

ARS POETICA

(Short story)

by

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Author's Note, May 1974:

Although I have forgotten exactly when this short story was written, I do remember for certain that it was some time in the early 1950s. In any case this is quite clearly borne out by its atmosphere, its subject, and its thinly veiled message. I submitted it to some literary periodical at the time; it was accepted, sent off to the printers, and I even remember receiving the proofs. However it never appeared in print, for the entire journal was dispatched to the pulping mill. The manuscript lingered in a drawer of my writing desk and gradually faded from memory. Hence it did not emerge from obscurity even when there was no longer any barrier to publication. I saw it and salvaged the manuscript from oblivion while making preparations for the publication of my collected works. I would surely write my Ars Poetica somewhat differently today, but nevertheless I have let the original stand word for word. Rather than make any alterations, I consider it more useful to preserve the full literary ambiance of a period of history that is now past, with all its heart-wringing sincerity.

I was already taken by surprise to hear the concierge saying a good two years ago as he stood in front of me on the stairs;

“Oh, the senior consultant sends you his regards.”

“What senior consultant?” I asked.

“Dr. Miakits, from the Bodrog Street hospital.”

“You’re wrong there, Mr. Kiraly. Dr. Miakits is not a senior consultant yet, and I hardly think he is likely to become one in the near future.”

He was adamant, however, that Miakits was indeed a senior consultant and head of the medical ward. He himself had been sent home from hospital just the day before after treatment for an ulcer in the large intestine. Miakits, according to the concierge, enjoyed a high reputation in the department and as a matter of fact dealt only with the most complicated and apparently hopeless cases. He had deigned to examine the concierge only after hearing that I was one of the tenants of his house.

I gaped in astonishment at all this. We didn’t think that Miakits quite made the grade as a doctor. He lived nearby and so we did call him across from time to time, but we always nicknamed him “little Miakits”. It was characteristic that once, when my sister was running a temperature, my mother declared, “I’ll send for little Miakits, but if you’re not improving by tomorrow, I’ll call a doctor.” This gave rise to a catchphrase, and whenever anyone complained about feeling bad he was invariably asked, “should we call a doctor, or will little Miakits do?”

Yet it wasn’t so much that we wanted to cast aspersions on his professional knowledge. To be perfectly honest his medical qualities never came into it. His awkward behaviour and ubiquitous modest stoop prevented us from ever taking him seriously in his vocation. He would arrive and bow, and the hand he extended was as soft as an inflated leather glove. He abandoned every sentence somewhere in the middle, as if he were ashamed of its continuation. What he had to say came out in bits and pieces, or rather it split forth like the water from a lame man’s bucket. He was always soaking wet when he arrived, as if the

skies always opened just when he set out to visit us; and on his way out, even though he knew the flat well, he never failed to turn the knob of the lavatory door instead of going through to the hall. No, it was impossible to take little Miakits seriously. My surprise was all the greater when an artist friend of mine tragically lost his twenty-four year old wife in the flower of her youth; on the verge of madness, staring bluntly and almost blindly in his despair he exclaimed:

„Inconceivable! Unfathomable! Ten days ago Miakits told me there was no need to worry.”

„Who’s this Miakits?” I asked.

„Maybe it was just because Miakits flew off to Prague during the crisis that poor Nelli had to die.”

„Why did he fly to Prague?” I asked.

„Oh, he was called to sonic Minister’s sickbed.”

Miakits is a fairly unusual name, I thought, but there just might be two of them. Yet everything corresponded. My artist friend’s Miakits was also called Endre, he too lived in Buda in Harangvirág utca, and he too owned an ivy green Fiat of the type that had become popular not long before.

