



The Topos of Journey in Antal Szerb's Novel *Journey by Moonlight*

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Abstract. The topos of journey in literature is anything but contemporary, it dates back to Homer who in the *Odyssey* first developed the idea incorporated into a literary work on the subject. The themes of journey, of nostalgia and restlessness, present in the *Odyssey* as a guiding principle and driving force, can also be found in Antal Szerb's *Journey by Moonlight*. From the very beginning, from how the main character of the novel, Mihály, introduces his trip to Italy, it is clear that it cannot be a conventional journey but one towards the discovery of himself. He arrives in Venice, a unique city because it is close to the border which divides Central and Eastern Europe from Western Europe, yet it presents the essence of Italian life. It is no coincidence that Mihály, although he embarks on his honeymoon with the confidence of a newlywed, is immediately thrown out of his peace of mind, and his psychological drama begins. He is given the chance to get away from a domestic atmosphere laden with norms and expectations, and the Italian trip, with its strong exoticism, offers him a taste of a different kind of existence, away from ordinary life, and becomes the road to and for self-understanding.

Keywords: the topos of journey, Antal Szerb, *Journey by Moonlight*.

Introduction

Antal Szerb (1901–1945), despite having been a literary historian who has to his credit many essays of literary criticism and monumental works on the history of literature that can still be used profitably today, is known to a wider audience mainly for his novels. Of these, *Journey by Moonlight* (*Utas és holdvilág*) is perhaps the most successful one, and it is widely considered as Szerb's masterpiece (Havasréti 2013, 387). Based on this novel, plays, films, radio programmes, audio books, photo albums have been made, and the book has also gained a certain notoriety

abroad thanks to the translations into English, German, Polish, French, Italian, Spanish, Dutch, Serbian, and Hindi. Yet, when it was published in 1937, the reception of the novel was not overwhelmingly positive; in fact, some considered it an immoral work (Erdősi 1999, 303; Havasréti 2011, 428).

The novel was originally published in Hungarian in 1937. It appeared in English in 2001 (the first translation by Len Rix was published by Pushkin Press), while throughout this essay I will refer to the more recent 2016 translation by Peter Czipott, published by Alma Classics Ltd.

Journey by Moonlight has multiple layers of meaning – it can be decoded and understood in various ways. From a nostalgic perspective, it can be seen as a romantic throwback to youth, to the Ulpius house’s children’s hermetically sealed world and their role-playing games lurking and lusting for death. In a figurative sense, it can be considered as an “educational metaphor” used symbolically to represent an existential journey which has a task: the self’s accomplishment through research and renewal. In this regard, M. T. Moscato (1994, 103–104) writes:

Indeed, the figure of the journey expresses a metaphor of the educational process in an inseparable way from the broader metaphor of human life, and its symbolic power lies precisely in this. In the theme of travel, it is the whole of human life in its complexity that is described as a “journey” and “transformation,” that is, as an “intentional movement” towards a goal that is only hypothetically defined.¹

Finally, the novel can be read as a travel novel set in 1937 Italy. The travel motif can be interpreted in several ways. On the one hand, it can refer to Szerb’s personal experiences in Italy, on the other hand, to the tradition of travel literature related to Italy and, finally, also to the symbolic journey that the main character of the novel, Mihály, accomplishes through a geographical change of location towards the depths of his childhood and of his soul, and generally towards the primordial mythological deep layers of culture. In what follows, I will discuss these different aspects of the topos of journey, focusing mainly on Szerb’s background in this regard and his protagonist’s passionate interest in Italian culture and history, which is intertwined with the pilgrimage of self-search.

1 “In effetti la figura del viaggio esprime una metafora del processo educativo in maniera inseparabile dalla più ampia metafora della vita umana, e proprio in questo risiede la sua potenza simbolica. Nel tema del viaggio è l’intera vita umana nella sua complessità che viene descritta come ‘cammino’ e ‘trasformazione,’ cioè come ‘movimento intenzionale’ verso una meta solo ipoteticamente definita” (the English translation is mine, E. R.).

