

**This is a self-archived version of an original article. This version may differ from the original in pagination and typographic details.**

**Author(s):** Orzóy, Ágnes

**Title:** Reading Ádám Bodor's Sinistra körzet ['The Sinistra Zone'] in English

**Year:** 2018

**Version:** Published version

**Copyright:** © 2018 Ágnes Orzóy

**Rights:** CC BY 4.0

**Rights url:** <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

**Please cite the original version:**

Orzóy, Á. (2018). Reading Ádám Bodor's Sinistra körzet ['The Sinistra Zone'] in English. *Hungarian Cultural Studies*, 11, 104-119. <https://doi.org/10.5195/ahca.2018.325>

## Reading Ádám Bodor's *Sinistra körzet* ['The Sinistra Zone'] in English

Ágnes Orzóy

**Abstract:** This article focuses on the English translation and reception of a major contemporary Hungarian novel, Ádám Bodor's *The Sinistra Zone*. A fairly slim book, *The Sinistra Zone* was first published in 1992, established Bodor as a major writer and inspired a considerable amount of critical literature in Hungary. The article first gives an overview of the position of *The Sinistra Zone* in contemporary Hungarian literature and highlights some issues discussed by critics that are relevant for the discussion of the English translation and reception. After reviewing the American reception of the book, Orzóy examines how specific features of Bodor's prose are rendered in Paul Olchvály's English translation by discussing some translational choices and analyzing how these choices may modify possible interpretations of the novel. It is also suggested that besides the interpretive potential of the English translation, expectations towards translated novels may be a reason for the divergence of opinion between Hungarian and American reviewers and critics.

**Keywords:** *Translation criticism, translating culture, political allegory, global novel, Ádám Bodor, Paul Olchvály*

**Biography:** Ágnes Orzóy is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Jyväskylä, Finland. She is writing her dissertation on the English translation of contemporary Hungarian novels. She also works as foreign rights director at Magvető Publishing, Budapest. [a.orzoy@gmail.com](mailto:a.orzoy@gmail.com)

In this article, I focus on the English translation of Ádám Bodor's *Sinistra körzet*. Rather than criticizing the translation by pointing to weaknesses or strengths (although I will comment on individual choices that I regard as more or less felicitous), my aim is similar to the one spelled out by Lance Hewson in his seminal book, *An Approach to Translation Criticism*, namely "to understand where the text stands in relation to its original by examining the interpretive potential that results from the translational choices that have been made" (Hewson 2011: 1). I will also discuss reviews published in American print and online journals, as well as the paratext

---

\* This article is a shortened version of a chapter of my dissertation, a work in progress. I wish to thank Peter Sherwood for reading the first draft.



New articles in this journal are licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.



This journal is published by the University Library System of the University of Pittsburgh as part of its D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program and is cosponsored by the University of Pittsburgh Press

supplied by the American publisher, with a view toward shedding light on possible reasons for the divergence between the reception of the book in Hungarian and its English translation.

### **Ádám Bodor's *Sinistra körzet* and Its Critical Reception in Hungary**

One of the most important contemporary authors writing in Hungarian, Ádám Bodor was born in Kolozsvár (Cluj, Romania) in 1936. Convicted for political reasons at the age of 16, Bodor spent the years between 1952 and 1954 imprisoned in communist Romania, an experience which, in his own words, determined "practically all areas of [his] life" (Bodor 2001: 128). He moved to Hungary in the early 1980s, working first as editor, then as a freelance writer. When *Sinistra körzet* was published in 1992, it received unanimous critical praise in Hungary and established Bodor as a major writer. His other works include *Az érsek látogatása* ['The Visit of the Archbishop', 1999], *Verhovina madarai* ['The Birds of Verhovina', 2011], several collections of short stories, the latest selection being *Vissza a fülesbagolyhoz* ['Back to the Long-eared Owl', 2015], as well as a volume of interviews with poet Zsófia Balla, entitled *A börtön szaga* ['The Smell of Prison', 2000]. Although his works have been published in more than twenty languages, the only book available in English by Bodor other than *Sinistra körzet* is a collection of short stories (Bodor 1991).

In 1990, Bodor won the short story contest of the literary journal *Holmi* with a story entitled "Természetráji gyűjtemény Sinistra körzetben" ['A Natural History Collection in the Sinistra Zone']. This, and twelve other stories published in 1991 in other literary journals were later to become chapters of *Sinistra körzet*, published in 1992 by Magvető. The book was immediately hailed as a masterpiece and has been translated into seventeen languages to date. A fairly slim book consisting of fifteen chapters, *Sinistra körzet* is set in an unidentified zone somewhere in the Carpathian Mountains, controlled by mountain infantrymen. The inhabitants of the zone, who hold various bizarre jobs—from minding bears held in a state-owned reserve to frosting sheets of glass for prison windows—are not allowed to leave the area. *Sinistra körzet* has no linear plot, even though one can reconstruct a story by picking up information from various parts of the book. The narrator of most (although not all) of the chapters is one Andrei Bodor, the only character in the book who had come to the zone of his own free will while looking for his adopted son, Béla Bundasian. Andrei first works in a wild fruit depot, then becomes an assistant corpse watchman; in the meantime, he performs various services for the commanders of the zone, some of them involving horrendous crimes. The loosely connected chapters all narrate stories about the inhabitants of the zone, mostly stories of highly unusual relationships of control, domination, and cruelty, set in the majestic Carpathian Mountains, richly and exquisitely depicted.

*Sinistra körzet* has inspired and continues to inspire critical discourse, with the various approaches often in dialogue and sometimes in debate with each other. Rather than reviewing the vast critical literature written in Hungarian on *Sinistra körzet*, in what follows, I will highlight some of the main problems and issues discussed by critics that are relevant for our discussion of the English translation. Many of the reviews I will refer to were published in literary journals at the time or a few years after the first publication of *Sinistra körzet* and republished in a volume of collected essays on Bodor's works, the explicit aim of which was "to maintain the dynamics of interpretation," engaging young critics to enter into the dialogue (Scheibner–Vaderna 2005: 10).

