

On Multilingualism in the Works of Dezső Kosztolányi and Danilo Kiš

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Received 4 February 2025 | Accepted 19 June 2025 | Published online 14 July 2025

Abstract. This paper presents the multicultural, multilingual milieu of Hungarian literature in Vojvodina, focusing on the works of Dezső Kosztolányi and Danilo Kiš. The multicultural milieu of Subotica is important for both authors, but they do not have the multilingual experience of the Subotica milieu, the *couleur locale*. In Kosztolányi's case, the assimilationist linguistic approach prevalent during the Monarchy, but in Kiš's case, the cultural politics of Yugoslavia determined the representations of multilingualism. The paper poses questions about the changes in literary language in the wake of historical events in the twentieth century, the way multilingual literature gains legitimacy, and the ideological constraints it was subjected to in the Yugoslav context, additionally addressing the question whether there is any monolingual literature at all.

Keywords: multilingualism, monolingualism, transculturality, cultural policy, Monarchy, Yugoslav ambivalence

The trance of the mother tongue

There is no monolingual literature. Every language is a set of cross-sections, interactions, foreign adaptations. Moreover, every language is multicentric, existing in many varieties; the construction of a literary language is only one of many.¹ This constant linguistic change is highlighted by bilingual or multilingual literature. Works in transnational languages make the multilingual elements of national literatures tied to the 'mother tongue' more visible. As Beáta Thomka says of the double bind of the prose of contemporary world literature: "Cultural homogeneity is counterbalanced by multiplicity, and national literary horizons and hierarchies are replaced by a networked structure without a centre and transcultural relations."² This also transforms the concept of the nation: if each language exists through the other, through

1 Lanstyák, *Nyelvükben otthon*, 158–72.

2 Thomka, *Regénytapszlat*, 19.

the incorporation and naturalisation of elements of the other, then the nation is not a homogeneous phenomenon. Transculturality is the recognition that the other is as much a hybrid as one's own. National sovereignty takes the form of transnational sovereignty.

According to Thomka, this does not imply self-surrender or unconditional assimilation:

“The novel fulfils its role in the ‘cosmopolitan imagination of world geography’ (Siskind) more convincingly than in previous periods. This is precisely because the creative invention combines the imported and the domestic repertoire without requiring total self-abandonment and unconditional cultural assimilation.”³

The romantic national construction of the nineteenth century, the homogeneous nation, the primacy of the mother tongue and the “popular” or “oral” culture is an illusion, and “self-surrender” is a reflection of this ideological construction. There is no homogeneous national language, but this does not automatically mean that there is no national language.

Wolfgang Welsch—in contrast to the Herderian conception of nation and history—believes that in the era of globalisation, transculturality is a self-evident phenomenon. It is not merely a characteristic of migrant, post-migrant or post-colonial cultures:

“[...] in their identities we combine multiple cultural origins, the various social milieus, the many complex geographical, historical and ethnic cultural patterns of origin.”⁴

There is no mother tongue without different cultural elements. Self-abandonment is in fact the abandonment of homogeneity and the illusion of a hermetic language free from external influences. World literature is not merely the sum of the literatures of different nations; national literatures carry the experience and influence of world literatures. This in turn reassesses the history of national literatures. Hence, transculturality is not merely a part of the contemporary experience of the novel; it is present in twentieth-century literature, in the tools of modernity and postmodernity, or even in earlier periods, naturally, not necessarily in a reflected form.

According to Welsch, the history of transculturality is not always pretty, and global migration is a consequence of the oppression and capitalist exploitation of

3 Thomka, *Regénytapasztalat*, 19.

4 “[...] wir verbinden in unserer Identität Elemente unterschiedlicher kultureller Herkunft, die verschiedenen sozialen Milieus sowie geografisch, historisch und ethnisch unterschiedlichen kulturellen Komplexen entstammen.” Welsch, *Wir sind schon*, 13.

other nations. Oppression often originates from homogenising constructions of identity and racism (white vs. black). At the same time, it would be superficial to dismiss concerns that globalisation could lead to the disappearance of local cultures. This is particularly relevant when we consider the critique of capitalism not by homogenising local values, but by interpreting them in interaction with another, with the neighbouring culture. Local values can be made salient, even if these interactions are not always positive; on the contrary, sometimes they are even traumatic.

