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Variations on Mother Tongue. Language and Identity in Twentieth-Century Hungarian Literary Exile

This essay attempts to reveal the variety of ways in which exilic or post-exilic consciousness brings about a diversity in lingual identity and the ways in which this identity is maintained, suspended, lost, expanded, regained, rediscovered, or caught in transition. The author considers how adherence to the mother tongue becomes an ideological shelter against the menace of a metaphysical homelessness for Sándor Márai; how multilingualism turns into a defense of locality for Áron Kibédi Varga; how translation comes to serve as a substitute for an unborn offspring both in the literary and the genetic sense for Endre Karátson; how, in the case of Agota Kristof a second language never fully acquired is felt to ruin one's mother tongue precisely through a literary achievement of the highest standard; how, in the case of Tibor Fischer, the traces of a remote lingual and cultural heritage show up in a text written in a language other than one's mother's tongue.

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In recent decades exile studies have become a remarkable new subfield in international literary criticism. From a historical perspective, emigration, the “separation of people from their native culture through physical dislocation (as refugees, immigrants, exiles, or expatriates)”,¹ appears to be one of the most formative experiences in twentieth-century political, social, cultural and anthropological developments. In theoretical concerns, the notion of emigration gained currency because it seems to coincide with elements in the oppositions underlying Western thinking that came to be favored since poststructuralism: the textual metaphors of *dislocation*, *margin*, *difference*, *absence*, *heterogeneity* (as opposed to fixedness, center, sameness, presence, homogeneity) offer themselves for translation into the existential conditions that émigrés had to face.² In addition, the much debated theoretical issues of memory, time, space, location, nation, and identity are also connected to the peculiar forms of exilic experience. As

1 Angelika Bammer, “Introduction,” in *Displacements: Cultural Identities in Question*, ed. Angelika Bammer (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), xi.

2 Sophia McClennen, *The Dialectics of Exile. Nation, Time, Language, and Space in Hispanic Literatures* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2004), 20.

the embodiment of alienation, estrangement, restlessness, and longing, exile provides a pervasive metaphor for modern consciousness.

The figure of the exiled or emigrant writer, whom in his path-breaking 1969 essay George Steiner labeled the “extraterritorial”, “unhoused” and “wandering across language”,³ may represent the whole of post-romantic literary developments. In their uprootedness, emigrants have experienced both cathartic losses and liberating new vistas: while surveying at least two worlds, exile brings about a creative “plurality of vision” as well as the impression of the estrangement of the whole world.⁴ In conditions of *heterotopia* and *polyglossia*, the traumas of displacement and dislocation provided emigrant literati a “productive insecurity of having to face and make use of more than one language and culture.”⁵ While becoming more sensitive to the imposed homogeneity in national cultures and monolingual environments, émigré authors encountered new forms of identity that were less bound to particular geographical place, ethnicity or language.

The history of twentieth-century Hungarian literary exiles still awaits rewriting along these theoretical lines. What should concern Hungarian literary and historical scholarship is the fact that, due to well-known historical and political circumstances, East Central Europe has apparently become one of the key areas in the recent developments of exile studies. *The Exile and Return of Writers from East-Central Europe*, a collection of essays published in 2009, deals extensively with the consecutive waves of exiles that fled the region during the twentieth century, mapping out their associations and publishing ventures, the peculiar system of genres they developed (with a focus on the most characteristic émigré genre, autobiography), following certain individual trajectories, and assessing the aftermath of exile in the post-1989 era.⁶

Of the numerous formal and institutional concerns exile studies have raised, in this essay I will attempt to scrutinize a single aspect, the various relationships between writers in exile and their mother-tongues. Émigrés came

3 George Steiner, *Extraterritorial. Papers on Literature and Language Revolution* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), 14–21.

4 Edward W. Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), 173–86.

5 On the way this contributed to the development of literary theory per se, see: Galin Tihanov, “The birth of modern literary theory in East-Central Europe,” in *History of Literary Cultures in East-Central Europe. Junctures and Disjunctures in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*. Volume I, ed. John Neubauer and Marcel Cornis-Pope (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing, 2004), 416–24.

6 *The Exile and Return of Writers from East-Central Europe. A Compendium*, edited by John Neubauer and Borbála Zsuzsanna Török (Berlin–New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2009).

to entertain different notions of linguistic identity, depending in part on the waves of exiles to which they belonged and the generational differences within each wave. What they seem to have in common, however, is the observation that while in a monolingual environment language appears to be an unproblematic vehicle, from the perspective of an exile the mother tongue tends to lose its naturalness, and from representing something obvious, a natural tool ready at hand, it seems to run the risk of becoming an ambivalent property at stake, open to unpredictable metamorphoses.

In this essay I examine, on the basis of a few case studies, the variety of notions of lingual identity thrown into relief by experiences of exile. I consider how these identities were maintained, lost, suspended, expanded, regained, rediscovered, or caught in transition.

