

also by Agota Kristof

The Notebook

The Proof

The Third Lie

Yesterday

Agota Kristof

The Illiterate

translated from the French by Nina Bogin

introduction by Gabriel Josipovici

C *editions*

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With grateful thanks to my sister Magda Bogin and my dear friend Gabriel Levin, who both read this translation with generous attention.

And my gratitude, as always, to my husband Alain, for the enthusiasm he shares with me for Agota Kristof's writing – and all the rest. – N.B.

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Contents

GABRIEL JOSIPOVICI On Agota Kristof vii

The Illiterate

Beginnings	3
From speech to writing	7
Poems	11
Clowning	14
Mother tongue and enemy languages	18
Stalin's death	21
Memory	25
Displaced persons	29
The desert	32
How do you become a writer?	35
The Illiterate	39

Translator's afterword 43

GABRIEL JOSIPOVICI

On Agota Kristof

Every now and again you read a book by an unknown author and you know immediately that you are in the company of greatness. That is a rare and precious feeling. It happened to me when, a few years ago, a friend sent me a copy of Agota Kristof's first novel, *Le Grand Cahier* (*The Notebook*). The utter simplicity of the style, the clarity, the unflinching gaze at a world far removed from any I had experienced and yet curiously familiar – that of a peasant culture on the border of what we take to be Hungary and Germany in the dying moments of World War II – and the deep humanity underlying it all, took my breath away.

L'Analphabète (here translated as *The Illiterate*), the short memoir she published in 2004, eighteen years after that dazzling debut, explains how it came about. Agota Kristof was born in a Hungarian village in 1935. Her father was the local schoolmaster, all the children in the school clustering together in the one classroom. In 1949, at fourteen, her father was imprisoned, we must presume for falling foul of the Communist authorities, and she was separated from her adored older brother and sent to boarding school,

where in her distress she began to write. In November 1956, in the wake of the Russian crackdown on the Hungarian uprising, now married and with a child, she and her family crossed the border on foot with a group of other refugees and sought refuge first in Austria and then in Switzerland. They eventually settled in Neuchâtel, where she found work in a factory. Once again her sorrow – at being cut off from her parents and siblings, her language and her native land – were the spur to writing. But in what language to write? The Hungarian she was inward with but knew she would never be able to use naturally again, or the French she heard all around her but which lacked, for her, what she felt to be essential to a living language? Laboriously, like a child, she set out to master the language of the country in which she would probably spend the rest of her life. Eventually she felt confident enough to write it, and she even put on a few plays in the factory to bring some amusement to the lives of herself and her fellow workers.

She also began jotting down lightly fictionalised memories of growing up with her brother in their Hungarian village. Each memory consisted of a bare couple of pages. But soon they had taken on a life of their own and she found herself with an entire novel, the story of twin boys, sent by their mother to live with their grandmother in a village on the Hungarian border to avoid the bombing (at least that is the

inference; there are no names of countries or cities in this book, nor any reference to historical events). The grandmother, known locally as ‘The Witch’ and rumoured to have poisoned her husband years before, lives in utter poverty and unimaginable squalor, hoarding under her bed what money she makes by renting a room to an officer from the town and selling the few extra vegetables she grows. She makes her grandchildren work for their food, sells the clothes their mother has given her for them and purloins the money she regularly sends them.

The boys react to their new situation in an extraordinary way. Instead of retreating into sullenness and self-pity they make the decision to present a façade of imperturbable strength to the world, doing more in the garden and with the vegetables than their grandmother has asked of them, teaching themselves to read and write, hardening their bodies by whipping each other with their belts, lying in silence for hours, gradually finding ways to lead a decent and almost normal life in the midst of the filth and degradation of the grandmother’s pigsty of a house.

To learn to write they undertake to describe what is happening to them, always referring to themselves in the first person plural:

We start to write. We have two hours to write about the subject and two sheets of paper at our disposal.

At the end of two hours we exchange our sheets of paper, each of us corrects the other's spelling mistakes with the help of the dictionary and, at the bottom of the page, writes: 'Good' or 'Not good'. If it's 'Not good', we throw the composition in the fire and try to write about the same subject in the next lesson. If it's 'Good', we can copy out the composition into the Big Notebook.

To decide whether it is 'Good' or 'Not good', we have a very simple rule: the composition must be true. We must describe what is, what we see, what we hear, what we do.

For example, it is forbidden to write: 'Grandmother is like a witch', but we are allowed to write: 'People call Grandmother the Witch.'

It is forbidden to write: 'The Little Town is beautiful', because the Little Town may be beautiful for us and ugly for someone else.

Similarly, if we write: 'The batman is nice,' this isn't a truth, because the batman may be capable of nasty acts that we know nothing about. So we would simply write: 'The batman has given us some blankets.'

This, in effect, is Agota Kristof's own credo, and explains why her books are, thankfully, free of the overwriting which one finds in so much of the best post-war Hungarian authors, such as Kertész and Krasznahorkai.

