

**“WHO IS WHO—THE FACE AS A MASK”  
PÉTER ESTERHÁZY’S AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL PACT  
WITH HIS READERS (*CELESTIAL HARMONIES,  
REVISED EDITION*)\***

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The much-cited theorist of autobiography, Philippe Lejeune, uses the term *autobiographical pact* to describe the silent contract between the author and reader, in which textual (and extra-textual) signals about referential and autobiographical nature of a narrative are understood as coming from the author and are accepted by the reader (Lejeune, 1989, 3–30). Autobiographical themes, connections and concrete allusions have always been present in Péter Esterházy’s fiction (e.g., *Termelési regény*, 1979; *Helping Verbs of the Heart—A szív segédigéi*, 1985; *The Book of Hrabal—Hrabal könyve*, 1990; *Celestial Harmonies—Harmonia caelestis*, 2000; *Not Art—Semmi művészet*, 2008). In this context, the text *Revised Edition (Javított kiadás*, 2002), written in the form of a diary, which describes a real event in the form of one of the most authentic autobiographical genres, signifies not only a change in the author’s understanding of the relationship between autobiography and literature, but also changes the reader’s expectations, i.e. the aforementioned silent covenant between him and the author. I will attempt to explicate the character of Esterházy’s autobiographical writing (understood on the one hand as autobiographical referentiality and on the other as an autobiographical way of writing<sup>1</sup>) on the basis of the texts *Celestial Harmonies* and *Revised Edition*.

**Keywords:** Péter Esterházy, autobiographical pact, intertextuality, Hungarian literature

### **Autobiography and referentiality**

One of the most interesting issues in the discussion on autobiography is undoubtedly the question of referentiality. At the same time it forms one of the key criteria of the various, often diverging definitions of autobiographical writing and reading. One way of understanding autobiography is to see it as an “honest” presentation of the narrator’s own life corresponding to *the truth/truthfulness*; it assumes a *faithfulness to reality (total referentiality)* and language transparency (*mimesis*)

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(the Aristotelian tradition, Lejeune and others). The other way of theorizing autobiography emphasizes that an autobiographical text is a speech act and as such represents the intention of the narrator. Faithfulness to reality is replaced by its *construction*, which is conditioned, besides the psychological or special interest motivations of the subject, also by the impossibility to fully recover life material (the problem of *self-knowledge*—G. Gusdorf, *Mémoire et personne*) (Varga, 2002, 247–257). The demand for *truthfulness* introduces other views into the discussion: according to some, fiction (the novel) can be more true-to-reality than autobiography (A. Gide, F. Mauriac, J.-P. Sartre). In this sense, the concept of faithfulness to reality shifts towards a model of mediation, or—as suggested by Umberto Eco—referentiality is created by the mimetic function of structures (Eco, 1989, 180–236; Mekis, 2002, 259–264). However, in any case referentiality must be confirmed—someone must acknowledge that the autobiographical text represents the real life story of the narrator. Lejeune solves this by introducing the concept of the *autobiographical pact*.

Another way of understanding autobiography is the concept by Paul de Man, which denies the referential character of autobiographical text in the sense of involving textual references that gesture to actual situations, events, etc., that are “actual and potentially verifiable” (de Man, 1979, 920). On the contrary, de Man emphasizes the tropology of autobiography, or its function in the mirror model of cognition, which is created during reading through tropological exchanges (de Man, 1979, 923). By suppressing referentiality, the autobiographical character of a text shifts away from the original (Aristotelian) understanding towards ways of reading and becomes a *figure of reading* (de Man, 1979, 921).

The Hungarian postmodern author Péter Esterházy seems to operate in his texts with various possible ways of understanding referentiality in relation to autobiographical writing. In the next section I will attempt to sketch the character of Esterházy’s referential web created in his works *Celestial Harmonies* and *Revised Version*. According to Lejeune’s classification the first is an autobiographical novel (since *Celestial Harmonies* contains besides autobiographical and fictional elements) and the second is an autobiography.

It should be pointed out, however, that neither satisfies Lejeune’s definition of “pure”, “classical” autobiography in the sense of “*retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality*” (Lejeune, 1989, 4).<sup>2</sup> *Celestial Harmonies* is a family saga about the author’s own family, at the centre of which is the figure of the father. The possibility/need to widen autobiography towards a family saga as an alternative form of autobiography has been pointed out by K. Bednárová with reference to French theoretical discourse. If autobiography plays a role in the understanding of one’s life, undoubtedly it also has a function in the understanding of the story of the ancestors (Bed-

nárová, 2011, 26). *Revised Edition* on the other hand focuses on the narrower story of two years in the life of the author’s father, discussing his role as police informer.