The World as a Language Course: Sándor Márai

For Márai (and most of his contemporaries in exile), being-at-home increasingly resided in an intimate though problematically maintained relation with the Hungarian language. The anxiety created by the question of whether he was still in full command of Hungarian was especially frustrating from the 1950s onwards. However, the idea of *Heimat* as a linguistic phenomenon had appeared in Márai's writings well before his second emigration in 1948. One can cite related confessions from his poetry, diaries, and memoirs:

Otthon vagy? Hol vagy 'otthon'? Csak a nyelvben.
Minden más fonák, zavaros, homályos.
Versciklus. Egy – Hetvenkettő (1944–45)⁷

[Are you at home? Where are you being at 'home'? Only in language,/ Everything else is awry, turbid, vague.]

Az 'ország', a 'nép' még nem 'haza'. A tényekből – az országból, népből
– akkor lesz csak 'haza', ha az anyanyelv nevet ad a tényeknek! Nincs
más haza, csak az anyanyelv.
*Napló 1968–1975*⁸

7 Sándor Márai, *Összegyűjtött versek* [Collected Poems] (Budapest: Helikon, 2000), 193.

8 Sándor Márai, *Napló 1968–1975* [Diary 1968–1975] (Budapest: Helikon–Akadémiai Kiadó, n. a.), 287.

[The ‘country’, the ‘people’ are not the ‘homeland’. The facts – the country, the people – only make a ‘homeland’ only if the mother tongue endows them with their respective names. There is no other homeland but the mother tongue.]

(...) ez a nyelv és irodalom nekem a teljes értékű életet jelentette, mert csak ezen a nyelven tudom elmondani, amit mondani akarok. (És csak ezen a nyelven tudom elhallgatni, amiről hallgatni akarok.) Mert csak akkor és addig vagyok ’én’, amíg magyarul tudom megfogalmazni, amit gondolok. Például 1947. február 10-én éjjel a felismerést, hogy számomra nincs más ’haza’, csak a magyar nyelv.

*Föld, föld!...*⁹

[...] this life and this literature had meant the wholeness of life for me, for it is only in this language that I can tell what I intend to tell. (And it is only in this language that I can remain silent on subjects on which I wish to remain silent.) Because I am ‘me’ only as long as I am able to phrase what I think in Hungarian. For example, the revelation on February 10, 1947 that for me there is no homeland apart from the Hungarian language.]

As for his novels, one can mention two corresponding though antithetical examples. Márai went into exile twice. He spent the 1920s in Germany and France, and after 1948 he lived primarily in Italy and the United States. Márai’s early, somewhat neglected novel, *Idegen emberek* [Strange People], published in 1931, summarizes the insights he drew from his first exile. A parable of chasing European identity and its reconciliation with national heritage in the multicultural scene of post-World War I Paris, *Idegen emberek* posits the questions of being away from the homeland in a way characteristically different from the citations above. The dilemmas brought up by *Idegen emberek* are only remotely connected to the adherence to the mother tongue, indeed they only partially concern language itself. The focus is on the issues of culture and anthropology: the dilemma whether Hungarians belong to Europe is not primarily a question of language, but of culture and race. The protagonist is shocked when an Albanian expatriate claims to recognize him as Turkish: in light of Hungarian history, he cannot exclude the possibility that he might have had Turkish ancestors. One of the highlights of the novel is when the protagonist, on the verge of deciding whether to go home or to stay, asks a gay Senegalese cabaret singer: “Do you consider

9 Sándor Márai, *Föld, föld!...* [Memoir of Hungary] (Budapest: Helikon, 2006), 309–10.

me a white man?” (“*fehér embernek tart ön engem?*”).¹⁰ Attempting to set the highest magnitude of differences, he hopes that his “whiteness” would guarantee his belonging to Europeans. Their conversation suggests, however, that they have more in common than the protagonist at first would have been ready to admit: both are foreigners in Paris, and in their current location both Senegalese and Hungarian landscapes and works of art count as remote and exotic.

The most remarkable feature of the novel is that it presents a wide range of instances in which “strangeness” might occur, including everyday sensory perceptions, sexuality, communication, mentality, environment, and landscape. As the notion of “strangeness” is being constantly redefined according to the various contexts (nature vs. civilization, city vs. country, male vs. female), the corresponding emotional and physical experiences are only arbitrarily connected to the conditions of exile. Mapping out the semantic diversity of the term *idegen*, from being “unfamiliar,” to “foreign,” “impure,” “extraneous,” or “newcomer,” the borders between “us” and “them” are relentlessly redrawn according to the ever-changing experiences of familiarity and unfamiliarity. In this interpretation of being “alien,” language, however important it may be, is merely one aspect in which strangeness might occur. Lingual distance undeniably plays a key role in the events that lead up to the seduction of the protagonist’s French (Breton) lover by a French artist: even if the artist is a stutterer, his lingual competence outdoes that of the protagonist. Nonetheless, lingual unfamiliarity is only a single element in their estrangement: the girl sees in him a Parisian, alien to her native Bretagne.

