

The Reception of Péter Esterházy's *Helping Verbs of the Heart* from the Perspective of Translatability and Readability

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Abstract. This paper examines the challenges of translating and interpreting Péter Esterházy's *Helping Verbs of the Heart*, a work deeply rooted in Hungarian literary tradition. Esterházy's prose, marked by complex stylistic elements and cultural references, poses significant interpretive difficulties for English-speaking readers, who may lack the cultural context essential for full comprehension. By exploring how translation choices, influenced by both literary merit and marketability, shape foreign reception, this study highlights the nuanced shifts in meaning that occur when such culturally embedded texts are translated. It also considers how these translations impact interpretive methods in English-speaking contexts, revealing how Esterházy's work challenges prevailing literary frameworks and necessitates new reading strategies.

Keywords: Péter Esterházy; translation; *Helping Verbs of the Heart*; poetic limitations; readability

I

The canonical position of Péter Esterházy's oeuvre has attained unquestionable stability in Hungarian literary history. Its profound impact on the aesthetic and particularly on the narrative-textual trends of Hungarian prose is a central theme of numerous papers on literature. As his distinctive stylistic elements and rhetorical/poetic techniques are increasingly apparent and are reshaping late-modern literature, they have also led to the publication of numerous foreign translations. While the motivations behind translations cannot be attributed to literary merit only, publishers and translators have had a significant influence on the choice of works to be rendered into other languages. Thus, in the case of Esterházy's writings, the availability of new translations is shaped not only by contemporary literary currents but also by publishers' interests and the European, predominantly German, marketability of his works.

Every act of translation carries significant consequences. Particularly challenging are linguistic-poetic expressions, such as those found in Esterházy's prose, posing difficulties in grasping their nuances for both translators and foreign readers. Moreover, the intricate linguistic-narrative references can also be easily diluted when removed from their cultural context, leading foreign readers to perceive fewer poetic elements and interpret the text only within a limited framework. These challenges are evident in the English translation of Péter Esterházy's *Helping Verbs of the Heart* (*A szív segédigéi*). This paper analyses the accessibility of translated literature in a new language, while also examining the implications of translating a narrative deeply entrenched in Eastern European literary traditions. My aim is to demonstrate that Esterházy's prose resonates most fully with his Hungarian readers, who possess the cultural and literary background to appreciate his rich intertextual references and progressive literary techniques that have evolved within an existing prose tradition. I will also show why Esterházy's texts pose serious difficulties for the English-speaking readership, who may often come to 'false' or simplified interpretations.

II

This section of the paper endeavours to explore the intricacies of reception and interpretation within the English-speaking cultural and literary sphere, diverging from the Hungarian-centric analysis of Péter Esterházy's novel *Helping Verbs of the Heart*. It elucidates the outcomes of interpretative approaches and, importantly, juxtaposes key aspects of the reception history in foreign-language contexts with notable stages of interpretation methods within the Hungarian-language domain. Furthermore, it also aims to point out the challenges of interpreting translated texts (without going deep into translation studies and theory), particularly concerning their constrained poetic potential. This issue is fundamentally intertwined with and represents a pivotal juncture in the development of the impact and interpretative mechanisms of hermeneutical principles. It concerns the question whether literary texts, when encountering the literary axioms of a cultural community based on a different language can generally engage in a meaningful dialogue with the aesthetic-linguistic codes and information inherent in the original text. Alternatively, they may struggle to navigate this intricate process due to inherent dissimilarities.

Before going into detail, it is crucial to highlight some key characteristics of Esterházy's prose. His texts are regarded as indispensable elements of the Hungarian literary tradition, intricately intertwined with the social heritage through their poetic portrayals of Hungarian and Eastern European history and collective memory. However, it is acknowledged that these quasi-referential forms profoundly shape and

influence the expectation horizon¹ within a specific cultural sphere—in this instance, the English-speaking population at large, with particular emphasis on North America and Great Britain. Furthermore, it is imperative to look into the textual and prosopoetic dynamics regarding how the translated target-texts impact the interpretative methodologies within the receiving community, particularly in relation to contemporary literary trends in the English language. This entails examining whether the translations have broader literary implications, spark polemics in literary criticism, or necessitate the adoption of new reading strategies. Such considerations echo the challenges of translation and raise similar hermeneutical inquiries as those encountered in Esterházy's *Helping Verbs of the Heart*. Consequently, we should assess how Esterházy's works, particularly the unique prosopoetic potential of the initial English translation, have impacted the academic literary tradition of English-speaking cultures and influenced their prevailing interpretative methodologies.

