

Meta-Borges A Magyar Meditation on Masters, Maori and Meaning

Critic Tanacs Ferenc has described “Hajónapló” [Logbook] (1987), a short story written by Ottlik Géza, as “a Borgesian exercise in transfictionalizing certain obsessive paradoxes of national identity, authorship, writing and language” (168). Certainly, Ottlik seems to have faithfully adopted the skewed world vision, the penchant for linguistic invention and a mode of tongue-in-cheek historical (re)creation so characteristic of Borges. Despite these assurances, one might persist in asking what might Argentinean Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986), the prolific master architect of fantastic literature, and the Hungarian author Ottlik Géza (1912-1990) whose most well-known work, the novel *Iskola a hatáton* [School on the Frontier] (1959) which dealt in much starker realities, have in common? I suggest that while extra-literary similarities certainly lay the groundwork for what will later be recognized by Tanacs as the stylistic affinity between the two writers, Ottlik will, in a Meta-Borgesian flight of fancy, move beyond the thematics of the master.

Both Borges and Ottlik moved in a world of shattered cosmologies, navigating the willy-nilly union of accumulated mythologies: those fragments and fantasies of past and present conceptions of the universe, which mark moments of transition and transformation. Borges, who studied and formed himself intellectually in Europe, returned to Buenos Aires as a major innovator of Ultraism. However a new world fascism—ushered in by Colonel Juan Perón and his young bride, Evita—threatened to break apart his universe. The tide of popular sentiment turned to the grandiloquent albeit empty promises of the new regime, accelerating the demise of the oligarchy and disrupting the genteel security and orientation it afforded its members. For his part, Ottlik, after receiving his certification in math and physics from Budapest University, began writing short stories and reviews which appeared in various magazines (*Nyugat*, *Tükör*, *Magyar Csillag* and after 1945, *Magyarok*, *Új Idők*) until 1949. Judged “unpublishable” by the Sta-

linist government of Rákosi Mátyas (1948-1953), he would survive an eight-year long forced hiatus with ghost writing and translation work. Clearly, the experience marked him and his later writing. Nevertheless, similar to the respite provided Borges by his tenure as a librarian, this period proved fruitful and ended with the publication of a short story collection entitled *Hajnali háztetők* [Rooftops at dawn] (1957), applauded by critics for the humanizing of his perspective and two years later of the aforementioned novel, his only exemplar of the longer genre.

Into this/from this “complex interplay between mentality, institutions, aggregate interests and the exercise of power” (Maravell vii) arises the creative production and stylistic companionship of Borges and Ottlik. As a result, both men narrate the uses of power (most often in its totalitarian aspect), the changing fortunes and “the radically changed [...] mentalities of the people who have lived the change” (vii). They share a fascination with the eccentric, the paradoxical and the bizarre and even a visage dominated by the same bushy eyebrows. Their shared interest in the complex interplay of adversity and challenge occasioned by the meeting of cosmologies becomes evident in their focus on the levels of dialogue between being, for Borges/becoming, for Ottlik, and knowing—a rational drive to know what/who one is, the need to transform into forms (words, thoughts) the experience of humanness.

Their treatment of the themes of language, consciousness and the bilateral impact of these on identity represents another point of comparison. More centrally the two writers share the recognition of the power of language to culturally structure human awareness and behaviour. And they would agree with the Spanish conquistadors that, in the clash/meeting/encounter of cultures, language is indeed the first tool of empire—an observation astutely expanded by James Baldwin

It goes without saying, then, that language is also a political instrument, means, and proof of power. It is the most vivid and crucial key to identity: it reveals the private identity, and connects one with, or divorces one from, the larger, public, or communal identity. There have been, and are, times and places, when to speak a certain language could be dangerous, even fatal. Or, one may speak the same language, but in such a way that one's antecedents are revealed, or (one hopes) hidden. This is true in France, and is absolutely true in England: The range (and reign) of accents on that damp little island make England coherent for the English and totally incomprehensible for everyone else. To open your mouth in England is (if I may use black English) to “put your business in the street”. You have confessed your parents, your youth, your school, your salary, your self-esteem, and, alas, your future (650).

The writings of Borges and Ottlik then sniff out/at the language of power, “the range (and reign)” of discourse which controls the systems of meaning and access to the same¹. Just as the inheritance of ratio-centric cosmologies born with the 17th century Enlightenment formed a human consciousness unimagined, unavailable to the human of the Middle Ages whose strictly hierarchical, god centered universe spoke within another cosmology, so too do the communicative scenarios created by these authors remain equally incomprehensible in the destabilized contexts in which their protagonists move. Their fantastical universes then ask the reader to focus how disruption (political, linguistic), or in Blumenburg’s terminology “breakdown,” makes visible the heretofore invisible sutures of culture.