Displacement in *Idegen emberek* implies questions more concerned with cultural self-assessment. At the end of the novel, the main character appears to have made the decision to travel back to Hungary, but in the last pages it remains unclear whether he will actually take the train. His last utterances refer to having arrived at a notion of being-at-home that would include images of landscapes and characters, memories and sensations that provide familiarity regardless of their respective geographical and cultural origin. This montage-like form of identity mirrors the expressionist devices employed in the novel, especially in the depictions of the chaotically modern urban scenes of Paris.¹¹ In this light, the very dilemma of

10 Sándor Márai, *Idegen emberek* [Strange People] (Budapest: Helikon, 2005), 410.

11 On the role of expressionist devices in *Idegen emberek*, see: Csilla Tóth, „A szöveg mint tárgy (Vizualitás, narráció és társadalmi reprezentáció Márai Sándor Bolhapiac című kötetében 1934, 2009)” [The Text as Object (Visuality, Narration and Social Representation in the Book Flea Market by Márai)], *Forrás* 43, no. 1 (2011): 101–2.

whether to go or stay appears to have dissolved. What the protagonist refers to as an inevitable *Heimweh* thus turns into a longing for a familiarity that can be found in various elements connected only by one's individual consciousness. The montage nonetheless promises to have the capacity to re-fabricate a disintegrated identity in a non-linear but dynamically coherent form.

While *Idegen emberek* is more open to ironic interpretations of identity, in *San Gennaro vére* [San Gennaro's Blood] Márai gives a static and symbolic elegy of his impression of the whole world being estranged. *San Gennaro vére*, written in the late 1950s and first published in Hungarian in 1965, is representative of Márai's second exile, when, unlike in the period of his first exile when he pursued a kind of lingual integration by writing journalism in German, he came to the conviction that exile is foremost an alienation of language and it ineluctably threatens to deprive one of his mother tongue, that is, of his personal identity. The story, which deals with the suicide of an Eastern European scholar fleeing the communists, is set in Naples in the 1950s. The hero, whose intention is to "redeem the world," is present only through reports and confessions by others. Referring to the claim made by the British historian Arnold Toynbee that in the alienated modern world only "displaced persons" convey the metaphysical possibility of salvation, in *San Gennaro vére* exile is portrayed as a negative sacral experience. The hopelessness of salvation coincides with the impossibility of being-at-home anywhere: waiting for a miracle on behalf of the natives coincides with waiting for a permit for immigration on behalf of the foreigners. What gives the salient feature of this global homelessness is that the world in its Babelish structure has become comparable to a "language lesson" that deprives émigrés of the linguistic signs that constitute their identity. As the Napoleonic "agent," contemplating the death of the scholar, states with regard to all the emigrants:

Mint egy nyelvleckére, úgy készülnek a világra. Mikor már nincsen ékezetük, nincs anyanyelvük sem, s ezért össze-vissza beszélnek és olvasnak, mindenféle nyelven.¹²

[As if it were a language lesson, they are preparing for the world. When they have lost the accents from above their names, they have lost their mother tongue as well, and they talk and read gibberish in all kinds of languages.]

12 Sándor Márai, *San Gennaro vére* [San Gennaro's Blood] (Budapest: Helikon, n.d.), 127.

As in a hopelessly alienated world language must always be relearned but only to become nonsensical, there is no space remaining for genuine identity. Inasmuch as the Babelish structure of the world in *Idegen emberek* provided a multilayered repertoire from which to collect elements of a dynamic, constantly re-fabricated, montage-like consciousness, and in *San Gennaro vére* the irredeemability of global homelessness leads to the futile sacrifice of a blank or static ego, I would argue that the former novel is able to address the dilemmas of cultural or existential familiarity and unfamiliarity in a more subtle way than the elegiac framework deployed in the latter.

Multilingual Conformity and the Defense of Locality: Kibédi Varga Áron

The anxiety of losing command of the mother tongue pervaded Márai's second exile. As he exclaims in a 1952 entry in his diaries: “*Néha, olvasás közben, a rettenet: tudok-e még magyarul?*” [Sometimes, while reading, comes the horror: do I still know Hungarian?]¹³ The next generation of Hungarian émigré literati was considerably less bothered by such anxieties. For those who left the country at a younger age, mostly refugees of 1956, several languages, geographical places and cultures came to provide the impression of being-at-home, partly because they were educated away from their motherland in multilingual environments.

Áron Kibédi Varga (b. 1930) fled Hungary in 1944 at the age of fourteen, attended middle school in Germany and the Netherlands, studied Arabic and French at the universities of Leiden, Paris, and Amsterdam, and became a professor of French in Amsterdam. After his retirement he settled in Germany. His widely acclaimed works of literary theory were written foremost in French, his poetry exclusively in Hungarian. As a co-founder of the most significant cultural-scholarly organization in post-World War II Hungarian exile, the Hollandiai Mikes Kelemen Kör [The Kelemen Mikes Society of the Netherlands], he defined the task of emigration as the preservation of the Western-orientation in Hungarian culture and the maintenance of two-way mediation between Hungarian and Western cultural and scholarly developments.¹⁴

In the series of aphoristic diaries he published in Hungarian between 2000 and 2007 Kibédi Varga repeatedly touches upon the questions of multilingual and multicultural identities, for instance in an entry from November 22, 2006:

13 Sándor Márai, *Napló 1945–1957* [Diary 1945–1957] (Budapest: Helikon, n.d.), 194.

14 Áron Kibédi Varga, “Nyugati magyar irodalom” [Hungarian Literature in the West], in *Párbeszéd Magyarországgal* [Dialogue with Hungary], ed. Béla Pomogáts (Budapest: Szépirodalmi, 1991), 347–51.

