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"Foreignness Is a Safe Shield." Translation as Cultural Transmission in Andrea Tompa's *Home*

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Abstract. Winner of the PEN Translates Award and included in the longlist for the Dublin Literary Award, the English version of Andrea Tompa's *Haza* [*Home*] (2020), translated by Jozefina Komporaly and published by Istros Books in 2024, adds intriguing questions to the infinitely rich cultural, thematic, linguistic, and stylistic tapestry of the original. Of autobiographical inspiration, Andrea Tompa's novel presents various patterns of emigration and explores the ethical, epistemological, and psychological implications of changing places, whether in the form of leaving or returning home, cutting all connections or incessantly searching for the roots, *lust* or *lost*, moving forward or looking back, condensed in the most abstract formula, i.e. moving from A to B. While Hungarian readers can precisely decipher the hidden local references, identifying the main locations of the novel in Budapest and the Transylvanian city Cluj-Napoca/Kolozsvár, the novel subtly plays upon withdrawing the possibility of referential reading, extending the experience of emigration in time and space and looking at it as a fundamental human experience. In what ways does/may the reading experience of the book change through the English translation? What are the implications of transferring it into another language that is itself one of the main "protagonists" of the highly metatextual and multilingual essay novel? How can the "foreignness" of the foreign language be preserved when the new linguistic text and context is provided by that foreign language itself? The paper looks at the challenges of translation both in linguistic and cultural terms. On the one hand, it focuses on how the main challenges of the text, i.e. gender, names, specific lexical items, intertextuality, ekphrasis, multilingualism, metalinguistic reflections, and differences of Hungarian language use over political boundaries, are solved in translation. On the other hand, it looks at broader questions of translation as cultural transmission, as "a multilayered cultural transfer with a partially unpredictable effect" (Kappanyos 2013, 28). The paper aims

to highlight that ingenious translatorial decisions introduce a new dynamic into the (con)textual diversity of Andrea Tompa's universe.[1]

Keywords: translation, cultural transmission, foreignness, multilingualism, translatability.

1. Introduction

Winner of the PEN Translates Award and included in the longlist for the Dublin Literary Award, the English version of Andrea Tompa's *Haza* [*Home*] (2020) praises the translation work of Jozefina Komporaly and was published by Istros Books in 2024. Several features of the original, which will be presented in what follows, have led to the urge to examine the result of the translation work in detail. This paper starts from the premise that the translation raises intriguing questions about the infinitely rich cultural, thematic, linguistic, and stylistic tapestry of Andrea Tompa's novel. Certainly, these questions are formulated from the perspective of the Hungarian original, by a Hungarian reader and researcher, who is obviously not the target reader of the translation. This indispensable limitation may remind us of André Lefevere's somewhat provocative statement that "[t]ranslations can only be judged by people who do not need them" (1975, 7). Nevertheless, before allowing the translation to take its place in the global discourse – and before dissolving the dichotomy between the "original" as text A and its "translation" as text B in the spirit of Gérard Genette's hypertextuality (1997) –, it is worth examining the translation in relation to the original, scratching the surface of the Genettean "palimpsest" to let the layer below be seen, for the benefit of both texts implied in this dialogue.

For the Hungarian reader, meeting Andrea Tompa in translation also allows for a re-reading of the original in a new light, while there open up new interpretive horizons, all the more that the English language itself is one of the main "protagonists" of this highly metatextual and multilingual essay novel. In what ways does/may the reading experience of the book change through the English translation? What are the implications of transferring it into another language that is continuously referred to and present in the text in many facets? How can the "foreignness" of the foreign language be preserved when the new linguistic text and context is provided by that foreign language itself? These and other questions constitute the main guidelines in exploring Jozefina Komporaly's translatorial achievement, based on the premise that:

1 This work was supported by the Domus Senior Scholarship Programme of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.

> [n]either the foreign writer nor the translator is conceived as the transcendental origin of the text, freely expressing an idea about human nature or communicating it in transparent language to a reader from a different culture. Rather, subjectivity is constituted by cultural and social determinations that are diverse and even conflicting, that mediate any language use, and that vary with every cultural formation and every historical moment. (Venuti 1995, 24)

2. Andrea Tompa in Translation

Hungarian writer and theatre critic Andrea Tompa is the author of five novels, with several interconnections: as mosaics of a larger pattern, they display the twentieth-century history of Transylvania since the Treaty of Trianon, its effects being referred to as the T-syndrome, as it reverberates across generations down the line. All her books explore collective and personal traumas, the imprint of fateful historical events on private destinies, the possibilities of processing and healing from transgenerational trauma. Seen through the lens of her fourth novel, *Home*, all her works are connected to the experience of losing one's home, albeit in different forms or contexts.

A hóhér háza [*The Hangman's House*][2] (2010) is set in the context of the communist dictatorship that darkened in the 1980s, also reaching back to the period around the Treaty of Trianon that decisively inscribes the experience of losing one's home in the family history and shapes the evolution of the protagonist's destiny. *Fejtől és lábtól. Kettő orvos Erdélyben* [Head to Feet. Two Doctors in Transylvania] (2013) relates how the First World War and the change of power shatter the protagonists' plans and destroy the flourishing cultural life in Transylvania. *Omerta. Hallgatások könyve* [*Omerta. The Book of Silences*] (2017) is set in the context of state socialism consolidating in the 1950s; it presents four narratorial perspectives and, accordingly, four versions of truth, their interconnected life stories, the functioning mechanism of the communist system, the changes in the relationship between the individual and power, the degrees of vulnerability, the dissolution of the Hóstát community in Kolozsvár, thus a version of the collective loss of home as imposed by the political power. *Sokszor nem halunk meg* [Often We Don't Die] (2023) is the coming-of-age story of an adopted child who survives the Holocaust and who grows up in search of her past, her identity, and her sense of home. Preceding this work, the fourth novel, *Haza* [*Home*] (2020), arrives in the present, yet this present is framed by the past and bears the consequences of the historical-political turns of the last hundred years. It can be inferred from the past, from the fate of the Transylvanian