Nevertheless, certain telling divergences exist. While both writers explore themes derived from their musings on a world in turmoil, Borges starts from the highly ordered and traces the descent into chaos through the arbitrary practice of power, imagining the havoc to be loosed by “una periódica infusión del caos en el cosmos” (“La lotería en Babilonia”, *OC 1*: 459). This is nowhere more true than in the short story collection *Ficciones*. In two of its offerings, “La lotería en Babilonia” and “La biblioteca de Babel,” institutions—“la compañía” and “la biblioteca” respectively—set in place unwieldy bureaucratic systems—in one case, a reform of “la lotería” which “[interpola] unas pocas suertes adversas en el censo de números favorables” (*OC 1*: 457), and in the other, a dauntingly elaborate cataloguing scheme. In a world ruled by the capricious whim of absentee deities and planners whose ends remain impossible to intuit or rationalize, these systems then prove impenetrable to ordinary human design or logic. Even in “Las ruinas circulares” where “[a]l principio, los sueños eran caóticos” (452), an order quickly establishes itself. And although the project of “el hombre taciturno” (451) seems clear—to dream a human—an invisible hand manages to disguise itself until the final line of the story, at which point, the dreaming creator “[c]on alivio, con humillación, con terror, comprendió que él también era una apariencia, que otro estaba soñándolo” (455).

¹ Current evidence of this can be found in the Ebonic (the combination of the terms Ebony and Phonics used to designate North American Black speak based on a mixture of English and African language syntax) debates centered on the Oakland, California Board of Education's decision to recognize the existence of Black English while teaching students its distinction from so-called “Standard” English as a gateway to employment and participation in the public sector.

The sense of powerlessness that haunts each of Borges' "central" characters results in large part from an excruciating alienation based on a solitude aggravated by a dearth of meaningful communication with their fellows and even further exacerbated by the impossibility of deciphering the designs of the powers that be. Just as these fictive personalities lack a stable point of reference, the reader too often feels set adrift in Borges' deliberate play at ahistoricity and the cult of the (a uniquely Western) individual. Consequently, even while the narratives can be extrapolated into the public sphere of the nation (or that of Latin America) and its political context, in general, Borges' writings continue to be intimately, intensely turned in upon themselves in introspective dialectic or circularity such as that narrated in the later "El otro" in which the aged, vision-impaired author confronts his younger alter-self-ego on a park bench in New York.

Inversely, perhaps in part due to his training in math and physics, Ottlik instead begins with the history of discontinuity, attempting to deduce a hidden order. Somewhat in the vein of Physics' Chaos Theory which fixes its gaze on "the irregular side of nature, the discontinuous and erratic side-[which] have been puzzles to science, or worse, monstrosities" (Gleick 3), Ottlik seems to see "chaos [as] a science of process rather than state, of becoming rather than being" (5). Accordingly, the Hungarian does not rely on a cosmically-given or apparent mandate, but rather perseveres in the pursuit of a camouflaged, yet proper to the thing itself, ordering. In another contrast with Borges' investigation of the state of being, Ottlik's exploration of the process of becoming develops in a more humane ambience where seemingly closed systems evidence unexpected fissures, leaving them momentarily, fleetingly available to (a uniquely Central European) human intervention and questioning. More explicitly politically engaged, more interested in human interactive dialogue than dialectical exercises, this interrogation expects, not an answer, but a response. This approach marks a change from Ottlik's pre-censure works which intriguingly share a much more intimate affinity to Borgesian thematics. In contrast, Ottlik's probing 1980s literary experiments speak to/for the nation as a socialist (in its broadest terms) amalgam.

Accordingly, the theme of "Hajónapló" concerns the meeting of cosmologies—national/socialist, vanquished culture/conquering discourse. In a fantastical inversion of tales of imperial encounter, the "West"—in the guise of two landlocked Danish sailors—finds itself subjugated by unlikely colonizers, the seafaring Maori people, indigenous tribesmen who have sailed half way round the world from New

Zealand (yes, New Zealand) to stake their claim on “Danemark,” home of the Vandal people. The uses of language provide the backdrop for the investigation of the mythologies of the rational and the logic of the fantastic. In a manner reminiscent of the Argentine master, Ottlik adroitly juxtaposes the patently ridiculous with the theoretically probable in order to discuss the limits of rationality, the pitfalls of imperialism and, ultimately, the personal negotiation of the nation(al) and the political in a play between lighthearted and off-handed cynicism.

