

Dezső Kosztolányi
To Be or Not To Be

Dear Fellow Writers,*

One day in early spring István Széchenyi summoned his friends to his mansion at five o'clock in the afternoon. This date was March 12th, 1848, just before the outbreak of the revolution.

He sent the following entreaty:

"As our homeland and in particular our nation may easily come to harm, and we find ourselves faced with a situation in which our people must choose either to enter a glorious new era or be ensnared in great perils, I call on those whose names are listed below in particular (as I would gladly welcome anyone) to be so kind as to honour me with their presence in my home for a friendly gathering to take counsel of one another. István Széchenyi."

Behind the page bearing the summons one finds the long list of those he had invited, the names of some seventy public figures, Kossuth among them.

His guests arrived, one after the other. Széchenyi's servants, one from Vienna, the other a bearded old Bohemian, helped the gentlemen descend from their coaches and led them into the drawing room.

Five o'clock came and went, then quarter-past, then half-past. The master of the house failed to appear. The guests grew impatient, not because of their host's discourtesy so much as his disregard. They stood up and prepared to leave. Then, at around a quarter to, István Széchenyi appeared between the wings of the open door.

He was agitated and pale. His dark brown skin had visibly sallowed. He was deathly pale.

He shook hands with no one. He stopped, still near the door, which his

* ■ Text of an address delivered on 2 February 1930 at the General Meeting of the Hungarian Writers' Society.

servants in the meantime had closed. His gaze darted across the faces of those present.

The first thing he noted was that Kossuth had not come. Naturally, naturally. For weeks he had been receiving letters from all corners, from county seats, from "the Hungarian sons of the Transylvanian homeland," advising him of the plans and schemes of the impassionate leader of the people. He had not expected him to come. But he was nonetheless outraged that he had not.

In that fateful hour some twenty of the seventy people invited had shown up. Count György Andrassy, Count János Cziráky, Count György Károlyi, Count Károly Keglevich, Bishop József Lonovics, Judge György Majláth, Antal Majtényi, Count Móric Pálffy, Baron Zsigmond Perényi, Count József Szapáry, Count Antal Széchenyi, József Ürményi were present, and others. The revolutionary currents of the moment had borne Transylvanian magnate Baron Miklós Wesselényi from his home in Zsibó to Széchenyi's door. And at the side stood his two step-sons, Félix and Henrik Zichy.

The failure of the other fifty to show up disheartened him. If a moment earlier his blood had been aflame because of Kossuth's failure to appear, their apathy chilled him. In his left hand he wearily held the leaf of paper on which he had written the watchwords of his speech. The paper trembled in his fingers.

He looked down at the floor, rigid, as he did when preparing to speak.

"Forgive me, gentlemen," he began, "that I have kept you waiting. It was not any official business that delayed me, no. Something entirely different. Something of less matter, something of more matter. Before I stepped into this room I was brooding in my study. A terrible storm raged in my breast," and here he fell silent, hooking his fingers into the tails of his buttoned-up coat as was his wont. "Slowly it gathered strength, doubt upon doubt, cloud upon cloud, but now it has burst. And I have come to a decision." Again he paused. "For years I have wondered whether it is worth continuing our constructive labours. In the beginning one or two flickering rays of hope still glimmered. The horizon has since grown thick with clouds. You are all familiar with the political situation. It would be superfluous to expound the details. We dream and speak of blood, all of us. Here we stand at the centre of Europe, the disgrace of the continent. Our nation is lazy, boorish, haughty, insensate to justice, negligent of duty, and hardly susceptible to refinement. Perhaps in the east, in its fertile native soil, it could have flourished, but transplanted westward it has degenerated, shrivelled, and grown feeble with years. In vain we graft the nobler branch of cultivation onto a mouldering trunk. If it becomes western it loses its original distinctiveness and personality and is transformed into something foreign. If we neglect it, it dries out, withers, becoming neither Western nor Eastern, nor Hungarian. What is the point of being Hungarian anyway?" he asked, raising his head impudently, almost provocatively. "What is the good of speaking a language that is not understood