The Theme of Travel in Szerb's Oeuvre

Szerb's oeuvre is connected in many ways to the theme of travel. In addition to his great love of travel, it is the theme of many of his writings; among others, an alternative guidebook about Budapest (*Budapesti kalauz marslakók számára* [A *Martian's Guide to Budapest*], 1935) and a travelogue (*A harmadik torony* [The *Third Tower*], 1936) recorded during his trip to Italy in 1936. Szerb's own trip to Italy is an important precursor to *Journey by Moonlight*, which appeared a year later, in 1937. Some passages of the novel recall the author's Italian experiences reported in his travel diary. A few extracts from *The Third Tower*, which is subtitled *Journeys in Italy* and can be considered as the non-fiction companion to *Journey by Moonlight* (Havasréti 2013, 387), are worth quoting here, as they underpin some of the issues only lightly related to in the novel.

Szerb initially wanted to go to Spain, but the outbreak of the civil war, marking the beginning of the dictatorship of General Franco, very close to the ideology of fascism and as such supported by Nazi Germany and fascist Italy, prevented him from fulfilling his plan. Italy, however, could still be a travel destination, as he points out:

Then it occurred to me that I simply must go to Italy – while Italy remains where it is, and while going there is still possible. Who knows for how much longer that will be; indeed, for how much longer I, or any of us, will be able to go anywhere? The way events are moving, no one will be allowed to set foot outside his own country. [...] No doubt the totalitarian state will sooner or later decree that the true patriot is the one who stays at home. And this is why, whenever I travel to Italy, I go there as if for the very last time, and why, when I first set eyes on any of its towns, it is as if I am not just returning, but bidding it farewell. Dostoevsky writes that we should live as if our every minute were the last moments of a man condemned to death: that way, we would grasp the ineffable richness of life. My impressions of Italy always feel like the last visions of a dying man. (Szerb 2014, 12)

This passage reflects the shades of fascism and Nazism starting their own journey towards war and is charged with intense personal nostalgia.

Both *The Third Tower* and *Journey by Moonlight* open in the back alleys of Venice, a city considered by Szerb the centre of the world, at least one of them. He articulates the essence of Venice's eternity as follows: "Venice is the centre of the world. Or rather, one of its centres, for the world has several. [...] Venice is the city of intimate closeness. The most human-scale of all cities. Here Western culture's Faustian rush to infinite expansion comes to a halt. Venice cannot 'develop.' It cannot become any larger than it already is" (Szerb 2014, 15).

In *Journey by Moonlight*, Venice perfectly fits the plan of the narrative. Venice, the city of love, the place for romantic couple holidays, with its beautiful Gothic architecture and hosting some of the best galleries and museums full of art treasure, has a hidden side forming a parallel universe to the crowded shopping and sightseeing districts around Piazza San Marco and the Rialto. The real magic of Venice lies in its back alleys (*calli* in Italian) that most tourists do not visit. In this labyrinth of narrow side streets and footbridges, one can discover the unknown corners and forgotten canals of the city that exert an irresistible charm and offer an opportunity to lose oneself in unexpected experiences. The opening sentence of the novel is like a warning to the reader: “There had been no trouble at all on the train. It began in the back alleys of Venice” (Szerb 2016, 5).

The two works cited before, *A Martian’s Guide to Budapest* and *The Third Tower*, as well as *Journey by Moonlight* form a close unit: the duality of the traveller’s private world of experience and the geographical-cultural framework of the trip play a major role in them; the tradition of Bildungsreise, i.e. educational journey, is also an issue that generally defines Szerb’s works which implies the textual readability and symbolic interpretability of cities and landscapes (Havasréti 2011, 429).

