technical element of the creation of fiction. It begins with the item “sadness” (‘As with him, so this sadness links us to other people, so that we may be each other’s tools. . .’, (p. 219)), and eventually ends with ‘one of the persons of the indivisible God atoned for the sin of Creation. . . and it is possible that Christ’s passion was merely a representation of what has been going on within God since the dawn of the world’ (p. 268).

This eschatology encompasses “physical meaning”, the communication and communion between bodies (‘he placed his senses. . . in the other’s body’, (p. 195)); ‘with this slowness, such a space is created between the two bodies,’ (p. 197); ‘Is it possible that an orgasm is nothing other than the physical manifestation of time, if only for a few seconds?’, (p. 217), as is the involuntary splitting of selves and their heterogeneity, even “within” the individual (‘These selves, split off from the self but nonetheless still unified with me. . .’, (p. 262)) and the problem of the “soul” (‘. . . I must assume a space within the self, that may perhaps be termed emptiness. . .’, (ibid.); ‘I compared the thing they call the soul to emptiness too,’ *ibid.*; ‘God scattered his own emptiness within us. . . We will be the tools of his own salvation,’ (ibid.))

The body and soul are thus likewise organic parts of this eschatology (the word “organic” may have a specific and unique meaning in the context of eschatology: an *organic* order, since it refers to a non-formal dynamic system. In the parallel drawn in the book, this is the system that we can detect in music, ‘which was created several million years ago in the life of cells,’ (p. 138)), as well as body and mind, and the complex of notions on the nature of the relationship between body and soul. Thus, the statements quoted above and others like them fit into this system, again



like a checklist: ‘The body replacing my self detected,’ (p.114), ‘he placed his senses. . . in the other’s body,’ (p. 195), ‘with this slowness, such a space is created between the two bodies,’ (p. 197), ‘there are two kinds of consciousness, two kinds of memory. The never-ending flow of one created in him the immaterial sense of self that can be made abstract, while the other made him realise, on occasions such as this, the fact of fundamental unity, which linked him exclusively to the material. This, however, he considered negative, since in suffering we seek to deny our body. . . the unity of self and body is sustained not by the principal flow of consciousness, but this state, which is like a form of being outside the self,’ (p. 214). One of the directions of activity here – labelled as negative – is *insanity* (as an entry or retreat into a primal universe?), which gains organic expression in this same system of eschatology: ‘With him, the way I managed to separate from my own self was by having the servants of tyranny crowd in his place: thus, it was *idées fixes* that now filled that emptiness that the self, robbed of its own will, left behind,’ (p. 85). The analysis that follows can reproduce, as it were, the chemical structure of the process. One could say it shows us the sketch of the mechanism of the process: ‘The intermediary rendered the presumed events of the past present. As if he were the only proof that the past did not exist. Anyone forced to search time can only experience things that happen in the “present”. . . As if he himself were the event. In that moment, the present is nothing but a riverbed, the banks keeping the process of the past in check, while my self has moved on. . .’ (p. 86).

In this eschatology, the material, and thus the outlines of the physical, have a direct creative influence. This coefficient, as the quote from page 217 shows, is the central pillar of the whole eschatological construct. The discussion on this scale of the “final questions” of physicality is a fundamental possibility of myth, and is a primary meaning that is both within it and can be derived from it. These commentaries from the narrator and the author-narrator, these semi-visions, semi-wonderings or simply ruminations do not in the end form a separate thread in the direction of the clustered chains. Quite the contrary: they would be the projecting threads, if there were any, but this is the interwoven mass of threads that I was talking about. They come sticking out of the linear succession of events itself, and it is thus that they to some extent form a cross-unity, all the while taking part in the construction of the knots and patterns running across. Indeed, in places they themselves are the primary pattern. Their mere presence is a decorative addition, but it is so deeply derived from myth, the process of events, the very material of the action itself, that we cannot consider them patterns printed on the material, that affect only its spatial appearance. All we can think is that these are so deeply of the very material of the weave itself, and within that have come to be so deeply of the very quality of being of that weave itself, that they are similar to a glass dish whose chief decoration are the cracks, fissures, bruises or masses of bubbles – like a miniature Milky Way – in the glass itself, created deliberately during the process of blowing or moulding. Extending this analogy, I would just note that these ruminations are natural accompaniments of the style of presentation. The story, one could say principally, is the story of a rumination. It is true that also present is a series of events borrowed from a more material world, occasionally imbued with the juiciest materials of that material world, in order to ensure that this is at the forefront of our attention. The events, however, are not primarily taking place there, but in the finite processes of the analysis of memory, and indeed the precise, analytical observation of all action and emotional nuance. The nuance of constructing meaning also finds fulfilment in these actions.

