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# Péter Esterházy: The Author, the Text, the Reader, or All of Them?

**Abstract:** The end of the 1970s meant the beginning of a poetic shift that completely changed the language of Hungarian literature. It affected the language of prose and poetry as well. According to the outstanding literary theorist Ernő Kulcsár Szabó, the year 1986 was of great importance in relation to that shift, because two key works were published that cemented the process of change: *Emlékiratok könyve* [A Book of Memories] by Péter Nádas and *Bevezetés a szépirodalomba* [An Introduction to Literature] by Péter Esterházy. In my work, I deal with the latter author, who is evidently one of the key figures of postmodern Hungarian literature. I have focused on the aspect of intertextuality in the works of Péter Esterházy, and I have also investigated the interpretation of that aspect in his Slovak reception – essays, studies, and journals of various kinds. However, Slovak cannot be the only literary-cultural environment that is interested in questions of intertextuality in the works of Esterházy, because after meeting with a warm response in a German context, he has gained prestige throughout Europe and has become the subject of studies outside the borders of Hungary.

Texts of other authors are natural components of Esterházy's texts: some of his works contain an (incomplete) bibliography or footnotes, and some of them do not. The latter kind I consider more complex and therefore more interesting objects of comparative analysis: they question the author, the text, and also the reader, who, in the manner of Barthes, can situate him or herself in relation to the author's position. In this article, I focus on the author, the text, and the reader in Péter Esterházy's world of texts.

**Keywords:** Hungarian literature, intertextuality, originality, Péter Esterházy, postmodernism

## 1 Instead of an introduction

A few days before the 21st World Congress of the International Comparative Literature Association, on 14 July 2016, came the sad news that, following a long and serious illness, Péter Esterházy had died. This significantly changed the context for further research on Esterházy's *oeuvre*. Since death has put an end to his

work, it is now possible to re-examine its periods, which during the life of the author were considered as open, changing sections.

## 2 Postmodern, Hungarian, author

It is widely accepted that, during the second half of the twentieth century, an approach, namely postmodernism, arose that has changed the interpretation of the author–text–reader triangle. As the outstanding semiotician Roland Barthes claims, the author has died and the reader has been left alone with the text (Barthes 1996).

In Hungarian postmodernism, this manifests itself through the radicalization of the language of the text. Compared to anglophone literature, a certain delay can be observed: the Hungarian postmodern shift started in the middle of the 1970s and reached its peak in 1986 with the publication of two crucial books: *Emlékiratok könyve* [A Book of Memories] (1986) by Péter Nádas and *Bevezetés a szépirodalomba* [An Introduction to Literature] (1986) by Péter Esterházy. The importance of the year 1986 is emphasized by a collection of studies, *Diptychon* (1988), selected by Péter Balassa and focusing on the two publications just mentioned, and also by the literary theorist Ernő Kulcsár Szabó in his monograph *A magyar irodalom története 1945–1991* [History of Hungarian Literature 1945–1991] (1993). Here, he argues that, after the appearance of Esterházy, it has been impossible to write as before.

From that time, Péter Esterházy met with a significant critical response far beyond the borders of Hungary. As in the case of many of authors from East-Central Europe, the key role in his European success was played by his German reception: after he was acknowledged on the German literary scene, his further rise became possible. In my research, I concentrate on the Slovak context, where Esterházy was also partially encountered via his German reception.

## 3 Esterházy in Slovak

The first Slovak translations of Esterházy's works, which represent the first stage in foreign reception (the second stage is critical response), were published after 2000, but they are from the latter period of the author's *oeuvre*, with only one exception: *A szív segédigéi* [Helping Verbs of the Heart] (Esterházy 1985), translated by Juliana Szolnokiová as *Pomocné slovesá srdca* (Esterházy 2009). This means that the Esterházy of the postmodern shift is still completely unknown to the Slovak reader. The absence of translations of epoch-making significance presupposes a context that lacks the confidence of the original context. However,

when it comes to interpreting the works of Péter Esterházy, the original context plays the greatest role – a context which, in case of the early works, differs markedly from the current reception environment. Therefore, it is not only the time-gap that hinders interpretation (this can only affect translations), but also the lost context (this can affect readers of the original text as well – if they are, for example, members of a younger generation).