Esterházy's prose works, along with their deep integration into Hungarian literary culture, can be illustrated with the words of Mihály Szegedy-Maszák,² particularly exemplified by a statement Péter Esterházy made at a conference on János Arany's oeuvre and the broader Hungarian literary tradition. Esterházy remarked "In a single sentence, we encapsulate our entire literary experience. Centuries unfold within each living phrase, reflecting choice, confession, judgment, passion, beauty, and morality."³

In line with the preceding quotation, it is evident that the reception history of *Helping Verbs of the Heart* encompasses its foreign language translations. The act of transposing a work into another language invariably involves a process of (re-)interpretation, whereby all meaning-constructions and dialogic interactions represent varying methods of perception. Additionally, Ernő Kulcsár Szabó, in his 1984 study, delves into the relativity and challenges of translating a specific linguistic code, stating: "When a work is introduced into different cultural contexts, such as through translation into a foreign language, it effectively becomes a segment of the original literary landscape."⁴ Hence, these sentences also emphasize the discourse regarding the progression and transformation of any language code when presented in a medium other than its native text.⁵ They acknowledge that texts for-

1 Jauss, *Aesthetic Experience*.

2 Szegedy-Maszák, "Hagyomány és (újra)értelmezés." Szegedy-Maszák also wrote about Esterházy in English as part of the book entitled *International Postmodernism: Theory and Literary Practice*. Szegedy-Maszák, "Nonteleological Narration."

3 Esterházy, *Egy Kék haris*, 193.

4 Kulcsár Szabó, *A zavarbaejtő elbeszélés*, 35.

5 This sentence seems to come to the same conclusion as David Damrosch. The oft-quoted, somewhat enigmatic claim by Damrosch is the following: "World literature is literature that gains in translation." Thus, while after any act of translation, new interpretative ways open up, in my

mulated within the Hungarian language code may be less accessible to interpreters from other cultural backgrounds: “It becomes incomprehensible because it lacks the historical, social, cultural, and even emotional and political experiences that underpin the aesthetic references for Hungarian recipients. Specifically, this type of work serves as a prime example of literature’s attachment not only to language but also to lived experiences, with cultural conventions significantly complicating the deciphering of the aesthetic sign system.”⁶ The initial segment of this paper reviews the various interpretive approaches and pivotal junctures within the critical discourse stemming from the English text of *Helping Verbs of the Heart*. Concurrently, it extrapolates insights from these critical mechanisms and interprets them within the evolving reception history in Hungary.⁷

III

First and foremost, we should acknowledge a significant translation milestone: the completion of the English version of *Helping Verbs of the Heart* in 1990, marking the inaugural entry of an Esterházy text into the English literary tradition, undertaken by Michael Henry Heim, a Slavic languages professor at UCLA, renowned for his previous English translations of György Konrád, Milan Kundera, Bohumil Hrabal, and Günter Grass. The introductory remarks by John Lee, the editor of the volume, serve as the initial contribution to the English-language reception history: “Known for his innovative novels on forbidden, delicate, and controversial subjects, Péter Esterházy has played a vital role in the recent flowering of fiction writing in Hungary. With *Helping Verbs of the Heart*, the first of his books to be published in English, he puts a distinctively original twist on a classic theme – the death of a parent.”⁸ Furthermore, the preface, also written by the editor, describes the fundamental plot, narrative structures, and implied meanings inherent in these processes:

“Two brothers and a sister, now adults, are summoned by their father and reunited on a miserably hot August day at the hospital where Mother lies on her deathbed. Their awkwardness is intensified by the presence of the outrageously vulgar doctor and an evil nurse. The elder son faithfully

study, I try to answer why the given text proved difficult for the English readership to understand, and what the reasons of the consistently “negative” critiques are.