The deciding factor therefore is not that myth and the commentary-ruminations, or the observation and analysis of the rumination-action can lead to the unpacking of the meanings of



eschatology, but that meaning – as a direct content of observation – is always present, is constantly constructed, and with the need for generalisation, always attains local significance.

The style of presentation also conforms to this system. The tone presenting the meanderings of memory attuned to the meanderings of the mind is the same as that of the very meanderings of the mind. It is not only homogeneity that is important throughout, but that there is a duality that maintains distance. That is what renders it a series of events in itself, and at the same time an ornamentation that looks clear, but is thus merely transparent. The significant lines I have highlighted above are woven from the same material as the lines of observation and presentation.

If we place the whole within the framework of the novel-essay, it will simplify our impressions. This is, thanks to the naming of the genre, the caste or ghetto that accommodates it and brands it with its identifying marks; and, judging from a certain viewpoint, it is as if it were these marks and nothing else, as if it existed only for them. In reality, the novel and the essay only diverge from each other in certain extreme cases and in temporary phases: the pure encyclopaedic nature of the text may be retained as a kind of ontologically activated lack in the action of the novel. The lack of the eschatological coefficient also regularly reveals the quality – the required degree of quality. The novel-essay nature of *Prae* is only mixed in form in terms of the consciousness that is narrowed down onto the action of the novel. As an encyclopaedic creation, with its ever-present and cosmic lists, it conforms to its genre. Indeed, this is probably one of the chief directions of the fulfilment of the novel form: the encyclopaedic work of linguistic imagination.

*The Parasite* is, in terms of genre, slightly related to *Prae*, but its musing style, its way of linking words and its construction of images can also be taken as a direct effect if we cannot prove that the inherent stylistic possibilities of this kind of writing do not offer a wide enough set of possibilities to present other alternatives. But even if we cannot prove this, it is a fact that *The Parasite* is denser (stockier) than *Prae*, more unified and more clear (more clearly focussed on one subject).

But is it clear enough? It is a Johnny-come-lately. Formally, all the places are taken, there is no more room at the table. We ought to clear a space, or spaces. It is not easy, though. The reordering will take a while, if it will ever happen at all. After all, it is hardly the role of the creative work simply to join the ranks. And its potential rank is its very birthright.

## 2.

The linguistic manner of the narration reveals the hand of a master. The orchestration is, to my mind, to be compared with the greats. The triangulation points of the work's ontological place are Henry James's *The Golden Bowl*, Herman Hesse's *The Glass Bead Game*, and Herman Broch's *The Death of Virgil*. But we can mention others. Thematically, we could include William Burroughs's *The Naked Lunch*. As well as others.

What is decisive in this orchestration is first and foremost the complete unity of tone. There is no grasping after more fitting tones, no wandering around the beaten paths of linguistic creation. The intonation is the same, and yet at every turn – at every turn of every development – the inner light of discovery is present in the discovered, and the vibrato of the musical core itself. Fortunately, these small linguistic phenomena are presented without directing the



limelight of the reader's inner stage onto themselves (or what is even more insufferable: on the presence of the author himself or herself).

