

István Dobos: The Religious Horizons in Péter Esterházy's Novels

Motto: "he wanted to be a good writer more than a good Christian"

The self-definition quoted in the motto is from *Hrabal könyve* [*The Book of Hrabal*], which is one of Esterházy's books with the most religious subject matter: in its essay-like details theological questions are regularly addressed. In this lecture, I aim to provide a *poetical* approach to the topic identified in the title; therefore, I will not group the novels around theological questions, and neither will I follow the chronology of the date of creation of the works. In my opinion, the act of re-reading with the focus on the poetical aspects puts the worlds of the texts into altered relationships. In my overview, I will consider the meaning-creating novel-language, the complexity of expression, as the basis of my analysis. In the final analysis, this allows the most economical explication of ideas.

The more than one hundred religious passages of varying length in *Bevezetés a szépirodalomba* [*Introduction to Belles-Lettres*] are made up of repeated elements. As an example, we could mention the quotation taken from the Gospel of Mathew, which first occurs in the chapter titled "A szavak bevonulása" [*The Entry of Words*] and goes like this: "Hanem a ti beszédetek legyen igen-igen, nem-nem, ennek felette valami esik, az a gonosztól vagyon" [*"But let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay: for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil"*]. It is also striking at the same time that if someone takes the religious passages from the various parts of the novel and places them side by side, the resulting text seems to resist the efforts for a coherent reading, an attempt to unify the text. The religious elements do not constitute a closed chain of meaning in the novel, because they are situated in an open textual space, in which the repeated units return in constantly changing forms and meanings, despite the fact that they appear identical. My remark that it would be problematic to contemplate the religious passages of *Bevezetés* from a single special perspective also applies to one of the methodological hazards of the present interpretation, since the point of view and the narrative situation are constantly changing in the novel. The narrator of the novel multiplies his roles and identifies himself, i.e., as the "text-selecting subject" establishing different relationships to the religious passages in various parts of the text, with the "grammatical space." To mention an example, the narrator of *Függő* [*Pending*] distances himself from a certain Catholic attitude. The desperate tirade of Dédi vehemently scourging his/her (?) environment for their atheism fills him with fear. On the other hand, the narrator counterpoints his commonplace atheistic slogans with irony: "ez az igazi emberi nagyság, egyedül, mankó nélkül az üres ég alatt ! barátaim" [*"this is real human greatness, all by yourself, without crutches, underneath the empty sky ! my friends"*] – "kamuzik" [*"he is bullshitting"*], the narrator adds. He also refers to his own *situation in between*, which is exactly why the comment made by the persona following the scene is very revealing: it balances out the difference between the two ways of thinking. Personally, this is how I would summarize the interpretation of the narrator regarding the two kinds of attitudes to religion: just as a believer knows that s/he is threatened by being a non-believer, and so s/he must feel temptation, similarly for a non-believer, faith itself is the temptation which threatens his/her seemingly closed universe. It is characteristic of the entirety of this highly ironic text that the narrator does not settle on this view either. As Esterházy himself put it in *Kis Magyar*

Pornográfia [A Little Hungarian Pornography]: “E kettő között van egy tucat félálláspont, de a főcél a fő” [“Between these two positions there are a dozen more half-positions, but it is the main objective that really matters”].

My basic assumption is that *the religious register is subordinated to various systems of rules enforced in the narration*. In other words, it is only one of many elements constituting the form. It is a part of the textual world in which the deconstruction of the referential role of language, the constant shifting between modes and tones, intertextuality, the elimination of aim-oriented storytelling, and as a result, omissions and fragmentation receive more emphasis. The meaning of the repeated elements belonging to the circle of ideas of Christianity is not fixed in the textual space of *Bevezetés*; in fact, it is the constant interplay of various languages used, which cannot be planned in advance, that creates the conditions in which they are interpreted. The regular interruption of the narrative process and the random co-ordination of possible worlds side by side force the readers of the novel to continuously shift their attitude and point of view.