There was no doubt that it was our little Miakits he was talking about, and the praises sung by my friend commanded all the more respect in view of the fact that poor Nelli had after all died in his department. It turned out that little Miakits exercised some magical charm over his patients. It wasn’t merely that they had a blind faith in his capabilities, nor was it because he was such an imposing and handsome personage – our little Miakits, imposing! – although these were not merits to be sneezed at in the women’s medical wards. Miakits’ magic was mainly due to his ability, as poor Nelli had expressed it, to “strike the right chord with everyone.” By the time he set out on his rounds at ten o’clock, the wards had been imbued with some peculiar sense of expectation since dawn. By the time he finished after marching past all the beds his patients were truly buzzing with excitement, their aches and pains had eased, and their general disposition had perked up. He never uttered any special words of wisdom or gems of wit, but he always managed to come out with just the right words for each individual. For example, every morning he used to greet a seventy-two year old woman suffering from cancer with a slap on the back and the question, “What’s new? How did you sleep, you old bag?” And on hearing this the woman would beam back at Miakits as if from the edge of the grave and spend all day making fresh plans, confident in the future, as if she wanted to live seventy years all over again.

“There’s a sort of internal equilibrium there,” my friend explained, “some kind of healthy self-confidence which the patients are able to sense. When it comes to doctors, Miakits ranks with the very best.”

I have to admit that this recognition flattered me as well. It is one thing to be respected by a clumsy oaf whom everyone ridicules a little, and quite another to attract the same respect from one who is an outstanding professional in his own field, a famous physician who is summoned to treat foreign Ministers... for the fact was that Miakits held me in the highest esteem. He used to buy my books as soon as they appeared, have them bound in the same red ribbed-back cloth, and then pay me a visit for me to inscribe each new possession. Then he would launch into a few rapturous sentences, which he always left unfinished, attempt to leave via the lavatory, and in the end, after a couple of awkward bows, back out onto the staircase.

It followed from this that Miakits was leading a double life.

However as soon as I realised that the Miakits known to me was quite different from the one known to his patients, I understood at once the reason for this double life. It was only in my presence that Miakits was clumsy, and the source of this clumsiness was the respect he

felt for me. My presence made him shrivel and contract, like a styptic stick affects the skin. In all probability he walked imperiously down every street and drew the glances of the ladies after him; his head was still held high as he strode up the stairs; but the moment that he approached me his neck would give way and he would move anxiously back and forth like someone with his head destined for the pot. As a matter of fact Miakits considered me to be the greatest writer of the age.

I could never manage to find out how he arrived at this conviction. Perhaps there is some mysterious preordained affinity between us. Perhaps I am the writer who happened to express the horror of waking up at dawn, the smile of unfaithful women, or the highway after a heavy shower, in just the way that corresponded best to his own way of thinking and nervous system. It is also possible that Miakits was some sort of culture fiend who liked to dazzle his company with the originality of his views. These queer fishes typically quote Arvers, the French poet rendered immortal by a single sonnet; they like to mention that renaissance staircase in the rear wing of the Palazzo Pitti in Florence, to which entrance can be obtained only by bribing the porter; and they are forever conjuring up a Beethoven fragment whose sixty-seven bars are worth more than all the symphonies. Finally it is also conceivable that Miakits had a real passion for discovery and, seeking in his own way to open the lock of life's secrets, hadn't managed to find a better key than myself.

That's what I thought. That's what I thought until some time last year when Miakits began to drop hints about certain writers (no names mentioned) who brazenly stopped at nothing in striving to increase their popularity, whilst others (still no names mentioned, but an unmistakable gaze in my direction) had retreated too far from the public eye, were really shutting themselves away from their fans... I was accustomed by now to the fact that, rather than use plain words, Miakits seemed to follow some sort of Chinese etiquette manual when he was talking to me, forever digressing and never reaching the point; consequently I managed to grasp the meaning of the following sentence at once:

„For example, to do an aesthetically pleasing public reading... (pause) Far be it from me to put forward such a daring suggestion... (pause) The writer with his own personal accentuation could bring to light the hidden meanings of his sentences, and in doing so the audience would be...”

He fell silent and reached into his pocket, searching for something; presumably he wanted to complete the predicate of the unfinished sentence.

„If I'm right, Dr. Miakits, you're interested in organizing some kind of literary evening,” I prompted him.

He smiled gratefully with downcast eyes.

„If there was a writer, a writer who really deserved it, who...”

He broke off and stared at me stonily. I had to burst out laughing.

“I'm sure such a writer could be found, Dr. Miakits,” I remarked, naturally in such a way as to suggest that I had no idea as to who this writer might be, but I'm afraid it might prove harder to find him an audience.”

