

The Mouth and the Tongue – or the Dictator and the Dentist

The Head and its Parts as Figures in Andrea Tompa's Prose

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Abstract

In this paper I attempt to give a reading of Andrea Tompa's two novels by examining one chosen chapter from each work, hoping that the investigation will provide insights into the work as a whole. I will approach the text through close reading and examine the poetic and semantic role of the body parts that appear in the text. In *The Hangman's House*, the focus will be on the *mise en abyme* and we will have a better understanding of the metaphoric process. In *Home*, an essayistic travel novel, the interplay of literal and metaphorical meanings and the question of allegory will be raised. The contrast between medical themes and an artistic approach reveals the relationship between language and home, and the strangeness inherent in that which is one's "own".

Keywords

Body parts, embodied experience, metaphor, language, home, mother tongue, dictatorship

"The senses of proximity are the skin, the ears, the tongue and the nose - the gaze alone is capable of the act of objectification and idealisation: of distancing and organising the simultaneous order of things. The critic uses all his senses, so to speak, simultaneously: his judgments of true and false, beauty and ugliness, are based on the dynamics of proximity and distance."

(Sarloita Deczki, *Praise of Sensuality*)

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In this paper,² I would like to show the prose-poetic role of parts of the head in Andrea Tompa's prose. I examined all five of her published novels from this point of view. It is interesting to note that in each of them there is a part of the body that is of central importance. (Of course, this emphasis on my part does not mean that only one sense organ appears in a work.) This narrow interpretative framework offers the possibility of seeing Andrea Tompa's oeuvre as a unified whole, insofar as a face is formed by mouth, head, ear, tongue, and eye; this may be a confluence of interpretative arbitrariness and chance, but it may lead to important insights. The validity and *raison d'être* of this viewpoint is due, first, to the recent prominence of various body poetics and corporeal narratology approaches in literary studies, and second, to the increasing prominence of embodied mind theory (Varela, F. J., Thompson, E., Rosch, E., 1991) in philosophical, psychological, and linguistic studies since the 1990s. Linguistic cognitive metaphor theory, understood on the basis of the embodied mind, is also relevant to this study (Kövecses 2005, 32). On the other hand, in the past few years, such hybrid fields of research as *medical humanities* have been continuously gaining ground within cultural studies.³ Daniel Punday's theory laid the foundations for corporeal narratology, one of the novelties of which is that it incorporates referential readings of the body into the creation of meaning.⁴

Here I focus on two works, specifically her first and fourth novels, because these two works exist in an English translation. In *The Hangman's House* (*A bóbér háza*, first Hungarian edition 2010) I explore the mouth, and in *Home* (*Háza*, first Hungarian edition 2020) the tongue. I am also looking for answers to the question of the relationship between body parts and text, how they participate in meaning making, and whether we are dealing with metaphorization and allegory. We will see that the starting point is a concrete narrative unit, and from this we will derive multiple meanings throughout the text. An oscillation between literal and metaphorical meanings seems to be the author's trademark. This exploration appears to support the argument concerning Tompa's whole oeuvre that embodied experience, different modes of perception, and sensory language are prominent features in this prose.

² This paper is an extract from the extended and further developed version of my lecture for the conference on *Poetics and Semantics of Literary Representations of the Head and its Parts* held on 13 January 2024 at Pázmány Péter Catholic University, Budapest. In this lecture I studied all five of Tompa's novels and in each the role of a part of the head: in *Top to Tail*, *Two Doctors in Transylvania* I examined the figure of the head, in *Omertà* the ear as a subtext in the Riffaterrian sense, and in her recent work *Often We Don't Die*, the figure of the eye. The role of the body is most prominent in *Top to tail*, where the body is a code that provides a way of approaching the whole emancipatory era represented. The study of the five novels (with the two others studied here) puts together a whole image of a face (mouth, head, ears, tongue, eyes) as, in a sense, a metaphor of Tompa's oeuvre.

³ E.g. *Helikon's* special issue on *Medical Humanities*, Volume 68, no 1, 2022.

