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Digital Publicness and Textual Authority: *Criticism Debates in Hungary around the Millennium*

Hungarian literary culture is one of those for which — at least from the advent of modernism — weekly and monthly journals were the most dominant fora, even though their audience was more limited than that of less elitist daily newspapers. In journals such as *Nyugat* ('Occident'), considered the most important in Hungarian modernism, literary scholars who published the majority of their work in professional academic journals also appeared among the contributors who wrote reviews on the latest production of Hungarian or European literature. However, the split between these two forms of publicity, which John Guillory traced back to the emergence in the nineteenth century of so-called "professional society" and the concurrent "decline of another occupational type, the 'critic,' whose locus of operation was the periodical public sphere",[1] did not, in most cases, tear apart the unity of œuvres or the identities of critics. In Hungary, it was merely reflected in some literary historians' refraining from a supportive aesthetic judgement of contemporary literary trends — which did not prevent them from entering political alliances with contemporary literary and/or ideological movements. Of course, the distance between the two fundamental ways of understanding the task of criticism, that is — to quote Guillory again — between conceiving it as either a "practice of judgment" or a "method of interpretation", has been steadily growing. This meant first and foremost that professionalised criticism had consolidated its position in the public arena of literary communication. One of the consequences was that since the 1970s, professional literary criticism has been invading literary journals: following the poetry and prose columns, and before the review section, studies of the same type as those that fill academic publications can be found regularly.

1 John Guillory, "Preface," in Guillory, *Professing Criticism* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2022), xi.

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This development intensified after the political change in 1989, when the rapid and intense reception of then current theories of literature also found a forum and resonance in literary journals. The consequence was that practices of reviewing—in terms of linguistic and argumentative style—came, in large part, very close to those of scholarly, theoretical articles. Claims were made that the growing ignorance of the distinction between professional and general readers (whatever the latter should mean) blocks access to understanding and, moreover, is not conducive to taking pleasure in contemporary literature. In 1995, an unusually heated debate erupted over the interpretation of the short stories of contemporary author László Garaczi. It focused on the cultural functions of criticism and the threat posed to them by the discourse of professional literary criticism (frequently called "university criticism"), which, as many argued on one side, replaced taste, sovereign judgement, self-cultivation, and similar principles with the authority of methodologies of interpretation. The other side accused a range of influential, but academically unskilled critics (often referred to as "impressionists") of lacking self-reflection and being unable either to cope with the challenges of close reading or to accept changes in the norms and concepts of literary language.[2] In 2007, a second debate, referred to as the "minor criticism debate," took place. This was a period that had already witnessed the partial migration of literature, including reviewing, to non-print media, and this new debate sought to examine how the practice of criticism was being affected by the new structures of the digital public sphere. Several contributors to the debate mainly sought to describe the emergence of new 'genres' of literary criticism—blogs, podcasts, reviews written by anonymous readers on commercial websites and/or different topic fora—with one of the key concepts being "the revolt of the reader."[3] The digital revolution, it seemed at the time, carried the promise, on the one hand, of the decline of theory-heavy or professionalized critical language, and, on the other hand, of the emergence of previously 'invisible' readers in the discourse on and evaluation of literature. More in-depth analyses

2 The quarrel broke out after the publication of papers presented at a workshop on contemporary criticism in the monthly literary journal *Jelenkor*. After a while, discussion moved to the more widely disseminated and shorter contributions to the weekly *Élet és Irodalom* and to the then largest daily newspaper *Népszabadság*. For the most recent of numerous accounts, see Róbert Smid, "A nagy kritikavita (part 1, part 2)" (https://helyorseg.ma/rovat/olvasokalauz/smid-robert-a-nagy-kritikavita-i-resz; https://helyorseg.ma/rovat/olvasokalauz/smid-robert-a-nagy-kritikavita-ii-resz; last access: 05/06/2023)

3 See the title of the related collection: *Az olvasó lázadása?*, ed. Tibor Bárány and András Rónai (Bratislava and Budapest: Kalligram, 2008).