### *Celestial Harmonies*

*Celestial Harmonies* (orig. *Harmonia caelestis* [2000], English translation Judith Sollosy [2004]) tells of the fame and fall of the House of Esterházy through the eyes of a contemporary—a son coming to terms with the paternal legacy. Such coming to terms always involves searching for and defining own position, forming/formulating own identity, it “*has the function of gaining self-knowledge in confrontation with the other*” (Bednárová, 2011, 26.).

Péter Esterházy’s text fits into the context of a currently widespread sub-genre in Hungarian literature—the so-called “father novel” (*aparegény*), which deals with recent past and its consequences on personal narrative through a son’s reflections on the father. Typically, these texts are based on autobiographical elements and represent works of authors socialized in the dead-end times of the totalitarian communist regime. L. Jánossy (one of the authors of the so-called “father novel”) mentions in this context that totality deprived the word adulthood of its meaning: “*the freedom to deal with the moral consequences of an act*”; these books thus signify “*attempts to liberate oneself from childhood perspective*” (Jánossy, 2006, 18). In the background of a son’s efforts to come to terms with a paternal authority, whether it is understood widely as repressive power of the state or more narrowly as parental authority that commits oneself, are psychological motives.<sup>3</sup> If the figure of the father becomes the centre of a narrative, a text can at the same time be understood as part of a long tradition of this theme in literature, which has over time accumulated various connotations (Balassa, 2003, 47–50). However, in no sense is it a light, malleable material.

In *Celestial Harmonies* the author chose a strategy that destructs the figure of the father by erasing his uniqueness. He takes him apart, or rather writes him apart into multiple figures of the father from the concrete author’s father or more distant ancestors of the Esterházy through figures of Hungarian history, the winners and the losers from every social layer and side, to allegorical and fictitious literary characters. Considering the field of connotations, including cultural, historical, literary, psychological dimensions, etc., he widens the idea of the father to an extent in which it starts losing its meaning. The figure of the father in an anthropological sense thus becomes a figure in a poetological sense, some sort of force. It loses its *face* as an expression of individuality, or more precisely, its facial features are so richly “depicted” that the concrete features of a particular figure/person are erased.

Theoretical literature on autobiography, with a reference to the fine art genre of the auto-portrait, often uses the term *face* as a metonymy for a specific hero and simultaneously the author-narrator of autobiography (Lejeune, de Man, Abbott). The issue of the *face* in autobiography relates to referentiality, besides another basic assumption: whether autobiography relates to a particular person (referent) as for example photography does, but also questions such as whether and how the face of a referentially-understood author is created by an autobiographical text, or whether the process of reading performs a sort of *de-facement* (de Man) as a result of the construction of one's own idea about the protagonist/author of an autobiography.

Since *Celestial Harmonies* is not a pure autobiographical novel, the figure of the protagonist and author-narrator do not overlap and the image of the protagonist's face is described through a mediator. However, all the more focus is put on the questions of cognition: what is reality, what channels of access to it there are, whether and how it can be approached, described with language. The text seems to undermine its own aspirations at veracity with mentions of the theory of relativity and other related scientific theories—e.g., quantum mechanics in sentence number 183; Schrödinger's hypothesis of multiple universes in sentences number 141 and 142; Gödel's thesis in sentence number 187: "*My father resorted to the use of logic to prove—my father's thesis, 1931—, that within any given system, it is impossible to deduce all the truths that can be formulated within that system. Surely, one or two, my mother muttered under her breath*" (217).<sup>4</sup> Referential relationship is destabilized by natural laws also in relation to the referent himself, since the shape of his existence is *a priori* inaccessible, appearing to the observer only partially. According to this, the truthfulness/validity of a referential text is not the result of a narrative effort, which loses its relevance based on the very "way" of the world. Citing Schrödinger's well-known virtual experiment with a cat, the narrator sums up his thoughts on the accessibility of his narrative subject: "*Schrödinger locked my father inside a thick-walled box. (...) Schrödinger's question is as follows: Just before we disassemble the box to ascertain whether my father is alive or dead, what can we say? Does it contain a living father or a dead one? (...) At that particular moment (...) the most we can say is that my father is either alive, or he is dead, i.e., that there is a 50 percent probability that he is alive and a 50 percent probability that he is dead. That is all we can say. Naturally, if we open the box, we can assess whether my father is alive or dead. (...) if we had not opened the box, (...) the box as a system would have functioned like a box in which there was a 50 percent probability of a living father, my father. Is it possible that the observation itself, the observation of the son, could kill (could have killed) my father, or unequivocally restored him to life from the 50% state of death (...)? That is why it is forbidden to touch one's father. Who wants to be his father's murderer, even if the probability of it occurring is only 50*

