

Deczki, Sarolta and Ágnes Kovács (eds.). *Az otthontalanság poétikája. Tanulmányok Agota Kristofról* [The Poetics of Homelessness. Studies on Agota Kristof]. Budapest and Kőszeg: Gondolat – Felsőbbfokú Tanulmányok Intézete, 2026. 232 pp.

Reviewed by Magdalena Roguska-Németh¹, University of Warsaw

When the Hungarian translation of *The Notebook* [*A nagy füzet*, 1989], Agota Kristof’s debut and unquestionably her most important work, was published in 1989 (three years after the original edition), Hungarian literary criticism reacted with surprise, even a certain degree of bewilderment. Hungarian scholars of literature were unsure how to approach an author who was Hungarian by origin yet living in Switzerland and writing in French (and who, as would soon become clear, had achieved extraordinary international success).

The reception of the novel was generally positive; however, the success was not entirely perceived as “ours.” It was seen as non-Hungarian, since the novel had not been written in Hungarian. Of considerable importance in the early reception of Kristof was an article by Péter Esterházy. A fragment of this article, frequently cited in later studies of Kristof’s work, was even included on the cover of the Hungarian translation of *The Notebook Trilogy* [*Trilógia*, 1996], published seven years later. The trilogy, alongside *The Notebook*, also comprised its two sequels, *The Proof* [*A bizonyíték*] and *The Third Lie* [*A harmadik hazugság*]. In that article, Esterházy stated that Agota Kristof is not a Hungarian writer, because she does not write in Hungarian, although “her memories are Hungarian, and the landscape she carries in her eyes is Hungarian.” Although in the remainder of the article Esterházy did recommend Kristof’s work to readers, his categorical reservation left little room for doubt—when reading Kristof, we are reading foreign literature.

The following years did not bring any significant change in this regard. Practically until the author’s death in 2011, she was regarded in Hungary as a representative of French, Swiss, or more broadly, Francophone literature—but not Hungarian literature. A clearly perceptible shift in how the work of authors writing in languages other than their first (including Agota Kristof) came to be viewed occurred only around the 2010s, when transcultural and transnational studies became firmly established within Hungarian literary discourse. Language, which for many years had been the primary criterion for assigning a work to the canon of national literature, lost its status as an absolute determinant.

¹ m.roguska@uw.edu.pl



Consequently, integrating the work of authors with a Hungarian cultural background who do not write in Hungarian into Hungarian literature became an urgent necessity. Such a gesture can be seen in the publication of the essay collection *Az otthonatlanság poétikája* [The Poetics of Homelessness], an important volume not only for Kristof studies but also for the broader discussion of translingual authors of Hungarian cultural background, whose work has rarely received sufficient scholarly attention in Hungary.

The volume in question is a multifaceted and interdisciplinary scholarly study devoted to the life and work of Agota Kristof. It is the result of more than a decade of research conducted by the Agota Kristof workshop operating at the Institute of Advanced Studies in Kőszeg (iASK). The occasion for its publication was the ninetieth anniversary of the writer's birth in 2025. The volume opens with a "Foreword" by the editors, Sarolta Deczki and Ágnes Kovács, outlining the publication's principal aims. This is followed by an essay by Zoltán Kenyeres, which examines the writer's ties to the town of Kőszeg and the issue of how works written in a foreign language relate to the canon of national literature.

As the editors note, Kristof's reception is marked by a dualism. International scholars often overlook her Hungarian background, while Hungarian criticism has long questioned whether a French-language writer can be fully integrated into the Hungarian national canon. The volume seeks to address both issues.

The main body of the book is divided into five parts. The first, titled *Kőszegtől a világhírig* [From Kőszeg to Worldwide Fame], focuses on the biographical and historical foundations of Kristof's work as well as the history of its reception. Mónika Mátyai presents the town of Kőszeg as the prototype of the "Little Town" from *The Notebook*, juxtaposing literary fiction with historical documents (diaries and memoirs of local inhabitants) from the period of the Second World War. Györgyi Földes discusses the contents of the Agota Kristof archive held at the Swiss National Library in Bern, describing previously unpublished works (including short stories, plays, and early poems), as well as extensive correspondence with the Seuil publishing house. Judit Prileszky-Simon outlines the reception history of Kristof's works in the Francophone world, examining key literary studies devoted to the *Trilogy*, with particular attention to narrative, identity, and the question of truth. Sarolta Deczki analyzes the process of Kristof's "return" to Hungarian literature, dividing her domestic reception into three phases—from initial distance (as a foreign-language writer) to her eventual recognition as an integral part of Hungarian literary heritage.

