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Languages of Exile and Community in Dezső Kosztolányi's *Esti Kornél* Cycles

Abstract: *An avid translator, the poet, novelist, essayist and journalist, Dezső Kosztolányi believed in linguistic relativism, the uniqueness of each language-created world view, and the impossibility of translation. Paradoxically, one of his main concerns was to express in fiction various encounters between individuals belonging to different linguistic and cultural communities, and to explore whether communication between them was at all possible. It is exactly this double bind—this status of finding oneself between two or more cultures and languages—that the Hungarian novelist explored in many of his works, particularly in his last fictional writings, the Esti Kornél cycles: Esti Kornél (1933) and Esti Kornél Kalandjai (The Adventures of Kornél Esti, 1936). Several of the Esti Kornél episodes are linguistic explorations of the encounter between “self” and “other,” when these two often belong to different cultural and linguistic communities. The result of estranging language during such encounters leads to a better understanding of language and the context that created it—just as, in translation, the loss and, therefore, the presence of the original’s linguistic form is most acutely felt and understood by the translator.*

Dezső Kosztolányi was born in 1885 in Szabadka, Hungary, today Subotica, Serbia. Growing up in one of the most ethnically rich and diverse cities of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, Kosztolányi heard spoken around him Hungarian, Croatian, Serbian, and Romanian. He may have learned German from his own mother, who was ethnically German, while his grandfather, who had been a Captain in Kossuth Lajos’ revolutionary army and later followed him into exile in Turkey and in the United States, taught his grandson English (Szegedy-Maszák, “Dezső Kosztolányi” 1231). Later in life, Kosztolányi also mastered Latin, Italian, and Spanish. In addition to being a very successful journalist, Kosztolányi was an avid and versatile translator, rendering into Hungarian the works of authors as diverse as Shakespeare, John Donne, William Blake, Edgar Allan Poe, Byron, W. B. Yeats, Walt Whitman, F. Hölderlin, F. Nietzsche, F. Marinetti, Vita Sackville West, Amy Lowell, Li Po, Tu Fu, Po Chü-i, Basho, Lewis Carroll, Thornton Wilder, and many others. Paradoxically, this prolific multilingual translator also argued for the impossibility of translation. In his 1922 essay, “Nyelvtudás” (Language Learning), he wrote “It is possible to know a foreign language very well, but never well” (“Idegen nyelvet lehet nagyon jól tudni, de jól soha”) (*Nyelv és lélek* 39); while in “The ABC of Language and Soul” (1927) he reaffirmed:

Foreign Languages: [...] Only in my mother-tongue can I be my true self. From its deepest deepness bubble up those unconscious screams, verses. Here I forget that I speak, write. Here my recollections of words are as old as if they were of the things themselves. Here concepts and their signs are fused together fatefully and inseparably. About *knife* [kés], I know it is *culter*, *couteau*, *Messer*, *knife*, *coltello*, *navaja*. However, if someone very much wanted, he could convince me I’m wrong. But about *kés*, no one

could convince me it is not *kés*. (Kosztolányi, *Nyelv és lélek* 72; all translations are mine unless otherwise noted)

These assertions should be considered in the context of the post WWI years, in which not only were the borders of the European states rearranged, following the Paris Peace Treaty, but also in which Western-European intellectuals were making claims about the superiority of their languages and about the necessity of smaller nations to renounce their own native languages. In particular, Antoine Meillet, a professor at the Collège de France and a former student of Ferdinand de Saussure, wrote several books in which he argued that “minor” linguistic communities would naturally prefer to use a more advantageous language [namely, French] (Meillet, *Les langues du monde* 3) and to put behind them the linguistic semi-anarchy of interwar Europe, favoring a discipline that would impose “the universal civilization of tomorrow” (Meillet, *Les langues dans l’Europe nouvelle* 4).