*percent?*” (138–139). However, the narrator opens the box and takes the risk, he wants to catch his father *in flagrante*, he wants to reveal, despite all doubts about it being possible, his real, unique “*face she [the mother] thought she knew, but which she never really did to his dying day (nor, for that matter, did anyone else)*” (220). His method of autobiographical testimony is close to those concepts of literary truthfulness (see above) that on the basis of a mediating model, structural correspondence, situate its expression more into fiction. Father’s face emerges from a row of masks piled narratively by the author from various sides/aspects, it is formed by their mutual interaction and conflict through the process of reading.

While some reflections in the text and the creative approaches weaken the referential understanding of the novel, others confirm it. This game characterizes all levels of the text.

In terms of composition, the novel consists of two parts, each of which uses a different narrative strategy. *Book One, Numbered Sentences from the Lives of the Esterházy Family*, is concerned mainly with the historical past of the noble family, connects individual textual parts associatively, ignores temporal-causal logic, eliminates narrativity: not only is there no story, but it cannot even be reconstructed from the fragments. *Book Two, Confessions of an Esterházy Family*, uses transparent language to mediate the story of the narrator’s family. While the narrative strategy of *Book One* supports the artificial character of the text, that of *Book Two* supports its real character. While the “artificial” novelistic world of *Book One* contains self-referential (autobiographical) allusions, the “real” novelistic world of *Book Two* introduces fictitious elements. This strategy represents an ironical gesture of the author, referring as much to the literary tradition or own text, as to the process of reading, in which the inherited or newly-created meanings result in a new final significance.

As part of attempts to classify autobiographical texts, H. P. Abbott proposes modes of reading. He observes that while the reader of a literary (fictitious) text participates in the creation of narrative and construction of meaning, etc., thus erasing the author (his *face*), the reader of an autobiographical text tries to “keep him or her in view” (Abbott, 1988, 608). In this sense, he calls the mode of reading fictitious texts *fictive*, characterized by creative readings, and the mode of reading autobiographical texts *factual*, characterized by analytical reading (Abbott, 1988, 611). He also distinguishes two types of *factual* reading depending on the kind of reader’s engagement: while some readers “accept the text’s authority [and] read the narrative not as an autobiography as a biography of the author” (Abbott, 1988, 601), a *suspicious* or *autographic* reading wants to catch the author lying (Abbott, 1988, 603–611). The mixing of narrative strategies and other text-making elements, which appear autobiographical or, on the contrary, derail an autobiographical approach, is undoubtedly aimed at destabilizing the reader’s position, acquiring his empathy and his creative collaboration.

Below, I will analyze the question of reference in *Celestial Harmonies* based on particular examples.

***Celestial Harmonies, Book One—Numbered Sentences from the Lives of the Esterházy Family***

*Book One, Numbered Sentences from the Lives of the Esterházy Family*, employs a narrative strategy that implies a so-called *creative reading*, which is characterized, among others, also by the erasing of the author's *face*. However, Péter Esterházy will not allow his *face* to be lost: he inserts into his text various elements that make it necessary to read this at first sight fictitious world (also) referentially. In his article on historiographic or literary approaches to history in *Celestial Harmonies*, Mihály Szegedy-Maszák even suggests that if Esterházy biography was written, it would turn out that similarly to Beckett in his works, "he also constantly 'writes apart', re-evaluates his own life" (Szegedy-Maszák, 2010, 196).

The titles of the novel's two parts (*Numbered Sentences from the Lives of the Esterházy Family*, *Confessions of an Esterházy Family*) instantly demarcate the author's family as the narrative space. The family name of the protagonist is emphasized in the text by the insertion of the constant periphrasis "and here my father's name followed", which repeatedly accentuates also the narrator's filial relationship to the protagonist. The unambiguous overlap between the narrator and author, i.e., the identity of the protagonist's son, is repeatedly confirmed by textual signals in the form of, for example, reflections on the origin of the form of the family name (9<sup>th</sup> numbered sentence), description of the family genealogy (10<sup>th</sup> numbered sentence), references to well-known works, deeds, possessions of the Esterházys (e.g., in the 6<sup>th</sup> numbered sentence). At the same time, it needs to be said that this identification of the narrator with author, which seemingly identifies the protagonist as his father, is accompanied by the blurring (multiplication) of the figure of the father as the protagonist. The *face* of the author is further emphasized by explicit references to concrete persons, as for example in the 103<sup>rd</sup> numbered sentence of *Book One*, where in a narrative told as an old family story (gesturing to the story of Oedipus) we read the sentence that Grandmother "was about the same age as Gitta is now" (116), whom the reader can identify as the author's wife.