6 Kulcsár Szabó, “A fordítás »antihumanizmusa«.”

7 For more about Esterházy in different languages: Lőrincz and L. Varga, *Herausforderung der Literatur*.

8 Esterházy, *Helping Verbs of the Heart*.

narrates the inevitable unfolding of events—Mother’s death, the funeral, and the days of mourning—struggling to make sense of an experience at once commonplace and painfully unique, and so powerful as to be compared only to love.”⁹

Thus, the editor’s statements constitute the initial significant element of the reception history. However, I should add that their contentious nature arises from a fundamental aspect of literary interpretation mechanisms: all interpretations encompass potential misreadings as well as understandings.¹⁰ Therefore, when the editor’s introduction makes meaningful statements about the text as a whole, addressing both thematic and biographical aspects, it understandably emphasizes a particular interpretation. However, this focus inevitably restricts the expansive horizon of potential understanding, consequently denying the reader the pleasure of engaging in the interpretative discourse.

Similarly, John Taylor’s critique approaches the text from a biographical standpoint, suggesting, in his paper on current trends in European literature, that Esterházy’s work is characterized by a sequential, comedic, and ironic portrayal of events. However, Taylor emphasizes that it is the structural aspects of the text that introduce innovative methods of understanding Esterházy’s prose.¹¹ Additionally, in his literary analysis, Alexander Karn regards *Helping Verbs of the Heart* as a prime example of the organizational principles of postmodern literature. He asserts that the varied critical reception of the text following its translation in 1990 suggests that it may not evoke the same impact in different linguistic and cultural contexts due to disparities between languages. Karn contends that interpreters of the translated text may have a limited grasp of linguistic and aesthetic nuances compared to readers in the original language and cultural sphere.¹² These insights into translation methodology are further underscored by the scholar’s (Karn) assertion that interpreters often struggle to penetrate deeper layers of meaning within the text, resorting to a pragmatic reading that overlooks its aesthetic values. Thus, this can clearly show us something, why the biographical tones are so embedded in the processes of interpreting this prose.

John Simon, in his critique in *The New Republic*, also articulates a fundamentally negative sentiment regarding the perception that “this writer’s program is only vaguely understood or sensed.”¹³ Additionally, he draws attention to the postmodern literary

9 Esterházy, *Helping Verbs of the Heart*, Preface.

10 Culler, *On Deconstruction*, 176.

11 Taylor, *Into the Heart of European Poetry*, 208.

12 Karn, *Postmodern Techniques*.

13 Simon, “The Stunt Man,” 35.

techniques of the implied author in this specific literary piece, resulting in a fragmented body of text, which, according to Simon, could be interpreted as an overall failure of the author's endeavour. Nevertheless, the assertion that "failure" is an inherent element of the text itself is irrelevant. Instead, in this context, "failure" pertains to the effectiveness and accuracy of the text as a medium for conveying through language the concept of death. Thus, this is not solely the author's or literature's failure but is due to the inherent language challenges in capturing the metaphysical nature of death.

However, it is crucial in the interpretation that the narrator frequently draws the implied reader's attention to the limitations of the written word and explains the difficulty of capturing death within a narrative structure:

"It's nearly two weeks since my mother died, and I'd better get to work before the urge I felt so violently during the funeral, the urge to write about her, turns back into the lethargic wordlessness I felt at the news of her death. Yes, to work! Because while the need to write about my mother still comes on me unexpectedly, it can be very vague, that is, I must stop myself from giving in to the whim of the moment and thwacking a single key till it covers the paper: m m m m mmm m mmmmmmm m mmm m m m [...] I don't use language. I don't wish to discover the truth, even less to lay it before anyone. Nor would I dream of naming the world, as a result of which I don't name a thing in the world: naming is tantamount to making a permanent sacrifice of name to named..."