It is also important to underline the name of Renáta Deáková, who has made most Slovak translations of Esterházy's works,<sup>1</sup> and the publisher Kalligram, which has been responsible for them. It is to be noted that Kalligram primarily focused on literature in Hungarian, but later broadened its profile with Slovak publications and has acquainted Slovak readers with many notable works of Hungarian literature. This outstanding publisher has recently met with several difficulties and has undergone reorganization, albeit not, unfortunately, in a happy manner.

## 4 Intertextuality vs plagiarism

Intertextuality can be regarded as a cornerstone of the works of Péter Esterházy, but the foreign reception of the Esterházyesque method is largely polemical. The Slovak critical response, however, does not reflect that contradiction: building the text from passages borrowed from various authors has been interpreted in some cases as plagiarism, but not by Slovak reviewers.

The key work of Esterházy from this point of view was published in 2000 under the title *Harmonia caelestis*.<sup>2</sup> In its original version, there is no list of sources, despite the fact that its first part consists mostly of texts by others and the second part also contains unmarked quotations. At first glance, this appears to be plagiarism, and thus some translations included an incomplete list of sources and the Hungarian digitalized version included a supplement translated from the German edition.

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1 Translations by Renáta Deáková: *Harmonia caelestis* (2005; trans. of *Harmonia caelestis* [Celestial Harmonies: A Novel]), *Opravené vydanie* (2006; trans. of *Javított kiadás* [Revised Edition]), *Jedna žena* (2011; trans. of *Egy nő* [She Loves Me]), *Jednoduchý príbeh čiarka sto strán – šermovacia verzia* (2013b; trans. of *Egyszerű történet vessző száz oldal – a kardozós változat* [Simple Story Comma One Hundred Pages – the Sword-Brandishing Version]), and *Jednoduchý príbeh čiarka sto strán – verzia podľa Marka* (2014; trans. of *Egyszerű történet vessző száz oldal – a Márk-változat* [Simple Story Comma One Hundred Pages – Mark's Version]).

2 The English version, entitled *Celestial Harmonies: A Novel*, translated by Judith Sollosy, was released in 2004.

The German translation (Esterházy 2001) is crucial from this perspective – even its carefully constructed structure with a list of sources did not make it possible to avoid accusations of plagiarism.<sup>3</sup> This edition consists of three books that are packed in a box: *Harmonia caelestis* itself; its metatext, *Verbesserte Ausgabe* [Revised Edition]; and *Marginalien* [Marginalia], a booklet that contains extra information about the author and the text. However, as was mentioned earlier, the list of sources is insufficient: it seems to be part of the artwork. In 2010, a Hungarian literary portal, *Litera* ([www.litera.hu](http://www.litera.hu)), reported that the German author Siegfried Gauch had accused Esterházy of stealing his text. The accusation concerned a chapter from the novel *Vaterspuren*, but Gauch did not succeed: he was legally informed that any kind of citation could be used by another author if it is part of that author's artistic language.

This was not the only challenge which Esterházy had to face because of his intertextual methods. The same report on *Litera* mentioned some other accusations in the US that preceded the Gauch case. It has to be highlighted that the English version (Esterházy 2004) also contains a list of sources which is not complete; but it was constructed according to more strict rules than the German one.<sup>4</sup> As US reception took up the book immediately after its publication, the question of stolen texts was not thematized. The Hungarian discourse started to deal with the problem after the cases just mentioned, nearly ten years after publication of the original text.<sup>5</sup> The subject of copyright was shifted to the centre of attention, and therefore the literary portal *Litera* asked for professional help from Artisjus, an agency dealing with copyright protection. A public letter from Artisjus informed readers of *Litera* that there had been no regulation declaring the maximum length of citations and exact usage of quotation marks.<sup>6</sup> An interesting result of this in the Hungarian environment was online forums that functioned as games with a quest for hidden quotations in *Celestial Harmonies*. One of them, entitled “Ajtó ablak nyitva van – szövegkereső társasjáték, ki mit lel a HC-ben?” [Doors and Windows Are Open – a Game of Quest for Texts, Who Finds What in CH?] (n.d.) was made public at *Litera*, and after a few years of unavailability it is now accessible again. Not only lay readers, but also many critics and authors using nicknames, whose true identity was later revealed in most cases, took part in the discussion. The subjects of this forum

3 The German version, translated by Terezia Mora, was released in 2001; its second edition, with *Revised Edition* and *Marginalien*, in 2003.