Historical references in the text refer primarily to the members of the House of Esterházy and the related events. These are both private persons, the narrator's ancestors (the fathers of his father and their fathers), and personalities from Hungarian history, known from various sources. However, they are not presented under their real names, their identity erased, but become symbolic figures of the

richness and variety of an old noble family with historical significance. Nevertheless, the text leaves enough clues to allow the reader to recognize them.

Here are a few examples of how the text works with historical and referential elements.

“... my father, this ferocious-looking baroque grand seigneur who was in a position, nay under obligation, to raise his eyes to Emperor Leopold (...) leaped upon his chestnut steed, Challenger, and galloped off into the discriminating seventeenth-century landscape (or description thereof)” (5).

This excerpt is about an ancient ancestor Pál Esterházy (1635–1713), a palatine who received the title of Prince from Leopold I (1687) for his part in expelling the Turks and was also the compiler of the religious hymn book *Harmonia caelestis* (1711). The horse named Challenger (Zöldfikár) is also known from the Esterházy history. It was a Turkish horse that never belonged to Pál—it was only promised to him. His brother László rode it in the battle near Nagyvezekény in August 1652, the horse tripped and László died together with other three Esterházy cousins, leaving the sixteen-year-old Jesuit student Pál responsible for the entire family. These details are known from the journal of the young Pál,<sup>5</sup> excerpts from which are identifiable also in the novel (without mentioning the sources). The event of László’s fall is repeatedly referred to in the novel (Görözdi, 2014).

The excerpts illustrate the way in which *Book One* inserts referential elements (historically documented events) into the text in the form of allusions, rather than as narrative “historical retrieval”. This method simultaneously reveals and conceals the historical references. The question is how the reader responds to this. The fictitious or referential/autobiographical character of a text will thus depend on the way of reading: if the reader lets himself/herself be carried away by authorial codes and textual strategies supporting literariness, and erases the *face* of the author in favor of the textual universe, his/her reading will be (according to P. Abbott’s terminology) fictive. On the contrary, if he/she decides to follow the historical references, he/she will search for the facts referred to and (focusing on the *face* of the author) his/her reading will be factual. The text supports both ways of reading and at the same time disallows the application of only one of them. This is self-reflectively commented on here: “*the places, the hips and waterfalls, the events and persons in this book are real. They accord, or correspond, to reality. For instance, my father’s steed really did slip in the mud of the August gully. (...) My father’s son (...) wrote only what he remembered, and there will be readers who, thinking of this book as a factual account, will discover 1,001 inadequacies. Though the author dealt with real life, he thinks it ought to be read as a novel; in other words, without asking either more or less of it than a novel can give (everything)*” (378–379).

In the case of *Celestial Harmonies*, the sentence “*he wrote only what he remembered*” (378) needs to be understood more widely, since the private memory

of the noble family, whose members were for centuries involved in public life (in politics, the army, the Church, culture, economy, etc.) merges with the collective memory of the Hungarian nation. In this context we must mention the observation by P. Balassa, who distinguishes the forms of memory used in the novel: while *Book One* relies on external remembering in the sense of *Gedächtnis*, *Book Two* focuses on interior personal remembering in the sense of *Erinnerung*. This distinction not only creates a basic contradiction between the two parts of the novel, but at the same time articulates the novel's "position on tradition, history versus the unique, original and individual, while (...) as the only source of the truth presents a man of confessions" (Balassa, 2003, 35–37).

Collective memory consists of historical materials, art works, autobiographical texts, (journals, correspondence) of individual persons, even anecdotes and legends. The novel uses them as a source, and at the same time calls attention to the fictitious elements of that "reality" recovered by these sources perceived as the origin of the references. For example, in the 10<sup>th</sup> numbered sentence, it undermines the power-verified "authenticity" of the family genealogy *Trophaeum nobilissimae ac antiquissimae domus Estorasionae* (Vienna 1700), compiled by Pál Esterházy on the occasion of receiving the title of Prince and which was (also on this occasion) officially verified by the court. By mentioning this document the novel points to the suspicious nature of its own referentiality.