With reference to the motto borrowed from the Gospel of Mathew, the narrator identifies his own position in the space between the “yea” and the “nay.” This means that, on the one hand, he recants all his statements immediately after making them. On the other hand, he takes an ironic position from the very outset, which is usually dubious not only from one point of view. *The arrangement of the words appropriate to the given speech situation makes an idea temporarily acceptable for the narrator, because he associates meaning with use*. The fictional character creating and deconstructing himself in the process of text-creation is referring to the paradox nature of this situation when he makes the exploration of the reality of the self dependent not on some kind of firm foundations but on the acceptance of linguistic relativity. According to one of the repeated passages of *Bevezetés*: “Élni annyi, mint bizonyos lehetőségek között habozni, élni annyi, mint végzetesen erősnek érezni magunkat a szabadság gyakorlására, élni annyi, mint elveszettnek érezni magunkat, az, aki ezt elfogadja, már meg is kezdte a magára találást” [“To live means to hesitate between certain possibilities; to live means to feel fatally strong to practice liberty; to live means to feel lost; and whoever accepts this has already started to find himself”].

The created self of the text makes many times unsure and hides into quotations and paraphrases his anxious pondering about the very foundations of his existence. While parodying himself, he also apparently strives to render the questions quoted from Kant – “What can I know?” “What do I have to do?” “What may I hope?” – *discernible* in his text, because the speech thus created is capable of not not exhausting quickly the possible answers in any respect, which is the real ambition of the writer of the novel. The fictional author is fighting a never-ending battle to side-step the alternative of “yea” and “nay” in order not to have to clearly choose one of the two declarations of faith. Several literary solutions may give rise to such a conjecture in the reader. For example, we can hardly find any passages from the Bible which do not quote the words of the gospel in a distorted manner, mixing the sublime with the commonplace. Also within the religious passages, Esterházy freely employs the narrative devices which make it more difficult to unify the meanings of these texts. For example, he connects distant circles of ideas in his apparently serious religious discussions, but does not make an effort to resolve the uncertainty caused by the multiple perspectives. The book regards the naïve interpretations of the ideas of Catholicism as superficial, and it does not even stop short of using the simple, accentuated rhythms of popular songs to ridicule them: “Arcomon csak/ mosoly lehet/ és derű, // mert az élet/ végső fokon/ nagyszerű” [On my face/ there’s

only smiles/ and gaiety, // because life is/ so wonderful/ ultimately”], we read his maxims turned into the lyrics of a popular song.

It is of fundamental significance that in the majority of the religious passages, Esterházy creates a link, with the help of guest texts from Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* and allusions, between the meaning of “yea or nay” in the gospel and in literature, meaning the requirement for structural accuracy in writing. The meaning of acceptance or rejection changes in the system of relationship of these two kinds of commitments. This intertextual play keeps the religious passages of *Bevezetés* in constant motion. Their common essence is manifested in one respect. The struggle for the accuracy of designation, the search for the right word seems to mean at the same time a quest for the absolute in the perspective of the religious passages. Two examples are in place here. The hopelessly optimistic writer of *A fogadós naplója* [*The Diary of the Innkeeper*] puts his trust in the word, and the whole existence of the created stories fills him with hope. In the spirit of the present religious subject, therefore, he has a metaphysical inclination. The innkeeper, at the same time, mainly prays for good sentences, but sometimes he has the feeling “mintha Isten egy igazágtalan raktáros volna, s őt a szíve gyökeréig gyűlölné” [“as if God was an unjust storeman, who hated him to the core of his heart”]. The word “storeman” is a profane simile referring to the characteristic *storehouse-like quality* of language. It refers to Wittgenstein's early notion of language proclaiming the mutual attribution of world and word. The novel's creation of text can be interpreted as a radical deconstruction of this former notion, as it is rather defined by the ideal of the meaning-creating language. It is mainly such semantic stratification that one can find in the religious passages of *Bevezetés*, and this is why they resist the allegorical or the ideological-critical approaches. The second characteristic example represents a much simpler variety than this.

