From *The Budapest File* to *An English Apocalypse:* Identity, Locality, and Language in the Poetry of George Szirtes

Katalin Szlukovényi, Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest

Abstract
At the turn of the millennium, the Hungarian-born English poet George Szirtes published a pair of poetry collections: The Budapest File *and* An English Apocalypse. *Concentrating on these two books, this paper outlines the major theme of identity as defined by locations and languages in Szirtes's poetry. Tropes connecting places and cultures permeate his entire work from* Portrait of My Father in an English Landscape *to* Notes on the Inner City. *Challenging nationalistic approaches and bridging the cultures of two countries on the Western versus Eastern peripheries of Europe, Szirtes addresses the fragile possibilities for a postmillennial European identity.*

Keywords: *contemporary poetry, Europe, Holocaust, locality, identity*

1 Introduction: home and identity

The concept of home seems fluid in many texts by George Szirtes. As he writes in "English Rain", a poem from his latest volume *Fresh Out of the Sky* (2021): "This rain, this unremitting stoical drench / that defined everything by fully soaking it / was now home." (54). In these lines, home is not represented in the form of a particular place but as a natural phenomenon with symbolic significance – recalling the stereotypical English weather – and an all-encompassing medium that permeates and thus contextualizes everything. Similarly, home is just as often depicted by Szirtes in terms of cultural phenomena like pieces of art or language as in terms of space.

Places, however, are of utmost importance in Szirtes's work. They appear in numerous titles of individual poems as well of entire volumes, from *Bridge Passages* (1991) to *Mapping the Delta* (2016). This is hardly surprising in case of an author whose oeuvre abundantly reflects on his early-childhood migration experience and its consequences as well as on his narrative identity defined and produced by its double, English and Hungarian contexts. This geographical and cultural duality is most systematically explored in his poetry collections *The Budapest File* (2000) and *An English Apocalypse* (2001), which were clearly designed as a pair of parallel volumes, both published around the turn of the millennium.

Apparently, Szirtes understands identity as being closely related to, but not exclusively defined by the place(s) where one was born and one lives, especially as these two do not always coincide. Being a poet and translator who does not only have abundant first-hand experience in migration and mediation between different cultures but also contemplates these issues profusely, he can be a highly interesting and inspiring source for post-millennial readers facing intense globalization in increasingly multicultural societies.

In the following, I will examine the connections between identity, locality, and language in Szirtes's poetry. Focusing on *The Budapest File* and *An English Apocalypse,* and also referring to other texts by him, I argue that identity is a central theme in his work, yet he deliberately and overtly exceeds the boundaries of the traditional concept of a monolithic identity. His texts can be better understood as acts of identification – often with contradictory results – as explained by Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper in their seminal essay "Beyond Identity" (2000).

2 Family history: *The Photographer at Sixteen*

The history of his family is a major subject in Szirtes's oeuvre, therefore it is useful to inform the reader about the basic facts. The poet himself does so in the biography *The Photographer at Sixteen* (2019) written about his mother in reverse chronological order. His narrative is organized by a spatial logic, following the protagonist Magda's life from the house where she attempted her final suicide through the detailed descriptions of the Szirtes family's previous apartments in London and in Budapest back to the scene of her childhood in "Cluj or Kolozsvár, also known as Klausenburg" (146, 163, 165, 166, 168, 170, 171). Naming the protagonist's birthplace in all the three local languages – Romanian, Hungarian, and German – within the same phrase repeated several times with a quasi-ritual precision emphasizes that identity is far from being unambiguous, even in the very beginning.

The narrative about Magda's life offers a condensed, personal version of the 20th-century history of Hungary, and, in several respects, of the entire Eastern-European region. Born in 1924 as Magda Nussbächer in a Hungarian-speaking, secular Jewish family in Transylvania, she was afflicted by all the major regional traumas either directly, or through the fate of her closest relatives. Country borders were moved multiple times, assigning Cluj – together with other parts of Transylvania – from Hungary to Romania in 1920 (Treaty of Trianon), then back to Hungary in 1940 (Second Vienna Award), and again back to Romania in 1947 (Paris Peace Treaties). Apart from the threatened and insecure minority position, her professional ambitions as a young woman also explain why Magda decided to leave her hometown at around the age of eighteen in order to receive training in photography in Budapest. There she met László Szirtes in the shadow of the Holocaust. Magda's entire family in Cluj were killed; she barely survived the concentration camps of Ravensbrück and Penig; and László was taken for forced labour. The couple could marry only after the end of World War II and had two sons, the elder of whom, George Szirtes, was born in 1948. As a result of the revolution in 1956, however, the nuclear family – along with about 200 000 other Hungarian citizens (Niessen 123) – left Hungary, and they settled down in London. Tracing these series of traumas through the personal history of apartments and the communal history of cities and countries, Szirtes concludes that "[t]hese changes of status and identity left traces on her already intense emotions" (146), leading to serious health issues, succeeding suicide attempts, and finally her death.

