

**THE ABSENCE OF HUNGARY:
NOTES ON A DIDACTIC AUTOBIOGRAPHY
BY DAVID MARTIN**

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The autobiographical act as we traditionally know it opens with a narrator looking back upon the time and place of her or his birth. The sequential structure of this typically chronological narrative form, which offers an iconic representation of lived experience in the linearity of a syntactic construct,¹ necessarily fixes the emergence of the speaking subject at the origin (both temporal and spatial) of the narrative chain, in a place and date of birth.

Fox on My Door, an autobiography for younger readers written by the Hungarian-born Australian author David Martin, at once confirms the linear metaphor structuring many autobiographical texts, with its subtitle *A Journey through my Life*, and simultaneously flagrantly infringes this very same convention.² David Martin was born in 1915 in Budapest into an assimilated Jewish family (whose Hungarian lineage he traces back at least four generations in the later autobiography, *My Strange Friend*)³ as Ludwig Detsinyi; he later changed his name by deed poll. His parents came to Berlin at the end of the First World War; he himself subsequently left Germany in the early 1930s. After some time in Holland, Hungary and Palestine, he served in the Spanish Civil War in the International Brigade in 1937–38. In 1938 he settled in London where he worked as a newspaper and radio journalist, and married an English writer and teacher, Richenda Powell, in 1941. After a period as a journalist in India in 1948–49, he visited Australia and decided to stay. Already before coming to Australia he had published several collections of verse and two novels (*Tiger Bay*, 1946; *The Stones of Bombay*, 1949). More recently he has published *The Young Wife* (1962), *The Hero of Two* (1965), *The King Between* (1966) and the significantly titled novel *Where a Man Belongs* (1969). He has also established a reputation as a children's writer, beginning with *Hughie* (1971). Martin's writing is notable for its preoccupation with the hard realities of social existence; he has been active in left politics for his entire adult life.

Fox on My Door confounds expectations of an autobiographical narrative by opening far away from David Martin's native Budapest and by refusing the ha-

bitual retrospective gaze towards the moment of his own birth. Rather, this autobiographical work firmly states its implantation in the author's adopted land, and his concentration upon the future instead of the past. The opening chapter is situated in the writer's study in a house on the edges of rural Beechworth, a small town on the erstwhile goldfields of Victoria, Australia; in the midst of his labours the writer is interrupted by his two boisterous grandchildren knocking on his door. These implicitly negative gestures embody a movement away from the native land and towards the future which is programmatic for David Martin's conception of his activity as a writer. The places of the past are returned to in this autobiography only to generate an ongoing movement of exile; and crucial moments of the coming to being of selfhood are only evoked to be promptly deflated in favour of an orientation towards others. These are the two key elements – the one geographical, and intimately linked to a Hungary which is most notable for its absence in the narrative; the other subjective, and typified by a younger generation which interrupts the writer in his work of writing – of what I believe to be David Martin's attempt to suggest a model of didactic autobiographical literature, a literary precursor of an as yet unwritten "philosophy of emigration."⁴

But though the performative aspect of the inaugural gesture of denial is positive in simply placing another generation and another land in the inaugural scenes of the autobiography, the fundamental negativity of such a gesture generates considerable problems at the level of the epistemological foundations of this didactic undertaking. Permanent mobility is the dominant theme in this account of a writer's existence, not merely in as the structural principle behind the events related, but also in the effect aimed at by the writer: "Sophie, Toby, listen to your grandfather," intones the narrator in a remarkably explicit embodiment of the pedagogic role: "Can you hear the train? Why sit still in one spot if you do not have to?" (27). The prominence persistently accorded to grandchildren from the very outset in the autobiography's dramatisation of its own production confirms "filiation," eroded as a mode of cultural inheritance according to Edward Said,⁵ as the larger ethical framework in which the book is written as well as its very principle of generation. Mobility is something that is passed on from generation to generation, as Martin reveals in his account of childhood rehearsals of the everyday exile performed by his own parents: "before my nose reached to the top of the dining room table I put my father's bowler hat on, took his stick and an empty suitcase and started out for the nearest station" (21). The latent conflict between, on the one hand, a principle of intergenerational imitation, and on the other, a principle of departure and mobility, is manifest in the narrative's incipit: the absence of Hungary figures as a rupture of connections and is doubled by the narrator's turning away from his own birth; but this displacement of the narrator's own birth is immediately compensated by an account of the birth

