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Multilingual Locals and Accented Reading as a Remediation of Shared Multi-Ethnic Memories: Ádám Bodor's *The Sinistra Zone* and *The Birds of Verhovina*

To read the names from the slabs with your hands you have to tear off the moss. [...] Besides this, there must be ruins of languages, words, ruins of letters, of this movable memory. (Yuri Andrukhovych 2018, 5)

East-Central Europe as multilingual

East-Central Europe as a historical in-between territory where dislocating maps have for centuries continuously re-framed static spaces and their inhabitants merges traces of different national and ethnic memories.¹ The cultural interferences and juxtapositions mean that the internal heterogeneity and hybridity can be seen as key aspects of the East-Central European cultural space, where “multilingual self-awareness” (Thomka 2018, 34) is probably the most common human experience.

This essay argues that cultural interferences mean the multi-ethnic hybridity of East-Central Europe as a shared territory between different national and ethnic groups can be seen as a common non-national context. I chart how the phenomenon of “multilingual locals” (Laachir, Marzagora and Orsini 2018) deconstructs ethnic and national spaces, and also literary hierarchies. I focus on Hungarian literature as a medium for multilingual cultural memories that restructure Hungarian cultural perception in a way that results in the Hungarian language oscillating between accents. The novels of Ádám Bodor that I examine transform the deterri-

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1 East-Central Europe as a geopolitical term in its broadest sense covers Poland, Hungary, Czechia and Slovakia, and also “the Baltic states, Belarus, and Ukraine, as well as southeastern Europe and the Balkans, Brandenburg-Prussia and – for the second half of the 20th century – the German Democratic Republic (East Germany)” (Puttkamer 2015, 1). A visual conceptualisation of Europe, and especially East-Central Europe, by a group of French-Hungarian artists *Société Réaliste* (2007) shows a dense veining of borders because of the stratification of different maps from different periods.

torialised and then reterritorialised Hungarian language into an audible archival medium of multilingual cultural spaces that create “located perspectives” (Laachir, Marzagora and Orsini 2018, 6) and juxtapose potentially conflicting mnemonic legacies and differences.

New research on multilingualism in literature argues that “a located and multilingual approach shows that the imperial centre-colonial (or quasi-colonial) periphery axis was only one among the vectors of circulation, that European literature was also co-constituted through this axis rather than being a prior formation, and that language, or rather multilingualism, may indeed be a better starting point than the nation for comparative literature” (Laachir, Marzagora and Orsini 2018, 7). While these new “located perspectives”, which also imply located theories and methodologies, are linked to colonial areas, these ideas are also fruitful on many levels for East-Central European contexts. The heterogeneity and hybridity of the East-Central European cultural space shows many parallels with postcolonial cases, but it is also important to highlight the differences. Unlike in many postcolonial areas, the power relations here have been inverted multiple times in history, driven by the impulse to seek retribution for previous repressions.² National and ethnic memories, which are different from one another but have become impregnated with each other in the course of their coexistence, are layered onto one another together with power hierarchies and asymmetries that have also been altered because of the changes to geopolitical maps.³

Beáta Thomka explains that the organic unity of the nation, language and literature is denaturalised and restructured by new literary phenomena. A multitude of literary works find their audiences beyond their linguistic and national borders, and moreover, they can even originate outside the original national languages and cultures (Thomka 2018, 48–49). Contemporary authors from the region,

2 Transylvania is an example of a ‘movable’ multi-ethnic territory, where the Romanian population was oppressed under the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, but when Transylvania was re-mapped as part of Romania after 1920, the Hungarian population turned into an ethnic minority. During the communist period, strong Romanian nationalist tendencies ruled and the Hungarian names were Romanised. The re-mapping in 1920 is also the basis of a literary phenomenon that has been described from the Hungarian perspective as “Transborder Hungarian Literature”, meaning the Hungarian minority literature in Romania, Slovakia, Ukraine and former Yugoslavia.

3 Like Transylvania, Transcarpathia (*Zakarpattia Oblast*) in Ukraine is a historical region on which different maps were constantly superimposed. The term *Transcarpathian Ukrainian Literature* defines specifically the literature of the *rusini* (Ruthenians) “who were born in the territories of present Eastern Slovakia (Priashiv region) and the Transcarpathian (*Zakarpats'koï*) region of the Ukraine” (Babatová 2001, 45). For a detailed historical summary of the development of Transcarpathian Ukrainian Literature in the twentieth century, see Babatová 2001.

such as Agota Kristof, Herta Müller, Terézia Mora, Nicol Ljubić, Melinda Nadj Abonji, Alexandar Hemon, Saša Stanišić, Ismet Pricić, Ilma Rakusa, and Dubravka Ugrešić are bilingual or trilingual authors whose poetic languages create specific “commuting grammars” (Thomka 2018, 146) between different languages, and juxtapose cultural worlds and social experiences. Consequently, their affiliation cannot be described using just a single national literary category, but they need to be analysed within multiple category systems. These multiple affiliations to different languages, cultures and spaces – which do not assume that there must be any loss or lack of origin, identity or totality – allow the works to be viewed as sites of negotiation between cultures and nations. Their inner linguistic otherness dislocates the traditional descriptive categories of literary history and of national literary canons. As Beáta Thomka claims: “The cultural homogeneity is counterbalanced by becoming multi-faceted, and the national literary horizons and hierarchy are replaced by a non-centred, networked, transcultural relationship system” (2018, 19). Marko Juvan (2019a, 2019b) joins Thomka in focusing on the aesthetic potentiality of multilingualism in East-Central Europe and outlines the theoretical possibilities of “post-monolingualism”⁴. Juvan points out that hegemonic monolingualism of the official language, and monolingual conceptual systems and states in the East-Central European geo-cultural space reduce the multilingual environments and complex identities in the region. It is by creating local social and historical connections that the multilingual literature of the East-Central European region could mark a new direction in the research into multilingualism that focuses on national, ethnic, class, gender intersectional, hierarchical, historical, and other stratifications and configurations of social and historical localities.⁵

Multilingual and multi-ethnic memory: acoustic poetics of invented names

Ádám Bodor (b. 1936) is an ethnic Hungarian born in Cluj-Napoca/Kolozsvár in Transylvania, who emigrated to Hungary in 1982 because of the communist dicta-

⁴ The idea of the “post-monolingual condition” was conceptualised by Yasemin Yildiz in 2012.