In this constantly changing framework, locality and language are both decisive components of identity and possible sources of confusion, or even of persecution, occasionally, which can be illustrated by innumerable examples from *The Photographer at Sixteen*. Traumatised by the concentration camps, Magda Szirtes denied her Jewish heritage: "According to the fiction, she was not Jewish at all, or that was the story she told us later. […] There were reasons for the fiction. We, her children were that reason. And the reason lies partly in Ravensbrück itself" (126). Arriving in England, Szirtes's family did their best to assimilate: "We were Englishing ourselves as best we could. Not that my mother ever did, not properly. It wasn't that she resisted, although she did sometimes: she found it impossible" (63). Although the entire family came from Hungary, they "had never been to the Hungarian Embassy" yet "accepted invitations to the Romanian Embassy in London for film shows and exhibitions" (50). In other words, labels attached to the individual by society on the basis of homeland, citizenship, ethnicity, religion, native language, or other obvious categories of identity, do not always coincide with the person's own self-understanding, challenging "the Western understanding of the 'self' as a homogeneous, bounded, unitary entity" (Brubaker and Cooper 17).

As it can be seen from the brief outline above, George Szirtes's narrative identity is primarily based on his Hungarian and his English cultural heritage. At first, both seem to be defined by place and language, but a closer examination quickly reveals how the boundaries of both are unstable or blurred. An excellent example of this ambiguity is the story of his first name. After the liberation of the concentration camp, a young American captain called George wooed Magda. Finally, she married not him but László Szirtes, yet, as the son of the newly-wed couple writes, "she must have been very fond of George because when I was born she gave me the Hungarian equivalent of his for my middle name" (134). Later, recalling a family anecdote about how his mother made a joke about George Szirtes being a clumsy child by saying: "*Gabi mozdult!* George moved!" whenever "something went tumbling back in Budapest" (181) indicates that the family used the boy's first name Gábor (Gabi is its nickname form), whereas in English they switched to the English version of his middle name György, George, which also happens to be the "original" form of the name in the family history. In other words, even George Szirtes's own name, which is the primary signifier of any individual, implies ambiguities and historical layers regarding his double, Hungarian and English (or rather anglophone) heritage.

Szirtes not only refers to numerous elements of identity in many of his texts but also performs their close examination. He does that most comprehensively in the pair volumes of poetry: *The Budapest File* and *An English Apocalypse* (2001).

3 Hungary: *The Budapest File*

While in the biography *The Photographer at Sixteen*, George Szirtes embraces the Jewish heritage of his family, his collection of poetry *The Budapest File* focuses on Hungary. More precisely, the poems explore "a subject whose epicentre is Hungary but whose domain is essentially eastern continental Europe, more particularly the history of that region, which is by extension the history of the circumstances that made my grandparents, parent, myself – and even my children – what we are" (11), as the author defines the theme in the "Preface". Connecting locality and identity, he emphasizes the formative power of history.

Accordingly, the three cycles in the book follow a chronological logic, reflecting on three major historical periods in Hungarian history associated primarily with three succeeding generations. The first cycle is "The Town Flattened: war correspondence". It reflects on the period before World War II, mainly the generation of George Szirtes's grandparents, as indicated by poems like "Grandfather in Green" or "After Attila", an English paraphrase of "Jön a vihar", a poem by the great pre-war Hungarian poet Attila József. The second cycle "The Courtyards: Iron Curtains" addresses the decades of the Cold War, which defines the lives of the parents, as it is represented in poems like "A Picture of My Parents with Their First Television". Finally, the central theme of the third cycle "The Flies" is Szirtes's own experiences as he returns to Hungary after the change of the regime in 1989. As he starts to work more and more intensely on translations from Hungarian to English in that time, many of the poems deal with literary themes, from "Burning Stubble at Szigliget", which takes place at the iconic Writers' House at the lake Balaton, to poems written in the memory of Hungarian poets whom Szirtes has translated, like "In Memoriam Sándor Weöres" or "In Memoriam István Vas".

