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Postmodernism in Hungary

The example of Péter Esterházy - against the background of analysing John Barth's later fiction

Like many of my Hungarian colleagues, I ventured into the territory of Hungarian literature only when I felt comfortable in discussing foreign, in my case mostly English and American literary works. Since the study of literature in Hungary has traditionally been political in its orientation, it seemed to many of us that a more disinterested, more detached, and more aesthetically oriented, if not objective, approach to literature is more likely to be developed in a neutral territory, and then it can be applied to our own literature. This paper, therefore, is comparative primarily in the sense that a Hungarian critic educated in Hungary in the Anglo-American tradition will discuss a Hungarian work.

The work in question is *The Book of Hrabal* by Péter Esterházy, arguably the leading postmodernist author in contemporary Hungarian literature. Since most of my recent work, however, has focused on the American John Barth and the special brand of postmodernism present in his works of the past two decades, I approach Esterházy with the assumptions and tools developed while analysing works by Barth. The second level of comparativeness is, therefore, the transplantation of literary trends and analytical frameworks from an English speaking, mostly American, context to a Hungarian one.

A complementary level of comparativeness will be added by the fact that I will discuss Esterházy's work in its translation into English, and while my original analysis of the work was done in Hungarian, certain features change their significance in translation.

POSTMODERNISM IN HUNGARY

Postmodernism as a literary and cultural phenomenon has been discussed in Hungary for the last 10-15 years in various periodicals, some of which also produced thematic issues or introduced series of argumentative articles.¹ There have also been debates as to the validity of the term "postmodernism" in Hungary, or, if it is to be accepted, whether Esterházy's works can be categorised as postmodernist.

Some critics claim that postmodernism as a general cultural trend has its specifically Hungarian variety. This is called, tongue somewhat desperately in cheek, "posztmagyar"² by Ferenc Odorics,³ while features in Hungarian literature similar to those of postmodern literature in Britain or the United States are described as "neo-avant-garde"⁴ by Sándor Mészáros and István Szerdahelyi. Szerdahelyi, for example, claims that postmodernism is a term for American architecture in the 1960s and has no relevance for contemporary Hungarian prose fiction.⁵ This position indeed has historical foundations, since the phase of Hungarian literature contemporary to High Modernism in Britain was called "avant-garde" in Hungary, and it is mainly the hindsight of colleagues well versed in European Modernism that directs the process of relabelling the works of poets and artists, such as Lajos Kassák, as Modernist.

Other, mainly non-Anglo-American critics also discuss postmodernism in its relation to the avant-garde.⁶ Achille Bonito Oliva, for example, uses the term "trans-avant-garde" rather than postmodernism,⁷ yet his article is included in Thomas Docherty's representative volume *Postmodernism: A Reader*, proving the vanity of attempts to narrow down the scope of this term, even if a unified terminology is more a result of cultural colonialism than that of a genuine similarity of contemporary phenomena "home-grown" in different countries and continents.⁸

1 For a representative list, see Eszter Babarczy's bibliography in *BUKSZ*, 1994, summer issue.

2 "Magyar" is the Hungarian word for "Hungarian".

3 Odorics 5-7.

4 Mészáros 124-150.

5 Mészáros 139.

6 See Huyssen, Bürger, Lyotard and Oliva.

7 Oliva 257-262.

8 Cf. Friedrich 58-59.

POSTMODERNISM - A COMPARISON OF ESTERHÁZY AND BARTH

Accepting the term postmodernism for approximately equivalent phenomena in Hungarian literature, whether lately borrowed or developed from earlier forms, I will now concentrate on specific features that seem to qualify Esterházy's work as postmodern. The features in question will be selected with special attention to Barth's later fiction, since both authors seem to foreground techniques and notions that seem to lie at the core of various definitions of postmodern fiction, that is, the multiplication of possible worlds within any individual work of fiction and the undermining of the difference between the biographical author and the fictionalised image of the authorial self.

