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## Acts of (Liminal) Speech

### Dezső Kosztolányi's Documents of Illness and Death between Philology, Hagiography and Performativity<sup>1</sup>

Mateusz CHMURSKI

In the last years of his life, the Hungarian poet, writer and translator Dezső Kosztolányi (1885–1936) suffered from throat cancer, which made him lose his voice and, finally, his life. After nine operations, eleven transfusions and two radiotherapies in the Stockholm Radium Institute, he died in November 1936 (Kosztolányi 2010: 26–33; Szállási 2014). During the last months of his life, he communicated only on paper with his doctors, nurses and family members. The 539 “conversation sheets” (*beszélgetőlapok*) he used have been conserved until today and published by the prestigious publishing house Kalligram in 2010 as the second volume of the Kosztolányi's *Complete Works* (*Összes Művei*) (Kosztolányi 2010). The conversation sheets, however, contain only one half of the dialogues that took place around his hospital bed: the second half, oral, remains silenced. This particular communicative situation has scarcely been analyzed by literary scholars, yet raises numerous questions: why those particular (and intimate) documents have been published (should they be published)? What conceptions of art, literary work or intimacy this edition implies? How to analyze those speech acts on paper, once published in the form of a literary work?

A survey of anthropological, sociological and literary aspects that the publication of *Dezső Kosztolányi's Documents of Illness and Death* brings would be impossible in the frame of this article. It proposes to focus instead on the liminal status of both the cancer conversational sheets and their publication, questioning the conceptions of art, authorship and, *implicite*, literature. My claim is threefold: the conversational notes may be read as a textual performance of a disappeared voice (and a disappearing human being). Their edition, accompanied by numerous other documents on the author's life and death, inscribes them in the frame of a literary publications' series, imposing admitted forms of edition to the fragmentary notes of functional character. Thus, a precise (i.e. artistic) frame of lecture is added to an artifact, although as such it questions the possibility of *any* expression.

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Kosztolányi's absent voice is presented as performing anew, alas for the last time: performing as if the publication of cancer notebooks was really his last oeuvre. The *absence of (artistic) representation* in the text due to the pragmatic character of the notes is completed by the edition, *representing the absence* (of a sick, mourning, disappearing body) *as an artistic object*.

I chose to focus on three aspects of the Kosztolányi's cancer documents: establishing a typology of the cancer conversation sheets seen as acts of (liminal) speech will lead to a metadiscursive scrutiny of the published volume itself, situating its specifics between philological precision, secularized hagiography and performativity to consider in the end the conception of literature the publication implies and sketch its place in the Central-European context.

### “My End is Near . . . :”

#### Typology of Kosztolányi's Cancer Notes as Acts of Speech

Without any context, it would be difficult to read, understand, and, what is more, interpret in any way the following short fragment. Are those lines of emotional poetry or is it a stenographic transcription of life necessity? Shall we read them seeing performance as a poet's chosen way of expression or rather hearing the expression of bare necessity in the mouth of a dying human? How the way these lines have been published influence our interpretation, and how different could it be based on a direct access to the manuscript? How our reflexes and habits in reading literature modulate the interpretation of the text which is *not* literary? In short: the excerpt represents already both the specifics of the so-called “cancer notes” by Kosztolányi and the theoretical, methodological and editorial issues raised by their publication:

I cannot breathe. / I am drowning. / Give me vaccination! *Give me cold water / Cold water / Cold water / Cold water / Cold / Col / Cold water / Cold / Cold wat / Give me mixed powder / I will get better? / I will not die? / What's the pulse? / I will not die?*  
(Kosztolányi 2010: 210)<sup>2</sup>

Born in 1885, Kosztolányi belongs to the pantheon of twentieth century Hungarian authors. He is known for his poetry, prose, translations and journalism and sometimes called “the Hungarian Hugo von Hofmannsthal.” A few of his works, mainly novels, were translated to English, e.g. *Anna Edes* (*Édes Anna*, 1926) in 1993, *Skylark* (*Pacsirta*, 1924) in 2010, as well as a selection of poetry and stories under the titles *36 Poems* (2000) and *April Fool* (1999). Nonetheless the author we encounter in the notes from the last moments of his life is definitely not the

<sup>2</sup> Hungarian original: “Nem kapok levegőt. / Fuldoklom. / Adj oltást! / Adj hideg vizet / Hideg vizet / Hideg vizet / Hideg vizet/ Hideg / Hid / Hideg vizet / Hideg / Hideg viz / Adj kevert port Jobban leszek? / Nem halok meg? / Milyen a pulzus? / Nem halok meg?” (Magyar Tudományos Akadémia Kézirattár [MTAK] Ms4620/141/43v). Emphasis in the original.

well-known master of language precision, subtle humor or delicate psychological analysis as appears in the above-quoted works, but a seriously ill man. Not to mention the fact that his direct expression of despair is really difficult to read, as the quoted example can testify.