The volume articulates identity essentially through place. In "The Lukács Baths" (24), elderly women swim around in a pool, from "circa 1900" up to the present of the writing, about a hundred years later, circling in the fluid and translucent medium of history, water, the eternal metaphor of time since Heraclitus. Watching them, the lyrical I concludes that they are the embodiment of history themselves: "Inside every grandmother there sits / an attractive young girl […] as they swim / and push away the past like tired waves" (24). In Szirtes's vision, human bodies are not just defined by their place: often they *are* the place themselves. In "A Game of Statues" (138-139), the poet imagines "people after the war returning to their homes, entering their rooms and passing straight through the walls, turning into statues in the process" (14). The speaker first focuses on a single woman – reminiscent of the author's mother, recognisable from several other relevant texts by Szirtes – as "She mounts a ruined staircase / through heaps of rubble. She has come / back from the camps" (138) and joins many other inhabitants of Budapest, similarly returning to their past and turning into stone by the traumatic processes of history, like so many wives of the biblical Lot: "Across the city / thousands are marching past, and poking heads / and arms through niches, waiting there / for common symbols of eternity" (139).

Although identity is frequently communicated by Szirtes through elements deeply rooted in place, and often Hungarian places in particular, the result is far from being unambiguous. A good example of this deliberate multiplicity is "The Accordionist" (28). The poem is dedicated to André Kertész, a Hungarian Jewish photographer, who started his career in Budapest but gained international recognition in Paris and New York, becoming another representative of complex identities with a Hungarian origin. Szirtes's poem is the dynamic and creative ekphrasis of Kertész's black and white photo representing a miserable, worn-out street musician, with whom the lyrical self seems to identify: "The accordionist is a blind intellectual / carrying an enormous typewriter" (28). The projection of the musician's profession into that of the writer is continued with the figurative extension of the picture: the expanding and collapsing instrument recalls the memory of tall houses destroyed by the war; in particular, the typical houses in the city centre of Budapest, where Szirtes spent his childhood, and many of which had been heavily affected by World War II.

> My century is a sad one of collapses.
> The concertina of the chest; the tubular bells
> of the high houses; the flattened ellipses
> of our skulls that open like petals.
>
> We are the poppies sprinkled along the field. (28)

The destruction of bodies is inseparably connected with the destruction of houses in the metaphor. The image of the instrument proliferates, turning from the means of artistic articulation into the subject of it, and from human body into the shelter for them, all doomed to perish. In the final stanza, the series of urban motifs is replaced by a natural scene: a field full of flowers. Yet these flowers are remembrance poppies, a typically English symbol for the victims of wars since John McCrae's poem "In Flanders Fields" written in 1915 in memory of soldiers who died in World War I.

In Flanders Fields, the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.

We are the dead.

The poem "The Accordionist" pays homage to a photographer of Hungarian origin and international fame through a series of interlinked images borrowed from Budapest streets and English iconography, commemorating the victims of both World Wars, which determined the fate of millions, often fighting against each other all over Europe in the 20th century. The reconciliatory gesture of the flowers is gently counterpointed by the mild irony of the closing lines: "Beware the sentiments concealed / in this short rhyme. Be wise. Be good." (28) as well as by the contrast between the melodious, perfect rhymes and the tragic subject. It can be claimed that the poem thus pays respect to both the Hungarian and the English heritage while not erasing the latent tensions between the two, either.

4 The United Kingdom: *An English Apocalypse*

A year after *The Budapest File,* its pair volume *An English Apocalypse* came out. Both books were published by the same publishing house, Bloodaxe. Besides, they are also visibly connected through the similar design: the same size, the same shiny black paperback cover, the same portrait of the author on the back, a painting by the author's wife Clarissa Upchurch on the front, and further pictures by her, which separate the sections. Yet the first cover painting features a typical urban picture: a caryatide above the entrance of a characteristically Budapest terraced house, whereas the second one represents a part of a road in a landscape. In other words, both books highlight locality in the title and in the cover image as well, that is both on the verbal and the visual level, contrasting Hungary with England as a primarily urban versus rural experience for the author.

Visuality is of utmost importance for Szirtes, who graduated at the Leeds College of Art and Design and worked as a painter and a teacher of arts at the beginning of his career. He writes in the "Preface" to *An English Apocalypse* that "I entered the England of imagination through the visual arts" (11). Truly, his poetry abounds in references to visual arts, from "Triptych for Music" (68), which borrows its structure from medieval altars consisting of three panels, to the title of "Payne's Grey" (83), which refers to the tint invented by the English painter William Payne and represents the sea with "this polite, most English of grey tones". In the latter poem, as in many other texts by Szirtes, "Life imitates Art" (Wilde 26) – as Oscar Wilde phrased it in his anti-mimetic dictum – that is nature is perceived through the filter or artistic representation, and it is also described with the means provided by arts in the poem.

