

## The Wonderful Life of Words

Külföldi könyvespolcokon. Tanulmányok Esterházy Péter idegen nyelvű recepciójáról [On Bookshelves Abroad: Studies on the Reception of Péter Esterházy in Foreign Languages]. Edited by Judit Görözdi and Magdolna Balogh. Budapest: reciti, 2022. 388 pp.

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A new volume of studies on the reception of the prose works of Péter Esterházy abroad and in foreign languages was published at the end of 2022, as part of a project conducted by the Institute of World Literature of the Slovak Academy of Sciences. Available online from *Reciti*, a Hungary-based publisher, the nearly 400-page book is a collection of the edited and transcribed papers of a two-day conference in Bratislava. The speakers at the conference, first and foremost, analyzed the paradoxical situation in the praxis of translation and translation theory concerning Esterházy's prose. How is it possible to translate literary works that are so locked into a certain language and a cultural atmosphere (which is conveyed through that specific language)? How to transform these language-centered, postmodern, playful works into a new language? The introduction to the present volume of essays illustrates this problem or paradoxical state with Esterházy's well-known sentence: "Literature is fundamentalist. It works with only one language [...] it is locked in the infinity and finitude of a language. It must draw everything from this language."<sup>1</sup> While these papers are concerned with the uniqueness of linguisticity, they do not fail to reflect on the impact on the poetology, literary history, and more broadly, on the art of the host culture. Indeed, they address aspects, such as what translation theory "values" and the ideas that can be used to translate Esterházy's

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1 This sentence is my translation of the original: "Az irodalom fundamentalista. Csak egy nyelvel dolgozik [...] Épp ez a lényege: be van zárva egy nyelv végtelenségébe és végességébe. Ebből a nyelvből kell kihoznia mindent."

prose into a foreign language and, most importantly, what it is that resonates with interpreters in a target country. Naturally, this has implications beyond the literary and purely academic field; the essays in this volume also shed light on the interrelationships between literary politics and the economic and artistic foundations of a given country, all of which influence the reception of books by a given author, in this case Esterházy. There is no need to go into detail about local specificities, as they are considered by each of the essays, studying the pieces arriving in the target country and language from a broader perspective.

Completeness is certainly not expected from a volume of this kind, and perhaps would be impossible anyhow, but this collection definitely aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the presence and reception of Esterházy's texts abroad, which is a very positive aspect of the publication. The meticulous work of the editors, Judit Görözdi and Magdolna Balogh, apart from a few minor mistakes, deserves special praise.

The papers, lectures, and discussions of the conference are grouped into three major sections. The first block comprises only one single text which, as a kind of prelude, introduces the peculiarities of Péter Esterházy's writing style and his main prose poetics. The Slovak aesthete Peter Michalovič, considers Esterházy's poetic-rhetorical toolkit a distinguished (even in a global context) manifestation of postmodern literaryism and offers fascinating reflections on the volumes *Life and Literature* (*Élet és irodalom*, 1998) and *The Minutes of Meeting* (*Jegyzőkönyv*, 1998). With examples taken from these books, Michalovič briefly demonstrates what he regards as Esterházy's individual style, namely a highly complex language-centered modality, which relies heavily on intertextuality and is extended by historical and political contexts. He then goes on to analyze these textual manifestations further, introducing new aspects of translation theory and philosophical history in the broader context of their reception history.

The second, eighteen-item block contains almost all the edited versions of the conference presentations and lectures (except for the Spanish and the Polish ones). These papers first and foremost deal with the development of the Esterházy reception in foreign languages, including both global and European literary aspects. Although the preface to the essays claims the symmetry of world literature, arguing that it does not distinguish between literatures of small and large cultures, it nevertheless seems that literary transfer at the global level favors the so-called "world languages". It follows that, although Esterházy's prose is (would be) of particular importance to the literatures of Central and Eastern Europe, it is mostly to potential readers in the German and English-speaking world that his prose has been more accessible. Unquestionably, Esterházy's reception in German and the presence of his literature in the German-speaking world are of particular importance.

Csongor Lőrincz's study *The Doubting Power of the White Space: On the German-Language Esterházy Reception (1996–2017)* provides a critical analysis of the reception history of this prose art, with a special focus on its context, causes, and literary impact. It traces the history of the German reception from 1996 onwards, analyzing all forms of publications (newspaper reviews, feuilletons, essays, studies, and treatises) and the themes that define and predispose the reception of Esterházy in the German speaking world. It even addresses the silence of the reception following the author's death, raising questions about the future potential, readability, and visibility of his oeuvre.