The writer humbly giving an account of his state of grace after his night prayer in *Függő* feels grateful to his wife who associates his devout attention with *his new spectacles*. The writer feels that he needs such profane sobriety, yet the entirety of the narration does not question the importance of metaphysical sensitivity.

The religious passages of *Bevezetés* exercise their influence in a system of poetic rules where the forms of signals creating the sense of representation are present, but they are situated in an open textual space. The book suggests that different representations constitute equal-ranking varieties of reality. The recurring realization of the narrator is that the imaginary sometimes appears more likely than the actually perceived world. In this relationship, however, the various elements are replaceable and interchangeable. All the same, it is certain that, according to the novel, no perspective is available to us that could warrant the authenticity of any one of them. The recurring realization of the narrator is that from the perspective of Christian humility the spiritual/intellectual Hungary appears much finer than its 20th-century history, and likewise, the home country preserved and recreated in our souls is much more precious than either the right-wing or left-wing dictatorships that actually existed and which deprived people of their liberty and dignity. Yet, the writer is unable to call this “place” real in his novel, and at this point, like in other places also, he leaves the question undecided as to which of these two kinds of approaches to the world should be regarded as more valid: starting out from actual reality or from the partly invented intellectual-moral dimension.

What is it then that puts a limit to the doubts of the narrator in the created world of *Bevezetés*? Ultimately, it is the acceptance of the fact that the ideal of the absolute must be preserved even if the transcendental meaning of life remains hidden from the entity existing in a temporally limited way. The fundamental question is phrased

in the chapter titled *Deo Gratias* in the following way: “De hogyan beszélünk, ha magunkra maradtunk, ha nincs Isten?” [“But how are we going to talk when we are left to ourselves, if there is no God?”]. After these words are spoken, a caricature of Christ is visualized in a repugnant apparition, and it is with this sacrilegious vision that the fictional writer demonstrates the consequences of the total relativity of values. The text at this point suggests that the concept of faith must be preserved, because its absence leaves such voids that can be filled by anything. It would appear that, in connection with language, the narrator *cannot accept the total elimination of the difference between meaning and usage*, because he is unable to face all the consequences of that. The reason for this is that it would mean that the Christian values received as a heritage would also have to be subjected to the discordant and differentiating systems of signaling. A reflection upon the text-creating activity of the novel writer, on the other hand, leads to the conclusion that the narrating and the narrated selves are not totally dissolved in the play of the uncontrollable languages, because the narrator, by accepting the value of systems inherent in the Christian tradition, also limits the number of possible modes of languages. The acceptance of being preceded by and included in language, therefore, does not mean the elimination of the notion of the subject rooted in the Christian tradition. More revealing is the fact that in *A szív segédigéi* [*The Helping Words of the Heart*], framed by the words of the Lord’s Prayer, which practically closes the novel, the same grotesque vision is repeated once more. However, here it is only the figure of the gnome-Christ that can be seen. The text, therefore, once again validates this mode of language use, i.e., the unconditional acceptance of the principle of meaning independent of use, which it discredited earlier. The novel continues to be written, impossible to be concluded from the perspective of religion. Let us now consider the next work and, following the same method of examination, let us focus on the poetical characteristics and ask the question of how the religious attitude is present in the text and what it means in the framework of the created world of the novel.

A Hahn-Hahn grófnő pillantása [*The Glance of Countess Hahn-Hahn*] is a self-interpreting novel. The religious motifs of its system of metaphors make the freer association of meaning-creating elements possible. The surmise of the absence of the transcendental signified permeates the whole book. The fictitious writer has many doubts as to whether the story can be told at all, and these doubts and reservations regarding the manner of writing and the form of the novel also receive a meaning from the perspective of religious faith. In my opinion, the passages containing religious ideas enrich and enhance the ambiguity of the text created with the help of the *bricolage* technique. These mainly investigate the conditions of novel-writing (or in a broader sense, of comprehension) after the “linguistic turning point” regarding the subject, language, things and their mode of existence.