„Oh,” he sighed, “the really worthy writer (and he stared at me once more) needn't be afraid of that. The fans... the fans and the sheer rapture...”

He suddenly thrust something soft towards me, which I ascertained to be his hand; then he opened the lavatory door and left in the usual way, though more hurriedly than usual.

In the following eighteen months or so he kept coming back to the idea of the public reading. In the meantime it turned out that he had talked with a good few readers of mine and lots of enthusiastic fans who, if he was to be believed, were all strongly in favour of the idea.

„There are a lot of bad lecturers around,” I told him once, modestly concealing my own identity behind this third person plural, “and many of them just send their audiences to sleep.”

„No, no!” he exclaimed in despair.

„Apart from that,” I continued, “there are genres which don’t go down well. The short story, for example, is not for mass consumption here. So where do we stand with the short story which amuses an initiated few rather than the masses? It’s better if that sort of author stays away from the public podium.”

I could see that these words depressed him. He thought that I was looking for a way out, and so I hastened to reassure him that, if he could find a number of persons who were interested. I would do all in my power to get hold of the appropriate “worthy” writer as a lecturer... His face beaming, he rushed out in the visual roundabout way.

Emboldened by this green light, he began to drop more and more unambiguous hints to the forthcoming reading. After a while he informed me that he had succeeded in finding a site of the right capacity and suitable for the occasion. Then he started to mention some sort of executive committee, but in my opinion this was going too far.

„All a writer needs,” I told him, again speaking in general terms, “is a chair, a table, and a lamp. He doesn’t need any executive committee to do a reading.”

Miakits turned pale.

„The committee has already been chosen,” he said in a pleading tone, adding after a brief pause, “it’s too bad the list isn’t quite as imposing as it should be, but you know how things are here...”

I ceased raising objections. Let him do as he pleases, I thought. I dumbly received notification that, after vicious internal squabbling, the committee had elected a President and a Vice-President, the latter to function in the event of the death or indisposition of the former. When Miakits enquired which of the flowers generally on sale in Hungary was particularly beloved by writers I replied without hesitating that writers like the cyclamen best of all, feeling sure that a pot of them would be waiting for me on the lecturer’s table. Thus the day of the public reading drew nearer.

Miakits rang the doorbell two hours before the reading was due to begin, with a single cyclamen in his buttonhole. He insisted that I put on tailcoat or a dinner-jacket, and only when I showed him that I didn’t possess either did he agree that I should appear on the platform in normal everyday clothes. He selected my shirt and tie and just before we left he unexpectedly opened a minute phial and sprinkled my hair with perfume. Outside the house we climbed into the green Fiat and I glanced at my watch.

„Dr. Miakits, what’s all the rush?” I asked. “The reading doesn’t begin for an hour and a half”.

„The Presidium,” said Miakits, “would consider itself honoured if the lecturer were to devote a little time to discuss a few formalities. They all suffer from stage fright, and they’re nervous wrecks by the time they come to shake hands with a famous...”

He didn’t finish. He started the car and we drove across to Pest, then all the way down Rakóczi lit, past the Keleti, and a good way beyond into a district which I don’t know. Then we pulled up by the gate of an enormous and visibly brand new building. Two hefty uniformed porters assisted us out of the car; it struck me that each wore a cyclamen in his service cap. The one opened the double glass doors and the other tagged along with us and opened numerous further doors in the long and stately marble corridor along which we walked. I was pleased at this polite reception. This pleasure soon gave way to a deeper emotion when we stepped into the meeting hall and I ran my eyes over the members of the Presidium.

This hall served normally as a gymnasium, rather above average and spacious, suitable for competitions. Now, however, the ribbed wall bars were covered by cyclamen coloured curtains, the poles, ropes, horizontal beams and horses were all decorated with fresh cyclamens. The same flowers were also strewn liberally over the conspicuously long table

around which the members of the presidential committee were waiting expectantly for me. They were all standing, and I came to an abrupt halt, unable to believe my eyes. Miakits had been right to rebuke me two years earlier for leading too much the life of a recluse. It was true, I could recognise the outstanding figures of the nation's arts and science for the most part only from the pictures I had seen of them. I was used to seeing them on newsreels when they were receiving their decorations, or celebrating their fiftieth birthday. I knew most of those present in such a way only. To my astonishment I made out several world-famous scientists amongst them, great musicians and sculptors, as well as writers whom I had hitherto considered to be my own masters. I was filled with confusion and apprehension, joy and pride. A great heat rose up from somewhere, my ears began to buzz, and I only understood Miakits' whisper when he repeated it:

„Wave to them...”

