Notes on Miklos Szentkuthy, **Prae**

(The essays I am posting on Humanities Commons are also on Librarything and Goodreads. These aren’t reviews. They are thoughts about the state of literary fiction, intended principally for writers and critics involved in seeing where literature might be able to go. Each one uses a book as an example of some current problem in writing. The context is my own writing project, described [here](#), theorized [here](#). All comments and criticism are welcome!)

**The Ultimate Failed Modernist Hyper-Novel**

**Prae** (1934, second edition 1980, English translation 2014) is one of the most important prewar modernist novels, along with Finnegans Wake, Musil, and Proust. Volume 1, is now available in English; it is 750 pages long, and the Hungarian original is 1,225 pages. (See "A Comedy of Ideas: Miklós Szentkuthy, **Prae**," 1981, posted on Hungarian Literature Online.) The entire book in English will be as long as Finnegans Wake or half of Proust.

The translation of **Prae** has not yet been widely reviewed, and I will take as my point of departure a brief review by Ágnes Orzóy, in *The Quarterly Conversation* (March 16, 2015). Orzóy suggests four principal meanings. I summarize them here, in order from less to more convincing:

1. **Prae** slows reading. "One needs to slow down, and then slow down even more, to read his sentences. In this sense, reading Szentkuthy in our speedy age is untimely but therapeutic: like a long walk in a forest or by the sea, it reminds us that we should live more slowly and attentively." This, however, doesn’t seem like a description of **Prae**: it could apply as well to late Joyce, to some Beckett, to all of Celan, to Nabokov… it could apply endlessly.

2. **Prae** changes perception of the world. "There is another way in which reading **Prae** is a peculiar experience. After working her way through those endless pages about a thousand ways of perceiving a gesture, a wrinkle in a dress, a habit, or an idea, the reader finds herself resonating with landscapes and works of art in completely new ways…. reading **Prae** can be compared to training, say, for a martial art—while training, you sometimes feel that all you do is scream and sweat and kick and jump, but it eventually leads to an altered consciousness…. **Prae** is not only a preparation for writing but also… for living." This, I think, is critical nonsense: any strong work changes how we see.

3. "One way to characterise **Prae**," Orzóy writes, "is as the enactment of perception and artistic expression. Life is viewed as an endless series of masks and metamorphoses," but "as things metamorphose… they become even more themselves… plus something else that has an even more powerful… existence," and that surplus is "artistic expression—form—if not the principle of life itself."

4. "**Prae**… is also about inexpressibility," things that are unrepresentable." And it is precisely this unrepresentability that **Prae** tackles, while admitting that… behind the words—behind Szentkuthy’s hyperintelligent and hypersensitive prolixity—the cantus firmus… is “No Word,” that is, inexpressibility."

These last two are right, I think, but what matters is how they work in any given passage; otherwise they are the sorts of straightforward philosophic claims that **Prae** itself continuously elaborates, undermines, and dissolves into its more complex ongoing meditations. Here I will suggest how a close reading might alter these last two conclusions.
The entire book is dense with breathless philosophizing. Most pages are taken up with analyses of phenomena, feelings, and ideas, and many pages contain theories, often structured as two-, three-, and four-part analyses. Szentkuthy had recently read Heidegger and psychoanalysis, and his text shows a wide, if diffuse, awareness of Kantian tradition, Platonism, Romanticism, medieval and classical philosophy, contemporaneous psychology, some recent physics (Schrodinger), and modernist fiction, including Proust and Joyce.

Occasionally Szentkuthy's analyses are perceptive, and I suspect that is what leads readers like Orzóy to praise his insight. But many more are opaque, mainly because the range of metaphors and allusions is at once too vague and to extravagant to make sense. Let me quote an example at some length to give a sense of this. It is the opening of a section titled "The three relations of substance and day-to-day reality: close kinship, barely touching, absolute otherness" (p. 194). The opening paragraphs set out those three relations, one after another, as in a philosophic essay:

"...the first step was the 'truth' grade, at which at which object and its essence were together like the Laocoon Group, where the extremities of the suffering and strangled man are the serpents that squeeze him to death: the state of identity poisoning.
"The second step, when the 'substance' is merely reflected on the object and sometimes brushes it: the object endeavors to work its essence out of itself, but in the end it gets no more than a coquettish tongue lashing from its essence: the essence does not infiltrate the pores of the object like bacilli, that would push it into a deadly 'substancitis,' but nibble a bit of it here and there, or keep dropping in strange little puzzle case-endings.
"Finally, the third step, a logical culmination of 'identity': in other words, the alterity grade: when the essence is still not airy enough, even in momentary silhouette shape it is still an excessive mimicry of the object, then it hatches out of the empty space of materiality like a foreign lining that appears on turning a glove inside out (the birth of Venus emerging from the sea is in point of fact a similar kind of lining-disclosure: the reverse of the blind sea brought to public attention), a second-degree nothing hatching from a first-degree nothing that humiliates the first as a crude 'something'; otherness, which is alone capable of meeting the requirements of 'spirituality' (geometry, not ethos), of absurd ethereality; the least common point between object and substance induces thickening, and thus an exacerbation, which cannot happen with the therapy of otherness..."