In this sense, the book is a story of the drama of the language of novels (its characters, action, complications, conflicts, developments, disasters, releases and catharses), or rather it is a list, a stocktake, including the toolkit of the inner forces of the possible paths of the story, its need for motion. And all of this happens without it ever for a moment turning into an external poetics. It is internalised not according to appearances, but its own reality. The linguistic movements, the movements of memory, its gestures, the scraps of song that bespeak understanding and feeling, the examples of eschatological fulfilment and the fragments of the Gospels are not merely some kind of accompaniment. Here, they are themselves the music, the music of the novel as a musical drama. It is in them that the principal action is played.

The linguistic ability that took on this task is of extraordinary power, also as an individual, authorial accomplishment. But at this stage, it is not this comparative and examining role of the critic that is important or interesting, but the results themselves.

Above all, there is the art of constructing the sentences, developing them, conducting their rhythm and melody. This mode of editing is in some sense a visual evocation of the dynamics of sensory observation, linguistic consciousness, and the birth of thoughts. That means that there can be no question of attracting attention to this process, even for a moment. Thus the stunning metaphor-creations are presented to us couched in the everyday tones of the intellectual's modes of expression, in most cases not sticking out of that at all. Here and there the process itself comes to the foreground, it is about IT, about the sides of the HERO's personality, which is to say memory, time in memory (p. 86), scoring the 'music of the personality' (p. 26), the places of integrating into the world order, and the presentation of linked factors (which is also a part of eschatology). The fortissimo start of the novel ('If...') is, in the very first sentence, a direct summoning of the spirit of the power of language (faith 'in the power of the written word') and its linking to the mental state and its extreme negativity (psychiatrist or writing - *ibid.*), entering into the crime and punishment and health/illness problematic. Formally, this is a complete outlining of the topic and an enumeration, while at the same time being a huge linguistic intonation. What the start of Chapter I once more elevates to the highest level is a phrase that is almost akin to the beginning of Genesis:

'Perhaps it was all decided at the very beginning' (p. 11). "Everything", "very beginning", "was decided", and "perhaps." Which is to say that this is no longer merely the riddle of completeness, of beginnings, alternative ways of being, and the frustrating impossibility of decision, but also the definitiveness of the "decided". The inevitable nature of tragedy. And even if only symbolically, that "decided" already carries within it the image of failure. The "perhaps" refers to the uncertainty of defining the timing: if not at the very beginning, then later, but at some point *yes*.

The action takes place mostly in the narrator's consciousness. Even when the action is shown, the background is so abstract in its contours that it is like the Bible, especially the locations of the New Testament. But we mustn't be fooled even when for instance a face is "represented" (e.g. pp. 68–69) with endless detail, or when the theme of the "woman before the mirror" appears (p. 129). Increasingly, it is linguistic expression, evocation, classification, analysis, stocktaking, the problematisation according to the categories of good/evil, beautiful/ugly, sensitive/harsh, true/false, real/unreal, sacred/profane, as well as the ultimate dynamics of doubt and the resolution of doubt that are pushed into the foreground in order to embed the



episodes (from the one-off modifiers, verb forms, similes and metaphors, as well as grammatical constructions to the larger individual sections of the multi-layered action/commentary on the ruminations) in the eschatology of the work's ultimate question, and those event processes that lead towards them or are themselves part of this final epiphany.

The chief driver in this dynamic is the sphere of influence of linguistic expression. Within this, the word choice, word order and the placing of stress, the length or briefness of snatches and sentences, the links between sentences, the rhythm and horizons of references forward and back, all work together. This, together with the division of the blocks of meaning and their presentation either in narrow or wider columns and the introduction of other looser or tighter formations, represent that system of linguistic music which is almost impossible to appraise separately when talking about novels. If it receives too much attention, it can seem that true *poesis* has been replaced with some sort of overheated linguistic eroticism. Thus, it is perhaps dangerous to mention this, even as praise. Further: the reader does not have to feel this. The goal is for them not to sense it at all, or appreciate it; it is enough if they let themselves be borne along on its current.