This excerpt highlights the narrator's struggle with expressing the ineffable through language, emphasizing the natural limitations of the narrative in encapsulating the concept of death.

Hence, it is highly plausible that the internal tension within the text and the narrator's sense of inertia stem from the nature of death, which makes it unspeakable. Furthermore, this textually based existential experience finds support in the Hungarian reception history, particularly in the concise analysis given by Gábor Tolcsvai Nagy. While his study deals primarily with the stylistic structure of *Helping Verbs of the Heart*, it also touches upon essential points of its reception in English, exploring the linguistic possibilities and articulation of the state of death. Therefore, his discussions concerning the potential of native language abilities and the expression of metaphysical concepts through language are noteworthy:

"First of all, it is necessary to state that style pluralism [...] can be understood as part of the attempt to articulate: the speakers speak in their own language so that their utterance has a truth value [...] so this is not about illustration [...]"¹⁴

14 Tolcsvai Nagy, *Nem találunk szavakat*, 239.

These observations emphasize the narrative and stylistic framework of *Helping Verbs of the Heart*, revealing the narrator's (in)ability to articulate the subject of death and the prevailing negative undertone within linguistic boundaries. Consequently, it attempts to grapple with the linguistic constraints surrounding what cultural history has deemed inconceivable: "Strictly, the text is a narrative, that is, based on the indispensability of language."¹⁵ However, as fundamentally evident within the text, death as a metaphysical concept remains incomprehensible and unutterable to the narrator, who struggles to articulate the sequence of events associated with it. Therefore, the implied author tries to depict the occurrence of death through various intertextual linguistic elements. According to Tolcsvai, the moments of realizing this impossibility and the overwhelming tension it evokes are highlighted and magnified midway through the novel in a striking dark panel that contains no more than a single line saying "I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal! I hope you all rot. I hate you."¹⁶ This particular page serves as an exceptional illustration of linguistic syncretism, suggesting that the narrator is unable to convey his thoughts solely through language, finding solace in the inclusion of external texts, in this case Apostle Paul, to maintain narrative coherence.

Alexander Karn also discusses the technique of intertextuality, commonly associated with postmodern literature, and identifies the mechanisms of utilizing intertexts and allusions in Esterházy's work. He highlights a fundamental structural disparity between the novel's main text, associated with the narrator, and a body of intertextual segments printed in capital letters, illustrating the writer's attempts to convey the ineffable through various narrative voices. Furthermore, Karn's study also suggests a potential quasi-failure in the reception of the work, attributing it to Esterházy's poetic-rhetorical tools that may significantly perplex foreign language readers, thereby diverting them from the expected horizon of interpretation of the text as a coherent literary piece. Nevertheless, it is essential to recognize that the use of poetic tools is not incidental but serves an implied authorial purpose. However, we should note that if a novel possesses a predetermined implied authorial intent, this inevitably restricts the possibilities of diverse interpretations and constrains the text's inherent pluralism, treating it as a readable entity rather than a malleable work open to reinterpretation. Nevertheless, additional interpretative challenges regarding the capitalized elements of the text may arise as they rely on the reader's extensive literary knowledge. Consequently, the text can only engage the reader in a meaningful dialogue if the literary assumptions are fully met; otherwise, it risks losing its poetic weight and relevance, and potentially undermining its significance.

15 Tolcsvai Nagy, *Nem találunk szavakat*, 240.

16 Esterházy, *Helping Verbs of the Heart*.

Indeed, Vince Passaro delves into the significance of intertextual elements, highlighting the challenge for readers who may not grasp the contextual reasons behind their inclusion and lack the necessary literary background to interpret them effectively.¹⁷ Similarly, another review, written by Alexander Karn, acknowledges the text's complexity for readers while also noting its potential for stimulation and provocation. Weidenfeld draws attention to the presence of intertexts throughout the work and the playful possibilities they offer, particularly in addressing the semantic complexities surrounding death, whether of the narrator's mother or death itself, as a linguistic conundrum requiring logical and linguistic analysis. However, Karn's comments overlook the fundamental role of linguistic mediation as the cornerstone of existence, failing to recognize the inherent limitations of language in conveying certain concepts.¹⁸ Furthermore, James Marcus's article in *The Philadelphia Inquirer* critiques the linguistic-poetic aspect of narrative speakability.¹⁹ Marcus argues that the profound sadness associated with the narrator's mother's death, coupled with the narrator's sense of "uncanniness" (*Unheimlichkeit*), renders the narrative technique ineffective and difficult to navigate.