Zoltán Németh, one of the leading Hungarian researchers of the literary aspects of transculturalism, argues that transculturalism can be studied in the context of Slovak and Hungarian literature. Out of Németh's five aspects, I would highlight the one that breaks with the nineteenth-century model of national literary history:

“We must break with the homogenous insularity of Hungarian literary history and criticism, which, for example, links the events of Hungarian literature only to the Hungarian language [...]”⁵

This is especially true for minority literatures, but may also be true in a broader sense: in the perspective of universal literature, national literatures are also defined by literary translation, thus their history is inseparable from the literature of the other nation. These are the fundamental questions of classical comparative literature.

The present study outlines the ideological aspects that determined the prose language of Dezső Kosztolányi and Danilo Kiš. The main puzzle can be formulated as follows: What role did Europeanism, the West and local culture, the East and the Balkans play in their aesthetics?

Kosztolányi and Kiš on language

Kosztolányi's “mother tongue”

Dezső Kosztolányi (1885–1936) never systematised his approach, but his contradictions reflect the linguistic struggles and ideologies of his time (he referred mainly to French, German, English and Hungarian sources). Already as a young man, he was concerned with the writer's attachment to his mother tongue, and as an experiment wrote part of his diary in German. Although many authors have been tempted to write diaries in different languages, in Kosztolányi's case, the German experiment failed, but this failure contributed to the development of his approach to language. Following Humboldt, Kosztolányi conceived language as a natural formation, an organic ideal. The romantic idea of the unity of nature–people–language was deeply rooted in his world view. The literary scholar Mihály Szegedy-Maszák argues that:

5 Németh, *Transzkulturalizmus*, 14.

“[t]he Hungarian poet obsessively returned to the emphasis that language embodies the memory of the community [...]”⁶

For Kosztolányi, language expresses not only the collective memory, but also character, i.e., language reflects the psychology of the nation.

Kosztolányi launched a powerful campaign against Germanisms. Obviously, it was not just Germanisms that bothered him. He was particularly critical of the dependence on German culture. His main problem was not only the presence of foreign linguistic elements, but that ‘invader’ words supplanted the Hungarian version, whether as a fashion fad or for other reasons:

“We are not afraid, Mr. Secretary of State, of any fashionable rhetoric and ‘new wind’. But if this new or old wind blows in our ears and tells us to sacrifice our language, our spirituality, our spiritual individuality, we will create a storm that will sweep away all unscientific and ignorant elements of dubious value.”⁷

In his defence of the mother tongue, Kosztolányi sometimes goes to extremes, as in his debate with the literary critic Aladár Schöpflin, when he considers all languages to be chauvinistic.⁸ Indeed, there is no language that has incorporated all foreign elements; however, the opposite is not true either: there is no language without certain foreign elements. Kosztolányi was certainly aware of this, and probably it was in reaction to Schöpflin’s exaggeration that he went so far, since Schöpflin had accused Kosztolányi’s “movement” of linguistic chauvinism.

Kosztolányi’s approach to language is based on relativity.⁹ According to Szegedy-Maszák, he respected the mother tongue of all nations:

“The Hungarian poet’s unconditional respect for linguistic diversity led him to oppose those advocating linguistic universalism.”¹⁰

As much as he respected Esperanto, as a writer he could not identify with it or benefit from it.

Kosztolányi’s debate with the French linguist Antoine Meillet is extremely instructive. The term “debate” is perhaps an overstatement, since Kosztolányi received no reply, although his text was published in French as well. Meillet’s book (*Les Langues dans l’Europe nouvelle*) came out after the First World War and

6 Szegedy-Maszák, *Kosztolányi Dezső*, 533.

7 Kosztolányi, “Egy kis merénylet,” 249.

8 Kosztolányi, “Bábel tornya,” 176.

9 Bengi, *Elbeszél halál*, 202.

10 Szegedy-Maszák, *Kosztolányi Dezső*, 527.

reflected the ideological preconceptions of the wartime rhetoric. It was precisely this that Kosztolányi objected to, especially since Meillet considered Hungarian and German (thus, their culture as well) inferior to other European languages. In the words of Szegedy-Maszák, “Meillet ranked languages, Kosztolányi proclaimed their total equality.”¹¹ Kosztolányi also rejected the notion of barbarism in relation to languages, highlighting the French scholar’s false ranking:

“Liberty, equality, fraternity, even in hell, even in linguistics. He argued that no language is, was, or can be ‘barbarian.’”¹²

Recognition of the equality of language is also recognition of the equality of cultures, since language and culture are inseparable.