A kétnyelvűség ma már teljesen normális állapot: nemcsak a trianoni határokon kívül élő magyarokra gondolok, hanem a rengeteg törökre és marokkóira, akik az elmúlt évtizedekben árasztották el Nyugat-Európát. Én viszont nem két, hanem három nyelvben éltem húsz éves korom óta. Franciát tanultam, majd tanítottam az egyetemen, magyar barátaim voltak, az üzletekben hollandul beszéltem. Franciául, hollandul és magyarul beszélgettem, olvastam, telefonáltam, írtam, majdnem minden átmenet nélkül. Ehhez most hozzájön egy negyedik, a német. Ez már túl sok lenne? A négy nyelv állandó keveredése pillanatnyilag mindenestre még némi nehézséget okoz: megesett már, hogy a vendéglőben a német pincértől franciául kértem a számlát.¹⁵

[Bilingualism is now a completely normal condition: I do not refer merely to the Hungarians living outside the borders drawn by the Versailles Treaty, but to the immense amount of Turks and Moroccans that flooded Western Europe in recent decades. I, however, have lived not in two but in three languages since I was 20. I studied, then taught French at the university, had Hungarian friends, spoke Dutch while shopping. I conversed, read, phoned, wrote in French, Dutch, and Hungarian almost simultaneously. Now, a fourth, German, is being added. Could it be too much? As for now, the mixing of the four languages raises some difficulties: it has happened that at restaurants I asked the German waiter for the bill in French.]

Apparently, unlike the vision of the world as a language course, which for Márai constituted a kind of deterioration, for Kibédi Varga the conditions of exilic multilingualism do not imply any anxiety over losing his mother tongue or his identity. Unlike the metaphysical concerns in *San Gennaro vére*, here the question is raised in a pragmatic way, and the difficulties, if they occur, are related to banal, everyday situations and considered merely temporary.

This does not mean, however, that the relationship between multilingualism and identity could be treated as unproblematic. For Kibédi Varga multilingualism raises precisely the question of whether it is possible to live simultaneously in more than one culture:

én mindig csak egy kultúrában élek, egyszerre kettőben vagy háromban nem tudnék. Fordítani nem tudok, se szóban, se írásban: vagy magyarul vagy franciául, vagy hollandul gondolkozom.¹⁶ (October 3, 1999)

15 Áron Kibédi Varga, *Lépések. Napló 2005–2006* [Steps. Diary 2005–2006] (Pozsony: Kalligram, 2007), 91–92.

16 Áron Kibédi Varga, *Amsterdami krónika 1999* [Amsterdam Chronicle 1999] (Pozsony: Kalligram, 2000), 84.

[At one time I only live in one culture, I could not live in two or three at the same time. I cannot translate, neither orally, nor in writing: I think either in Hungarian, or French, or Dutch.]

According to this, it is not merely impossible to synchronize the different lingual worlds, but there is no need to do so either. The parallelism between the different lingual worlds, which Kibédi Varga claims to rotate consciously according to particular situations, delineates the multiplication of personal identity and consciousness. The parallelism nonetheless does not entail the dissolution of the borders between the respective languages and cultures. Instead of their temporal or spatial simultaneity, it maintains precisely their differences and acknowledges their particular and context-bound entitlements. That is why Kibédi Varga is keen to protect lingual authority, although not in the manner of preserving the purity or flawless command of the mother tongue, but from the perspective of *locality*:

Asztalt akarunk foglalni egy elegáns amszterdami vendéglőben. A telefonon egy női hang: 'Can I help you?' Mire én megkérdézem, tud-e hollandul. Azt válaszolja, hogy nem. Én viszont ragaszkodom hozzá, hogy hollandul válaszoljon. Angliában vagy Amerikában szívesen beszélek angolul, de itt nem. A nő megsértődik.¹⁷ (April 8, 1999)

[We want to book a table at a fancy Amsterdam restaurant. A female voice on the phone: 'Can I help you?'. I ask her if she speaks Dutch. She answers, no. I do insist that she reply in Dutch. I am pleased to speak in English in England or in America, but not here. She feels aggrieved.]

Feltűnő, hogy Hollandia mennyire elangolosodik. Folyik a téli kiárusítás, rengeteg ember minden üzletben, tizenöt évvel ezelőtt ilyenkor még holland feliratok voltak mindenütt ('Uitverkoop'), ma már csak az áll, hogy: 'Sale'. Rövidebb, egyszerűbb. Itt senkit sem zavar az anyanyelv romlása.¹⁸ (December 16, 2001)

[It is striking how Holland has become Anglicized. The winter sale is on, scores of people in every shop, fifteen years ago there were Dutch banners everywhere ('Uiterkoop'), now it is only: 'Sale'. Shorter, simpler. Here no one is bothered by the decay of their mother tongue.]

17 Ibid., 31–32.

18 Áron Kibédi Varga, *És felébred, aminek neve van* [And Wakes the Thing with a Name] (Pozsony: Kalligram, 2002), 113.

Here the point is stressed that lingual pride or self-defense can be adequately claimed with regard to one's second or third language, as well as in the case of one's mother tongue. While expressing concern for the *local* language, Kibédi Varga, showing the typical features of an integrated émigré mentality, stands up to protect something not inherently his own. In this, somewhat ideological, position of language politics, the alien and one's "own" gets reversed in order to reprehend the multicultural Netherlands for neglecting lingual and cultural self-defense.