⁵ It is significant that in the recently published influential volume *Multilingual Literature as World Literature* (Hiddleston and Ouyang 2021), the region is completely absent and does not feature in global circulation. One of the East-Central European multilingual borderlands is explored in *Literary Multilingualism in the Borderlands: The Challenge of Trieste* (Deganutti 2023).

torial and anti-minority regime of Nicolae Ceaușescu in Romania.⁶ His novels are examples of “commuting grammars”, in which the texts are written with a “multilingual self-awareness” (Thomka 2018, 146, 34–35) that transmits and translates the multilingual experience and polyphonic cultural memory of East-Central Europe. They create localised perspectives by juxtaposing conflicting mnemonic legacies and differences, and by remediating them as audible vernacular memory into dispersed and accented contemporary reading experiences.

Bodor’s poetic language is extraordinary because it transforms the Hungarian literary language into a fictitious blending. His oeuvre evokes the memory of a multi-ethnic community in the past by inscribing in it a continuous oscillation between the memory of other languages, covering Armenian, Yiddish, Hebrew, Ruthenian, Transylvanian Saxon, Zipser German, Romanian, Ukrainian and Polish, which is translated by his texts into a Hungarian linguistic and poetic experience. As I will analyse below, his novels transform the deterritorialised and reterritorialised Hungarian language into the medium of preservation for the multilingual cultural spaces. By being set in multi-ethnic borderlands, Bodor’s novels create a fictitious, intermediate discursive space where the different cultural and multilingual references are inseparable and saturated with each other in the most organic way. By creating multi-ethnic and multilingual literary worlds, they indirectly question traditional thinking about languages and cultures that is based on the triad of nation, language and country.

Bodor’s novels feature multilingual hybrid characters and place names that provoke the monolingual reader. Their hybridity means the names can be pronounced in several ways and they inherently have a range of possible pronunciations. The novels therefore implicitly embody their readers as accented. Names are oscillating aural archives in which pronunciation will always preserve the aural memory of another language. If they are pronounced in only one language, there is a reductive expropriation of the shared linguistic, mnemonic and cultural border zone experience. Bodor’s fictitious multilingual textual borderland worlds are consequently remediated as aesthetic reading experiences that by their multilingual and accented nature “restructure cultural perception” (Erll 2011, 150)⁷ and

6 Under Nicolae Ceaușescu’s dictatorship, the non-Romanian cultural heritage in multi-ethnic Romania was progressively destroyed and the minority populations like the Hungarian minority in Transylvania, of which the writer himself was a member until he emigrated, was consistently Romanised.

7 Astrid Erll re-contextualises Wolfgang Iser’s triadic conceptualisation of the literary texts as the result of “fictionalising acts” (2011, 149–150), which is a relevant theoretical frame for Bodor’s novels because of the interplay of the real, such as names, and the imaginary in the fictional world that is created.

indirectly render the expropriating national(ist) interpretations impossible. Through reading with accents, or by oscillating between different pronunciations, and merging different languages and dialects as a post-monolingual condition, the literary text is embodied by the reader as an oral and aural medium. Through the accents, even the monolingual reader experiences a multilingual poetic world.

Bodor's first novel *The Sinistra Zone: Chapters of a Novel* (2013, *Sinistra körzet. Egy regény fejezetei*, 1992), is set somewhere in a Romanian, Ukrainian, Polish, and Moldovan border zone that appears to be an interface between real and imaginary worlds.

This secret vista – a crag that jutted out slightly beyond the spruces and firs – formed a rocky part of the crest of Pop Ivan Mountain. From it you could see far across the border to the bluish, rolling, forested hills of Ruthenia. Dark smoke rose from behind the furthest hills, perhaps from as far away as the open country beyond. As if night were already coming on, a purplish curtain draped the horizon to the east, but it faded with the rising sun. When, hours later, the valley filled with the opalescent lights of afternoon, the forest commissioner packed away his binoculars and picked up his hat: the reconnaissance had come to an end. Whether he had in fact caught a glimpse of what he sought on the slopes across the way – of the waxwing or some other sign of the Tungusic Flu approaching from bush to bush – this was to forever remain his secret; nor did I ever figure out why he had taken me – a simple harvester of wild fruits, and a stranger at that – along to the Ukrainian border that day. (Bodor 2013, 4)

In this fragment, “the hills of Ruthenia” (“a ruszin erdővidék”)⁸ appear together with the Ukrainian border, featuring as two different geographical markers, one showing the geopolitical existence of a contemporary state border, the other a trace of an ethnic group's existence. Both the Ukrainian border and the Ruthenian hills signal existing geopolitical entities, but they do so in very different ways. The history of the Ruthenians as an ethnic group without an independent state renders the border of the Ukrainian nation state a historical construct in this stratified, mobile historical perspective. Ruthenia signals its difference from the Ukrainian border as a contemporary geopolitical entity, since the Rusyns/Ruthenians are a stateless, cross-border ethnic group.⁹

⁸ In German “des ruthenischen Waldgebiets” (Bodor 1994, 6). As in the Hungarian text, Ruthenian in the German translation remains an adjective.

⁹ The Ruthenians, according to Paul Robert Magocsi “The Rusyns – also known as Carpatho-Rusyns, Carpatho-Russians, Carpatho-Ukrainians, Lemkos, Rusnaks, Ruthenians, and Uhro-Rusyns” (2002, vii), are a group of Slavic people living in East-Central Europe at the crossroads of contemporary Poland, Slovakia, Ukraine, and Romania. Carpathian Rus encompasses the Lemko Region in Poland, the Prešov Region in Slovakia, Subcarpathian Rus' in Ukraine, and Maramureș in Romania, northeastern Hungary, and the Vojvodina region of former Yugoslavia: “Rusyns have never

Astrid Erll observes that “literary works can display and juxtapose divergent and contested memories and create mnemonic multiperspectivity” (2011, 151). The English translation of Bodor’s novel encourages the reader to search for the country of Ruthenia, and this could be a good starting point for experiencing that mnemonic multiperspectivity. The text juxtaposes different territorial definitions and cartographic constructions from different eras. The description of the landscape layers the different geopolitical divisions of the space on top of each other as archived maps.¹⁰ The history of the Rusyns condenses and expresses the stratification of geopolitical maps, and the text recalls this continuous geopolitical re-framing of this ethnic group, which renders the construction of the border itself as a historically mobile phenomenon. Through the narratorial viewpoint, the natural landscape appears as an archive of historical changes, of the contesting and contested layered maps.¹¹ The narrator’s point of view has a local and internal historical consciousness that underlines the hybrid vernacular nature of the border region.