It follows from all this that Kosztolányi was a firm believer in linguistic sovereignty. But this is not without its contradictions that stem from a lack of a system. According to László Bengi, in the 1930s the author was not concerned with regional, historical or social differences. Yet these are just as much a part of linguistic diversity. He did not raise the question of the internal stratification of the “mother tongue” either. According to Bengi, “... he says little or nothing more than the theoretical desire for linguistic purity about the linguistic situation of communities whose members do not speak the same mother tongue, for example, about Hungarians who are in a minority and who have lived together with other nationalities and languages for centuries.”¹³ For Kosztolányi, the “mother tongue” is based on the idea of the vernacular rooted in Romanticism, but he ignores the dialects in which the vernacular exists. In fact, the ‘vernacular’ or ‘mother tongue’ conceived in Romanticism is actually a literary language, i.e., a construction in relation to the vernacular, as is demonstrated by his numerous articles on the purity of language.

Csongor Lőrincz points out a further contradiction when he relates Kosztolányi’s approach to the Humboldtian idea that language is a living organism. In other words, when Kosztolányi sees language as a natural phenomenon, he emphasises its irregularity, its lack of a system. Lőrincz sees this idea echoed in Kosztolányi’s views on literary translation:

“The life of language or the life of language as transgression (which also means: beyond the traditional meaning of ‘life’) ‘is never quite complete, and so it is precisely for this reason that it must be ‘rewoven’, or rather the other way round. It is precisely the reweaving (in the mode of archaism) that manifests the state of ‘not-readiness’, not by animating something (un)closed again, but rather by re-animating the ‘not-ready’ as a mode

11 Szegedy-Maszák, *Kosztolányi Dezső*, 530.

12 Kosztolányi, “A magyar nyelv helye a földgolyón,” 90.

13 Bengi, *Elbeszélt halál*, 212.

of survival. Translation only preserves and reverts to its linguistic reality through this character of the emergence of language.”¹⁴

It is in this incompleteness that languages become relatable and equal. In this sense, the mother tongue is never complete, and in the Derridean sense it is foreign¹⁵, exposed to external influences, as it cannot be separated from the fragmentation of other mother tongues. This is why it is important to observe the national stereotypes Kosztolányi applies in viewing the other, and in general, how he relates to the language of the other.

In Kosztolányi’s fiction, or in his practice, the idea of linguistic and cultural equality does not appear explicitly, especially in the examples where we would look for languages that are smaller or closer to Hungarian. Serbs do appear in Kosztolányi’s works, but—like most Hungarian writers of the time—they do not speak in their own language, and their characters are rather stereotypical and parodic.¹⁶ The portrayal of others is often done with a few characteristics, at best by caricaturing clichés and stereotypes. According to Csongor Bodrogi, this stereotyping is aimed at creating an alienating context:

“The deeper meaning of stereotyping, therefore, is to transform sensual, visceral impressions that affect the various senses into language and to place the image of alienation on the level of language.”¹⁷

In other words, the revelation, parody and over-identifying gesture system of external elements actually unmasks the insoluble mystery of the other, his otherness. Beyond the stereotypes lurks the essential component of foreignness, but it remains inaccessible to us, which is why Kosztolányi plays with caricature-like representation.¹⁸

14 Lőrincz, “Fordítás, archaizmus, történelem,” 306.

15 Lőrincz, “Fordítás, archaizmus, történelem,” 308.

16 See, for example, the short story „The Serb” [A szerb], in which a Serbian man called Bogumil is optimistic and cheerful, even when he is hit by a bus and dies a horrible death. With similar irony and humour he portrays Mr Samson, the Hungarian prototype who is never satisfied with anything and mocks everyone (A bolond magyar, “The Foolish Hungarian”), or the snobbish lawyer from Sárszeg, Rd. The character and story of János Schlossiarik (“Bácska”).

17 Bodrogi, “Olvasható-e,” 35.

18 At the same time, a distinction must be made between the author’s fiction, his travelogues and his work as a journalist. In the latter, the political context also plays a role, and this is particularly true of the anti-Semitic aspects of the articles published in the Pardon column of the *Új Nemzedék* periodical. Of course, this does not call into question Kosztolányi’s qualities as a fiction writer, but rather highlights his political prejudices and contradictions, especially in light of the fact that he had previously published articles that represented a diametrically opposed attitude to Pardon: in fact, they were philo-Semitic. (See: Arany, “Pardon, Kosztolányi”; Bíró-Balogh, “A Pardon... rovat történetéhez”; Lengyel, “Egy s más az *Új Nemzedék* Pardon rovatáról.”)