In a 1930 open letter entitled “The Place of the Hungarian Language on Earth,” Kosztolányi responded to Meillet’s claims in a way that is still very much relevant in today’s age of globalization. For the Hungarian author, the move to renounce one’s language would have been absurd and impossible. Kosztolányi believed that language, rather than ethnicity, defines a particular community and its world-view; and that language does not simply give form to expression but defines the very nature of thinking. For the Hungarian poet and novelist, this meant that every language is unique, no linguistic community is superior to another, and the loss of any language, no matter how small its community of users, is irreparable. Kosztolányi understood Meillet’s calls to rationalism and civilization as stemming out of a seventeenth-century linguistic rationalist tradition, and tried to expose its failures:

[...] rationalism cannot be applied to natural phenomena. It cannot be applied to language either, for language too is a phenomenon of nature, the live tissue of life. Many blunders of the seventeenth-century linguistic rationalism result from the attempt to approach language from a rational point of view. When the adherents of this school tried to dissect language, they found nothing but cells. They did not discern what is intrinsic or fundamental in it. They did not perceive the impressions that the desires and passions of the living and the dead left upon it; they did not realize that it is the spirit that moulds the language, it is the fire of the spirit that melts it down and solders it together, it is the spirit that forms and “refines” it. And compared to this mysterious process, the “civilizational fact” as to whether language is incidentally refined by those whose passion and profession it is to refine it, namely the so-called poets and authors, is an insignificant trifle. From this loftier perspective all languages are equal. “*Liberty, equality, fraternity*” must ring true even in linguistics. Such a thing as a “barbaric language” does not, has never, and can never exist. (Kosztolányi, “The Place of the Hungarian Language on Earth,” Tr. Éva Tóth, 27–28)

At the same time, Kosztolányi recognized that the uniqueness of each language-created world-view implies isolation, the impossibility of complete understanding and communication between different linguistic communities. Paradoxically, one of his main concerns was to express in fiction various encounters between individuals belonging to different linguistic and cultural communities and to explore whether communication between them was at all possible. It is exactly this double bind—this status of finding oneself between two or more cultures and languages—that the Hungarian novelist

explored in many of his works, but particularly in his last fictional writings, the Esti Kornél cycles, *Esti Kornél* (1933) and *Esti Kornél Kalandjai* (*The Adventures of Kornél Esti*, 1936). In the first chapter of the first cycle, two “authors,” an anonymous Narrator and his childhood friend Kornél Esti (whose last name, “Esti,” literally means “evening” or “of the night,” suggesting elusiveness and mystery), plot to write an anti-novel made up of journeys, fragments, and dreams. Kornél is the one who supplies the Narrator with the stories of his life, real or imagined, and together they set out to compose an anti-novel, a “Travelogue” in which Esti recounts “where I would have liked to travel; [a] romanced biography in which I will account even how many times the hero died in his dreams. [...] Only what is fit for a poet should remain: the fragment” (Kosztolányi, *Esti Kornél* I 19).

The chapters of the two *Esti Kornél* cycles are only loosely interconnected in the sense that they do not have a traditional, chronologic, all-unifying plot that describes the development of a hero. Instead, the most important unifying factor is language itself. Having discarded the concept of a stable hero, Kosztolányi is, instead, concerned with the linguistic construction of the subject who perceives the world. The episodes of the two cycles may be seen as different types of answers to the same questions, different variations on specific themes. To give just one example, in the ninth episode of the first cycle (1933), an older, cosmopolitan, and multilingual Kornél Esti travels eastward through Bulgaria; while in the first episode (entitled “Omlette à Woburn”), of the second cycle (1936), a young and inexperienced Kornél Esti stops in Zürich for dinner on his way back to Hungary from Paris. Although it is not possible to know exactly which episode was written first (there are no extant manuscripts of these particular stories), it is important to note that they are not arranged in chronological order: Kosztolányi included the one depicting the older Esti in the first (1933) cycle, while the episode depicting an inexperienced young Esti, he included in the later (1936) cycle. If anything, the hero has not become wiser but, ironically, has regressed as he lost his youthful innocence, gained cosmopolitan experience, and mastered more foreign languages. The episodes of the two cycles do not describe a process of learning, intellectual and spiritual development akin to the Bildungsroman. Teleology is, instead, undermined.

Placed back to back, the ninth episode and “Omlette à Woburn” offer a cross-section of the protagonist’s life in reverse, from adulthood to youth, while he travels across the map of Europe diagonally Northwest to Southeast, from France to Turkey. Both journeys take place at night—they are metaphorical “nightmares” about the impossibility of abandoning one’s language and culture no matter how strong the desire to escape one’s native culture and experience another one. For example, in the ninth episode of the 1933 cycle, Esti encounters a Bulgarian train conductor and decides on the spot, with virtually no knowledge of Bulgarian, to engage him in conversation and convince him that he speaks Bulgarian as well as a literature professor from Sofia. The confrontation is a linguistic one. Esti manages to trick the conductor into telling him a story to which he listens with perfectly feigned attention. Listening has become, for Esti, a theatrical act and the border that separates real and feigned understanding is no longer relevant, just as in a play it does not matter whether the actors truly understand each other and believe in their lines, as long as they act, as long as they exchange them in a manner pre-established by the script. Despite this, language—the real protagonist of this episode—gains the upper hand in the end and Esti cannot travel unscathed through a