Kosztolányi's cancer notes revolve around illness, suffering and various painkillers, constant fever and constant pain; food and problems with enemas; wounds that do not heal, as well as anger and hopelessness, fear of death and, at the same time, the longing for death. "*Now I'll Tell You How I Disappeared.*" *Dezső Kosztolányi's Documents of Illness and Death* ("... most elmondom, mint veszttem el." *Kosztolányi Dezső betegségének és halálának dokumentumai*), a quotation chosen by the editor, Zsuzsanna Arany, as the first part of the title of the volume, represents well its main themes. The edition is based on manuscripts conserved today mainly (481 folio) in the Library of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (MTAK Ms4620/124–130 and 139–143, Ms6181/40); as well as partly in the Petőfi Literature Museum (V.4104 and V.3196/83) and partly in the Manuscript Collection of the Széchényi National Library in Budapest (11.392) (Kosztolányi 2010: 57–71). The editor added a selection of medical documents and photographs of therapies, press articles devoted to the author's illness, death and funeral, resulting in a total of 608 pages.

From a theoretical point of view, it may be useful to set the reading of the cancer notes first in the frame of the speech acts theory, defined by John L. Austin's *How to Do Things with Words* (Austin 1962) and expanded by John Searle and Daniel Vanderveken in their *Foundations of Illocutionary Logic* (Searle/Vanderveken 1985). Considering each of Kosztolányi's notes as a transcription of precise act of speech at a given space and time, i.e. in the particular case of a muted patient at a hospital bed, one may divide their content into three groups: the first and largest part of Kosztolányi's notes includes all transcripts of conversations about medicines, temperature, enemas, etc. According to Searle and Vanderveken's classification of illocutionary points, they could be considered as *assertives*: affirming, stating or informing, notifying and reminding, suggesting, yet also blaming nurses, doctors, friends and relatives nearby Kosztolányi's bed. Their length varies from a few words to longer sections, such as:

I absolutely need an enema. / Yesterday I had no stool. / I forgot about the ricin that fosters enema by me though. / Would it additionally be possible not to give the ricin in coffee, but in something different? For example in a soup? etc. / Bad. Yesterday I vomited. I vomit every day. Apparently the *hormonal* vaccine works that way. (Kosztolányi 2010: 136)<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Hungarian original: "Föltétlenül szükségem lenne egy beöntésre. / Tegnap se volt székletem. / Viszont a ricinusról, mely nálam a beöntést előmozdítja, megfeledeztem. / Nem lehetne-e a ricinust pótlólag valami másban – nem kávéban – beadni? Pl. levesben? stb. / Rosszul. Tegnap hánytam. Minden nap hányok. Úgy látszik, a *Hormon*-oltás hat így" (MTAK MS4620/139/16). Emphasis in the original.

Those pieces of discussions Kosztolányi has with hospital employees or his relatives express most frequently his physiological needs and the daily reality of a terminal cancer patient. The illness, however, has also obliged him to express all emotions in writing: his pain can only be deduced from the different forms of underlining (simple, double or triple), his anger can only be read between the lines, and his hopelessness is growing with time (from one folio to another).