The transnationality of Kosztolányi's literary works reflects the author's closeness to Western Europe: Latin, English, French, German, Italian—these are the languages he most frequently quotes. But even when he speaks of the languages of pre- and post-war minorities in Hungary, he does not speak of these minorities. This brings us to the paradox that Kosztolányi's literary Szabadka (Subotica in Serbia today), the fictional Sárszeg, does not reflect the linguistic milieu of the real Szabadka: there are no Croatian, Serbian, Bunjevac, Ruthenian, Roma or Hebrew language elements, and the multilingual Austro-Hungarian Monarchy is represented only by its official languages (German, Latin). This is illustrated in his book of stories "Kornél Esti" as well by another Eastern European example, the case when the main protagonist, Kornél Esti meets the Bulgarian ticket inspector on the train. Esti chats with the exotic stranger without understanding a word of his language. The Bulgarian guide's answers and sentences are seen through Esti's consciousness, so the link between the two cultures is a fiction, but a fiction that can still establish a connection with the stranger through non-linguistic communication. Bodily sign language seems better suited to crossing the boundary between the stranger and the self.

Lőrincz interprets the story of the Bulgarian guide in the light of linguistic contradiction:

"The ambiguity of the narrative level thus transfers the unknowability of linguistic acts or the incommunicability of their intention into one's own language in the sense of its 'own strangeness', i.e., beyond the insuperability of one's own language, it is precisely the strangeness, the intraspecificity of this language that is the subject."¹⁹

Lőrincz imbues Esti's (and the guide's) silence with traits of the animal, as if the two alien characters found each other in the silence of animal existence. This is because in the story, it is not Esti but the Bulgarian guide who is the representative of linguistic, that is, human communication, while it is language that is the obstacle to reciprocity:

"The 'presupposition' of the linguistic gift, a kind of silence or inexpressibility (even in language, not irrespective of it), is therefore not necessarily an exclusively human or anthropomorphic quality, at least not a quality on which the distinction between 'human' and 'animal' can be safely based."²⁰

Body sign language seems better suited to crossing the boundary between the other and the self, provided it is not the silencing of something.²¹

19 Lőrincz, "Nyelvi próbatételek," 88.

20 Lőrincz, "Nyelvi próbatételek," 90.

21 Lőrincz, "Nyelvi próbatételek," 90.

Similar non-verbal communication takes place in the Esti episode with the Turkish woman (Chapter VII), where we encounter the linguistic incorporation of the strange. Árpád Kollár's interpretation of that situation:

“Through the foreign words, the stranger is completely incorporated, becoming his own in parallel with the transformation of the words. These words, according to the Esti's confession, are taken as their own by the speakers of both languages.”²²

This adventure sees the possibility of bridging the dialogue and distance between the West and the East not through the slogans of the Enlightenment, but through eroticism. Of course, this can only work if the body is understood as a metaphor without ideology. But is the body, the erotic, itself not based on an ideological idea? According to Freud and Foucault, sexuality is subject to the mechanisms of power at work: the kiss between Esti and the Turkish girl is not without politics.²³

To be someone or to be someone else—the mask is Esti's escape from forced self-determination. A good example is the encounter with the Bulgarian conductor, or when Esti chats with the Italian waiter on the train in another story:

“He knew that the Budapest express had arrived, and so he addressed his guest in Hungarian, with an almost spicy accent: “Breakfast, sir?” Esti didn't reply, waited a moment, then said, “*Si, una tazza di caffè.*” The waiter happily reverted to his native language: “*Benis-simo, signore,*” and was about to go. In his delight at having passed that test with flying colors, Esti called after him: “*Camariere, portatemi anche pane, acqua fresca e giornali. Giornali italiani,*” he added nonchalantly and unnecessarily. “*Sissignore, subito,*” replied the waiter, and hurried away with his indescribably pleasant s-es.

Esti was happy. Happy that he had been taken for something other than what he was, perhaps even for an Italian, but in any case a foreigner, a person, and that he was able to continue to play his role, escaping from the prison in which he had been confined since birth. He sipped his espresso, which the waiter poured into his glass from a large aluminum jug, devoured six croissants and four rolls, then, as if he'd been doing it all his life, buried himself in the *Corriere della Sera*.²⁴

In other words, Esti acts not only for the other, the foreigner, but also for his own pleasure; the play, the carnival, is the essence of language, of languages. And

22 Kollár, “A család otthonossága,” 164–65.

23 Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 3–13.