world in which, as he explains, “yes is no and no is yes.” The story is exactly about falling into the trap one has set for the *other*. As Esti and his companion light up cigarettes in the dark, the conductor slowly warms up and begins to tell a story at the end of which he roars with laughter, pulls out a letter, the photograph of a dog, two large, green buttons made of bone, and waits for Kornél’s response. When Esti says yes and approves of the buttons, the stubby, black-mustached conductor begins to sob; when Esti says no, the conductor becomes angry. To save face, Kornél returns to his compartment and falls into a deep sleep—as if struck by a heart attack. He awakens at noon only to find the conductor waiting next to him like a faithful dog. As he gets off the train, Kornél’s last word, “yes,” makes the conductor happy. This is an elusive, embedded narrative that lacks a center because Esti Kornél can never know what the conductor’s story is and how it could be interpreted. Kosztolányi undermines the idea that meaning is inherent in language and affirms, instead, that meaning is reader and context dependent.

“Omelette à Woburn,” raises similar questions about linguistic and cultural communities, and makes the possibility of offering answers even more problematic. The protagonist travels from West to East across space and time, languages and cultures, searching for a way to understand his identity. This episode shows, perhaps most strongly, Kosztolányi’s critique of the process of creating hierarchies of linguistic, cultural, and ethnic “otherness” in a Europe whose boundaries had been completely rearranged after the 1919 Paris Peace Conference. In 1933, Kosztolányi published an article in the journal *Pesti Hírlap*, in which he expressed doubt about the usefulness of artificial, universal languages such as Esperanto, because they lacked exactly that which he considered to be the essence of language—its memory (Szegedy-Maszák, “Kosztolányi nyelvszemlélete” 260). The “Ninth Episode” and “Omelette à Woburn” are a fictional exemplification of this idea. In both stories, the protagonist is placed in circumstances in which he suddenly loses this linguistic memory and suffers a complete loss of identity, a kind of death.

In “Omelette à Woburn,” Kornél Esti returns from Paris on the “Hungarian coach” of the train in the company of emigrants who are also returning to Hungary from abroad some, we are told, from as far away as Brazil. Esti is “nauseated by the reek of clothing and acrid smoke” of his Hungarian fellows. A contrast is immediately established between the “familiar stale smell of his poor country’s misery” (Kosztolányi, “Omelette à Woburn,” Tr. Zsuzsanna Horn, 121) and the Zürich he sees from the train: “fascinated by [...] the villas looking like toy houses with idyllic little lights glimmering in the windows” where “the air was pure, vapourless and translucent as glass” (122), he is “seized by an irresistible longing to get off” the train (122), and he does. It hardly matters that, at least geographically, both Zürich and Budapest belong to the center of Europe: they are represented as they tend to perceive each other, in opposition, as civilized West and provincial East. In fact, Kosztolányi makes it clear that what Kornél Esti sees in Zürich is a construction—painting with words: “In a frame of embankments and houses on stilts, the lake looked like a china inkstand with light blue ink undulating in it. A single boat with its romantic lantern was rocking near the opposite shore. For a while he mused over it. Then he realized that he was hungry” (122). The scene Kornél beholds is made of China ink. Yet, this artificiality should not be taken simply as a metafictional literary game. It is also an intrinsic part of the “otherworldliness” Kornél experiences.

Years later, in 1991, another Hungarian novelist, Péter Esterházy, would comment similarly in a novel entitled *The Glance of the Countess Hahn-Hahn (Down the Danube)*. Like Kosztolányi, Esterházy compared the perception of Western Europe—this time Vienna, closer than Paris or Zürich—from the perspective of the East-Central European:

The barbed wire surrounding Hungary [...] was not impenetrable, but fluttered now and then, and all the peeping Hungarians were simply dumbfounded by what they saw. Wow, hi-fi bananas! Everything had become so formless that we longed disproportionately for form. We would never have dreamed of distinguishing between form and formality. [...] And we were eternally grateful for the strait-laced, mechanical smiles of the Viennese shopkeepers, their reserved politeness and soft, unmeaning phrases. In restaurants we disastrously overvalued the orderliness of the napkins, mistook the courtesy of waiters for genuine affection, and read the neatly-laid tables as a sign of moral strength. (Esterházy 101)