⁴ Györgyi Földes speaks about Punday's theory: "He argues that although the body always fits into a sign system, it also points beyond the text, preserves cultural and thematic influences, points to its sociological and anthropological frames, and is influenced to some extent by the personality of the author." (Földes 2018, 27)

1. The dictator's mouth

Andrea Tompa's first novel is *The Hangman's House*, published in 2010, the most analyzed chapter of which is entitled "The Mouth". This chapter is the third in a novel of 38 loosely linked chapters, in which schoolchildren assemble a living image of the dictator's face at the behest of a teacher. It is also a key chapter, since, according to Júlia Szilágyi, it contains the key sentence of the novel, which suggests that the hangman's house is only a fiction. Perhaps this is the most analysed chapter of the novel because it is easy to extract from the text and it offers an easily interpretable metaphor or at least it seems to be an easily interpretable one. According to one interpretation, the power of the metaphor is related to its comprehensibility, namely that it is easily understood by the recipient: "Andrea Tompa's novel has the great merit of making this reality comprehensible to everyone without any embellishment, with this powerful metaphor." (Szilágyi 2010, 83)

Most critics and academics interpret it as a metaphor of the communist regime, showing how dictatorship works through a cult of personality. Éva Bányai emphasizes that the totalitarian system is inscribed on the body,⁵ Flóra Kovács assumes the creation of the tableau as one of the "incorporation techniques of the regime" (Kovács 2011, 15) and attributes its description to the author's intention to illustrate it. In my opinion, if this were the case, namely that the author only wanted to illustrate something with this scene, it would detract from its aesthetic value. Kovács calls this image "redundant, but at the same time inventive" (Kovács 2011, 15), where in the case of the first adjective it is not entirely clear what the critic means. Perhaps we might think that although it "does not carry new information", it "represents an additional element in communication that facilitates reception" (Kovács 2011, 15).

The characteristic and authorial decision that the protagonist of the novel, the girl, should represent the dictator's mouth, i.e. his speech organ and not any other part of his body, is read in different ways by critics and scholars. Kovács sees in this that the individual can only appear as the "mouthpiece" of the regime (Kovács 2011, 15), while Orsolya András understands her as the opposite, as a signifier of silencing, as the regime's "intention to silence" individuals. (András 2023, 224) As

⁵ "The Formation into image, the embodiment: the dictatorship-figure that emerges from the unconscious, but still *participating* bodies that consequently take *part* in it, is also a regime metaphor: they all form the dictatorship, the bodies are "constructing" it, which also raises the (memory) creating power of fiction: the existence of (fictional) doubles and the space of fear constructed by the image(s), just as the hangman's house was built by the memory to have something to fear." Bányai, Éva. 2016. *Fordulat-próza. Átmenetnarratívák a kortárs magyar irodalomban*. [Prose of the Turn: Transitional narratives in contemporary Hungarian literature], Kolozsvár: Erdélyi Múzeum Egyesület. 36-37.

Magdolna Balogh has pointed out: in the chapter “At the Tear Man”, the girl learns that it is necessary to speak, that trauma can be dealt with by telling one's own story, though only silently” (Balogh 2023, 89). In this sense, the novel itself can be considered as subversive counter-speech (András 2023, 233) to this silencing intention, given that it is the story of the girl narrated by a third-person narrator.

The dictator's name is not written down once in the text. He is referred to as “One-ear” (*Félfülű*), because the side profile on his pictorial representations does not allow the viewer to see more than one ear. We have seen that this image of a face made up of bodies functions as a metaphor, but Szilágyi goes even further and speaks of “an image with symbolic power”, that is, she understands the “tableau” as a symbol that is stronger than the metaphor, and one that affects the whole novel. Szilágyi, moreover, considers this chapter to be “one of the best resolved chapters of the novel.” (Szilágyi, 2011)

This chapter, understood as a *mise en abyme*, can be a “small mirror” (diminishing mirror) of the whole novel, in so far as it seeks to show the “face” of a dictatorship from the bottom, from the point of view of an adolescent girl, told in an “undisclosed order” in successive chapters. The face, made up of ignorant children who do not know their roles as parts, visible only from above, can be juxtaposed with the text: is there a position or point of view that unites the pieces and makes them whole? Does the reader get a picture of the period, of the Ceaușescu dictatorship?

The chapter, which consists of a single long sentence, opens with this sentence in medias res: “*What part of him are you?*” (Tompa 2021b, 22, original italics) This follow-up conversation with classmate Csabi, waiting at the trolley-bus station, embeds the ekphrasis in a narrative framework and creates readerly expectations, since it is not yet known to which person and to which part the question refers. A conversation with a classmate awakens the girl to what has happened earlier. The ekphrastic text thus describes not only the image, but also the situation in which the girl runs away from the scene of the conversation, while becoming aware of her role in a living image.