„Why wave?” I asked, alarmed.

„Because they won't dare to sit down until you wave.”

I gave an embarrassed wave and everyone sat down. There was a throne-like structure at the head of the table in the centre of a cyclamen-covered carpet. Miakits led me to it and I sat down. This all happened as if it were a sequence from a dream.

It was only now that I understood that it had been a foolish error to live so much like a recluse. Why had I never tried to secure admission to this community of all the talents? I made a quick reckoning. Amongst all those present a grand total of seven writers, two painters and one architect were personal friends. I could see that the seats around the presidential table were numbered and I realised that my best friend, a grey-haired, stubborn-looking novelist with a predisposition to liking my works, was eighty-seventh in the order of those invited. “How typical!”, I thought. My friend looked across and smiled encouragingly, giving me a little strength as he did so. This tiny drop of self-confidence evaporated at once as Miakits whispered in my ear:

„The President!”

A decrepit old man leaning on a stick shuffled towards me from the presidential chair, where the number '1' was clearly visible. I instinctively rushed to greet him, but Miakits thrust me firmly back onto the throne.

As a young man, before a few vague poems started me off on my literary career, I had graduated as an engineer from the Technical University in Budapest. Even then Professor Rimanóczy enjoyed a world-wide reputation. His name was there to be read in every text book, and now it was he, the man who had so many times and with such paternal tenderness hauled me over the coals for the slow progress of my studies, who in his dotage limped painfully towards me beside the ceremonial table.

„The finest day of my life,” he mumbled as he gripped my hand, and under his shrunken eyelids tears filled those lurking cobwebbed eyes.

„It was worth so much suffering over the years, young man, to be able to shake hands with you once again...”

He dismissed Miakits' offer of assistance, hobbled back on his stick across the marble flooring, and minutes ticked by whilst he dried his eyes in a red-bordered handkerchief the size of a tea-towel. After him, János Hagyó, seated on his right, stood up to speak. My heart leapt as the voice of the uncrowned Prince of our poetry resounded:

„For two days and nights we debated, in hunger and in thirst, whether it was right to put you forward to face the nation, in place of ourselves. We have decided that none amongst us is more worthy of the task than you. You were chosen by general acclamation. Only one person's support was not forthcoming, that is if that crawling worm, that filthy scum in our midst can be called a 'person'.”

As he said this he pointed to a critic skulking at the end of the table, known for his bad

breath and base intrigues, who not only changed his ideology every four or five years but his own name as well. (He currently went by the name of Fedor Kukurikuvics Káposzta.) Lo and behold, this literary turncoat had even found a way in here, and even here he was obviously up to his usual tricks. He was continually fidgeting and whispering into the ears of those seated next to him, disparaging my artistic ability in ambiguous phrases. Not for long, however! As soon as the speaker pointed, two brawny security men grabbed him by the collar and bounced him out of the hall with heavy kicks to the backside.

„Do away with him,” said Rimanóczy, as the three of them left. Then he accepted my helping hand and pointed towards a gilded door. “Let’s adjourn to the scene of the lecture.”

We walked along a maze of echoing corridors and up broad stairways, then through a wrought-iron gate and out into the open air. The Presidium sat down in the VIP boxes and Miakits led me off up yet another stairway.

„The fans!”, he murmured as he left me, “the fans are simply longing for...”

He didn’t finish. I started up the steps, completely on my own now and feeling some ghastly power gaining strength over me. At the top of the steps a narrow rostrum awaited me, complete with table and chair, and on the table the predictable pot of cyclamens. When I reached the podium a hundred and twenty cannon fired the ceremonial salute and then a brass band which I couldn’t see began the National Anthem.