As Esterházy further explains, the perception of Vienna as a civilized West depends on which direction one comes from: “Coming from home, I feel I have arrived in a glittering western metropolis, and gratefully sink into my seat beside a nice clean tablecloth. Coming from the other direction, however, Vienna somehow seems all too familiar, and [...] I am seized by the *unheimlich* feeling of being at home” (Esterházy, *The Glance* 101). Similarly, Kornél Esti is very disappointed to find that the mysteriously-named omelette “à Woburn” he has just ordered in a Zürich restaurant turns out to look “exactly like the scrambled eggs his mother used to make” (Kosztolányi, “Omelette” 127). Yet, the omelette remains very much out of his reach, resting symbolically “in the middle of the silver platter, as if lost in infinite space, fried in the shape of a fish” (127–28). The merciless Swiss waiter seizes this sacred fish with his knife and fork, “snips off the two ends,” and leaves the hungry student with a greatly diminished meal.

The restaurant Esti has found open while meandering through Zürich late at night flaunts a foundation year of 1739, a red coat of arms, and a menu that resembles an incunabulum. It espouses an ancient, noble elegance yet there is something otherworldly about it. At the center of what seems to be almost a sacrificial rite recounted in third person in which omniscient narration and free indirect speech are intertwined, the waiters warm plates “over a buffet with a violet flame that gives off a strange perpetual light” (Kosztolányi, “Omelette” 125), and the toast brought to Esti is a tissue-thin wafer “like the host at Holy Communion to nourish the soul and prepare it for eternal life” (127). Kosztolányi achieves, at this moment, a *Gesamtkunstwerk* effect by combining, in writing, the visual arts with music. After eating his omelette, Esti hears the restaurant’s orchestra playing Wagner’s *Tannhäuser* but, awed by what he has just experienced, he can pay little attention to it: “The lake’s waves were chattering, the orchestra played the singers’ contest on the Wartburg, the company seated before him had still not arrived at the end of their meal, but he could pay little attention to all these” (“Csevegtek a tó hullámai, a zenekar a wartburgi dalnokversenyt játszotta, as előtte ülő társaság még mindig nem tudott a vacsora végére jutni, de őt mindez vajmi kevésbé érdekelte”) (Kosztolányi, *Esti Kornél Kalandjai* 10). This is a small but significant detail. Richard Wagner’s *Tannhäuser und der Sängerkrieg auf die Wartburg* is about the struggle between sacred and profane love, and grappling with the question of whether redemption is possible. The opera’s performance history is also pertinent in this context. Wagner had to create a

special version to be performed in Paris, in which significant changes were made in order to accommodate the conservative Paris Opera public: a ballet scene, a Bacchanal, was introduced in Act 1; the libretto was translated into French; a solo for Walther was removed from Act 2; feeling that the dull audience would be confused by only hearing the Venus motif at the end of the opera, the composer brought Venus physically on stage. Yet, despite Wagner's attempts to adapt it, the performance was a failure in Paris. Kosztolányi was, very likely, aware of these aesthetic differences between the two versions of the works and the historical conditions that required them. Whether this parallels his own hero's bitter return from Paris would not be an unwarranted speculation. But that in Wagner's work redemption is enabled through sacrifice is a detail Kornél Esti, like Tannhäuser, is not able to notice at the time of his crisis, caught as he is within the immediate. When time comes for Esti to pay for his meal, the terror of not being able to pay the bill is followed by relief that he can, and then by embarrassment for having over-tipped the waiters who, in turn, repay him with supercilious contempt. This moment could be interpreted simply as Esti suffering from an inferiority complex that does not forgive any marginal provincial who comes into contact with a cosmopolitan metropolis. But Kosztolányi complicates matters even more. The haughty waiters Esti tries hard to please are not German or Swiss but Italians who use their own language among themselves, but French or German with their guests. When Esti tries to communicate with them in Italian, the majordomo coolly switches to German, declining the familiarity (Kosztolányi, "Omelette" 124). Furthermore, the Wagnerian musical intervention is highly ironic: on the restaurant's delightful pavilion that juts out over the inky lake, an orchestra of "gypsies with beards and spectacles" are "playing strictly classical music, from printed sheets" (126). East and West can no longer be clearly defined and separated. They have become hybrid contexts that unbalance the hero.