The “Ukrainian border” and “Tungusic Flu” create another interplay between the real and the imaginary. In the novel, the authorities postpone vaccination, which is consequently interpreted by locals as them having the power to postpone even the epidemic.

The ganders announced that everyone should go on home in peace since this winter would be epidemic-free, and there would be no need for inoculations. [...]

“They’ve postponed the epidemic”, observed Doc Oleinek.

“Yeah.”

“You believe that?”

“Why not.” (Bodor 2013, 89 and 91)

had their own state, and some of the governments which have ruled over them have ignored or actively tried to suppress the Rusyn historical past. For instance, in the second half of the twentieth century, Carpathian Rus’ was ruled by Communist States (the Soviet Union, Poland and Czechoslovakia) which banned the name Rusyn and refused to acknowledge that Rusyns comprise a distinct people, or nationality [...] Rusyns and their cultural heritage were described as Ukrainian, and those individuals, organisations, or publications that did not support the Ukrainian national orientation were, in general, disregarded” (Magocsi 2002, vii).

10 Ruthenia evokes Galicia in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy: “Rusyn – ethnonym used to describe the East Slavic population of Carpathian Rus’ [...]. Until at least the outbreak of World War I the term remained widespread as a designation for Austro-Hungary’s East Slavs living in eastern Galicia and northern Bukovina as well as in northeastern Hungary” (Pop 2002b, 407–408).

11 Alarmingly, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 meant that the poetic depiction of a historically layered landscape became a tragic reality.

This very cryptic repartee gives an impression of the logic attributed to the authorities depicted in the novel, and also of the novel's peculiar humour. Through the fictionalising act of the narrative, an element of external reality, the Ukrainian border, interacts as a sign with an invented imaginary epidemic, Tungusic Flu, as "lured into form" (Iser qtd. in Erll 2011, 145) in the medium of fiction. As a result of this merging interplay we can follow how one imaginary element creates other imaginary processes as natural evolution in the fictional world, where the authorities can postpone the vaccination and so indirectly postpone the epidemic.

The novel's characters are from their first appearance multi-ethnic, bringing into play a non-existent imaginary cultural state of the past. All the names in the novel are written in non-Hungarian order.¹² Béla Bundasian is a Hungarian-Armenian name for example, Mustafa Mukkerman is a Turkish-German name, Zoltán Marmorstein is a Hungarian-Yiddish/German/Saxon name, and Aron Wargotzki could be a Hebrew/Yiddish-Polish name. The name of Colonel Izolda Mavrodin-Mahmudia or Coca Mavrodin contains the contemporary names of two Romanian villages, as Mavrodin is a village in Teleorman County, Muntenia, and Mahmudia is a village in Tulcea County, Northern Dobruja.¹³

The text provokes the reader, and probably not only the monolingual reader, because the multilingual hybrid characters and place names make the reader reflect on the aural aspect of the literary text. In this textual poetic world, we are faced with a permanent oscillation between the written and spoken languages. Even the title must be read in a non-Hungarian way, as the Hungarian spelling should be *Szinisztra*, while the name that is spelt in the title as *Sinistra* would be read phonetically in Hungarian as *Shinishtra*. The novel inscribes its accented reading through the names, and implicitly embodies its Hungarian and international readers as accented. Their hybridity means that most of the names can be pronounced in several ways, and therefore the languages and nationalities of the characters remain openly undecided. There is most probably no reader who could pronounce every name without an accent. This is not a matter of language skills, as these names have inherently dispersive possibilities for pronunciation, which makes the names into oscillating aural zones between different languages and accents. The accent preserves the other language, and the interaction of languages, as an audible present.

12 Even the name of the Hungarian Géza Kökény appears in a non-Hungarian order. The Hungarian name order would be Kökény Géza.

13 Other character names suggest different ethnic belongings: Hamza Petrika, Géza Hutira, Augustin Konnert, Father Pantelimon (in original "Pantelimon pópa", where *pópa* is an Orthodox priest), Elvira Spiridon, Bebe Tescovina, Colonel Jean Tomoioaga, Colonel Velman, Toni Waldhütter, and Aranka Westin.

The first-person narrator's name Andrej Bodor – a mixed Romanian-Hungarian alias name – is a good example:

From his pocket he removed a sheet-metal dog tag that dangled, glistening from a watch chain. On it, freshly engraved: ANDREI [ANDREJ] BODOR. My alias. Colonel Puiu Borcan himself put it around my neck, and then clamped the loose ends of the chain at my nape with little pliers. No sooner had he done so than the metal began warming my skin. Andrei, now that part of my new name I especially liked. (Bodor 2013, 25)

The name contains the writer's Hungarian surname *Bodor*, making it fertile territory for the interplay of reality and fiction, but it is also a hybrid name with a Romanian first name *Andrei* that has a non-Romanian letter in the original *Andrej*; in Hungarian text this appears as a Hungarian phonetic transcription of the Romanian unvoiced final *i*, and consequently it also sounds like a Slavic name. It remains uncertain though whether we should pronounce the *A* as a short Romanian and Slavic *a* or, because we are reading a Hungarian novel, as the darker Hungarian vowel, halfway between *a* and *o*. Unfortunately, in the English version this aspect of the multilingual-sounding juxtaposition remains silent since the first name features as the Romanian *Andrei Bodor*. Names in this novel are thus oscillating aural archives in which pronunciation will always preserve the aural memory of another language.