The second group of notes consists of repetitive, desperate exclamations in the form of short one to three words sentences such as such as: *Végem* (“It’s all over with me”), *Meghalok* (“I’m dying”) or *Nem bírom* (“I cannot stand it anymore”). They could be interpreted as either *expressives* (used to thank, complain, lament, protest or deplore) or *directives* (requesting, urging, demanding and commanding, ordering and insisting, begging and imploring). Like a double refrain of despair, they express over and over again the author’s degrading health and emotional state, his feelings and thoughts, his anger and refusal of the disabled condition in which he is situated, often followed by calls for help, questions about how long he will have to suffer or requests for help in committing suicide: “My throat hurts / *My end is near* / [Verso:] / My end is near / Call me someone / I want! / The end / Call someone” (Kosztolányi 2010: 87).<sup>4</sup>

The idiom *Végem [van]* (“My end is near,” literally “I’m done”) alone can be found more than thirty times in Kosztolányi’s notes and shows his increasing hopelessness. The notes become stereotypes of a struggle with inevitable death. It seems significant that Kosztolányi tried a few times to date his last entries in the last months before his death, as if he tried to transform those disparate notes into a diary, to find again a place in the linear, chronological reality, to gain control when almost all control was already lost (Kosztolányi 2010: 269–270); six other dates were added by a foreign hand (Kosztolányi 2010: 273–274). However, he managed himself to indicate twice only the month, not the precise day, nor the exact time.

The third group consists of notes that are either incomprehensible or written in a language other than Hungarian, thus stratifying the already complicated (yet pragmatic, not literary) text’s structure. Their illocutionary force can be defined only in the case of comprehensible notes, such as a few sentences in German (e.g.: “Und bringen / Sie mir einen Thermosack / Sie hat es zerbrochen [sic!]”) or a section in English (Kosztolányi 2010: 272). Numerous other fragments are far too inconsistent to make any sense, e.g.:

<sup>4</sup> Hungarian original: “Fáj a tarkóm / *Végem* / [Verzól] / *Végem* / Hívj valakit / Akarok! / *Vége* / Hívjatok valakit” (MTAK Ms4620/126/7).

**Nausea**

aminophenazone  
 vaccination  
 rinse  
 rinse  
 [illegible word]  
 racket[?] [two incomprehensible syllables]  
 [illegible word]

Put it away! **away!**

[deformed words: *savanyú* – sour; *eddig* – the one so far]

he he did not not do it

do it bloody[?]

[three incomprehensible syllables]

for [on?] me too.

[... ] for [on?] [me]

*I/ ... Ja*

(Kosztolányi 2010: 235)<sup>5</sup>

I have tried to translate these fragmentary notes into English, but it is really a difficult task. Sometimes there are only a few syllables, sometimes only a few letters. Here the communicative function of language could only be saved by the context (and the oral part of the exchanges, unavailable to the contemporary reader). The liminal speech acts reach the borders of any communication. One may also observe a particular aspect of Arany's edition: the transcription of any partly saved fragment of those exchanges, such as the last quoted line. Even if only the first and the last letter of the word have been transcribed and the middle part remains illegible (i.e. the whole word incomprehensible), the editor decides to remain literally faithful to the manuscript and give the reader *every* decipherable letter.

One could ask here, why publish notes that are incoherent, incomprehensible or simply unreadable. Is this philological fidelity to the liminal acts of speech, the last words of a dying author? How does our perception of such a particular text change between the manuscript and the printed edition, what role can be played by commentary, paratext, illustrations and other added elements? What profit can they bring to the analysis of Kosztolányi's work or biography? And how does the

<sup>5</sup> Hungarian original: “**Émelygek** / demaglon / oltást / öblögetni / öblögetni / [olvashatlan szó] / lárma[ ... ] el[ ... ] me[ ... ] / [olvashatlan szó] // tedd el **el!** / savavanyuny[ ... ] / eddieigigii / van edd edd i[ ... ] gi / neki neki nem nem futotta / futotta veres[ ... ] // ve / a / ve[ ... ] / erre magam is. / [ ... ] erre is / *I/ ... Ja*” (MTAK Ms4620/143/20). Emphasis in the original.

edition of such texts change the image of a given author as well as, *implicite*, the conceptions of artist and literature in Central Europe.

### **“Look, I’m Dying:” Philology, Hagiography, Performance**

Kosztolányi’s manuscripts and the rules of their transcription chosen by the authors of the volume are precisely described in the edition (Kosztolányi 2010: 57–72), separate commentaries concern also, e.g. stenographic fragments or notes in foreign languages contained in the cancer conversational sheets (Kosztolányi 2010: 65–72). However, it is obvious that any chosen format of the edition can modulate the reader’s expectations (and lecture experience), and in case of such a particular document, this question becomes far more complicated.