Juxtaposing the ruminations of the two shipless sailors, Captain Harald Kirketerp and Vice-Admiral Ivo Maandygaard, and the cultural system of the Maori invaders, the short story follows the men’s afternoon reminiscing about the mariner life as they cheer on compatriot, Astrid A. Andersen, in her televised quest for Olympic gold in Paris. Her possible victory inspires their attempt to decipher the transitoriness of meaning in the wake of domination and failed challenges as reflected in their country’s past:

Denmark has no ports left, no seaboard, ever since the Swedes, those treacherous allies, having chased out the Visigoths and the English, proceed to take over the country only to be expelled by the Russians who were in turn ousted by the Marquesan warriors who gave away even more Danish territory to the neighbors. Gone was Schleswig-Holstein; their ancient province Norway had been lost in the time of the Swedes, and after the Polynesian takeover Aarhus and the heart of Jutland was practically all that was left. And the conquerors had been progressively worse, according to Kirketerp. The English protectorate had been preferable to the Swedes, while under the Czars, although converted to Greek Orthodoxy, they kept their Christianity as well as the Danish monarchy (albeit under another name and transformed into an absolute autocracy) whereas the current Marquesan dominion outlawed all religions and abolished the monarchy. The country became a tribal sub-chieftainship and received a new name, [Vandal (Danemark)] (9-10).²

² “Dániának nem maradt kikötője, tnegerpártja se, amióta előbb a svédek, áruló szövetségeseik, kiverték a vizigótokat és az angolokat, s megszállták az országot, aztán az oroszok kiverték a svédeket, őket pedig a Marquesas-harcosok győzték le, és újabb dán területeket csatoltak szomszédaikhoz. Schleswig-Holsteint és ősi tartományukat, Norvégiát még a svédek idején veszítették el, a polinéziaiak győzelme után pedig jóformán csak Jütland közepe és Aarhus maradt az övék. Amegszállók is egyre rosszabbak lettek, Kirketerp szerint. Az angol protektorátus jobb volt a svédnél, s míg a cár alatt, görögkeleti hitre áttérve bár, de a kereszténységüket megtarthatták, és a dán királyi monarchiát is -(más néven ughan és korlátlan teljhatalommal felruházva)-, most a Marquesasuralom betiltott minden vallást, és eltörölte a

That detailed fictive recapitulation of the Vandal's history is pointedly reminiscent of the historical reality of Hungary – called “a nation of lost wars” (Nagy 11):

the Turks occupy the country for nearly 150 years after the defeat of the Magyar army in 1541; the Habsburg Empire rules in feudal, semi-colonial splendor for another two centuries (1686-1867); the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy (1867-1918), while allowing a certain measure of economic, social and political development, ultimately denies to Hungary the practice of Statecraft. After the dissolution of the Monarchy following World War I, the country is ruled, in turn, by a conservative elite (1920-1948) and then a Socialist-Communist coalition (1948-1953) headed by the dogmatically Stalinist Rosi Mátyas. [...] various attempts to challenge the existing cosmologies meet with failure: the Revolution for Independence in 1848, the bizarre compromise of 1867 which makes Hungary a kingdom without a king; the short-lived (133 days) Hungarian Soviet democracy (1945-1947); and a series of disastrous alliances, e.g., with Germany (vis a vis the Monarchy) in World War I which reduced Hungary's territory by two-thirds (Treaty of Trianon, 1920), and again during the second World War based on Hitler's promise to restore those lands (Fox 4).³

The tumultuous events in 1956 Hungary and the ensuing Russian “occupation” would do little to remake this history. Obviously, for Kirketerp and his fellow Vandals, just as for Ottlik and his fellow Hungarians, discontinuity forces the constant renegotiation of meaning: “And so the Captain was a chauvinist, but not at the same time, a patriot”⁴.

Indicative of this subtle identificatory/linguistic balancing act, the search for meanings in the short story takes place on two levels: “the hunt for words” (17)⁵ on a practical plane and on the other, the soul's “ability to create for itself additional room for play, elbow room, a new dimension where it may exist free forever” (19)⁶ at more esoteric, intangible heights. Both levels – the hunt for fragmented meanings and the creation of shared fantasies – reflect the workings of culture: how

királyságot is. Altörzsfőnökség lett, és más nevet kapott az ország [Vandal (Dane-mark)]” 7-8.