a mere stone's throw from here? What is the point of a little people, barely a handful's worth, clinging obsessively to the madness of their ancestors? No gentlemen," he said, slapping his dishevelled hair to his forehead, "no gentleman," he said again, raising his voice, almost yelling, "there is no point whatsoever. No point in shutting ourselves off from the community of cultured nations. No point in playing the ardent nationalist here, on this minute little point of the globe. No point in passing on our language to our sons and their sons like some kind of congenital disease. Then we must forget it," he spoke with mounting vehemence, "we must melt in among the German speakers, melt into the Empire. Let the expansion of the hereditary provinces and the final and utter demise of our nationality and language be a blessing and act of kindness upon us and the whole of humanity. Only the first generation will suffer any pain. The next will bless our memory. The Hungarian must cease to be, he must abandon his thoughts of revolution and his petulance. For our part, we have but one duty: to allow the events of implacable world history to take their course. There is no other path. Certain annihilation awaits us. We can choose between two kinds of death: one is painful, the other painless. Believe me, only after enduring grave conflicts of conscience and long days and nights did I choose the latter for my hapless people. At least they will not suffer a guilty conscience for the sin of their degeneration, they will not sense that pall and coffin soon await. It is therefore my firm and unwavering decision to cease my work once and forever. Dust soon will cover it. I am pained only to have awoken those who slept. But they will fall asleep again," he gave a wave of his hand and began to speak more rapidly, almost jabbering. "I have informed Prince Metternich of my intentions. He suggested an amicable peace. He promised a painless death. As for how you mean to act, that depends entirely on you. I am very sorry to have troubled you to come here. I merely wished to inform you of this. I have nothing else to say."

He took another step back towards the door so that the space in the enormous hall separating him and his guests would widen. The orator fell silent. He stood alone, far from the others, isolated in his sombreness and his black garb, like Shakespeare's melancholy Prince of Denmark. He stared at a single point, like a man deranged. He trembled with agitation. His audience also trembled. They had stood in silence and listened to him from start to finish, without interrupting or offering even the tiniest hiss in protest. The silence now grew. It was the stillness of a burial. They stood shocked, their feet rooted to the ground. The gentlemen held a muffled exchange of views, casting wary glances at their host, who was still brooding, immersed in himself. Some timorously expressed their approval of the basic idea, objecting only to the manner of execution. Again they fell silent. It was a long silence.

"Scoundrel," someone cried, then again, "you scoundrel," pointing at Széchenyi, "you're a scoundrel."

Who was it? Miklós Wesselényi. He slammed his tremendous fist down on a little baroque table so hard that it cracked. He leapt to his feet and began to run, but he knocked over a chair. He was blind. He groped and stumbled his way forward, his eyes long extinguished, through the never ending night of sightlessness, struggling towards the spot where he surmised Széchenyi must be standing, to attack him. The others grabbed him and tried to calm him.

"Scoundrel," he gasped in his rage, "scoundrel."

"Traitor," screeched a thin voice. "Son of Count Ferenc Széchenyi, who founded the National Museum?"

"It's a perfect disgrace," the patriotic magnates lamented indignantly. "I can't fathom this."

"Ist der Stefi verrückt geworden?"

"C'est très fort."

"Mais il est fou."

They spluttered and raved, to Széchenyi, to one another, to the air, and to themselves.

"He has renounced his *principia*."

"All in vain, for he was born in Vienna, as a lieutenant he couldn't even speak Hungarian, he learnt it from books."

"The German in him is creeping out."

"To this day Countess Crescenz cannot speak Hungarian."

"You want to deliver a nation to the court, you fink?" the childhood friend with whom he had travelled to France and England shouted again. "I can only assume you have lost your mind. Or was it all a hoax? Was it not you who wrote that every drop of your blood bears the veneration of the nation? Now you are rousing the nation to give up its rights, its independence, now you are handing it over to the forces of reaction. Where is your place after all this, you who sought to put the ashes of our great ancestors into the national pantheon? No, no, this little people is not lazy, only neglected, not aged, rather a child still in need of assistance and protection. The people of the East must fight both for the East and against it, for the West and against it, then it can attain the stars. We will continue to labour on its behalf, to follow the path ordained for us, without you, even against you. We will never abandon our righteous plans for reform, however. We are of the conviction—you wrote this too—that someone who plants a few fruit trees in his life will rest more peacefully in the soil. So help us God."