The Tradition of Hungarian Travel Literature

Most of the foreign trips of Hungarians from the fifteenth to the eighteenth century were directed to Italy. The first Hungarian intellectuals arrived in Padua and Bologna or in Roman schools, primarily for study purposes. Among the first testimonies of travel literature, we find the *Italian Travel Diary (Itáliai útinapló)* from 1552 of the Transylvanian Saxon Martin Brenner, a village doctor from Hermannstadt, and Mihály Forgách’ *Speech on the Journey and Its Glory*² from 1587, in which the author argues that travel is necessary, fair, useful, and pleasant.

The nineteenth century proved to be the age of travel and journeys, which were made to complete the educational and cultural process, for professional, political, sentimental, family, personal reasons and more. Unlike those of previous centuries, most of these movements were accompanied by punctual and daily reports, expressed from time to time in epistolary, diary, and intellectual form. Among the destinations, the Italian Peninsula was the sought-after destination for trips that can be placed in the tradition of the Grand Tour, responding to needs dictated by the political, ideological, and cultural transformations of the “century of nationalities.” The nineteenth century is also the century of the birth of worldwide

2 Original title: *Oratio de peregrinatione et eius laudibus, cum ex insigni Argentoratensi quo ante missus fuerit celeberrimam Witebergensem Academiam venisset in inclyto nationis Ungaricae Coetu Witebergae scripta et habita Michaele Forgacz libero barone de Gymes. Witebergae, 1587.*

travel guides. The guides – often referred to simply as “Baedekers” after the inventor of modern guidebooks, Karl Baedeker (1801–1859) – contain information about routes and travel facilities, descriptions of noteworthy buildings, sights, attractions, and museums, written by specialists; maps and historical and cultural information are also often included. Italy’s power of attraction was not limited to curious Hungarian enthusiasts, but it contaminated many artists throughout Europe, including celebrities such as Johannes Brahms, Friedrich Nietzsche, Thomas Mann, or John Ruskin. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, intellectuals manifested the desire to explore landscapes steeped in history and the past, against the backdrop of the delightfully mysterious Italian art. In Hungary, Endre Ady, Mihály Babits, Dezső Kosztolányi, Attila József, and many others, in particular artists related to the literary magazine *Nyugat* ‘West,’ represented the love for Italy through literature. In Szerb’s novel, we find references to some of them (e.g. Endre Ady and Mihály Babits).

These approaches are also important from Szerb’s point of view as a writer whose text does not lack references to Baedeker. Tourism is a lens through which he creates the position of the outside observer and the initiate at the same time; it can simultaneously create an alienating and participating – thus ironic – perspective.

The Pilgrimage of Self-search in *Journey by Moonlight*

The road you travel along is the symbol of life, research, and knowledge in literature and the symbol of the desire for elsewhere, which can also serve as a stratagem for contemplating the question of existence. This happens, for example, in the case of Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726) or in that of *Candide* (1759) by Voltaire, where the authors use the journey as an excuse to argue on society and humanity.

In *Journey by Moonlight*, Italy becomes the background against which a man’s desperate race in search of his lost self will take place. Italy is described not just from the perspective of the casual traveller but also through the eyes of a literary critic who knows it well from its portrayal by Goethe, Byron, Shelley, and several other authors to whom Szerb refers explicitly. After Venice, the protagonist’s journey continues through the regions of Emilia Romagna (where he visits Ravenna and “sweet” Bologna), Tuscany (where he visits “noble” Florence, Fiesole, Siena, “the most beautiful Italian city,” Arezzo, Cortona, Terontola), Umbria (where he visits Perugia, Assisi, Spello, Foligno, Spoleto, Gubbio, Norcia), and Lazio with Rome, the city that Mihály particularly appreciates: “All the other Italian cities shrank into insignificance next to Rome” (Szerb 2016, 151). It is an itinerary worthy of a professional Baedeker tour guide.