Nonetheless, the implied author elucidates the predicament in the preface to the main text, acknowledging the challenge of finding adequate words to confront and comprehend the state of death, resulting in a palpable sense of absence within the narrative flow. Consequently, this explains the primary motive behind the narrator's recourse to borrowing language panels from other authors: to approach the unspeakable death of his mother more closely:

"Because while the need to write about my mother still comes on me unexpectedly, it can be very vague, that is, I must stop myself from giving in to the whim of the moment and thwacking a single key till it covers the paper: m m m m mmm m mmmmmmm m mmm m m m [...] I don't speak, but I'm not silent, which isn't the same. I'm cautious: this is about my mother. Maybe the whole thing should go into italics. [...] Why is it more perverse to write about her than to say nothing?"²⁰

17 Karn, *Postmodern Techniques*. (All the other scholars mentioned above cannot be referenced, since Alexander Karn's paper is missing its reference list as well. So I can only refer to these lines, as Alexander Karn cites them.)

18 Karn, *Postmodern Techniques*, 327.

19 Karn, *Postmodern Techniques*, 327.

20 Esterházy, *Helping Verbs of the Heart*, v. It is an interesting question whether these phonetic elements denote similar phonetic values in English and in Hungarian. In a sense, it is also debatable whether the act of rewriting the letters is considered as translation or something else. In a sense no, it is not exactly translation, as these letters are important predominantly from the aspect of sound.

Simultaneously, the introduction by the implied author seems closely associated with Andrea Máthé's study, which also explores the theme of death by asserting that philosophy, in accordance with Socratic-Platonic ideals, is particularly concerned with death.²¹ In line with these notions, Wittgenstein posits that "if one philosophizes, one will eventually end up wanting to produce only an unarticulated voice", which could lend support to the interpretation of the implied author's personal philosophy and the repetitive "m" sound as a solitary vocalization. Consequently, the continual utterance of this voice, as Máthé rightly cites Helmuth Plessner, essentially disrupts the linguistic self-regulation system, embodying a state suspended between silence and speech and signifying an innate desire to articulate the concept of death. Máthé interprets *Helping Verbs of the Heart* as a quasi-prayer endeavour which, throughout the narrative, "does not transform into internal speech in the conventional sense;"²² neither does it solely carry a sacred connotation. It is noteworthy that the narrator's style varies between the sacred and the profane, reflecting an ongoing attempt to communicate. It frequently happens that the narrator is either struggling for words or consciously refrains from using them. Consequently, the linguistic constructs of prayer fail to encapsulate the world within the framework of mourning. Hence, the inclusion of a quasi-translation of the *Hymn to Love* by Apostle Paul on the black page in the middle serves as a poignant expression of the displacement and isolation engendered by grief, akin to a desperate cry: "During the period of mourning, speech is interrupted; single phonemes are uttered in a child-like manner, with yelling and silence emerging as predominant phenomena."²³ Therefore, in the first half of the text, according to Máthé's analysis, it is precisely those words which the narrator once learned from his mother that lose their significance. Consequently, the shift in the narrator's stance observed in the second half of the text can be justified as the mother assuming the narrator's role and beginning to re-educate her son on proper speech. In light of these interpretive elements, the negative reception of the English American version of *Helping Verbs of the Heart* could possibly be attributed to the readers' inability to comprehend certain historical aspects, coupled with the critical observation that "the language of translation, if not disappointing, is rather meagre compared to the linguistic layers of the Hungarian text."²⁴

Having checked various stages of reception, it appears that Esterházy's *Helping Verbs of the Heart* has significantly contributed to the literary discourse of the English language. In several instances, this prose fiction has sparked literary debates and prompted new reading strategies by challenging outdated decoding methods.