I would like to highlight only one factor: that of the metaphors.

It is as if the construction of the universe were here repeated in the words making up the metaphors. The reference points of the meta-space of the metaphors here are made up of directions in space and time, proportions, aggregates, wave and particle motion; the world of the finiteness of the senses, the relationship between cells and tissues, as well as kinds of creatures, animal and human bodies, and body parts, human faces, spiritual movements, memory, attention, sensory perception, the power and relationships of reason, the arts, above all music, and finally ethics, aesthetics, ontology, gnoseology and axiology. This, too, is a sort of stocktake of the world, building always directly onto the first-person course of life.

Space-time reason: 'With the bleeding together of inner and outer space. . .we are surprised to experience the progressive strengthening of a different kind of meaning,' (p. 15). 'My passion suspended the logic of causal relations, so that it could broaden out that corridor of time in which everything could take place,' (p. 74).

The layering of feeling in anatomy and geography: ' . . .wonder dried to his bones and muscles in thin layers. . . ' (p. 197).

Transfer of desire and energy: 'That fresh energy. . .that he will direct onto the girlfriend arouses the man's desire,' (p. 152).

Cosmic geometry of forests: 'the vertical freedom of trees,' (p. 168).

Interpersonal dynamics: 'I call this balancing force a force equal to the meaning of the body. . . ' (p. 15); ' . . .they were not afraid of his possibly breaking out, but from that presence whose axis was balanced by that terrifying pair of eyes,' (p. 29); 'There is a beauty derived from resistance,' (ibid.); 'gravitation of bodies' (p. 103).

Meteorological observation: 'They could be similar to those streams that come to still waters on a late autumn dawn, resting like a thin membrane till it melts away in the morning,' (p. 171).

Appendix to the spiritual osmosis of the face: ' . . .the anxiety perceptible in the gaze slowly settles on the face, which absorbs these shadowy waves like a sponge,' (p. 30).

Sexual alchemy: 'This secretion ought to be collected in a test tube. . .In one word, he was studying the hidden chemistry of desire. . . ' (p. 172).



Geographic proportions are the measure of the world of feelings: 'His face became a seismograph of suffering...' (p. 66).

Tunnels for pupil: 'She looked into his eyes. She saw two wide tunnels...' (p. 36).

And everywhere, language - spoken, written, body language, the language that exists in a logic of its own: '...the legs, those ever-elegant quotation marks that enclosed - now straight, now slightly curved - that uncertain certain area from his loins to his feet' (p. 144); 'Yes, it wasn't her talking at all, but her body,' (p. 98); 'She used her hands, that extended organ of language, as confidently as the dumb. . . she stabbed the air with her hands, as if it were there, at that invisible point that she was to find the meaning that she had previously been searching for in vain with her grammatical modifiers' (ibid.); '...fears packaged in grammar are less terrifying than their loose companions. . .' (p. 272); 'Every single word has its own chemical valency that we can bind or release with another' (ibid.). Meaning 'occasionally no less than mocking the original intention...' (p. 273).

This "becoming language" is in fact complete in the section preceding the final chapter. Here, the primary linguistic action becomes visible from scene to scene. Or, more simply: the unpacking of the action is nothing other than an essay on language, specifically, its written appearance: '...there are cases where the secret migration of sentences towards one another can definitely be discerned, and this can completely transform the typographic framework of a page, though of course you can never catch it actually *in flagrante*. . . The predicate of the main sentence at this point gets together with the verbs of any sentences that cross its path, just like the modifiers which are particularly keen on this sort of adventuring, since in this free movement they find opportunities for intimacy that are practically akin to rumpy-pumpy. . .' (p. 275). The personal relationships of sentences is also discussed, but in the process a meaning comes to light that could stand for the entire work itself: 'This hidden chemistry of dissolution and relaxation was a great help to me, because I could be sure that my compulsive fantasies, which had hidden behind the bastions of my words, would also be subject to this breakup. In the juices of the over-ripe fruit, fermentation is already present, you only have to set it aside until the squashy tissues reach the very border of putrefaction. Thus I, too, waited for my manic thoughts to dissolve...' (p. 275). Linguistic questions are raised here that have never been discussed anywhere else, like that above, the "aroma of sentences", or another, the "framing of sentences": 'Those who can only recall a forgotten thought or memory by jumping off from specific words will be very familiar with the contradictory logic of this operation,' (p. 276). The excitement of observation and analysis is transferred to this level: 'The relief battalions of my scattered sentences were only visualised on the level of graphic signs, which is to say I had to decipher their meaning one by one,' (p. 279). And then the *statis* of language, silence: 'Every single word, every accent, every clause had to be absorbed into this glittering flow. Not a single preposition or conjunction could remain aloof from this dumbness, which was graver than the silence of a falling suicidal body the moment before it touched the ground. The sentence was imbued with this silence from the capital letter at the start to the significant ending of its full stop,' (p. 278).