Drawing on the analysis of Mónika Dánél, who interprets this text as an ekphrasis, reading it from the point of view of the relationship which exists between image and language (2018, 115), we can say that language is not transparent, as the text calls attention to its own linguistic composition which constructs itself as a speech. In this way, instead of using language to create an image of the photograph in the reader, whether known or not to the reader, self-referentiality becomes the primary concern, the rhythm of the text pulling the reader along. Language draws

attention to itself primarily through repetition. In the following passage, the lexeme of “pictures” is used three times in succession and a little later a fourth time, which gives particular emphasis to the figure of the leader as a fiction created by visuality:

I am him, or more precisely we are all him, because we're all stood in nice, tidy order and we turn on the word of command and we're him: but he himself doesn't exist anywhere, nobody's ever seen him, never: Tátá's seen him and my uncle Pista as well, they've sat with him at meetings, but now *he's just pictures, pictures, pictures, not a person, just pictures* (Andrea Tompa, 2021, 28, my italics).

In the second quotation, the text employs enumeration and repetition as its main rhetorical tools:

and they've become a picture, *mouth, hair, skin, eyes, floppy bow-tie and ears*, but they can't see it, can't hear anything, aren't looking at anything, saying *nothing, nothing, nothing*, If you turn to the left you become him at once, and now “left turn!”, and they feel no pain in the January frost. (Andrea Tompa, 2021, 29, my italics)

Here the word *nothing* is repeated three times, as a signifier of silence (*saying nothing*). The image created in the dynamics of proximity and distance of subjects identified as parts is only assembled into a whole in the mind. We are witnessing the subject becoming an image through language, as here the gesture of silencing and later freezing becomes dominant in the final lines. The final phrase refers to this freezing, to the immobilized moment of becoming a picture: “in the January frost”, the narrative voice concludes the chapter-long sentence. The repetition makes the language lyrical, the rhythm of the text accelerates towards the end of the chapter, which at once reveals the monotony of the live image, the repetition of the movement to the words of command and the subsequent running, the accelerating rhythm of the flight, the agitation, the negative emotions provoked by the girl's subsequent confrontation with the part of the body of the dictator she had to display: “*Now I'm his disgusting mouth*”. The mouth here is not only an organ of speech, but also a ‘sexual organ’ in the sense that it can be understood in terms of sexuality since it is represented in a highly eroticized way in the text. The dictator's mouth, which does not utter slogans – it only “vomits” out letters without meaning – nevertheless begins to possess the adolescent girl sexually in her imagination, creating in her a feeling of disgust, first with physical contact and then with herself. The detail is full of adjectives (two and three adjective structures) and reinforces the disgust in the recipient by alliterations, repeating the initial sounds 'f' and 'h' (in Hungarian: “*fehér, fröcsögő betűket*” and “*batalmas, habzó száj*”):

Now I'm his disgusting mouth, came suddenly into her head, and she felt sick as she thought of herself and the overalls that she'd not long taken off, she felt as if cold, drooling lips were kissing her defenceless body, as if this huge frothing mouth were vomiting white, foaming letters over her, and she was becoming a bit of living, loathsome, pink flesh, torn off and displayed to public view" (Tomba, 2021, 27)

In the English version the "f" is dominant (frothing, foaming) and the alliteration is given by the words "living, loathsome" and "were vomiting white".