21 Máthé, *A könyv csábítása*, 39.

22 Máthé, *A könyv csábítása*. 40.

23 Esterházy, *Helping Verbs of the Heart*, 39.

24 Szegedy-Maszák, "Hagyomány és (újra)értelmezés," 86.

This portion of the paper aimed to present and analyse the poetic performance of the English version of *Helping Verbs of the Heart*, while also highlighting the interpretation processes engendered by the text. Additionally, it has assessed the degree to which the expectations within the English cultural sphere align with the interpretive framework of Hungarian readers, and consequently, the extent to which the translated text can be comprehensively deciphered in English.

IV

Therefore, transcending a detailed examination of the foundational concepts of translation theory and instead concentrating on their underlying principles and possibilities, it is imperative to undertake a pertinent re-evaluation and analysis of the prosopoetic and linguistic characteristics of Péter Esterházy's *Helping Verbs of the Heart*. This entails considering the opportunities, dilemmas, and novel capabilities arising from its introduction into a new cultural domain, specifically into English and American contexts. As the preceding chapter concluded and as previously alluded to at a referential level, thereby delineating the trajectory of further inquiry, it was focused on the prosodic and rhetorical features of Esterházy's text. These features will assume a central role in the forthcoming analysis, clarifying the conceptual potential of the interplay among various linguistic registers and the use of linguistic syncretism in a novel context. Additionally, it highlights the reinterpreted attributes of these speech-like techniques within the intricate context of the English translation, ultimately anticipating its quasi-failure.

In his *Withdrawal of Language Eloquence from the Prose of Péter Esterházy*, Gábor Tolcsvai Nagy studies the theoretical potential of linguistic syncretism as a means of interpreting *Helping Verbs of the Heart*. Although concise, Nagy's examination also delves into literary hermeneutics and linguistic pragmatics. Moreover, the underlying premise of his paper can be succinctly summarized by the observation that Esterházy's prose, particularly evident in the language of *Helping Verbs of the Heart*, presents various linguistic levels and modes of speech—often referred to as non-privileged, speech-like, or informal conversational language—for numerous reasons. Consequently, these textual alterations are effectively captured through a proso-ethical and rhetorical shift. The transition from the anticipated elevated language register, which implies a high level of complexity and literacy, to a more speech-like and informal language articulated by the implicit author, marks a significant departure from the prominent rhetorical practices prevalent in Hungarian and European literary traditions. While some critics may perceive this shift as a regression from established literary norms, others view it as a welcome evolution in language manifestos, thereby expanding readers' interpretive horizons and challenging

the traditional expectations of literary progression. Additionally, within the same volume, Tolcsvai's paper addresses the stylistic structure of Esterházy's *Helping Verbs of the Heart*, examining how the narrator's speech shapes the text's linguistic landscape, akin to his previous study.²⁵ This discussion highlights the diverse possibilities of linguistic syncretism. The paper concludes that the text intricately interweaves various linguistic registers, resulting in a complex rhetorical tapestry that, from its original appearance, appeared dauntingly new and challenging to interpret. To substantiate this theoretical and textual analysis, Tolcsvai cites a narrative linguistic unit from the opening part of the main text:

“Let us pray,” I said, by which I meant pray and get going. My brother spun round to me with burning eyes, as if he'd been bitten by a treacherous papist viper and I'd made a wisecrack or said a dirty word. Not daring to calm him down, I launched into the Lord's Prayer like a black marketeer. My sister made a face, because since childhood we'd thought of Our Father as our father, our very own, or, rather, we'd tried to shoo the thought away, which shooing process we called “saying the Lord's Prayer.”