The original notes by Kosztolányi were written on large folios, which dimensions range around the contemporary A4/A5 format (162 x 205 mm, 180 x 230 mm, 183 x 250 mm, 222 x 290 mm) (Kosztolányi 2010: 58–64). A comparison of the number of lines transcribed with the dimensions of those manuscript pages is itself a testimony to the difficulties in writing Kosztolányi had during that period. This also can be confirmed by the few pictures of the manuscripts added to the volume (Kosztolányi 2010: 597–602).

Similar observations can be made about the writing style. Kosztolányi’s letters are often huge, the writing seems chaotic, and if it is not the case, the almost blank pages express by contrast the same difficulty of expression. Different forms of underlining he used to correct or request, protest or command, urge or lament were rendered by italics (simple emphasis in the manuscript) or bold characters (multiple emphasis).

The dimensions of printed pages and manuscript folios as well as differences in the density of writing have to be taken in account in the interpretation of the volume as such. For obvious reasons, those aspects are either reduced or simply absent from the edited volume: unless printing a facsimile (remaining rather and artifact than a legible document), the dimensions of the volume can hardly be close to the manuscript. Nevertheless, these changes modify already the lecture of the text itself, an aspect which becomes particularly visible in the case of such a liminal document as Kosztolányi’s cancer notes: standardizing their chaotic aspect in print brings *volens* the original closer to the usual forms of the readers’ experience, rationalizing in a way the disabled expression of mourning, sickness and approaching death. The writing is simplified and corrected up to the liminal situations of in/comprehension, where only single letters from words can be deciphered, if any. Without any doubt the editor’s work is characterized, first and foremost, by an impressive philological effort and a true faithfulness to *every* word and line of the author’s last manuscripts. It reaches however the limits of transcription, but also comprehension and reconstruction of a dying author’s gesture, where the (il)legible writing denotes the disabled condition of the writer.

The lack of artistic representation in the ordinary (i.e. non-literary, Simonet-Tenant 2001) writing used for pragmatic reasons becomes hence a part of an artifact whose definitive form and structure (from title to paratext or illustrations) were chosen by the editor. On the one hand, the notes included in such a document play a role in bringing the contemporary reader as close as possible to the suffering body of a great national author. On the other hand, though, the editor's choices as well as their further implications can be read as an in/direct interpretation modulating the reception of the cancer conversational sheets.

Taking in account elements added by the editor to the publication of Kosztolányi's cancer notes enables us to further develop the proposed interpretation. The cancer notes in the printed edition correspond precisely to 200 pages (vs. 539 manuscript folios). The editor added a very large critical frame of 408 pages, containing, i.e. introductory remarks with a long editor's preface and a detailed chronology (83 pp.), notes to the text (156 pp.), letters, medical documents, bibliography and a choice of photos (152 pp.). The critical apparatus can be read as an independent part of the second volume of Kosztolányi's *Complete Works*, completing and commenting the notes themselves, yet proposing also a certain vision of authorship, intimacy and literature.

In the chronology opening the volume, the works published from 1933 onwards are placed next to the story of the illness of Kosztolányi. The first entry refers to the publication of the novel *Kornél Esti (Esti Kornél)* on the 6th of May 1933, although the text has no connection with his illness apart from the autobiographical aspect of novel, yet written and published before the author's sickness, which dates from June 1934 onwards. The reader learns also that, e.g. in 1934 Kosztolányi defied pain and radiation therapy in Stockholm, and "continues to work on painkillers" (Kosztolányi 2010: 29). The last entry in the chronological list contains the exact date and time of the author's death as well as his legendary last words (*ultima verba*, based on a previous testimony: "Look, I'm dying." Could we read those elements as a suggestion that Kosztolányi's masterpiece was written already during the early stage of his cancer, a way to relate suffering *and* creation?

The chronology included in the volume is one of the first elements exposing indirectly what could be called a sanctifying dimension of the publication: in fact, it may be seen as perpetuating biography of a romantic cultural hero that stems from the personal myths developed at that period (Janion/Zmigrodzka 2001: 201–485; Janion 2014). His destiny is devoted to the elevation of national spirit through art, his words lead and console his oppressed people, and his suffering, as well as quite often death at a young age, provides him with an aura of mysticism, if not sanctity (Masłowski et al. 2011). Thus, becoming a bard in the sense of Latin *poeta vates*, the reception of authors such as Sándor Petőfi or Adam Mickiewicz, yet also Frédéric Chopin or Jan Matejko, established a model of literature (and creation) founded on the triad *bíos – ethos – páthos* (Porebski 1995; Pekacz 2006).