"To the gallows and the firing squad," someone said quietly, as if to himself: Count Lajos Batthyány.

The gathering murmured and rumbled for minutes on end, first with approval, then outrage, then objective, impartial debate, then glinting hatred, glowering defiantly at the man standing by the door, obstinate, smiling haughtily on principles, shrugging his shoulders, imperturbable. His eyes glowed beneath his

bushy brows like the burning bush. A hail of invectives and curses pattered on his bony, yellow pate. He heard an unceasing stream of his one-time words from men at whose sides he had fought for decades. They took aim at him, the words of his books *Credit*, *Light*, and *The State of Affairs* their weapons.

“Untiring zeal, patience, steadfastness,” Wesselényi flared in the throes of oration. “Do you not shudder at the thought that I, the poor blind man who lost his sight in the prison of Buda, see the path, while you, you, who once lit a light for us in the darkness, no longer do?”

Széchenyi’s lips quivered. They thought he was going to burst into tears. But he didn’t. Nonchalantly, like a man of the world, he walked to the centre of the room and burst out laughing. He laughed for some time. Then he announced that the whole thing had been a charade. He had wanted to test them. He had acted out a carefully devised comedy, drawing his friends in as well, and had arrived at the conclusion that in the company of so many noble patriots it was worth continuing the work with renewed vigour. His face lit up with joy. He had his footmen bring in the candelabra, as night had fallen, and behind the closed doors the discussion, the very serious “friendly gathering to take counsel,” began in earnest, stretching into the late hours of the night.

The details of this story are recorded in a spy report held in an archive in Vienna for undisclosed documents. The report was submitted to the camarilla that very day, March 12th, under the registry number 3652–3653, but because of the tumultuous international political events of the moment it did not arrive in the hands of the young Austrian emperor Ferdinand until March 27th. I have seen the invitation with my own eyes, on it Széchenyi’s signature, and a mouldy, crumbling sheet of paper bearing the draft of his speech, written in pencil.

Why did I tell all this in such detail? Because I myself could say nothing more concise, jarring, or dramatic. No such drama has ever been performed on stage either. But it has been played out on the stage of history. Not played out so much as lived through. Both sides lived through it, both those who were hoodwinked and the jester himself. Whether the jester was really a jester or not I cannot presume to decide, and I have not therefore pried into the question. If he was not a jester, then his conviction that it was worth believing and creating, even when beset by doubts, is all the more worthy of respect. If he was a trickster and was merely acting, the experience was no less revealing. Every joke is an organic part of our thinking, a splinter shaved off our notions and sentiments. Every game is an abortive act. Whatever it may have been, the scene is as profound and as moving as Hamlet’s soliloquy, “To be or not to be.” It was not acted out in the name of a single man, but rather in the name of millions upon millions. The speaker dramatized his own doubts. It is not a soliloquy so much as a wondrous polyphonic melody with rich, capricious, tragic orchestration. It is the Hungarian “To be or not to be.”

My friends, I have often thought about Széchenyi's troubling jest. I believe all of us who take plume in hand must constantly address the question of being and not being. We awaken to it in the morning, lie down with it at night, and think of it many times each day. Simply because it is our craft. When the Hungarian Writers' Society honoured me with an invitation to say a few words here, on the occasion of its first general meeting, an idea flashed through my mind: to appear in disguise and from beneath the mask of despair and ridicule to whisper the following impish words into the ear of an imagined fellow writer:

"Tell me, and be honest, what is it that you are seeking, you poet, writer, artist, in the twentieth century, and moreover what are you seeking here, among us? I cannot help but chuckle when I look at you. You are the son of a poor, indebted, people of plough and field, the child of a nation spat upon and humbled, another unwanted mouth to feed in a starving country maimed until only a few counties remained. A man who shuns scythe and hoe, a laughable anachronism, a vestigial organ. In the best case scenario you are a luxury article. You are the gilded plaster rose, the first thing to fall clattering from the gable when they demolished our old, beloved homestead. I have no idea why you are still dawdling here in this world. I can assure you that no one reads you. Neither your scribblings, nor anyone else's. They do not like you. But they don't really hate you either. They are indifferent to you. If you do not believe me pop into a few of the distinguished bookstores. Observe how loyally the Hungarian books huddle together on the shelf, how they are pushed aside with a haughty smile by those still able to purchase paper cluttered with letters. Things foreign are all the rage now, friend, everything *di moda, à la page, tief und gedankenvoll*. Sometimes the social clubs fete a writer in the salons. Most of them are foreign too. They are besieged at the train terminal and interrogated as to their opinions, then dragged in a triumphal march to the banquets. We have dozens of writers more interesting than they, but the public is simply not curious to know anything about them. And with good reason. First, because they do not own dinner jackets and it would be unthinkable to put their patched trousers and emaciated faces in the spotlight, and second because readers have been progressively weaned from the habit of taking an interest in them. Much of our press—with all due respect to the exceptions—is left cold by things of "eternal value." Whatever is of "eternal value" is quite pointless by now. Elsewhere things are hardly rosy these days. Yet still one notes with surprise that the French newspapers devote pages to literature, and each has a regular critic with a keen personality and unlimited purview. The Italian press considers it a question of honour, which is to say obligation, that the *terza pagina* contains exclusively articles on books and ideas, much as the Spanish press reserves the *segunda página* for literature. In Hungary there is no real place for this. Writers are squeezed out by those more interesting, the house-painters and house-servants turned movie stars and murderous rapists

abroad. We have no works of criticism. From time to time a laudatory book review is published. Readers seasoned and blithe turn the page with a smile, because they imagine the edifying scene when the writer managed, begging on his knees, to secure it. Sadly, this is often the case. Sometimes a disparaging invective is published. This too everyone flips past, because we can guess the motives behind it. And again, most of the time we hit the nail on the head. It is thanks to this absence of criticism that independent opinion is received with suspicion and protest from the outset. An independent word is unfamiliar, and readers cannot imagine that someone may hold a different opinion without any political or financial motive. A rebel sometimes pops up. From time to time he vents his bile, cuts someone down, perhaps unjustly. This is not excusable, but it is understandable. Slaves can only revolt, they cannot fight. We have no literary commandos, only literary terrorists who, considering the intellectual and cultural squalor in which they live, prefer to stab the capitalists of the mind, the kings of culture. In the absence of criticism the form of government of literature resembles that of the ancient régime: tyranny mitigated by regicide. We live under the reign of terror of murderous factions. Freedom of thought has been tossed to the dogs. No one dares let slip a yelp. This censorship, practiced with the common consent of all parties (which support, nourish, and strengthen one another with their lack of cultivation, their petulance, and their shared punitive expeditions), is more dreadful than any official, undisguised censorship. The common concern of literature falls victim to it. You do not realize that you are thinning while those who have scrambled to the public square grow pleasantly plump at the expense of all writers, chuckling together in secret, like the augurs. Let us suppose, however, that they do not kill you outright. You are still not allowed to write your views, because you have no power. You have no strength to take the initiative. It is hardly a wonder that the writer is usually a figure of scorn and disdain, intellectually debased, physically deformed. A writer friend of mine sent me a letter asking for thirty fillérs for a tram fare. Another sucks at the teat of the society for the protection of infants. Twice a day they give him free milk, and with good reason, for this is his lunch and dinner. But it may come to pass that you "make it," as so many have. Then, for the novel on which you worked for one or two years, you will certainly receive enough to live on for a month or two without the slightest care, and for the short story on which you worked your fingers to the bone for over a week you will receive more than enough to cover the cost of the coffees you drank and the cigarettes you smoked while writing. And so you take another job. You work from dawn till dusk so that the writer in you can work from dusk till dawn. It is not true that there are no longer patrons of the arts among us. Our writers are the patrons of the arts. They are their own patrons. In the operetta era following the war, the paradise of dilettantes and semi-scholars, this is how true poets and artists cheat the