Tolcsvai contends that this quote aptly illustrates the interplay between various stylistic layers. The opening sentence, he argues, exudes a distinct speech-like quality, while the subsequent sentences exhibit a unique Esterházy style that verbally delineates the relationship between the brother and the speaker. The contrast between these styles—archaic and folklorized in the first instance, contemporary and confidential in the second—further illustrates the text's rich stylistic tapestry. Similarly, the linguistic disparity between the terms “Our Father” and “black marketeer” exacerbates the discrepancy in the following sentence. The following sentence methodically deduces this contradiction in a linear and causal manner. The progression from the varied iterations of the word “father”, “Our Father” to a more linguistically styled interpretation, is associated with a touch of irony. This transformation is achieved through a simultaneous act of secularization, as the narrative mode adopts a prayer-like address to “Our Father”. This act, while secularizing various expressions of the word “father” also gives them an aura of sacredness. The exploration of linguistic syncretism and style-combinatorial processes in *Helping Verbs of the Heart* reveals complexities that extend beyond the theoretical limitations of this paper. Therefore, only a superficial examination can be conducted to consider the translation implications of stylistic disparities and the implicit authorial manipulation. These intricacies struggle to manifest meaningfully within the linguistic framework of the target-text, constrained by limitations in readability and translatability. Tolcsvai's investigation of the dilemma of linguistic translatability

25 Tolcsvai Nagy, *Nem találunk szavakat*, 209.

and style synchronicity, serving as the foundational method of prosopoetics and rhetoric in Esterházy's prose, draws attention to a significant challenge. The comprehension and differentiation of speech registers are deeply rooted in specific cultural contexts. Consequently, when transposed into a new linguistic medium, registers inevitably lose the nuanced theoretical possibilities of irony and linguistic fiction. This process yields a simplified and constrained text for a broader interpretive audience, particularly within English and American cultural contexts.

From the use of intertextuality, recognized as a potential postmodern attribute within the realm of Esterházy's prose, it is abundantly clear that a coherent examination of its interplay with the actual challenges posed by guest texts in the translation process is warranted. The system of transtextual references should take a central position in the analysis, given its causal relationship to the theme of death. In his paper *Quote Ended/Unquote*, Zoltán Kulcsár-Szabó emphasizes this historical significance, drawing attention to the prosopoetics and stylistic attributes of Esterházy's works.²⁶ Kulcsár-Szabó underscores the intricate theoretical elements surrounding the study of quotation techniques and the potential of the briquetting method, which have been consistently prominent in the Esterházy reception. However, this study also examines the practical applicability of citation technology, as evidenced by the use of quotations in *Helping Verbs of the Heart*, while simultaneously raising a host of legal and literary theoretical questions and dilemmas, occasionally highlighting controversies. These assumptions have led to articulations of receptive processes that have shifted towards interpretative mechanisms presupposing the autonomous nature of aesthetic experience. This implies that openness and the dialogic nature of meaning-construction are already regarded as axiomatic in contemporary literary schools' perspectives within the broader field of literature studies. Furthermore, the function of creating intertextual texts is discernible in how Esterházy's works consistently challenge interpreters with the genuine risks of understanding. However, this inherent ambiguity also suggests that this method will emerge as one of the primary organizing principles of texts, encapsulating assumptions that reception aesthetics later encapsulates within the dialogic context of meaning-construction. Simultaneously, it has become evident to contemporary critics that this prose world, characterized by its incorporation of borrowed sentences and texts, challenges and subverts the conventional notion—previously assumed in the interpretation of Esterházy's early prose—that studying the parallels between fictional and real states, as advocated by realist literature, would enable interpreters to grasp the prosopoetic qualities or fundamental attributes of texts. These shifts in the understanding of translation techniques and literary translation have significantly impacted the interpretive landscape, prompting questions regarding whether target

26 Kulcsár-Szabó, "Idézet vége," 70–82.

texts, post-translation, can evoke the aesthetic qualities that are inherently present in the source text.