In harmony with both the country scene on the cover and the cultural perception of nature, pastoral is a major inspiration and a dominant genre in *An English Apocalypse.* There is not only a poem with the title "Pastoral" (34) but an entire section called “Pastorals” (115-119), and numerous other poems with rural themes like “Sheepshearing at Ayot St Lawrence” (35), “Picnic” (43), or “A Walk Across Fields” (44). As John Sears, the author of the so far only monograph on Szirtes observes: “The compression, and the consequent symbolic force, of the versions of ‘pastoral’ in these poems, resides in part in their connection to the landscape of melancholic nostalgia that comprises Szirtes’ England” (165). In contrast to the city of Budapest in case of Hungary, in England, it is the countryside that proves to be formative for Szirtes. Yet both landscapes are shaped and mediated by human culture: in Hungary mostly by history and literature whereas in England more by contemporary politics – as in “The Pickets” reflecting on miners’ strikes – and various arts, from paintings through film to music.

The book consists of two major sections. “Early English: poems from earlier collections” offers a selection of previously published poems related to the theme of England, whereas “An English Apocalypse: new poems” presents the author’s fresh output. The latter section includes two cycles: the first is a series of independent poems, while the second gives the title of the entire book: “An English Apocalypse”. This final cycle is a carefully constructed example of formal poetry, held together by the “Prologue” as well as the strict form of the terza rima and divided into five thematic parts, each with five poems. While the places in *The Budapest File* tend to offer the opportunity for a submersion in historical time, many poems about places in *An English Apocalypse* seem to host the encounter of distant cultures: “The Australian botanist / meeting the lecturer from Belarus / in a garden of old roses”, like in “Victoriana” (118), outlining a multicultural society. Yet also the difficulties of assimilation are articulated in poems like “Acclimatisation”: “Sometimes we were slow to / pick up a hint, to smile at the appropriate juncture / of a given conversation, were too often liable / to solecisms of an almost terminal sort.” (22)

5 Conclusion: Europe

In the light of the samples from Szirtes’s oeuvre above, it is clear that identity is a central concern in his writing. He started to recognise its significance especially after he rediscovered Hungary from the late 1980s.

> Everything was crying out for definition or redefinition, but the triangular relationship between Hungary, myself and England felt all the more uncomfortable for it being defined at all. None of the three parties involved knew how it felt about the other two. (*An English Apocalypse* 14)

His attempts at such plausible definitions resulted in numerous books, most notably *The Budapest File,* which reflects on his Hungarian family history; *An English Apocalypse,* which focuses on his adopted country, the United Kingdom, and within that, mostly England; and, finally, *The Photographer at Sixteen,* which explores his family’s Jewish heritage through his Holocaust survivor mother’s biography.

Many of these texts testify to the immense importance of locality in respect of identity. Szirtes, however, often explicitly rejects territory-based, nationalistic definitions.

> My greatest difficulty with nationally or culturally rooted notions is that they inevitably exclude those who are migrants, floaters, drifters and shadows.
> […]
> Poetry is always local. It is just that in this case – and in the case of other writers, indeed, I would suggest an increasing number of writers, those used to moving about from place to place without a secure notion of belonging – the notion of the local is rooted in the incidental.” (*The Budapest File* 15)

Being conscious of his personal lack of a monolithic, all-comprehensive identity, Szirtes represents and explores various complex identities, challenging the concept of homogeneous identities in general. Consequently, his texts can be read not so much as the expression of one identity or another but rather as conscious acts of identification with certain communities, as described by Brubaker and Cooper.

It is not surprising that, surpassing the nation-based notions of identity, Szirtes concluded to the importance of Europe, as had all the member states of the European Union in the second half of the 20th century. Even after Brexit, he voiced his sense of belonging to this community, which includes all the heritages his narratives rely on:

> Having worked as an English language writer and translator from Hungarian for about forty years I now think it is even possible to become part of English literature without ever being quite English. Could I become Hungarian and start again after 64 years? I really don’t think so. That’s two close communities dispensed with.
> But there is a third community of which I am historically, culturally, and psychologically part, and that is Europe. (Szirtes 2020)

In our age of globalization, rapid changes, and

multicultural societies, Szirtes’ texts reflecting on the challenges and pleasures of heterogeneous identities can serve as inspiring textual sources of immediate relevance. In his latest collection of poetry, he warns his readers again about the power that lies in the acts of identification and the need for resistance, awareness, and precision:

> Say no to cliché, to
> chronicles that bear too heavy a
>
> symbolic load. Say no
> to the role assigned to you. Say no,
> to the assigners who include
>
> yourself.
>
> […]
>
> Start again. (“Fresh Out of the Sky” 63)

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Katalin Szlukovényi
Lajos utca 70-72.
Budapest
1036 Hungary
e-mail: szlukovenyi.katalin@btk.elte.hu

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