The idea that true art is born of suffering still plays a major role in the Central-European postromantic mentality (and conception of art), especially in its Hungarian and Polish form. No wonder that the claim that life and work are a unity it implies can also be found reverberating in the introductory part of the edition. Referring to Michel Foucault, Zsuzsanna Arany emphasizes that “all texts belong to the work and are therefore interpretable” (Kosztolányi 2010:15). Explaining the chosen way and form of publishing the notes as well as the selection of commentaries accompanying them, she explains the ethical dilemmas associated with the publication and speculates on the author’s last will: “Although Kosztolányi did not consent to the publication of these notes, we have clues to prove his desire to spread the story of his suffering to the people” (Kosztolányi 2010: 17). The statements the editor refers to are those by Kosztolányi’s wife, Ilona Harnos (1885–1967), and by Oszkár Ascher (1897–1965), an actor and friend of the family, who has written an important text on the illness of Kosztolányi. A fragment of his souvenir was also chosen as the motto of the volume as a whole, framing the whole content – and implying far more than the Arany’s strictly scientific explanations: “The completed blocks convey in my opinion a painful transcript of the work of Kosztolányi: an ‘Inferno’ that his poor, tortured body has passed through this earth to the end, but that is why his soul beckons the seventh heaven” (Kosztolányi 2010: 7).

Ascher talks about *tömbök*, literally “blocks,” referring either to text blocks, but also to small notebooks. In a different sense, the Hungarian word could also refer to tombstones (*sírtömbök*). In any case, suffering and creation are directly linked here, again, and the aura of illness, agony and death legitimizes directly and explicitly the last works of Kosztolányi, who, according to Ascher, becomes thus a martyr’s figure. The reference to Dante’s *Divine Comedy* reinforces this interpretation: gone through a true *Inferno* on earth, Kosztolányi is supposed to reach his *Paradiso*, i.e. “the Seventh Heaven, or that of Saturn, where are seen the Spirits of the Contemplative” as described in Dante’s XXI canto (Dante/Longfellow 1867: 136). The first part of the volume as a whole suggests thus already – between the lines or very clearly – a romantic and heroic interpretation of the last years of Kosztolányi’s life, extending the perspective of sacrifice and suffering (the aura of national saint devoted to his work and his people) on his oeuvre, from literary works, such as the novelistic masterpiece, *Kornel Esti*, to the last words expressed: “Look, I’m dying”. From the corpus of writings to the corpse itself: “Dezső Kosztolányi [ . . . ] / aged 51, – months, – days / journalist by profession / living in the Budapest 1st district, Tábor u. 12, [ . . . ] / died / on the third day of Nov. 1936” (Kosztolányi 2010: 564).<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Hungarian original: “Kosztolányi Dezső [ . . . ] / 51 éves, – hónapos, – napos, / ujságíró foglalkozású / budapesti I. Tábor u. 12 lakos, [ . . . ] / 1936 év nov. hó 3. napján [ . . . ] / meghalt” (MTAK Kézirattára Ms4620/144).

This is by far the most particular of the documents contained in the Arany's edition: the excerpt from Kosztolányi's death certificate. What is the purpose of publishing such an administrative document, purely formal and serving mainly to confirm the exact date of the author's death? Altogether with extensive and detailed comments, analyses, illustrations and press extracts added to the edition of Kosztolányi's notes it serves to present the suffering and the death of a venerated author to the reader by all available means. Including the death certificate means Arany proves her devotion to the difficult, formally and ethically complex task she decided to accomplish. Yet, she also adds a new layer to the paraenetic, if not hagiographic structure of the volume: solemnly attesting the death with the help of every possible document that witnesses to the last hours of Kosztolányi's life, she completes the (secularized) path of *imitation Christi* inscribed in this postromantic (estheticized) hagiography.

