

The Fragility of the Mother Tongue

Language as Exercise and Enemy in the Works of Agota Kristof

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Abstract. The paper examines the relationship between the mother tongue and the foreign language in the works of the Hungarian-born Swiss writer Agota Kristof, and its poetic, literary and theoretical consequences. The analysis is based on the approach adopted by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in their book entitled *Kafka. Toward a Minor Literature*, addressing the Czech writer's specific use of language. In examining and interpreting Kafka's life and works, the two French philosophers challenge the concept of a homogeneous, authentic, 'natural' mother tongue. Using this starting point, the present paper analyses examples of language learning, foreign language and mother tongue related passages in Agota Kristof's oeuvre and explores their poetic implications, with reference to the short novel *The Notebook* and its 'postmodern' narrative. In this respect, Agota Kristof's piece can be seen as a poetic experiment that adds to Deleuze and Guattari's concept in the sense that it attempts to disconnect language from the individual and individuality. In her novel, language learning is therefore nothing other than the conditioning of the individual to a harsh foreign world deprived of the immediacy and homeliness of the mother tongue.

Keywords: Agota Kristof, minor literature, language shift, language learning, mother tongue, trauma

In their 1975 book *Kafka. Toward a Minor Literature*, where Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari introduced the concept of 'minority' or rather 'small' literature (they actually adapted Kafka's term *kleine Literaturen* to a broader context), they talk about the 'intensity' of Kafka's style.¹ It can be traced back to the limited stylistic features of the "paper language" (or artificial language), namely German common in Prague at the time, i.e., the multilingual environment in which Kafka lived. The ideas of the two prominent French philosophers were quickly adopted by Kafka scholarship and have been hotly debated ever since. The most important and certainly most justified point of criticism against Deleuze and Guattari's concept is

1 Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka*, 21.

that Kafka used the term *kleine Literaturen*, which has been taken into French with a slight change of meaning as *littérature mineure*, not to refer to Kafka's own texts written in German but to Yiddish and Czech literature in Prague. These 'small' literatures, however, do not meet Deleuze and Guattari's criteria. In this regard, the two philosophers' rather schematic portrayal of the intercultural and multilingual contexts of the cultural milieu of contemporary Prague has been heavily criticized.²

In addition to complementing and illustrating the cultural-historical insights outlined, the interpretive performance of the Kafka book establishes a less frequently addressed linguistic and literary-philosophical perspective as a basis for the thought process. According to the authors' definition of 'minor' literature: writing in a foreign language rather than in one's mother tongue is "the deterritorialization of language", when people "live in a language that is not their own".³ 'Minor' literature is thus not only about alienation and exclusion, not only about presenting alienation, but also about realizing and carrying out alienation within language as a linguistic event. But how does this event take place, what are the linguistic and poetic properties of 'minor' literature? Deleuze and Guattari begin their explanation with a surprising observation:

"Rich or poor, each language always implies a deterritorialization of the mouth, the tongue, and the teeth. The mouth, tongue, and teeth find their primitive territoriality in food. In giving themselves over to the articulation of sounds, the mouth, tongue, and teeth deterritorialize."⁴

Without pursuing the open-ended questions of evolutionary biology and other fields, it is obvious that a new and unusual linguistic perspective is being explored here. Language and speech are not brought closer to the human, to subjectivity—as for example, in traditional logocentric thinking; on the contrary, speech here deprives vital human organs of their original mode of functioning. This language is therefore unnatural, not a vehicle for communication (and thus a fundamental medium for human coexistence), but an anti-life, a threatening activity that does not establish and secure the identity, but rather obscures and obliterates it⁵ - as we so often see with the heroes of Kafka's stories. As Deleuze and Guattari continue, confusion arises in the creation of meaning because "ordinarily, in fact, language compensates for its deterritorialization by a reterritorialization in sense."⁶ Sense is

2 Thirouin, "Franz Kafka als Schutzpatron der minoritären Literaturen."

3 Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka*, 18–19.

4 Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka*, 19.