2 I indicate with italics the books that have been translated into English. The titles that are not in italics are my own translations (J. P.).

ancestors cut off from Hungary by the Treaty of Trianon, why the protagonist has *two* homelands, what lies at the heart of the ethical dilemma between the "old" and the "new" homeland, what defines home and, in general, what it means to be at home in two places – or perhaps nowhere at all. "I somehow always write the same book," the author says in an interview; "from this point of view, every book I have written so far has raised the important question of where the protagonist lives, how safe that place is, to what degree it can be regarded as a home, and what happens if that home is lost."[3]

Several of Andrea Tompa's novels have set out on the journey of being translated. Without doubt, the challenge of the author's first book, A *hóhér háza* [*The Hangman's House*] – as for its translators, Bernhard Adams into English (Seagull Books, 2021, longlisted for the Oxford-Weidenfeld Translation Prize 2022) and Judit E. Ferencz into Romanian (*Casa călăului*, Editura Institutul Cultural Român, 2025) – was to render the flow of its "ultra-long sentences" and "cascading narrative."[4] Similarly, *Omerta. Hallgatások könyve* [*Omerta. The Book of Silences*] also posed hurdles to overcome in translation due to the polyphony of its narratorial voices; it was translated into German by transcultural author Terézia Mora (Suhrkamp, 2022) and into English by Bernard Adams (Seagull Books, 2024).[5] A potential translation of Andrea Tompa's second novel, *Fejtől és lábtól. Kettő orvos Erdélyben* [Head to Feet. Two Doctors in Transylvania] "has been hindered by the difficulties of rendering her highly idiomatic style involving dialect and complex shifts of register" (Komporaly 2021, n. p.). As for her latest novel, *Sokszor nem halunk meg* [Often We Don't Die], it will hopefully augment the list of the author's translated works soon.

3. Andrea Tompa's *Home* and Its Translator

Preceded by publications of its fragments in journals, such as the chapters "Copper Flowers" in *Apofenie*,[6] "Via negativa" in *The Los Angeles Review*,[7]

3 Libri: "Kortársaság. Tompa Andreával Juhász Anna beszélget" [Contemporary Company. Anna Juhász's Interview with Andrea Tompa] *https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LGQFdyu-f3I* (Last accessed 28 August 2025). Translation mine (J. P.).

4 "On Translating Andrea Tompa." *PEN America*, 23 October 2012. *https://pen.org/on-translating-andrea-tompa/* (Last accessed 28 August 2025).

5 The latter has been recently released, in the presence of the author herself, in Kolkata and Mumbai, India, where the publisher, Seagull Books, is based: *https://hlo.hu/news/andrea-tompa-coming-to-india-in-february.html* (Last accessed 28 August 2025).

6 *https://www.apofenie.com/the-latest-content/2020/6/25/copper-flowers* (Last accessed 28 August 2025).

7 "*Via Negativa* Translated from the Hungarian by Jozefina Komporaly." *The Los Angeles Review* 10 August 2023. *https://losangelesreview.org/extract-from-home-by-andrea-tompa-translated-by-jozefina-komporaly/* (Last accessed 28 August 2025).

"Nice Words, Depleted World" in *Hungarian Literature Online*,[8] and "Tongue in Mouth" in *World Literature Today*,[9] the novel *Home*, translated in its integrity, is now available for the global readership.

Translator, interpreter, and academic Jozefina Komporaly has engaged in the cultural transmission, via translation and cultural diplomacy, of contemporary Hungarian and Romanian literature. Her translation practice had gradually emerged from her academic research and teaching conducted in the United Kingdom,

> motivated by an insider knowledge of the source cultures and a sense of frustration with the limited representation of contemporary Hungarian and Romanian literature in English translation. To put it differently, I reacted to my dissatisfaction with the discrepancy between the indigenous and foreign recognition circuit, and my aim was to contribute to the Anglophone understanding of Hungarian and Romanian literary traditions. (Komporaly 2022, 76)

Thus, her endeavours serve a dual purpose: to bring lesser-known literary cultures to wider attention and to foreground the vital role of the – non-native English – translator in mediating "between relatively small literatures on the semi-periphery and the hyper-centre that is English" (Komporaly 2022, 77). Since, in the case of translating Hungarian and Romanian works, the main target language is mostly other than English, "[f]or both Hungarian and Romanian literary outputs, the ultimate aim with English translations is not merely to set foot in the UK or US market but also to open up texts to a wider global access" (Komporaly 2022, 77). Advocating for diversity in the corpus of works mediated through translation, she has also translated drama and theatre, including plays by the Hungarian András Visky and the Romanian Matei Vişniec, and published widely on theatre and adaptation; her translations have been staged in London and Chicago. The translator's agency manifests in the practice of "supply-driven" translation, when the main drive for translation comes from outside the target literary system (Vimr 2019, 46–68), and it is the (L2) translator who chooses the work to be translated, contacts the author, and reaches out to the publisher (Komporaly 2022, 79). This agenda differs from the more traditional "demand-driven" translation and renders the translator visible as an active cultural agent within the public sphere of literary and cultural politics. In an interview

8 "Nice Words, Depleted World." Translated by Jozefina Komporaly. *Hungarian Literature Online* 10 May 2024. *https://hlo.hu/new-work/andrea-tompa-home.html* (Last accessed 28 August 2025).