In the medieval stories, the finality of every narration devoted to the life and death of a venerated figure leads to his or her martyrdom, repeating (at imperfect human scale) the uniqueness of Christ's sacrifice for humanity (*alter Christus*). Since the foundation of modern *Acta Sanctorum* by Urban VIII, the procedure of sanctification has taken the precise form of canonization: a blessed (*beatus*) is declared saint (*declaration pro sancto*) after a long procedure and inscribed in the canon of the saints (*canonisatio*) (Jolles 2006: 26). In particular, the body of the saint is venerated for his heroic virtues proven in the process, as well as the miracles the happened under his patronage. As André Jolles described it in his classical study:

After the *beatificatio* has been completed, the matter is brought before a higher authority, but to make it possible, new miracles must happen. They are re-examined, the proceedings reintroduced, witnesses interrogated, arguments advanced, and finally, when all this is done, the pope ex cathedra declares the *beatus* for *sanctus* [...]. (Jolles 2006: 27, emphasis in the original)

Stemming from numerous traditions ranging from medieval saints (*imitation Christi*) (Jolles 2006) to modern kings, emperors and artists (*imitation heroica*) (Soussloff 1997; Hoff et al. 2015), Napoleonic marshals or revolutionary leaders (Janion/Żmigrodzka 2001), romantic individualism incarnated in biographies of rebels (with a cause) reproduces a model which structure repeats some crucial elements of memorial cult: collecting souvenirs (if not relics) of a given hero, commemorating places and events of his biography (museums, monuments, portraits) and, in the case of artists, venerating poems, paintings or musical pieces. The accumulation of oral, written and material documentation describing and glorifying the hero plays here a crucial role. Would it be possible to read the impressive number of documents devoted to the illness, suffering and death of Dezső Kosztolányi, *toutes proportions gardées*, as a postmodern rewriting of the over thousand-year-

old macronarrative, deeply inscribed in European cultures (Attardo 2001; White 1987)? Following the hypothesis to read the volume as *acta* of a modern, secular canonization process, confirming the position of Kosztolányi in the national pantheon of heroic figures, I propose a concise rereading of the publication as a whole. The volume is framed by three portraits. On the cover of the edition one observes the author in a well-known photograph by Rónai Dénes from 1931: a mature, confident writer, looking directly at the viewer. The scheme of the cover is identical as in the case of all the other volumes: one of the portrait pictures of the author on the left side, in the middle the title in italics, and the name of the author written in capitals on the right side. As if every volume containing Kosztolányi's words, including the cancer notes, represented one of the Kosztolányi's works (*művei*). On the illustration that closes the volume however, the same Kosztolányi poses at the roof of the St-John Hospital in Budapest (Szent János Kórház) in a way to hide the other side of his face, visibly deformed by the cancer, as on a second picture, on which the suffering author is portrayed *en pied*, frontally, accompanied with his nurses and doctors (Kosztolányi 2010: 605). Reading through the volume one discovers those two faces, the one known to the public and the one which scale of suffering, confirmed by the cancer notes, was only recently exposed through the publication of the volume. Nonetheless the reader finds here also (in)direct consolation, or at least explanation in the aura of beatitude surrounding the last, dramatic gestures and words of the author.

The final moments of Kosztolányi's life are reproduced in an utmost precise, close and evident way as possible. Throughout the volume, we see pictures of and narrations on places related to the last years of his life – such as the Stockholm Institute (Kosztolányi 2010: 603–604) or the Budapest St-John Hospital (Kosztolányi 2010: 605–606). There is the burial ceremony, there are texts by friends, celebrities, fellow writers, authors of necrologies, all in all witnesses to both Kosztolányi's great art and tragic end (Kosztolányi 2010: 498–550). We encounter likewise experts of different kinds examining his words, his writing, his illness and his corpse. Because there is also the corpse, described in letters by the doctors of the Radium Institute in Stockholm, written in German and translated into Hungarian (Kosztolányi 2010: 551–563); the corpse measured and analyzed in the excerpts from Kosztolányi's medical files reproduced in the volume (Kosztolányi 2010: 563); the corpse declared death by the coroner, Dr László Gloetzer, who established his death certificate (Kosztolányi 2010: 564–565). In short: the corpse of an ordinary human who became a national icon, a laic saint, a cultural hero.