In actual fact, the novel is a *fictitious travelogue down the Danube*, built upon the topos of quest. Its fundamental question concerns the understanding of history, and through it, ourselves. Esterházy projects the various samples of reflection upon the meaning of the Danube as a symbol onto the process of the narrator’s education. The fictitious writer who was commissioned to write an account of his travels along the Danube destroys the utopias regarding the happy coexistence of the small peoples in Central Europe. In the meantime, he deconstructs and rebuilds on multiple occasions the notion of the unity of the personality in an existential sense. He is not able to see any part of this heritage in a unified way: neither the large narratives of history, nor the discourses of humanism, while he is also unable to find the relationship or the crossover between the two. The fundamental problem of the writer is that he is unable to define the subject of his novel. “Ettől kezdve Dunának

neveztetik a dolog” [“From now on, the thing will be called Danube”], the narrator announces at one point. In a philosophical sense, these words suggest that for the purposes of our perception, there is no real directness and potentiality. The Danube can only be conceived together with its related discourses. Things always become accessible in a form already understood as something. This proves that the use of the Hungarian word *van* is made uncertain in a multiple fashion, and with its biblical allusions, also invalidated in the mirror of theology, by the text. The words “*van*” (“is”) or “*vagyok*” (“am”) cannot be pronounced by a being created in the spirit of the Bible, except by God. In other words, an existing being is “somebody made into a question and questionable” for the fictional writer. Among the many allusions of the novel is “*hogyan beszélünk, ha magunkra maradtunk, ha nincs Isten?*” [how are we going to talk when we are left to ourselves, if there is no God?]. It quotes the question raised in *Bevezetés*, and it opens up the novel structure for intertextual links. It can be seen that the narrator is struggling in his book being written with the misconception of the historic myths surrounding the Danube and with the temptation of metaphysical thinking. It is of symbolic significance that the writer is unable to surmount the object of his narration, in the phrasing of the novel, this large “*metafizikai locsi-pocsi*” [“metaphysical splish-splash”], since this “thing called Danube” has its origin and history. It comes from somewhere and goes on somewhere, and it connects points remote in space. “*Ám hogy az mit tesz, a folyam, nem tudja senki*” [“But what the river does no-one knows”], we can read in the final line of Hölderlin’s poem titled *God*, which is also part of Esterházy’s universe of quotations. In my reading, this represents the final conclusion of the novel, which means neither a resolution nor acquiescence. The narrator acknowledges the chaos experienced in the world with resignation, and prepares for the next occasion when he can listen in to the “*Conservation of the World*” with determined gaiety.

The above phrase appears in *Termelési regény* [A *Novel of Production*], and what I intend to appropriate it for in this instance is to explain the complexity of the religious register of the work with the *interminable ambiguity* of the text wrought with special care. It is my opinion that all modes of the metaphorical meaning-creation of *Termelési regény* are consistently enforced in the religious textual universe of the novel. All this could only be elucidated here with the example of the most frequently repeated sequence in the text, the example of the ritual. Let me propose just one example. In this situation at the beginning of the scene, at the usual Sunday mass, the attention of the writer wanders away; his other great passion, in addition to writing, is football, and he is a registered player in a third-division team in the capital city. In his mind he feverishly replays Saturday’s match, and this time he does not miss out on the colossal chance for a goal, when he suddenly senses the silence: “*Papírlapok egyre hangosbodó recsegése: a plébános lapozott. De nagyon lapozott. Előre, hátra, már látszott hogy nincs szisztémája, a jó szerencsére bízta magát. Az azonban késni tetszett. A mester lesett. Hirtelen megállt a lapozás. “Megvan” - mondta a plébános, s noha a mester is tudja, hogy ez felolvasva van, és folytatva így lesz: (megvan) írva....*” [“The ever louder rattling of sheets of paper: the priest was turning the page. But he was turning the pages very intensely. Forward and backward; it was already apparent that he had no system to it, and just trusted himself to his good luck. But his good luck seemed delayed. The master was on the watch. Suddenly, the turning of the pages terminated. ‘Here it is,’ said the priest, and even though the master knew it also that it was *read*, and will be continued this way:

(It is) written...”¹ The expression “megvan” at the end of the quotation is in parentheses. By omitting this word, the last clause reads: “folytatva lesz így: írva” [“it will be continued this way: written”]. The irresistible humor of this scene derives not only from the fallibility of the priest and the language mistakes made by him. From the interlude uniting the sacral and the commonplace, like in all other scenes of the novel depicting church rituals, a polysemic game of metaphorical associations emerges on the basis of the “similarity of the signifier.” (The phrase “similarity of the signifier” is borrowed from Mihály Szegedy-Maszák.)

The scene of the priest turning the pages of the Bible and the accompanying remarks result in a semantic interaction. This play on words also refers at the same time to the mode of existence of the literary text, since that is only “read,” and so it exists in the sphere of reception. Furthermore, it also refers to the relationship between the novel being written and the writer, and even to the imagined encounter of the finished work and the future reader. As a self-interpreting metaphor, it refers to the structure of the novel and to the status of the writer listening to the “conversation” of the world. The reader can encounter this immediately after this scene. Upon seeing a handicapped adolescent boy in the church, the fictional writer breathes a deeply moved prayer: “Kicsi öcsém, kicsi öcsém, kicsi öcsém” [“My little brother, my little brother, my little brother”]. This is the stratification in which the religious manifestations appear in the novel.

The story-teller of *Hrabal könyve*, who is walking the laborious path of those aspiring after faith, talks about his creative ambitions this way: “he wanted to be a good writer more than a good Christian.” The completed book is, beyond doubt, the most Catholically-spirited writing of Esterházy. In this case, however, it is not the Catholic register where the artistic success of the book is located. I only wish to refer to some of my objections regarding the poetical solutions of the text. In the book, the Lord also makes an appearance. His part of mixed tone is designed to demonstrate the loss of confidence in the transcendental intellect, since God sometimes chats with Hrabal in Czech, sometimes using the language of big-city slang with Charly Parker, who teaches him to play the saxophone. He also bickers with his mother intimately, but most often he is issuing orders on his walkie-talkie from the supreme heavenly authority to two of his angels, whose job on earth is to stop the writer’s wife in her planned abortion. This *fractured* language suggests the total relativity of values in the created world. The language of this novel, however, in comparison with *Bevezetés* or *Termelési regény*, is too monotonous to establish intertextual relationships with the Central European conditions of life and with the works of Hrabal. The text is unable to continuously *recreate* itself, and therefore, it is only partly capable of placing the failure of human relationships and of communication in general into the universal perspective of religion, and thereby *giving an expression* to this notion.

According to the rule gradually enforced in the book, the authorial narrator unites the elements of the novel otherwise difficult to fit together. This is why the temptation gains strength in the course of the reading process to interpret the story on the basis of the fictional writer’s religious trains of thought. Ultimately, the texts are organized into a unity on the basis of the Catholic dogmas formulated in the *essay-like inserts*: they become parts and expressions of the same Catholic ideology. The narrator of the novel, who could not be “either really a believer, or truly without faith” [“se igazán hívő, se igazán hitetlen”] is looking for the final grounds whereby the continuity of values can be maintained and *unhappiness* can be given a meaning. In the final

¹ This is a pun that cannot be translated: the original word of the priest “Megvan” means “Here it is” or rather “I’ve found it”; the way the master suggests the priest will continue is “(megvan) írva...”, meaning “It is written...”

analysis, he comes to a conclusion similar to that of Wittgenstein recorded in his notes written before his death: "At the end of the search for any evidence, we arrive at a believed evidence; at the end of every proving, we find a dogma." However, if we start to believe something, Wittgenstein continues, "then we do not just accept one statement, but a whole system of statements." The narrator of *Hrabal könyve*, like the writer of the Lili Csokonai book, finds the order of shareable experiences in the world of Catholic ideas. In the center of this system of faith, one finds the equal-ranking correlation within the conceptual trinity of love, suffering and happiness.