of the grandson, who perpetuates the family lineage and subsequently generates and founds narrativity in his role as the youthful recipient of story-telling in the first scene. The dilemma evident here is that of founding a highly assertive narrative pedagogy upon an absence. The question raised is that of the place from which one speaks. Discursive authority is often embodied in and derived from a specific place, be it a speaker's dais or pulpit, the situation of a reputed publishing house (London, Oxford, Paris...) or the proximity of a reporter to the events conveyed (the scene of the crime, for instance). In the postmodern age, however, such authority is undermined by the multiplicity of possible places from which one can speak, and the concomitant revelation of the arbitrary and relative character of sites of discursive authority. Postmodern analyses of the connections between discourse and power tend to discredit discourses of authority. In such a context how can one speak didactically without falling over into an authoritarian discourse? How can a libertarian pedagogy speak against totalitarian politics and the modes of thought, which foster the emergence of such politics and perpetuate their existence, without itself mirroring that absolutism in its own discourse? (Or alternatively, how can one espouse tolerance without depriving one's own words of all significant force?) David Martin indicates his awareness of this dilemma by making mention in his text, in stark contrast to authoritarian injunctions to his grandchildren, of his wife's criticisms of the "pompous sermons," which bedevil early drafts of his work before the conjugal editor has taken her merciless red pen to them (112). Likewise, the author's grandchildren vigorously resist their grandfather's assumption of elderly wisdom: his granddaughter Sophie "gives me a sideways, slightly haughty look. 'I know that already,' the look says. I watch her stalking round my study, trying to hide how fussed I feel ... She honours me with another one of those looks. It clearly says, 'Don't patronise me, old man'" (45). Such episodes dramatise the tensions at the heart of a libertarian pedagogics, one which is implicitly self questioning at the very moment of making claims for didactic authority.

Addressing this dilemma is all the more pertinent given the immense didactic power possessed by autobiographical modes of writing in Martin's country of adoption. Anna Johnston has analysed recent Australian autobiographies, which tend to offer powerful narratives of national identity, thus eliding the reality of many Australian experiences of expatriation or exile and the fundamentally heterogeneous character of "Australia" as a nation;⁶ in marked contrast, another (immigrant) Australian, Paul Carter, has called for a new "framework of thinking that makes the migrant central [...] to historical processes.

We need to disarm the genealogical rhetoric of blood, property and frontiers and to substitute for it [...] one that does not suppress the contingency of its community but makes its migratory haphazardness the material out of which it weaves its identity.⁷

In displacing Hungary as the originary place of autobiographical narration, David Martin announces such a project of propagation of mobility as a mode of tolerance, but paradoxically, undermines the very basis for the selfsame didactic ethics of literary production.

As suggested at the beginning of this essay, David Martin's autobiography consistently works to displace the habitual narcissism of masculine autobiographies. The chapter entitled "Photo of a young soldier" (Ch. 8), which recounts David Martin's experiences as a volunteer in the Spanish Civil War, continues this programme of iconoclasm directed at the self by 'addressing a quintessential image of heroic masculinity':

In my study there is a photograph of a soldier with thick, rimless glasses. It stands on a shelf to the left of the window which is blocked by the air-conditioner on which my stockwhip rests. His obvious short-sightedness; gives the man an unmilitary air, so much so that even Toby sometimes says he does not look at all like a fighting man. But it is me (67).

The narrator constantly stresses his myopia as a strategy of self deprecation: the allusion to the stockwhip refers to a chapter, significantly entitled "Short-sighted with a stockwhip" (Ch. 7) in which the hero, attempting to crack a drover's stockwhip, only succeeds in bloodying his own face and smashing his spectacles; in a parody of the circularity of narcissistic self reflection, the tool of hypermasculine performance turns back upon its myopic performer, depriving him of the very faculty of self adoration. And indeed, it is these spectacles which prevented David Martin from taking up the heroic military role that such a photo might be thought to embody: incapable of shooting straight, he is barred from becoming "a fighting man" in Spain and is delegated to the medical corps.