The night was already drawing in. In the hollow of an elliptical basin, all around as far as the yee could see, an incalculable mass of human beings was swarming under the floodlights. On the smooth turf below, usually the setting for soccer matches and athletics meetings, tens of thousands of girls in white dresses spelt out the first letters of my name in the arena, like initials embroidered on the corner of a giant handkerchief. They finished the Anthem and then the applause burst out.

This was not a dream, it was really happening to me. I could touch the leg of the table with my knee, my dark suit was pinching at the armpit, a little stone had crept into my shoe – I could sense everything exactly as it was. I touched the mystery of the manuscript paper with my fingertips and the rhythmic applause squirted through to my eardrums like the jet from a garden sprayer. If it had been a dream, perhaps fright would have caused me to lose control; but this was reality, concrete and alive, a reality which demanded action, blew my mind clear, and sharpened both my hearing and my vision. I could feel the breath of hundreds of thousands on my skin and the burning assault of the lights on the pupils of my eyes. I spotted Káposzta, the critic who was forever changing his tune, as two muscular hangmen strung him up onto a lamp-post. The hanging took place in the far distance, at the tramstop behind the tribune on the opposite side of the arena, but I could see Kukurikuvics clearly. His legs gave a last convulsive writhe, then his whole body distended and he spat forth his tongue.

By then, however, all eyes were fixed on me, and a deathly silence descended, such that even in the far corner of the arena you could hear me turning over the pages of the manuscript. I emitted a little cough and glanced down at the opening sentence.

The words were already formed on my lips when my vocal chords seemed all of a sudden to freeze up inside me. I was appalled by what I was about to read. I felt that this sentence, in this spacious night, split in a hundred thousand directions, did not read well. I moved on to the next sentence, but here a new and still greater disappointment awaited me.

What to do? There was no other way out and so I skipped the first paragraph, from beginning to end.

I thought to myself that I could begin with the second paragraph instead, where I recalled having captured in words an important and even universally valid idea. But – Christ, what’s going on here? – this too stuck in my throat. It was certainly a fine idea, but it only sounded good, because it wasn’t quite true. It is quite possible that it wasn’t even true when I wrote it down, but I only realised this now, when it would have been delivered in the crossfire

of the spotlights and amplified through loudspeakers.

I was terrified. The pages started to crackle between my trembling fingers. I quickly reached for the second page and glanced through it, then passed rapidly on to the third and the fourth... Somewhere here (or perhaps on the following page) there had to be one sentence on which at the time of writing I had worked and worked until I was satisfied: at last there would be something exact, true and reliable... I found it! I wanted to shout it boldly into the microphone, but I could only gaze down at the letters, and words failed me. Even this passage of which I was so proud turned out to be all superficial embellishment, narcosis, falsehood. Who am I then? The truth-teller who lies with every word? In the meantime the silence around me became ever deeper and more oppressive; my teeth chattered as if it were very cold, but even this sound was heard by me and no one else.

Then I arrived at the final page, with only four lines typed on it. I glanced at them, my last straw. What I saw there was not merely a lie (for it is possible to have good intentions when telling lies) but an open and deliberate slap in the face for truth. Even if I had wanted to I couldn't have uttered a word because of the choking in my throat. I folded the papers together and put the manuscript away, mopped the icy sweat off my brow and bowed, as if my reading had come to its end without anything the least untoward having occurred.

I felt as cold as tinplate inside, dreading what was to come. The crowd waited a few moments in motionless silence, weighing up my mute performance, but then – as if responding to a command – an overwhelming round of applause rang out. The ten thousand girls in white dresses joined hands and danced on the green turf, then a few deafening bangs signified the commencement of the fireworks display. They wouldn't even boo? They weren't going to throw eggs at me? It seemed rather that the whole entertainment was going according to plan, without any hitches. I took a deep breath when I saw that the members of the Presidium had leapt to their feet and were waving handkerchiefs in my direction. Before I left old Professor Rimanóczy asked me if he could kiss the hem of my suit, but I wouldn't let him. I drew him towards me, kissed him on the forehead, and escorted him out with my arm across his shoulder.

As for little Miakits, he took me home and in the car, in between fresh outbursts of sobbing, wiped away his tears.

„I knew it,” he murmured, ”this is what we expected. This is what we hoped for. We guessed, we felt that at least the writers...”

He never finished that sentence either.

Translated by Chris Hann