Havasréti (2011, 430) assumes *Journey by Moonlight* to be a book of social distinctions, where Szerb's comments on travel are based on the logic of "differences and distinctions." This is indicated at the beginning of the novel:

As befitting highly intelligent people possessed of enormous self-awareness, Mihály and Erzsi strove to find the proper middle way between snobbery and anti-snobbery. They didn't exhaust themselves attempting to accomplish everything Baedeker demanded, but even less did they seek to belong to those who return home and boast: "The museums... well, of course we didn't visit any museums!" – and then look smugly at each other. (Szerb 2016, 5–6)

For Mihály and his wife, Erzsi, a trip to Italy is not a means to satisfy the primitive hunger for entertainment of mass tourism, it is not a demonstration of fulfilling one's duty arising from highly valued education but a kind of "experience project" that includes cultural motivations, bourgeois prestige needs, and the satisfaction of entertainment needs. Later on, this peculiar attitude, balancing on the border of snobbery and anti-snobbery, turns out to be an illusion: while Mihály's trip to Italy turns into a journey leading to the depths of his own soul, Erzsi has to face the disintegration of the bourgeois conventions connected to the trip and inevitably to her own life.

Mihály's mistake, the fate that pushes him to get on the wrong train at Terontola station, thus moving away from his wife, represents the author's artistic means of offering a chance for redemption to the protagonist, who is eager to find out what's there beyond the conventions of his bourgeois life that he has been forced to adapt to for too long.

The debate about man's desire to seek and discover himself has been widespread and exhaustive since the dawn of literature. The story is actually the same as faced by dozens of other literary works of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, namely the search for oneself in a world that seems completely foreign, where everything is impenetrable, incomprehensible and complicated, and where the person ends up no longer recognizing oneself. The unstoppable desire to travel comes from people's feeling of dissatisfaction. Dostoevsky, Gogol, Kosztolányi, Karinthy, Kafka, Sartre, Camus, and many others have addressed this topic, not surprisingly, as this sentiment was typical of their era.

Journey by Moonlight deals with the same phenomenon, only in a different way, so delicately, humanly and with such empathy that I would dare to define it as unique. This is probably the key to the success of the novel even after eighty years it was penned. There is mystery, there is nostalgia, there are desires and fears that merge almost indistinguishably. Antal Szerb reveals the most hidden and darkest places of the human mind. All this, unlike his peers, without triggering

the slightest disturbing feelings or a sense of oppression, and indeed, giving us a light book, which results to be almost funny.

It is the story of a profound reflection on one's identity, the narration of a spiritual and introspective journey which, following a misunderstanding, shows the protagonist the limits imposed by a society in which he can no longer reflect himself and from which he feels strongly conditioned. He confesses what follows to one of his old friends' circle, Ervin, the first of them to find meaning in life, not in the world that they were familiar with but by withdrawing from it to a monastic life:

Mihály couldn't resist the confessions that strove to erupt from him. As he talked, everything that he'd sensed instinctively since his flight came to the surface: how much of a failure he felt his adult – or mock-adult – life and marriage had been; how he had no idea what to do next and what to expect from his future; and how he might recover his true self. And mainly, how much he suffered from his nostalgia for his youth and the friends from his youth. (Szerb 2016, 126–127)

It echoes what Erzsi wonders at the very beginning of the novel: "How much longer [...] can this fiction be sustained?" (Szerb 2016, 10), where fiction means the effort to maintain the appearance of adulthood. Through the figure of Mihály, Antal Szerb reflects on self-fashioning, the public self-representative behaviour of the well-educated literate citizen, one's outwardly projected image created towards society, for others, to gain recognition from others. "Self-fashioning," a term introduced by Stephen Greenblatt in 1980, refers to the process of shaping public identity and personality to reflect socially and culturally acceptable models: "[...] self-fashioning is in effect the [...] version of [...] control mechanisms, the cultural system of meanings that creates specific individuals by governing the passage from abstract potential to concrete historical embodiment" (Greenblatt 2005, 3–4). Mihály's portrayal offers a form of self-representation based on culturally inspired procedures. The protagonist of the novel tries his best to create his own public self-image, and for a long time, for fifteen years, he struggles to assume a socially respectable role while working in his father's company. When he becomes Erzsi's husband, to play the new role, he must give up his former identity.