³ As I suggest in a footnote in the dissertation from which this citation is taken: Among other, “Patrick Brogan offers a less sympathetic picture of 20th century Hungarian history in, *Eastern Europe 1939-89: The Fifty Years War* (London: Bloombury, 1990).” (FN6)

⁴ “Ezért volt a kapitány hazafiatlan és egyben sovinizta ember” (8).

⁵ “a szavak keresgélése” (20).

⁶ N.B. The translation is not literal.

culturally specific rules, here linguistic, serve to form human consciousness and, by extension, the culture-specific and history-tied conception of humanness. A wonderful example of this process is contained in the sailors' remembrance of their first meeting. There, a "goatsnudge" – "a judiciously chosen kick in the butt" (20)⁷ proffered by Maandygaard interrupts Kirketerp's suicidal meditations, precipitated by harsh treatment at the hands of cadet trainer Schundtvig, "the most ferocious maniac at the [Royal Danish Naval Academy]" who "crushed their self-esteem, rubbed out every trace of their human dignity" (12)⁸ and under whom they endured the "flawless, unmitigated fullness of daily desperation" (20)⁹. A more perfect prototype of a Borgesian powerbroker is hard to imagine. Listing twelve meanings, Kirketerp remembers that the goatsnudge

said, at the time, the following (simultaneously, but in this order):

- (1) Hey.
- (2) Here I am, Kirketerp.
- (3) It's me. Ivo Maandygaard.
- (4) Schundtvig? Yes. That's what we've got.
- (5) That's all we've got. Nothing else.
- (6) Anchor chain? Yes, it can be undone.
- (7) I see you too have found out about it. Up around your neck and into the water with the anchor etcetera.
- (8) It's useful. It gives us an alternative. If we resort to it, it's all over. But we can also live with it, with our alternative.
- (9) I see you too have figured that out, Kirketerp.
- (10) You know what? We'll survive it. Both of us. And each of us.
- (11) Because now it is different. (The riddle of the old Danish artillery joke: Why must two artillerymen sit atop a gun carriage drawn by six horses? Because one alone could not stand the jolts.)
- (12) And let's get on with that elbow room in your soul, old man! What hadn't been there before. Hey, not that way, this way! (Plus several volumes' worth of Danish words...) (20-21)¹⁰.

⁷ "kecsketúró" – "egy jól megválaszlott ülepen rúgás" (24).

⁸ "[a] legfélelmetesebb vadállatá [a Királyi Dán Tenegerésztszti Akadémián]" who "összetört bennük minden önérzetet, szétta méltóság uknak még a nyomait is" (12).

⁹ "esteledett, a mindennapos reménytelenség hibátlan, hiántalan teljességgel vette körül" (24).

¹⁰ "akkor a következőket mondta (egyszerre, de ebben a sorrendben):

The opening proviso suggests that at another time, in another cosmology, the same goatsnudge might insinuate other meanings or a different ordering of significations, associations and connotations. The implicit, immediate communicative sympathy which the two enjoy underscores the fact that they share a language and the context that gives it meaning, a sympathy further emphasized by their ability to communicate with each other telepathically, literal and figurative evidence of a shared cultural consciousness.

This hunt, exemplified in definitions one through six, trails the scent of meaning. A gesture, translatable into words, opens itself to naming, to the association of one concept with another. The more completely invisible—that is to say, implicit, immediate—the hunt, the more complete, the more convincing the proof that one operates, not solely “in language,” but “in culture”. An implicit echo of the Hegelian/Lacanian dynamics of the recognition of the other in a play between subjectivity (the construction/projection of personal identities, #1-3 and #10-12) and objectivity (the positioning of the individual within situational/cultural realities, #4-9) holds together the two levels.