I have been referring to *Sinistra körzet* as a "book," carefully avoiding calling it either a novel or a short story cycle. The question of genre has been abundantly discussed in the critical literature on *Sinistra körzet*. Even though there are certainly good reasons to call it a novel—unity of place and characters, and even, to a certain extent, time and plot—yet, as some critics argue, it is not a novel in the proper sense. In an essay published a few months after its first publication, László Márton points out that although in *Sinistra körzet* Bodor has "successfully launched and completed" a complex epistemological project, which has traditionally been regarded as the terrain of novels, this project is based on the "characteristically short-term intensity of short stories." In other words, *Sinistra körzet* as a whole does not deepen our understanding of the "demonic" world it represents more than any of its parts, and therefore it cannot be considered a novel in the proper sense of the word. Rather, it is in a "constant oscillation between short story and novel" (Márton 1992: 1875). For this phenomenon, Zoltán András Bán offers the term "exploded novel," (Bán 1992: 58) a metaphor which not only refers to the experience the reader has in scraping together scattered pieces of information to get closer to understanding the world of the Zone, but also describes the Sinistra Zone itself, a world which defies logic, reason, and human relations as we know them, yet which uncannily resembles our own world.

The nature of the world described in *Sinistra körzet* has been discussed by a number of critics. While the book is certainly informed by Bodor's experience of prison and of communist Romania in general, the reading of *Sinistra körzet* as a political parable is rejected by most. From the beginning, critics have stressed the high level of indeterminacy and incongruence in *Sinistra körzet*, as well as the rich ambiguity inherent in the idea of a "sinister zone." Gergely Angyalosi points out that the confinement of evil and devastation to the "zone" feels a victory for those outside—a sense of triumph over evil (Angyalosi 2005: 49). This zone, this Other, can be Eastern Europe for Western Europe; it can be the past itself; or it can be interpreted on a psychological or transcendental plane as well. Yet Angyalosi stresses that it would be reductive to interpret *Sinistra körzet* according to the logic of binary opposition. If it were as simple as that, escaping from the Zone to an outside world which is far superior to the Zone would be portrayed as the ultimate goal for its inhabitants. Yet nobody is willing to conspire with Andrei to escape from the Zone. Rather, *Sinistra körzet* offers an insight into the technique of creating boundaries, of isolating evil, ad infinitum (Angyalosi 2005: 52). There is no external point of view in *Sinistra körzet* that would allow for the Zone to be described in terms of victims and perpetrators: everyone is both at the same time (Scheibner 2005: 166). As Györgyi Pozsvai puts it, Ádám Bodor—and his narrator—approach the absurd world of the Zone with a *contemplative* attitude, rather than with the intention of solving the ethical dilemma of retribution versus forgiveness (Pozsvai 1998: 155).

What makes *Sinistra körzet* so disconcerting is that rather than being the portrayal of a particular dictatorial regime with a particular ideology, it shows a world in which the same rules apply even after the ideology had been discredited and those responsible for implementing it had died or had been toppled. Although there is some kind of rebellion in the Zone (Chapter 11), it is described as a grotesque, annoying and irrelevant commotion, and when Andrei returns years later, he finds the Zone unchanged.

Although it may be tempting for a reader to draw a line at some point, and claim that if *Sinistra körzet* is not a portrayal of the Romanian version of communism, then at least it is about the general conditions—irrespective of socio-political setup—in Eastern Europe. Yet some

critics have argued that Ádám Bodor's book does not offer the consolation of confining evil in the East: they suggest that *Sinistra körzet* is an inquiry into the deepest problems of the human condition. Perhaps this is the most disturbing quality of the book: even though the Zone of the novel is portrayed as a sort of penal colony, the laws of the world Bodor creates can be identified in many societies and subcultures. Ultimately, they reveal a state of things that is always there, lurking underneath civilized life. Critics who focus on the narratological and poetic aspects of Bodor's text go even further and claim that a geopolitical or existential reading is inadequate for coping with the novelty of Ádám Bodor's text (Bengi 1997, Demény 2005, Kovács 2001).

Indeterminacy extends to the temporal structure and setting as well. The narrative is not linear, certain events are told repeatedly, some of them in an inconsistent manner, and there are random indications of time all through the book. One has the impression that events happen without any motivation and consequence; rather than time moving forward or standing still, it seems to be operating in fits and starts. A number of critics have discussed the significance of landscape in *Sinistra körzet*. While the setting is clearly somewhere in the Carpathian Mountains, close to the Romanian–Ukrainian border, it is highly stylized and allegorical (Márton 1992). Rather than an idyllic space and a refuge, the landscape has a metaphysical status: the operation of the military dictatorship in the Sinistra Zone is analogous with an existence determined by nature (Simon 1992, Szilágyi 1993). People seem to be part of the landscape: they talk and act dispassionately, and accept suffering, cruelty, or betrayal, as if these were facts of nature. In the world of *Sinistra körzet*, human life does not seem to have priority over other parts of nature. The identities of inhabitants are destabilized by the roles the authorities bestow upon them. Their language reflects this instability as well: strange and chilling yet hilarious, it is a mixture of sanctimonious phrases, officialese, slang, and childish expressions, full of stylistic incongruences.

### **Reviews in American Print and Online Media on *The Sinistra Zone***

When discussing the American reception of Bodor's book, we have to take into consideration that a translated book from a small Eastern European country does not stand a good chance of being extensively reviewed in the American press. The difference between the types of publications in which the reviews appeared must also be stressed: the Hungarian reviews quoted above were published in literary journals (*Alföld, Holmi, Tiszatáj*), a scholarly monograph (Pozsvai 1998), and a volume of critical studies (Scheibner–Vaderna 2005), whereas the American reviews were published in online literary journals (*Words Without Borders, The Literary Review, Full Stop*), a cultural and political journal (*Brooklyn Rail*), the trade news magazine of the publishing industry (*The Publishers' Weekly*), and the book review section of *The New York Times*. It must also be taken into consideration that the Hungarian tradition of reviewing books is different from the Anglo-Saxon practice. There are very few Hungarian journals and newspapers which print reviews written for a general educated audience, in which the reviewer puts author and work into context and describes the main topic and themes of the book. The reviews and critiques published in journals quite often use academic language, refer to schools and trends of literary criticism and are intended for people who are already familiar with the book.