The story is set in the thirties. A couple from Budapest arrives in Italy for their honeymoon. The two newlyweds, apparently happy and model bourgeois citizens, hide restlessness and emotional instability. Mihály appears to be an intelligent, precise, orderly person who corresponds to the model of the perfect bourgeois imposed by the society of his time. However, once he begins his physical and mystical pilgrimage, he is bound to re-evaluate his life and experience up to that

point. In the world of *Journey by Moonlight* Mihály reaches a fatal turning point in which he tries to reconstruct his identity, and the tool for this process is the narrative oftentimes made up of monologues.

A flashback story, which is pivotal to the whole novel, commences after bumping into one of his old friends in Ravenna, János Szepetneki. The unexpected appearance of this long-lost classmate makes him recall his nonconformist youth. His narrative begins by exploring memories dating back to the Ulpius house, which represents for him the world in which he can move easily, without imposed external rules. Mihály suffocated memories of the past at the Ulpius house for a long time to live his life as an adult citizen. During the honeymoon in Italy, the symptoms of suppression appear: the escape from Erzsi and the illness in the form of tiredness and exhaustion triggered by the solitary walk in the alleys and the memory of his friend Tamás Ulpius, who took his own life. This process is called regression in psychoanalysis (Freud 1973, 383–385; Jung 1993, 32). During the time of Antal Szerb, the Freudian psychological trend was extremely popular, and this is well reflected in the description of the protagonist's struggles: as if Mihály were in permanent dialogue with his subconscious on the one hand and his superior self on the other.

In the Ulpius house, the group of friends centred on Éva and her brother Tamás sought escape from the quotidian conventional bourgeois life and found refuge in private theatricals where death was a constant presence. In Italy, Mihály, looking for Éva and waiting for her, feels the childhood sense of loss and anxiety again. After having met her in Rome, in his longing, he asserts an Éva-centred theory of existence through which his life until then can be divided into two parts: searching for Éva and spending time with Éva on the one hand and being without her on the other. “The time he spent searching for Éva was much more existent, much more true in its reality, than the months and years without Éva; whether it was good or bad, no matter how dreadful the anguish and sense of doom that came with it, he knew that this was life, and without Éva there was no other reality than thinking of Éva and waiting for her” (Szerb 2016, 198). The two states of existence separated by Mihály also divide the plot of the novel in two.

One pole is represented by the adaptation to social norms, to a bourgeois existence after breaking away from the Ulpius house and the detachment from childlikeness represented by Éva: namely his corporate work, earning his father's recognition, his marriage with Erzsi, which means at the same time his inclusion among adult and serious people. This state of existence will also include the period after his returning home, which the novel does not present, only foreshadows it.

The other state of being relates to Éva's presence or the search after her. However, Éva is a kind of a symbol here, too, that of victimhood represented by childhood, the games at Ulpius house and with Tamás. The feeling of loss, the attraction to Éva and Tamás and their duality can be linked to this second period.

Mihály perceives these years as much more realistic, whether good or bad, as for him it meant an active form of suffering or enjoyment, having in this way an advantage over the passive middle-class life: "When I entered the atmosphere of the Ulpius house, my constant feelings of shame disappeared, and so did my nervous symptoms. This was the happiest period of my life, and if some scent or play of light awakens its memory in me, even now that excited and dizzying happiness courses through me: the only happiness I ever knew" (Szerb 2016, 28–29). In the novel, the alternation of the two states provides the dynamism, the basis of Mihály's research and its direction. The main change is between the married life with Erzsi and the wandering in Italy realized by the *action gratuite* of missing the right train.