Rather than the repetition and "fixing" of subjectivity Lacan detected in narcissistic self mirroring, David Martin's autobiography constantly stresses the arbitrary, mobile character of individual identity. The narrator is aware that writing, with its almost simultaneous concomitant of re-reading the image of the self laid down on paper, tends to constitute the writer's ego in a self confirming mode of existence, as indicated by the grandson's comment on the author's cramped cohabitation with a study full of his own books: "Your David Martin Memorial Museum?" the boy enquires acerbically (4).

Contrary to this process David Martin's autobiography labours to keep such smug self-importance in check. The Spanish Civil War chapter records the narrator's survival, but gives that intact existence a paradoxical final twist: "And I? I am still here. Yet I am one of the few people alive who have read their own death notice" (72). But the episode inaugurated by this statement, far from confirming the durability of the self, as it would initially appear ("And I? I am still here"), tends to show to what extent the self is an arbitrary being. The Interna-

tional Brigade medic David Martin lays his overcoat over a shivering soldier suffering from a stomach wound. When the anonymous soldier subsequently dies, the identity conferred upon him is the narrator's: "For some reason he had no identity disc or document and my own was found in the pocket of the coat which arrived with him on the stretcher" (73). David Martin is consequently declared dead, and his demise announced in the Haifa newspaper read by his girlfriend on a Kibbutz in Palestine. A person's identity, it would appear, is the product of discourse, external and arbitrary – and here, easily transferable. Any essential identity a subject might possess is subordinated to a linguistically (and thus socially) produced "subject position" into which the subject is slotted: "Apparently they had buried him [the wounded soldier] under my name," explains Martin in a wonderfully lapidary sentence (73). Subjective identity is not essential, but is principally derived from an instance outside the self, be it name-bearing paternity or language itself. Autobiographical writing functions here, as Blanchot has suggested, as a way of dissolving the self. The act of writing highlights language, through which the subject comes to being, so as to reveal, by performative means, the constructedness of individual subjectivity, and to foreground its insubstantial nature.⁸

Typically, the book opens with a paradox: namely, that children interrupt writing but that they reactivate it and provide its rationale, a paradox prominently dramatised in the inaugural gesture of *mise-en-abyme* already mentioned above. The opening chapter tells of the narrator's difficulty in concentrating upon his work with his two boisterous grandchildren playing outside his study, and eventually bursting into the writer's intimate space. "All right for Sophie, I suppose", he complains, "but Toby really should know better. Did he not tell me himself that he too wants [sic] to be a writer? Writers should be left alone" (3). The narrator appeals to the mirror-image of himself – the grandson as disciple following in the grandfather's artistic footsteps – as a defence against that self-same youthful agent of disturbance. In this way the grandson's disruptive assertion of himself as an independent presence is assimilated to the writer's aspirations to peaceful isolation. Fortunately for this narrative initiated by the episode of disturbance, however, which otherwise would have been cut short – transgression being the trigger of the narrative process, as Lotman has pointed out⁹ – the small boy does penetrate his grandfather's study, and succeeds in persuading him to tell a story, that of his own (Toby's) birth (5–7). The dramatised frame-narrative and the secondary narrative contained within it both portray the irruption of a younger generation into the life of their elders, thus providing the stuff of narration. Without this doubly dramatised transgression of the space of writing, there would be nothing to write about. Storytelling is based upon the interruption of isolation, of the interruption of oneself with a reflection of oneself, which merely confirms and perpetuates that existence in isolation. It is the mo-

bility of the two children which triggers the creative process of story-telling – and which gives that story-telling its ethical rationale. One is reminded of Christa Wolf's description of her children as "ferment and fundament" of her life as a writer.¹⁰ Writing only finds its true vocation, so to speak, when interrupted, when alienated from itself. Writing which is devoted to itself, which is not confronted with an other outside it, with the world which challenges it, and to which it can never do justice or fully account for, has lost its reason for being. It is the mobility of the younger generation which mobilises and orients writing in this inaugural and thus programmatic chapter of Martin's autobiography. It is the paradox of the interruption writing which becomes the reactivation of writing, driving writing out of the stasis and closure of the writer's customary "place."