24 Kosztolányi, *Kornél Esti*, 54.

Italian culture, even if sometimes seen through a carnival of stereotypes, is perhaps the culture closest to Esti, and this is illustrated by the music of Italian words heard on the Italian trip:

“Everyone was chattering in that language, that language which is too beautiful for everyday use, that language of which he wasn’t ignorant, which he had taken to his heart in the cramming torments of schoolboy nerves.”²⁵

According to Csongor Bodrogi, Kosztolányi’s approach to language should be interpreted along the lines of the concepts of foreignness and homeliness.

“In Kosztolányi’s work, the concepts of foreignness and homeliness are not only organised along the axis of a foreign nation, of one’s own homeland, but are at least two kinds of foreignness that arise not only from separation from the world of the self, from an individualised way of being, but from the functioning of community life. This insight is important because it can make us aware that when we speak of identity and homeland in Kosztolányi’s work, we can distinguish between a national and linguistic basis, on the one hand, and a more fundamental mode of it, which cannot be resolved by language, on the other.”²⁶

Kosztolányi’s approach to language is similar to the assimilationist language policy of the Monarchy. In his open letter to Meillet, Kosztolányi rightly condemns the disparaging remarks about the Hungarian language and advocates linguistic equality, but he himself is not interested in smaller languages. Naturally, this is not the same chauvinistic position as Meillet’s, but it reflects the spirit of the times, especially the Habsburg policy towards the nations of the Monarchy.

Naturally, it would be unfair to claim that Kosztolányi is the only Hungarian writer with such a view of language. On the one hand, it is rare to find a nuanced view of Hungarianness in the literature of neighbouring nations, and on the other hand, other Hungarian and Austrian writers were no more sensitive. Minority policies were still in their infancy, if they existed at all, and it is no coincidence that there were many conflicts in educational policy over the use of language. Kosztolányi’s view of language, his imagology, is contradictory and says more about the cultural policy of the Monarchy and the desire for dominance in Hungarian politics than it does about the other nation. But, as I suggested earlier, this was also the spirit of the age. At the same time, Kosztolányi relativises his own stereotyping through parody, thus preserving the foreign for what it is: insolubly mysterious.

25 Kosztolányi, *Kornél Esti*, 53.

26 Bodrogi, “Olvasható-e,” 31.

Language layers of Kiš

Danilo Kiš (1935–1989) was not concerned with the psychological and existential context of language, at least not on a theoretical level. But his relationship to language can be read in his relationship to culture, or more precisely, to cultures.

A recurring concept in Kiš's essays and interviews is pluralism, polyphony, doubt about metanarratives, rejection of any ideological narrowing (gender, language, nationality, etc.) and Eurocentrism. As a writer of Hungarian–Montenegrin–Jewish origin, he also refused to be pigeonholed as a “Jewish writer”. In the words of Viktória Radics:

“It would be unfortunate psychologisation to see Kiš as an ‘identity saviour’ who spent his life dissecting these questions; it would be better to say that he shook off the templates that closed the question of identity and tried to reformulate it [...]”²⁷

Instead of the term ‘reformulation’, it might be more accurate to use the Nietzschean term ‘revaluation’. In Kiš's work there is an ideological critique of the failed conceptions of the identity of the twentieth century.

It is not difficult to see that Kosztolányi's romantic concept of the mother tongue and nation was far from Kiš's. His literary work, however, was very close to it, as he stated in several interviews and lectures.

Kiš was attracted by Kosztolányi's Monarchy, by his imaginary town of Sárszeg,²⁸ but in comparison, he used the real name of the city Szabadka/Subotica in his works, in Hungarian and Serbian (not in Latin and German, while the city officially had names in four languages in the Monarchy). While in Kosztolányi's Sárszeg protagonists speak German and Latin beside Hungarian, in Kiš's Szabadka/Subotica we find Hungarian words creeping into the “Serbo-Croatian” text. In the Yugoslav context, Hungarian is the minority language, whereas in Kosztolányi's time, at least during the Monarchy, it was Serbian.