Definitions of postmodernism that draw attention to the principles underlying these features include "the Many asserting their primacy over the One" and "the capacity of the mind to generalise itself in the world ... to become ... its own environment" - as stated by Ihab Hassan, perhaps the most devoted and faithful theoretician of postmodernism, who also suggests that indeterminacy and immanence are the two main characteristics of the postmodern world.⁹ According to Geoffrey H. Hartman and Hassan, postmodernism is an all-embracing category not only exceeding literature but also one that transcends the distinction between life and art, to which Douwe Fokkema adds in his "Preliminary Remarks" to *Approaching Postmodernism* several other traditional distinctions, such as those between highbrow and popular literature, fiction and non-fiction, literature and philosophy, and literature and other forms of art.¹⁰

Alan Wilde, on the other hand, finds the postmodernist core in "a radical epistemological and ontological doubt",¹¹ an approach that is phrased somewhat differently by Brian McHale, one of the most important theoreticians of postmodernism,¹² who emphasises the dominance of ontological questions in postmodernism as opposed to the dominance of epistemological questions in Modernism. According to McHale, there is a shift of emphasis from problems of knowing to problems of modes of being, and the description of the universe is

9 Bertens 27-29, quoting Hassan, esp. (1983) 29.

10 Fokkema 1-2. Fokkema here refers to Hartman's article in Hassan and Hassan, 87-91, and to Hassan (1975) 58.

11 Quoted by Bertens, 35-36.

12 McHale (1986) 72-74 and (1987) 3-11.

replaced by that of a particular universe, implying a possible plurality of universes, leading to the question of "Which is the real world?"¹³

These questions and doubts seem to be painfully present in the oeuvres of both Esterházy and Barth, especially in terms of writing, or rather, in the interaction within their books of their own writing and various forms of other fiction, and in the tension arising between fiction created by, and life lived by (or is it the other way round?) the authors.

Writing is presented as the core of identity and the source of immortality in both authors' works, although they are concerned with other issues as well. For Barth, these other issues include toxic waste and the CIA as well as the interrelation between discourse and sexual intercourse, or the various forms of sexuality. Esterházy is interested in the dichotomy of the old, pre-World-War II Hungary and the Hungary of the communist period, himself being a representative of what György Gömöri called a "politically macho" Hungarian postmodernism in his lecture in June 1989 in Oxford, just before this particularly Central European version had become extinct.

The epithet "politically macho" is applicable to Hungarian or Central European postmodernism inasmuch as this variety seemed to have more of a direction or force to it, having concerned itself with political evil perceived as something that could change for the better, unlike Barth's Tragic View of the CIA, for example, which accepted the fact of being American as imperfect but something that would not and could not be changed for the better.

That there was a general hope of Central and Eastern Europe bringing about some positive change, some new energies, perhaps some more acceptable models for social development, seems apparent from such references as the choice of Prague for Bruce Chatwin's *Utz*, a book published in 1988, or the choice of Prague for many American expatriates in recent years. This hope is considered somewhat ironically in the choice of Hrabal, the Czech author, by Esterházy in *The Book of Hrabal* in 1990. The ontological doubt of identifying the real world is set up in this book between the perceived realities of our Post-Communist Central or Eastern Europe and the alternative ways of past and future "market-economies" played out against a largely unspecified backdrop of the Western World. One reason why the title of this work is *The Book of Hrabal* may be that, whereas the mode of writing employed may be influenced by the West, the avowed affiliation in terms of the

13 Cf. McHale (1986) 60.

common doubts concerning the reality value of what is being described is to the fellow Central European writer, the Czech Bohumil Hrabal.