The transition point between levels, marked by the casually inserted “etcetera” (#7), serves to indicate the reach towards created, contextual, connotative, culturally referenced communication. One must actively know and at least tacitly accept cultural judgements/parameters concerning suicide, in one case (#7-10), and humour, in another instance

- (1) Hé.
- (2) Itt vagyok, Kieketerp.
- (3) Én vagyok. Ivo Maandygaard.
- (4) Schundtvig? Igen, Ez van.
- (5) Nem: “Ez is van.” Csak ez.
- (6) Horgonylanc? Igen, le lehet csatolni.
- (7) Látom, maga is megtalálta, Harald. Fel az ember nyakába, aztán a horgonnyal együtt be s a többi.
- (8) Hasznos. Van egy alternatívánk. Ha élünk vele, megszűnik. Élhetünk viszont együtt vele, az alternatívánkkal.
- (9) Látom, ezt maga is végiggondolta, Kirketerp.
- (10) Tudja mit? El fogjuk viselni. Mind a ketten. És akkor külön-külön is.
- (11) Mert ez így más. (A régi dán tűzérhumor találós kérdése: Miért kell két tűzérnek ülni a hatos fogattal vontatott ágyútalpon? Mert a rázását egy tűzér nem bírná ki.)
- (12) És gyerünk azzal a könyöktérrel a lelkedben, apafej! Ami eddig nem létezett. Hé, nem arra. Hé, emerre! (És még több kötetre való dán szó...)” (24-25).

(#11). The ending elipsis, “...” then becomes especially significant of communication beyond words, and by extension, the centrality of a shared consciousness: cultural telepathy. Here, Ottlik surpasses Borges whose typical protagonist wanders in a linguistically enigmatic and opaque universe, consumed by the solitary task of deciphering meaning **for itself**. That Borgesian figure, most likely suffering in bemused and passive silence the whims and wrongdoings of a Schundtvig, would remain inexplicably barred from the humanizing catharsis of communication, meaning **in itself**, which occupies the afternoon musing of the two sailors.

The logbook represents another—and more Borgesian—point of linguistic contention, offering a brief examination of the art and practice of (written) language. Despite the fact that the context which gave meaning to the exercise of daily entries—his life on board ship—has long since disappeared, the Captain has continued the practice, driven by a faithfulness to duty and the force of habit:

Kirketerp was a conscientious and pedantically precise sailor. He wanted the truth, the whole truth put into Danish words. He had never imagined how much time and trouble this would take. (17)

Inversely, the search for words had bestowed his life/existence with meaning, a *raison d'être*, defining him as a useful human in the former Vandal context. However, one day the daily entry—“Cold”—in the remarks column proves inadequate and after some thought the duty bound mariner emends the entry to read: “Incomprehensible rage around noon” and then “Justified incomprehensible rage around noon” (17).

From that point onwards, the Captain stockpiles words written on scraps on paper in order to not “deface the column” (17) with other impromptu additions. Nevertheless, even this practice runs aground, stalled by two potential entries “‘Transitional state’ and ‘Transitoriness’” (28) which discover the contextual deficit. Kirketerp has given up, defeated by the hunt for words and a disruption—the literal suspension of a meaningful context—too powerful to ignore. Only Astrid’s victory will again provide inspiration and impetus for the continued logbook exercise.

In contrast, to the goatsnudge and the log book -memory and relic of the fragmented Vandal cosmology- the meanings of the new Marquesan cosmology prove particularly elusive to the landlocked sailors precisely because of the absence of a unifying shared point of departure—or arrival. As Kirketerp explains to the Rear Admiral regarding the meanings of the Marquesan term **taboo**:

[T]he word we translate as Magus, Totem Animal or ‘Sacrifice’, designates something that is lacking not only in our vocabulary but in our way of thinking. We would have had to conceptualize them first and then develop and polish them over thousands of years. What these words designate are composites of rational, emotional, volitional, moral and esthetic elements or units of reality. Of all that, we are equipped to understand only the rational component. They, however, can grasp these meanings instantaneously with their whole being and are able to invest these interrelated contents as comprehensive wholes in the key words shared by their several Maori dialects. Our language is too unevolved for this, and our mode of thinking, if I may put it this way, too partial, too primitive. Can you see that? (20-21)¹¹

Akin to a computer thesaurus which will access a series of synonyms and antonyms, the partial, primitive knowledge of language, at the denotative level of “vocabulary,” allows reference to and understanding of terms, but remains woefully unable to decipher the nuances of a particular word choice—the way of thinking—appropriate for the context (e.g., sentence, thought) into which it will be inserted. In a similar context, anyone who has attempted to learn another language (or who, like the young Otlík made a living as a translator) will remember puzzling over lists of tricky “idiomatic phrases,” those culturally specific wordings which consistently evade literal translation and “rational” reduction into first language logic or syntax¹².