9 "Tongue in Mouth" by Andrea Tompa, translated by Jozefina Komporaly. *World Literature Today* Summer 2021. *https://www.worldliteraturetoday.org/2021/summer/tongue-mouth-andrea-tompa* (Last accessed 28 August 2025).

with Jozefina Komporaly about the translation of Andrea Tompa's *Haza*, she emphasizes the active role the translator of smaller languages must take in order to promote the works:

> it does seem to me that if you translate from, let's say, French or Spanish, you are more likely to be offered books to translate into English. So, if you don't want to necessarily go out and find your own authors, you probably have enough work and can just translate whatever publishers want or need. That's not the case in our languages, at least not for me. Maybe there are other translators who can do that, although I doubt it to be the case, with the exception of one or two individuals. So, it is really necessary to be proactive, not just because you may want to. (Komporaly 2025, n. p.)[10]

Prior to completing the translation of Andrea Tompa's book – a cold pitch picked up by Istros Books in the UK –, she had noted that "Tompa's fourth novel, *Haza* [*Home*], has the potential to be successful in English, both in terms of subject matter and style: written from the perspective of a central narrator, it addresses the complexities of identity and engages with writing across borders and diverse possibilities for belonging. It is a story of migration and in-betweenness, elegantly filtered through personal and cultural memory" (Komporaly 2021, n. p.). In the mentioned interview, the translator revealed her personal attachment that also motivated, among other factors, the choice of the book to be translated: "*Haza* was something that spoke to me on a personal, emotional level as someone who also lives between countries and languages, is preoccupied with questions of belonging in a broader, philosophical sense, but also in a practical sense as well as stylistically, and this is why I wanted to translate it" (Komporaly 2025, n. p.).

4. Andrea Tompa's *Home* – A Semi-Autobiographical and Polyglot Novel

Of autobiographical inspiration, Andrea Tompa's novel presents various patterns of emigration and explores the ethical, epistemological, and psychological implications of changing places, whether in the form of leaving or returning home, cutting all connections or incessantly searching for the roots, *lust* or *lost*, moving forward or looking back, condensed in the most abstract formula, i.e. moving from A to B. The book thematizes movement among languages and cultures; its main

10 The interview was carried out within the Domus Senior Scholarship Programme of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. The video recording, created with the technical assistance of the Regional Committee in Cluj of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences on 26 September 2025, is available at the following link: *https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i4aI698mgmo&t=3782s*.

topic is switching countries and/or languages. As the translator herself notes, "[i]t turns out that switching countries is the easy part: switching languages is an altogether different proposition, and the ultimate challenge is trying to ascertain the boundaries between homeland and home" (Komporaly 2021, n. p.).

"*And what's your story?*" (Tompa 2024a, 36). It is not merely the story of one single return home. The protagonist's story of homecoming runs in parallel with the stories of the other characters, representing one possible life path among several other alternatives. Everyone is part of the story, whether they left their homeland voluntarily or their homeland left them behind as history redrew political borders. The protagonist returns *home* – from *home*. On the occasion of a class reunion, she returns from the second, chosen living space to the hometown, to the scene of the school years, to the bond of former classmates who had scattered all over the world. In the wider space of reflection, the variants of fate are complemented with those of the great emigrants of Russian literature, among them Vladimir Nabokov and Joseph Brodsky, and are metaphorically framed by Odysseus's mythical journey home to Ithaca.

The novel displays several features that make it an intriguing case of translation. First and foremost, the text plays upon reinforcing and suspending autobiographical references: the protagonist is a writer who emigrated from Cluj-Napoca/Kolozsvár, Romania, to Budapest, Hungary, just like the author herself. In terms of genre, it displays hybridity, blending diegesis and metadiegesis, travelogue and essay novel, semi-autobiography and socio-narrative. Through the applied narrative and rhetorical strategies, a rich field of reflexivity is formed in the novel, in which the search for self becomes a transcultural and multilingual experience.

Accordingly, Andrea Tompa's book can also be discussed in terms of transculturality (Welsh 2009), literary multilingualism (Vincze 2025), literary code switching (Domokos and Deganutti 2023), translanguaging (Collischonn 2024), and among multilingual novels as transnational literature (Sabo 2014). It is a polyglot novel that not only thematizes but also linguistically performs emigration, displacement as a fundamental human experience.

The state of existential, linguistic, and cultural in-betweenness is rendered by a systematic inclusion of words, phrases, and sentences in other languages, mainly English and Russian. This procedure results in breaking the homogeneity of the text, linguistic hybridization, the dissolution of linguistic boundaries. Ferenc Vincze (2025) identifies explicit literary multilingualism as the readability of transculturality – not merely as the materialization of the foreignness of other languages but also as a tool for familiarization with their otherness, in the form of a cognitive and sensory experience in the act of reading.

5. Translation Challenges – Translatorial Strategies

Due to its specificities listed above, Andrea Tompa's novel has posed several challenges for the translator. As follows, this paper will take stock of and discuss the most salient challenges and the applied translatorial strategies.