Kiš was born into a multilingual family. His father was a Hungarian Jew from Zala, his mother Montenegrin. His Serbo-Croatian language skills linked him to the majority culture, his Hungarian roots linked him to the minority culture and his Jewish origins also linked him to a minority culture and a culture within a minority. According to Beáta Thomka:

“Smaller communities living in multilingual regions may be linked to a cultural or religious centre that is geographically distant from them, or circumstances may lead their members to choose one language. The

27 Radics, *Danilo Kiš*, 231.

28 Szarvas, “KD – DK.”

importance of language choice increases in the context of minority and immigrant cultures, as well as in the case of multiple inherited linguistic identities. The principle of the intellectual, born in linguistic and cultural crossroads, is the depository of several traditions. Its attitudes and the different determinants of its intellectual structure make it susceptible to different contexts. [...] These works offer their respective readers an open opportunity for the recognition of different contexts. Their particular value lies in the fact that they convey an inherently *dialogical concept of literacy*, as opposed to the monologism of monolingual, monocultural works.”²⁹

Which language did Kiš choose? The first is Serbian, or Serbo-Croatian, as it was officially called in Yugoslavia. However, the author’s culture was linked not only to South Slavic literature, but also to Hungarian and, certainly, to world literature in general. In Kiš’s work, the languages of Western European nations (English, French, and German), as well as Serbo-Croatian, Russian from the East, Hungarian, reflecting the multilingualism of Vojvodina, and Yiddish are all present. While Kosztolányi’s transnational Hungarian includes the languages of the culturally dominant Western European cultures alongside Hungarian, Kiš created a transnational “Serbo-Croatian” prose that is sensitive to the languages of minorities.

In 1978, Kiš was awarded the Gold Medal of the Order of Labour in the “Hungarian People’s Republic” for his translation of Hungarian poetry. In his acceptance speech, he recalled Goethe’s world literature, which he defined in opposition to nationalism and Eurocentrism:

“[...] I do not undertake here to classify us at all costs among the great literatures, among those more fortunate by history and fate or by chance, but by selection, but precisely with Goethean corrective, with the awareness that we are also, and with full right, part of European culture, and therefore also of Weltliteratur. [...] In the meantime, we writers and literary translators of small nations should adopt the Bachelardian formula: ‘My ideal library is first and foremost an open library.’ Better said: unprejudiced with nations, states and languages.”³⁰

29 Thomka, “Narratív örökség,” 73–74.

30 “[...] ja se ovdje ne zalažem da se uvrstimo među velike, među istorijom i sudbinom, i slučajem, srećnije literature *po svaku cenu*, nego upravo odbirom, nego upravo geteovskim *korrigieren*, i sa samosvešću da smo i mi, i to s punim pravom, deo evropske kulture, dakle i *Weltliterature*. [...] A sve dotle, mi pisci i prevodioci malih jezika trebalo bi da svojatamo bašlarovsku formulu: »Moja idealna biblioteka u prvom redu je *otvorena* biblioteka.« Što će reći: bez predrasuda u odnosu na nacije, države i jezike.” Kiš, “Protiv duha evrocentrizma,” 515.

According to Mihajlo Pantić, the library is a key Borgesian metaphor for Kiš, which is why he calls him an Alexandrian author: “[...] there are no more “source” writers, there is no literature beyond literature.”³¹ And from there we can proceed: there is no original language, there is no language without languages, the basic condition of all languages is transnationality. Kosztolányi’s opinion in his discussion of Meillet, when he experienced first-hand the humiliating prejudices against Hungarians, can be understood in a similar way.

In Kiš’s essays, and especially in his trilogy of family novels, which he called a “family circus” (along with Western European novels), we find Hungarian elements, as in “Early Sorrows” (*Rani jadi*, 1970), “Garden, Ashes” (*Bašta, pepeo*, 1965) and “Hourglass” (*Peščanik*, 1972). According to Thomka, this is the context of Central European spirituality:

“The Central European model also appeals to him because it is constituted on an intermediate, wedged, East–West plane and is therefore open to value currents from both hemispheres.”³²

Thomka also links the Jewish tradition to this, and in a Central European context. Following Jörg Schulte’s rabbinic interpretation, “Eine Poetik der Offenbarung”, he looks at three European Jewish writers from the point of view of the poetics of storytelling: Babel, Schulz, and Kiš are placed in a mystical and shared geopoetic and geopolitical context, without any one intellectual tradition overriding the others. The universal, the whole, is not homogeneous, but unified in its fragmentation, shared, and reciprocal. In many ways, this is reminiscent of the Kabbalistic view of language. According to the Kabbalah, language is a translation, a fragment, and Kiš consequently considers form to be more important than language.³³ For Kiš, fragmentation, the recognition of the signs of absence, the doubt of the unbroken ego, become the basis of the Kabbalistic concept of language. His idea of form, akin to Russian formalism, sees form as an ideal fragment that can be grasped by literature: a collection, an encyclopaedia of different perspectives, languages, cultures.