The essay by Zoltán Kulcsár-Szabó is related to the context of the examination of the possibilities of this literary transfer into the German language area. Kulcsár-Szabó analyzes the critical reception of *Introduction to Literature (Bevezetés a szépirodalomba, 1986)*, a significant work by Esterházy (known as a distinguished piece of the so-called “prose transition” a.k.a. “prózaforidulat”), which was also a prominent “event”, a happening” in the history of Hungarian literature). Although many of the pieces in the volume of *Introduction to Literature* had first been published individually before the collected material came out, the success of *Celestial Harmonies (Harmonia Caelestis, 2000)*, a previous book by Esterházy, led to the birth of this particular book. It was a consequence of this delayed publication, Kulcsár-Szabó points out, that the political situations and associations were more difficult to understand for non-Hungarian readers. At the same time, this also meant that it was more strongly associated with avant-garde literature in German literary history, thus new, form-disruptive prose styles became once again more prominent in the local context.

Szilvia Szarka's paper traces the success of the reception of *Celestial Harmonies*, focusing on aspects that might answer the question of why there was a change in the German understanding of Esterházy's prose after 2001. She identifies among the reasons that *Celestial Harmonies*, labelled as a “great European novel”, produced literary contexts, allusions, and associations such as Umberto Eco, Julio Cortazar, Italo Calvino, and the historically common European background and cultural patterns that made it easier for German readers to approach Esterházy's peculiar, extravagant prose world.

After these studies, which are focused mainly on the reception history in the German language area, the authors of the following two papers question and examine the reception potentials of another world language, English, and its main language areas. The first of these contributions is Zsuzsanna Varga's paper, *Esterházy's Reception in Great Britain*. By examining the intensity of this presence and the nature of the reception itself, Varga concludes that while Esterházy's role and position in the Hungarian literary canon is important and stable, in Great Britain he

has not attracted many readers and has not aroused much interest. Nevertheless, by pointing out that critical reactions, from knowledgeable professional readers and lay readers alike, have been sporadic and rare, she offers an assessment of the opinions of the books published in Britain, and also tries to give some other, non-literary reasons for this indifference. The possible reasons include poorer marketing strategies, less successful translations and translators, and differences between Hungarian and English cultural patterns. Related to this issue is Judith Szöllősy's less "scientific" essay on the subject, giving more personal yet insightful reflections on the author and the artist from a translator's perspective. In *Péter Esterházy's Reception and Presence in America*, she does not point out the continental context but attempts to summarize and explain Esterházy's success in the United States. She goes through his oeuvre one by one, discusses their translators, briefly analyzes some of the ninety critical manifestations and critical responses published, and aims to interpret the importance of the fact that on numerous occasions Esterházy lectured at American universities. This, coupled with well-planned publishing strategies and accurate quality translations—in addition to a brief theoretical summary of the relationship between translatability, language-centeredness, and media theory—are of particular significance, because, in Szöllősy's view, Esterházy's pieces are not necessarily famous as literature alone, but also because of the person and the presence of Péter Esterházy himself in American culture.

After these papers examining the possibilities of literary transfer into the two world languages, the following studies focus on the reception potential of target languages closer to Hungarian history, culture, and movements in literary history. These are the transcribed versions of papers that aim to comprehend the literary, academic, and critical dialogue in Slovak, Czech, Slovenian, and Romanian in relation to one or even several of Esterházy's works. These studies have a common point of departure. As we read in Judit Görözdi's Introduction to the volume, "the interest of Central European cultures, in the cultural-historical sense occupies an important place in the reception of Esterházy in foreign languages" (p. 11). Therefore, it appears that these are the target languages in which, theoretically and hypothetically, the presence and significance of Esterházy's prose should have been the strongest, obviously because of shared historical and artistic experiences. Naturally, this was not always the case, and the particularities are also presented in these papers. The Slovak reception is dealt with in the essays by Judit Görözdi and Mária Kusá. The former pays particular attention to the aesthetic and ideological reasons for Esterházy's late reception in Slovakia, as well as the influence of Renáta Deák and Kalligram Publishers on the recognition and appreciation of his prose. It even explores the impact of Esterházy's prose on Slovak literature. Meanwhile, Kusá reflects on the function of Esterházy's Slovak translations in a broader literary-historical perspective, paying attention to

the art of Pál Závada, Péter Nádas, and others, in the context of the complex relationship between the so-called “minor” and “major” literatures.

These essays are followed by two studies on the Czech reception by Jenő Gál and Marta Pató. Gál traces the reception of Esterházy’s published works. Discussing the political situation and the state of Czech literature after 1968, he shows that it was only in 2005, with his translation of *The Helping Verbs of the Heart* (*A szív segédigéi*, 1985), that Esterházy became a recognized author in Czech. In addition, Gál’s essay also discusses who and what could possibly be the literary-historical anchors in the Czech understanding of Esterházy, whose prose can, “establish the foundations of” or convey this postmodern artistic style. Pató, on the other hand, focuses on the image of the author (biographical image) as portrayed in Esterházy’s novels, and examines how this work inspired Czech prose and why there are so few real, well-informed, and capable readers of Esterházy in the Czech Republic. She attributes this status to, among other things, the difficulty the reader faces when giving meaning to his prose with the abandonment of the story or the plot, and the postmodern playfulness of language.