According to Kirketerp, the denizens of Denmark, hapless victims of the pitfalls of just such second language acquisition, suffer from “a pathological hypertrophy of the intellect at the expense of our world of emotions” (25)¹³, while the “benevolent autocracy of these Marquesans”

¹¹ “a Tabu, vagy például mint amit Mágus-nak, Totemállat-nak, „Áldozat”-nak fordítunk, olyansmit jelöl, ami nem a nyelvünkben nincs meg, hanem a gondolkodásunkból hiányzik. Forgalmakat kellett volna alkotnunk rájuk, és ezer és ezer éven át csiszolni, kifejleszteni őket. Csakhogy amit ezek jelölnek, azok a valóságnak összetett értelmi, érzelmi, akarati, erkölcsi, esztétikai elemei, egységei. Ebből mi csupán az értelmi összetevőjét tudjuk felfogni. Ők egyszerre, egész valójukkal tudják megragadni: és ezeket a teljes és összefüggő tartalmakat teszik ak a többféle Maori nyelvjárásaik jórészt kősös kulcsszavaiba. A mi nyelvünk ehhez még fejletlen, a gondolkodásunk pedig, hogy úgy mondjam, részleges, kezdetleges. Érti, nem?” (27).

¹² I have always been amused by the fact that North American cats enjoy nine lives while their South American cousins must content themselves with seven.

¹³ “az értelmi gondokozás kóros túltengése az érzelmvilágunk rovására” (32).

(23)¹⁴ can boast that “It is more integral. It has remained intact” (25)¹⁵. And so Kirketerp again admits defeat:

[A]lready at the preliminaries we are doomed to failure: our mode of conceptualization is not suitable for this. By means of the rational mind alone, we cannot grasp that higher degree of reality, that they can with their whole being. (22)¹⁶

The Captain has discovered that communication, and the cultural codes it disguises, insinuates what becoming *wholly* human signifies in a given context, here, that of the Vandal-Maori. More centrally, the communicative exercise implies the pre-existence of a human consciousness—holistic, instantaneous, comprehensive and simultaneous—which constructs meaning in culture, in time, where language acts to reflect the continual and adroit balancing and juxtapositioning of cosmologies and mythologies.

Similarly, Kirketerp observes that the ways in which each cosmology conceptualizes itself impacts meaning. He discusses how cosmic disruption—here the clash of cultures occasioned by colonialization and imperialism—transforms language use for both vanquished and conqueror, in defeat and in victory. This linguistic-ideological transformation sets in motion an examination that makes visible the workings of culture, in the guise of the sophistication of conceptualization. In the context of defeat, he muses on the case of a “conquered England” (33) where the plentiful leisure time of failed (military) challenge catalyzes the simple hunt for words:

The English hated the autocracy of the Danish kings, [t]heir defeat gave them sufficient leisure time for doing-nothing so that their poets and playwrights were eventually able to create texts that are close to Meta-language. (33)¹⁷

Concomitant with Meta-language—non-utilitarian tied enunciation—is the concept of Meta-thought which the shipless wordsmith defines as “nonexistent, totally unknown meanings [expressed] in a currently

¹⁴ “a Marquesa-belieknek a békés önkényuralma” (30).

¹⁵ “Egészebb. Ép maradt” (31).

¹⁶ És már itt, az előfeltételnél megbukik a dolog: a mi fogalomalkotási módszerünk erre nem alkalmas. Pusztán az agyunkkal nem lehet megragadni a valóságot úgy, *olyan* teljesebb fokon, ahogy ők képesek az egész valójukkal” (27).

¹⁷ “Az angolok gyűlöltek a dán királyok önkényuralmát, a vereségükből mégis fakadt annyi ráérő idő a semmit nem csinálásra, hogy a költők, színdarab-íróik kvázi-Metanyelvet megközelítő szövegeket tudtak ezáltal létrehozni” (45).

spoken language" (34)¹⁸. Accordingly, his personal experience of defeat with the logbook, typified by his struggles with the remarks column, likewise represents a move from a language of necessity to the dynamics of Meta-thought.

However, it is "Meta-thought nuance" (34)¹⁹, that is to say consciousness, which precedes both words and their multiplied meanings:

[H]ow long" [he muses,] "will it take us, going about on all fours, to acquire the handful of Maori (or Old Maori) words about which, for the time being, all we know is that we don't understand them [?] (34)²⁰

The clash of cultures has inverted/reversed the natural to the thing itself order—consciousness of cultural codes to pre-linguistic experience of meaning to language and enunciation. The Marquesan—an enigmatic Borgesian—order now requires that the Vandals splash helplessly about in a murky pool of unattached utterances: from word to exercise to understanding. That is to say, rather than describing thought and action in a word, the Vandals see themselves consumed by the action of attaching meaning and context to an arbitrary string of letters or collections of sounds. While such a clash disrupts and, here, inverts order, the process contaminantly makes apparent the heretofore invisible practices of culture. So Kirketerp aptly concludes that, "A defeat was good for giving a person lots of leisure time for thinking it over". Nevertheless, he cannot help but wonder, "how about a victory?" (33)²¹.