5.1. Title

The first challenge is posed by the title itself. The Hungarian word *haza* has two basic meanings, 'homeland' and 'homeward.' The text activates both meanings, reflecting on the burdened meanings of homeland, due to historical reasons, and focusing on the orientedness towards home, i.e. on the motion rather than on the fixed place. The English word *home* primarily designates 'one's place of residence,' further entries also referring to 'one's own country' and 'to or at one's place of residence or home' (*Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, s. v.). Polysemy is an inherent feature of a language; the translator may seek a solution that maximizes semantic gain while minimizing loss. As the translator notes in the interview,

> *Homeland* was my first title, and I felt that in many ways it was a bit more inclusive and perhaps closer to the original. However, again, Andrea felt very strongly that *Home* was more appropriate and more fitting, and it didn't quite have the political connotations we wanted to avoid. Also, it parallels, it mirrors the Hungarian title in its shortness, abruptness, sharpness. It includes the same four letters, it almost looks the same on the page as the Hungarian title. Also, it was perhaps less frequently used as the title of other books, films, cultural outputs. And that is also an important decision in choosing titles for works that hopefully are circulating internationally, the avoidance of using the exact same title that perhaps readers might be familiar with from elsewhere. So, yes, I was mindful that perhaps *Home* did not include every single connotation that *Haza* had, but felt that this was a sensible and reasonable choice that did justice to the book long and short term. (Komporaly 2025, n. p.)

5.2. Names and Gender

When it comes to translation, perhaps the most intriguing aspect of the novel is its reticence towards the name and gender of particular characters. While the narrative comprises characters of all sorts of nationalities who, in their turn, embody the most various patterns of displacement, the protagonist has no name whatsoever, being consistently referred to in an elliptical way. As the translator remarks,

> There isn't a clear indication as to who this character is. And in English that's very unusual, to put it mildly. It's borderline impossible to do something like that due to the nature of the language; you either use their name or a pronoun that indicates their gender, and this was not something that the Hungarian text naturally allowed or invited. So, this was one of the things we did indeed discuss with Andrea [Tompa], and with Susie [Curtis] at Istros, and we agreed that we shouldn't yield in and reveal too soon. We shouldn't immediately name this protagonist just to make it more comfortable for an English-speaking reader, but also perhaps we shouldn't create too much of a fuss about it either. So, we decided to try to be as casual about it as possible and allow this information to emerge organically and hope for an attentive reader that may pick up on the clues all along. (Komporaly 2025, n. p.)

In Hungarian, the third-person subject can be inferred from the conjugation of the verb, without lexicalizing it in the sentence, while in English the sentence requires a subject. This was probably the first and most significant decision the translator had to make. Jozefina Komporaly decided upon using the phrase "our protagonist," which first appears in the second paragraph of the novel, corresponding to the Hungarian sentence with an implicit subject: "Our protagonist is contemplating the landscape through the lense [sic!] of reading glasses, from behind the steering wheel" ["Olvasószemüvegén keresztül nézi a tájat az autó kormányánál ülve"] (Tompa 2024a/2020, 5). Although this decision introduces a slight sensation of *différance*, as it resorts to a phrase typical of the omniscient perspective in the body of a narrative discourse in which focalization prevails, it is a fully adequate solution to how to say the least about the protagonist, thus maintaining the elusive character of the original: "[i]nstead of saying 'she' from the first sentence, I tried to refer to the protagonist in other ways. Sometimes just say 'the protagonist,' or, depending on the situations in which this character was, called her the traveller or the speaker, etc., finding other ways of pinning down her identity" (Komporaly 2025, n. p.).

Further on, the original also keeps hidden the gender of the protagonist, for as long as about 80 pages. It is deliberately reticent about the gender of the protagonist, managing to keep it in the neutral zone for long, assisted by the Hungarian language having no grammatical gender. The text even subtly plays upon gender by attributing masculine traits to the author figure such as the traveller, the car driver, and the military leader (Hannibal), mixed with neutral references ("Where's that former *self* who was so keen on the airports?" ["Hol van az az *ember*, aki annyira rajongott a repülőterekért?"] (Tompa 2024a/2020, 5; emphases mine). At the end of the first chapter, there turns up the protagonist's – also nameless – Son, which might imply the mother figure but, still, the text

preserves the ambiguity through the word "Map," a compound of both "mama" and "papa," created by the Son for naming the parents. The word smoothly fits into the English translation, as the signifier of a subject constantly on the move, with a map, even "struggling with orientation" (Tompa 2024a, 17). Jozefina Komporaly says about the method she worked with:

> [c]lose detective work surveying intimations in other parts of the book may come in handy; other times it is simply a matter of drawing conclusions from contextual clues. In this excerpt ["Tongue in Mouth"], I opted for the masculine in the case of Dr. Rostam, not so much because football associations still connote masculinity in a Hungarian context but because Tompa uses the term *doktor* (as opposed to the still widely encountered feminine form of *doktornő*). (Komporaly 2021, n. p.)

From sporadic reviews, it can be inferred that for readers of the English translation, the nameless characters – the Son, the Father, the Other, the Painter, the Teacher – pose a challenge, yet the technique becomes meaningful as indicating a certain degree of distance and abstraction.

5.3. Specific Lexical Items

Under the label "specific lexical items," I have selected individual words or fixed expressions that carry unique semantic components essential for constructing meaning in the text, thus making them challenging to translate. As the translator argues in the interview,

> I should say more generally, not just about this particular translation, that this is the space where different translators would choose entirely different solutions. And, I think, that's the beauty of it. And this is probably why some books are translated multiple times, often in a short span of time, because another translator may feel that they can approach that particular situation more creatively or just simply more in tune with their approach to language. (Komporaly 2025, n. p.)