4 The German list contains the names of authors and/or titles of quoted works; in the English version, some pages are also identified, and the structure is different.

5 See Forgács (2007) or Z. Kulcsár-Szabó (2011).

6 For details, see the articles “Plágiummal vádolják Esterházy Pétert” (2010), “Cáfolta az Esterházyt ért vádakat Terezia Mora” (2010), and “Szerzői jogok” (2007).

included, in particular, legal questions about the difference between intertextuality and plagiarism. The other channel for discussion has been *evocatio.blog.hu*, which was created with the intention of mapping as many citations in *Celestial Harmonies* as possible (see “Megidézett írók – irodalmi iwiw” 2008).

In the end, however, Esterházy was not obliged to defend his intertextual methods officially: because of the intense discussions, the Hungarian re-edition of *Celestial Harmonies* published in 2008 was extended with the list of sources translated from German, and his later works reflect some changes influenced by the cases we have discussed.

What are the main features of Esterházy’s language and intertextuality? Can he, despite his controversial methods, be recognized as an original author? In what follows I will try to answer these questions.

## 5 Intertextuality vs originality

Intertextuality in its broad sense has been present in literature since its beginnings. However, until the 1970s, it was not the subject of any research. Péter Esterházy appeared on the literary scene in the era when the theoretical basis of intertextuality was being established – in Hungarian literature, this also meant the emergence of postmodernism. The author’s prose invented a radically new language that influenced the language of other authors but was unique at the same time. As Péter Nádas, another outstanding author of the period, declares:

It is no accident that we have got a Péter Esterházy in Hungarian literature. Somebody has come who looked at the language used by the people unwittingly, used by all of us. His work is the most grandiose act of linguistic criticism that has ever been achieved in the Hungarian language. He raised expressions of stupidity to the language of literature, ennobled them, and at the same time, made fun of them. [...] A whole generation started to use Esterházyesque language, and they started to make fun of the regime in an Esterházyesque way. (Mihancsik 2006, 255; my translation)

Thus, because of the nature of intertextuality, we should go further than just questioning the originality of Esterházy.

The author’s originality can be discovered in language use generally, which has several components. The above quotation mentions the term “Esterházyesque language,” which hints at highly complex details: intertextuality, but also the merging of language varieties (sometimes also foreign passages), double coding, and so on. However, intertextuality cannot be entirely separated from the other aspects. For instance, material can be borrowed from another text in a distorted form, as can foreign-language passages or those which are placed next to each

other representing different language varieties. On the one hand, it seems that intertextuality and originality are hardly reconcilable phenomena. On the other hand, Péter Esterházy might be a good example of the contrary. In his understanding, anything can be an intertext – as Julianna Wernitzer writes in her book about Esterházy's quotations:

Esterházy uses a wide range of quotations in his works: from literal and non-literal, through literary and scientific ones, and aspects of subject and form, to marked and unmarked quotations. Texts in their original meaning are taken by him, in a form that can be estranged or split in two, in changed meaning. From long, extensive quotations, through sentences, to short quotations, anything can happen in Esterházy's texts. Under certain circumstances, even one word is a quotation; however, this is possible only if word usage and context support the quoted word appropriately. (Wernitzer 1994, 26; my translation)

I would add that all of the Genettean (1996) categories of transtextuality play an important role in his works: sometimes he uses footnotes, sometimes footnotes take the function of the main text, sometimes even the footnotes are misleading; but titles, subtitles, mottos, or prefaces also influence interpretation decisively. It follows that Esterházy's texts not only pick and steal, and place the stolen passages next to each other: they are always the result of an extremely complex concept.

