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II. Szilveszter második élete by Miklos Szentkuthy

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and courage, be rehabilitated. The 150,000 ought to be remembered and mourned; they bear no responsibility for either the defeat or the war.

Although Nemeskürty's critics tend to agree in their positive evaluation of his *Requiem*, they question some of his theories. No doubt, the present book cannot be considered the last word on the subject. A more comprehensible assessment of the European political climate of the time, for instance, might put things in a clearer perspective. Nevertheless, "Requiem for an Army" is a timely, engaging and passionate book capable of arousing compassion and indignation.

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Miklós Szentkuthy. *II. Szilveszter második élete*. Budapest. Magvető. 1972. 427 pages.

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Miklós Szentkuthy started his career as a tireless experimenter. While still an undergraduate, he published a 630-page novel, *Prae*, in which he set himself the task of telling the adventure of creative writing, thus anticipating the aim of French avant-garde novelists of the 1960s and 70s. After World War II he took another direction, and wrote biographical and historical novels as well as grotesque short stories. In retrospect, one must regard this second phase of his activity as a blind alley. "The Second Life of Sylvester II," the seventh volume of a novel sequence entitled "The Breviary of St. Orpheus," begun in 1937, marks a return to the most serious problems of twentieth-century novel writing which had been the author's main concern in his early years.

Pope Sylvester II, the would-be hero, is dead on the first page of the book. Is it a narrator, then, who speaks about the deceased to the reader? Or is it the spirit of Sylvester who meditates on the past and the future as his body is being embalmed? The text is so discontinuous that the reader cannot decide whether he is reading Sylvester's imaginary confession to Esther, his love of Hungarian origin, or an ironical narrator's burlesque of history. Many questions are asked which remain unanswered. Chronology is dismissed, and it is tacitly acknowledged that history is nonlinear. The novelist's apparent intention is to create a parody of historical romances, which is why he writes only about the second, i.e., the purely fictive life of Sylvester. The traditional story is discarded: elements of fiction are consistently interrupted and in-

validated by the narrator. The book has no hero: in his second life Sylvester is everybody and nobody.

Szentkuthy has a capacity for creating an original kind of *écriture*. On the face of it, the texture of his novel is bereft of unity. The chaotic surface structure is apt to lead the reader astray, setting traps for him. Parentheses and (mostly false) quotations contribute to a labyrinthine design. The narrator opens at every step the floodgates of his store of associations. On close view, however, a deep structure emerges. The basic organizing principle becomes clear: in the narrator's mixed style the sublime is always deformed by the vulgar, and vice versa. What is more, the whole text is subordinated to a close-knit pattern: each section is a variation on a single word denoting some part of the human body (neck, arm et cetera), so that meditation follows the various phases in the embalment process.

Szentkuthy is not a theoretician, but in his practice he upholds with exceptional consistency the principle that the discovery of important artistic content must always go hand in hand with formal experimentation. Having realized that the twentieth-century novelist must pay an enormous debt to James Joyce, who did his utmost to open a new path for verbal artists of narrative prose, this Hungarian writer tries to solve problems of content and form, the urgency of which has been recognized only by the most daring of his contemporaries, Borges and the representatives of the French *nouveau roman*.

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Lilla Wagner. *A negyedik Petőfi*. London. Szepsi Csombor Kör. 1972. 136 pages.

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1973 sees the 150th anniversary of the birth of Sándor Petőfi, perhaps the finest lyrical poet that Hungary has given the world. It is not an event that Hungarian readers are being allowed to forget; yet this brief contribution to Petőfi studies should attract their attention because of the place of its publication and for its unique approach to its subject. For Lilla Wagner of London claims that hitherto scholars and biographers have depicted, broadly speaking, three Petőfis: the revolutionary, the naive composer of artificial folk-poetry and the national hero of the 1848-49 revolution in which he perished. She is unhappy about these three views of