Why then would an anecdote about the origin of the term "the Esterházy fairy land" be less reliable? Its source is a Frankfurt illumination provided by Prince Miklós Esterházy, also known as "Fényes"—"light-lover" (1714–1790) at the coronation of Joseph II in 1764, described by J. W. Goethe in his autobiographical work *Dichtung und Wahrheit*: "We admired the various brilliant representations and the fairy-like structures of flame by which each ambassador strove to outshine the others. But Prince Esterhazy's arrangements surpassed all the rest. (...) This eminent envoy, to honour the day, had quite passed over his own unfavourably situated quarters, and in their stead had caused the great esplanade of linden-trees in the Horse-market to be decorated in the front with a portal illuminated with colours, and at the back with a still more magnificent prospect."<sup>6</sup>

In his reference to this passage from Goethe, Péter Esterházy emphasizes the problem of fictionality/reality, bringing it to the centre of attention: "*The youth flushed, then awkward but proud, proclaimed that the idea of a, and here my father's name followed, type of fantasyland has now become reality. Not bad, my father nodded, and told someone to make a note of it, though he then also said to the youth in his most friendly manner, this here is merely dichtung und wahrheit, poetry and reality, and nobody knows the difference between dichtung and wahrheit better than he. This time, it was the youth who made a note of it*" (21–22).



As we can see, the novel’s narration, even though it uses confident and convincing diction, is in the context of a wider understanding of autobiographical material constantly undermining the possibility of telling, linguistic accessibility and the limits and of its interpretive nature, the very possibility of cognition. The author articulates this narrative instability in relation to the truth and fictitiousness already in the first sentence of the novel: “*It is deucedly difficult to tell a lie when you don’t know the truth*” (5).

This instability is expressed through references. On the one hand, some references have an almost documentary value (I will give an example from *Book One*)—it is an extreme case of literary faithfulness to reality. On the other, there are comments referring to other fictitious worlds, i.e., other texts—which is the other extreme. These textual references work through intertextuality. If we are analyzing referentiality in this postmodern work, we should also ask the question whether it is possible to understand referential relations traditionally as a relationship between the text and reality in the sense of the palpable/visible/experienced (etc). world, or whether the signified to which the textual references gesture may not be understood as textual reality, i.e., the world created by other texts. In any case such understanding reflects the postmodern philosophy of Péter Esterházy, who has often declared that he sees the world textually and linguistically, and this is also the basis of his poetics.

The novel’s mixing of autobiographical material with references to other fictitious texts is unusual, it subverts the assumptions of autobiography. In *Celestial Harmonies*, this is related to the mosaic way of writing through which the portrait of the father emerges, as well as all of the themes that this family narrative brings up (how it is possible to own the past, what memory is composed of, etc.). The author inserts into the text longer or shorter passages from various authors, which are either adopted verbatim or with minor changes. For example, the story of the golden chain from the times of the Republic is from Kosztolány’s novel *Anna Edes*—Chapter 45 in *Book Two*<sup>7</sup>; the novella *Slavno je za otadžbinu mreti* by Danilo Kiš, which thematizes a motif from the Esterházy legends and had been referenced by Péter Esterházy already in 1986 in his novel *Bevezetés a szépirodalomba—Introduction to Fiction*, is here cited in the 24<sup>th</sup> numbered sentence<sup>8</sup>; lengthy citations from Donald Barthelme’s *The Dead Father* are included for example in the 144<sup>th</sup> numbered sentence of *Book One*; there are many other excerpts from Magda Szabó, Peter Handke, Ernst Jünger, Sigfrid Gauch, Frank McCourt, Natalia Ginzburg and many others.<sup>9</sup>

This inter-textual saturation (often perceived as over-saturation) has been the subject of discussions both in Hungary and abroad.<sup>10</sup> The author concedes the extremeness of his method and argues that he “*perceives inter-textuality always from the point of view of the text (...) the method arises from the experience that we live in one linguistic area, in which there are sentences with a different sta-*

*tus and we work with these sentences.*"<sup>11</sup> Esterházy's inter-textuality at the same time represents a methodological answer to one of the basic ontological questions about the nature of reality, which he constantly engages with in his writing.

### *Celestial Harmonies, Book Two—Confessions of an Esterházy Family*

The subject of *Book Two, Confessions of an Esterházy Family* is the family's recent past—the period which the author more-or-less witnessed and experienced. We are dealing here with a "pure" autobiographical material processed on the basis of genre conventions of a family saga. The author applies methods that confirm referentiality in the traditional sense of faithfulness to reality. In terms of narrative strategies, the text utilizes conventional realist narration moving from a beginning to an end, observing temporal and causal logic. Language appears to be transparent and does not constantly question the possibility of knowledge. The characters are unambiguously identifiable members of Péter Esterházy's close family; the central protagonist continues to be the father. The referential character of the text is confirmed also by plot elements which correspond with the family history, known from other sources (the expropriation of their farmsteads after the land reform of 1945; the declaring of the aristocrats class enemies and their exclusion from society after the communist grabbing of power in 1947; forced removal of the family to live with a peasant family in the village of Hort as part of a national program of aristocracy internment in 1951; etc.).