In the course of the past few decades, the intertexts of Esterházy changed a lot. The following examples are intended to demonstrate that change. His first novel, *Termelési-regény (kisszregény)* [Production Novel], which was published in 1979, forced Hungarian readers to learn to read for the second time. The main text is a parody of the production novel as a genre that was typical of socialist propaganda, and it is interrupted by notes that follow the main text and form a separate unit, virtually a separate novel. Obviously, there are some nodes connecting the two parts, but the connections are not always obvious. The narrator of the main text holds himself at a distance from the story; however, the main feature of the narrator of the notes is referentiality, which was always characteristic of this author's works.

The radicalism of *Production Novel* was, in a sense, exceeded by *Introduction to Literature*, which consists of five previously published but slightly modified booklets of Esterházy, extended with new texts. It contains illustrations and marginal texts, and lists the names of the authors whose texts were used by Esterházy. As the notion of the (prose) text as such was radically reinterpreted by Nádas and Esterházy, this book, along with Nádas's novel, was labelled the end and beginning of a period of Hungarian literature at the same time.

The next *grand roman* was *Celestial Harmonies: A Novel*, which Esterházy worked on for more than ten years. The title is borrowed from a composition referred to as a work of Pál Esterházy, an ancestor of the author from the turn of

the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In this book, Péter Esterházy returned to a division into two parts: as Zoltán Németh suggests in his monograph *A posztmodern magyar irodalom hármass stratégiája* [The Triple Strategy of Postmodern Hungarian Literature] (2013), the first part involves characteristics of so-called non-referential postmodernism, while the second part is comparatively anthropological. The first part is constructed out of numbered paragraphs – its title, “Számozott mondatok az Esterházy család életéből” [Numbered Sentences from the Lives of the Esterházy Family], refers to this – which are actually sentence-long only in exceptional cases. On the other hand, the second part – “Egy Esterházy család vallomásai” [Confessions of an Esterházy Family] – straddles the boundary of fiction and non-fiction. It takes place in the twentieth century and focuses largely on the narrator’s lifetime. The central character of the whole novel is the father, who travels through the centuries, changing location and form as a timeless and shapeless sign, and who can also be a present, physical, and authentic father-figure. Focusing on intertextuality, because of the reasons analysed above, *Celestial Harmonies* can be described as the most radical work of its author. However, in case of *Celestial Harmonies*, literally interpreted originality becomes marginal, and the accent is put on the concept behind the book. It could be studied from any perspective; concentrating on its Slovak reception, it can be stated that each of the two studies published about the novel demonstrates its complexity. One of the studies focused on historicity (Görözdi 2014), the other on referentiality (Görözdi 2013); both were written by the Hungarologist Judit Görözdi.

After the ambivalent reactions provoked by the unmarked intertexts, Esterházy’s texts appeared to change and their radicalism became moderated. One of his last books, *Egyszerű történet vessző száz oldal – a kardozós változat* [Simple Story Comma One Hundred Pages – the Sword-Brandishing Version] (2013a) is a good example of that change: it is heavily footnoted, but the narrator also frequently makes associations between seemingly random texts and other seemingly random texts, and sometimes the role of footnotes and main texts is transposed – footnotes become main texts and main texts become footnotes. In this novel, pages stand for chapters, but one page in this sense does not equate to one conventional page: it is usually shorter or longer. The storyline goes back to the seventeenth century, when the current territory of Hungary was occupied by Ottoman troops. However, the phrase “simple story” in the title is tricky: there is no coherent story, and even if there is, it is not possible to tell it. Due to such a complex structure, the change in Esterházy’s approach cannot be taken seriously; it is instead illusory.

Esterházy’s originality can also be discovered from the reader’s perspective. On the one hand, when a reader without preconceptions about the Esterházy-text starts to read it, he/she easily realizes what the author calls “trembling,” “move-

ment,” or “split,” the perfunctorily hidden intertext itself. On the other hand, the suspicious reader reckons with intertexts, but this does not mean that he/she will find all of them. On the contrary, it is impossible to find all the passages borrowed from other texts. Moreover, the author renders the hunt more difficult: sometimes he pretends to use intertexts when he actually does not.