Seeing in the effects of globalization a phase of reprehensible cultural colonization, in Kibédi Varga's diaries the predilection for the local against the global, regardless of nationality or ethnicity, is voiced in several instances. He also mentions that museums should be inhabited with works of art that represent the achievements of the specific geographical-cultural landscape:

minden város, ill. ország csak azt kellene kiállítsa, ami ott készült, ami ottani. Velence Tizianót és Carpacciót, Amszterdam Rembrandtot és Vermeert, Párizs Monet-t és Picassót.¹⁹ (May 30, 1999)

[Every city and country should exhibit solely what was made there, what is local. In Venice Tizian and Carpaccio, in Amsterdam Rembrandt and Vermeer, in Paris Monet and Picasso.]

In the light of this idea the defense of the local language is but a part of Kibédi Varga's general cultural ideals.

Unwarranted Subversion of Language: Endre Karátson

Endre Karátson (b. 1933) graduated in 1954 from the *Idegen Nyelvek Főiskolája* [College of Foreign Languages] in Budapest, where he studied French. In 1956 Karátson emigrated to Paris and in 1959 he graduated from the Sorbonne as a student of the École normale supérieure. He earned his degree in 1969 in comparative literary history and became a professor at the University of Lille. The salient feature of Karátson's oeuvre, both as a scholar and a writer, is its apparent bifocality: in his doctoral thesis he dealt with the influence of modern French poetry on early twentieth-century Hungarian literature,²⁰ in a

¹⁹ Kibédi Varga, *Amszterdami krónika*, 52.

²⁰ André Karátson, *Le symbolisme en Hongrie (L'influence des poétiques françaises sur la poésie hongroise dans le premier quart du XXe siècle)* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1969).

later work with the intercultural mediation performed by the Hungarian Poe-translations,²¹ and, in a wider European context, with the decisive impact of the “poetics of rootlessness” on modern fiction.²² In a similar fashion, Karátson’s short stories also show the features of transnational mediation: his Hungarian texts were influenced by non-Hungarian authors such as Beckett, Borges, Kafka, and Nabokov, who also lived and worked in multicultural and multilingual environments.

Karátson’s two-volume autobiographical essay *Otthonok* (2007) gives an idiosyncratic survey of the development of what he calls his “dioecious existence” as a French scholar and a Hungarian writer. As Karátson recalls, when arriving in France, in the refugee camp he found himself in the position of a middleman mediating between his countrymen and the French authorities. In his role he saw a reversal of the familiar and the unfamiliar: an alienation from his own companions and a simultaneous approximation to a new cultural environment.²³

The integration into something other though familiar, however, had its own peculiar difficulties. What Karátson as a non-native speaker had to face was exclusion from any creative involvement with language, that is, from any subversion of French. Symptomatic of the state of being unwarranted to play language games or make puns in the presence of natives is the episode in which in the dormitory lunch-room sardines are being served, and one of the French students mentions, “putain de merde”: (*the food is shit, kurvára szar a kaja*). Karátson would go on adding “merde de putain”: (*we are eating the shit of whores, kurvaszart kapunk vacsorára*).²⁴ He found the storm of indignation that followed all the more awkward because Karátson considered this type of rhetorical transfer, a semantically obscene chiasmus, as a kind of mental exercise, and as such it was to become the trademark gesture of his short stories. What adds the real irony to the story, however, is that in the ultimate instance Karátson approves of the anger of his French schoolmates (only a *Danish linguist* laughs at his joke), for, as he expounds, if a non-Hungarian were to play with his mother tongue in a similar way, he would also see it as a disturbing, unwarranted intrusion by an outsider. The episode nonetheless conveys a traumatic experience, and might explain why

21 André Karátson, *Edgar Allan Poe et le groupe des écrivains du 'Nyugat' en Hongrie* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1971).

22 André Karátson and Jean Bessière, *Déracinement et littérature* (Lille: Presses Universitaires de Lille, 1982).

23 Karátson Endre, *Otthonok* [Homes] (Pécs: Jelenkor, 2007), vol. 2, 75–81.

24 Ibid., vol. 1, 208–9.

Karátson never attempted to write prose fiction in French: the insiders rejected his basic rhetorical maneuver from the outset.

Along with the notion of lingual authority, Karátson's memoir discovers (or brings about) an idiosyncratic connection between his refusal to write prose fiction in French and to have a child. As he expounds, he rejected parenthood with his French wife, Nicole, for he thought it would lead to a "lingual mestizo," and as such would entail lack and alienation.²⁵ On the one hand, as an emigrant he would have been unable to transmit to the child his own mother tongue and the country to which it belonged, the country he had left behind. On the other, due to the inevitable flaws in his French, the child would have seen in him a hyphenated alien. Eventually, the tension created by this double lack (that of a literary work in French and that of a child) was resolved with a single gesture: Nicole set about translating Karátson's Hungarian short stories into French.