Such paradoxes not only generate Martin's writing, but are the principle surface feature of the episodic accounts, which make up his autobiography. The paradoxical character of these stories often springs from their stark simplicity: there is no moral to be drawn from the tale, and the reader is left baffled by anecdotes from everyday life, which are merely odd. They are, to steal a phrase from Thomas Bernhard, "accessible to the point of inaccessibility."¹¹ The action is simple, as befits a children's story, but strangely, by virtue of that very simplicity, defies easy translation into some sort of edifying message. Puzzling clarity, as so often, is the overall impression left by a story about David Martin's search, as a tourist in Salonika, for a penknife with which to peel apples. Having only minimal Greek, he communicates his request in the first shop at which he enquires by means of sign language. The shopkeeper, although himself having no such items in his stock, directs him to another shop nearby where the narrator repeats his performance. Once again his mime is fruitless. It is only when he has exhausted all gestural resources, that he realises that the first shopkeeper is standing at the window, watching the mute performance. Only then does the first shopkeeper reveal his good command of American English: "You should be on the stage. You would make your fortune. Forgive me, I couldn't help it. That apple, that knife! It's the funniest thing I saw since I came back from the States" (36) – upon which the first shopkeeper conveys David Martin's wish to the second. He duly receives the sought-for penknife – and a set of worry beads (*komboloi*) in memory of the occasion.

Here the narrator finds himself the victim of a deception of the variety suffered in an earlier episode by Ruth, the erstwhile girlfriend of the narrator's twin brother Rudi. The latter had employed Ludi (David Martin) as an identical replacement for himself, having tired of Ruth's company (Ch. 2). Like Ruth, the narrator is also taken in by withheld information. Ludi had concealed his real identity, just as the first shopkeeper had concealed his English competence. Both Ruth and the narrator are thus caught up in a fiction of which themselves are

unaware; both perform upon a stage, believing that it is reality. Whereas Ruth quite understandably reacts with anger, the narrator of the Salonika episode realises that he has benefited from the experience: he has obtained his penknife and a set of worry beads and afforded pleasure to the wily spectator. (Ruth, significantly, does not perceive the change of partner as a possible enrichment of her experience.)

This simple tale, however, is preceded by a prior episode apparently unconnected with its sequel, in which the traveller has his worn shoes repaired by an old man who also communicates in vivacious sign language. The narrator, indeed, anticipates the reader's puzzlement: "What has my shoemaker in Salonika to do with the *komboloi* in my study, the string of beads Sophie is taking to Richenda? Patience: we shall come to it directly" (33). He does not, however, subsequently answer this query. Rather, the answer is contained in the first part of the story: "The old fellow was a born mime" (37). Mimicry unifies the two parts of the story, as an activity which is passed on from character to the another, both as communication and entertainment. But mimicry, bodily imitation, is also one of the most fundamental forms of learning: we learn by imitating what we see around us. Mimicry involves a high degree of identification with an other whose actions the scrutinises and internalises.

But such identification with the image of an other is exactly what Martin's self deprecating mode of autobiographical contests. Thus it is important that this identificatory form of learning incorporates an element of freedom always available to the recipient of narration. It is significant that there is a temporal and spatial interval between the two parts of the story; what is "learnt" from the shoemaker is tested elsewhere in the town and with other people. It is also significant that the author writes, regarding the worry beads which symbolise this experience in Salonika:

He taught me how to play with [the worry beads], but for *komboloi* to do the nerves good, each owner must develop his own tricks ... I know that Sophie likes my *komboloi* and I have been wondering if I should let her have them. But I don't think I will. I have heard from other Greeks that you may give a new set of beads to anyone, but never one which you have already used. That would mean passing on your own worries, and who wants to do a thing like that to their one and only granddaughter? (37).

The worry beads are a reminder of an experience of learning by imitation, which incorporates an interval between model and repetition. This is the mode of learning which David Martin performs in his stories, with their insistent dramatisation of the didactic relationship: the stories always embody a paradox, such that their stark simplicity forces the listener or reader to reach a conclusion independently. Just as used beads ought not to be passed on to another person, so as not

to impose the cares associated with them, so a tale which already includes its own interpretation ought not to be imposed upon the young listener, excluding space for them to work towards their own understanding of the narrative.