The red dress that she has to wear takes on multiple meanings as the text progresses, first with the romanticizing description of the dictator – in which his mouth takes on feminine features – ("blood-red cherry lips"), blood as a colour, then the dress as a representation of the mouth, "blood-red overall", and then the mythology of the victim ("the transfusion of blood, the child's blood" for the demon to survive). These processes of metaphorization through transference provide the structural arc of the chapter: first we start with a post-situation and questioning ("What *part of him* are you?"), after that there is a misinterpretation ("Aren't we *letters*?"), a withholding of information and lack of information ("no one had officially told them *what* they were portraying"), a lack of self-reflection ("and so the girl hadn't thought about what the colours meant"), a recollection ("How many *reds* do you think there were?"), and a realization or recognition ("it has suddenly dawned on her that she could only be *his mouth*"). In the middle of the text it turns out that the reference of the picture is perhaps only a fiction ("*the tiny original of the picture* [...] He won't come because he doesn't exist"), the girl makes an identification ("Now I'm his disgusting *mouth*"). After that the problem is raised to community level ("we are all him") and finally comes mythologization ("it is I, I, I in *my blood-red overalls* that keep him alive" and "this blood transfusion, this *children's blood* which the demon receives every week to keep him alive"). (Tomba 2021b, 29, my emphasis)⁶ Thus the chain of signifiers results in a continuous metaphorical shift: *part of him* – *letters* – *what* – *reds* – *blood-red cherry lips* – *his mouth* – *we are all him* – *blood-red overalls* – *children's blood*. The body becomes a sign, these signs are constantly open to interpretation, and are sometimes referred to as the signified, sometimes given meaning through multiple transpositions, whereby the children are represented as mythical victims, as unconscious upholders of the system.

⁶ Although the direct quotations and internal monologues are in italics in the text, I have written them in roman type to make the emphasis clear.

In many ways, it is interesting to compare this chapter with the one in György Dragomán's novel *The Bone Fire* (*Máglya*, first Hungarian edition 2014), in which the protagonist, Emma, finds the torn photograph of the dictator in the school's bathroom after the revolution. Emma continues to dismantle the pictures of the previously damaged wooden panels. Here, only pieces of the photograph remain and recall the whole image, while in *The Hangman's House* the whole gigantic picture is pieced together. In both cases, the contemplation and recollection of the image gives the characters insight into the system. In Dragomán's case, "everyone just lied" becomes a theoretical truth; in Andrea Tompa's case, the mode of operation is more complex, understood on several levels: the doubt in the existence of the dictator, the disappearance of the individual as subject, and more specifically, the Romanianization of the school. In the context of this parallel, Bányai points out that the scene recalled in *The Bone Fire* "becomes a system theory told in an accessible way, at a child's level." (Bányai 2016, 91)

An interesting similarity is that eroticism is also present here, because while Emma is looking at the One-Ear's mouth, the girls are talking about kissing in the toilet, the narration of which has textual similarities with Tompa's text quoted above:

I don't want to listen but still I hear as they mention some boy who told everyone that he had been *kissing* someone, and it was real grown-up kissing, not only her cheek, but *her mouth* too; [...] Even in the semidarkness I recognize the curly hair of the Comrade General, *a piece of his earlobe, a piece remaining from his mouth* as well, the exact middle of *his lips*, the part that was always shiny; enough of the gold lettering remains for all the slogans and mottoes to complete themselves in my head.

[...]

I reach over to the wooden panel, and with the nails of my thumbs I begin to scratch off pieces of Comrade *General's lips*, *I feel the repulsion in my throat*, but even so I can't stop. (Dragomán, 2021, 64-65, My italics)

While Emma is the first-person narrator of her own story, Tompa's text uses a third-person narrative, but there is a striking similarity between the two novels in the language of the narrative based on the figure of congeries and the use of the coordinative clauses. The two simultaneous narratives are layered on top of each other: the narrated experience of the others' lovemaking and the protagonist's tactile perception of it, its aggressive, destructive nature (she scratches the pieces of the

mouth with her nails), and it is as if both simultaneously evoked a sense of disgust in her. The gesture of putting the pieces together is typical of the period when the system was in operation, as we have seen in the case of the dictator's picture, which served to maintain a cult of personality, and the period after the overthrow of the system is characterized by the disintegration of images and representations.

As historical context, it should be pointed out that the pictorial and sculptural representations of dictators served to maintain dictatorships and cults of personality in the communist countries of Eastern Europe, including Hungary. The destruction of these symbols was a quintessential act of rebellion against the regime. Such was the case with the destruction of the statue of Stalin during the 1956 revolution in Budapest. The picture of the statue's head between the rails in Blaha Lujza Square captures the iconic gesture of the destruction of the statue. For decades, pieces of the statue were hidden as secret, forbidden souvenirs. The ear was purchased by the Hungarian National Museum for half a million forints in 2009, with the help of a donor.