5 This approach is in some respects related to the critique (or: deconstruction) of logocentrism in the philosophical works of Jacques Derrida and others, also developed in the 1960s and 1970s.

6 Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka*, 20.

the result of the “extensive” or “representative” use of language, which thus compensates for the original deterritorialization. In contrast, the “intensity”, “strangeness” or the uncanny of Kafkaesque language renounces meaning, or more precisely, it de-automatizes meaning-making: it places the mere acoustic, meaningless sound in the foreground and undermines the processes of metaphorization, understood as meaning-making. The contexts of meaning, to paraphrase the two philosophers’ at this point rather expansive reasoning, are questioned in the course of the reading and subsequently rearranged into unstable, uncertain structures. Not only the constant communicative difficulties of Kafka’s characters come to mind here (e.g., in *The Trial* or in *The Castle*), but also the ‘phantasmagoric’ nature of the narratives (e.g., in *The Metamorphosis*), which in this respect can be interpreted as a disturbance, irritation, and uncertainty of metaphorical-allegorical meaning-making (i.e., Gregor Samsa does not become a vermin in a metaphorical sense, but does actually transform into one). Deleuze and Guattari derive this model fundamentally, but somewhat generously, from Kafka’s “paper language” German, from the interlingual features of his texts, thus providing a considerable target of attack for Kafka studies, which are currently struggling to re-understand Kafka’s interculturality in a broader cultural-historical context.⁷ Deleuze and Guattari’s line of thought thus leads less towards social and cultural historical conclusions, and more towards a literary theory or poetics of multilingual alienation, which concerns the literary and hermeneutical aspects of texts and which offers the reader another, specifically linguistic experience of the alienation, isolation, and disintegration of the individual.⁸

Agota Kristof’s oeuvre is a very specific example of ‘multilingual’ literature. The author is well-known for writing in a language she learned as an adult, French, rather than her Hungarian mother tongue.⁹ Using this ‘non-native’ language undoubtedly constitutes one of the fundamental layers of Agota Kristof’s art, a fundamental experience that determines the linguistic structure of her texts, thus the mood and meaning of the narratives; in short, it defines the framework for the readability of her writing. Yet, this is not a constant and striking feature of her works, except perhaps in her brief biographical narrative *The Illiterate*. In the short novel *Yesterday*, her only major text besides the pieces of the *Trilogy*, ‘writing’ emerges as a kind of abstract, almost transcendent promise of refuge, a possibility that has more to do with the integrity and desires of the characters than with language, which in this work is emphatically unconnected to the notions of ‘homeland’ or ‘home’. *The Illiterate*, which is both a biography and an *ars poetica*, also states, “What I am certain of is that I would have written, no matter where I was, in no matter what

7 Höhne and Weinberg, eds, *Franz Kafka im interkulturellen Kontext*.

8 Bay and Hamann, eds, *Odradeks Lachen*.

9 Hites, “Variations on Mother Tongue.”

language.”¹⁰ In the chapter “The Desert”, the refuge-like quality of literature is suggested by a striking image: in this chapter suggestively discussing the monotony and hopelessness of being a refugee, the clock factory is introduced as “a good place for writing poems,”¹¹ because the rhythm of the monotonous machines encourages the creation of poems. Literature is presented as a chance or, more precisely, given the example of machines, as the only possible, almost compulsive, almost automatic activity in the face of total hopelessness. Its essential feature relevant for the present discussion is that it is practically independent of language; the problem of switching languages arises only as a practical issue.