There are objects too, such as the radiation equipment or a book, “one of the last readings by Kosztolányi” (Kosztolányi 2010: 607): i.e. a reproduction of the *Hamlet* volume he was supposed to read in his hospital bed, accompanied by short testimonies on the will to read this very piece by Ascher and Ervin Zágonyi, as well as the history of the book itself. It is with this image, and not with a

representation of the corpse, nor the graveyard, nor any of numerous Kosztolányi's monuments for example, that the illustrative part of the volume – and the volume as such – come to an end. No wonder: the last book that Kosztolányi was supposed to read fits perfectly in the picture of a great author, a genius, a worthy successor to the author of the famous *to be or not to be*. Reading *Hamlet* at his deathbed before joining Shakespeare in the pantheon of the greatest.

Zsuzsanna Arany emphasizes in the preface, quoting Kosztolányi himself: “The volume brings both together: the writer, who wrote the book, and the reader, who reads it” (Kosztolányi 2010: 23). And in fact, all the documents presented to the reader bring the reader and the author together, not only through the last, often incomprehensible words of Kosztolányi himself, but also using every possible document to describe, examine and reconstruct the *via crucis* (for the sake of art) Kosztolányi had to go through in the last years of his life. As well as to imagine his death and from this perspective see (and read) his life, his work, not to mention his *Complete Works* this edition is the second volume of.

Lastly, this brings us to the question of literature and performativity. Kosztolányi's notes are far from any fiction; they are a transcription of oral communication, stenotypes of a disappearing voice. It is their publication, however, that presents the last words, gestures, images and testimonies by and on Kosztolányi *as a part* of his work. How fragmentary and extreme the case of the acts of (liminal) speech, the cancer notes, could seem, their publication answers both to the modern and very Central-European need of cultural heroes, yet also to the post-modern, voyeuristic exploration of all human experience. The volume as a whole seems to fulfill indeed the very idea of “precariousness” the late Jacques Derrida attributed to any literary work. In his interpretation literature

it is an institution which consists in transgressing and transforming, thus in producing its constitutional law; or to put it better, in producing discursive forms, “works” and “events” in which the very possibility of a fundamental constitution is at least “fictionally” contested, threatened, deconstructed, presented in its very precariousness. Hence, while literature shares a certain power and a certain destiny with “jurisdiction,” with the juridico-political production of institutional foundations, the constitutions of States, fundamental legislation, and even the theological-judicial performatives which occur at the origin of the law, at a certain point it can also exceed them, interrogate them, “fictionalize” them: with nothing, or almost nothing, in view, of course, and by producing events whose “reality” or duration is never assured, but which by that very fact are more thought-provoking, if that still means something. (Derrida 1992: 72)

In the case of Kosztolányi's cancer notes, the *intentio auctoris* of a literary work in the traditional sense of a composed, structured, entitled document is lacking, on the one hand, yet reconstructed by chosen testimonies in the form of the author's will to express the story of his suffering, articulate his muteness. On the other hand, the *intentio operis* resulting from the editor's choice to publish those

incomprehensible parts seems clear: given the context, all the documents related to Kosztolányi's illness and death gathered in the volume, the editor completes and extends by every possible means the representation of the silenced author's voice. "With nothing, or almost nothing" publishing the pragmatic writings of a dying man added to the series of his fictional works and auto/biographical writings produces an "event." Literary, and intellectual, imaginary. A "work," the last performance of a dying man. Lifework. The *Illness and Death of Dezső Kosztolányi*.

The entire history of the illness of Kosztolányi not only exposes the unspeakable dimension of his suffering, but also legitimizes his work and his position in the pantheon of the greatest. Considered somewhat in the frame of a modern (nationalized and estheticized) canonization process, the veneration of Kosztolányi's work transposed to his body in pain and every word he couldn't pronounce, yet left us written, however readable, comprehensible and intimate those notes are, becomes the actual theme of the volume:

The suffering body, which uses the published notes to articulate its basic, physiological needs in writing; the diseased body, which the doctors describe in many languages, but also photograph, measure, analyze; the dying body being watched by the contemporaries, the press, fellow writers and citizens; the tortured body of a martyr struggling with the serious illness, which is both frightening whilst being admired; and finally the body of the famous writer: a saint figure for the modern, disenchanting reality, a world without God yet needing saints, celebrities or other figures worthy of admiration; and a cultural icon guaranteeing the national coherence in the "region of differences" (*Region der Differenzen*) (Csáky 2010: 76–77), where the fragile state institutions seldom matched the linguistic, ethnic or religious claims. In a sense, the evolution from the adoration of Christ's mystical body to the theological concept of the king's two bodies, progressively secularized, attains here a modern coda at the half-peripheries of Europe (Kantorowicz 1957; Ariès 1977: 37–96; Sowa 2011).