The most distressing feelings and fears of people do not come from nature but from social existence. It is part of the development of the personality that operates prevention mechanisms. If the anxiety becomes unbearable, or one cannot satisfy their own needs, one starts using self-defence mechanisms. Escape is such a mechanism and a motive at the same time. The self excludes the possibility of coping and experiences deep conflicts as a predestined failure; one gets stuck, weakens his perception of reality, goes back to childhood or into a constructed, unreal dream world, becomes nostalgic, suffers, and loses the power to act. The fleeing person becomes lonely, the feeling of insignificance and weakness intensifies, and, in many cases, the desire to die appears (Fromm 2002, 21, 89, 129). The honeymoon shown in the novel is symbolic, and the train only takes Mihály, who longs to return to his childhood, to one more station of former adolescent complexes, showing him the path to himself. According to Freud, travel is one of the most common symbols of death, it leads to self-discovery and an encounter with oneself (Freud 1985, 272). Each station evokes signs, fears, and emotions. For Mihály, every passage through Italy is extremely important, it has a value beyond the movement itself.

Venice is mysterious and exciting. Its peculiar atmosphere can manifest for the traveller the threshold of life and death. Mihály arrives in Venice with Erzsi for their honeymoon, a passage that would be an initiation rite to enter the bourgeois world, a passage that the woman has already experienced with Zoltán, her first husband. Ravenna is a city of transience; it does not live in the present. It awakens the feelings of youthful death wish and adolescent self-pity. Under such influences, Mihály tells his wife about his youth, but she cannot interpret it. Florence is a city of ominous signs, with constant bad weather. Struggling towards self-knowledge, Mihály realizes that he is unfit for adulthood, and he has been trying to conform in vain. He gives in to his instincts and wants to relive his teenage years. The trip to Siena leads to a casual and pleasant encounter with the American girl Millicent Ingram. This foreign woman represents youth. After Mihály's unhappy marriage to Erzsi, Millicent symbolizes freedom and

adventure, something unexpected. Wandering through the mountain landscapes, fears and visions accompany Mihály's journey. The vision of the dead Tamás Ulpus creates in him a longing for death and awakens his memories of Éva.

The scariest place on the trip is Rome, where Mihály arrives alone, led there almost by a superior will. In an alley of the city, a stranger gives him a mysterious letter from which he learns that Éva is in Rome. She appears and demonizes our protagonist with the story of Tamás Ulpus's death. Mihály is coward to die, no matter how much he wants to. He avoids this confrontation as well and escapes into the unconsciousness of drunkenness at a baptism he is invited to. In his dreams, he sees that his life instinct is stronger than his desire to die (Csiszár 2002, 335–340).

During Mihály's travels, Erzsi's attempt to escape takes place on another thread. What Mihály is looking for in the wonders of adolescence Erzsi wants to find in love. Mihály does not think in accordance with the maturity and age of his personality, and as a result he cannot undergo experiences, such as travels, that would have a role in the development of his personality:

Mihály was now seeing Italy for the first time – at the age of thirty-six, on his honeymoon. He had covered the map in the course of his long-extended years of wandering. He'd spent years in England and France, but he had always avoided Italy, sensing that the time was not yet ripe: he wasn't prepared for it. He assigned Italy, along with siring offspring, to the category of grown-up matters, and in secret he even feared it: he feared it the way he shied away from strong sunlight, the scent of flowers and extremely pretty women. If he hadn't got married and if his intention hadn't been to begin his wedded life with the standard Italian honeymoon, he might have postponed the Italian journey until his death. Even now, he had come to Italy not on a visit but on a honeymoon, which is a different matter altogether. (Szerb 2016, 5)

There is no solution for Mihály. His journeys, feelings, and emotions lead him to senseless wandering and inability to grow up and develop. He does not realize that it is not loneliness, that it is not longing, but it is his own helplessness and immaturity that are the causes of his suffering. He represents an era, a specific state of mind, a tragic type of a tragic era. His childish self, his being stuck cannot escape from the minimum requirements of his era and his own personality. He must conform, the solutions he seeks and finds will not help. It seems like a positive conclusion to his suffering that he chooses life although he does not yet know how and what path to take. But at least he decided: "He could do nothing else but go home. There would have been one other solution, but... those external circumstances from which he had wanted to flee into death had, it seemed, ceased to be" (Szerb 2016, 259).