Multilingual originals in translations

The novel is mostly a first-person narration by Andrej Bodor. The characteristics of the cultural scene, the names of the characters, and the references to a dictatorship with its surveillance, state control over intimacy, and unconditional obedience to authority indicate that it is set in Romanian society before 1989 and that the characters speak mostly in Romanian, or eventually in some other language, depending on who the interlocutors are. All the dialogues play out in a hybrid textual and linguistic space. The narrative is written in Hungarian but the dialogues could be considered as translations because of the multi-ethnic border zone they are held in. The novel therefore does not just condense traces of other languages, as the language it uses could itself be interpreted as a translated language. *The Sinistra Zone* as a fictional text restructures Hungarian cultural perception in such a way that we could imagine a Hungarian poetic language that is a “born translated” (Walkowitz 2015), one that also simultaneously oscillates between different accents. The novel preserves this continuous oscillation, the inscribed memory of other languages, and the reality of a multi-ethnic community in the past on the territory signalled as a border zone, and they are all translated by the text into a Hun-

garian linguistic-poetic experience. By doing this, *The Sinistra Zone* transforms the deterritorialised and reterritorialised Hungarian language into the archiving mnemonic poetic medium of multilingual and multi-ethnic cultural spaces.

The habits of the locals and the languages used are suggested in the novel through the figure of the stranger. The Red Rooster seemed to be an idle wanderer.

He was a slight, wispy fellow who spoke Ukrainian, Romanian, Hungarian, and even Carpathian German. But he spoke none of these well. The Red Rooster probably didn't have a decent command of a single language spoken around here. Even his way of walking, a self-assured swagger, wasn't the way the locals walk. Besides, he seemed to spend all his time outside, as if to leave no doubt in anyone who might see him that the only reason he was rambling along the Sinistra River was to gaze in awe at the mist-shrouded mountaintops. (Bodor 2013, 5–6.)

Equally though, the region's vernacular languages are embodied, in a ruined mode, by Cornelia Illarion, or Connie Illafeld to use her artist name. Her original surname Illarion indicates her Rusyn origin.¹⁴ In Bodor's poetic world, the destroyed, ruined multilingualism is interconnected with the brutality of a dictatorial system, and the victim is a female character.¹⁵ After a medical torture, Cornelia Illarion or Connie Illafeld can only speak in a ruined, multilingual, gibberish language that reveals all the existing languages together in their ruined disappearances. In a controversial way, the violence preserves and makes audible all the languages spoken in the region through their destruction:

[S]he no longer spoke any one single language. Instead she mixed them left and right, and the only people who could communicate with her somewhat had to know Ukrainian, Swabian German, Romanian, and Hungarian, and it didn't hurt to know Carpathian German and Ruthenian dialects as well. Few such people lived in the Dobrin forest district, but one of them happened to be the chief bear warden, my friend Doc Oleinek. (Bodor 2013, 101)

She was transformed by what was presumably an overdose in a medical treatment into an animal-like "hairy figure" (Bodor 2013, 109), and she forgot her own name. The authorities dehumanise her female body and at the same time conserve her

¹⁴ Ilarion was the Orthodox bishop of Mukachevo, Subcarpathian Rus, from 1556 to 1561 (Pop 2002a, 205).

¹⁵ An intertextual connection could be detected with another multilingual East-Central European writer Danilo Kiš's *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*, where the plurality of local languages is connected to a death by murder of a young girl: "The story that I am about to tell, a story born in doubt and perplexity, has only the *misfortune* (some call it the *fortune*) of being true: it was recorded by the hands of honourable people and reliable witnesses. But to be true in the way its author dreams about, it would have to be told in Romanian, Hungarian, Ukrainian, or Yiddish; or rather in a mixture of all these languages" (Kiš 2001, 3).

significant historical name on a “shiny metal nameplate” (Bodor 2013, 109), which thus commemorates her Rusyn inheritance and her former social status. The Carpatho-Rusyn name around the neck of an animal-like hairy figure consequently turns into a dishonouring medium for the Rusyn historical and cultural legacy preserved by the name itself. The diabolic mechanism of an authoritarian and nationalist system is shown by this process of destroying through preserving.

Cornelia Illarion, with her family name’s historic allusion and with the paintings she sells, metaphorically crosses the geopolitical and nation-state borders and so indirectly contests them. Under the unnamed dictatorial regime depicted in the novel, using a pen name could be interpreted as an act of voluntary self-silencing or of covering the Rusyn memory and legacy of her surname:

Connie Illafeld was a sort of pen name. The progeny of the Illarions – landowning, serf-holding Bukovinian boyars – this woman, who lived among simple mountain folk on her family’s onetime estate, had originally been named Cornelia Illarion. [...]

Connie Illafeld, the pen name of this last member of the Illarion family, lived as a recluse and made her living by painting everyday scenes from antiquity on small, pocket-size plates of glass; she worked on commission for Jews from Chernivtsi and Lviv, though how she managed to get them across the border to the Ukraine¹⁶ was a mystery. [...]

The tunnel watchman, who never slept, claimed that a foreign traveller was wooing her – a fellow from Galicia¹⁷ who supposedly swam across the Tisza River every night and who sometimes paid her a secret visit, too. (Bodor 2013, 101–104)

Béla Bundasian is later the one who most probably ends the process of dehumanisation of his ex-lover by killing the humiliated figure of the former Cornelia Illarion. At the same time, by disconnecting her name from “her” body, he also stops the destruction of the Rusyn memory orchestrated by the authorities through their transformative methods: “The blood on her neck – where someone had ripped off her dog tag with no little violence – was dark blue, like clotted blueberry juice or

16 In the English translation “to the Ukraine” is an insertion. In the Hungarian text there is just “across the border” (Bodor 1992, 94).

17 Here the text uses another historical name for the broader region as a liminal space between two different European civilisations, which also makes palpable the cartographic multi-layered aspect of the textual poetic world depicted. Janeczek and Wünsch explain: “Red Ruthenia, Halyč-Volhynian Rus’, Crown Ruthenia, southwestern Rus’, Galicia, Lesser Rus’ (Malorossiya), Eastern Lesser Poland (Małopolska Wschodnią), Czerwień Land (Ziemia Czerwieńska), Western Ukraine – different names used over the centuries to designate a region of shifting territorial extent, a vast land that spread from Lesser Poland in the west of Podolia in the east and from Podlachia in the north to the Carpathians in the south. The changing names and migrating borders are indicative of the stormy political fortunes of this region, which was continuously subject to fluctuations of state affiliations, conquests, partitions and annexations” (2004, 7).

like the blood of the Illarions, Ruthenian boyars” (Bodor 2013, 111). The body that has been killed and detached from the Rusyn name is transformed back into Ruthenian memory, or blood, by the narration.