An example of how autobiographical and referential character of the narrative is reinforced are chapters 99 and 101, which provide (in quotation marks without a mention of the sources) the memories of the author's grandfather count Móric Esterházy (1881–1960), briefly Hungarian Prime Minister, active politician in the interwar period arrested by the Arrow Cross Party and deported to Mauthausen, then interned together with his family (including the little Péter). His memories, referring mainly to inter-war Hungary's politics, have been written and published in German<sup>12</sup>, but not yet in Hungarian; in this context, the excerpts in the novel have an almost documentary character (for the reader who can decipher them).

As I discussed, *Book One* emphasizes the artificiality of the textual universe, which is interrupted by references. *Book Two* represents the opposite strategy—its mimetic character is interrupted by elements that undermine its referential validity, pointing to the illusoriness of mimesis. "*Its 'realism' is in itself a stylization*"—observes P. Balassa, which he explains as "*a rejection and criticism of the uncomfortable pressure of the immediacy of the confessions*" (Balassa, 2003, 36).

Among the misleading elements in the text we can mention fictitious family members (a younger sister of the author, uncle Robert—an informer), or the motto of *Book Two*, i.e., a paratext which, in contradiction to Lejeune's understanding

of paratext, rids the author of his *face*, performs the gesture of *de-facement* (de Man). It suggests a fictitious character of the text to follow, only to then employ all possible narrative strategies (diction, narration, composition, etc.) to convince the reader of the contrary: its referential autobiographical character. The motto is from *Memoirs of a Burgher*, an autobiographical novel by Sándor Márai (unattributed):

*“The characters of this adventurous biography are creatures of the imagination. They are authentic only within the context of this book. They are not living characters, nor were they ever”* (395).

In connection to the “repeated interruption of the illusion of referentiality” of *Book Two*, P. Szirák brings attention to the trope of irony (Szirák, 2003, 143). I maintain that it is precisely irony (whether we understand it as a figure of speech, or according to de Man as a trope) where we can find Péter Esterházy’s position on the interface between truth and fiction. In contrast to classifying observations, irony always represents opening and confrontation of issues. In this sense the author’s irony points also to our traditional and seemingly straightforward ideas about what is history, what is personal history, whether they correspond with the narratives, whether “facts” can be separated from modes of processing (the questions of cultural memory, textual tradition, linguistic-literary representation).

### ***Revised Edition***

Two years after *Celestial Harmonies*, its sequel was published, titled *Revised Edition—a supplement to Celestial Harmonies*. It is a novel that discusses the process of writing. The impulse for its origin was the fact that after finishing the manuscripts of the family saga Péter Esterházy discovered documents that prove that his admired and lovingly described father in *Celestial Harmonies* was an agent of the communist secret police.

If in relation to *Celestial Harmonies* we talked about a game with referentiality, the destabilization of the reader’s sense whether (and to what extent) this is a “real” (autobiographical and family-historical) story, in the case of *Revised Edition* we must observe an aggressive expression of a historical reality understood in the most commonplace sense of the word. It is well-known that communist regimes in Central Europe eliminated people who were dangerous or uncomfortable either for their dissident thinking or origin: brutal methods such as physical liquidation, violent displacement of entire ethnic or social groups were gradually replaced by “more sophisticated methods” such as the obstruction of one’s social integration or professional career, exclusion to the margins of society and coercion into corruption. The aim of forcing someone into corruption was a moral liquidation of a person or a group which that person represented and one way

to do it was by enlisting the person into the secret police as an agent, which was often achieved by physical and psychological torture. The targets were non-communist intellectuals, artists, people representing the religious circles, “enemy” classes and especially the aristocracy, every free-thinking individual, etc. This led to a social and moral crisis that the post-communist Central European societies are still dealing with. Péter Esterházy’s book is part of this processing<sup>13</sup> and represents—both in the sense of the author’s intention, as well as the reader’s expectations—a different form of literary testimony that seems to contradict the notions (presented in the rest of Esterházy’s work) about the textual and linguistic nature of the world and the philosophical skepticism about the possibility of mimetic representation.

*Revised Edition* follows the narrator’s (author’s) story of coming to terms with the fact of his father’s role as secret police agent. In a diary form, he reproduces his father’s notes about his reports, own reflections and self-reflections in the process of confronting oneself with this fact. The text has attributes that unambiguously constitute an autobiographical text according to Lejeune’s “narrow” definition (with the exception of the criteria of the retrospective).