The Italian world, full of secrets, makes Mihály transform his outer journey into an inner one. Mihály's monologues, his self-talk, and his self-definition constantly challenge the limits of linguistic expression. The novel also represents a challenge to the various literary genres of the time such as the psychological novel, the travelogue, the novel about the rebellious generation. In the 1930s, Hungarian novel underwent a transformation, mainly under the influence by Szerb's contemporary, Sándor Márai (1900–1989), who created the model of the narrative of the “rebellious youth” and in those same years developed themes closely connected to travel, understood as the discovery of the world and of one's own identity, still very present in today's literature. Sándor Márai's *Zendülők* [*The Rebels*, 1930] also deals with a group of adolescents graduating from high school towards the end of the First World War, just like Mihály and his friends, and likewise rebelling against their bourgeois origins. More strikingly still, Márai's rebels also act out a private theatrical experience with ominous overtones, and one of their circle also perishes. Márai's *Egy polgár vallomásai* [*Confessions of a Bourgeois*, 1934] also features a secret society formed by children to defy the adult world. Critics have often compared both *Journey to Moonlight* and *The Rebels* to Cocteau's *Les Enfants Terribles* (Havasréti 2011, 427; Lezard 2001; Szávai 2003, 334). Yet Szerb is unique in presenting youthful rebellion from the nostalgic perspective of the (surviving) characters grown to adulthood. The result is a multifaceted work full of ideas in which the inner journey is the master with a return to the happy and carefree times of childhood, far from the obligations and rigid and suffocating social conventions.

Conclusions

In *Journey by Moonlight*, the protagonist is a man who lives an experience of profound self-search with an attitude of strong self-analysis. Antal Szerb asks serious and recurring questions about human existence in a philosophical-metaphysical key, where nostalgia turns out to be the undisputed protagonist of life. To this end, he places great emphasis on the issue of free will (cf. Schopenhauer 1906), which is largely delimited by the social pillars of conventions and expectations. Mihály both tried to integrate into society and to step out of it, playing and ignoring the practical side of life. However, none of them matched his personality completely because Mihály cannot be perfect either as a conformist citizen or as a rebellious outsider. He is the archetype of the seeker, as Szepetneki, one of Mihály's old friends, states to Erzsi: “Mihály is not cut out to be a husband. He... how should I put it... he's a seeker... He's been seeking something his entire life, something that's different. [...] Honestly, I confess I never did understand that man” (Szerb 2016, 142).

One of the cornerstones of the protagonist's inner journey turns out to be the father figure. In the life of Éva and Tamás Ulpius, the paternal thread as a representation of ancient patterns and stereotypes is weak, almost non-existent since they hate their father whom they see as the suffocating force of society (the father wants to marry Éva and send Tamás to work in the office). In contrast, Mihály surrenders to the old power without any opposition. When his father comes to Italy to take him home, he sees him as an old man and worries about him so much so that Éva, Italy, and his mortal plans do not mean anything anymore. For Mihály, there remains the victim's role, a bitter feeling of self-abandonment, the possibility of re-conformation in the wake of those conventions from which he has tried to escape to live his individual dimension.

The journey in Italy leads him to inevitable self-revelations and to self-surrender to his true self. This experience allows him to breathe and feel free for the first time, it helps him undress of the mantle of society and the coercion exercised by it. In the end, conformity triumphs over non-conformity. Erzsi goes back to her first husband, Zoltán, and Mihály returns to his family. But it all ends on an overall optimistic note: "He must stay alive. And he too would live: like rats amidst the ruins. But he'd live, nonetheless. And as long as one lives, something might yet happen" (Szerb 2016, 261).

While the vivid descriptions of places and events are rooted in reality, there is simultaneously a surreal, dream-like quality to the stories with mystery, intrigue, and plot twists. It is a wonderfully subtle, surprising and original book, beautifully written, unpredictable, playful, intelligent and quietly profound, combining serious and grotesque elements in a way only Antal Szerb is capable of doing.

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