Hence, it is imperative to direct our analysis towards the principle that underscores the composition of *Helping Verbs of the Heart* as a tapestry of intertextual references and diverse linguistic elements. However, post-translation, these components remain inert until activated by the recipient's interpretative reading, a process fraught with challenges. The target language, divorced from the cultural and literary context of the source text, struggles to grasp the irony embedded in these intertextual references. Nonetheless, their recognition is vital for the translation-interpretation process. As Gábor Szabó elaborates, *Helping Verbs of the Heart* can be likened to a literary mausoleum that, due to its timeless nature, houses a myriad texts of varying significance and aesthetic value. Consequently, these elements lose their original roles, with the motif of maternal death serving to accentuate and elucidate Esterházy's prose technique.²⁷ Close scrutiny of the textual disparities between the two versions reveals the limitations of the interpretative procedures of the target language, which operate within a constrained field of comprehension.

The theoretical complexities arising from this issue are most apparent within the intertextual reference system, where the implied author incorporates texts from previous volumes as transtextual elements. This assumes either their inherent readability within the cultural context or implies a translation of these elements within the text. However, in the absence of this linkability status, there is a risk that the interpreting circle may not fully grasp the textual-causal positions of the two texts. A pertinent example illustrating this situation is found in the passages extracted from *Fancsikó and Pinta* that require analysis in the comparative context of the English translation:

“Fancsikó tünődő arckifejezésének ellentmondó erővel csapott le apámra. – Csihi! Puh! A bőrpapucs robbanása a homlokon. Édesapám a megropant vállai közül fölnézett. – Miért – jelentette ki halkán. Sunyítva kuporgok igazságaim tömbjén.”

and:

“Fancsikó pounced on father with a force that belied her contemplative expression. ‘Pow! Pow!’ The leather slipper exploded in his face. My father looked up from between his broken shoulders. ‘Why?’ He protested softly. I squatted, cowering on the block of my truths.”

The comparison between the two intertexts and their relation to the main text reveals a clear disparity, particularly evident in the original Hungarian version. Here,

27 Szabó, “A ragaszthatatan szív.”

the implicit interplay between the texts not only operates on semantic levels but also allows for a quasi-network reading experience. However, in the English translation, questioning the relevant status of transtextuality becomes a valid point of analysis. English transtextual elements lack the ability to reference an existing text due to the absence of any established translation method, significantly narrowing their readability. Here the above-mentioned quotation has something in it that gives an example of some difficulties arising from the loss of transtextual origins and knowledge. In the sentence “Fancsikó pounced on father with a force that belied her contemplative expression. ‘Pow! Pow!’ The leather slipper exploded in his face,” the translator misgenders Fancsikó, as Fancsikó was evidently a boy in *Fancsikó and Pinta*, a previous novel by Esterházy. This act of misgendering shows how the English text changes the perception of this figure. Naturally, this may pose new questions about genders, family relations, and identity, but the original sense of the interpretative play loses its relevance, because the links cannot be made, or it somehow rewrites its origins, showing that the intertextual base is just a fictive, non-existent phenomenon. Consequently, the implicit interplay is suspended, ceasing to function as a relevant procedure in Esterházy’s oeuvre. Drawing upon the Freudian concept of “das Unheimliche” or the uncanny, best describes the general experience of translation, and specifically this single translation. This concept evokes a sense of homelessness, suggesting that the translated work evokes a frightening yet knowable feeling.

In conclusion, this paper has analysed and interpreted *Helping Verbs of the Heart* within the context of translatability theory and has explored the operating theory of intertextual references. It has also aimed to highlight that the aesthetic values of Esterházy’s text are deeply rooted in the Hungarian literary and cultural scene. The last section of the paper further delved into the complexities of linguistic registers within the English translation and examined the attributes of intertextual references in a new language context, alongside exploring the motif of death through the lens of the “das Unheimliche” concept. Ultimately, this paper on Péter Esterházy’s novel has also elucidated the complexity of receptive and interpretative processes within the English-speaking cultural and literary community. It has articulated the results of decoding methods and compared key points of the foreign-language reception history with Hungarian-language interpretation stages, highlighting the challenges of interpreting translated texts due to limited poetic possibilities. The question of whether this literature can be fully appreciated in English remains open, as each translation is an interpretation and may not fully capture all the nuances of the source text. It transpires across different linguistic communities that reading literary works in one’s own language may generally offer readers a greater chance of understanding.

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