The metaphorical interconnectedness of language and the unborn child is further elaborated when Karátson recounts the experience of first seeing the French version of one of his Hungarian texts that Nicole prepared from his rough translation. Karátson is unable to recognize the text as his own progeny: "torzszülöttének éreztem a hangot, amelyik nem az én torkomból jött."²⁶ [Having come from a throat other than mine, it sounded like the voice of a freak of nature.] Translation as *abortion* thus comes to occupy both the positions of their common unborn child and the French work Karátson was unable or unwilling to produce himself: "nem csupán helytálló, hanem írói szövegre vágytam. Mintha én írtam volna franciául."²⁷ [I longed not merely for a relevant text, but an authorly text. As if it had been written by me in French.]

Nicole fully understood the subconscious significance of the translation, that it would be a substitute both for the unborn child and the unwritten French literary text. That prompted her to learn Hungarian properly and to restart the translation on her own without Karátson's rough intermediary version. When the new translation was complete and published, Karátson felt that it properly stood for the absence of the child: "a könyvet mint gyermeket hozta a világra, azt a gyermeket, amelyet nem szült meg soha."²⁸ [She brought the book into the world as a child, the child to whom she had never given birth.] The birth

25 Ibid., vol. 2, 251.

26 Ibid., vol. 2, 297.

27 Ibid., vol. 2, 298.

28 Ibid., vol. 2, 308.

of Karátson's French book of short stories²⁹ thus serves as a multi-directional compensation, both for the writer and the translator, the husband and the wife, the Hungarian and the French, the (non-)father and the (non-)mother. As a substitute for something non-existent, translation here dissolves the lingual and cultural unfamiliarity that has remained between the spouses, and, on the other hand, it gives ultimate initiation for the husband into the receiver culture:

közös művünk, azon túl, hogy kárpótolja őt az elmaradt szülésért, nekem is megnyitja egy második haza meghittséget biztosító ajtaját. (...) Nem beolvasztani akart, hanem megadni annak a lehetőségét, hogy két nyelven teljes ember legyek. Talán az nem is jutott eszébe, hogy jobb, ha egy vagy két könyvben ölt testet a megosztott egység, mint egy másodgenerációs gyermekben, akinél a szintézis kidolgozása alighanem gonddal járna.³⁰

[our common work, in addition to giving her compensation for the delivery that never took place, opens the doors of a cozy second mother country for me. (...) What she wanted was not to incorporate me, but to give me the chance of being whole in two languages. Probably it did not even occur to her that it is better to have our divided unity incarnated as a book than a second-generation child, with whom it would have been more difficult to arrive at a synthesis.]

The metaphor of translation as giving birth arrives at a unique interpretation of the notion of the mother tongue. The mother, Nicole, does not mediate her tongue to her child, but produces the child as language and language as a child. The child that is born as a translation speaks the *mother's tongue* while conveying the father's. The translation that is born as a child becomes a lingual entity, the *mother tongue* itself, or, to be more specific, the child is the father reborn in the mother's tongue.

Among Hostile Languages: Agota Kristof

Agota Kristof (1935–2011) emigrated to Switzerland in 1956. She began to write drama and prose fiction in French in the late 1960s and became one of the very few Hungarian emigrant authors who entered the international literary scene in

29 Endre Karátson, *Êtes-vous damné, Monsieur Goya?*, trans. Nicole Bagarry (Pécs: Jelenkor–l'Harmattan, 1999).

30 Karátson, *Ottthonok*, vol. 2, 308–9.

a second language. (The price she had to pay was, Márai would say, that she lost the accents from above her name.) In order to map out Kristof's relationship to her mother tongue, I will not deal with the three novels that brought her world-fame (*Le grand cahier*, *La Preuve*, *Le Troisième mensonge*), but turn to a short book containing recollections that was released in 2004 under the telling title *L'analphabète* [*The Illiterate*].

The title of the book refers to the dispossession of language. As Kristof recalls, having settled in Switzerland for five years, she spoke French comfortably, but was still unable to read and write. She felt all the more awkward because in Hungarian she had acquired both abilities at a very early age. Through exile she fell back to a state prior to language, or, rather, prior to culture. With regards to raising her child, who had been born in Hungary but was growing up in a French-speaking environment, this illiteracy entailed not merely interruption but rupture in the continuity of bequeathing her tongue, the literal mother tongue. Consequently, the very notion of motherhood and its relation to language underwent a crisis:

Esténként a gyerekekkel megyek haza. A kislányom tágra nyílt szemekkel néz rám, amikor magyarul szólok hozzá. Egy alkalommal sírni kezd, mert nem értem meg őt, máskor meg azért, mert ő nem ért meg engem.³¹

[In the evenings I go home with the child. My daughter stares at me with eyes wide open when I speak to her in Hungarian. Sometimes she cries because I do not understand her, other times because she does not understand me.]

Kristof's own language, the mother tongue or the tongue of the mother, the transmission of which would be the task of the mother, comes to differ from the one in which her daughter is increasingly able to speak with growing competence. The mother therefore is dislocated from the position of a mediator (teacher) to that of a receiver (student), and in her efforts to acquire linguistic competence she becomes synchronous with her children: "Még két gyerekem születik. Velük gyakorlom majd az olvasást, a helyesírást, az igeragozást."³² [I give birth to two more kids. I will practice reading, spelling, conjugation with

31 Agota Kristof, *Az analfabéta* [*The Illiterate*], trans. András Petőcz (Budapest: Új Palatinus, 2007), 58.

32 Ibid., 60.

them.] Given that her linguistic skills, like those of her Swiss-born children, are limited, the hierarchy of lingual competence between parent and child collapses: when her children ask about the meaning of a word, she cannot give the explanation, but must reply that she would “look it up.” Being unable to teach them, she learns with and from them. The motherly competence thus becoming dependent on language books refers back to an earlier episode in *L’analphabète*, resembling Márai’s allegory of exile as a language lesson, when Kristof recalls, while crossing the border, that she was carrying two bags: children’s clothes in one, dictionaries in the other.