The ending of the book is as shocking as anything in literature, all the more so for the quiet way it is narrated. But the shocks have been there all the way

through, in the cold description of the hare-lipped neighbour's daughter, desperate for someone to love her, offering to suck their cocks and then caught inciting the dog to mount her; in the punishment they mete out to the charming and lively maid of the local priest, who has bathed them and washed their hair and is always ready to do them favours, but who they then see taunting and baiting a bedraggled line of Jewish prisoners passing through the village on their way to the railway station. Agota Kristof, through her clear-eyed twins, sees and describes it all with a coolness and a precision which is the opposite of detached. Turning her lack of inwardness with French, a language, after all, which she only started to learn at twenty-one, into a source of enormous strength, she shows that, for the born writer, no barriers are insurmountable.

L'Alphabète is equally pared down and precise, but this story of exile and loss, of how, for the refugee, the country in which she eventually settles, however kind and well-meaning its inhabitants, will always be a poor and inadequate substitute for the country of one's birth, its language always an alien thing, however proficient she becomes in it – this is the story of so many people today that it is perhaps *the* story of our time, and Agota Kristof should perhaps be seen as our transnational bard.

Reading this brief and modest book you cannot

help but be moved by the pain and suffering of her life, but even more, I think, to be exhilarated by it as an example as well as an account of the extraordinary resilience of human beings. If the horrors we inflict on one another never cease to surprise and amaze, then let us not forget the goodness and strength of character we can also, sometimes, show. This book is a testimony to that.

Agota Kristof died in 2011, at the age of seventy-five.

THE ILLITERATE

Beginnings

I read. It is like a disease. I read everything that comes to hand, everything that meets my glance: newspapers, schoolbooks, posters, bits of paper found on the street, recipes, children's books. Everything in print.

I am four years old. The war has just begun.

At this time we are living in a small village that has no railroad station, no electricity, no running water, and no telephone.

My father is the only schoolteacher in the village. He teaches all the grades, from the first to the sixth, in the same classroom. The school is separated from our house by only the schoolyard, and its windows look out onto my mother's vegetable garden. When I climb up to the last window of the schoolroom, I see the whole class with my father standing at the front, writing on the blackboard.

My father's classroom smells of chalk, ink, paper, calm, silence and snow, even in summer.

My mother's large kitchen smells of slaughtered animals, boiled meat, milk, jam, bread, wet laundry, baby's pee, agitation, noise, and summer heat, even in winter.

When the weather is too poor for us to play out of doors, when the baby screams louder than usual, when my brother and I make too much noise and kick up too much of a ruckus in the kitchen, our mother sends us to our father for a 'punishment'.

We go outside. My brother stops by the shed where the firewood is stored.

– I'd rather stay here. I'll chop up some kindling.

– Yes. Mother will be pleased.

I cross the courtyard, enter the classroom. I stop near the door, lower my eyes. My father says:

– Come closer.

I come closer. I speak into his ear.

– Punished . . . My mother . . .

– Is that all?

He asks 'Is that all?' because sometimes there is a note from my mother that I must hand over without saying anything, or a word I have to pronounce: 'doctor', 'emergency', or sometimes just a number: 38 or 40. All because of the baby who is always catching childhood diseases.

I say to my father:

– No. That's all.

He hands me a picture book.

– Go sit down.

I go to the back of the classroom where there are always extra places behind the oldest pupils.

It is thus that, at a very young age, without taking

any notice of it and completely by chance, I catch the incurable disease of reading.

When we visit my mother's parents who live in a nearby city, in a house with electricity and running water, my grandfather takes me by the hand and we make the rounds of the neighbourhood together.

Grandfather takes a newspaper from the big pocket of his great-coat and says to the neighbours:

– Look! Listen!

And to me:

– Read.

And I read. Fluently, without mistakes, as quickly as I am asked.

Apart from this grandfatherly pride, my reading disease brings me mostly reproaches and scorn.

– She never does anything. She's always reading.

– She doesn't know how to do anything else.

– It's the most pointless activity that exists.

– It's pure laziness.

And above all:

– She reads instead of . . .

Instead of what?

– There are far more useful things to do, no?

Even now, in the morning, when the house grows empty and all my neighbours leave for work, I feel a little bit guilty when I sit down at the kitchen table to read the newspapers for hours, instead of . . . doing the housework, or washing last night's dishes, or going

out to do the shopping, or washing and ironing the laundry, or making jam or cakes . . .

And above all, above all! Instead of writing.

From speech to writing

Even as a small child, I like to tell stories. Stories invented by myself.

Sometimes Grandmother comes to visit from the city, to help Mother. In the evening, it is she who puts us to bed. She tries to lull us to sleep with tales we have already heard a hundred times.

I get out of bed and tell Grandmother:

– I'm the one who's going to tell the stories, not you.

She takes me on her knees, rocks me.

– You tell, you tell then.

I begin with a sentence, any sentence, and the rest follows. Characters appear, die, or disappear. There are good characters and evil ones, poor and rich, winners and losers. There is no end to the story I stammer on Grandmother's knees.

– And then . . . and then . . .

Grandmother settles me into my cot, lowers the wick of the petrol lamp and goes out into the kitchen.

My brothers are asleep, I too fall asleep, and in my dream the story continues, beautiful and terrifying.

What I like best is to tell stories to my little brother Tila. He is our mother's favourite. He is three years