2. The writer's tongue and the B6

Home's protagonist is an unnamed writer who is headed for a class reunion in her hometown. An important theme of *Home* is to show the links between language and home. The first online review after the novel's publication in the UK also reflects this in its title: "The only liveable space is language: *Home* by Andrea Tompa." (Schreiber 2024) The problem of language is central in the narrative-reflexive structure, and one aspect of this is the relationship between language and home. If we subject the corpus to a machine text analysis and explore it in a quantitative manner, we find that the word *nyelv* (language, tongue) occurs 63 times in its root form, and if we count all other forms, including the subjunctive forms and word compounds, we can find 289 occurrences. By comparison, the most frequent occurrences of nouns are the phonemes "fiú" (boy) (156) and "festő" (painter) (111), which are primarily character names ("Fiú" in the English translation is the *Son*, and *Painter* is used for "Festő").⁷

The chapter "Tongue in Mouth", Chapter 15 in the 45-chapter novel, which tells the story of a visit to the dentist, may be a *mise en abyme* (small mirror) of this

⁷ This analysis is made with Voyant Tools program. <http://www.voyant-tools.org/>

language–home problem. This is the chapter which the author read in an interview,⁸ and which was published first in English translation as *Tongue in Mouth* (Tomba 2021c) before the publication of the complete text. The text plays with the phonemic ambiguity of the Hungarian word *nyelv* ('1. language 2. tongue 3. style') using both the speech organ of the writer-protagonist and the dentist's medical style of speech (the use of the plural first person, which he adopts involuntarily): "It feels like new, and adopting *Dr. Rostam's style*, she adds, even though we haven't touched these teeth at all." (Tomba 2024, my italics) In the original text the word *nyelv* is used "Rostam doktor *nyelvé*", an ambiguity that cannot be reproduced in English, and so the Hungarian word *nyelv* is translated as either *tongue* or *style*. This is why Jozefina Komporaly, in her one-sentence introduction to her translation, may speak of "the complex connections between teeth and home", and not between tongue and home, but on closer inspection, there are several different connections. Although it is true that the protagonist first complains to the dentist about the foreignness of her tongue, later on she also talks about grinding her teeth and fillings.

Elements of medical jargon are also incorporated into the text, representing the problem of the familiar and the foreign in multiple ways. For example, first of all the scientific name of the teeth (B6, B7, B8) are used, then "the back of the tongue" and the marked appropriation, i.e. "bridging" in quotation marks. The very title – *Tongue in Mouth* – sounds strange, since it is obvious where the tongue as an organ is located, but this clarification is also necessary because of the polysemy of the Hungarian word *nyelv*, and it can be the source of humour or irony as well. In the first sentence, the writer's own tongue is thematized as a foreign tongue: "So she's ready to discuss the issue of foreign tongues, or to put it differently, the issue of one's *own foreign tongue* in the mouth, with Dr. Rostam." (Tomba 2024, 133, my italics) In the opening of the sentence, the adjectival structure "foreign tongue" does not appear as the hitherto thematized "idiom spoken as a non-native language", although this would correspond to the reader's expectation.

The writer then complains that her tongue seems to have grown, and we are later informed that the teeth B6 or B7 feel as "if somehow they weren't really her own". During the reading, the writer is alienated from her own text:

Her tongue, like a heavy inelastic block, is barely rolling, always smashing into either the B6 or the B7, or even the barely there yet still semiprotruding B8,

⁸ When she was interviewed, the author found it suitable and easy to pick out of the text and read it out: Andrea Tomba: Home, In conversation with the author László Valuska. <https://www.margofeszt.hu/hu/fesztival/program/tomba-andrea-haza>, (5:00 -11:18)

the latter seemingly displaying sharp edges despite Dr. Rostam's attempts at smoothing it at least six times with that slow but extremely loud drill. The text intended for reading out loud has become inaccessible in the course of the process, *despite consisting of her own sentences, woven together slowly and meticulously. She can no longer relate to it, and, what's more, the words pulverize like sand dust as soon as they are uttered and said out loud.*" (Tomba 2024, 135 My italics)

Rebeka Seres draws attention to the fact that the feeling of nervousness arises in the process of utterance, in speech, which can be contrasted with the process of writing. "For the writer at the centre, it is also a problem when the writing becomes spoken word. [...] First she goes to the dentist with her problem, blaming it on the sharpness of his teeth, but eventually she realises that the problem is her struggle with language. And by pronouncing it, she alienates herself from what he has to say [...]." (Seres 2020, 29)

Then the parallel between the writer and Dr Rostam is established: the doctor, of Persian origin, who arrived in the country at the age of two, had to learn the correct way of articulating sounds (not through the nose but through the mouth), which he mastered perfectly. Strangeness must be disguised, in his interpretation – both the dentist and the writer seek to disguise it with perfection. In the novel, the writer herself disguises (and it is rarely unveiled) how painful it is for her still to be considered a stranger, an emigrant in her new homeland even if she did not have to change language.

