

Herausforderung der Literatur: Péter Esterházy [Challenge of Literature: Péter Esterházy]. Edited by Csongor Lőrincz and Péter L. Varga.

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This monograph on Péter Esterházy is a comprehensive investigation of the author's work, examining a wide variety of aspects from diverse perspectives. One essay explores the role of keeping silent (*schweigen*) in Esterházy's work, embedding it within the philosophical discourse. Another analyzes the author's literary production through the lens of his *Novel of Production*, a seminal work that lays out crucial premises for his entire body of work. The monograph highlights playful elements of Esterházy's oeuvre, connected to chance operations (aleatoric techniques), as well as his graceful liberties with and reimagining of tradition. The author is shown to create a new relationship to world literature by integrating other texts into his work, developing a fragmentary encyclopedia and a bricolage à la Lévy-Strauss. Esterházy's central position within postmodernism is a running theme. Esterházy's work reinterprets the genre of travel literature, and he is established as one of the most important authors in Central Europe, although not as Moritz Csáky defines the region. Elsewhere, the volume explores the important role of informants and moles in Central Europe, a subject that has received little attention in cultural studies. The scholars further examine the function of archives in literature and culture as well as the author's treatment of the body and, by extension, with illness and disease. This review will delve into each of these topics in greater detail.

This monograph introduces us to the robust middle generation of Hungarian literary scholars, alongside Daniela Lugarić and Robert Smid as outliers and Ernő Kulcsár Szabó, of course, as the presiding doyen of Hungarian literary studies. Fortunately, the publication is available in German, providing valuable insights into contemporary Hungarian literary studies for German-speaking readers. Kulcsár Szabó's Hungarian literary history, which was also published in German a few years

ago, was an initial step in this direction. This our attention also turns to the German translations of Péter Esterházy's works, and indeed the translators themselves have their say at the beginning of the monograph. This strikes me as crucial: while reading Esterházy, I quickly concluded that it was indispensable to read the originals side by side, and indeed necessary to learn Hungarian, to adequately appreciate the accomplishment of translators such as Zsuzsanna Gahse, Terézia Mora, and Hans Skirecki.

Texts that had not previously been translated into German were translated by the respective authors or by the translator, which of course complicates a comparison. Csongor Lőrincz's reference to Italo Calvino as a postmodern author is very stimulating, as it allows us to revisit and reread Calvino in a new light after reading Esterházy, even though Esterházy's work lacks any direct references to Calvino, alluding instead to authors such as Bohumil Hrabal and Danilo Kiš. In the introduction to Esterházy's work that opens the volume, one sentence is left ambiguous due to an elusive frame of reference. A German-speaking reader can hardly be expected to know which "literary strands" have "collectively authorized themselves since the Romantic Era."

Another enigma is what the "plot-driving effects of language" might be. Overall, however, there is a tendency not to distinguish here between *parole* and *langue*, speech and language, a distinction that is crucial for understanding Esterházy's poetics. For Esterházy, speech is a way of taking action; this becomes a motif in the text. This is contrasted with the act of keeping silent (*schweigen* in German), which Lőrincz discusses extensively in another important contribution to the volume. The 1934 novel *Egy polgár vallomásai* [Confessions of a Citizen] by Sándor Márai is only mentioned by its German title, even though the translation did not appear until 1996 (in a short edition) respectively 2000. Lőrincz relates Dezső Kosztolányi's understanding of language to that of Wilhelm von Humboldt, but it is questionable whether one needs to go so far back. His book *Termelési-regény* [A Novel of Production] was published in the late 1970s but not critically analyzed until 1996; one explanation is that until then, any efforts at interpretation fell flat and the book was merely mined for quotes. The hybridity of Central European literatures, as highlighted by Csáky, is modeled in Esterházy's texts, where language is not only realized in speech but transcends it, according to Lőrincz.

The translation of the section title "Függő" as *Indirekt* [indirect] in *Introduction to Belles-Lettres* misses the mark. In fact, *függő* means hanging, dependent, or pending, and is used in chess for an adjournment of a match. The use of the term "trope" seems to be beset by some comprehension issues, leading to the coinage *Tropologisierung* [tropologization], which is not yet widespread in literary studies. Lőrincz points to an evident lack of a current theory of literary historiography.

However, now that Ernő Kulcsár Szabó has published his literary history analysis of the *Novel of Production*, there is an urgent need now for interpretation, without which it is impossible to understand “the poetological and linguistic conceptual aspects, motivations, and driving impulses”. It would have been good to include some examples of the anacolutha in *Hahn-Hahn grófnő pillantása – lefele a Dunán* [The Glance of Countess Hahn-Hahn: Down the Danube] and *Esti*. The “wordless echo of language in facial expressions and gestures” likely has a pragmatic explanation.