Indeed, how about a victory? Delving the theme of disruption - challenge, transition, transformation-, Kirketerp ponders Astrid's triumphant performance at the Paris Olympics within the larger political context of the bittersweet glories of winning:

The developmental process of the quasi-Meta-language (or Meta-language, sans quasi) was regrettably disrupted when the lifestyle giving birth to it was disrupted. When the creators of the language decided to leave off their two hundred fifty thousand year old meditation and enter the path of conquest—a path so familiar to us. Technological activities, the manufacture of tools and weapons need only

¹⁸ "nem létező, teljesen ismeretlen tartalmakat sikerült neki egy kurrens, közhasználatú nemzeti nyelven közölni?" (45-46).

¹⁹ "egy metagondolkodásbeli árnyalattal" (47).

²⁰ "[H]ogy ezzel a négykézlábra ereszkedéssel mi mennyi idő múlva fogjuk birtokolni csak azt a néhány Maori (vagy Ó-Maori) szót, amiről egyelőre azt értjük, hogy nem értjük[?]" (47).

²¹ "A vereség arra jó, hogy sok ráérő időt nyer vele az ember. Hát hogy állunk győzelemnél?" (45).

clear rational concepts and words. So that the words of Old Maori, formerly multidimensional in meaning and emotional charge, became unequivocal. (35)²²

Ironically, in winning, something gets lost. In consequence, the “benevolent autocracy” presents multilayered challenges: 1) between the systems of meaning of vanquished Vandals and conquering Maori; 2) between the multidimensional, custom-based Old and the New perverted—that is, technologized and unequivocal—Maori; and, 3) between Pre- and Post-Maori Danish. All these levels combine in the Captain’s attempt to decipher the nuances of the term **atua**:

At first it seemed to mean the spirit of a departed chieftain; later, a general reaching out for contact with, and help from, our dead. Or a benevolent source of spiritual energy, for whatever purpose. We were unaware of the many prohibitions it included. In some of the adjacent Melanesian Islands an anthropophagic rite still persists in many places, prescribing instead of burial, the ceremonial eating of dead parents, out of religious reverence. **Atua** put an end to this ancient custom. (36)²³

Under examination, meaning, seemingly at war with itself in this trans-cosmological context, falls apart.

[D]isturbances, uncertainties arise in the return of the spirits of the dead if their remaining flesh and blood becomes, in part, our flesh and blood. Their spirits, when summoned, may get confused, tangled up with the souls of the living. (36)²⁴

The restless spirits of the dead and the souls of the living abound: Vandal/Maori, traditional/perverted, past/present. These entities get tan-

²² “A kvázi-Metanyelv (vagy kvávi nélküli Metanyelv) alkotási folyamata sajnálatosan megtört, amikor létrehozó életformája megtört. Amikor, ugyebár, a nyelvalkotók úgy döntöttek, hogy kétszázötvenezer éves meditációjukat megszakítva, a hódítások-általunk jól ismert -útfára lépnek. Technikai tevékenységhez, számszámok, fegyverek gyártásához világos, érthető fogalmakat, szavakat lehet csak használni. Így az addigi többjelentésű (és érzelmi töltésű) Ó-Maori szavaik átmentek egyértelműekbe” (48-49).

²³ “Először úgy látszott, hogy az eltávozott törzfőnök szellemét jelenti, aztán, hogy általános segítséget, kapcsolatot találni a halottainkhoz. Sőt, hogy jótékony szellemi jellegű erőforrás bármihez. Nem tudtuk, hogy többféle tilalmat tartalmaz. A környező szigeteiken, Melanéziában, sokfelé még ma is él egy antropofág rítus, hogy ez elhunyt szülőket temetés helyett, tiszteletből, vallásos szertartással, megeszik. Az Atua betiltotta ezt az ősi szokást” (49-50).