If we allow ourselves an autobiographical and auto-referential parallel with the author herself, we may consider a quotation from a Facebook post by Andrea Tomba on 18 October 2019, in which she briefly explores the question of the emigrant writer: "I am increasingly preoccupied with the not at all theoretical question of until when we are considered immigrants and from when." She also stresses the problem of language, i.e. concepts and designations: "(If it seems that I am playing with words, then yes, I am. Words are dreadfully important.)" (Tomba 2019) This problem – namely her ambivalent relationship with her new home – certainly plays a role in the fact that the protagonist's mother tongue is never identified as Hungarian, nor is it stated that she lives in Hungary. Furthermore, the author wants to present the subject as universal. The fiction continues in this direction and explores this ambivalent status in the next chapter, entitled "I'm Not an Émigré". The mouth hides the tongue, but it cannot be hidden at the dentist's. The question "So where do you come from?" (Tomba 2024, 139) sounds painfully at the end of the chapter, and presumably the amalgam fillings have unmasked the writer. This

chapter speaks of the writer's persistent sense of alienation in her own country. It can also be interpreted as an allegory of the strangeness that is to be concealed, but is repeatedly revealed, and an allegory of the *stranger in the familiar*. The theory of *transculturalism* can be brought into the interpretation here, in which the concept of transfer is particularly suited to this problem.

The concept of transfer can be understood as a voyage of discovery of the foundations of cultural dynamics, with the aim of discovering the *alien in the self*, the known in the alien. Josip Užarević, quoting Descartes, transforms *cogito ergo sum* into *transfero ergo sum*, calling for a new exploration of cultural transfer.” (Thomka, 2018, 40 My italics)

In the context of the whole novel, the problem of the alienation of the self is part of the process of the writer's search for her mother tongue, of her writing, and in order to do this, she must alienate herself from her mother tongue. In contemporary literary studies, questions of switching languages and the relationship of translingual writers to language have become increasingly important. Akira Mizubayashi, a Japanese writer who has published in French, said: “La première qualité d'un écrivain est d'être étranger à sa propre langue.” (A writer's greatest virtue is his ability to be alienated from his own language). (Darfeuille, 2014) In this sense, the novel's protagonist is also trying to renew herself as a writer by distancing herself from her mother tongue. Translation is one way of moving away from the mother tongue, as when the writer is forced to think in English⁹ in a conversation with an American girl, Kincső on her way to a class reunion. We also see this in the question of the translation of *salvation* (üdvösség) and the reflections on it.

According to another, similar approach, writing is not based on the habitual use of the mother tongue, but on the creation of a new language, a poetic language, one might say. One language-shifting Bosnian-German author considers it so:

For me, writing itself is a *foreign language*. For every story, for every play, for every new creation, I have to learn a new language: I have to find the narrator's voice, I have to decide on my figure's specific verbal characteristics, and I have to learn and keep the rhythm and flow of the whole. [...] A *language* is the only *country without borders*. Writers, indeed anyone, can (and should) use the privilege to make a language bigger, better, and more beautiful by planting a wordtree here or there, one never grown before.” (Stanišić 2008, My italics)

⁹The writer can express herself better in English when talking about intimate or painful topics, as in the case of her presentation for the conference “Guest in your country”: “Fortunately, the talk will be in English. It's reassuring to avoid the traps of one's mother tongue, with its exceedingly complicated twists and endless ramifications. Instead, there's an opportunity to proceed in English, as if navigating a safer and less busy dual carriageway, where things can be named a lot easier because they already have names in foreign languages. No need to be afraid, foreignness is a safe shield.” (Tompa 2024, 8)

This kind of literary ingenuity and Tompa's individual word creations are particularly well exemplified in *Home*, for instance in “*házabetegség*” a literal translation of “homesickness”, “*házaszerelem*” (homelove), “*emberszomj*” (thirst for human), “*szóhámozás*” (peeling back of words), and so on.