The edition of Kosztolányi's cancer conversational sheets belongs to a much wider corpus of different types of life-writing texts published recently in Central Europe – from Witold Gombrowicz's secret chronology of sexual, financial and artistic life, published in 2013 under the title *Kronos* as well as facsimile, to Géza Csáth's diaries, published between 1997 and 2017, exploring (and exposing) his parallel yet unequal addictions to morphine, sex and psychoanalysis – which may gain popularity, may receive a large and controversial reception, or may also remain silenced and known only to a few academicians as in the case of Maria Dańbrowska's full diary edition in 2009.

Discussing chosen aspects of those phenomena in Hungary, Zoltán Z. Varga proposed an interesting conception of autobiographical fragments, once published, becoming "the text found" (*talált szöveg*) in different senses of the term (Z. Varga 2014). In his analysis of cancer notebooks by Mihály Babits (1883–

1941), published as early as 1980 (Babits 1980), he insists on the radical contrast between the canonical work of the modern Hungarian *poeta doctus par excellence* and the blurred identity visible in his notebooks, as well as on the aspect discussed in the first part of this article: the “form of the formless” (*a formátlanság formája*) appearing in those lines that could also be read, without context, as works of avant-garde poetry, developing (in Babits’s case at least) a language of suffering close to surrealist experimentations, as if the utopian idea of the language expressing himself would come true (Z. Varga 2014: 191–195).

The (potential) artistic form appearing (or projected by the editor, the form of publication and the reader’s horizon of expectations?) in such liminal publications remains one of their most fascinating (yet difficult to seize) aspects. However, this vague of publications incites to raise a much more important number of questions, concerning both the particularities of those texts themselves and the specific conditions of their reception in our voyeuristic post-Big-Brother times: how life-writings by authors dealing with the problems of gender, sexuality, and disabilities gradually gained an important place in the Central-European literary field? In what manner their manuscripts relate bodily differences? How editions reveal their initial message and to what extent do they adapt or modulate it? What role do they bodies perform in contemporary discourses, and how do they question admitted aesthetic or ethical distinctions?

The example of Dezső Kosztolányi’s cancer notebooks allows to explore not only the particularities of an almost unprecedented case of individual expression at the threshold of life necessity and art. They also offer a potential insight in the evolution of Hungarian (and Central-European) horizons of expectation – to use the classical concept by Hans-Robert Jauss – towards literary work, the evolution of privacy/intimacy’s boundaries, the narrative schemes and myths still functioning among readers (authors, editors, etc.) as well as the way the publishing of such texts developed in the last decades. These liminal acts of speech blur boundaries between literary creation and readers’ expectations, ordinary and auto/biographical writing, aesthetics and ethics, intimacy and public exposure. Last readable syllables and letters instead of *ultima verba*, the performance of a dying corpse replacing *mehr Licht*. Last sounds, last letters, last signs on the paper.

The postmodern curious eye excavates and assimilates Kosztolányi’s corpse to its own intellectual, political, aesthetical, and emotional needs. His corpse becomes another posthuman body-as-node, defined by Judith (Jack) Halberstam and Ira Livingstone: a space, where “bodies, bodies of discourse and discourses of bodies intersect to foreclose any easy distinction between actor and stage, between sender/receiver, channel, code, message, context” (Halberstam/Livingstone 1995: 2). Exposed, analyzed, described, photographed, speechless yet projected on and spoken of.

There is no possible way of translating the two letters remaining in longer words such as the “*I/ ... Ja*” quoted above. There is no sense, besides the sonority of those vowels. The absence of (any) representation is completed by the edition, in which the precise transcription of any intelligible word, letter or other sign in the conversation sheets, surrounded by any possible testimony (and printed as part of the *Complete Works* of Kosztolányi) becomes, in the readers eyes, an artifact, if not a literary work itself, representing both the suffering body of the author – and the admiring, curious, contemporary reader at the same time.

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