The dependence on dictionaries (as the narrator puts it, the “relentless and passionate” use of dictionaries) becomes an emblematic sign of the lack of intimacy with and authority in the very language Kristof is supposed to teach or transmit as a mother. In her case exilic conditions came to subvert the gendered roles attributed to language use, undermining what counts as mother tongue and what counts as mother. In this both multilingual and language-less status, Kristof characterizes her second tongue as a “hostile language”:

Több mint harminc éve beszélek, húsz éve írok is franciául, de még mindig nem ismerem. Nem beszélem hiba nélkül, és csak a szótár gyakori használatával tudok rajta helyesen írni. Ezért hívom a francia nyelvet is ellenséges nyelvnek. És van még egy oka, amiért így hívom, és ez az utóbbi súlyosabb. Ez a nyelv az, amelyik folyamatosan gyilkolja az anyanyelvemet.³³

[I have spoken French for thirty years, I have written in it for twenty, still I do not know it. I do not speak it flawlessly, and it is only with the frequent use of dictionaries that I am able to spell correctly. That is why I call French a hostile language. And there is one more reason why I call it this, and this one is the more serious. French is the language that constantly murders my mother tongue.]

The term “hostile language” also refers back to an earlier episode in *L’analphabète*, when the narrator enumerates the languages with which she became acquainted as a child and learned to regard as “hostile,” that is, a means of political oppression: German and Russian. In exile, however, French becomes a kind of *interiorized* enemy. The self-expression she longed for in this newly

33 Ibid., 30.

acquired language coincides with self-destruction, the self-annihilation of the mother tongue, or of inherent lingual identity.

All these ambiguities do not merely concern Kristof's personal life, but also had a decisive impact on her way of writing fiction as well. The suggestiveness and intensity of her French prose stems precisely from the reduction of stylistic, rhetorical, and syntactical means. She dismisses the diversity of tenses: her first novel, *Le grand cahier* [The Great Notebook] is written in present tense. In a sense, Kristof's prose mirrors the infantilization of language, the process of language becoming a lesson that she went through after her emigration. As she recalled in an interview:

A fiam akkoriban volt 12 éves; az ő házi feladataiból is merítettem, a szinte gyermekien egyszerű mondatszerkesztéseket. Az első könyvemben, a *Nagy füzetben* ugye gyerekek beszélnek. A fiam írt körülbelül így. A könyvet sok helyen nyelvtanításra is használják, iskolásokkal is olvastatják.³⁴

[My son was twelve back then. I drew on the almost childishly simple syntax from his homework. In my first book, *The Great Notebook*, it is children who speak. My son wrote just about the same way. In many places this book is being used to teach language, children read it at school.]

Out of French lessons, Kristof emerged as a French writer, who, through an uncommon dislocation, created literature in language course French, which, in turn, became once again the material of language lessons.

Relearning the Exotic: Tibor Fischer

Tibor Fischer, a British novelist born in a Hungarian émigré family, possesses a multicultural identity quite common among contemporary British authors.³⁵ His parents left Hungary in 1956, Fischer was born in 1959. As a child he spoke

34 Gergely Nagy, "'Nem akartam megnevezni semmit' Beszélgetés Agota Kristof írónővel" [I Did Not Want to Name Anything. Interview with the Writer Agota Kristof], *Heti Világgazdaság*, September 19, 2006, <http://hvg.hu/kultura/20060915agotakristof>, accessed December 17, 2012

35 For a comprehensive view on Fischer's oeuvre, see: Mihály Szegedy-Maszák, "A magyarság (nyelven túli) emléke" [A Monument to Hungarian (Beyond Language)], in *A magyar irodalom története, III. 1920-tól napjainkig* [The Histories of Hungarian Literature, vol. 3: From 1920 to the Present], ed. Mihály Szegedy-Maszák and András Veres (Budapest: Gondolat, 2007), 831–37.

Hungarian in the family circle, but when he started attending school he dropped it and has spoken English, even with his parents. As Fischer mentions in an interview, he regrets that he forgot Hungarian, for “having *any* languages is very useful and worthwhile.”³⁶ “Any” might suggest that Fischer does not consider Hungarian a preferred heritage, but when between 1988 and 1990 he worked as a correspondent for a British daily in Budapest, he had to relearn Hungarian – not as a forgotten mother tongue, but as the exotic though familiar tongue of a distant though exciting country.