In what follows, I will only focus on points where the interpretation of American reviewers clearly differs from that of Hungarian critics, or where they seem to be baffled by certain aspects of the book. Apparently, the more a reviewer approaches the book with the

expectation that they are reading a traditional realist or a magical realist novel, the more they are frustrated by the reading experience and consider any deviation from the norm a shortcoming, a technical flaw, or arbitrary, uncalled-for mannerism. Those who expect a realist novel are disappointed by the vagueness and inconsistency of the plot ("While Bodor's writing is rich in descriptions of unique characters... the narrative lacks urgency and the myriad peculiar characters distract from Andrei's mission to find his son" *Publishers' Weekly* 2013). They also note the "questionable" motivation of characters, the "sloppy" structure, the shifts in narrative point of view that "seem more like lazy strategizing than stylistic boldness," and the repetitions that give the impression of lack of editorial work (Halperin 2013).

Those expecting a magical realist novel are dissatisfied as the book, although populated with fantastic characters including dwarfs, witches and giants and full of outlandish occurrences, constantly oscillates between the grotesque, the absurd, magical realism and realism, and lacks the exuberance of a full-blooded magical realist novel. *The Brooklyn Rail*'s reviewer compares Bodor to García Márquez, contrasting the "gentle melancholy and humanity" of the latter's characters to the "somewhat cardboard characters" of the former, and opines that while "Márquez moves seamlessly between the real and the fantastic," Bodor's novel "remains in the realm of a political fairy tale" (Petrova 2014).

Other than the difficulties concerning the genre of the book, some reviewers also seem to be puzzled by the nature of the world described in *The Sinistra Zone*. Apparently, the more a reviewer expects to find a concise analysis of a totalitarian regime as experienced in Eastern Europe in the second half of the twentieth century (a reading encouraged by the background of the author as well as by the setting), the more likely they are to label the novel as inadequate. There seems to be a resistance by readers of the English translation to the understanding of totalitarianism as portrayed by Ádám Bodor: as an essentially ineradicable mode of existence on a deeper level rather than an anomaly, i.e. the result of a concatenation of events whereby a dictator comes to control a country or a region where, once the dictator is toppled, things go back to normal after a period of readjustment. The reviewer in *Full Stop* reads the book as a political allegory, by an author whom he calls "a vehement anti-communist," but one that compares unfavorably with Orwell's *1984*: "though the critique begins pointedly, after working its way through the book's vulgar and whimsical digestive tract, it plops out the back end of the novel watered down and amorphous. This is not the shrewd, organized and high-tech government of *1984*" (Halperin 2013). Although he notes that "in this forested bureaucratic fairy tale, we get the feeling that Big Brother is, indeed, watching, but in the form of a dwarf peering out from behind a toadstool," he does not reflect on the fact why that is so, and whether it might in fact be the point.

Remarkably, with the exception of the two short reviews (*Publishers' Weekly*, *The New York Times*), all the critiques mention the scene in which—having finished the job of pouring cement into the opening of a cavity where a stream goes underground and where the sole survivor of the forest rangers who were burnt alive is hiding—Andrei stands Elvira Spiridon on his skis in front of him and, "as the forest began flitting by on both sides of us, gliding away backward ever faster toward the retired forest ranger's clearing, with my nails and my teeth I tore that new spring dress right off of her; and, using my knife, I snipped my cement-armored trousers off my waist until, finally, once again I felt her velvety behind in my lap (Bodor 2013: 131)."

The reviewers in *The Brooklyn Rail* and *The Literary Review* seem to be impressed by the acrobatics, while that in *Words Without Borders* portrays it as an aggressive act. The reviewer in *Full Stop* sums up the scene as "anal ski-fucking" and one which "illustrate[s] the twisted logic that drives the novel down a nauseatingly loopy 'scenic route.'" The divergence of these opinions demonstrates the complexity and open-endedness of this—merely one-paragraph-long—scene, in which aggression and intimacy, an improbable feat and realistic detail, callousness and sensuality are all present at the same time, as in the whole novel.

### **The English Translation: *The Sinistra Zone*, published by New Directions in 2013**

Before delving into the translation itself, let's take a look at the American edition, the book as presented by the publisher, New Directions, a prestigious American publisher of international fiction. The back cover of *The Sinistra Zone*, published in 2013, contains a short description, three blurbs, and a few lines about Ádám Bodor. A gripping account of the story, the description conditions the reader in a variety of ways. It firstly focuses on Andrei, as if he were a protagonist in the conventional sense. It stresses supernatural and strange elements typical of magical realist novels ("supernatural umbrellas, plague-bearing birds, albino twins") and ends with the suspenseful phrase "and then...", suggesting a dramatic dénouement. The expectation of a magical realist novel is reinforced by the second of the three blurbs, in which the critic of *Die Zeit* likens the novel to the works of García Márquez, whereas the third quote, from Péter Esterházy, evokes Raymond Chandler, although Esterházy—who calls the novel "a chronicle of a bygone world"—immediately warns us that we should not expect detective fiction.

The title page of the Hungarian edition contains a subtitle: "Egy regény fejezetei," ['Chapters of a Novel'] which is missing from the English edition. The publisher may have had commercial reasons for omitting the subtitle: as short story collections are much harder to market, it would have been unwise to intimate that the book could be anything other than a novel. Yet this subtitle is an indication that what the reader holds in his or her hands is not a "proper" novel as it suggests incompleteness. The American publisher also eliminated the brackets that surround the chapter titles in the Hungarian original. This minor typographical feature affects the expectations of the reader. The chapter titles all follow the same pattern—they are all possessive phrases, e.g. "Colonel Borcan's Umbrella," "Hamza Petrika's Love," etc. In brackets, they give the impression of vague reminders, suggesting arbitrariness and contingency, much like the dog tags the characters of *Sinistra körzet* wear, engraved with the name they had been given on entering the Zone, rather than with their real name. Without the brackets, however, the reader will be more inclined to expect elegant and well-rounded stories. The reader who takes this volume in her hands is primed to read a book that is in many ways at odds with its Hungarian critical reception—one that is more rooted in a particular time and place, and more conventional in terms of plot and genre.