This part is almost certainly the pinnacle of the musical development of the themes. If we really wanted to, we could see in this development a polyphony built on the system of chords, and which lays out the synchronicity of the chords in the linearity of a parallelism of a different aspect. One or two of Bach's solo sonatas and partitas, when played very fast, give the impression of polyphony without having any actually parallel parts sounding at the same time. If





this is caused by the pressure of the impotence of our understanding, can we imagine a polyphony which, to the contrary, despite its prolonged nature, as an overall impression produces rapid changes at the edges of symphonic effects?

When the “personal relationships of sentences” begin to contain the structural relationships of the imprint of the narrator’s most personal relationships and within them the confession of the novel, as well as the possible self-knowledge and the impossibility of navigating the self inherent in writing or expressing them, and the lack of answers (linguistic silence, dumbness), with – at one and the same time – comparisons that judge the process itself (finding juices, putrefaction, suicide), the work becomes complete: the fiction, and the fiction within the fiction (the invented tale of L.). This is the organic union of linguistic expression as a primary given and as fiction. There is no further. This is a threshold, this “no further” is written in the very laws of matter, and what comes after it, if anything does come after it, can be none other than falling into the temporal terminus of the black hole that stops all light from leaving.

In this phase, in this essay-story, one finds the screenplay of a typographic action movie. At the same time, this is also the fulfilment of that textual construction and mode of linguistic presentation, that linguistic style that I considered right from the start the manifestation of “linguistic intellectuality”. Here, it is this linguistic ability that is constantly speaking, it is this language itself that talks. And as I said, this for me is the greatest textual experience in this text.

### 3.

If this is the thing to which I am most sensitive, it is no wonder that this sensibility should be the basis of my fastidiousness, and that my doubts, if I have any, should also arise in connection with this.

Let us examine these at the most basic level. The language is that of intellectual expression, so-called literary language, and within that of a mode of expression that is somewhat colourless, but that does not indulge in the extremes of stylization, which the new linguistic sensibility calls, with some justification, literary-translation style.

This category today is very broad. Even in Hungary, the linguistic libertinism of the so-called postmodern (or whatever) style, or the style that may be referred to as such, has rendered it apparently limitless. That there are boundaries only becomes apparent when we are already out in the thick of the minefield. That is how strict the boundary conditions are here.

The range of comparisons and metaphors on offer seems inexhaustible. The possibilities of Baroque blossoming and transposition of intellectual language into metaphor (and back) are limitless, and the quotations given above can be supplemented with some real beauties: ‘I consider the human body the reactor of well and badly intentioned forces, which even in its resting state is constantly radiating,’ (p. 247). Or (in a Biblically sententious style): ‘Because the sacrifice of anyone who, even if it is unconscious, while relieving the other of their burden, cracks under the strain themselves, is worthless,’ (p. 253). And, with even more striking ballad-like magical power: ‘Maybe that’s why it is no coincidence that where there has been much love, the Earth is more fertile,’ (p. 106). And again (though in a profane version): ‘...you have to pile so much joy on her that she gets to the point where she cannot take in any more wonder at all’ (p. 191. Note the discrepancies in the overly refined system of allusions in “so much”, “to the point” and “where”). Or (with a realistic but overly sensitive decadence): ‘She thought that, from