The narrator reflects on the description with a knowledge that shows he is local, and so historically multi-ethnic and as part of the processes of violent transformation. At the same time, his allusion to “Ruthenian boyars” gives his located perspective a trans-bordering and historical aspect. The natural landscape depicted at the beginning of the novel, where the “hills of Ruthenia” combine with the “Ukrainian border”, and the description of the violated and dehumanised body transmediate the Ruthenian memory of the multiply bordered region, both working as natural archives.

Transformed and translated memories

The Sinistra Zone evokes Ruthenian cultural heritage and the traces of historical memory in the multilingual poetic space through a transnational and trans-bordering narratorial perspective, but Bodor’s third novel *The Birds of Verhovina: Variations on the End of Days* (2021, *Verhovina madarai: Változatok végnapokra*, 2011) is dedicated to Jewish cultural traces¹⁸ in a poetic world in which Hungarian appears as an incomprehensible language. The novel preserves the historical layers of a multi-ethnic region and depicts it as saturated by Jewish/Yiddish and Hungarian cultural ruins. The unfolding transformative processes of repurposing mark the former presence of a material and spiritual Jewish, Yiddish and Austro-Hungarian cultural legacy.

The imaginary poetic world of *The Birds of Verhovina* is situated somewhere further east than the previous novel, in the mixed Romanian-Polish-Hungarian-Moldovan-Ukrainian Transcarpathian region, and it is also set in a time closer to today. While in *The Sinistra Zone* Chernivtsi appeared “across the border”, Czernowitz in *The Birds of Verhovina*¹⁹ seems to be in the same geopolitical space as where the story is set: “Two weeks before he was arrested, my adoptive father, Brigadier Anatol Korkodus, bought me a brand-new Stihl petrol chainsaw. He said he had ordered it from Czernowitz” (Bodor 2021, 23).

¹⁸ Allusions to the Jews living across the border already appeared in *The Sinistra Zone*. See the passage quoted above in which Cornelia Illarion sold her paintings “for Jews from Chernivtsi and Lviv” (Bodor 2013, 104).

¹⁹ I will discuss the translations of the names later.

The Sinistra Zone is infused with the technologies of power and media of a dictatorial system that controlled and abolished the private sphere, which is typical for the second half of the twentieth century in East-Central Europe. *The Birds of Verhovina* is framed by a more recent capitalist system that replaces a previous structure, which had the contours of a more egalitarian system.²⁰ In this sense, Bodor consistently writes his imaginary historical vision of the transformations in East-Central Europe. In his view, structural and political transformations make visible the region's stratified multi-ethnic memory and heritage that is framed differently by various systems, but is still present as natural and cultural ruins. *The Birds of Verhovina* preserves the different historical layers of the space, and also the memory of a multi-ethnic region, this time imbued with the cultural ruins and linguistic debris of Jewish, Yiddish, and Hungarian culture. The most fascinating aspect of this world is the marking, tracing and staging of transformations and transfigurations. Following Hartmut Böhme's idea of the aesthetic of ruins, the novel is set around buildings and in a natural and cultural landscape in which the traces of a former vanished world appear with a new semantics, converted into a new function. The Jewish-built and spiritual heritage appears as movable memory in a process of transformation, which as memorial ruins "become the silent sign language of history" (Böhme 1989, 287). Consequently, the narrative uses cultural ruins as transformative signs to create a bridge between "a past that is not yet completely lost and a future that is already present" (Böhme 1989, 287):

The square, squat building with its ornate façade and oval windows had been built with Isac Gold's money as a kind of small synagogue, but by the time it was completed both the entire Gold clan and the entire Man clan had converted to Lutheranism. The building stood empty for years, until Anatol Korkodus had it converted into a public wash-house. It was fed by hot water from the slopes of the Paltin's thermal springs. Above the stone troughs set into the walls there ran a conduit with taps carved from oakwood. (Bodor 2021, 88)

The synagogue reused as a public wash-house gets a new function with a new semantic according to Böhme's ruin concept. The disused and converted synagogue is the architectural trace of a Jewish community in the novel's world, one that has mostly disappeared in a process of transformation. The repurposing of the architectural heritage, however, was preceded by a religious transformation: "the entire Man clan had converted to Lutheranism" (Bodor 2021, 88). Through the converted building and the religious conversion, the former function of the synagogue and the former religion are preserved as absent. In describing the transformation processes, the narration stratifies the former architectural and spiritual heritage

20 At the end, the novel is dated as 2011.

of the transformed Jewish community. Their former presence is converted into a transit memory that is preserved by other languages, different religions, and new functions for buildings. The Jewish-built and intellectual heritage is represented in this process of repurposing, mediating, and transformation. And the transformations continue: “Nowadays, as visitors are few and far between, Ed Pochoriles mostly spends his days reading, buried in the former Lutheran school’s books before he uses them for kindling” (Bodor 2021, 212). The Austro-Hungarian institution of Lutheranism and the material memory of it are also converted.

Like *The Sinistra Zone*, this novel is written in Hungarian, but in the textual world depicted the Hungarian language appears as a forgotten language, and as a cultural ruin that nobody understands.²¹ The disappearance of the Lutheran school is accompanied in *The Birds of Verhovina* by the disappearance of the Hungarian language, which makes it clearer that although we are reading a Hungarian novel, the characters of the world created in it do not speak Hungarian. The first-person, and therefore unreliable, narrator himself does not understand Hungarian, and he can only read it.