This linguistic strangeness is heightened by the fact that, on the one hand, a Russian phrase in italics, printed in Cyrillic letters, is wedged into the text, which at the same time testifies to a positive emotional attitude:

In this time-gap, where, using her favourite Russian phrase, there was от нечего делать, and, as a result, she was overwhelmed with inertia, she could have had them replaced indeed, even if not with sparkling white but with the recommended shade 2 composite filling, in lieu of the old gray metal mixture, of mercury and another metal, perhaps silver.” (Tompa 2024, 136)

Quotations in Russian and French are often literary quotations while English ones represent an everyday communication tool. The phrase “от нечего делать” (“nothing to do”) is clearly a reference to Anton Chekhov, since this concept is at the centre of his poetics.¹⁰ He also wrote a short story with this title (“Nothing to be done!”, 1886), and it is of course also found in his drama, *The Three Sisters*. In the second act, Andrey says to Ferapont: “Today, *out of sheer boredom*, I took up this book—old university lectures, and I couldn't help laughing.” (Chekhov, 2022) This – the fact that it is her favourite phrase – cannot be a coincidence, since, if we look at autobiographical references, the author's work as a theatre critic and theatre scholar is well known.

Moreover there is a quotation in Hungarian translation from a Russian poet in exile, Joseph Brodsky, who, starting from a similar dental theme, bases his poem “In the Lake District” (or in another translation “At the edge of the Lake”) on the contrast between the badly preserved yet valuable teeth and the teaching of rhetoric: “She would have had the opportunity to have her large, dark amalgam fillings replaced with pretty, white ones in two, maximum three appointments. *Wisdom tooth, for, Hiding in the mouth, / The ruins of the Parthenon cleaner*, as Joseph Brodsky writes, preoccupied, like all poets, with foreign matter in the mouth.” (Tompa 2024, 136) I would like to point out that the English translation of the chapter contains a longer excerpt from Brodsky's poem – originally written in Russian – than the Hungarian

¹⁰ Moreover, the same Russian phrase already appeared in the first chapter, and this repetition only emphasizes it: “She stops in front of a stationery shop, having just remembered a favourite Russian expression: от нечего делать, meaning idleness. The reason for going into the shop is simply to use up excess time.” (Tompa 2024, 11)

one. The Hungarian translation “*romnál tisztább romok szájamban lakoztak*” (“my mouth was inhabited by ruins cleaner than ruins”) allows the above interpretation.

I have interpreted the Parthenon metaphor that appears in this quotation in the light of the whole poem. Here, the Wisdom tooth is given a symbolic meaning (written with a capital W), as a contrast between the old home and the new home, and is identified with the cradle of culture (the Parthenon), where the common trait is decay, desolation, and wisdom, since it was dedicated to the goddess of wisdom, Pallas Athena. On the other hand, the identification is based on a metonymic, geographic contact: the other continent (Europe). The teeth in the mouth in this poem, as we have seen in *Home*, are also markers of the old country – decaying (the teeth of an emigrant speaker bearing the traces of a “rotting culture”), but still reminiscent of the homeland (cf. amalgam fillings waiting to be replaced).

However, the poet referred to it in an interview as a humorous poem, and when talking about its genesis, he took the text literally. He responded to the interviewer’s claim – “I think of the metaphor of the ruins of the Parthenon as decaying teeth” – thus: “The whole point is that is not metaphor actually – it is very literal especially since I came to Ann Arbor with my Russian dental work, so to speak.” (Brodsky 1979, 64)

In the Brodsky poem, however, there is no mention of foreign matter, but rather the focus is the theme of the dentist. On the other hand, the figure of Brodsky plays a very important role in the whole novel, and concerning him, in the Hungarian tradition we might link him to Sándor Márai, in the sense that, at least in the interpretation of the narrator, as an emigrant poet he considers language to be his homeland. The chapter “The Speech” reflects on the moment when Brodsky was expelled by the Soviet authorities. He was asked why he would not emigrate to Israel: “According to the record, all Brodsky had to say was: ‘Я русский литератор.’ I am a Russian writer. This sentence meant that he wanted to live there. In the Russian language.” (Tomba 2024, 303)

The foreignness of the tongue and the teeth is represented by *the own*, which becomes strange from one moment to another (this is only perceptible to the subject, it is a sensation). The third foreignness, the visible foreignness, is “the foreign matter in the mouth”, the amalgam filling, which contrasts sharply with the colour of the teeth. It is alien, yet it represents the abandoned home. The emigrants carry the abandoned home with them, like the amalgam fillings that the patient refuses to replace. If we take it as a metaphor of adaptation, she does not want to adapt to her new home, she wants to keep something of her homeland. The figure

of the “common mouth” is formed; this heritage creates a community, somewhat ironically, between those from the old homeland.