then on, she could lift her thin, nervous fingers up to her face without consequences, for instance when she was lighting up' (p. 105). Or (suggesting dumbfoundedness): '...the eyes almost burn away the entire surface of the face' (p. 29). Or (as a scene of self- and character-perception): 'I didn't dare look in her eyes, because I was afraid of humiliation, of holding up a mirror to her deviation' (ibid.). And this, too, is a linguistic drama, a real Webster-like tragedy in half a sentence: 'This is perhaps the only fear we await' (p. 216). The situational comedy of irony is also couched into sentences: 'in case the other hadn't noticed, this was a lyrical soul ruminating fruitfully' (p. 155).

This choice of language, which is brushing the borders of over-refinement, is the same, even in everyday language and its *langue* nature. It has to carry on a constant, individual and *parole*-style struggle for its existence, in order to stay within the bounds of over-refinement, in order that its refinements, without which it is not itself, should remain acceptable, but at the same time still has to make itself stand out, what's more at every point, from the obviously everyday "language of translation." The linguistic sensitivity that is the equivalent of this sensibility finds expression in the text of the novel, perhaps with direct references to allergic symptoms as a reference to a sensitivity to words: 'she [considered] the expression "piercing gaze" excessive' (p. 173); 'she found the word rule exaggerated' (p. 192); 'She did not like the word sadness' (p. 190). It is the meeting of the highlighted everyday and linguistic perversion that makes it possible for single sentences to have as much power as they do in this work. And not only because 'that sentence crushed in me even the memory of those two easy months, washing it right out of me and leaving behind nothing but despair,' (p. 116) - for this could be the linguistic result of any everyday love story - but because this sensitivity is the same as that which creates the story of L., and which caps it off with the passage on the special sensitivity to typographical meaning in the sense of 'the perversion of words' (de Saussure).

The way it describes "an act of love" or even just "a face" could well (perhaps? Maybe? Who's to say?) have its place among world literature. The way M's crying face is evoked on pages 65–66 is a good example: 'At first, her face only twisted barely perceptibly, then thin, irregular lines appeared beneath her eyes, and later, around her chin. She kept her mouth tightly closed. . . I will never forget that unitary gaze emerging from those countless pairs of eyes. It was madness that kept it together, which I felt to be incomprehensibly distant, but at the same time always familiar. I had to define this look, which is why I called it madness, though I would have been more precise if. . .'

Bravissimo! From the phenomenology of a crying face we have ended up – with the constant peripatetic descriptions – at the phenomenology of linguistic labelling, and even further, with the addition of a period of time: 'Today, I am almost sure that this was all the mirror of my own detached state, and M was merely a vector.' Bravissimo again! The circle is complete, and we are now at the eschatologically significant function of the "vector". But there's more: 'Our love-making was a continuation of M's tears. It was not our bodies but our fears that embraced one another, leaving behind us the so-called easy territory of sadness, which had merely brushed the borders of our being. . .'. And so on. Because there is still more.

And make no mistake, these heights that almost take us to places where the air around us begins to thin are no exception – they are the fundamental level of this text.

My enthusiasm may seem excessive within the circles of initiated professionals, or those who consider ourselves (sic) as such – in my own circles, even, but this is how far my initiated status goes. This is where it starts to strain against my initiated professional life.



There is a more peaceful, but just as wonderful, description of a face, on p. 32: ‘She talked without self-pity, and yet her face still underwent a discernible change. . .’ And finally, ‘her face was once more taken over by that particular light. . .’. As a companion to this, there is also the metamorphosis of “photography” on pp. 36–37.