For years now, Friday mornings had belonged to Klara Bursen [*Klara Burszen*]. Miss Bursen felt resentful towards Yablonska Polyana [*Jablonska Poljana*], only visiting the settlement on high days and holidays, so once a week I do her shopping and take it to her on the Boursin farm in a saddlebag. On my way there I would borrow the odd Hungarian-language book from the library of the former Lutheran school and take that as well. She doesn’t understand Hungarian, yet she veritably devours books in the language. Once I arrive with the saddlebag, and the book in it, she asks me to take a seat and, while she makes me elderberry-cordial pancakes, asks if I would read her at least a page or two from the book I have brought. While I do that she is careful to make not even the slightest noise with the dishes, so that not a syllable escapes her attention. It’s all quite pointless: she doesn’t understand a single word, but she listens in awe with her eyelids lowered. Sometimes we make a joint effort to guess what the piece I’d read might be about. But we never get anywhere. (Bodor 2021, 46)

As this quote shows, the language of the novel, Hungarian, appears as a non-spoken and incomprehensible language in the diegesis, but its acoustics and its sound have an effect on the listener. The Hungarian language appears in its sound and its

21 The motif of the ruins of languages and different ethnic sites, such as Jewish, Armenian or Lemko cemeteries, in the Transcarpathian region is also central for Yuri Andrukhovych in Ivano-Frankivsk in 1960. See his autobiographical essay *The Central-Eastern Revision: My Final Territory* (2018). Consequently, Andrukhovych “is one of the first writers in post-Soviet Ukraine who began to conceptualise the existence of various historical regions within the country. [...] The author tried to open up Ukrainian collective memory to the previously marginalised and criticised Polish, Jewish, Austrian and Central European history of the region” (Dvoretzka 2017, 5, 8).

acoustic materiality as an aural medium like music.²² The earlier presence of the spoken and written Hungarian language is also marked by the transformative process of repurposing. Through reading and listening, the incomprehensible Hungarian appears in its acoustic materiality as a liminal linguistic ruin and not as a meaning-centred language, since its acoustic materiality manifests as a reminder of a former linguistic meaning, and in its new function it works as an audible site for attuning.

The unreliable narrator is playing ironically with the reader reading in Hungarian, who by now at the latest has to reflect on the language of the novel and on the languages of the diegetic world. However, as a self-reflective metaphor of reading, this sensitises the readers not just to multilingualism, but also to the acoustics of languages, which is an aspect that is often weakened in our focus on meaning processes, especially when prose is read silently. The sound could also work as a site of memory in its acoustic materiality.

In harmony with this, the text consistently asserts the distinction between the spoken and written forms, for example the forms of the French word *Boursin*. In the original text, the French last name of *Klara Burszen* is written in Hungarian following its Hungarian pronunciation, which is significant in comparison with *the Boursin farm (Boursin-tanya)*, which has preserved the French form.²³ The narrative indirectly preserves the distinction between the spoken and written languages, French or otherwise, consequently transmitting and mediating the audible presence of other languages. The written narrative thus creates the diegetic world as an oral world too, in which the characters' names appear, meaning they are written, as they are pronounced by other characters. The names being written differently within the novel creates an imaginary spoken multilingual world in which people pronounce the multi-ethnic names differently with different accents.

A suspicious reader may ask why Klara Burszen's surname is written in a language she does not understand, but to which "she listens in awe with her eyelids lowered" (Bodor 2021). The Hungarian narrative is very consistent in considering

22 See also: "I think Klara Burszen understood none of it. Still, I read aloud, crunching and fracturing the alien words, as the lady pricked up her ears, trying hard to attune them to the sound of Hungarian speech" (Bodor 2021, 135).

23 In English translation *Klara Burszen* translates the Hungarian spelling version of the name, with the Hungarian *sz* replaced by *s*. In contrast to the English translation, the French translation preserves the distinction from the original text, with the character's surname as it is written in Hungarian to match the pronunciation and the place name in French. See: "Il y a des années que le vendredi est la matinée de Klara Burszen. La demoiselle, un peu fâchée contre Jablonska Poljana, ne s'y rend qu'à l'occasion des fêtes. Une fois par semaine je lui fais donc ses courses et marche jusqu'à Boursin une gibecière sur l'épaule" (Bodor 2016, 28).

and spelling the surname *Burszen* as Hungarian and not only because of the Hungarian *sz*. Under Hungarian orthographic rules, suffixes can be added to foreign names in different ways. If the last letter of the name is pronounced, then the suffix is attached to the name in writing, so “belonged to Klara Bursen” in the Hungarian text appears as “a Klara Burszené” (Bodor 2011, 28).²⁴ If the last letter, or the diphthong *ẽ* in the case of *Boursin*, is silent or semi-silent, then the suffix is attached with a hyphen. In the novel’s narration, the name *Boursin* with the French spelling appears only as part of a place name marking a territory, and in this case the hyphen has a different function, as it connects two words, a proper noun and a common noun.²⁵

In the novel, Miss Klara Bursen [Burszen] loves “a Hungarian army officer”:

Klara Bursen, filled with a fantasy of love, awaited a Hungarian army officer from Beszterce who the clairvoyant had said would soon come to fetch her on horseback, sweep her up into the saddle before him, and ride off with her beyond the mountains, into Trans-Sylvania, just as seamstress Aliwanka had foretold.

Aliwanka used threads of wool for divination, balls of yarn, though she could also divine from sand, but especially from water, swirling currents of it, raindrops that spread out ringlike in puddles, from the mist, from the clouds. And, of course, from saliva, beads of sweat, and even from Klara Bursen’s teardrops. (Bodor 2021, 135–6)

Her “fantasy of love” is the reason why the narrator, Adam²⁶ reads to her “from a book in Hungarian on the orography and hydrography, and the flora and fauna, of Máramaros County” (Bodor 2021, 135–136), even if Hungarian is incomprehensible to her. The Hungarian language thus appears, beside the apparently ruined material memory like old “mouldering Hungarian books” (Bodor 2021, 46) in a fantasy of love, as an aural medium, as a voice, even if it is one that is incomprehensible to its listener. This could be another example of how the novel emphasises the oral nature and the aural aspect of a language in the world created. Beside the written and architectural forms of memory, the text suggests the different forms of orality

²⁴ Emphasis is mine. The Hungarian version of Klara Burszen’s name would be Burszen Klára.