The second part, titled *A közteesség mint létállapot és poétika* [In-Betweenness as a Condition of Being and a Poetics], brings together texts that analyze the experience of emigration, translingualism, and the construction of identity. Dorottya Szávai compares Agota Kristof with Lorand Gaspar—both Hungarian émigrés writing in French. She examines their relationship to their native language and to the "hostile" adopted language, paying particular attention to the recurring motifs of the desert and silence in their work. Jody Jensen focuses on the trauma associated with the loss of the mother tongue as described in *The Illiterate*, analyzing the "linguistic wound" of the émigré, which becomes a source of aesthetic innovation and a new form

of identity. Ivana Stepanović compares the twins' writings in the *Trilogy* to contemporary digital archives and social media, where identity is continuously constructed.

The third part, called *Mindenhol idegen: Agota Kristof költészete és drámái* [A Stranger Everywhere: Agota Kristof's Poetry and Drama], is devoted to genres that are less well known and less frequently discussed, yet crucial for the evolution of the author's style: her poetry (written mainly in Hungarian) and her plays and radio dramas. Zoltán Csehy analyzes Kristof's Hungarian-language poetry, pointing to her gradual move away from "poeticity" toward a raw, objective language that later became the hallmark of her prose. András Nagy discusses the author's dramatic works and radio plays, emphasizing their dystopian character, their departure from traditional psychological dramaturgy, and their focus on extreme situations and moral paradoxes.

The fourth part, titled *Irodalom szögesdrótból: A Trilógia* [Literature Made of Barbed Wire: The Trilogy], contains detailed studies of Kristof's most important work. The analyses address the perception of the body, narrative uncertainty, the motif of lying, and the specific construction of space in the *Trilogy*. Diána Mosza examines the role of touch, pain, and bodily perception in *The Notebook* as key elements in the formation of the child protagonists' identity within the brutal reality of war. Ágnes Kovács analyzes the unstable position of the narrator in the *Trilogy*, showing how the multilayered nature of fiction and the constant undermining of "truth" across successive parts of the work shape its narrative structure. Tamás Lénárt focuses on the motif of lying, arguing that in Kristof's world it functions as a necessary defence mechanism enabling survival in the face of trauma. László Boka discusses the "spaces of osmosis" in the *Trilogy*—the interpenetration of memory, reality, and fiction within the closed, liminal space of a town situated on the edge of a state.

Finally, the fifth part, *Túl az etikán* [Beyond Ethics], examines the moral dimension of the works. István Sümegi presents the concept of an "ethics of necessity," according to which, in extreme situations, traditional morality is suspended in favor of the uncompromising fulfillment of basic needs and the provision of help to those who are absolutely in need of it. Andrea Timár analyzes the narrators' "ethics of impassivity," arguing that the stark, emotionally restrained language is not only a consequence of trauma but also a deliberate ethical choice aimed at achieving an objective account of reality.

Among the fifteen articles included in the volume, there is not a single weak or unnecessary text. From the perspective of the aim stated in the introduction—namely, the integration of Kristof's work into Hungarian literature—all of the chapters are undoubtedly significant. They complement one another and together form a complete and nuanced portrait of Agota Kristof as a writer. A few articles, however, deserve special attention. First and foremost, Györgyi Földes's contribution stands out. It is based on extensive archival research conducted at Agota Kristof's collection in the Swiss National Library in Bern. The materials analyzed by Földes may significantly broaden the understanding of Kristof's oeuvre in Hungary and support future monographic studies.

Equally important are the articles in the same section of the volume that systematize the reception of the author in Hungary and in Francophone literary scholarship. Judit Prileszky-Simon maps the global research landscape on Kristof, providing an essential point of reference for Hungarian scholars. Her article organizes French criticism into two main strands: analyses of the author's distinctive, austere style (contrasted with the brutality of its subject matter), and studies of the geopolitical and historical background.

In turn, Sarolta Deczki's article is crucial for the volume's central mission: the attempt to integrate Agota Kristof into the Hungarian literary canon. Deczki documents the process of the writer's "discovery" in Hungary, dividing it into three phases and explaining why Hungarian criticism long struggled to recognize Kristof as a Hungarian writer.

Finally, Ágnes Kovács's study of the *Trilogy*'s narrative structure deserves particular attention. She argues that *The Proof* and *The Third Lie* do not simply continue *The Notebook* but repeatedly reinterpret it, creating successive layers of fiction. By focusing on the unreliable narrator and the instability of identity, Kovács demonstrates that the *Trilogy* functions as a self-referential system in which fiction constantly rewrites itself, and writing becomes the protagonist's only fragile proof of existence.

Az otthontalanság poétikája is a publication that undoubtedly represents a breakthrough in the process of integrating Agota Kristof's oeuvre into the Hungarian literary canon, demonstrating that her choice to write in French did not erase her prose from East-Central European literary heritage. The authors of the studies convincingly show that it is precisely Kristof's position "in-between," suspended between cultures and languages, that became her greatest aesthetic strength, making her work not only Hungarian but also profoundly universal. The volume also challenges the view of Kristof as a marginal figure in Hungarian literature, showing that the "poetics of homelessness" constitutes both an ethical and an artistic strategy through which the author redefined her identity.