One instance the translator did discuss with the author arose in the chapter's title "PM. Az utolsó arcváltás:"

> I was really thinking hard about this and tried to be as imaginative about it as possible and came up with a number of versions. When I asked her what it was that she actually meant here, she said that she was thinking about mirroring "*levélváltás*"/'exchange of letters' and "*arcváltás*". It was this

> explanation that led me to my choice which perhaps sounds less radical on the page than I initially wanted, but mirrors indeed her intention. So, I put "PM. The Last Time They Exchanged Looks" as opposed to "they exchanged letters". (Komporaly 2025, n. p.)

In the chapter "Invasive Species," the Hungarian word *holtág* could most neutrally be translated as "backwater;" however, it is essential for the text to retain the component *holt-* 'dead' to evoke reflections on death and the memory of the dead Father, who was driven to commit suicide due to the persecutions by the secret police. Thus, the translator opts for the rare, literal translation "dead arm," which facilitates further meaning making: "She recalls when the Son initially thought that the dead arm was a place for the dead" (Tompa 2024a, 230).

In the chapter "I'm Not an Émigré," in the talk between mother and son there pops up the phrase "do a cartwheel." The Hungarian *cigánykereket vetni* contains the word *cigány* 'gypsy,' which is referred to in their discussion. The translation creatively solves the case by adding an explanation: "Why are cartwheels called gypsy wheels in their mother tongue?" (Tompa 2024a, 144). This addition enables the mother's etymological explanation:

> They may not have had carts and the wheels to go with them, perhaps this was their only wheel to use as a means of transportation, she explains. Their very own wheel. This is how they moved in space. This is how they conquered space, by turning into a rotating body, just like the Earth. Or on the contrary, because they were always on the go, they had a wheel under themselves, a cartwheel that was always in motion, hence the name. (Tompa 2024a, 144)

5.4. Intertextuality

Intertextuality is a major organizing principle of Andrea Tompa's book. Intertextual references permeate the entire novel, invoking world literature in both overt and covert forms – from the *Bible*, through Homer's *The Odyssey*, to the Russian émigrés and beyond. Due to length limitations, I illustrate the translator's strategy of rendering intertextuality with one single example: in the original, the author inserts a quote from *The Odyssey*, in Gábor Devecseri's translation, marked with quotation marks and indicating the source of translation in the footnote. The English translation of the novel doubly accentuates the embedded text, using single quotes and italics, indicating the translator, A. T. Murray, in the endnotes: "But the great-hearted Odysseus he found not within; for he sat weeping on the shore, as his wont had been, racking his soul with tears and groans and griefs,

and he would look over the unresting sea, shedding tears" (Tompa 2024a, 102). As Jozefina Komporaly (2025) reflects on this aspect,

> I tried to source existing English translations of these and include them, because I feel that in this way we are intertextual with a tradition of translation, too, that I feel very strongly about. Perhaps this wasn't happening in every single instance, but that goal certainly was part of my intention, and I generally try to do this in most of my translations.

5.5. Ekphrasis

In addition to the network of intertextual references, the text is densely intermedial, thanks to overt and covert references to painters and their works as well as ekphrastic descriptions. This occasions reflections on the difference between words and images: "Words are inaccessible. But perhaps paintings aren't" (Tompa 2024a, 299). Besides faithfully conveying overt references to William Turner, the translator also had to capture covert painterly references, such as the allusion to Hans Holbein the Younger's *The Ambassadors* in the description of the dying Painter's work, reminding the protagonist of her dead Father:

> The viewer is only presented with a retreat into the painting. There is no representation of death, dying or illness, not even a round-up of the iconography associated with ephemerality, such as skulls or fruit, or the props of music, arts and science, such as globes and compasses. It simply seems to be the end of everything, with a refuge into the painting. (Tompa 2024a, 222)

5.6. Translating Foreignness

Regarding translation, yet another challenging aspect of the novel is the way it relates to foreignness thematically, linguistically, and metalinguistically. Thematically, it scrutinizes all imaginable patterns in which one can experience foreignness: at home, apart from home, in constrained or self-imposed exile, within or beyond one's mother tongue. "Is home a universe built in the course of one's adult life or the place where one was born, and which, though left behind, cannot be abandoned altogether?" (Komporaly 2021, n. p.). The search for home is experienced as a sense of in-betweenness: "Stuck between two worlds, no longer at home but not yet back home either" (Tompa 2024a, 15). Is the sense of home and, by the same token, the sense of foreignness translatable?

Feeling at home or a stranger in the world are not binary opposites; rather, they presuppose each other. Every story represents a possible variation of

how the relationship between familiarity and foreignness evolves, and which predominates: foreignness within familiarity, or vice versa. Foreignness is not necessarily the negative pole, as it may spur the traveller to explore new cities, countries, continents. Similarly, familiarity can be a false sensation, or merely an illusion of a home long lost or rendered impossible.