The text explicitly identifies the first-person narrator with author: “*I, Péter Esterházy, am speaking here; I was born on April 14, 1950, my mother’s name is Lili Mányoky (Irén in her ID, but she hated Irén), my father’s name is Mátyás; my ID number: AU-V. 877825. This, then, is the ‘I’ (but I’d rather not go into the details, no details, please)*” (19).<sup>14</sup>

The narrator emphasizes the veracity of all facts and figures, the world he makes accessible is fully verifiable (he describes how he accessed the archival volumes in Hungary’s Historical Institute and how he studied them, family members and acquaintances from everyday life, the quotidian life of a writer, etc.).

Autobiographies always express a narrator’s intention, whether explicitly or implicitly. In this case the intention is moral, the author—besides continuing in the basic intention of *Celestial Harmonies* to sketch/reveal/get to know the real face of his father—seeks to participate, through his book, in the collective confrontation with the past: “*historical responsibility is not abstract, but personal*” (272–273).

The text excludes the aesthetic function of language and narration. Its documentary function is emphasized by citations from reports, which (contrary to *Celestial Harmonies*) are attributed to a concrete source and are even distinguished by font color.

The referentiality and autobiographical character of the work are not undermined by other levels of the text. While in *Celestial Harmonies* the reflections on referentiality, the “*fiction-non-fiction seesaw*” (189) were part of compositional, narrative, and discursive strategies, in *Revised Edition* they exist on an explicitly reflective level. Péter Esterházy reflects on his attitude to these issues especially

in passages where he comments on his new reading of the family saga. (In this sense, the description of a game in which an editor of *Celestial Harmonies* tries to guess which passages about his father are true and which are invented is interesting as it describes a particular reading experience that is both *fictive* and *factual* at the same time.) The fact that led to the writing of the *Supplement* to grandiose family saga also marks the author’s thinking. In the following selected excerpts he comments on the issues of the narrative subject in (autobiographical) prose text, the strategies responding to theoretical discussion on the (in)distinguishability of the real and fictitious basis of a literary work, the reader’s positions. It is thus concerned with the basic criteria of Lejeune’s definition: the object—the real private life of the narrator, and the narrator—the real person identical with the author.

*“I am I. I wouldn’t be at all surprised if someone were to doubt this now. I had my share in raising such doubts, it took me quite a bit of doing. This whose who, the face as a mask, role playing and citation upon citation – altogether, probing the soft boundaries of fact and*

*fiction – perhaps this is the most characteristic – what? my theme? my subject? my ability? In any case, over the past decades – and this includes Celestial Harmonies – I have set many traps for the reader in this field. I’m not saying that I fell into it myself; still if I were suddenly to refer to my honesty now, my personal, civil honesty, you’d wave it off”* (19).

*“I knew that many would take it [Celestial Harmonies] word for word; continually and in a vulgar manner; the text plays (works) with the boundaries of fiction-nonfiction. But I did not count on the consequences of history appearing in the book, the fact that the book is not just family history, but national history as well”* (35).

*“-You’ll die for the country, won’t you, boys?*

*-Yes, Papi, dear, we’ll die.”*

*“At which I start crying again. Ridiculous. Whereas it’s (just) quoted from an outside source, no such scene occurred in my life. I’m gradually beginning to think of Celestial Harmonies as fact, the primitive referential reader has come out of me; so much for our postmodern reputation”* (111).

The cited passages declare the shift of the author’s understanding in the context of postmodern deconstruction, the repositioning of the basic questions of referentiality: the boundaries of reality, textuality, fictitiousness. Even though this shift does not affect his further creative work, it is symptomatic of the book *Revised Edition*, where the father’s real story re-evaluates aesthetic reflections and also—as has been pointed out by G. Angyalosi—“does change the meaning of the original text” (Angyalosi, 2003, 174–175), i.e., it had and probably has an effect on the rest of Péter Esterházy’s work. While the autobiographical pact (in Lejeune’s understanding) represents in literature—including *Celestial*

*Harmonies*—the object of authorial irony pointing to the readers’ assumptions and bias in the process of reconstructing the world of a literary work, *Revised Edition*, on the contrary, validates the autobiographical pact, and in this way willy-nilly undermines his own authorial irony. I consider it a significant gesture in a work that participates in a processing of Hungarian communist past not only through its subject, but also its attitude, in which the author was able to radically re-evaluate his own positions.