THE AUTHOR'S SELF - WRITING

It still has to be explained, however, why Esterházy's book is named after another writer. We know now why a Czech, perhaps, but why a writer? The thematic answer is, that one of the central characters of the book, called "the writer", "was supposed to write about Hrabal",¹⁴ and this is his work-in-no-progress-at-all throughout the book; while the other central character, Anna, "the writer"'s wife, is writing a mental love letter to Hrabal, which is the body of the second chapter, "The Chapter of Infidelity". Hrabal himself also appears briefly in the third chapter, called "Chapter Three", in conversation (partly in Czech) with The Lord, and there are other, more conventional references to writers in the form of quotations and epigraphs.

On a deeper level, however, the choice of the name of another writer in the title is even more significant. One of the most obvious common features of Barth's and Esterházy's writing is the introduction of one or more characters who strongly resemble the authorial self - and who are introduced as writers or storytellers themselves. These characters reappear in several novels in various forms. In Barth's *Chimera* (1972) we have the Genie; in *Sabbatical: A Romance* (1982) there is Fenwick; in *The Tidewater Tales: A Novel* there is Peter Sagamore, as well as Fenwick again; in *The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor* (1991) we meet Somebody's early, earthly, 20th-century incarnation, Simon W. Behler; and when one might feel that the possibilities of autobiographical fiction have been exhausted, in *Once Upon a Time: A Floating Opera* (1994) Barth introduces the authorial self in the first person singular, as well as his counterself Jay W. Scribner, in the form of a fictional autobiography.

Esterházy likewise introduces variations on himself. As a predecessor of "the writer" in *The Book of Hrabal*, we have The Master ("a Mester") in his perhaps most famous postmodern work of fiction, *Termelési-regény (kissregény)* (1979), that is, "A novel of production (lovella)" in an approximate English translation, where production is an ironic reference to a genre in the socialist realist tradition, as well as a playful allusion to the postmodern preference of process to product. In this

14 Esterházy (1993) 11.

work, we are already introduced to the family of the Master, a family that strongly resembles the autobiographical family of Esterházy, complete with aristocratic lineage, a soccer playing brother, as well as several children. Moreover, during the process of political changes, between 1988 and 1990, Esterházy had a regular column in the periodical *Hitel* where he offered his views in a less fictionalised form, in a non-fiction variation of his own recognisable voice.¹⁵ But before discussing his voice, let us concentrate on some other features of *The Book of Hrabal*, namely, the conflict, language, and the figure of Anna.

ESTERHÁZY'S POSTMODERNISM IN THE BOOK OF HRABAL

The main conflict in *The Book of Hrabal* is that of abortion, although not in the general sense: it is the fate of a specific pregnancy of Anna's, wife of "the writer", which is to be decided. Moreover, this is her fourth pregnancy, the other three having duly resulted in children.

The conflict is approached from the outside. Two angels (in the original specified as guardian angels) disguised in a Lada with a state license plates are watching a house. They are sent by the Good Lord, and they are called Blaise (Balázska) and Cho-Cho: "In the house, which the strangers have been staking out for the past two hours, there lived a family (this was a family house!), a married couple with three children, the woman's name was Anna, and the man was a writer."¹⁶

As it turns out, Anna does not want this fourth child, hence the necessity of the angels whose job it is to prevent the abortion. Interestingly, however, while the Good Lord takes the trouble to involve himself in the decision, Anna and "the writer" never quite discuss the problem themselves. "The writer" is trying to write about Hrabal, and Anna is mentally writing to Hrabal too, both attempting to escape the problem by displacing it onto a level of abstraction where it can never be solved.

The Good Lord seems to enter the story in the manner Barth juxtaposes the worlds of Greek mythology or the world of the *Arabian Nights* and late 20th-century United States campus culture. In *The Book of Hrabal* this is a way of contrasting the alternative worlds of Roman Catholicism and State Socialism, yet another way to introduce a multiplicity of mythical worlds, from that of the creative writer to that of the creative Lord.

15 Published as a book: Esterházy 1991.

16 Esterházy (1993) 5.

The emphasis on the characters of the authorial-looking writers and storytellers also results in a strong focus on language and communication. Language as the art of the surface has a special role in postmodern writing, as the interplay of referents as well as the medium of an almost baroque predilection for splendour and proliferation, while there is also an underlying mistrust of communication to be balanced. The pleasure of verbal texture is combined with a Tragic View of Communication, as represented by the empty bottles and other aborted missives in Barth's works.