*Sinistra körzet* was translated into English by Paul Olchváry, an experienced translator of Hungarian fiction who is at home in both worlds: a native of Amherst, New York, he has a Hungarian family background, and lived in Hungary for years. Besides being the translator of György Dragomán's internationally hailed *The White King*, Károly Pap's *Azarel* and Ferenc Barnás's *The Ninth*, among other works, Olchváry has his own press, New Europe Books, which publishes books from and about the former Eastern Bloc. Both as a translator and as a publisher, Olchváry has a rare sensibility for finding books that have a potential audience in English.

In what follows, I discuss some aspects of Olchváry's translation as published in the New Directions edition—this caveat is important as we have no way of ascertaining how the editing process affected the end result. I have selected examples where divergences on the micro or meso level seem to have macro level effects. In other words, I do not intend to single out "mistranslations," i.e. outright mistakes in the translation resulting from a translator's inadequate command of the language or from inattentive reading due to hasty work (there are very few such mistranslations in Olchváry's text). I will point to divergences which, though often minor, and sometimes perhaps inevitable, shift the tone, style, rhythm or viewpoint of the source text in such a way that they result in interpretational transformation or shrinkage. The terminology and the method used in my analysis are indebted to the method of translation criticism outlined by Lance Hewson in *An Approach to Translation Criticism* (Hewson 2011).

After providing a relatively detailed analysis of the beginning of the first chapter, I will then highlight some typical and recurrent differences between the original and the translation that I consider of paramount importance and demonstrate their effects on some passages. The first chapter is in a key position, setting the tone and conditioning the reader's expectations; it also exemplifies those, presumably often subliminal, choices that the translator (and/or the editor) made in order to make the text smoother, less puzzling, and thus more acceptable to the target audience. Then I will select some examples from the other fourteen chapters in which the English text diverges from the original.

Chapter 1, entitled "Colonel Borcan's Umbrella," starts with an idyllic, almost fairy-tale like scene of the narrator on patrol with Colonel Borcan, the forest commissioner, the commander of the mountain infantrymen who control the region. This opening presents an idyllic, beautiful nature scene, except for the fact that the first line already informs the reader that the Colonel would die soon after this walk. By the end of the second paragraph, we further learn that the waxwings have arrived, birds that bring a deadly fever called the "Tungusic flu." (There is already a minor—and inevitable—semantic loss in the translation of the word for "waxwings," called "*csonttollú*" ['bone-feathered'] in Hungarian, which in English does not have the same grotesque and sinister overtone.) The reconnaissance visit, which takes several hours and consists in the Colonel sitting on the summit and gazing at the mountains in the distance, is described in the source text in a single paragraph made up of three sentences. In the English translation, the same description takes up five sentences and two paragraphs:

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 (Bodor 2013: 4).



*A fenyvesből éppen csak kibukkanó bérc már a Pop Ivan gerincéhez tartozott, messzire el lehetett róla látni a határon túlra, a ruszin erdővidék egymást követő kék vonulataira. A legutolsó halmok mögül, talán már a róna messziségéből sötét füst emelkedett, az égbolt nagy részét keleten, mintha máris az éjszaka közelednék, lila függöny takarta. Ahogy a nap emelkedett, tompultak a távoli színek, s amikor a völgyek kiteltek a délután opálos fényeivel, az erdőbiztos eltette messzelátóját, vette a sapkáját, jelezve, hogy a szemle véget ért (Bodor 1992: 5-6).*

The three sentences in the Hungarian original are roughly of the same length, and all start with a component of the landscape: a crag jutting out beyond the spruces; the furthest hill; the sun rising. In each sentence, there is a gradual movement of the gaze: first, further and further into the distance, to the most distant hills, then to the open country beyond them, followed by the sky beyond the open country (first and second sentences). The gaze then heads from the rising sun back to the closest valleys and finally to the viewer himself (third sentence). In the first two sentences, the landscape seems to be getting darker (although we also learn that the viewer is looking eastwards), but in the third sentence, it is made clear that we are looking at a landscape before sunrise. A human presence—the forest commissioner—appears only at the end of the last sentence as the gaze returns to its starting-point, which is, as we only now become aware, the point where the forest commissioner stands.

The translation does not reflect the length, structure and focus of the sentences in the source text. The first sentence starts with an added element ("This secret vista") which shifts the focus from the landscape to the human presence. The three sentences of even length are cut into five sentences of uneven length, with the syntax rearranged to produce a more reassuring effect by virtue of being more explicit and explanatory. A literal translation of the second sentence of the Hungarian original would be: "Beyond the furthest hills, perhaps from as far away as the open country beyond, dark smoke was rising, [and] much of the horizon to the east, as if night were already coming on, was draped by a purplish curtain." In the translation, this sentence is cut into two, with the word "east," seemingly out of place, moved to the next sentence, together with the "rising sun," which is in a separate sentence in the original. These changes, complete with the temporal specification, however vague ("hours later") added to the last sentence, cancel the puzzlement and uncertainty inherent in the original. The thematic structure of the sentences (gazing further/dark colors, then gazing closer/the rising sun) becomes invisible. The decision to devote a whole new paragraph to the last sentence separates the Colonel from the surrounding landscape and gives him a prominence and emphasis that were not inherent to the original text. Although the changes in the translation are minor, together they result in a paragraph in which the human presence is more marked and reassuring, as opposed to the original which exudes the relentlessness and overwhelming presence of nature.