Kornél Esti's experience is about belonging and not belonging, about assimilation and the impossibility to assimilate. In free indirect discourse, the narrator explains the waiters' contempt for Esti: "A gentleman ought to speak but one language." Esti's mistake is to have tried to cross this line by addressing them in their own language. In other words, one's self-definition and place in society depends exactly on one's linguistic identity, and one's history depends on the memory inherent in language. Esti, who thinks it is wonderful to "roam about unknown streets, to which no memory bound him" (Kosztolányi, "Omelette" 122), has broken this important rule. As discussed above, the much older and cosmopolitan Esti Kornél on his way to Turkey through Bulgaria also broke this rule and, as a result, he experienced a kind of death as he found himself completely outside of his language and culture. In contrast, in the case of young, inexperienced Esti, the narrator suggests an awakening. At the very beginning of the episode, he describes Esti's third-class traveling companions, a group of Hungarian emigrants returning "home" from Brazil, in the following way: "At times the sleepers fidgeted, reassembling their lost limbs from beneath the wooden seat or elsewhere, as on the Day of Judgement" (121). At the end of the story, after running from the restaurant all the way to Zwingli's statue "as if he had escaped death after some terrible adventure," he collapses on a bench and sobs (129–30), much like Cseregdi Bandi, as we see below.

Kornél Esti's perception of Zürich, his shock and disorientation, destabilize the binaries periphery/center, East/West: in "Omelette à Woburn" there is more of the East or South-East (the gypsies, the Italians, the omelet itself) in the West than the West would

acknowledge. Esti has come to the heart of Europe only to find that it is missing. Despite the majordomo's assertion that each gentleman should speak his own language, the linguistic world Esti has entered is a disorienting and hierarchical mixture of languages. Even a simple omelet exists in three different guises in the restaurant's menu: Esti has to choose between Napoleon, Zingarella, and Woburn. Having tried to escape from the train that brings him back to his homeland, being outside of his native language and culture, Esti selects the omelet à Woburn exactly because the name tells him nothing but has a distinctive sound. He is surprised to see that the omelette turns out to look much like the ones his mother used to make. The restaurant scene is an exploration of, and play with, the gap between one's own linguistic and cultural identity and one's wishing to become an "other"—to experience another linguistic, social, or cultural context.

In another episode of the Esti Kornél cycle, "Cseregdi Bandi," Kosztolányi revisits such issues from yet another perspective. At the center of this story too there is a restaurant scene. This time, however, what is "authentic," one's native culture, as expressed through food and language, is questioned by being placed in a foreign context. Bandi Cseregdi is a university student who has passed his law exams and whose great uncle from Sárszeg rewards him with a "modest" sum, just enough to live for half a year in Paris. His old uncle sends him away with the advice to get to know people and learn French. For this purpose, he passes onto him an old conversation manual, which both he and his father had used, suggesting that Bandi will have the honor of being the third in line to carry a family tradition of undertaking this journey and using the manual.

Knowing little about France, and even less about the French language, Bandi tries to do what he imagines the French do: he dresses elegantly, travels "business class," and avoids third class "mixed company" ("vegyes közönséggel") (*Esti Kornél Kalandjai* 20): "He was a broad-shouldered, stubby young man from Bácska, cumanian-black eyes, brown-skinned face. He was dressed smartly. He wore a gossamer-thin shirt, colorful tie, and new, porcelain trousers ("Széles válú, zömök bácskai fiú volt, kunfekete szemű, barna arcbőrű. Takarosan öltözködött. Zefíringet viselt, színes nyakkendőt s az új porcelánnadrágját") (*Kosztolányi, Esti Kornél Kalandjai* 20). Predictably, Bandi spends all his money before the end of his first full day in Paris but it is difficult to tell whether his recklessness is due to an excessive pride, inexperience, or simply to a fierce "hunger" for his homeland—its foods, smells, sounds, and language— which overtakes him as soon as he begins his journey. When his friend, Kornél Esti, who has been waiting for him in Paris, takes him to a French restaurant, Bandi's hunger becomes impossible to appease:

They had the set menu in a restaurant where, at narrow, tight tables, the chatting people were pressed together like sardines. Several different kinds of salads were placed before them, lean roasted lamb, rabbit. Well, they had really nailed down what he liked. He didn't touch anything. He just spooned out the cream, and swallowed the thin slice of papist-colored sponge cake. He was left starving. He felt homesick for the good, thick vegetable stews, for the cooked noodles.