This is the role played by the disconcertingly simple surface of the tale and by the lack of connection between its two constituent episodes. No pre-determined interpretative position is offered to the reader. David Martin's paradoxical tales oblige the listener to examine them from several points of view, often conflicting, before coming to some sort of conclusion, if at all. They embody the intellectual virtues learnt by the emigre or exile, who Kristeva contrasts with

his distainful hosts who lack the *distance* – possessed by him – to see himself and them. The foreigner is fortified by this interval which prides him away from others and from himself and gives him the elevated sentiment not of possessing the truth, but of relativising the world and himself where others are caught in the ruts of monovalency.¹²

Martin's tales teach intellectual mobility, the mental equivalent of the author's own incessant travelling and his nomadic spirit of adventure: "When I travel, I travel light. I never know in the morning where I shall sleep at night. I put my pack – not a very big one – on my back and trust to fate, so long as my nose is pointed in the right direction" (28). The functioning of David Martin's anecdotes can be helpfully illuminated by a comment by Meaghan Morris:

I take anecdotes, or yarns, to be primarily referential. They are oriented futuristically towards the construction of a precise, local and *social* discursive context, of which the anecdote then functions as a *mise en abyme*. That is to say, *anecdotes are for me not expressions of personal experience but allegorical expositions of a model of the way the world can be said to be working.*¹³

The world view which David Martin's anecdotes create, in so far as they encourage the reader to formulate a position in response to the paradoxical situations narrated, is one which values a permanently enquiring, questioning spirit, a mode of intellectual mobility. "Art is large and it enlarges you and me. To a shrunk-up world its vistas are shocking," comments Jeanette Winterson: "Through [art] we see ourselves in metaphor. Art is metaphor, from the Greek, *meta* (above) and *pherein* (carry) it is that which is carried above the literalness of life."¹⁴ Art is produced by and produces mobility. Thus Martin, introducing a grotesque gigantic Santa Claus suspended in the summer heat from a wheat silo in Port Pirie, South Australia, writes: "What I could do, I suppose, is talk about him, this Dinkum Aussie Yuletide Daddy, and see where it, or he, might take us. Because he must lead us *somewhere*. I will not accept that it ended up exactly where it started, twenty or thirty metres up in the December air" (80). This sight

of this huge Christmas mannequin in turn motivates Martin to undertake a journey from Melbourne to Sydney along the Hume Highway, in order “to take a fresh look at my adopted country and its strange customs, so that I could learn to feel at home in it once more” (81). It is mobility, precisely, which produces the possibility of identification and belonging. The overland journey produces unexpected results: in Albury, on the Victoria-New South Wales border, Martin learns about the earlier Sikh immigrants in North-Eastern Victoria, information which in turn germinates into a project for a novel. The necessity of field research in turn breeds the idea of a trip to India, and a visit to the Sydney manager of Air India: “I explained my idea and that my book might make some young Australians sufficiently interested in his country to want to visit it” (82). The poles of exile and belonging are themselves produced within a constant oscillation between places. The generative term in this dialectical process is mobility, both geographical and intellectual.

The basis of Martin’s pedagogic project, then, appears to be the rejection of prefabricated models of thought to be imposed upon the pupil by the schoolmaster. The youthful David Martin was very nearly expelled from his boarding school in Germany in the early 1930s for writing an essay against an authoritarian education:

Teachers, I pointed out, love what they call ‘helping to form characters’... In a boarding school they can mould and knead character all day long, from first bell to lights-out. But it was, I reasoned, revolting for any person to want to muck around with the character of any other person, large or small ... Leave the poor blighters to themselves, don’t twist and trim them, let them grow up to make their own characters ... The school claimed it could model snotty-nosed brats into patriotic sons of the fatherland, and I, a Jewish boy, had spat on it like a boy-scout on his toggle (52).

Yet such an anti-authoritarian approach to education throws up the dilemma of the authoritarian basis in any educative project. Not to acknowledge and to wield some degree of authority as an educator is simply to hand over that authority to some other social instance or influence. Some form of didactic power must be exerted if education is to function, as Martin admits: “I am still not sure that this character-forming rigmarole is such a great invention, but how do you get around it?” (52). Martin’s text does, however, suggest some ways of confronting this dilemma.