How *The Illiterate* moves on from here to define the significance of the mother tongue will be discussed later, but the starting point allows a more precise definition of the poetic significance of the *Trilogy*, especially the first part, *The Notebook*. This is where the way of being written enters the novel’s fictional space, resulting in a much more complex narratological structure than elsewhere in the oeuvre. The title is telling, *The Notebook* refers to the medium of writing, unlike Agota Kristof’s ‘usual’ short titles denoting abstract concepts, motifs, or figures (*Yesterday*, *The Monster*, *The Plague*, etc.). Metafictionality is not uncommon in the European literature of the so-called postmodern period, often due to a narrative instance rich in ‘verbose’ self-reflexive commentary; in the case of Agota Kristof and the *Trilogy*, however, this narrative solution is associated with a different narrative voice, namely a concise, reduced, symbolic, sometimes elliptical style, which is also characteristic of the author’s all other works, including narratives and plays. Metafiction thus gives a new context to this reduced literary discourse, which has considerable modern antecedents and brings it into the realm of ‘postmodern metafiction’, creating the unmistakable discourse of the *Trilogy*, strikingly simple in language and almost unintelligible in narrative.

The fact that the story is not conveyed by a personal or impersonal but certainly abstract narrator, but rather by a document, which is, naturally, very unclear and unreferenced—e.g., without any paratextual elements—but nonetheless written, puts the ‘realness’ of the text or, more precisely, its verifiability, confirmability, and reliability, into a different context. The notebook is one way of accessing events, and not, as in the case of an abstract narrator, the only way. Simply put, regarding *The Notebook*, one might suppose that ‘perhaps it didn’t happen that way’, whereas this question does not make sense concerning *Yesterday*, where at most the reader can ponder over moments that the narrator has not explained. Obviously, the authenticity and truthfulness of any narrator can be questioned, but *The Notebook*—and subsequently the other two pieces of the *Trilogy*—addresses this specific

10 Kristof, *The Illiterate*, 31.

11 Kristof, *The Illiterate*, 32.

problem through its metafictional structure, leading the reader to question narrative transparency.¹²

In *The Notebook*, the metafictional character of the text becomes clear for the first time in the chapter entitled “Our Studies”, where readers first realize that they are reading that particular notebook:¹³

Our Studies

For our studies, we have Father’s dictionary and the Bible we found here at Grandmother’s, in the attic.

We have lessons in spelling, composition, reading, mental arithmetic, mathematics, and memorization.

We use the dictionary for spelling, to obtain explanations, but also to learn new words, synonyms and antonyms.

We use the Bible for reading aloud, dictation, and memorization. We are thus learning whole pages of the Bible by heart.

This is how a composition lesson proceeds:

We are sitting at the kitchen table with our sheets of graph paper, our pencils, and the notebook. We are alone.

One of us says:

“The title of your composition is: »Arrival at Grandmother’s.«”

The other says:

“The title of your composition is: »Our Chores.«”

We start writing. We have two hours to deal with the subject and two sheets of paper at our disposal.

At the end of two hours we exchange our sheets of paper. Each of us corrects

12 This metafictional structure, which is thus rooted in the medial specificity of *The Notebook*, i.e., in its “notebook-like” nature, presents an inherent challenge for all adaptations, theatrical and cinematic. Without giving a comprehensive analysis, which would be very much desired, although writing it would not be without risks, it can perhaps be said that János Szász’s 2013 adaptation bypasses most problems arising from intermediality, and, with a few exceptions, resolves the questions necessarily or intensively left vague or undecided in the text, and sometimes even “over-explains” them, such as the figure of the father (in the opening sequence and in the entire work) or the context of the war, which the film presents in a much more tangible form than the text. At the same time, the film does not leave the potential of the intermediary qualities entirely untapped; the ‘notebook’ which the twins receive as a gift from their father in the film, again as part of concretization’s dubious aesthetic success, appears in the film multiple times, opening up an exciting new dimension in the otherwise rather mono-planar visual world; indeed, it is the evocation of the notebook that allows the director to make “twinhood,” the basic character-narrative structure of the work, the subject of the visual artwork (in the form of the “twin print” at the end of the memorable introductory sequence).

13 Miletic, *European Literary Immigration*, 247.

the other's spelling mistakes with the help of the dictionary and writes at the bottom of the page: "Good" or "Not good." If it's "Not good," we throw the composition in the fire and try to deal with the same subject in the next lesson. If it's "Good," we can copy the composition into the notebook.