present age. As for posterity, don't hold out even the slightest hope, my friend. I know posterity. We ourselves are posterity, the posterity of the recent past. Tell me, where are the books on the great artists with whom we walked arm in arm, István Petelei, Károly Lovik, József Kiss, Viktor Cholnoky? And when did their impassioned devotees last celebrate Sándor Bródy, Géza Csáth, Gyula Török, Margit Kaffka, or Árpád Tóth, just to mention a few? In other lands, where literature continues to thrive, they still pay due respect to the dead, injecting them into the electric current of life. Every decade they are assessed and reassessed, elevated or repudiated. In other words they are discussed. Here there is no resurrection. The Hungarian dead are buried deep. Their immortality generally lasts as long as they can still ring their publishers or friends. As soon as they are no longer able to place a call, they are in trouble. They are no longer "divine sons" pressed close to the bosoms of rapturous Hungarian maidens and youths. Nor are they the writer-nabobs of rich nations, who travel by airplane and vacation in summer villas by the seaside. The spirit of the age has become base. National seclusion has vanished from the globe, replaced by the warmth of a huddling mass of peoples and a cold internationality. One rarely comes across distinctive folk costumes anymore. Barely half a century ago there were Hungarian villages that in winter were entirely isolated by the snow. Until spring arrived they had no contact with even the nearest villages. In the manor houses of the nobility and in peasant huts people would tell tales or read by candlelight while spinning or stripping the fowl of their down and feathers. This familiar intimacy, the fertile silence of reverie, in which both poet and reader mature, is forever a thing of the past. As a result of the forward march of engineering and the triumphant breakthroughs in transportation the world has become one. It is not irrelevant that today one can fly to New York in barely three days. One should also not forget that it was not until 1840 that the first rudimentary train chugged down the tracks in Hungary, we were not able to make phone calls until 1880, and this technological revolution, which is buffeting national literature towards unknown and unforeseeable crises, is still in its earliest stages and will only later make its true influence felt. For the moment even the women of the farmsteads refer to lipstick as *rúzs*, the phonetic Hungarian spelling of the French *rouge*. All manners of literatures have been slung about our necks, either in the original or in translation. And, what is more disconcerting, the written word has found a formidable rival in the cinema, which makes almost exclusive use of merchandise foreign to us and every day draws enormous crowds away from the book. It has taught people to feel and think in images, without expressing themselves in language, without delighting in the wonder of linguistic expression. In any event it causes the word to atrophy. Office clerks can learn from the various language lessons on the radio and perfect their pronunciations watching talkies. A new era has arrived: the jazzband age

of internationalism. The glittering star of language is on the wane. It would be foolhardy to assume that you will be able to cook up even a single book for this audience. You can perhaps contend with this or that absurdity, but in doing so you merely treat the symptoms. You cannot race against an airplane, an airship, a high-speed train, you cannot rattle and clatter as furiously and omnipresently as the film, and you cannot out-clamour the radio, the never-silent maw, which bellows in ten languages at once, from every longitude and latitude. It is as heroic to take up arms against the undefeatable as it is foolish. So what is the point of being a Hungarian writer? There is no point, my friend, none. I advise you to break your fountain pen in half, cast the pieces to the bottom of the Danube, and quickly seek a better livelihood. If however you lack the resolve to do this, then grab your pistol, bite down on the end of the barrel to be sure you hit the mark, and pull the trigger. Eliminate yourself now, quickly, before others do, slowly. Let no trace remain of the scribbler's accursed breed. Let the literature once so illustrious perish now, at the beginning of the twentieth century, let it die out once and for all, the literature that began so appropriately with the *Funeral oration*."

How patient the writer to whom I address this philippic! For he has yet to cry out and cause a scandal by chasing me from the hall. I know he is not here, and indeed I know there is no such writer, for he is merely a creature of my fancy. But even if there is no such writer, he should nonetheless emerge now from the void, like a living contradiction, to silence me by soldering these blasphemous words to my throat. I already hear his voice, the resounding voice that gushes from me and from all those present.