In the contemporary transcultural context, as Welsch states,

> Henceforward there is no longer anything absolutely foreign. Everything is within reach. Accordingly, there is no longer anything exclusively 'own' either. Authenticity has become folklore, it is ownness simulated for others – to whom the indigene himself belongs. To be sure, there is still a regional-culture rhetoric, but it is largely simulatory and aesthetic; in substance everything is transculturally determined. Today in a culture's internal relations – among its different ways of life – there exists as much foreignness as in its external relations with other cultures. (Welsch 1999, 199)

Yet, at the "micro-level" of "the transcultural formation of the individuals," the process of gaining "the ability to transculturally cross over" (Welsch 1999, 199) is not without tensions, queries, and sensations of foreignness. Linguistically, the text stages foreignness by the great number of foreign inclusions, mostly English and Russian, but sporadically also in other languages, the speaker herself being not only a writer but also a translator, in a continuous struggle to find a verbal referent to the unspeakable. This also entails the question of translatability. An example of this is to be found in the protagonist's correspondence with the Finnish literary scholar and translator about "the various *berries* that were in season up North" (Tompa 2024a, 7). The original text turns the Hungarian reader into a translator, since there the English word appears: "éppen milyen *berry*k érnek odaföntÉszakon" (Tompa 2020, 8). This is neutralized in the English translation, since no linguistic code switching takes place in it. And, metalinguistically, it encompasses a lot of language-philosophical reflections, constantly navigating the boundary between diegesis and metadiegesis, text and metatext, narration and self-referentiality. Let us examine some instances of these cases in turn.

5.6.1. At the Linguistic Level: Foreign Inclusions

The presence of foreign inclusions in the Hungarian text has multiple functions: to maintain a continuous tension, Derridean *différance* between the mother tongue and the experience of the foreign language; to perform foreignness at the textual level; to continuously relate to the foreign in an attempt of appropriation; to make perceptible the foreignness of one's mother tongue, and, also, to turn the foreignness of the foreign language into a sensory experience. The embedded

English and Russian phrases, especially the Cyrillic letters of the latter, are simultaneously foreign matter (also visually) and real delicacies, both suspending and allowing the flow of reading by providing their translation in footnotes. They suggest that monolingualism is a mere utopia in the boundless transcultural environment. They become the linguistic markers of emigration, linguistic emigrants in the Hungarian context.

What happens to the foreignness of the foreign inclusions once the text is translated into English? "Multilingual writing has often been deemed untranslatable" (Collischonn 2024, 14). It seems that there is no way to save the *différance* of the English in an English context. It is the case of the German sentence "Hölderlin ist ihnen unbekannt?" in Örkény's one-minute story *Dr. K. H. G.* in the German translation, about which Kappanyos (2015, 167–168) writes:

> when we read the unexpected German sentence in a Hungarian context, wrapped into the shock of foreignness, we get the subliminal presumption as a particular, implicit metalepsis that Dr. K. H. G. speaks German as a Hungarian. This information cannot be transmitted at the referential (or even subliminal) level of the diegesis, as the German is here the normative basic situation, it does not have any relevance. In fact, it should be conveyed that it was in German *in the original*, but this would imply stepping out at the metatextual level, that is, recognizing the failure of translation.[11]

Jozefina Komporaly resorts to the classical solution that can be done in the case of polyglot novels, namely putting in italics what was in English – and also in italics – in the original, preserving a slight degree of typographical *différance* between English and English:

> "*You have to be very organized*," Tom writes, that is Thomas, the American organizer and later friend, when all the details of the trip are finally put together, "Oh, that's not a problem for me," she replies, "Well, it is for me," Tom indicates. He teaches at a prestigious university, this is surprising, "*I thought that all Americans are organized*. How do we say organized in our mother tongue?" (Tompa 2024a, 28)

At times, the English phrases embedded in the Hungarian original are in American spelling, about which Komporaly (2025) says:

> I kept all the American and I even put in a note to that at the beginning of the book, because I do know that this book is going to circulate outside

11 Translation mine (J. P.). All translations of quotes by András Kappanyos (2013 and 2015) are mine.

> the United Kingdom and there will be readers, possibly more readers who are perhaps more familiar with American English. I wanted to signal that wherever there was an American spelling, that wasn't because I didn't pay attention, that's how it was in the book and we try to keep that in italics as well wherever possible. There is already the UK, British, fairly British, English versus the American. So, that was retained throughout.

As for inclusions other than English, the chosen translatorial strategies are varied and flexible, including the translation of the foreign word or phrase in the text itself, in the form of juxtaposition, or in endnotes (all Russian quotations are indicated in the endnotes), sometimes even changing the Russian inclusion into English:

> "Brodsky," Ari adds proudly. "Бродский," the woman onerously repeats the writer's name.
> "*I haven't read any Brodsky*." [in the original: не читала Бродского** (translation in the footnote)]
> Genitivus negationis. Negation+living being = genitive case.
> эмигранты такие, kind of emigrants [translation also in the endnote; in the original: эмигранты такие (translation in the footnote)] (Tompa 2024a, 115; 2020, 154)

The tendency in the translation was "to keep the multilingual aspect," but having in view the readability of the text for English readers, the publisher suggested some of the foreign inclusions to be translated back to English, so "it got somewhat reduced in the process for ease of access" (Komporaly 2025, n. p.). The decision of using endnotes instead of footnotes also favours the unhindered flow of reading.

5.6.2. At the Metalinguistic Level: In between the Mother Tongue and the Foreign Language

At the metalinguistic level, the novel abounds in reflections on language, pervaded by Wittgensteinian scepticism, that "there were no suitable words to describe it [the topic of the presentation] anyway" (Tompa 2024a, 8). The protagonist also regards translation with doubt: "'*I don't believe in translation*. Words can never be transposed into one another, just like people or trees or sparrows can't either. How many words and how many other things have to come to pass between us, between two people, in order to understand each other?'" (Tompa 2024a, 38).