The most telling signs of a concern with communication in *The Book of Hrabal* are the lack of communication between the couple as to the solution of the conflict, and their devotion instead to writing about, and to, Hrabal, as well as the comparatively easy communication with God.

The first sentence of the first chapter, "The Chapter of Fidelity", already centres our attention on language: "The two angels spoke to each other in the language of (what else?) angels."¹⁷

The angels, however, do not speak the language of the Good Lord, as we are told,¹⁸ therefore the Lord has to address them in their own language, which sounds rather colloquial with a rich vein of slang: "Look here, Cho-Cho, you'd better go and check out what in God's name, if you'll pardon the expression, they're up to down there... Straight to the point, minimum of fuss, but plenty of circumspection, you know how it is... free will and tact and all that jazz."¹⁹

The first chapter is preceded by an epigraph in Latin and in Hungarian (in this translation in English) "from a medieval devotion in Milán Füst, *The Story of My Wife*". Beside foregrounding language, this epigraph also draws attention to the special position of the character of the wife in the book. This position is so special that the Hungarian film based on *The Book of Hrabal* was called *The Film of Anna*.²⁰

While the writer is identified variously with the Good Lord, with Hrabal, or with an old woman, Anna seems to be the same. Discussing her character in the book would offer a feminist reading, but now let us stay with the way Anna is seen in the book.

17 Esterházy (1993) 1.

18 Cf. Esterházy (1993) 2.

19 Esterházy (1993) 1.

20 *Anna filmje* 1993.

The author presents her by name, unlike the presentation of her husband by profession. Her name, Anna, is that of the mother of the Virgin Mary (in the gospel according to Jacob), with a strong acoustic reference in Hungarian to the word “mother” (anya). If she is not referred to by name, she is called “the woman”²¹ (az asszony), more likely to be simply translated into “she” in English. Other characters also perceive her mainly as a woman excellently prepared for procreation, rather than a person or personality. Cho-Cho, for example, exclaims as he looks at her: “Just look at that ass!”²² (“De jó segge van” - in strict translation: What a great ass she has!) The angel Cho-Cho’s comment, however, is fairly disinterested, since he is personally more inclined toward angel Blaise, while Blaise is genuinely enthusiastic about Anna in a rather un-angelically sexual way: “Oh that woman, that Anna, she’s an angel.”²³

Anna also presents herself in several ways, such as a kitchen-sink angel (dézsatündér, in strict translation “a kitchen-sink fairy”, rather than angel):

I happened to hear them from the kitchen. If the European tradition, whose custodians are the men, is in trouble, and even before the dessert comes they conclude that value is something that has to be *created*, something new, then the situation of a kitchen-sink angel like myself is congenial, after all. I hum a song and think of God, about how things are.²⁴

a twentieth-century Virgin Mary:

The car’s wheel were already in drive, too, when by way of an answer, the older of the two brothers cockily said it’s no use worrying about questions of life and death, [in strict translation “there is nothing to be considered about questions of life and death”²⁵] while I just grinned, a twentieth-century Virgin Mary, (coloured lithograph). The question that my brother-in-law had posed in his unsparing and rather blatant manner was: what are

21 Esterházy (1993) 6.

22 Esterházy (1993) 5.

23 Esterházy (1993) 79.

24 Esterházy (1993) 83. “A konyhából hallgattam őket. Ha az európai gondolkodás, melynek a férfiak a letéteményesei, bajban van, és még a nahspejze el tt úgy véli, az érték az valami olyasmi, amit teremteni kell, valami új, akkor egy *dézsatündér* helyzete mégiscsak kedvező. Énekelgetek és az Istenre gondolok, hogy hogy is van ez.” (Esterházy (1990) 97).