The sense of foreign or incongruous elements being coded into the landscape continues in the next few paragraphs. In the Hungarian, a stranger called the "red rooster" arrives, mid-paragraph. In English, he receives a separate paragraph. While in the original his lower-case moniker, far from being a nickname jokingly given by the inhabitants of Sinistra, is an indication that he is suspected of bringing unrest (as the red rooster represents a symbol of fire and revolution), in the translation, it is capitalized. At this point, I would like to make a short digression a propos of the names in *Sinistra körzet*. Many of the names contain some reference to animals and plants that are lost for the non-Hungarian reader. An even more serious, although inevitable, loss is the foreignness of all the fantastic names in *Sinistra körzet*. Hungarian is one of

those languages, rare in Europe, in which the surname comes first and the first name second. In this book some of the names sound Hungarian, others do not; even in the case of Hungarian-sounding names, the order is reversed, i.e. first names come first and family names follow. While this may seem legitimate as *Sinistra körzet* is set somewhere in the Carpathian Mountains, presumably in Romania, the order of the names lends an uncanny atmosphere of familiarity yet foreignness to the novel for Hungarian readers. Many of the names are extravagant and unlikely, an amalgam of Hungarian, Romanian, Armenian and Ukrainian elements, and we learn about several characters that they are ethnically "half" something (Hungarian, Armenian). Rather than a vision of a colorful, multicultural society, the names suggest brokenness, fragmentariness and a sense of uprootedness. These people do not seem to belong to any community; as we had mentioned before, these are not even people's real names, but names they received on entering the Zone.

In addition to paragraph formatting and capitalizing, there are some syntactic changes in the translation that add up to describe the red rooster's appearance in *Sinistra* as mysterious in an exciting way, rather than ominous and sinister and *therefore* all too familiar in the *Sinistra Zone*. (Cf. *egy reggel csak ott sötélettek idegen gyártmányú gumicsizmája nyomai a deres ösvényeken* versus "One morning, tracks left behind by foreign-made rubber boots appeared on those frosty trails. His boots.") In the Hungarian, these qualities are completely absent: the inhabitants of *Sinistra* seem neither surprised nor excited when a stranger turns up, as they know all too well that they have no reason to be. All these changes have the effect of highlighting the red rooster's appearance much more than it is highlighted in the original, and therefore making him a folktale-like character; although he is strange, sinister and out-of-place, his emphasis in the narrative reassures the reader that such appearances are indeed out of place, similarly to the explanatory translation of the apparent darkening of the eastern sky in our previous example.

The passage in which Géza Kökény, the night watchman, spots the stranger illustrates how even the slightest lexical and syntactic changes may affect the tone, and therefore the possible interpretation, of a motif:

Masons dismantling the forest chapel happened upon his tracks one morning; and hours later, Géza Kökény, a night watchman who spent his insomniac days in a watchtower at the edge of the village, spotted the redheaded stranger descending the slopes of Pop Ivan Mountain. He seemed to move as easily as the wind about the barbed-wire-tangled brush. Down below, he was asked more than once for his papers, but the infantrymen found his I.D. in order even if it was, after all, presumably forged (Bodor 2013: 7).

*Az erdei kápolna bontásán dolgozó kőművesek találtak egy reggel lábnyomaira, délután Géza Kökény éjjeliőr – aki nappalait álmatlanul a falu szélén egy magaslesen töltötte – elevenen is megpillantotta, ereszkedőben a Pop Ivan lejtőin. Úgy látszik, mint a szél, csak úgy szabadon járkált a sötvények, drótakadályok között. Az aljban többször is igazoltatták, ám iratait – vélhetően hamisak voltak – a hegyivadászok mindig rendben találták (Bodor 1992: 8).*

The Hungarian text gives the impression that the redheaded stranger is a sinister presence, whereas the translation keeps up the folktale tone: "He seemed to move as easily as the wind" for *Úgy látszik, mint a szél, csak úgy szabadon járkált*, suggests an inherent ability, as opposed to the Hungarian sentence's suggestion of a technical sense of freedom: while the inhabitants of

*Sinistra* are prisoners, the stranger can walk freely (rather than "easily") wherever he pleases. In the last sentence, the translation claims that his papers were found to be in order *in spite of the fact* that they were presumably forged, whereas the original proposes no causal connection between the two facts that his papers were found to be in order and whether they were genuine or forged. Similar to the previous ones, this example illustrates the disorienting indeterminacy of Bodor's prose being rendered in the translation according to the logic of our everyday expectations.

This discrepancy is also illustrated by the following sentence: "From the start, on glimpsing this stranger, Géza Kökény dubbed him the Red Rooster. And sure enough, since no one knew his real name, this simple but exact nickname stuck (Bodor 2013: 7) [*Mivel névről senki sem ismerhette, kezdettől fogva, hogy a nappal is vigyázó éjjeliőr megpillantotta – mindjárt el is keresztelte – az egyszerű és sokatmondó vörös kakas név ragadt rá*] (Bodor 1992: 8-9). Much of the ambiguity and complexity of the original sentence is lost in the translation. The syntactic rearrangement of the original sentence clarifies the paratactical syntax of the Hungarian text, and puts the emphasis on different elements, thereby giving the impression that everything in this world is in order: Géza Kökény is named in the translation rather than indicated by his profession and his alarming habit ("a night watchman watching people also in the daytime," this piece of information is completely missing from the translation), even though in fact this is not even his real name as all those who enter the zone receive a new name from the authorities. He dubs the stranger, and the community is happy to follow him—the translation endows the situation with a sense of agency and clarity. Characters possess a clear identity and are embedded in a community of people jocularly naming newcomers, as opposed to the disquieting original, full of ominous overtones: the night watchman watching people continuously, even in the daytime; the casual, incidental act of naming; and the "telling" (rather than "exact," as the translation has it) character of the name "red rooster."

After analyzing the beginning of the first chapter, I will continue by pointing to some characteristic features of *Sinistra körzet* that the translation seems to have slightly obscured, even though the differences between the Hungarian and the English text are often subtle. There is an extremely rich, multifarious and elaborate network of motifs in *Sinistra körzet* which open diverse paths of interpretation. Literally all our five senses have to be engaged when reading the book, as many of the motifs have sensual connotations, impossible to resolve or to pin down on a verbal and rational level. Györgyi Pozsvai likens the structure of metaphors, emblems, archetypes and synaesthesias of *Sinistra körzet* to a thickly woven rug (Pozsvai 1998: 191). When a motif is omitted or mistranslated, the links between elements are obscured, resulting in a loss of some elements of the metaphorical structure of the book.

