

Ferenc Kiefer: An appreciation

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Around the time that Feri died I encountered an observation by Mark Twain, which seemed much more broadly applicable than Twain intended. He observed that,

The researches of many commentators have already thrown much darkness on this subject, and it is probable that, if they continue, we shall soon know nothing at all about it.

Twain was reflecting on the dangers to understanding in the human and social sciences caused by the guiding simplifications of confident unthinking: simplifications that guaranteed the eventual certainty of misunderstanding. I've gotten respectful over the years of the wisdom of coincidence and the weird insights that often emerge in contingent events, so it seemed natural to relate Twain's observation to Feri, because Feri was to me the antidote to Twain's worries, someone dedicated to moving constantly, cagily, inexorably toward the light without dogma or cant.

To me he was a free-thinking and free-ranging adventurer, greedily synthesizing everything around him, eschewing apparent clarities, however erudite they seemed: the real complexities of language, especially Hungarian, literature, philosophy, music, the dynamic complexities of family and friends – a winker at the world, often more slyly contrary than overtly disruptive, and aware of the dangers that fixity of beliefs have on explaining the things worth understanding. As I reflect on this, I realize that I see him as the sort of archetypal trickster who appears in the mythologies of many cultures. Wikipedia characterizes the trickster figure as follows:

Tricksters "violate principles of social and natural order, playfully disrupting normal life and then re-establishing it on a new basis".

Yes, playfully disrupting normal life and then re-establishing it on a new basis. He always encouraged seeing the familiar in a different way. Playfully purposeful.

Maybe it's just me, but from the vantage of my own aging, it seems like we never really know where we are going or how we got to be where we are, nor do we understand why we think and behave in the ways we do when we're there. But at certain times, one is forced to pause and reflect about how the place you're at and the way you think might not have been that way if you hadn't met certain people and if they hadn't bothered to keep your presence in their life. This is the alchemy of influence and Feri was, in my mind, a wizard at this for me and, I think, for many.

Walter Lippmann, an astute American political commentator provided social psychology with the broad concept of stereotyping, He observed that,

For the most part we do not first see, and then define, we define first, and then see... we tend to perceive that which we have picked out in the form stereotyped for us by our culture.

But cultures arise from the interactions of individuals and influential individuals can provide the defining ways that shape how we see the world. For me, Feri exemplified a pluralistic worldview, it defined a way of experiencing and responding to the world.

The following fragments of memory are from different times and places, but I think, they show how he surrounded me with clues about how to think about what is worth thinking about in order to live a life worth living, and to value and propagate the pluralistic worldview that characterized his life.

In 1979 I was studying at the University of Helsinki and decided to travel to Hungary with some Finnish friends: it was solely a vacation for them, but I had a goal: the goal was to meet Ferenc Kiefer: Chuck Fillmore encouraged me to meet him. As an aside, travelling with the Finns taught me how blind native speakers can be to their own language: they kept commenting on how comically long Hungarian words were on street signs and shop windows and in each instance I noted how much longer the corresponding Finnish words were. They were puzzled at their misperceptions.

I first met Feri in the Linguistics Institute in the Castle District: it was easy, as if we were resuming some postponed conversation. He set me to working on the English translations for his 1982 publication *Hungarian Linguistics*: the volume was devoted to showing the variety and scope of general linguistics in modern Hungary. This was my first encounter with a young collection of collaborative linguists enthused about developing new ways of linguistic thinking, using Hungarian (and other Uralic languages) to broaden our understanding of how our imaginations are likely not equal to the typology of language differences and how the unfamiliar structures of Hungarian and related languages could inform theories about language. Among the authors were Marianne Bakro-Nagy, Istvan Kenesei, Katalin E. Kiss, Andras Komlosy, Csaba Pleh, Katalin Radics and Anna Szabolci. These contributions were extraordinarily rich and various, and I was enchanted. Feri and I developed a scheme for me to apply for a Fulbright doctoral Fellowship, which I got and managed to drag out under various renewals for some for 4 years. My time in Budapest in the early 1980's was magical: the discussions and interactions, the inseparable melding of the personal and academic, have shaped me in both recognizable and hidden ways I'm still discovering. This was an alchemy of influence facilitated by Feri and a way he helped to define our ways of seeing.

As we spent more time together, Feri decided I needed to know about morphology, so he invited me to what became the first International Morphology Meeting in Veszprem: this early exposure quietly germinated until about 15 years ago, when I and several other recovering syntacticians set about to build upon the paradigm based morphological insights of classical and 19th century grammarians and the Natural Morphologists who were Feri's partners in the still ongoing International Morphology meetings: this became the model for the American International Morphology Meetings which several of us initiated.

But, that was all linguistics and Feri was always more and larger than that. He would frequently invite me Jan, my wife, to dinner with Julia and the young kids. One night at dinner I noticed that Tomi avoided using the accusative case for nouns that would require a change in final vowel quality – alma – alma't. Feri and Julia were amused, but it was clear that I wasn't there to think or talk about linguistics: that evening and most of the others were for discussing everything else.

Through the years Feri took me on many, evidently random, outings, none were linguistic, but on reflection, all seemed intended to show me what he didn't talk about explicitly: he showed me his past, more than he described it: he told ribald tales about his father's life, tales that surprisingly continued as his father got old, but more important were the times we visited his father, conversing with him, and giving me a sense of the man with plenty of imagined inferences about his influences on Feri: but we never talked about this afterwards. He took me to his primary school in the Serbian town of Baja, where he had been invited to talk with the students: he spoke about the importance of curiosity and value of learning as a way to engage the imagination and how his doing this as a student at that school permitted him to travel the world and extend his curiosity. They could do it too. He invited us many times to his traditional village home in Zalaegerszeg: one memorable time for the annual pig slaughter in the village and another memorable time when we visited the local mason who was restoring the dilapidated chapel on Feri's property. The mason, Feri and I sat in the house, the mason's wife on the porch, coming inside whenever the mason yelled for more home-made palinka. I drank and drank, not noticing that Feri only sipped and watched me getting drunker and drunker as twilight came. The mason bellowed to his wife to kill a chicken for dinner for the American guest. But, Feri noticing me wilting, thanked him for the offer and we left. On reflection, I think he wanted me to have that experience in the countryside, part of the cauldron of ordinary exotica he wanted me to experience. These as I said, are merely some fragments, and there are many more. I haven't pieced them all together, but they seem to me to cohere. What is clear is that there were all things he wanted me to experience: he was a thoughtful and caring guide.

The last time we met, we arranged to eat at a Chinese restaurant in Buda that we'd eaten at several times over the years. I met him at the tram, since he couldn't drive: I hadn't expected him to be so wan and so frail. I suggested we take a cab for the 4 blocks to the restaurant. He declined and said he'd like to walk, but that we would have to go slowly. We walked the four blocks in 20 minutes. The walk was slow, but the talk was not, his face was animated with its familiarly devilish whimsy and humour. We fell into rhythms of familiar and favored topics that continued throughout the meal. He told me he couldn't eat much, but still ordered the huge fish he customarily ordered at that place: it looked like a coelacanth. He picked at it, packing the remains to bring home to Julia. We walked back to the tram, another twenty minutes, carrying the barely eaten fish. We parted at the tram, hugged and kissed, of course not knowing that that would be our last interaction. Reflecting on that last meeting, I think about his ordering that fish and realize that there was a summary lesson in that act: Feri had a huge appetite, it was a reflexive craving, even when he couldn't actually eat: he spent a long life

continually trying to satisfy it: in these efforts he led a large life and greatly influenced many other people's lives. Mine among them. I am grateful for the lucky accident of knowing him.