The following essay, Anita Huřková’s *The Slovak Translation of Esterházy’s Works from the Point of View of Linguoculturema*, examines Esterházy’s writing from a different angle, although staying within the sphere of the Czech and Slovak language reception. This reception analysis or insight focuses on the so-called *linguoculturema*, based on the principle that the grammatical and linguistic solutions specific to Esterházy’s prose pose a particular difficulty for the translator. The cultural embeddedness of his texts is an additional complicating factor that presents translators with several further challenges. Therefore, the author uses the linguistic concept of *linguoculturema* (national symbols, allusions, associations, linguistic representations of other elements of national consciousness) and examines, in close comparative readings of certain texts, how specific linguistic elements resonate in the target language, what new cultural contexts they point to, and which cultural references are lost in the target language because of translation.

Besides the papers focusing on linguistic transfers in Central and Eastern Europe, the volume includes three others dealing with the Slovenian, Serbian, and Romanian reception of Péter Esterházy, written by Jutka Rudaš, Kornélia Faragó, and Éva Bányai, respectively. In Rudaš’s view, Esterházy is the best known and most frequently analyzed author in Slovenia, thus she explores the context of the media, and political and literary history in detail, focusing on newspaper articles, reviews, and critical studies. In turn, Faragó explores the reasons for the relatively quiet reception of Esterházy’s works in Serbia, revealing that although literary comparisons with Danilo Kiš would be fruitful for understanding the postmodernist artist and style, there are few connecting points and reading patterns for Serbian

literature. This incompatibility between the two cultures and the two literary historical traditions is still observed today, and since the author's death, an even greater silence has surrounded the Serbian critical reading community. Finally, Bányai shows that, although Esterházy's translations are widely available, and many of his volumes have been translated into Romanian, there have only been a few interpretative contributions to the author's works. At the same time, it cannot be claimed that the author is unknown in Romania, as he was interviewed on several occasions, published numerous articles, and participated in literary events there, but all in all his literature does not appear to be important (or understandable) in the literary understanding of the Romanian-speaking environment.

This second block contains five further essays, which are neither about literary transfers of world languages and their reception, nor do they analyze the impact of the translation production of the Eastern and Central European cultural space. Instead, they focus on so-called small languages, or on Esterházy's understanding of cultures further away from Hungarian culture. András Kányádi analyzes the reception in French, Vyacheslav Szereda looks at the reception of a distinguished Esterházy work, *Corrected Version (Javított Kiadás, 2002)*, in Russian, Antonio Sciacovelli considers the possibilities of the Italian reception, the paper by co-authors Vesha Lati and Kristóf Fenyvesi looks at the Finnish, and Mika Waseda at the Japanese interpretability of Esterházy. Rather than presenting each of these papers separately, let me point out that the given target languages have several points in common in their understanding of Esterházy's prose. Apart from local particularities and cultural differences, it can be said of almost all of them that the author is present in the target language area, but his literary readership is low, and his works have not generated much critical dialogue. Many of his books are still waiting to be translated, and in many cases his major masterpieces are hardly known, being available only in collected editions. The reasons and consequences are discussed in these essays, which all provide convincing examples and contexts of literary history.

The last, third block of this volume presents the panel discussion of the conference in a written form. The panel discussion, which included Gábor Németh, Mari Alföldy, György Buda, Renáta Deák, Heike Flemming, Péter Rácz, Vyacheslav Szereda, Judith Szöllősy, Robert Svoboda, and Teresa Worowska, provides a closer insight into the mysteries of literary translation practice. It addresses issues such as how to translate Péter Esterházy's texts well, what the translator should pay particular attention to, giving examples of specific difficulties, and how to translate Esterházy's titles. The recorded, transcribed version of the program accompanying this conference is particularly refreshing after reading the papers of this volume, as it helps to deepen the discussion of many of the issues raised, using illustrative examples and a more informal tone. It is another important feature of the panel that

young literary translators were present in the discussion, and that a fruitful dialogue took place on the future of the translatability and intelligibility of Péter Esterházy's oeuvre.

All in all, an important volume of studies has been produced and published. It is hoped that this brief critical review allows the reader to see its main objectives and contributions. It is also worth highlighting that this is a volume of studies that not only aims to understand and to “better” understand Péter Esterházy's literature, but also intends to launch exciting discussions about translatability, as well as about politics, culture, and social relations. Perhaps that is what literature is good for, and perhaps it is even better when it generates more conversation about literature itself.