Let's look at the motif of the silk ribbon which appears four times in *Sinistra körzet*. The first and the fourth instances are in passages in the first and the last chapters: in both of these chapters, Andrei tells about his visit to the Zone "many years later" after the events described in the rest of the book. In a beautiful passage in Chapter 1, Andrei's double set of ski tracks are described as *ezüstös fényektől selymes pántlika* (Bodor 1992: 14). This is translated as "silky, silvery sheen" (Bodor 2013: 13), with the word *pántlika* ['ribbon'] eliminated, thus reducing the concreteness and physicality of the image. In the last chapter, Andrei wears his silver hair tied up in a knot with a dark blue ribbon of silk (*ezüst hajam... sötétkék selyemszalaggal kontyba kötve viseltem*, Bodor 1992: 156). In Chapter 11, the image of the silk ribbons placed parallel to each other appears a third time, in the scene where Andrei cuts Elvira Spiridon's hair. With a slight

variation, the locks are likened to *selyemszalag* ['silk ribbon'] again (Bodor 1992: 130, NB. *szalag* is a synonym of the more archaic *pántlika*), which is translated as "silk tie" (Bodor 2013: 143). A few pages later, the motif of the double ribbon of the ski tracks is repeated, in the form of a vapor trail in the sunlit sky. The parallel silk ribbons are always of a certain color (silver; freshly ironed, i.e. having a silvery sheen; orange-red/sunlit; dark blue), with the first and the last occurrences associated with memories ("many years later"), and the two middle ones to a decisive moment of Andrei's time in the zone: just before and just after the curfew, the last time Andrei and Elvira are together before their thwarted escape from the Zone. In the translation, this recurring image, sensual and metaphoric at the same time, indicating traces of key moments of Andrei's time in the Zone, is largely lost as the synonyms *pántlika/szalag* are translated only twice as ribbon, once as tie, and once as sheen.

A large variety of diverse sexual relations is described in *Sinistra körzet*, most of them highly unusual. The eight-year-old Bebe Tescovina is madly in love with a fifty-year-old meteorologist named Géza Hutira. Doc Oleinek cohabits with two identical twins called Hamza Petrika. Andrei Bodor falls for Elvira, the wife of Severin Spiridon (a man whose life Andrei had saved when Spiridon tried to commit suicide), and receives Elvira as a present from Coca Mavrodin when the latter appoints Andrei as assistant coroner. Rather than expressing desire, the language used by the Zone's inhabitants during erotic situations is clumsy and unwieldy, heavily laden with infantile and power-dominated expressions. Often, the bizarreness of this language as a language of desire does not come through in the translation. For example, in Chapter 1, Andrei pulls out a thistle leaf from Elvira Spiridon's foot, and "lick[s] it" (Bodor 2013: 10), whereas the Hungarian says *megköpdöstem* (Bodor 1992: 11), i.e. 'I spat on it [several times],' as if it was a pagan ritual rather than a scene full of erotic tension as the English suggests. Aranka Westin and Andrei have a "little reunion" (Bodor 2013: 15), whereas in Hungarian they "rub their trotters together" (*összedörgöltük a csülkeinket*, Bodor 1992: 15), an expression which is more suggestive of intimacy, and is at the same time more animalistic. Andrei is engaged in some "serious kissing" with Aranka Westin (Bodor 2013: 37), which is *nyalakodás* ['slobbering', Bodor 2017: 35] in the source text. In an effusion of desire, Andrei says to Elvira Spiridon:

'I'm going to kiss every last inch of you. Just so you know—so there won't be any surprises.'

'Just kiss me all over, sir, wherever you want' (Bodor 2013: 68).

...*hamarosan minden egyes porcikáját végigpuszítálom. Hogy aztán ne ériék meglepetések.*  
– *Ott puszítál végig az úr, ahol akar* (Bodor 1992: 63).

The thoroughly non-erotic Hungarian word *puszítál* ['kiss', 'peck on the cheek'], used by an adult when talking to a young child, feels grotesque in this situation, a strange expression when used for a mature man's desire. Elvira, in her turn, speaks with deference, detachment and resignation: *úr* ['master'], a polite form of address in the third-person singular, is not in the vocative as in the source text as in the translation, and the verb "kiss" is in the indicative mood in the source text rather than in the imperative as in the translation. Rather than encouraging Andrei, Elvira is simply stating a fact.

*Sinistra körzet* is full of bloody, painful and unspeakably cruel occurrences that are described dispassionately, as a part of the normal state of affairs. The narration of these gruesome scenes is sometimes overstated in the translation. In one of the most appalling scenes

in Chapter 8, a boy called Hamza Petrika—one of two identical twins, both called Hamza Petrika—impales himself because Doc Oleinek, the man both Hamza Petrikas had lived with, has decided to dismiss them both. On discovering that the boy had impaled himself, Doc Oleinek whispers to Andrei:

'Let's get out of here. I think the boy has impaled himself.'

'What the hell does that mean?'

'What do you think? He looks for the hole in his ass, nudges the pointy end of the post inside, and—wham!—sits right down.'

'I can't believe it.'

'Believe it or not, but come on, let's get out of here' (Bodor 2013: 94–95).

– *Aztán azt ajánlom, távozzunk innen. A fiú, azt hiszem, karóba húzta magát.*

– *Az mi az ördögöt jelent?*

– *Na mégis, mit! Megkeresi a fenekén a lyukat, beleilleszti a rúd hegyét, és – zutty! – beleül.*

– *Nem jön, hogy higgyem.*

– *Hiszi, nem hiszi, jöjjön, menjünk innen* (Bodor 1992: 87).

Fairly straightforward in the translation, the language of this short dialogue is awkward in the original and at odds with the horror of the situation. Let's just focus on *Na mégis, mit* (translated as "What do you think?"), a sentence that would be uttered by a teacher talking to a child who is particularly and annoyingly slow on the uptake. It indicates condescension and frustration on the speaker's part that his interlocutor should fail to understand something eminently simple and obvious. In its supercilious matter-of-factness, it blocks any emotional or moral reaction. After a brief initial surprise and perhaps remorse on the part of Doc Oleinek, the self-impalement of the boy settles into the order of things, as one phenomenon among the rest.