These “peripatetic descriptions”, all cut from the same cloth and all done in one breath, are both natural and amazing – of course, their function is to dissolve in naturalness, the unconscious modes of presentation of the first-person monologue. But even so, an incredible sense of rhythm still makes itself felt from behind the linear passages of the book which orders specific parts together or apart, or rather which organises them in differentiated succession. “Redacts.” For instance, that “ode to joy” (it is beautiful, in a new textual mode of beauty that is a fantastic *postmodern* feat, in that original literary critical sense of postmodern that is both a secondary continuation of the modernism of the turn of the century, as well as an inward progress of its denial). This ode (or rather, rhapsody, at once evoking Sappho’s “*Phainetai moi kenos isos theoisin. . .*” and the tone of *What Shall I Call You* by Sándor Petőfi), stands its ground faced with the comparable outpourings of joy whether in prose or verse in world literature. It goes on for three pages (pp. 101–103) uninterrupted after the first bout of lovemaking with L., before ending up with that specific sentence that precipitates the new crisis and brings about the return of the old, followed immediately by a precise description of the first impression: ‘She pronounced the sentence as naturally as if she were merely saying. . .’. And, following that in a strict rhythm, comes what I call here – for simplicity’s sake – “the dirge”, and the transformation into absolute retrospective jealousy. This is accompanied by enormous images, the apocalyptic revelations of the theme of loss of love, the torpid changes in sound and volume of the (crackling with brass) Secessionist Bruckner symphonies (in the text, too: ‘This is the toneless music of happy and unhappy love, with its one hundred-beat outbursts, thousand-cross changes, and the future claims of the lawless codes of Eros. . .’ (p. 106)), and from the few truly Hungarian tones (a part of the “literary translation” style is a text’s translatability: in this sense, this text is related to a degree of internationalism found in paintings and music) the softest *Appeal*, intended to be inaudible, comes through: ‘. . .and your hand on the wet glass, | the veins standing out upon it. . .’

Here the hand is on a wine glass, but in the continuous tense that doesn’t matter: ‘Say, if she touched a wine glass,’ (p. 105). It is this passage that leads to the matter of “The Story of L.”. This is so literally so that the novel ends with the same phenomenon with which this glass-scene begins: ‘I managed somehow to deal with these images, but it was much harder if the trajectory of the hand movement formed a somewhat doubtful arc with some object,’ (ibid.). The final line of the novel after the submission of the manuscript is: ‘. . .I’m going to turn to a psychiatrist. It was only somewhat later that I noticed that her fingers made a somewhat bent triangle with the pages,’ (p. 294).

Masterful.

#### 4.

Secessionist? Only insofar as Szentkuthy or Henry James are, too. It is mostly the passages in a similar tone to Szentkuthy that make it so. They could be from *Prae*: ‘L. stood the man’s gaze without fear. She seemed to see a half-globe with coloured panels nailed onto it, which from time



to time would emit a different coloured light. What she found oddest was that this gaze did not reach her in straight lines, as if the line of the gaze had arced up at some point in the space between them to make a fine curve and thence to descend, slowly and softly, down onto her face,' (p. 172). Yes, they could be from *Prae*, but it is obvious that that is not where they have come from. They are not an imitation, but are very much post-Szentkuthy; they contain all that distance that serves to differentiate everything that went before *Prae* from what came after. The unity of character and action as they become the ornamentation, and the way the ornamentation burrows into the action of the text are reminiscent of Szentkuthy and of Henry James. But it is not situating it in the history of stylistic development that locates this work, rather the accomplishment. It is the thematic art of empathy that does so. It is the author's creative, and creatively imitating and executive *poesis*, the ability to place himself into the lines of the faces, the gestures, words, sentences, fictions within fictions, frameworks, and reactions, the ability to feel them all. Not only is 'I wasn't living my life, I was living hers,' the fundamental basis of the work (p. 64), but the elevation of empathy into absolute, universal, and absurd is also a theme. Empathy and schizophrenia. This duality is the unity here. Even at the level of whether God exists or not: '...God could be the perfect example of perfectly developed schizophrenia,' (p. 262). But such is 'the guarding of the future memory of passing on,' (p. 215) as well, and also that 'we have mixed up the hard fact of immortality with the myth of wanting to live forever, though of course it is only non-existence that could wish for that...' (ibid.).