Menüt ettek egy vendéglőben, ahol a szűk, keskeny asztaloknál úgy szorongtak a tereferelő emberek, mint a heringek. Többféle salátát raktak eléje, sovány báránysültet, házinyulat. Hát eltalálták az ízlését. Hozzájuk se nyúlt. Csak a krémet kanalazta föl, s a vékony, pápistaszínű piskótaszeletkét kapta be, egyetlen falásra. Éhkoppon maradt.

Elfogta a honvágy a jó vastag főzelékek, a főtt teszták után. (Kosztolányi, *Esti Kornél Kalandjai* 24)

The French dishes and the thin, pale slice of sponge cake cannot satisfy Bandi, just as the omelette à Woburn, with its ends “so heartlessly cut off and thrown on a silver platter” (“Omelette” 129), had failed to appease Kornél’s hunger in Zürich.

This lack of fulfillment—Paris does not live up to Bandi’s hopes—and the inability to feel at home “in the world” bring into question the possibility of his being “a citizen of the world.” Bandi’s registration visit to the Austro-Hungarian embassy in Paris becomes symbolic in this sense. Even here the clerk speaks no Hungarian, only Austrian, and he resorts to communicating with Bandi through a kind of sign language. The clerk signals to him to choose between “registered” and “not registered.” Bandi points to the former, but his choice, just like the clerk’s signal, bears the mark of being aleatory and inconsequential—he realizes that it would have made no difference to have made the other choice. He is present, yet there is nothing to mark or prove his presence—he is also not present. The “yes is no and no is yes” motif of the “Ninth episode” is revisited here.

Understanding that his friend feels terribly homesick, Esti takes him to a “Parisian Hungarian country-inn” (“A párizsi magyar csárdában voltak”) (Kosztolányi, *Esti Kornél Kalandjai* 25), where everyone speaks Hungarian. This scene is a kind of replay of Esti’s restaurant experience in Zürich, but from a very different perspective. There, in the small garden restaurant, Esti had watched the other patrons from a distance: “there was a fair-haired dandy in a tail-coat who looked like a diplomat; opposite the latter sat two upper middle-class girls with their grey-haired father, who seemed to be an industrialist, and old Swiss patrician; near them sat a party of eight or ten ladies and gentlemen, all dressed in evening clothes” (Kosztolányi, “Omelette” 124). By contrast, in the Parisian-Hungarian restaurant, the Hungarian guests sit at a familiar-looking horse-shoe shaped table, “celebrating a name-day or birthday, girls and young men, old gentlemen with silver beards, mothers, relatives, just like home” (“Egy patkó alakú asztalnál névnapot vagy születésnapot ülhetek, leányok, fiúk, öregurak, ezüst szakállal, anyák, rokonok, akár otthon”) (Kosztolányi, *Esti Kornél Kalandjai* 25).

In Zürich the guests “took a slice of fish, a claw of lobster; or they tasted the glamorous flesh-coloured meat which at such restaurants is sometimes tinted like the faces of women; more than one of the ladies merely glanced at a dish and motioned it away” (Kosztolányi, “Omelette” 125). By contrast, Bandi feels himself again and at home in the Parisian-Hungarian restaurant:

Bandi settled down, he stretched out his broad chest, and let out a tremendous sigh.

He repeated constantly:

— See, buddy, this is it.

On the menu there were Hungarian veal stew, stew, egg dumplings, granulated pasta, gulyás, pasta with sour cream, farmer’s cheese, sprinkled with fried bacon, vermicelli dusted with jam, and cucumber salad.

[...] Boldi, the Parisian Hungarian gypsy, burst into playing the *Sparse Barley*.

As they drank quietly, Bandi cheered up, opened up like a wilted flower sprinkled by May showers. Around him there were only Hungarians. [...] Next to them dined Pista Nahotzky, the young *peintre* in his velvet coat. And Lala Szűcs, with his dear Bácska chops, then Gyuszi Orbán, the Paris news correspondent, then Zoltán Miklós,

Stocker, Berecs, Illés, all students. Before long, Bandi became acquainted with practically every social and artistic celebrity in Paris.

[...] The gypsy began to string out the *Green Frog* and that was Bandi's undoing. When he heard these songs he could no longer contain himself. He had them open champagne. Ten times in succession, Boldi had to play in his ear:

This was no good, that was no good,

Nothing ain't no good.