Kosztolányi says of multilingualism:

“There are bilingual and trilingual regions where children are born babbling equally well in two or three languages, and it is quite difficult for them to decide which is their mother tongue. But the poets who grow up here, miraculously, always choose one language, write consistently in it, and never change languages.”³⁴

31 Pantić, *Kiš*, 97.

32 Thomka, “Narratív örökség,” 74.

33 Orcsik, “Az ismeretlen tükre,” 24–35.

34 Kosztolányi, “Az idegen nyelvről,” 257.

In contrast, Kiš's philosophical problem of the one and the many, of the fragment, questions the nature of language. His experience of a multilingual family and environment opens up a perspective through which the relativity and contingency of language, or more precisely of mother tongues, the absence of the original language, the manipulation of exclusive identity politics based on its concealment, become perceptible. To recognise this, knowledge of minority culture is a prerequisite, and in Kosztolányi's time this was still in its infancy.

It is noteworthy that the carnivalesque (irony, parody) and Kabbalistic (fragmentary) approach to language was a dominant feature of Kiš's work since his second novel, "The Attic" (*Manzarda*, 1962).³⁵ In the three novels of his "family circus", the medium of language becomes a metaphor for the Central European way of being. And in his last book of fiction, "The Encyclopedia of the Dead" (*Enciklopedija mrtvih*, 1983), published during his lifetime, the horizon expands in time and space: in the dimension of transnationality, dead languages and cultures are added to the languages of Central Europe.

From a Hungarian point of view, Kiš's most memorable short story is "To Die for One's Country Is Glorious" (from "The Encyclopaedia of the Dead"), which Péter Esterházy twice appropriated/borrowed.³⁶ At the same time, the short story itself contains no Hungarian words. The story contains French sentences as the conversational language of nineteenth-century Hungarian gentlemen. It is perhaps the only work by Kiš that has a Hungarian context but no Hungarian language.

In the "Encyclopaedia of the Dead", however, there is another story, "The Mirror of the Unknown". The story, which evokes the era and geopolitical space of the Monarchy, uses German and Yiddish words in addition to Hungarian ones, and at several points mentions Central Europe as the terrain of the protagonists' wanderings and identity changes. The connection with Kosztolányi is strengthened by the inclusion of the Brenner family in the piece.³⁷ And through the character Fuchs, it is also linked to Kiš's family circus. The fragmented history of the Sam family touches on Hungarian culture and language in many ways, both positive and negative. The former is linked to Hungarian culture, the Hungarian language, the world and influence of the million Hungarian inhabitants of Szabadka/Subotica, the deportation and disappearance (murder) of one of the reminiscent protagonists/narrators in World War II, Andreas Sam's father.

35 Pijanović, *Proza Danila Kiša*, 42.

36 Orcsik, "Apakrifek," 36–55.

37 Kosztolányi's mother was Eulália Brenner, whose elder brother was József Brenner senior, father of Géza Csáth and Dezső Jász.

In Kiš's *family circus*, the Monarchy manifests itself as a Babylonian empire, with German, Latin, English, French, Spanish, Italian and Yiddish words and fragments wedged into the “Serbo-Croatian” text alongside Hungarian. The Serbian narration also reflects the influence of Vojvodina's multilingual character: Kiš's Serbian is different from the Serbian of the Belgrade region or southern Serbia, with a much greater number of Hungarian and German elements alongside Turkish ones. The Hungarian elements do not appear in the texts as alien elements, but as an integral part of the multicultural environment.

For this reason, in Kiš's universe of the Monarchy, language is rarely the subject of parody or national stereotypes, but rather of the Central European community and the aspiration to universality in Babel.³⁸ The other language here is the memory fragment typical of stream-of-consciousness prose in a process of reconstruction and deconstruction characterised by fragmentation, i.e., incompleteness and openness.

In contrast to Kosztolányi, in Kiš we find mostly words, fragments of the linguistic catalogue of a bygone era, for example when the narrator searches the family archives for his missing father:

“The coachman did not know that my father was searching for the star of his destiny, which was marked precisely in the Hungarian cabalistic-astrological study *A csillagfejtés könyve*.”³⁹

In addition to references to objects and old names, Kiš also uses foreign geographical and personal names, transcribed phonetically according to Serbian spelling. Whole sentences in his texts are mostly in German, but they are not part of the dialogue, as they are a memory. This confirms the idea that Kiš extends Proustian-Protean poetics into different languages as long as it serves the reconstructive narrative work, which is doomed to fragmentation.