In Fischer’s case the status of both mother tongue and cultural identity are somewhat ambiguous. His first name suggests foreignness in British, his family name in Hungarian environments. On the one hand, his Hungarian heritage puts Fischer close to the first and second generation immigrant authors dominant in the contemporary British literary scene. On the other, he is fully aware that defining himself as a British writer highlights precisely the changes that the nature of Britishness has been going through. Facing the disintegration of the traditional notions of Britishness, for him the significance of diverse cultural and lingual heritages resides not in the dilemma of losing or regaining something original or inherent, but in the insistence on the multicultural and multilingual nature of the society in which he lives and which has modified the nature of the English language itself. As Fischer claimed at the conference introducing the *Babylon: Myth and Reality* exhibition at the British Museum in 2008, the opposition between “us” and “them” can hardly be sustained, for ethnic and cultural identities had been unloosed from geographical places: “Everyone is everywhere.” London, his dwelling-place, he adds, cannot be considered an “English city” anymore.³⁷

Fischer’s first novel, *Under the Frog* (1994) (*A béka segge alatt*), follows the fortunes of the protagonist Gyuri Fischer and a basketball team in Hungary between 1944 and 1956. The source of the wittily told anecdotes in the novel is supposedly to be found in the memories of the author’s father. The English text is interspersed with Hungarian words and expressions such as “kocsma” [a pub], “bunkó” [lout], and “csárda” [a country tavern, not dissimilar to a “kocsma”].

36 Gerd Bayer, “I’m very keen on tea and Shakespeare.” An Interview with Tibor Fischer, accessed December 17, 2012, http://webdoc.gwdg.de/edoc/ia/eese/artic97/bayer/9_97.html (Italics mine).

37 *From Babylon to Bethnal Green: Does language unite or divide multicultural societies?*, British Museum Guardian Public Forum. The sound-recording of the conference can be downloaded at: http://www.britishmuseum.org/whats_on/events_calendar/recorded_events/guardian_debate_2008.aspx, accessed December 17, 2012.

In the Hungarian translation these elements appear as if being reintegrated into their “original” vehicle:

Within half an hour of mastication commencing, Gyuri was already seriously worried about parting company with consciousness: surrounding his enormous plate, which had grown a stalagmite of sausage, cured pork, pig cheese and boxing-glove-sized chunks of bread, were two glasses of wine, one red, one white, two glasses of *pálinka*, apricot and pear, and two glasses of beer in case he got thirsty.³⁸

Alig félórával a táplálkozási aktus kezdete után Gyurit már komolyan aggasztotta az eszméletvesztés lehetősége: széles tányérján tornyos cseppkőalakzatokban állt a kolbász, a füstölt sonka meg a disznósajt, bokszesztyű méretű kenyérdaraboktól körítve, a tányér mellett pedig két pohár bor, egy vörös meg egy fehér, valamint két pohár *pálinka*, barack meg körte, továbbá két pohár sör is, arra az esetre odakészítve, ha netán megszomjaznék.³⁹

In translation the Hungarian word *pálinka*, while returning to its natural lingual environment, is losing its stylistic and semantic surplus: with the dissolution of its foreignness it becomes rhetorically invisible. Contrasting the English and Hungarian versions of the novel, elements of this sort provide exotic “humps” for the reader of the English, unrecognizable familiarities for the reader of the Hungarian text.⁴⁰ The same applies to the title of the novel, a Hungarian dictum, here employed to depict the public sentiments of the 1940–50s. The expression does not appear to be equally metaphorical in English and in Hungarian.

In a sense, *Under the Frog* is an attempt at mediation and a translation in itself. As a peculiar version of trauma narration, it tells the stories of others, and represents the heritage of the author’s parents in a language foreign to their own. Mediation also comes to work in part because the anecdotes, jokes, and characters in the text are not merely from and of Hungary, but, as they remind the Hungarian reader of stories by Jenő Rejtő, Antal Szerb, or Frigyes Karinthy, might be recognized as concealed quotations from Hungarian literature. Being the outcome of interplay between British and Hungarian literary traditions,

38 Tibor Fischer, *Under the Frog* (London: Vintage, 1992), 63–4 (Italics mine).

39 Tibor Fischer, *A béka segge alatt*, trans. István Bart (Budapest: Európa, 1994), 95 (Italics mine).

40 See: Ágnes Györke, “Ex libris,” *Élet és irodalom* 16, April 21, 2006.

Fischer's first novel simultaneously displays the author's cultural affiliations, and, by introducing him as a British author, breaks this continuity as well.

Summary

I have attempted to show how exilic or post-exilic consciousness has brought about diversity in lingual identity hardly present among authors living in monolingual environments. Seeking to find characteristic and distinct types, I have considered how, for Sándor Márai, the attempt to reconcile Hungarian and European affiliations first led to a montage-like re-fabrication of the psyche, and later how adherence to the mother tongue became an ideological shelter from the menace of a metaphysical homelessness; how multilingualism turned into a defense of locality amid threatening globalization for Áron Kibédi Varga; how translation came to substitute for an unborn child both in the literary and literal sense for Endre Karátson; how, in the case of Agota Kristof, a second language never fully acquired was felt to ruin one's mother tongue precisely through a literary achievement of the highest standard; and how, in the case of Tibor Fischer, the traces of a remote lingual and cultural heritage show up in a text written in a language other than one's mother's tongue.

Although the line of the argument might suggest a linearity leading from obsolete to more characteristically contemporary experiences, I would argue that the respective attitudes listed here mark equally valid stances from which to address the ambivalence of lingual and cultural identity, an ambivalence that has come to effect our existence well beyond the confines of the historical phenomenon of twentieth-century exile.

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