To decide whether it's "Good" or "Not good," we have a very simple rule: the composition must be true. We must describe what is, what we see, what we hear, what we do.

For example, it is forbidden to write, "Grandmother is like a witch"; but we are allowed to write, "People call Grandmother the Witch."

It is forbidden to write, "The Little Town is beautiful," because the Little Town may be beautiful to us and ugly to someone else.

Similarly, if we write, "The orderly is nice," this isn't a truth, because the orderly may be capable of malicious acts that we know nothing about. So we would simply write, "The orderly has given us some blankets."

We would write, "We eat a lot of walnuts," and not "We love walnuts," because the word "love" is not a reliable word, it lacks precision and objectivity. "To love walnuts" and "to love Mother" don't mean the same thing. The first expression designates a pleasant taste in the mouth, the second a feeling.

Words that define feelings are very vague. It is better to avoid using them and stick to the description of objects, human beings, and oneself, that is to say, to the faithful description of facts.¹⁴

We read about the circumstances of the creation of *The Notebook*, which is the novel itself. The narrative instance, the writing activity of the "twins", is part of a series of conditioning activities called "exercises" or "learning", by which the twins condition their relationship with the world or, in traditional literary terms, create the world of the novel. In this sense, 'learning' is a compact linguistic treatise that describes the poetic structure of the novel. The essence of the writing exercise is telling the 'truth', which is apparently achieved by the absence of expressions of emotion, by the exclusive description of 'facts'; and this is how the text presents itself. In the name of telling the 'truth', a linguistic ideal is formulated proclaiming the autocracy of (referential) meaning to the detriment of broadly interpreted subjectivity. When emotions and judgements are absent from language understood as a mere 'faithful transmitter of facts', the communicative factors beyond referentiality—who is speaking, to whom, why, and how—are also called into question. The twins apparently seek to remove subjectivity from writing, thereby eroding the anthropological contours of language and the world it creates. The price of an 'exact' or exclusively

14 Kristof, *Trilogy*, 30–31. In the context of trauma literature, see Timár, "The Murder of the Mother Tongue," 226; Amir, *Bearing Witness to the Witness*, 37–48.

signifying language is a form of alienation, where language is detached from subjectivity, from the human; it is the ideal of an inhuman language that allows the representation of the novel's inhuman world.

This separation is also exemplified in the other 'language usage' section, a few chapters earlier, in the text under the subheading "Exercise to Toughen the Mind."¹⁵ Similar to bodily self-flagellation as a habituation to pain (see the chapter "Exercise to Toughen the Body"¹⁶), the twins condition themselves to scolding by scolding each other, until the conditioning reaches "the stage when we don't care anymore,"¹⁷ and the bodily cues disappear (no more blushing, ringing in the ears, shaking in the knees, etc.). The same applies to words, which they must forget "because our memory of them is too heavy a burden to bear,"¹⁸ i.e., they represent trauma for the twins. They try to neutralize the effect of the spoken word (not incidentally: the effect that can be perceived through bodily signs), because the 'traditional', or rather the 'natural' language is not available, or only accessible in traumatic deficit structures. The ideal of this endeavour is a denominating and denaturalized language, stripped from its human features.

"Learning" or practicing is therefore less the acquisition of something existing than the realization or the creation of this ideal of language: it is precisely through repetition that words lose their previous emotional impact during the "exercises to toughen the mind." Here, learning is a process of losing the natural, 'own' language, the result of which can only be the various fixations and modulations of this absence. This is how the later events of the *Trilogy* can be interpreted, from the symbolic patricide to the twins' later 'careers' (work, starting a family, etc.). Everything is rendered ambiguous, called into question by the initial absence, by this degradation of language, this loss of function: the ethical dimension of events, and the real aims; only through this filter, with fragmented and uncertain contours, are the emotions and identities of the protagonists and the minor characters conveyed to the reader. 'Accurate' 'factual' communication ultimately works against the 'real' because the full meaning and significance of words and concepts is immeasurable in this language; the events of the twins' lives just happen (they are reported), and the reader can only guess at their real, identity-forming significance. In this framework, telling the truth and lying might become central motifs of the text, since in the idealized, exclusively denominating language, lying, like telling the truth, is in fact incomprehensible; the text, however, does not represent the ideal, but the premises of the possibility or impossibility of the ideal: the plot seems to be built around important lies, but it is never certain where and what these lies are, among other things due to