One refreshing contribution is by Esterházy’s writer colleague László Márton, who shares his personal memories of the publication of *A Novel of Production*, which marked a moment of liberation and a point of no return. Interestingly, we had to wait until 2010 for a German translation—as if we did not need such a liberation ourselves. According to Márton, in Hungarian cultural tradition always associated linguistic and poetic modernization with public life. Within the German-speaking world, this sort of response would only have been expected in East Germany, while such a liberation did not seem necessary in Austria, West Germany, and Switzerland: the delay obviously owed to the fragmentation of the German-speaking audience. Márton argues that Péter Esterházy was not at the forefront of any specific trend, but it is fair to say that in the years leading up to his death, he was undisputedly at the forefront of Hungarian literature alongside Péter Nádas. Márton also periodizes Esterházy’s work, asserting that *Bevezetés a szépirodalomba* [Introduction to Belles-Lettres] is the author’s magnum opus and marks the end of his early work. If the deterioration of humanity is connected to the deterioration of language usage, then, according to Márton, freedom and dignity can be restored through language. According to Márton, Esterházy had to make do without composing a large novel and content himself with “texts with short wingspans.”

Márton describes the epochal shift of 1989 very well: stating During the period of actually existing socialism, he asserts, authors increasingly withdrew into the private sphere, from which they could no longer return to the public. Authors of the generation above Esterházy’s experienced as a trauma, whereas Esterházy found a solution to this dilemma by building up his “literary life’s work” while maintaining a presence in the press as a journalist. He demonstrated that a radical style of writing does not have to be a break with tradition; the other authors in the volume also address the question of tradition in Esterházy’s work. After the publication of his *Novel of Production*, Hungarian literary criticism constructed a kind of duel between Zsigmond Móricz and Esterházy. Considering that the former had already died and could not be consulted on the matter, his prospects of winning the duel were rather poor. Esterházy resolved this conflict by writing an essay about Móricz, which led to a new reading of Móricz that freed him from the clichés of socialist realism. We also know from other literatures that postmodernist writers are seen as

successors to baroque literature. This connection with the baroque era is apparent from the very title *Harmonia Caelestis*. The book develops a device of duplicating the father character ad infinitum, an ironic extension of the cult of personality, in which General Secretaries became fathers and thus entered into competition with biological fathers, but this device is withdrawn from *Corrected Edition*, which now suddenly only applies it—with dead seriousness—to a person's own father as the source of despair. But perhaps this agonizing confrontation with the father figure, which is somewhat surprising after *Harmonia Caelestis*, is simply a device (*priyom*) in the Russian Formalist sense. In that case, Esterházy does not “destroy his own honor as a human being and citizen,” as Márton writes.

As I wrote earlier, it is lovely that the monograph also gives voice to the translators. Zsuzsanna Gahse points out the difficulty of translating a “disastrous language” that has been distorted by German, considering the possibility of a mirrored process in translation: presenting a German language that is distorted by Hungarian.¹ Like Peter Zajac, Esterházy invokes the “pulse” of literature, a metaphor his translator Heike Flemming cites. Flemming's contribution also reveals that Esterházy himself, who wielded German so confidently at readings and lectures, downplayed his own abilities and emphasized that he had a “Hungarian ear.” Heike Flemming's assertion that “reading Esterházy's books calls for a translatory form of reading,” is crucial. This is also why a variety of translations are possible, with the translations into Serbian, Romanian, Russian, French, and English also deserving attention.

One of the central pieces in the monograph, to which other contributions refer, is Csongor Lőrincz's chapter about the act of keeping silent in Esterházy's early prose. He points out that, according to Heidegger, the call of conscience also resounds in deliberate silence, before mentioning that the Hungarian verb *hallgat* means both “to keep silent” and “to listen,” a semantic merger also found in Croatian and Serbian. Thus, the act of keeping silent—denoted in German by the simple verb *schweigen*—is not only serves as a form of defense and resistance, but also indicates willingness to approach others. The fluid boundary between language (*langue, Sprache*) and *schweigen* is probably more so the line between speaking and *schweigen*. Language's performative mode of being is none other than speech, that is, *parole*, and this is probably the problem: although *schweigen* is a performative act, it has no opposing secondary modeling system; unless, that is, the very rhetoric of keeping silent is one such system. Lőrincz describes *schweigen* “as a special chiasmus of activity and passivity.”² Building on this “chiasmus,” *schweigen* could be understood as a “non-anthropomorphic noise of language” that is contaminated and lives off language parasitically. For Lőrincz, *schweigen* becomes the counterpart

1 Lőrincz and Varga, eds. *Herausforderung*, 31.

2 Lőrincz and Varga, eds. *Herausforderung*, 48.

to the lyrical linguistic event; he opposes the act of speaking with the act of keeping silent, which also becomes an event. But keeping silent can also be a *parole* that prevents listening and silences one's interlocutor, a *parole* that serves to keep the essence under wraps or to prevent any information transfer at all. The transmitter becomes a signal jammer, and the receiver receives background noise, however anthropomorphic.