It is probably the language of the dialogues that poses the greatest challenge for the translator. Hilarious and chilling at the same time, this language is a mixture of incongruent styles and is rich in allusions. All the characters speak more or less the same language; their way of speaking does not express individual character. One is hard put to find an equivalent for this language, divorced from emotions and reality, with its inane cheerful tone and tentative rhetoric used to express a threatening and devastating reality.

In drawing my conclusions from the comparison of the English translation of *Sinistra körzet* with the source text, and from the reception of the two texts, I will now point to a few tendencies that seem to me to characterize the translation by Paul Olchváry as published in the 2013 *New Directions* edition. First of all, it must be noted that much of *Sinistra körzet* is very well rendered in translation, especially the nature scenes, in which the narrative voice is slightly different from that in the rest of the book. Throughout the book, Olchváry succeeds in rendering the narrative voice of those scenes, a voice which exudes appreciation and enjoyment of natural beauty, and which in fact makes nature the most robust presence in the book, allowing the possibility of both a concrete, sensual and a metaphoric reading.

Although the translation is (as a whole) good and often very inventive, certain features of Bodor's book are slightly obscured in the translation. In *Sinistra körzet*, the consistent absence of motivation and causality, coupled with temporal disorientation and the understatement of unsettling occurrences is present on the lexical, syntactic and stylistic levels, as well as in the rhythm of the sentences. These tendencies are often downplayed or eliminated in the translation.

In general, *The Sinistra Zone* in its translated version is less indeterminate, and therefore less open to a range of interpretations. The shifting conversations of the characters, the maddeningly unclear references to time and agency, and the incongruous elements are made clearer or they are invested with an aura of mysteriousness that is foreign to the imperturbable apathy of the source text. This apathy, as we have seen, extends to cruelty, violence and suffering, which fit seamlessly into the landscape, without any moral and emotional shock on the part of either the characters or the narrator. This is often well rendered in the translation, but at times it is slightly dramatized.

As I have noted before, the dialogues represent perhaps the greatest challenge for the translator. Resorting to any historical experience of the target audience which has produced a similarly broken language would shift possible interpretations of the book into directions that would be decidedly misleading. This is perhaps the greatest loss in the translation: while still amusing, the dialogues are divested of their shifting nature, incongruence and inadequacy.

To sum up, Ádám Bodor disorients us, whereas the translator helps orient us in various ways. Translators must no doubt often resort to techniques that help orient the reader, e.g. when explaining concepts or realia that are absent in the target culture. In fact, some of the features that we singled out above as characterizing the English translation of *Sinistra körzet*—e.g. explicitation, simplification, normalization—are considered by some translation scholars as inherent features of the process of translation (Blum-Kulka 1985: 17–35). Here, however, disorientation—which is perceived as extravagance or incompetence by some Anglophone reviewers—is at the core of the novel. While the book appears deceptively accessible and traditional at first sight, the constant sense of disorientation has the effect of pushing the reader into a “state of intellectual unrest where she hovers between alternative paths and puzzling endpoints” (Pozsvai 1998: 12).

It must be stressed, however, that the precise reasons for the difficulty of some American reviewers in making sense of *The Sinistra Zone* are far from obvious. In addition to reasons that have to do with the translation, the expectations of readers towards what has recently been called the “global novel” (Kirsch 2016) seems to be a crucial factor.

The most celebrated “global novels” (i.e. widely translated novels from all over the world) are often praised for “open[ing] our minds and giv[ing] us access to new ways of thinking and feeling” (Kirsch 2016: 14). However, they and their authors have also been under siege for being “purveyors of comfortable myths” (Alameddine 2018), “niche-marketing” “nationally and ethnically marked differences... as commercialized ‘identities’” (Apter 2013: 2), and therefore “prevent[ing] the possibility of any true encounter with difference” (Kirsch 2016: 14), as well as for impoverishing literary language and deploying “highly visible tropes immediately recognizable as ‘literary’ and ‘imaginative,’” in order “to remove obstacles to international comprehension” (Parks 2017). The American reviews on *The Sinistra Zone* suggest that some of the difficulties the reviewers have with the book may have to do with the fact that it resists easy categorization in terms of genre and political message, and therefore it does not conform to expectations towards the global novel. In addition, as we have seen before, the subtleties of Bodor’s language, accessible on the surface, are hard or impossible to render in translation.

Clearly, there is a tension between the realities of the publishing industry—the difficulties of publishing and marketing translated literature, changing reading habits, etc.—and what Antoine Berman, in his seminal essay *The Trial of the Foreign*, calls the ethical aim of translation: to translate “the Foreign as Foreign,” resisting “ethnocentric, annexationist” impulses

and the "censorship" of "cultivated" languages (Berman 2000: 286). As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak points out, a translator must take risks by paying attention to rhetorical elements which disrupt the logical systematicity of a language (or a work), and those risks often imply "violence to the translating medium" (Spivak 2000: 398). In other words, the translator must sometimes resist, rather than follow, the norm.

Considerations of the publishing industry aside, it must be pointed out that the extent to which translating "the Foreign as Foreign" may be possible is questionable if we consider the position of the translator. Even though many have argued that the work of literary translators qualifies as art, this art is by definition derivative. The more the original work is determined by its internal form—i.e. the more its radicalness depends on it subverting or "exploding" conventional forms and styles—the greater a challenge it is to reproduce it in another language, especially if speakers of the target language have a radically different historical experience and socio-political setup than those of the source language. Other than exposing where the target text stands in relation to the source text, the method of translation criticism gives insight into the internal workings of the source text. By pointing to aspects that may be too challenging for the translator, and to directions that the translation is unable to follow, translation criticism offers a method that sheds light on points that are less accessible to other forms of criticism.