15 Kristof, *Trilogy*, 24–25.

16 Kristof, *Trilogy*, 20–21.

17 Kristof, *Trilogy*, 24.

18 Kristof, *Trilogy*, 25.

the metafictional gestures of the text. The final scene of the novel, the ‘patricide’, i.e., the escape of one of the twins, is the dramatic and narrative climax not only because of its symbolic, psychoanalytic significance (the death of the father is the pledge of liberation that ends the ‘Doppelgänger’ existence of the twins), but also because the narrator leaves the question open whether the twins are lying to their father, or the man who claims to be their father is lying, or both are lying. It is this very indeterminacy that makes the scene uncanny. In other words, the story is told in a language that does not distinguish between truth and lies. The text is not trying to present a world without hope or evil, but, along with other ‘human’ content, it is trying to expel hope and evil from the world it has created.

The two tools of “our studies,” the dictionary and the Bible, are interesting from the point of view of the language that is formed. The dictionary, which contains the (exact) meanings of words, but has no real ‘meaning’, seems to parallel the twins’ aspirations to reduce language to ‘mere meaning’. On the one hand, the biblical texts reveal a very clear outline of the ‘Christian’ vision of man. On the other hand, it is particularly important that these texts are characterized by a fundamentally parabolic structure, meaning that they have an abstract and underlying content beyond themselves (the mere meaning of words), a ‘meaning’ worthy of interpretation, reflection and interaction, and as such they represent the exact opposite of ‘factual’ communication. It is not surprising, therefore, that the twins use the Bible in a particular way to develop their memory, which in this case can be understood as the opposite of mechanical skill development, understanding and interpretation.

In this context, the language of the novel is not merely stylistically simple, reductive, and certainly not ‘concise’ or symbolic in the sense of the ‘suggestive’ terseness of modern parable literature. It seems to evoke, instead, the ghostly atmosphere of language books designed for learning a foreign language—a narrative technique not without precedent, and thus a frequent feature in French ‘absurdist’ literature, especially in Ionesco’s stage plays. The example sentences in grammar books are perfect ‘correct’ sentences, and their peculiar simplicity stems from the fact that they have no real meaning with a communicative purpose; they only serve practice (perhaps to mitigate this rigidity, more modern grammar books strive to have ‘something to tell’, with recurring characters, an ongoing story, etc.). Not only does learning a foreign language give access to a new language (in a good way), but it also confronts the learner with the potential strangeness of the ‘other’ language. In fact, *The Illiterate’s* famous statement about the French language makes the same point more explicitly, showing that the acquisition of another language, a new language is never merely for personal enrichment, but it also confronts us with the fragile identity of our monolingualism:¹⁹

19 Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other*; Yildiz, *Beyond the Mother Tongue*, 205.

“I have spoken French for more than thirty years, I have written in French for twenty years, but I still don’t know it. I don’t speak it without mistakes, and I can only write it with the help of dictionaries, which I frequently consult.

It is for this reason that I also call the French language an enemy language. There is a further reason, the most serious of all: this language is killing my mother tongue.”²⁰

‘Multilingualism’ in Agota Kristof’s works is thus not only a circumstance or a characteristic, much less an imprint of the plural experience of multiculturalism, but a basic poetic layer of texts that explores the possibility of linguistic representations of strangeness. In other words, displacement and alienation are not so much the subject of the novel as its material. *The Notebook* is not about emigration, war or miserable living conditions, but is an experimental field for the idea of language stripped down to mere representation; the world constructed in the novel can be understood as the consequence, the deduction—and the tragedy—of this linguistic experiment.

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