This autobiography constantly foregrounds images and mirrors in order to contest the hegemony of identification with such images. A crucial early experience appears to have been that of being the younger of a pair identical twins, the follower rather than the leader, constantly caught within the proximity of his own echo (12). As *My Strange Friend* says,

Twins have unnumbered experiences in common. ... There is nothing mysterious, but it can make them wonder whether they are not going to remain for ever two halves of one whole, and since this is how they appear in the eyes of those who watch them the feeling becomes strong.¹⁵

One early episode concerns learning to “tell oneself apart,” thus throwing off the oppressive regime of imposed as well as inherited twinhood. This is the episode mentioned above in which the elder Rudi employs his brother Ludi (the narrator) to take up his place in an adolescent relationship with a girlfriend of whom the elder twin has already tired. For Ludi, the experiment offers the chance of intimacy with a woman, but one of a dubious character because based upon the brothers’ identical appearance. “Rudi fitted me out in his clothes, and so effectively that even our mirror could not have distinguished Ludwig from Rudolph” (15). For Ruth, the implicit mirroring of love is abruptly shattered by the discovery that the boy she believes she loves has been absent and thus no longer enables her narcissistic self reflection; and more devastatingly, that he has been replaced by someone else, demonstrating that romantic attachment is, to some extent at least, arbitrary and interchangeable. The wounded and furious girlfriend gives Ludi resounding slap on the cheek as a parting gesture mirroring her own experience of Rudi’s implicit contempt (14–18). Mirror images can be exploited, and can wound others; the deceptive game involved in the brothers’ exploitation of their mirroring of themselves also reveals the perils experienced by the lover in mirroring one self in the gaze of the loved other. Yet the mirror image equally allows a broadening of horizons: both Ludi and Ruth gain new experiences through this experiment, albeit with radically varying degrees of freewill. The condition of such experience, however, is the deconstruction of the mirror subsequent to its exploitation: while Ruth senses a difference on their first date, she has got used to her changed friend on the second, saying, “today you are my own sweet Rudi”, to which Ludi replies: “But I am not, you see ... I am not I” (18). Here the narrator discovers the arbitrariness in subjectivity, at the very moment of embracing the experience afforded by that subjectivity. “I” is merely a grammatical function which can be occupied by any number of real speakers, the “I” of the utterance (enonce) is not essentially identical with the “I” of enunciation.¹⁶ Mirrors, here, appear as a tool for experience, if only they can also be escaped from. Significantly, the same expression occurs in *My Strange Friend*, about the time Ludi left school: “Who was I? To many things at once ... One thing was clear. I was not I. ‘Ludi, what do you want from life?’ No one asked that question. Had somebody done so I could only have muttered, ‘Freedom. To be out of this goddam straightjacket.’”¹⁷ It is Ludi’s sense of his self’s non-coincidence with itself that acts as trigger for his quitting Hitler’s Germany in 1933, the first of many departures to come and an opportunity gladly seized.

In Lacanian terms, flight from the illusory and megalomaniac reflections of self in the order of the Imaginary is not afforded by the undifferentiated and subject-dissolving Real so much as by the realm of the Symbolic, where systems of signification are lived as pragmatic necessities within social existence, but seen for what they are: mere symbolic representations, otherwise insubstantial, without whose help however social exchange could not be carried out. We cannot get by without signs, but need to be aware of their constructed, arbitrary character. The fixity of a didactic master and a stable enunciative subject, even in a pedagogic project such as that of David Martin, in which a permanent questioning and erosion of predetermined points of view is espoused, can be seen as similar to the existential necessity of the Symbolic order within Lacan's triadic modes of representation. Some degree of authority is necessary to any pedagogic enterprise, even when the assumption of a didactic stance contradicts the freedom of thought which that pedagogic project aspires to communicate. Such contradictions are rife in intercultural education: Annedore Prengel, for instance, articulates the dilemma of a predominantly cultural-relativist orientation in intercultural education, which also acknowledges the pragmatic validity of the stance taken by an assimilative approach (migrants from other cultures are to be taught competence in the culture of the host country rather than encouraging the maintenance of their distinctive cultures), thus responding to the pragmatic need for host-culture competence, if the immigrants are to prosper in their adopted country.¹⁸ Sometimes there appears to be an ethical imperative for limiting the totalising aspirations of calls for discursive relativity. Significantly, David Martin says of his Teutonic schoolmasters: "I have no enmity towards teachers. I owe too much to too many of them ... And even the sadsack whose trouser fly we gawked at, he too has my gratitude. That I can write this book in English I owe mainly to him" (49–50). This autobiography's ethics of departure and exile espouses not a total departure, but a permanent occupation of the border between usage of discursive fixity and the dissolution of such fixity. The boy David Martin, leaving Berlin for Holland with his parents, is fascinated by the distinction between participation in a place in society (and by implication in its discursive conventions) and distance from that place: "But I am also trying to catch the instant when the wheels will begin turning and nothing can stop us any more ... We are moving and I have missed the precious moment" (24–25).