*Translated by Dobrota Pucherová*

### Notes

- 1 By autobiographical writing I mean a mode of writing that engages with the methods and strategies of autobiography, but does not result in an author’s report on own life.
- 2 I refer to this widely known (also corrected) definition also below in the sense of “pure” autobiography, i.e. autobiography in a narrow sense. Lejeune himself also used several definitions. See e.g., LEJEUNE, Philippe. 2002. Az önéletírás meghatározása, transl. Zoltán Z. VARGA. In: *Helikon*, Vol. 48, No. 3, pp. 272–285.
- 3 E.g., the Oedipus motif in *Celestial Harmonies* has been analyzed by SCHEIN, Gábor. 2010. Baleseti jegyzőkönyv. In: PÉCZELI, D.–PALKÓ, G. (eds.) *Találunk szavakat. Válogatott írások Esterházy Péter műveiről 1974–2008*. Budapest: Magvető, pp. 208–215.
- 4 ESTERHÁZY, Péter. 2005. *Celestial Harmonies*. Transl. Judith Sollosy. New York: Harper Collins Publishers. All following citations are from this volume.
- 5 ESTERHÁZY, Pál. 1989. *Mars Hungaricus*. Ed., transl. from the Latin by Emma IVÁNYI. Budapest: Zrínyi.
- 6 GOETHE, Johann Wolfgang. 1848. *Truth and Poetry: From My Own Life*. Transl. from the German by John OXENFOKD. London: Henry G. Bohn, York Street, Covent Garden, pp. 173–174.
- 7 See e.g., SZEGEDY-MASZÁK, Mihály. 2010. A történelem elképzelt hitele. In: PÉCZELI, D.–PALKÓ, G. (eds.), p. 200; SZIRÁK, Péter. 2003. Nyelv által lesz. In: BÖHM, G. (ed.), pp. 144–145.
- 8 The destiny of the novella in the texts by Péter Esterházy and in translation practice has been analyzed by LADÁNYI, István. 2006. Amikor a hóhért akasztják. Egy posztmodern gesztus és fordítói utóélete. In: *Jelenkor*, Vol. 49, No. 4, pp. 383–386; the parallels between the work of Danilo Kiš and Péter Esterházy are analyzed by BOJTÁR, Endre. 2005. Kis Esterházy. In: *2000*, Vol. 17, No. 12, pp. 61–65. Compare: ESTERHÁZY, Péter. 2003. Der Ich-Erzähler als Provokation des Mimetischen im Diskurs der Phantastik. In: *Harmonia Caelestis Marginalienband*. Berlin: Berlin Verlag, pp. 28–34.
- 9 The list of the cited authors and texts was published in the supplement to the German edition of the novel: *Harmonia Caelestis Marginalienband*, pp. 36–43 and also in the appendix of the English edition: *Celestial Harmonies*, pp. 843–846.
- 10 Hungarian internet literary journal litera.hu ran a forum about *Celestial Harmonies* called *Ajtó ablak nyitva van – szövegkereső társasjáték* (2007–2008), in which readers could share their findings of other texts in the novel – which often raised passionate discussions on the nature of authorship. Translations of the novel also sparked discussions in some countries on the ques-

- tion of authorial rights. These discussions led to the publishing of the lists of cited authors and texts in some translated versions of the novel. For a detailed analysis, see KULCSÁR-SZABÓ, Zoltán. 2011. Idézet vége. In: *Alföld*, Vol. 62, No. 7, pp. 69–83.
- 11 GÖRÖZDI, Judit. 2012. Citovat' nie je jednoduché. Rozhovor s Péterom Esterházym. In: *Romboid*, Vol. 47, No. 1, pp. 21–22.
- 12 GECSÉNYI, Lajos. 1990. Die Lebenserinnerungen von Moritz Graf Esterházy. In: *Ungarn-Jahrbuch*. München: Ungarisches Institut, pp. 179–204. Also available at: [http://epa.oszk.hu/01500/01536/00018/pdf/UJ\\_1990\\_179-204.pdf](http://epa.oszk.hu/01500/01536/00018/pdf/UJ_1990_179-204.pdf) [Accessed Nov. 13, 2015]
- 13 The book received a great acclaim not only in Hungary, but also in other Central European countries after the publication of the Slovak (2006), Serbian (2006), Polish (2008), Romanian (2008) and Czech (2014) translations.
- 14 I would like to thank Judith Sollosy for the translation of the excerpts from this novel for the purpose of this study. Page numbers refer to the original: ESTERHÁZY, Péter. 2002. *Javitott kiadás*. Budapest: Magvető. The novel has not yet been published in English translation, with the exception of the Preface: ESTERHÁZY, Péter. 2009. REVISED EDITION: AUTHOR'S PREFACE. Transl. by Judith Sollosy. In: *The Wall in My Head. Words without Borders Anthology, Words and Images from the Fall of the Iron Curtain*. University of Rochester.

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