– Enough, enough. Nothing but lies, motley, flamboyant lies, and what little truth they may contain has been perfidiously and insolently twisted. The man who contrived this speech has upbraided us for the common human mediocrity found in the better part of the literature of every country. We have learned from experience that those who chide our people are often lecturing all of humanity and criticizing nature itself. Like the others, he has made uninformed generalizations. His error lies not in the fact that there is not a grain of truth in his reproaches. His error is greater. His error lies in the fact that there is not a tatter of love in them either. There are two kinds of people. One says, when he has let his gaze wander and stubbed his toe against a stone in the sidewalk, "oh how clumsy I am!" He rubs his smarting foot and resolves to pay better attention next time. The other, having in his absent-mindedness knocked his foot against the same stone, says, "That's Hungary for you!" Then immediately he conceives a plan to build the sidewalks of the future not flat, but concave. Our speaker, for whom we cherish little respect, belongs to the latter type. He has aired his complaints, in which there is much that is moving. He has reproached us with references to a few foreign examples that may be worthy of imitation. I, however, will show the other side of the matter. The French lament that their critiques of

books are increasingly Americanized. In more than one forum favourable reviews are openly purchased by authors. In more than one forum they are governed by the camaraderie of circles of friends, the chapel that becomes the *chappelle ardente* of talent. In Italy, a country of some forty-two million inhabitants, the first encyclopedia is only now being published, while we have more dog-eared editions than I can count. Ninety per cent of popular literature in England is such drivel that it would make our readers vomit with revulsion. In Germany noted writers also work as insurance agents and claims adjustors. I have heard that *The Dial*, one of the most prominent literary journals in America, has a grand total of some eight-hundred subscribers, which is hardly impressive if we consider that the population of the United States is one-hundred-and-two million and some of the subscribers are European, me among others. Most importantly, our speaker has forgotten how we tower above the peoples of the region in our refinement. They are only now primping and embellishing their languages and calling desperately for their own Kazinczy. I do not know another nation of twelve million that has cast a lyrical star into orbit in the skies above us of the brilliance of Petőfi, a world-conquering storyteller like Jókai, an artist like Arany, who transfigured every clod and clump of our language, and what nation has had so many writers of the magnitude of Vörösmarty, Berzsenyi, Madách or Mikszáth? The surging waves of global tides never broke against our cliffs or stagnated in our lowlands. Shakespeare has been among us now for several generations as a living, national writer, and Dostoevsky, who the French are only now beginning to discover, was read by our fathers, as were Ibsen and Tolstoy. We are living in hard times, this is undeniable. The main body of our readership has been torn from us. Though they live next door, we now have to put as many stamps on a letter to them as we would on a letter to Australia. They often do not receive our books, even if we put twice as many stamps on them. But we do not take fright at the thought that the world is now one, that every literature is a part of world literature, that given the possibility of comparison the only standard that remains is the standard of world literature. Anyone who fears to take part in this competition and urges us instead to set up protective barriers is simply pusillanimous. Let us rid ourselves of all that is provincial, slovenly, mediocre. Thought and sentiment that are worth more to us than to the world should be left to wither in the bud. Europe is not foreign to us. Sometimes our hearts pine for memories of Asia, which we can only guess, but not know, and we imagine that if the treasures of the runic script, the bewitching words of the shaman, and the songs of the pagan heralds of spring garbed in sheets of bark are not lost and we are allowed to evolve in the cradle of culture, within the natural, old framework, then a literature can flower among us as distinctive, as unique as Japanese or Chinese. But this is a mirage. Our great poets and writers have since fatefully betrothed us to the European mind. We are Europeans, writers of Europe and the world. The only thing we can lament today is that we are more