What then, is the place – or rather the non-place – of Hungary in this didactic autobiographical project? It is disconcerting, for the reader who knows that David Martin was born in Budapest, or who is familiar with the space devoted to the writer's family origins in the *My Strange Friend*, to discover that there is hardly a single reference to the writer's birthplace in *Fox on My Door*. Martin enthuses over childhood travels: "At last comes the night of going away ... The journey starts in streets whose emptiness is like a secret" (22). This emptiness,

this darkness, are images for the absence in the text which is Budapest, the first place left behind, obscured by a narrative of subsequent exilic departures for whom it nonetheless constitutes the powerful but invisible motor. Martin's homeland barely rates a mention, except during the Spanish Civil War, that gathering of exiles par excellence, where Martin meets a Hungarian officer in the International Brigade, "the handsomest devil of a Captain: black moustache, fiery eyes, curly hair" (76) – thus the very antithesis of the self deprecating narrator. Hungarian, one might surmise, is what the narrator is not. It is significant that where *My Strange Friend*, for instance, describes the year the narrator on his way to Palestine spent "in and around Budapest, the city of my birth" (a description repeated on the occasion of the writer's 1968 trip to Budapest) and recovered his Hungarian nationality, *Fox on My Door* erases this place of origin.¹⁹ Foucault once commented that the search for origins is "an attempt to catch the exact essence of things, [...] and their carefully protected identities, because this search assumes the existence of immobile forms that precede the external world of accident and succession. [...] What is found at the historical beginning of things is not the inviolable identity of their origin; it is the dissension of other things. It is disparity."²⁰ Perhaps it is because of Martin's vigorous resistance to smug reflections of his own person, his awareness of the mobility of forms of subjectivity and their implication in the disturbances of history, that he is disinclined to anchor his own personality in an initial, and thus henceforth determining, place. The absence of Budapest, where David Martin was born, is not simply an index of the early age at which he left the city with his family: for though he concedes in *My Strange Friend* that "German, not Hungarian, is my mother tongue", he nevertheless adds that "I am pleased that something of Hungary remains in my background" by virtue of the Hungarian relatives on his father's side, a "branch of the family which has produced artists and professional people, [to which] I feel close ... I am not only my parents' child, I am the flesh of men and women stretching back into the dimmest past"; moreover, these connections extend into Martin's Australian present: regarding the 1956 events in Hungary, Martin speaks of "our woes," and Budapest relatives now living in Sydney maintain "last links with my Hungarian past."²¹ Rather, this absence functions makes every subsequent departure recorded in the novel a perpetuation of a process of exile in a life without an originary birthplace. In other words, the place of origin can only figure in this narrative as an absence, freeing the conception of identity and relationship presented in the narrative from the constrictions usually imposed by a site of identity. Mobility, in David Martin's autobiographical narrative, has been always already at work in the mobility of selfhood. In this way, the rationalisations with which rigid identities and exclusions are habitually conferred legitimacy are whisked away and replaced by a nomadism become the norm of existence – as a brutal fact of twentieth-century history, as a

realistic appraisal of the production of subjectivity, and as a mode of thought to be appropriated in service of peaceful existence between human peoples.