## 6 Comments

Compared to the period when my research began, the works of Péter Esterházy have gone through some cardinal changes. In 2013, when *Simple Story Comma One Hundred Pages – the Sword-Brandishing Version* was published, it seemed that the novel, along with its sequel *Egyszerű történet vessző száz oldal – a Márkváltozat* [Simple Story Comma One Hundred Pages – Mark’s Version] (Esterházy 2014a), was setting the stage for a work of great importance that would mark the end of a literary period. In the end, however, the long-awaited novel was never published.

*Hasnyálmirigynapló* [Pancreas Diary] (Esterházy 2016b), whose first passage was written in spring 2015, continuously documented the author’s disease and psychological state. The reader was actually introduced to the text only after it had been published as a book which closed the author’s *oeuvre*. Besides concentrating on his illness and its textual results, Esterházy was active in many fields.

Apart from excerpts from *Pancreas Diary* in the journal *Élet és Irodalom* [Life and Literature], Esterházy published various texts. When his health made it possible, he attended interviews and readings where his disease was also thematized. At the end of 2015, he released *A bűnös* [The Sinner] with the visual artist Miklós Szüts; the book was the result of mutual inspiration between the two artists and the two art forms. According to the blurb, Szüts prepared a diary of paintings and Esterházy was to comment on them so as to create a chain of detective stories. Finally, life events provoked the story of a murder which conquered all the other circumstances (Esterházy and Szüts 2015). This book also includes one of Esterházy’s most preferred motifs: the detective story is filtered through the motif of family, through a variation on the theme of parents getting to know each other. Page numbers are missing, which, along with the thematization of death and love, makes the harmony of pictures and text timeless. Death and love are connected to Pancreas, the main character of *Pancreas Diary*, which was published in 2016. The author personified his disease: the narrator treats it as if it were his loved one. The 87th Festive Book Week (Ünnepi Könyvhét), the prestigious book fair in Budapest, was opened by Péter Esterházy in 2016 and was the occasion for



the publication of *Pancreas Diary*. It was already evident that Esterházy would not write another book. He died on 14 July 2016, and on 2 August his urn was placed in the family mausoleum in Ganna, Hungary.

The book market reacted intensely to the death of Esterházy. In 2016, two posthumous works were published: *Drámák* [Dramas] (Esterházy 2016a) contains his then-unpublished plays, which had been performed in various theatres, and *A megrendülés segédigéi* [Helping Verbs of the Trauma] (2016), edited by József P. Kőrössi, collected texts written on the occasion of Esterházy's death. *Drámák* contains the historical revue *Mercedes Benz* (Esterházy 2015), which was written at the request of the Slovak National Theatre and whose premiere took place on 7 January 2017. The work follows the tradition of thematizing family and history: *Celestial Harmonies* and *Simple Story Comma One Hundred Pages – the Sword-Brandishing Version* are its intertextual pre-texts. Like *Celestial Harmonies*, *Mercedes Benz* also goes back in time to periods which were of great importance in the history of the Esterházy family, but it places all of them in the frame of a bet between God and Lucifer: can we (the Esterházy family) stay human in inhuman circumstances? The hypotext of the drama is a classical *Faustiadé: The Tragedy of Man* by Imre Madách.

While *Pancreas Diary* puts an end to the *oeuvre*, *Mercedes Benz* summarizes human existence and presents nearly all the characteristics of the texts of Esterházy. In this text-universe, all treatises are connected. On the one hand, in a broad sense – as Esterházy claims – this connectedness concerns all existing texts; on the other hand, in a narrow sense, his own works can be interpreted as a conglomerate which makes it possible to reuse passages from it – from a word up to longer units. Thus, elements of the conglomerate are freely combinable, and readers can easily find themselves in a trap set by the author: that of losing the ability to recognize which work of Esterházy they are reading.

## 7 Conclusions

In the works of Péter Esterházy, the key status of intertextuality is unquestionable; the questions concern instead how it appears in them and how it is original. In this article, I wanted to stress originality of the kind that is not related to the literal understanding of the term. I have demonstrated with some examples how the intertexts of Esterházy can be seen as authentic, and where his significance can be found. Whether he was the author, the reader, or the text of his works, is a question that might be answered with a quotation from *Production Novel*: “The grammatical space is me” (Esterházy 1979, 167; my translation). It now seems that

that statement has more to tell us than ever before: the “grammatical space” is closed – open to never-ending research.

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