25 “[A]mikor a bátyja válaszul hetykén azt fejtegette, hogy életen-halálon nincs mit gondolkodnia” (Esterházy (1990) 109).

we planning to do, should I, to put it bluntly, in spite of everything, get knocked up again.
Now I am really scared, possibly for the first time in my life.²⁶

a wife:

“I am a wife, emphasis on all four words.”²⁷

the Great Substitute:

I see, I can see that I am needed here. Except that sometimes I think it's *somebody* that's needed, and not me, an anonymous jack-of-all-trades, lover, wife, a family, a secretary, a mother, a mother-surrogate ... I am the Great Substitute, a great honour, no doubt, everything that is not, is what I am. But I am.

The decision was mine to make. I am free and I am tethered, that is my state of being.²⁸

We also learn Anna's opinion about her current pregnancy:

Pussy-blues, that's what it is. I don't want any more children. As far as wanting goes, I did not want anything up till now either; my children, too, I did not *want*, after all, there was never any question of me *not* wanting them, while *sober* reflection will never result in children; bringing children

26 Esterházy (1993) 94. “Ugyanúgy pörgött már a kocsi kereke, amikor a bátyja válaszul hetykén azt fejtegette, hogy életem-halálom nincs mit gondolkodnia, én pedig vigyorogtam, mint egy XX. századi Szűzanya (színes litográfia). A kérdés, melyet a sógorem a maga kiméletlen, valamelyest ordenáré és valamelyest őszinte módján fölített, az az volt, hogy mit csinálnánk, ha én, úgymond, bekapom mégis és újra a nokedlit.

Most félek, életemben talán először.” (Esterházy (1990) 109).

27 Esterházy (1993) 129. “Én feleség vagyok, hangsúly mindhárom szón.” (Esterházy (1990) 147).

28 Esterházy (1993) 132-133. “Azt látom, belátom, hogy szükség van itt rám. Csak néha azt hiszem, valakire van szükség és nem rám, egy névtelen ezermesterre, aki szerető, család, titkárnő, anya, anya helyett anya... Én vagyok a Nagy Pótlék, igen megtisztelő, minden, ami nincs, az vagyok én. De én vagyok.

Én választottam. Szabad vagyok és kötött, ez az állapotom.” (Esterházy (1990) 151-152).

into the world in this place is, to say the least, not logical.
I don't want to. I don't want to. I don't want to.²⁹

To sum it up: Anna does not want this child; is writing love letters to Hrabal; is praying to God; and does not discuss anything with her husband whom she loves. In terms of the decision to be made, she is on her own against a host of opponents: the Good Lord, the angels, possibly "the writer", although he does not explain his views yet, and all the external determinants the author used in creating her character, including autobiographical references such as the house and four children of Esterházy himself.

Why is this overpowering force to be listed against Anna? And why is she not given a chance to participate in the decision?

What is there, in the portrayal of the Maternal in general and particularly in its Christian, virginal, one, that reduces social anguish and gratifies a male being; what is there that also satisfies a woman so that a commonality of the sexes is set up, beyond and in spite of their glaring incompatibility and permanent warfare? [On the other hand, what is there in the notion of the Maternal that somehow still disregards what the woman says, or wants, to the point where today, when women are beginning to have a voice, this is exactly where their discontent is directed towards,] Beyond social and political demands, [taking] the well-known 'discontents' of our civilization to a level where Freud would not follow - the discontent of the species[?].³⁰

Considering Julia Kristeva's similar question in "Stabat Mater" concerning the values attached to the mother figure in Western culture is revealing, although the answer to the specific question raised by *The Book of Hrabal* may be found in the more direct context of the work itself. As one element of that context, the iconography of the figure of the Virgin Mary in the Christian tradition might be helpful, as it reveals that the pregnant Mary is to give birth not only to a baby but to *logos*, the divine word incarnate.³¹ In the country depicted in *The Book of Hrabal*,

29 Esterházy (1993) 99. "Pinabú, ez most az. Nem akarok több gyereket. Akarni eddig sem akartam semmit, nem akartam én a gyerekeimet, hiszen föl sem vetődött hogy *ne* akarthattam volna őket... Fontolásból pedig valóban nem lesz gyerek, *ide* gyereket szülni, az, finoman szólva, nem logikus. Nem akarom, nem akarom, nem akarom." (Esterházy (1990) 114, is worth reading on.)