Always someone else's sweetheart, that was good.

At that moment, he pressed in the gypsy's palm the first hundred franks. Thereafter—according to the old instructions—followed *The Thin Broad Fence*, and *Let the Horse Be Sorrowful*.

Bandi smiled and kept sighing. (*Esti Kornél Kalandjai* 25–6)

A párizsi Magyar csárdában voltak.

Bandi letelepedett, kifeszítette domború mellét, iszonyút fújt.

Ezt ismételte szüntelenül:

—Lásd, pajtás, ez már teszi.

Az étlapon borjúpörkölt, tokány, galuska, tarhonya, gulyás, tejfölös túrós csusza pörccel, lekváros metélt, uborkasaláta.

[...] Boldi, a párizsi Magyar cigány ráendített a *Ritka ápara*.

Csendesen iddógáltak, Bandi földerült, kinyílott, mint az alélt virág, melyet az áldott májusi zápor locsolt meg. Csupa magyar volt körötte. [...] Mellettük Nahotzky Pista vacsorázott, bársonykabátban, az ifjú piktor. Odahívtak. Beállított Szűcs Lala is, a drága bacsikai pofa, aztán Orbán Gyszi, a párizsi hírlaptudósító, aztán Miklós Zoltán, Stocker, Berecs, Illés, mind diákok. Bandi hamarosan megismerkedett Párizsnak údgyszólván minden társadalmi és művészi nevezetességével.

[...] A cigány a *Kecskebékát* kezdte húzni, és ez lett Bandinak a veszte. Ha ezt a nótát hallotta, akkor nem bírt magával. Pezsgőt nyitott. Boldinak tízszer egymás után kellett a fülébe muzsikálnia:

Így se volt jó, úgy se volt jó,

Sehogyan se volt az jó.

Minding csak a más babája, az volt jó.

Ekkor nyomta a cigány markába az első százfrakost. Utána – régi előírás szerint – a *Vékony deszkakerítés* következett, majd a *Búsuljon a ló*. (*Kosztolányi, Esti Kornél Kalandjai* 25–6)

The Parisian-Hungarian restaurant scene, like the Zürich one, is also artificial, yet for different reasons. Everything here claims authenticity, yet this cannot be a typical Hungarian country-restaurant, a “csárda,” because of the context in which it exists. It can only be Parisian-Hungarian. The dishes, the waiter, the music played by gypsies, folk-style music (“nóta”), rather than folk music, also strive to be authentically Hungarian. However, the perfection to which this authenticity is played out transforms the scene into a performance. The very name Kosztolányi uses for this restaurant, “csárda” (a wayside inn or tavern), rather than the more usual “étterem” or “vendéglő,” suggests the folk dance “csárdás.” In this case, both are taken out of their original context. It is highly ironic that before leaving Hungary Bandi spends much of his money on clothes he imagines the French must wear, which, he believes, would allow him to fit in, to “pass”; yet, having arrived in the French capital, he spends the rest of his uncle's allowance—a hefty sum to spend in one night by any standards—trying to recapture the Hungarian

identity he feels he has lost in the course of his first day in Paris. The language and the music he hears in the Parisian-Hungarian restaurant are “his undoing.”

What Bandi has failed to take into account is that his identity is inextricably connected to language. Both on his way to Paris and in Paris, he is at a loss because he cannot speak French and the language manual he has inherited from his uncle is outdated. It contains dialogues between a count and a princess representing the language and worldview of an age that no longer exists. The only words of thanks Bandi can use from his manual for the concierge who brings him hot chocolate and croissant the morning after he has lost everything are “Très bien, princesse.” Armed with the “weapons” of a knight, Bandi has little or no chance in this modern, cosmopolitan world.