²⁵ In Hungarian orthography, such place names are written with a hyphen: “Délután haját mosott, új ingét magára vette, és kezében a celofános csokorral kibaktatott a behavazott *Boursin-dűlőn a Boursin-tanyára, Klara Burszen kisasszonyhoz* [emphasis mine], hogy tizenkilenc éven át tartó konok harag után bocsánatot kérjen tőle” (Bodor 2011, 140), [“In the afternoon he washed his hair, put on his new shirt, and, with the cellophane-wrapped bouquet in his hand, trekked over the snow-covered Boursin vineyards to the Boursin farm, to Miss Klara Bursen, in order to beg her forgiveness after nineteen years of stubborn rancour” (Bodor 2021, 160)].

²⁶ Like in *The Sinistra Zone* the narrator’s name in *The Birds of Verhovina* recalls the author’s name, this time his first name, written in non-Hungarian without the specific Hungarian accents of Ádám.

as considerable media for mnemonic migration.²⁷ In the novel's mnemonic technology, the Hungarian schoolbooks as material remnants of the earlier Austro-Hungarian epoch are interwoven with a personal fantasy of love that is trans-mediated by oral divination. The material, the ritual, and the imaginary mediate the Hungarian legacy as absent, as a missing culture that is present in this oral trans-mediation process. In comparison with "the Boursin farm", in which the name signals the earlier presence of the French language, the name of the semi-Hungarianised *Klara Burszen* recalls the linguistic inheritance of the Magyarisation that occurred under the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy.²⁸ Through the transformation from *Boursin* to *Burszen*, the narrative also condenses a former power structure into an inheritance.

The novel preserves real Hungarian names for regions and towns like *Máramaros* and *Beszterce*,²⁹ which indirectly creates a possible past or present Hungarian map that lies beyond the mountains from the location of the story. Equally though, these North-Transylvanian Hungarian names are intertwined in the novel's Hungarian allusions with the old Latin name of *Transsylvania*, trans-written into Hungarian as *Transszilvániába* [into Trans-Sylvania].³⁰ This hybrid archaic use that again condenses a previous epoch for contemporary Hungarian readers creates the sensation of historicity and foreignness, because the contemporary Hungarian name of Transylvania is *Erdély*. The narration thus strengthens its consistent poetic position that names cannot be appropriated by a single language and definitely not from a Hungarian perspective, including even the Hungarian names indicated here.

In a more ironic sense, *Trans-Sylvania* appears as a liminal space between the love fantasy derived from a divination of teardrops, and a generic geo-location beyond the mountains. It is written about in a polyphonic way, and its real place is in the novel's poetic and diegetic space. Stressing the love fantasy that transposes the person desired from beyond the mountains like in a fairy tale, the self-relativising narrative also discourages any realistic siting of *Transszilvánia*. Its poetic location becomes more evident in the translations of the name as *Transsyvanien* in Ger-

27 In the context of the Jewish legacy in the novel, the orality also recalls the strong oral tradition of the Jewish, Yiddish culture.

28 For an analysis of the Magyarisation process as a social pressure and personal aspirations through which non-Hungarian names were Hungarianised, see Erdélyi 2015, 68–76.

29 Maramureș, Bistrița. Today both are in Northern Romania.

30 Almost all the translations of the novel known to me preserve the Hungarian names of *Beszterce* and *Máramaros*, but the archaic use of Transylvania in the Hungarian original is turned into the contemporary international equivalent in each language. The German translation uses the German name *Bistritz* but preserves the Hungarian version of *Máramaros* (Bodor 2022, 129).

man, *Transylvanie* in French, *Transilvania* in Italian, and *Trans-Sylvania* in English.³¹ The translators' choices emphasise the past form of the word *Transszilvânia*. This Hungarian transcription is archaic because of the letter *á* in the name, but it preserves the Latin name with its geographical reference of *trans silvam* as [beyond the forest], and its spelling draws attention to Latin as a pre-national language, the legacy of which is also emphasised in the English translation by its separation. The hybrid archaic *Transszilvânia*, pronounced *transsilvania*, in the novel's oral vernacular archives a pre-national status of the name that is contaminated in Hungarian history by national trauma, as Hungary lost two thirds of its territory, including Transylvania, after the Treaty of Trianon in 1920.

The ambiguity of the names is emphasised even more in the translations. The name *Csernovitz*, or its variant Hungarian spelling, *csernovitzi*, is written in the same way in both novels analysed, but it is translated differently into English as *Chernivtsi* in *The Sinistra Zone*, and *Czernowitz* in *The Birds of Verhovina*. The first form is the contemporary English transcription of the Ukrainian name, the second translation has chosen the German version of the name of the city, and so preserves a past historical condition in the name.³² In the network of the translations, the hybridity of the variant name in the Hungarian original becomes more evident. *Csernovitz* written in this hybrid way looks and sounds like a Hungarian hybrid spelling of the German and Slavic names. The city's name in Hungarian is *Csernovic*. The written form of the name as a memory of the hybrid pronunciation again stresses the existence of an interethnic and multilingual oral vernacular. The poetics of the names in the novels present a multi-ethnic city that was the site of several geo-political re-mappings but preserves or archives its actually identical name in this mixed variant. The poetic Hungarian language of the novel does not appropriate the name for a Hungarian past or legacy, rather it creates the name as an aural site of movable memory, where the historic juxtapositions and the multilingual co-existence are inherently and audibly inscribed. In Bodor's poetics the names exist and can be understood only in a non-monolingual way.

Different accents and pronunciation possibilities intersect in both novels, in the names with their performative sounds. Even if they are pronounced in a single way, they remind the reader of their multi-layered transnational form and ori-

31 See Bodor 2022, 127–128; 2016, 115; 2019, 140; 2021, 135.

32 The city, which had a strong Yiddish presence between 1775 and 1918, was part of Austria and later of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, and it became part of the Kingdom of Romania in 1918 with the Romanian name Cernăuți. It was allotted to the Ukrainian SSR during the Second World War and after 1944. Since 1991 it has been part of independent Ukraine. Its name was changed more than once, as German-speakers, Poles, Romanians, Russians, and Ukrainians each had their own name for it. On the context of other multilingual cities, see Horel 2023, 496.

gin.³³ They incorporate the transformation of a multi-ethnic zone that is continuously displaced by different political epochs and stratified cartography, and they inherently embody the memory of another language and possible pronunciation. In this way the novels do not represent a stratified multi-ethnic multilingual past, but they rather reimagine it poetically in that their readers, who are determined by their accents, are incorporated and embodied as multilingual in the inter-ethnic oral vernacular of the novels. Through the poetics of the novels and the accented reading of them, we can imagine a world that is not separated by languages and nations, but is rather from the very first interconnected, with cultures saturated by one other. The lost or absent memories of a language or culture are preserved as born translated by other languages through accented translation (Laanes 2021).