## Works Cited

- Alameddine, Rabih. 2018. "Comforting Myths." *Harper's Magazine*, June 8, <https://harpers.org/archive/2018/06/comforting-myths/>. Accessed June 8, 2018.
- Angyalosi, Gergely. 2005. "A kiismerhetetlen remekmű" ['The Inscrutable Masterpiece']. In *Tapasztalatcsere. Esszék és tanulmányok Bodor Ádámról* ['Exchanging Experiences. Essays and studies on Ádám Bodor']. Eds. Tamás Scheibner and Gábor Vaderna. Budapest: L'Harmattan, 49–56. (First published: 1992. *Hiány*, 8: 18–20.)
- Apter, Emily. 2013. *Against World Literature. On the Politics of Untranslatability*. New York: Verso.
- Bán, Zoltán András. 2005. "A főmű" ['The Masterwork']. In *Tapasztalatcsere. Esszék és tanulmányok Bodor Ádámról* ['Exchanging Experiences. Essays and studies on Ádám Bodor']. Eds. Tamás Scheibner and Gábor Vaderna. Budapest: L'Harmattan, 57–62. (First published: 1992. *Kritika*, 7: 16–17.)
- Bengi, László. 1997. "A szövegszegmentumok iterációja mint az epikai világ megalkotása ['The Iteration of Text Segments as a Means of Creating a Prose-World']". *Szép Literatúrai Ajándék*, 1-2: 113–131.
- Berman, Antoine. 2000. "Translation and the Trials of the Foreign." Translated by Lawrence Venuti. In *The Translation Studies Reader*. Ed. Lawrence Venuti. London and New York: Routledge, 284–297.
- Blum-Kulka, Shoshana. 1985. "Shifts of Cohesion and Coherence in Translation." In *Interlingual and Intercultural Communication. Discourse and cognition in translation and second language acquisition*. Eds. J. House and S. Blum-Kulka. Tübingen: Gunter Narr. 17–35.
- Bodor, Ádám. 2001. *A börtön szaga* ['The Smell of Prison']. Budapest: Magvető.

- Bodor, Ádám. 1991. *The Euphrates at Babylon*. Translated by Richard Aczel. Edinburgh: Polygon.
- Bodor, Ádám. 1992. *Sinistra körzet* ['The Sinistra Zone']. Budapest: Magvető.
- Bodor, Ádám. 2013. *The Sinistra Zone*. Translated by Paul Olchváry. New York: New Directions.
- Demény, Péter. 2005. "Körzet és antikörzet" ['Zone and Anti-Zone']. In *Tapasztalatsere. Esszék és tanulmányok Bodor Ádámról* ['Exchanging Experiences. Essays and studies on Ádám Bodor']. Eds. Tamás Scheibner and Gábor Vaderna. Budapest: L'Harmattan, 139–145.
- Garman, Emma. 2013. "Ádám Bodor's *The Sinistra Zone*." *Words Without Borders*, August, <http://www.wordswithoutborders.org/book-review/adam-bodors-the-sinistra-zone>. Accessed May 25, 2017.
- Halperin, Moze. 2013. "*The Sinistra Zone* – Ádám Bodor." *Full Stop*, July 4, <http://www.full-stop.net/2013/07/04/reviews/moze-halperin/the-sinistra-zone-adam-bodor/>. Accessed May 25, 2017.
- Hewson, Lance. 2011. *An Approach to Literary Criticism. Emma and Madame Bovary in Translation*. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- H. Nagy, Péter. 1994. "Dezintegráció és identitászavar (A *Sinistra körzet* a Bodor-novellák motívumainak kontextusában)" ['Disintegration and Identity Disorder (*The Sinistra Zone* in the Context of Motifs in Bodor's Short Stories)']. *Alföld*, 6: 35–43.
- Johnston, Cory. 2014. "A Review of *The Sinistra Zone* by Ádám Bodor." *The Literary Review*, January 19, [www.theliteraryreview.org/book-review/review-of-the-sinistra-zone-by-adam-bodor/](http://www.theliteraryreview.org/book-review/review-of-the-sinistra-zone-by-adam-bodor/). Accessed May 25, 2017.
- Kirsch, Adam. 2016. *The Global Novel. Writing the World in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. New York: Columbia Global Reports.
- Kovács, Béla Lóránt. 2001. "Etika és poétika között (*Sinistra körzet*)" ['Between Ethics and Poetics (*The Sinistra Zone*)']. In *Vándor szövevény. Az Alföld Stúdió antológiája*. Ed. Péter Szirák. Debrecen: Csokonai, 130–148.
- Márton, László. 1992. "Az elátkozott peremvidék" ['The Accursed Periphery']. *Holmi*, 4.12: 1873–1880.
- McCulloch, Allison. 2013. "Chronicle: Fiction in Translation." *New York Times*, August 30, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/01/books/review/through-the-night-by-stig-saeterbakken-and-more.html>. Accessed May 25, 2017.
- Parks, Tim. 2010. "The Dull New Global Novel." *The New York Review of Books*, February 9, <http://www.nybooks.com/daily/2010/02/09/the-dull-new-global-novel/>. Accessed May 21, 2017.
- Petrova, Marina. 2014. "A Political Fairy Tale." *Brooklyn Rail*, February 5, <http://brooklynrail.org/2014/02/books/a-political-fairy-tale>. Accessed May 21, 2017.
- Pozsvai, Györgyi. 1998. *Bodor Ádám*. Bratislava: Kalligram.
- Scheibner, Tamás. 2005. "A rezervátum boldogsága" ['The Happiness of the Reservation']. In *Tapasztalatsere. Esszék és tanulmányok Bodor Ádámról* ['Exchanging Experiences. Essays and studies on Ádám Bodor']. Eds. Tamás Scheibner and Gábor Vaderna. Budapest: L'Harmattan, 164–174.



- Scheibner, Tamás and Gábor Vaderna, eds. 2005. *Tapasztalatcsere. Esszék és tanulmányok Bodor Ádámról* ['Exchanging Experiences. Essays and Studies on Ádám Bodor']. Budapest: L'Harmattan.
- Simon, Attila. 1992. "A nem-tudás méltósága" ['The Dignity of Non-Knowledge']. *Alföld*, 9: 70–74.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 2000. "The Politics of Translation." In *The Translation Studies Reader*. Ed. Lawrence Venuti. London and New York: Routledge, 397–416.
- Szilágyi, Márton. 1993. "A tárnicsgyökér fanyar illata" ['The Tart Smell of Gentian Root']. *Tiszatáj*, 2: 82–86.
- "The Sinistra Zone." 2013. *Publishers' Weekly*, June, <https://www.publishersweekly.com/978-0-8112-1978-5>. Accessed April 21, 2017.