Yet there is another, contrary trace of Hungary in the autobiography. David Martin's birthplace and a family link to that place, and the language spoken there, are discretely manifested in a photo of Grandmother Joszi included in the volume's endpapers – and simultaneously in a more prominent position, but stripped of accompanying commentary, as the central figure in a constellation of six photos on the dustcover, directly above a drawing of the eponymous fox-door-knocker symbolising Martin's individualism and outsider-persona. Significantly, the narrator tells us that it was Grandmother Joszi who encouraged the aspiring writer to persevere in his chosen vocation, and who may have been the recipient of his first poem (46, 58). The photos thus offer an icon of a grandparent-grandchildren relationship and a tradition of creative thought passed on from generation to generation, motivating the autobiography's own didactic impulse. This photo, with its cardboard frame bearing an inscription in Hungarian (in the endpapers), figures the fixed place and imposed linguistic systems that David Martin contests as a coercive and limiting mode of thought, but which he nevertheless recognises as essential to even the most liberatory pedagogic project. Some sort of a fixed basis for action is gestured at by the framing inscription informing the onlooker of the name of the Budapest "Cabinet Portrait" where the photo was taken; the Hungarian inscription is representative of the inaugural gifts of language, nationality and familial identity later to be recast by the writing self ("David Martin is the name I adopted much later," the narrator tells us, "when I became a writer" – 16) and symbolises the unavoidable limitations within which and starting from which human freedom must necessarily be exercised. Hungary, then, is not entirely absent from this autobiography: it is contained in the margins of the book, almost outside the text, and thus almost completely mute, but providing the preconditions for an education in exilic creative freedom. In this sense, then, the presence and absence of Hungary in this chronicle of a "journey through [the writer's] life," is expressive of the didactic burden that autobiography is made to bear in Martin's version of that genre, and of the dilemma thrown up by his project: on the one hand the political imperative to educate a younger generation in the skills of striking out alone away from the beaten track of coercive common sense in a process of intellectual nomadism; and on the other, the stable staking-out of clearly defined ethical territory entailed by the very same didactic project.

Notes

1. See Karin Wenz, Raum, *Raumsprache und Sprachräume: Zur Textsemiotik der Raumbeschreibung* (Tübingen: Gunter Narr, 1997), 29.
2. David Martin, *Fox on My Door: A Journey through My Life* (Melbourne: Collins Dove, 1987). All subsequent references in brackets in the text.
3. David Martin, *My Strange Friend: An Autobiography* (Chippendale, NSW: Picador, 1991), 8.
4. See Vilém Flusser, *Von der Freiheit des Migranten: Einsprüche gegen den Nationalismus* (Bensheim: Bollmann Verlag, 1944), 34.
5. Edward W. Said, *The World, the Text and the Critic* (London: Faber, 1984), 16–17.
6. Anna Johnston, “Australian Autobiography and the Politics of Narrating Post-Colonial Space”, *Westerly* 41:2 (Winter 1996), 75.
7. Paul Carter, *Living in a New Country: History, Travelling and Language* (London: Faber, 1992), 7–8.
8. See Maurice Blancot, “Le journal intime et le récit”, *Le Livre à venir* (Paris: Gallimard/Folio essais, 1986), 252–59.
9. Jurij M. Lotman, *Die Struktur des künstlerischen Textes*, Trans. Rainer Grübel, Walter Kroll and Hans-Ebehard Seidel (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1973), 354ff.
10. Christa Wolf, *Im Dialog: Aktuelle Texte* (Frankfurt/Main: Luchterhand Literaturverlag, 1990), 154.
11. “zugänglich bis zur Unzugänglichkeit” – Thomas Bernhard, “Ein junger Schriftsteller” in *Männerbilder: Ein Lesebuch*, Ed. Wolfgang Schneider (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1998), 87.
12. Julia Kristeva, *Etrangers à nous-mêmes* (Paris: Fayard, 1988), 16 (My translation).
13. Quoted by Victor Burgin, *In/Different Spaces: Place and Memory in Visual Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), xi–xi (Burgin’s emphasis).
14. Jeanette Winterson, *Art Objects: Essays on Ecstasy and Effrontery* (London: Vintage, 1996), 66.
15. *My Strange Friend*, 21.
16. See, for example, Emile Benveniste, *Problèmes de linguistique générale* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), Vol 1, 251–57; Jacques Lacan, “Subversion du sujet et dialectique du désir”, *Écrits II* (Paris: Seuil/Points, 1971), 159.
17. *My Strange Friend*, 45.
18. Annedore Prengel, *Pädagogik der Vielfalt* (Opladen: Leske & Budrich, 1993), 76.
19. *My Strange Friend*, 75–76; 280.
20. Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History”, in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, Ed. Donald F. Bouchard/Trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 142 (“Nietzsche, la généalogie, l’histoire”, in Foucault, *Dits et écrits 1954–1988*, Ed. Daniel Defert and François Ewald (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), Vol. 2: 1970–1975, 138).
21. *My Strange Friend*, 9, 10; 248; 81.

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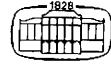
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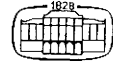
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