## 5.

The genre of *The Parasite* is parasitical in nature. Insofar as it is *encyclopaedic*, this label does not even refer to a substantial nature: here the novel, the confession, the essay, the essay-novel or novel-essay is what may seem substantial. We can experience it the other way, too, but without doubt there is an advantage in this regard for text complexes like *Prae*, *Finnegan's Wake*, or the Bible itself. In their cases, "encyclopaedia" can be a primary genre label, though it is still debatable to what extent this sort of genre-specificity is integral and independent of character.

Even if we call this merely a novel-essay, we still have to refer to some kind of symbiosis. We can say that in terms of its genre, its self-identity is floating and doubtful.

In any case, the problems of identity and identification are present throughout. In the entire text, it is always the suspicion of being deprived of the WHOLE, the sense of being split, the terror of being different, the desire or striving for coupling, identification, sympathy or empathy that drive the action, or are the action itself.

The capacity for empathy is so strong in the achievement of the author/narrator-narrator/author that the myth presented in fact acts against individual alienation. Not only does this narrator-hero arouse our secret empathy and jealousy for his ability so perfectly and with such an art to place himself outside himself, his heroic effort at the preservation of unity, the maintenance of the WHOLE or the reinstatement of it, can be quite constructive, in fact. The emphasis is transferred from the harshness evident everywhere to gentleness, the narrator's "cursed demon" fades into a powerless name, the constant awareness of guilt, the suffering it causes, the source of the allures of the seeming saviour of self-accusation, with its concomitant sweating of blood. As if the authorial narrator were reflecting the power of an even more authorial narrator, whose human and poetical greatness was expressed in his empathetic



abilities, eschatological realisations, power for artistic presentation and his sentences suggesting some deep wisdom. The first-person narration hides within itself the possibility of the contradiction that we can empathise with the negative hero or the hero's negativity. The power of the description and empathy on display here is so great that it makes it verily impossible to give credence to the detailed self-accusation.

The central theme in this negativity itself serves to underline the positive statement that 'man and woman are one...'. A doubtful or never conceived-of paradisaical state is never for one moment present here, or the certainty of Greek tales, nor does it even wink out from the background as a secret hidden item or thought: in this sense, it is not, it does not exist. Only its absolute lack, that perfect negativity, evokes it. Because anything that exists through not existing to such a degree can cloak itself in the mysterious, untouchable, tempting appearance of being.

Is it a weakness of this work, a revelatory shortcoming of the writer's creativity, that the presentation acts to such a degree against the listed objects and the story (myth) presented as an example for it?

The author-narrator-hero I-persona penetrates the mysteries of humanity, divided into two sexes, in the manner of Tiresias. The punishment for inner blindness is outer blindness. The result of untrammelled desire, of passion that penetrates the mystery of the difference of the other sex, the unenlightened interference with the only natural mode of (re-)unification, the complete identification created at the cost of a lack of insight, and at the cost of the loss of absolute empathy and a determined single sex, is becoming a seer unable any longer to influence external events. In the novel, the itemised execution of the myth of the novel suggests that after the end of the verbal part, it is the clouding of the narrator-hero's mental state that follows, this kind of "blindness." But the contrary actually happens, and this suggests that through the text's presentation of the – until then – blind empathy and in the apocalyptic manner of the entire text overall, the author-narrator with his double presence, or rather with the reader's thus implicated interpretation, demonstrates the final self-fulfilment of the spiritual forces, which is recognition and enlightenment.

This is also a sign of the work's artistic greatness. The entirety of the text proves able to form an infinitely complex metaphor that is one great unity, with many sides, mirrored on every part of its crystalline form – both inside and out.

Budapest, 6 January 1997.

*Translated from the Hungarian by Mark Baczoni.*