Coda

In the sense of transnationality, there is no second language, the minority is not a subordinate medium. Rather, the “subsidiary” is legitimised in the sense of a juxtaposition. Both Kosztolányi and Kiš use different languages where the monolingual reader becomes aware of the foreignness of the other, and where they establish the possibility of a multilingual—and systemic—approach to literature. An essential difference is that in Kiš's work the language of the other, especially the language of the

38 For more on Kiš's Kabbalistic interpretation of the Babel story, see Orcsik, *Az ismeretlen tükre*, 27–34.

39 Kiš, *Garden, Ashes*, 49.

minority, is not, or only rarely, an instrument of parody or stereotype (perhaps in the story “To Die for One’s Country is Glorious”, the statements of the Hungarian Count Esterházy, which refer to death-defying courage, can be understood in this way, since they depend on the source, i.e., they are in quotation marks⁴⁰). In Kosztolányi’s work, we encounter the phenomenon of the linguistic carnival, stereotyping and its parody, especially the mockery of snobbery, is much more common.

In Kiš’s works the minority languages are equal with his own, the “mother tongue” of the majority culture. Kosztolányi, in his polemic, fights for the rights of the Hungarian language to be recognised as European. But without the emancipation of minority cultures, this is still the result of the compulsion to conform to the West as an authority, on which the shadow of Eurocentrism is cast. At the same time, Kosztolányi created his work in the context of the Monarchy and its cataclysmic experience.

Even after the Shoah, Kiš was socialised according to Yugoslavia’s emancipatory but state-restricted minority policy. Kosztolányi repeatedly addressed the loss of territory caused by the Trianon ‘peace dictate’, and this was one of the sources of his nationalism and anti-Semitism. This was a taboo subject in Kiš’s Yugoslavia, and the author did not even mention it in his works, even when he depicted the monarchical Subotica. For him, the ideological discourse of the Shoah was the main issue, as the destruction and annihilation of his father and relatives during the Second World War had a much greater impact on his world.

The two authors’ different historical contexts and family linguistic backgrounds had a decisive influence on their approach to language and culture, and thus on the poetics of their work. Kiš’s multilingualism cannot be identified with the hybrid languages of post-colonial, Western emigration literature, since Yugoslavia was neither a colonised country nor one that had experienced mass migration. Rather, the “Trianon Peace Dictate” colonised the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (SHS) and the Kingdom of Yugoslavia and its successor, Tito’s Yugoslavia, in which Hungarian culture existed as a minority in a changing political environment and with changing rights. Kiš reflects these transitions by what he does not say.

The atrocities committed by the SHS, the Kingdom of Yugoslavia and Tito’s Federal Republic of Yugoslavia against the Croatian, Hungarian, Slovenian, Swabian cultures (and Serbs who were political opponents of Yugoslavia), who were considered oppressors and collaborators, are still a delicate legacy of trauma to be dealt with.⁴¹

40 It is one of the texts from the “Encyclopedia of the Dead”, a collection of narratives that Péter Esterházy “borrowed” in his “Introduction to Fiction” (*Bevezetés a szépirodalomba*, 1986). For more on this, see Ladányi, “Amikor a hóhért akasztják,” 24–33; Orcsik, “Apakrifek,” 36–54.

41 Let us add: the Austro-Hungarian Empire was not always permissive towards the South Slavic culture, and especially towards the Serbian culture, which showed strong resistance. But that is a subject for another essay.

Multilingual and transnational literature is an artist's way of displacing the standard language and norms that serve the institutions of power. Multilingual literature sets in motion the relationship between the periphery and the centre, operating a multisystemic literary space. Kosztolányi's insistence on a pure mother tongue cannot be understood without the repressive mechanisms of the contemporary German and Austrian powers. It is no coincidence that Kosztolányi was most concerned about the presence of the German language in Hungarian. Kiš wrote his works in Serbian, the language of the majority Yugoslav nation, with the result that we find many obsolete Hungarian and German words in Serbian. This is both a monarchical and family legacy and a conscious literary choice in the spirit of a pluralistic approach to culture. The latter possibility also appears in Kosztolányi's work, but his view of language and culture had not yet completely abandoned the Hungarian political prejudices of the nineteenth century. It should be borne in mind, however, that we are talking about a historical period when Hungary was not yet a fully independent country. I do not mean to imply that Kiš was a better writer than Kosztolányi, because Kiš could not write about all the traumas of the region due to Yugoslav censorship. Both writers share a sensitivity to language and aesthetic sophistication, in that they both shaped their poetic and linguistic universes in the power environment of their times.

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