Andrea Tompa's text is close to language, in the sense of the narrator's careful selection of words and expressions, pondering over their origins, forms, and

meanings, even comparing phrases in different languages. At times, the reader even comes across grammatical analyses, such as in the case of the English phrase "I miss it," since it grammatically differs from the Hungarian *hiányzik*: "'Not *I miss it*, but it's missing, not even it's lacking or it's absent, but it's missing from me, or I from it. »I« is an active agent, missing is a state'" (Tompa 2024a, 44; emphasis in the original).

At times, scepticism arises about the translatability of certain Hungarian words, such as *boldogulni*. One of the classmates, Bali, says: "'This term is just perfect, to make one's way in life,' he's savouring the word, though unable to read, he can talk really well. 'Well, this can't even be expressed in other languages, can it?'" (Tompa 2024a, 319). Indeed, the Hungarian word stems from *boldog* 'happy;' it does not have an exact equivalent, and it stirs a debate; "suddenly everyone is a linguist" (Tompa 2024a, 319).

Due to the protagonist's transcultural and translingual mode of existence, in constant motion between place A, place B, and other places around the world, the search for words always implies relationality, comparing the mother tongue to the foreign language. While English is explicitly referred to as a "major language," which provides "a particularly solid defence, great to lean against, and in the light of which it's comforting to bask" (Tompa 2024a, 8), the mother tongue, paradoxically, does not provide security but rather the threat of failure, traps to get lost in. As Ari, the protagonist's best friend in the student days, says, "[l]anguage is prison, captivity. What's only available in one's mother tongue is nothing but failure" (Tompa 2024a, 125).

Besides, the mother tongue is not explicitly referred to as Hungarian, only its specificities are reflected on, in comparison with English. The comparison is carried out via metaphoric images:

> Fortunately, the talk will be in English. It's reassuring to avoid the traps of one's mother tongue, with its exceedingly complicated twists and endless ramifications. Instead, there's an opportunity to proceed in English, as if navigating a safer and less busy dual carriageway, where things can be named a lot easier because they already have names in foreign languages. No need to be afraid, foreignness is a safe shield. (Tompa 2024a, 8)

This sentence can be read as a metalinguistic self-reference, as which itself performs the experienced convolutedness of the Hungarian language, the mother tongue becoming unfathomable in the sense of *L'Innomable* – translated into English by Beckett himself.

"[M]etalinguistic self-reference raises the dilemma whether translation should reflect the truth of the referential signification of the source language or the truth formed in the target language (contradicting the original referentiality)"

(Kappanyos 2015, 152). In translation, the metalinguistic reference to the source language is playfully deconstructed and shifts metalinguistic focus to the target language, staging the experience of the other language. The act of translation smoothly intervenes into these subtle interlinguistic reflections, displaying English as "the language in which everything can be discussed by virtue of the fact that it isn't one's own" (Tompa 2024a, 14).

The experience of displacement, the sensation of the foreignness of one's mother tongue entails the relativity of one's bond to his/her heritage language as what carries childhood imprints, wounds, and traumas; it overwrites the dichotomy of one's own vs the other; it undoes the monopoly of the mother tongue and monolingualism in favour of a state of in-betweenness permeated by both hope and fear: "In what language can one possibly articulate the truth?" (Tompa 2024a, 15).

6. From Linguistic to Cultural Translation

The general expectations that the translator must meet have a twofold orientation:

> One requirement the translator must fulfill is that his/her work should be understandable and preferably enjoyable, that is, a pattern that is active and open to new connections in the context of the target culture should be created. The other requirement is that this new pattern should model, follow and represent the original, that it should necessarily result from it. (Kappanyos 2015, 100)

This double-oriented set of requirements, however, implies a complex process of cultural transmission, the examination of which reaches beyond the scope of linguistic translation and invites culture-oriented approaches to translation, regarded as "a multilayered cultural transfer with a partially unpredictable effect" (Kappanyos 2013, 28). In the wake of the cultural turn in translation studies (Bassnet and Lefevere 1990), culture-centred approaches to translation "regard the translated and the source texts as carriers of cultural patterns" (Kappanyos 2015, 25). As follows, I will discuss instances where the translation of Andrea Tompa's novel touches on cultural aspects that are not explicitly, verbally expressed but rather subtly implied, hinted at. What can be transferred and what remains untranslatable in such cases?

6.1. Quasi-referentiality

Without fail, one such case is the intentional quasi-referentiality of the book, oscillating between the possibility of referential and non-referential reading. The novel subtly plays upon allowing and withdrawing the possibility of referential reading, extending the experience of emigration in time and space and framing it as a general human experience, irrespective of concrete geocultural connectedness. The possibility of reading referentially opens for the Hungarian reader, especially for the one who is informed about the author's biographical background and can decipher the hidden geocultural references, identifying the main locations of the novel in Budapest and the Transylvanian city Cluj-Napoca/Kolozsvár. As for these concrete place names, the novel resorts to reticence but, on the other hand, contains descriptions that allow referential reading. Such a covert reference can be found in the chapter *Staying at the Theological Institute*, which starts with the reference to a town:

> On this occasion, she's staying wherever it was possible to find accommodation: at the Theological Institute, or the *Divinity College* as the bilingual sign indicates. Since she no longer has a family home in this town, on her rare visits our protagonist tends to stay in consular guest rooms, university accommodations, or hotels, depending on the arrangements made by those who invite her. (Tompa 2024a, 70)

This passage reflects on the experience of being a guest in one's hometown, when the place of birth, "a constituent of individual identity" (Augé 1997, 53) turns into a non-place of supermodernity in Marc Augé's sense of the term, that is, "a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, and concerned with identity" (Augé 1997, 77–78), offering the subject "new experiences and ordeals of solitude" (Augé 1997, 93).