This chapter also condenses the whole novel by introducing the contrast between the Painter and the writer: the difference between the two media and artistic attitudes. The Painter is immersed in the study of the head, in the spirit of portrait painting, while the writer’s domain is language, in which he does not feel at home. Outside this chapter, the whole text of the novel also makes fascinating use of the ambiguity of the word *nyelv* (“tongue, language”) and the concrete meanings of the organs of speech and the abstract meaning of the expression. The title of the chapter in question (“Tongue in Mouth”) is also alluded to in the section on the character Ari, when the loss of one’s own language (mother tongue), the lack of an authentic, self-identical language and the conquest of English are also discussed: “Proof of the fact that *language has ceased to exist in the mouth*,¹¹ using instead other people’s borrowed language, which for them is at most a hired hut, a cheap bread and breakfast, a rental room but never a proper home. Triggers.” (Tompa 2024, 123, my italics) Ari’s loss of language is reported by the narrator: “Ari rarely posts, and if she does, then it’s usually some drawings by her children or herself, most recently she posted a series of screams – five ageless and genderless faces screaming. *Teeth, tongue, veil of the palate in the wind*, long wrinkles on the faces, all drawn in biro. One of the drawings is on a thick restaurant napkin, from a Punjabi Restaurant. Other times, she posts photos or films, without any *captions*.” (Tompa 2024, 125, my italics)

Here again, the text brings into play the semantics of the second member of the compound word *veil of the palate*, “*inyvitorla*” (*vitorla* ‘sail’) in Hungarian, and amplifies it with the locative (in the wind), while the word *nyelv* is also used in two senses in the passage.¹² Whereas here the gesture of howling makes the inside of the mouth visible, the description of the unrestrained laughter in *The Hangman’s House* becomes linguistically very similar: “and the blood-red *wvula*¹³ could be seen in Juci’s wide-open mouth, tossed in the gale of laughter that tore, free and unrestrained, from her throat, like the heavy, bloodstained but victorious banner of a fighter for freedom standing proud atop the peak.” (Tompa 2021b, 257, my italics) We may note the parallel between the two phrases (*veil of the palate in the wind* and *tongue in*

¹¹ Here again the choice of ‘language’ rather than ‘tongue’ eliminates the linguistic ambiguity, though in Hungarian it is one word (*nyelv*.)

¹² It is used once for *tongue* and twice for *captions* in a new sentence: “Nyelv nincs.”

¹³ Although the Hungarian texts both (*Home* and *The Hangman’s House*) use the same word (*inyvitorla*), the two translators rendered it in two different ways. In the citation from *Home* is translated *veil of the palate*. But in the second case using the word *wvula* this metaphor (sail - banner) based on the common idea of fluttering in the wind is not strongly founded.

mouth): both are locative phrases syntagms. This helps to maintain the simultaneity of concrete and figurative meanings.

The tongue is linked to the home not only through speech, but also through gastronomy as an organ of taste. The painter misses the flavours of his home, the taste of the spice in his chosen homeland is different, even though the name is the same: “His *tongue* and his tastebuds, those eighty-year-old warts, which are none other than his memories, do know that tarragon is French back home and Russian over here.” (Tomba 2024, 155, my italics) In another part of the text, when reading the father's observation dossier, the writer ironically contrasts the materiality of writing, of fiction (page number), and “reality” (the physical materiality of the person observed):

According to page 276, in “*Toma's fictional mouth the tongue finds it hard to roll, it has always found it hard, perhaps even from the very beginning, because 'Toma' had never really believed in language, while he is displaying threatening behaviour, he points out that one can also use language in order to lie [...]*” (Tomba 2024, 206, my italics)

Andrea Tomba succeeds in exploiting the multidirectional possibilities of meaning-making offered by this dental scene. Perhaps the play with the word *'nyelv'* is too obvious, too easy, and she has made too much of this linguistic correspondence in her writing. However, it is a fine example of how a personal, painful trauma can be stripped away and wrapped in simple ordinariness.

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