If *schweigen*, the act of keeping silent, consists of omissions, then these voids point to possible components, information that can be reconstructed, and the blacked-out words and lines are a particular brand of palimpsest that has a kind of integrity, even as the overwriting makes the preceding text disappear. The non-disclosure even extends into pragmatism. For example, dictatorships—though not only dictatorships—have conventions governing the subjects to keep mum about and the ones to discuss out loud; we see this, for example, in “the master's eloquent silence” in *A Novel of Production* or the agent's tight lips in *Corrected Edition*. By way silence, darkness is anthropomorphized, giving us an interesting metaphor: “the darkness, the grateful audience, kept solemnly silent.”³

Thanks to extensive footnotes filled with many quotations, Esterházy's poetics are very vividly presented, but of course, we are always referred to the original. For example, Terézia Mora's very successful translation of the metaphor “Die Töne sind nur Schatten an der Oberfläche der Stille” (“The notes are only shadows on the surface of silence”) or this line by Zsuzsanna Gahse: “nur der staubige Asphalt kreischte unter ihren Schuhen” (“only the dusty asphalt screeched under her shoes”).⁴

Lőrincz reinterprets the concept of “hiatus” on the framework of Esterházy's *Novel of Production*, as the author speaks of “hiátus irodalom,”⁵ which designates a literature of omissions, gaps that the narrator does not go on to fill with writing. Since the term is still available for literary studies (only in current use in medicine and linguistics), the primary sources have thus armed us with a new theoretical concept. At the same time, we are left pondering how to translate obscenities when the target language lacks an equivalent altogether. The frequent malediction *bazmeg*, a common filler word, is replaced by the lexeme *fűzfa* [willow]. This strategy obviates the need for an ellipsis or gap; instead, the author plants a tree in place of the curse word. This use of the term hiatus for a fissure or omission is obviously motivated by the phonetic resemblance to the noun *hiány* (lack or gap), as mentioned earlier: “nem valaminek a hiányát akartam evvel jelölni.”⁶ The text transforms into an

3 Lőrincz and Varga, eds. *Herausforderung*, 55.

4 Lőrincz and Varga, eds. *Herausforderung*, 59.

5 Esterházy, *Novel of Production*, 157.

6 Esterházy, *Novel of Production*, 157.

ornament through its repetition of definite articles, thus becoming elusive, another variation on the act of keeping silent.⁷ Lőrincz refers to Bakhtin’s polyphony, and the external *parole*, which Bakhtin identifies in Dostoevsky’s interior monologues, is absent from Esterházy. The interlocutor speaks identically to the first-person narrator, leaving no way to distinguish whether this is a dialogue or a monologue by two different people.

Péter Esterházy’s early work coincided with the period of so-called “goulash communism,” when the forces of suppression exercised restraint and the figure of János Kádár remained almost invisible, both in reality and in Esterházy’s work. Nevertheless, according to Tibor Bónus, Esterházy offers a reckless critique of the system under Kádár⁸ and implies an unbroken continuity with the dictatorship of Mátyás Rákosi. Bónus better captures the paradox of keeping silent as an event when he describes it as a speech event. Thus, his re-reading of *Novel of Production* bears fruit. One passage of the novel plays with the phonetic similarity between *légy* [housefly] and *lég* [air], so that the skill of catching flies, which is the subject of the passage, smoothly segues into the skill of catching one’s breath. Helpfully, Bónus leans heavily on the original and clarifies crucial lines for the German-speaking reader. For example, the phrase *légy komám* can have two meanings, either “my friend housefly” or “be my friend!” The translator also furnishes an explanation of the verb *züfocol*, which probably entered Hungarian via the Yiddish cognate of the German *seufzen* [to sigh]. In both cases, the German translation only indicates that the passage likely experienced difficulties in transit. Thus, Bónus’s chapter is also a necessary commentary for the translation, and new editions of the German translations should certainly be supplemented by such a commentary.