While in the original text a *város* 'the town' is the opening word of the chapter, occupying a significant position in the referential reading, the translator has moved it into the body of the second sentence, "in this town," as which no longer needs to be highlighted in a non-referential reading. Still, among the many concrete locations in the novel, from New York to Greenland, the nameless mention of the hometown retains a degree of weightiness even in a non-referential reading. The non-referential reading is encouraged also in the original: the nameless hometown becomes a cosmopolitan place imaginable in all parts of the world. What is more, it is compared to Odysseus's Ithaca, as an archetype of home that transcends ages and cultures, or as a "common reference," in terms of cultural translation. András Kappanyos brings the very example of home as

> a concept that most probably can be found in all cultures and languages that encompass literacy but let's imagine what radically different ideas it associates depending on traditions, social and economic structures, climate, lifestyle or cultural habits. In this sense, it is referentiality itself that might compromise the accuracy of translation: the idea occurring in the mind of the translation's receiver may significantly differ from what the author intended to evoke. (Kappanyos 2015, 144)

As the translator interprets the novel, "home is not an actual place first and foremost but a braiding of situations, objects, and recollections, which cannot be specified because it may no longer exist in the way in which it was committed to memory" (Komporaly 2021, n. p.). Thus, the quasi-referentiality of Andrea Tompa's novel seems to be in favour of translation, encompassing an ever-larger circle of meanings of home and cross-cultural subjectivities that meet in the shared, intersubjective field of reading.

6.2. Hungarian vs Hungarian

The basic situation of emigration that frames all other patterns of movement from A to B, as presented above, is from Transylvania to Hungary, which functions as a reference of reading for the native reader. In this sense, the text makes implicit allusions to differences in linguistic and cultural behaviour, extending over political boundaries, between Hungarians as ethnic majority in Hungary and ethnic minority in Transylvania. For the Hungarian reader, these are implicit cultural signifiers – for example, the preference for French tarragon indicates Transylvanian cuisine as compared to the more widespread Russian tarragon in Hungary. The better taste of the French tarragon as an indicator of the pristine, authentic, unspoilt Transylvanian culture that is, at the same time, the protagonist's erstwhile home that she left and feels nostalgia for – just as the lack of it standing for feeling foreign as a Hungarian in Hungary: "one couldn't lay hands on proper tarragon in this country" (Tompa 2024a, 150) – can only be inferred by an insider.

The same is the case with those nuanced linguistic markers that signal the Hungarian language use in Transylvania, such as the interjection *na* 'so, well' in the greeting of the theology students: "*Na, áldásbékesség!*." This sounds "Anyway, blessingsandpeace" in the English rendering, which does not need to evoke the same cultural association for a non-Hungarian reader, for "[t]he subject of a translation work is the source language itself, that is, a linguistic construct, rather than its cultural context" (Kappanyos 2015, 209).

In a similar fashion, for the cultural insider, the dialectal variant *birokrácia* of the standard *bürokrácia* 'bureaucracy,' which occasions a wordplay in

the original relying on the meaningful *birok* 'wrestling,' implies, again, the Transylvanian Hungarian language use. "This particular protagonist appears to be less educated and sophisticated than many of the other figures in the book. So, he uses a mispronunciation, a misspelling of the correct word, which signposts a social gap that I found difficult to convey in English using a more literal translation, such as 'bureaucracy' paired with a slight modification of the term," the translator says (Komporaly 2025, n. p.). The English translation finds an ingenious solution to render the paronomasia: "this country [Sweden] is a jungle of *red tape*. In his pronunciation this sounds like *red tap*, as if he had to *tap* on something" (Tompa 2024a, 81; emphasis mine). However, it does not need to convey the subtle cultural connotations that even Hungarian readers may not fully recognize.

> I felt that in this book, this issue is a lot less prominent than in many of Andrea's other books where this is definitely at the centre and the voices of the different protagonists really are constructed through these varieties. In this one, perhaps, this was less of an overall concern. Clearly, the nuances of class differences were just as important, and I guess I hinted at that above. I must stress that in the case of this particular translation project, these were not as central to my agenda as they would have been if I had translated *Omerta*, for example, where without departing from this premise you can't even begin to translate. (Komporaly 2025, n. p.)

In this way, the translation – as cultural transmission – stages, performs the "emigration" of the text, setting it on a journey of distinct and unpredictable cultural associations.

7. Conclusions. "Lust" in Translation

"One can convey anything in English," the protagonist of the novel concludes (Tompa 2024a, 330). This statement can also be applied to Jozefina Komporaly's successful translation, which reads smoothly and is distinguished by adequate and autonomous translatorial decisions. Through the selected corpus of analysed samples, this paper has sought to demonstrate that ingenious translatorial decisions introduce a new dynamic into the (con)textual diversity of the book's universe. The cultural transmission of a text also implies that certain connotations need not be transferred, as it cannot be expected from the target audience to be able to decode all cultural affinities and linguistic nuances. Ultimately, we arrive at the paradox of literary translation: "[w]hat must be translated of that which is translatable can only be the untranslatable" (Derrida 1992, 258).

The English translation plays a significant role in making Andrea Tompa's work accessible to readers worldwide. Besides the fact that "getting it published is incredibly rewarding in itself," "the circulation of the book is the next stage" (Komporaly 2025, n. p.). Andrea Tompa's novel concludes with the recognition that "the only liveable space is language" (Tompa 2024a, 254). Rendered in English, the novel is heading towards new "homes," meeting new readers, distinct cultural contexts, and further levels of understanding and interpretation.

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