The Birds of Verhovina itself could also be seen as a translation without an original, whose Hungarian narrative functions as a transnational medium of multilingual cultural memory and of shifted epochs. We do not know which languages the characters speak to each other in, but the nature of their fluidly interacting and layered world means that they presumably switch languages. The difference discussed above between the spoken and written languages is accompanied by some information at the end of the novel. The local written language contains no vowels:

He says that as he panned up and down the meadow he could see by the foot of the trees and shrubs a number of small wooden crosses, all with the same legend: STLN 2011. He guessed that they might indicate different plots of land, but all the numbers were the same, every little cross bore the same letters and the same numbers. So what's all that about?

You're not wrong, I say. What you see are small crosses marking graves. They mean no more than what they say. In these parts we don't use vowels. We write using consonants, the rest everyone adds in their head. STLN – does that mean anything to you? No? Then there's nothing to talk about. (Bodor 2021, 265)

The date 2011 connects the textual world depicted to the present and the partially-explained language that “we write using consonants” could be deciphered as Hebrew, which appears as a medium for a distinction between local people and newly arrived people. What is certain is the distinction between the written and spoken languages within the diegetic world. The narrator's ironic remark “the

³³ Horel says that in multi-ethnic regions such as Bucovina this kind of saturated language use was common practice in everyday life: “The so-called ‘*Bukowinismen*’ used in everyday language were common to all four languages: one could hear the same term in a German, Romanian, Ruthenian or in a Polish sentence. Since this vocabulary was mainly spread through oral practice, there were indeed many illiterate people who were bi- or trilingual” (2023, 102).

rest everyone adds in their head” could be conceived as a kind of self-reflective guidance for the reader, too. Furthermore, as an *ars poetica*, it reflects on the text that is itself created and perceived as an open imaginary narrative that combines multiple transnational memories and can therefore never be homogenised or totally expropriated, and can consequently never be finished. The layers of the past that act in their own absence, and the cultural and ethnic registers that form and act in their own absence, are shaped as an open and transformative mobile poetics of the novel into which the reader’s reflection is also incorporated as an active possibility. The novel creates multilingual cultural memory as a transformative process of translation, and as a memory that by definition is born and survives in translation.

Conclusion

In these two novels by Bodor, which can be regarded as media of multilingual and transnational memory, orality has a prominent mnemonic function next to the material and cultural agencies of ruins, re-purposed buildings and linguistic traces in mediating different ethnic and historical registers and layers. In the transmediating Hungarian language, the diegetic worlds of the novels are shaped as a multilingual spoken language space through a vivid multi-ethnic coexistence that is evidenced by the names that emphasise the oral and acoustic principle of the multilingual vernacular dialect even in their written forms. By emphasising the oral vernacular dialect, the novels indirectly highlight multilingualism as a broader phenomenon that cannot be reduced to written high culture and to the elites, as it often is today. In multi-ethnic regions, polyglot illiterates were a widespread phenomenon because of the need for everyday communication and mutual understanding.³⁴ Furthermore, orality is again amplified and acoustically enlivened in the accented reading through the uncertainties of how to pronounce the hybrid names. The readers of these novels are by default in contact with multilingualism as an aural space, since the place names and character names cannot be read in a purely monolingual way, nor appropriated by a single language.

As open narrative structures, a characteristic that is highlighted by the subtitles of the novels *The Sinistra Zone: Chapters of a Novel* and *The Birds of Verhovina: Variations on the End of Days*, these novels create variability and mobility as a

³⁴ Horel argues that in the beginning of twentieth century, “[p]olyglot illiterates were not a rarity in some places like Czernowitz, where coach drivers, waiters, hotel doormen and employees of various kinds had a command of at least the necessary words of their profession in two, three or more languages” (2023, 73).

poetic principle. This cannot be attributed purely to their postmodern aesthetics, but is an open compositional basis formed by the absent presence of languages, and the cultures and ethnicities that are preserved in their disappearance. The fragmentary and iterative narration as an unfinished, variable, mobile form developed by the poetics of these novels is linked to the vanished worlds of different epochs, the traces of which appear in a ruined, transformed form as natural relics and shifted memories. Absent cultures, languages and ethnicities are present in traces, and through the memories of their past presence. The worlds of the novels are posited as narrative worlds that are constantly changing and thus incomplete. The cultural, social, ethnic and linguistic transformation of a region is thus expressed as a poetic principle in narrative or structural openness and variability. Transformation is the main characteristic of these multi-ethnic spaces, in which the resulting gaps and absences are an inherent part of the poetic world. The open narrative structure also anticipates the possibility of further transformations in the future.

The imaginary worlds depicted are constantly saturated through the transformative mobile poetics by other missing worlds, and their totality could only be imagined through the infiltrating absences of peoples, cultures and languages. The traces of the previous epochs, cultural conditions and ethnic constellations as in-transformation, in-transmission and perpetual transmigration are part of these textual worlds. In these imagined worlds, which combine the multiple and disparate historical and cultural legacy of East-Central Europe, the plurality of languages and their traces preserve the fertile ground for inter-ethnic connections and co-existences, but at the same time also mark the restless tensions and conflicts that have been present in the region's history.

Bodor's novels create imaginary worlds that are interwoven with transnational and interrelated memories. The novels not only map East-Central European multi-ethnic regions in their shifted and stratified historicity, but also through their multilingual written narratives and their emphasis on orality trans-mediate the shared inter-ethnic legacies into an oral and accented reading experience. The "sound" of these novels is multilingual even in a silent reading. Through accented reading, their intertwined legacies and vernacular memories could be re-enacted by international readers as embodied "prosthetic memory" (Landsberg 2004). Bodor's stress on accent as an audible medium of transnational movable memory, and at the same time as a performative sound that destabilises national and monolingual appropriation, shows the way ahead for current research into multilingual literature and memory.

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