Kosztolányi’s linguistic and cultural relativism is expressed here once again: every language is unique and no linguistic community superior to another. The Hungarian novelist, who was a subscriber to *The Dial*, very likely read articles published there by Edward Sapir. Kosztolányi’s linguistic views may have been influenced by Sapir’s writings, as well as by those of Wilhelm von Humboldt, whose linguistic theories influenced Sapir and Whorf in creating their hypothesis. As Sapir explained,

Human beings do not live in the objective world alone, nor alone in the world of social activity as ordinarily understood, but are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society. ... the ‘real world’ is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group ... The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached. (Sapir, “The Status of Linguistics as a Science,” 209, as quoted by Penn, *Linguistic Relativity* 23)

While it is difficult to know with certainty which of the articles published by Sapir in *The Dial* during the 1920’s Kosztolányi read,

it is certain that, a few articles by Sapir—among them “The Musical Basis of Poetry” (1921)—contain such remarks about poetic language as would strongly remind us of the statements Kosztolányi made at the beginning of the 1930’s. The linguist dealt with the poems of two American writers, Amy Lowell and Carl Sandburg, from whose works Kosztolányi also translated, just as he was also interested in what roles the reader’s automatic responses play in the interpretation of meaning and what is the function of blanks (omissions) in verse. (Szegedy-Maszák, *Tanulmányok* 262)

Kosztolányi was harshly criticized for holding linguistic relativist views, for expressing them in the novel and transforming, in this way, the nature of genre. Even his once good-friend, the literary critic and novelist Mihály Babits, failed to understand this when *Kornél Esti* was published, in 1933, and criticized its author for paying so much attention to language in his “anti-novel”:

All of that—this literary point of view—to be told in prose could seem perhaps a little like a pose, a defiant, self-admiring pose. But Kosztolányi’s prose is more than prose. It is lyricism and art. This is a special writer: his prose is perhaps better than his verse; but he is still a poet and a lyricist, and not a prose writer.

With Kosztolányi everything is in the form, in the most exterior form, in style and words (Babits, *Könyvről Könyvre* 153).

Babits failed to understand that for Kosztolányi the language of the novel held the same values as the language of the lyric—that Kosztolányi created the *Kornél Esti* cycle as a kind of poem—and criticized his friend for conceiving of the novel as a lyrical play on the surface of language. Unlike Babits, who believed psychological analysis was an intrinsic part of discourse in the novel, and that hidden behind surfaces lay truths and realities that prose had to bring to light, Kosztolányi understood surfaces, like mirrors, to both reflect and contain reality. In life, as in language, he saw no separation between depth and surface, form and content. In response to Babits's criticism he published the poem "The Song of Kornél Esti," in which he explained that the diver who explores watery depths in his cumbersome suit can discover only mud, and can see nothing of the light and beauty reflected on the surface of the water.

Kosztolányi took a serious interest in linguistics, was an avid translator and, much like Kornél Esti, was multi-lingual. In the same essay in which he had harshly criticized Antoine Meillet, he compared the uniqueness of language to that of a flower that, though unnoticed, develops naturally and uniquely in its specific environment:

Some time ago I was wandering in a forest where hours went by without my seeing another face. In a clearing I caught sight of a flower that is capricious enough to bloom only in this eastern corner of Europe, in my homeland, and refuses to take root elsewhere. We call it golden flax, our erudite scientists call it, *linum dolomiticum*. ... [I wondered] why it bothered to bloom at all when there was no one to see it in this forsaken spot where it would wither and die without anyone noticing it, without anyone delighting in the sight of it, all summer long. It does not ask whether there is any point in its blooming and does not care that elsewhere it is azaleas and nymphaeas that people pamper and pet. ... It blossoms and fades like everything else that exists on this earth, like "great" nations and "small" nations, like "civilization" itself. We bloom and we fade. Perhaps this is the point of living. (Kosztolányi, "The Place of the Hungarian Language on Earth" 36–7)

The Hungarian poet understood that the uniqueness of every language-created world-view meant isolation—the impossibility of complete understanding and communication between different linguistic communities. It is paradoxical, then, that at some level, each of the episodes in the *Kornél Esti* cycles are linguistic explorations of the encounter between "self" and "other," when self and other often belong to different cultural and linguistic communities. The result of estranging language during such encounters leads to a better understanding of language and of the context that created it—just as, during translation, the loss and, therefore, the presence of the original's linguistic form is most acutely felt and understood by the translator. Often, the approach to translation is an attempt to capture the meaning or context of a text and render it into the target language. For Kosztolányi this was not so because he believed that content and form were indivisible. The Hungarian novelist, who was himself a prolific translator, understood this to be an impossible task: a text cannot be rendered into a different language, it can only be re-created. When Bandi dons elegant, Western clothes, he attempts, like Bottom, to be "translated" and, of course, he fails. The *Kornél Esti* cycles are exactly about the crisis of the European subject who, found at the intersection of two or more national languages and cultures, attempts to reconfigure his position by transcending traditional binary oppositions of self and other, East and West.

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