²⁴ “[A] halottaink szellemének visszatérésében keletkezik zavar [...] a saját húsunkká-vérünkkel válik. A megidézett szellemük összekeveredhet-zavarodhat a mi lelkünkkel” (50).

gled up, equally confused with the hunt for words (language and Meta-language) and the elbow room of the free floating soul (thought and Meta-thought). In the backdrop to the transitoriness of meaning, puzzle becomes monstrosity, plagued by negations, hidden nuances: “[The customized-based Maori] consider the **Atua**-prohibition a profound sacrilege, forcing them to abandon the departed, by burial in the earth to worms and decomposition” (36)²⁵.

Similar Borgesian spirits might occasion fear or stymie potential communication at the level of a Master/Slave dialect, blocked by the structuralist opposition of binary terms. For his part, as product of a Central European, between worlds consciousness, Ottlik instead relies on the often bewildering dynamics of synthesis and transitoriness. In both’s works, the resulting chaos of disturbances and uncertainties, “the irregular side of nature, the discontinuous and erratic side,” permits a telling glimpse of the sutures—Meta-thought nuance—of their understanding and approach to culture. Borges’ detailed descriptions of disturbance and uncertainty defy resolution. His central characters, unable to scratch the surface, sound the depths of meaning, confronts institutions and their systems which always, already remain impenetrable. Questions multiply: Who dreams the dreamer’s dreamer? Is the lottery player/victim’s version of history accurate? Does his impending hasty departure—to where, for what reason—represent yet another exigency of the perverted/masochist lottery machine?

What ordering does Ottlik’s thoughtmeister Kirketerp propose? What response does he await? In a word, Astrid. Indeed, the move to the “Meta” confirms that Astrid represents, not a distraction or the passing focus of the afternoon, but rather the hurdler embodies serendipitous response and the central thematic of the narrative. The young woman provides impetus for 1) the reexamination of bitter memories (Schuntvig); 2) the impromptu investigation of the galling Maori colonial presence; and, 3) the hope for the continuation of the flagging logbook. Astrid signals a third term (“egy harmadik dolog” 53), earmark of post-structuralist theorizing, a Hegelian synthesis of the linguistic binary oppositions, the meeting of cultural cosmologies.

Nevertheless, the reader suspects that Astrid represents more than the mere synthesis of contradictory elements. Whereas, the two landlocked sailors’ experience of victory has left them ill-prepared for the only

²⁵ “Épp azt érzik mélyen kegyeletsértőnek az Atua-tilalomban, hogy a halottaikat a föld alá temetve át kell adniunk férgeknek, kukacoknak, feloszlásnak” (50).

other option that they can imagine – defeat – her generation’s history of defeat enables the medal winner to put the track victory in perspective. In the emptied stadium, Astrid muses on the Vandal situation concluding that “victory is an accident,” “pure chance” (40), “an accident with the same value as a defeat” (41)²⁶. For his part, Kirketerp imagines that

[S]he is probing how much of the well-known, plentiful leisure time of defeat is left after the victory, for that all-important, primeval doing-nothing. Is there enough left for seeing things? (Taking care, of course, not to think about them.) (40)²⁷

In consequence, in the present moment of transition and transitoriness, Astrid can more easily incorporate the not so contradictory remnants of the myriad of former mythological systems, “Vestiges, towards a new or renewed Meta-language” (38)²⁸. The revitalized language, by extension, reflects a new way of thinking – a new Meta-thought –, and ultimately, an altered consciousness: a renewed Meta-thought nuance, a different communicative pose which recognizes a reality of intermediality. Her ability to “see[] things” and put them into words, without “think[ing] about them” overmuch definitively distances her from a field of bewildered Borgesian protagonists, and here one must include the two sailors, plagued by pathological intellectual hypertrophy. While Tanacs correctly asserts the similarities between Borges and Otlík, the Hungarian more importantly has created a Meta-Borgesian text which, more than a simple faithful or slavish imitation of the master’s stylistics and thematics, manages to invent a character capable of capturing the unimagined Meta-thought nuance of fellow Vandal, Georg Ludvig Borge.

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²⁶ “[A] győzelem éppolyan értékű véletlen, mint a vereség” (57).

²⁷ “[K]ipróbálja, hogy a jó ismerős, vereséggel nyert sok ráérő időből a győzelem mennyit hagy meg, a fontos, ősi semmit nem csinálásra. Marad-e rá annyi, hogy lássa a dolgokat? (Persze ügyelve, nehogy gondolkozzon fölöttül.)” (55-56).

²⁸ “Maradványokat, egy megkezdett vagy újrakezdett Metanylv-alapozásos” (53).

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