30 A somewhat edited English translation of Kristeva by Roudiez (163) complemented by my translation from the Hungarian translation (492-3) of the French version.

31 Cf. Hübner.

in 1988, at the time specified there as the setting of the story,³² a new order was also to be born, against all odds. 1988 was a year before the political changes of 1989, and the book was published in 1990, a year after. Although by today the trinity of God, country and family has been degraded to an empty election slogan, the urge for a new chance to be brought to life was explicable by the context, even if the work's imagery is in questionable taste or politics.

CREATION OR PROCREATION?

The conflict of abortion typically represents conflicts that cannot be solved, only arbitrarily decided upon: it is a matter of life and death about which "there is nothing to be considered" by mere mortals. As such, this conflict presents a wealth of possibilities for writers. Barth avoids solving the conflict in his twin-novels *Sabbatical* and *The Tidewater Tales* by aborting twin pregnancies in the former and finishing the book with twin births in the latter case. The conflict in *The Book of Hrabal* is not solved, either; although abortion will not happen, neither will a happy ending. The words are bitter,³³ Anna is unhappy, and the only consolation "the writer" can find is to offer to give birth to this baby himself.³⁴ The Good Lord is not any more helpful; he decides to learn to play the saxophone,³⁵ since he knows Anna likes blues - but "he had no ear for music,"³⁶ and he was doomed to failure in cheering her up, "because only humans can reduce the suffering of humans,"³⁷ and in this respect the Lord is helpless.

So are, it seems, our authors. The Tragic View of Postmodernism combines a clear perception of there being no final solutions for humankind's fundamental problems with an optimism that life goes on offering pleasures nevertheless. Postmodernist authors seem to celebrate the survival tactics of the individual facing a System. They do not offer solutions - they offer pleasures of the text while they write about writing in their metafiction³⁸ and narcissistic narratives,³⁹ finding the final source and end of writing in themselves and in the process of creation.

32 Esterházy (1993) 18.

33 Esterházy (1993) 122-125.

34 Esterházy (1993) 126.

35 Esterházy (1993) 153.

36 Esterházy (1993) 166.

37 Esterházy (1993) 141.

38 Cf. Scholes.

39 Cf. Hutcheon.

THE MASTER'S VOICE

Is it then the author's voice we find overpowering his works of fiction, as well as non-fiction? Postmodernism does not force writers or readers to choose between worlds, autobiographical or other - the multiplicity of possible worlds and world views is one of the fundamental assumptions, as we saw earlier. Yet many of the works discussed, especially *The Book of Hrabal*, show certain evaluative tendencies, strong preferences represented simultaneously by many layers of the book; the multiplicity of world views seems to be limited by the strong authorial presence. Even while we are supposedly reading the words of Anna written to Hrabal, for example, stylistically the text shows a remarkable unity with the different narrative strategies of the other chapters, and this stylistic unity, the constant authorial voice does pose serious limits on the apparent multiplicity of the text.

The notion of ontological doubt and questions concerning the recognition of the "real world" surface in these works in terms of the author's life and his fiction, as well as between the worlds of myth and fiction or religion and contemporary reality. This emphasis on the author, by way of pondering his life and his fiction, as well as the creative process bridging the two, is actually very far removed from the Barthesian notion of the death of the author.⁴⁰ Instead, this type of late postmodern writing very much centres around the author, celebrating the self writing - which emphasis on the existence and importance of the author suggests adding another code to the Barthesian model: that of an authorial code.

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40 Cf. Barthes.

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