distant from Europe than our ancestors, and we are therefore more distant from our own Hungarianness as well. This may seem a contradiction, but it is not. The pioneering generation of which I just spoke stood closer to the European mind and therefore the Hungarian mind as well. A writer can have no other ambition than to win the favour of the entire world. Literature is something unusually broad, enfolding everyone in its embrace. This greatness is the only thing worth seeking. We must conquer the West, not for ourselves, but rather for our people, for the East. We too move like the swing of the pendulum, between East and West, never resting. This nomadic restlessness, this ancient, mysterious duality is the profound essence of our heritage and our mentality. Our conquest, however, can only be internal. We must compete with the great minds of the world at home. Those more illustrious or more fortunate, whose books may sell in markets abroad as well, should not delude themselves into thinking that they will be able to knock down the bronze gates of fame with clubs. They will always remain oddities abroad, guests either welcomed or suffered. Nor is it important what befalls them abroad. What matters is what happens here. Even if the hand of a master has transplanted his poems into a foreign idiom, the rhymes will clink more languidly, his dialogues will stumble, half his allusions will be missed. Our witch's craft is a craft of form and nuance. We all draw sustenance from faltering memories, visions, hallucinations that stretch far into the past, a hallucination caused by a word that echoes mysteriously in the cavern of centuries. I regret that I cannot say something more original, but a literature can only breathe with the soul of a language. The old truths are fraying, but they nonetheless remain truths. Pascal wrote, "*Le silence éternel des espaces infinis m'effraie.*" Since Voltaire generation after generation has marvelled at the musicality of this sentence and has concurred that it is the most beautiful phrase in French. We must accept this as true, that this must be the case. Even if I had a lifetime to do so, in vain would I attempt to explain to them why the line "*elhull a virág, eliramlik az élet*"—the flower petals fall, life flits past—is so beautiful. For us it is enough to hear it. We look at one another and understand everything. In our eyes a familial spark gleams. Poetry is not just something broad, enfolding everyone in its embrace as I said before, but something closed as well, something familial. Every great poem is familial. The family members recount anecdotes of a small child whom we all knew long ago, anecdotes meaningless and incomprehensible to the stranger. They recall something that the stranger cannot recall and they smile. Poetry is similar. It lives in the spirit of our language, in which we are all fused together, whatever our political beliefs may be. We do not boast that we are faithful to this language. We are that fidelity ourselves. Nor do we claim that we breathe exclusively with, through, and for it. We are the language ourselves. Blood is not always thicker than wine, it can even turn on its own, but the community of a common language is immovable and indestructible. We usually do not notice this. We remain unaware of it, just as the wild tree in

the forest remains unaware that it is the wild tree in the forest. Sometimes we nevertheless must put this in words in order to strengthen our sense of responsibility and self-awareness. For a time we will perhaps have to make ten times as many sacrifices as before. But can someone who finds the price of the sacrifice too dear call himself a writer? We no longer have to fear for the tool of our trade, which the pioneers salvaged from harsher times and passed on to us. Our work is hard, but also enviable. Work is our passion. Guiseppe Rensi, the philosopher of Genoa, wrote somewhere that the poet is the happiest of men, for he spends his life playing with what he finds interesting. He can be compared to a smoker who is paid to smoke. The remuneration of our craft is more than any wage. We can multiply our lives in time and space. If we each should find only ten readers, ten genuine, devoted readers who sometimes think of us, independent of our physical being, then we have no cause for complaint. These readers exist, somewhere hidden from us, perhaps they are young, perhaps old, perhaps poor. Their love is not clamorous, and you will not see their names on any "list of those in attendance." Perhaps in Hungary fame is more pallid than elsewhere. Perhaps immortality is more concealed, but it is no less enduring. The other day a fourteen-year-old boy lay abed with a fever of forty degrees. In the evening, when I tucked him in, he was delirious. He said one word in his feverish dream: "Gárdonyi." I did not know that he read and loved Gárdonyi. I learned this then, and in the silence of the sickroom I learned what the immortality of the Hungarian writer means. In the middle of the night a feverish schoolboy in Budapest spoke of someone he had never seen, someone of whom he knew only his spirit. The value and power of literature does not depend on the numerical size of a nation. The nation that created the golden age of Greek literature was no larger than the population of three of our towns today, and had hardly more readers than three of our villages. We all need schooling in tragedy, as early as the children's playroom or the school desk, self-flagellation and not self-delusion, awareness of our tragedy. We need Széchenyi's tragic perspective on the world, which casts one into despair and can raise one to new heights. I am giving an answer to the question they have nailed to our breasts: to be or not to be? To be, certainly, to be. First and foremost to be human and humane, to be good Europeans and good Hungarians, a swordsman lunging both westward and eastward, an ambitious, wilful artist and a humble worker. Anyone who dreams of Rolls Royces and luxurious houses should take his leave. Anyone who seeks only to acquire the title "master," but not to be a schoolmaster to the nation, has no place here. Anyone in whom slumbers not a single glimmer of the creed or apostolic vision of those who built in Széchenyi's spirit does not belong here. The soul and language that we have inherited for a short time we must pass on to our offspring unchipped, polished with a new spirit. This is our calling, "whether the hand of fate should bless or smite us." This is our calling. Let us bow our heads just a little. But with hearts high, my friends, with hearts high. ❧