In the opinion of Ernő Kulcsár Szabó, Péter Esterházy’s work will likely lead to the formation of a new canon, a development that can only be compared to the poetry revolution in Hungarian literature ninety years ago. Society only appears in fiction in the form of language (*langue*), and it took many decades before Péter Esterházy made this apparent again. Although Esterházy’s works are copious, he is considered a short-form writer, which places him squarely in the company of Kálmán Mikszáth. The other contributors to the monograph also stress this. Although short forms are subversive, their subversiveness should not be understood in Greenblatt’s sense of the word, Kulcsár Szabó argues. Rather, Esterházy’s relationship to tradition is evident in his choice not to build on Gyula Krudy’s canon. Esterházy’s postmodern prose does not pick up the “mirror shards” of realism, which most likely amounts to bourgeois realism and not socialist realism. As an aesthetic phenomenon in the Nietzschean sense, existence is justified only through the power of language.

7 Lőrincz and Varga, eds. *Herausforderung*, 63.

8 Lőrincz and Varga, eds. *Herausforderung*, 130.

Kulcsár Szabó proceeds to highlight three waves of canonization. First came the official “Party/state-sanctioned” canon, delimited by such names as Sándor Petőfi, Endre Ady, and Attila József. This was juxtaposed against a “human ideological” canon, oriented around the likes of János Arany, Mihály Babits, and Sándor Márai. That in turn is then countered by a new canon, forged by Esterházy, one based on linguistic artistry: this canon also includes János Arany, but favors Dezső Kosztolányi and Sándor Weöres as its other compass points.

Hajnalka Halász maps the relationship between Esti and the narrator onto the extraliterary friendship between Karinthy and Kosztolányi, thereby incorporating the extraliterary parodying of Karinthy into the literary text of *Esti*.⁹ Halász shows how two nouns from utterly different paradigms are connected via homophony, as with the lexeme *azúr*, which means “sky,” but means “the Lord” when broken down into *az úr*. The author also highlights the work of translator Heike Flemming on *Esti*, as the wordplay *Frigyes/frigye*, punning Karinthy’s first name (equivalent to Frederick) with the bond of matrimony, at least on a semantic level. Halász invokes the idea that a secret’s very essence is lost when the secret is divulged; Lőrincz made a similar point in his essay about *Revised Edition*.¹⁰

Esterházy’s playful approach to literature and tradition is also evident at the subject level. In Dezső Kosztolányi’s version, the protagonist Esti has two options: either his father will give him a racing bike, or he will receive the equivalent cash and go on a trip. In Kosztolányi’s version, he chooses option two, while in Esterházy’s, the first option wins out. Drawing on the work of her colleague Péter Szirák, Halász sees this as a “narrative technique” that exposes the conventionality of storytelling, with a parallel Esterházy himself has drawn to the characters of Imre Kertész.

It takes a special form of alienation to perceive the monstrous as ordinary, to imagine that everyone will end up in a concentration camp sooner or later. Halász borrows a term from György Lukács, that of totality, which Esterházy’s work expressly nullifies: to reflect on totality is impossible,¹¹ as narrating the story of life is an incompletable writing process that only becomes impossible in the absence of life.¹² However, all traces of life escape in the play of Derrida’s *différance*, and what language puts in place is erased, as Halász sees it; still, perhaps life’s archaeological traces remain. The notion of secrecy is parodied when applied to unknown information that nobody cares about, information that remains unknown because the listener does not understand the speaker’s language.¹³ Halász also highlights the gaps

9 Lőrincz and Varga, eds. *Herausforderung*, 272.

10 Lőrincz and Varga, eds. *Herausforderung*, 340.

11 Lőrincz and Varga, eds. *Herausforderung*, 275.

12 Lőrincz and Varga, eds. *Herausforderung*, 276.

13 Lőrincz and Varga, eds. *Herausforderung*, 277.

in *Esti*, a method Lőrincz had pointed out in his analysis of the *Novel of Production*. Here, the gap arises from the communicative situation, the illocution, in which the addressee must periodically respond and can only use three filler phrases that must be as meaningless as possible.

The other contributions are certainly worthy of discussion, especially Daniela Lugarić's chapter with its comparative approach, but unfortunately time does not permit it. I hope that I have highlighted the monograph's strong points and shown the significance of Péter Esterházy's poetics, which can be very inspiring and stimulating, and not only for German-language literature. Indeed, they are bound to have a major impact beyond Europe, with translations playing a crucial role; without them, the world's writers would be unable to adopt Esterházy's techniques, his *priyoms*, for themselves.

Translated by Jake Schneider

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