It is possible to read this, and all of Prae, as what would have to be called a kind of poetry: that is, you'd read for the images, the rhetoric, and not the sense. But I think this is not what Szentkuthy expected. Szentkuthy is in earnest when he exposit his theories, and he is serious when he analyzes perception, imagination, and conceptualization. He wants readers to follow his thought. But if I do -- if I read this passage carefully, for example, trying to extract his claims -- I am stopped by the looseness of his metaphors. He chooses his metaphors quickly and loosely, and they don't always make sense even when his meaning can be deduced. In some cases, like "strange little puzzle case-endings," he has something in mind but doesn't bother to expand on it. In other cases, such as the "blind sea brought to public attention," he's just writing too quickly to make good sense. Presumably what he meant here was "unseen ocean made visible," not "blind sea brought to public attention." In yet other cases, like the notion that essence "hatches out of the empty space of materiality like a foreign lining," he's just writing carelessly. Linings don't hatch, and they aren't foreign.

(A parenthesis on the visual: these same issues extend to Szentkuthy's use of visual images. It's often unpleasant to visualize them because they are so carelessly chosen and evoked. In the opening pages, for example, there is a sunflower, a "Venetian ship" in the moonlight, an ellipse, radiating lines. His images are schematic and ugly, even though he does not mean them to be: he tends to favor simple visual images, but he doesn't think visually, so the images are crude, cliched, and harsh in comparison to his kaleidoscopic conceptualizations.)

If Szentkuthy were a student of mine, and this was presented as nonfiction or philosophy, I'd mark up every sentence. In order to write philosophy he would have needed both a line-by-line
editor and a censor. But this is fiction, so the question is how to understand 700 pages (with many more to come) of pseudo-logical pseudo-reasoning, when the author himself, and the narrator, both clearly ask readers to understand the text not only as poetry, but also as argument.

What drives the narrator in Prae is a desire to understand, but he is continuously frustrated not only by his own hyper-vigilant introspection and doubt, but also by his skittishness, his inability to settle down to consider one thing at a time. Prae is a novel of wheel-spinning, frantic, anxious, delirious (in Salvador Dali's sense of that word) conceptualizing. Its affect is vertiginous instability: the rug is pulled out from under the narrator's feet by his own restlessness. There is an urgency that drives him on, so he repeatedly forgets his own insights and pushes on, and past, other insights, like a man stumbling on a treadmill.

The theory of the modernist novel
An endorsement be a writer named Pal Nagy, printed in the inside pages of the book (and probably translated expressly for this edition), claims "virtually all of the problems of the old and the 20th century experimental novel can be found" in Prae. Certainly it's possible to read Prae as a hypertrophied, often monstrous, outgrowth of several tendencies of the modernist novel. If Walser, Gombrowicz, and Musil are intensely introspective, then Szentkuthy is crazily intensely introspective. If Musil, Proust, and others exemplify a moment in which the novel felt it had to be reconciled with the essay form, then Szentkuthy's book is the last gasping breaths of both the essay and the narrative. Plot is almost completely absent here: it's nearly strangled by the compulsive thinking. And if structural and linguistic complexity and extravagant length are necessities for the novel, as in Finnegans Wake or Arno Schmidt, then Szentkuthy is the author who works the hardest to come up with a new species of complexity and a new endlessness.

But the book is careless in its elaborations. For me, the most compelling part of the book is Chapter 1, which sets out the narrator's attempts to construct a novel. The entire book opens with an outline, in three parts (A, B, C), with several subdivisions, intended to support the production of a "supra-fictional stratum" that includes both an "object-novel" ("that is the ontological branch") and a "hyperaction'-novel" (that is the mania for fictiveness): in other words, a contemporary novel that has both essayism and narrative. This is Musil's problematic, and Proust's, and in Prae it is introduced in the most extravagant imaginable fashion: the first 44 pages of the novel are an extended, systematic elaboration of the outline on the first page, as the narrator struggles, and of course fails, to establish a ground for his novel, which of course never quite takes place.

This is not the same as the issue he works with "Towards the One and Only Metaphor" (1935), where "the ontological branch" becomes a matter of "biological" experiments, even thought it is still contrasted against a "pathology of consciousness," "self-analytical, and overscrupulous." The "pathology" is more focused, in "Towards the One and Only Metaphor," on language, because Szentkuthy is thinking of Joyce's Work in Progress; but the "ontological" tends toward Szentkuthy's own biological and scientific or scientistic interests, and his own theories of "Baroque" or "Hellenistic-roccoco" writing. As László Németh pointed out, Prae's affinities lie more with Kantian critique than Proust or Musil. (This is in Rainer Hanshe's essay, "Entering the World Stage: Miklós Szentkuthy's Ars Poetica"; Hanshe is founder of Contra Mundum, which published the English translation of Prae.) But Szentkuthy's affinities with Kantian critique, or with modernist science, are his own idiosyncratic choices. The problematic of his generation, and the reason Prae is still of interest, is the impossible meeting of essayism (whatever its subject) and endlessly refined, knowingly "pathological" thoughtfulness.

I hope every novelist and every historian of the modern and contemporary novel reads the opening 44 pages of Prae: they are the best example of the impassable swamps that lie in wait for any writer who still wrestles with the problems Proust, Musil, and Szentkuthy first experienced. Not much of this problematic has been solved: the novel remains "unwritten," "unwritable," a "novel in parenthesis," a "meta-novel," an "anti-novel": those are all Szentkuthy's formulations, written eighty years ago.