of the debate has shown, however, that the structural transformation of the literary public sphere did not reconfirm the distinction between professional and amateur approaches along the lines of contrasting practices of interpretation.[4] Unsurprisingly, this posed the challenge of thinking about the concept of "lay reading"—bearing in mind that a certain degree of vagueness in this concept is not unrelated, so Guillory argues, to the emergence of literary criticism as a discipline, even if the latter sometimes tends to generalize (and de-specify) its own methodology as "reading as such."[5]

Another aspect of the problem follows from a specific development that accompanied the "digital revolution": The most basic communicative frameworks of critical texts require new definition, above all in terms of addressing. As Yves Citton, among others, has pointed out, the digital technology that enables networked communication makes possible on one and the same platform communication between identified (even if falsely identified) agents on the one hand and publication operations from one source to an anonymous (and incalculable) public on the other.[6] In many cases, professional critics also mix these two speech situations when they form an opinion in digital fora. How this might lead to changes in certain premises of literary communication is still difficult to judge. For an interesting case study, it is worth taking a look at the debate surrounding the unattributed quotations in Péter Esterházy's 2000 novel *Harmonia caelestis* (English: *Celestial Harmonies*, transl. J. Sollosy, 2004), that took place in 2007 and almost exclusively on digital fora. Several arguments outlined in these discussions found their way into the discourse of professional literary criticism and even affected contemporary publishing practices.

In early 2007, writer Zsuzsa Bruria Forgács published an article on Esterházy's novel[7], which—as has become increasingly clear over the years—contains countless, sometimes unusually long, quotations from a wide range of literary works without indicating the sources. This was, on the whole, nothing new or unexpected from Esterházy, since unmarked intertextuality has been a frequently discussed issue in the critical reception of his work since the early 1980s. This time, however, the focus shifted from poetic to legal aspects. Forgács' article

4 See, for example, Tibor Bárány, "Olvasók az online nyilvánosságban," in *Kulturális iparágak, kánonok és filterbuborékok*, ed. Tibor Bárány, Gábor Hamp and Veronika Hermann (Budapest: Typotex, 2020), 79-133.

5 Guillory, "The Question of Lay Reading," in John Guillory, *Professing*, 210-11.

6 Yves Citton, *Mediarchy*, trans. Andrew Brown (Cambridge, U. K. and Medford, Mass., 2019), 131-32.

7 Zsuzsa Bruria Forgács, "A visszaadás művészete," in: *Magyar Narancs* 19 (2007, 1-2): 36-37. Translations of quotations here and below are the author's own.

formulated an accusation of plagiarism and—though only implicitly—raised the similarly old question of the distinction between plagiarism and intertextuality. The tone of the piece was not very well chosen: It portrays Esterházy, among other things, as a charming text-predator and tells of sleepless nights of exploited authors who, out of respect for Esterházy, did not dare give voice to the damage done to them. Equally, its argumentative weaknesses did not seem to be well suited to re-launching the debate on "postmodern citatology", i.e. a practice that "was primarily introduced and legitimized by Esterházy in contemporary Hungarian literature", and, further, "disregards the work, creativity, authorship and feelings of others". Yet, it did trigger a strange and extremely heated debate, which took place, with a moderate level of theoretic reflexiveness, predominantly on internet fora and, ironically, under use of pseudonyms, although with the participation of authors and critics who were also active in traditional print media—as the comments show. Forgács' writing focused on the notion of *vendégszöveg* ('guest text') and described Esterhazy as an extremely rude host whose guests (no longer guest *texts* here!) are neither aware that they have been invited nor, for reasons of anonymity, can they even consider themselves guests. Although neither Forgács nor the vast majority of the participants in the debate questioned Esterházy's status as a writer, many, or at least many voices, joined in her demand that in future editions of *Harmonia caelestis* Esterházy should disclose the exact details of the sources he had quoted.[8] The American edition, which, compared with Hungarian standards, was marketed in a very strictly regulated copyright environment, contained a list of the works used, albeit an incomplete one which lacked, above all, references to the Hungarian texts cited.[9] 'Materials' that provide information in this respect have also been available to readers of the German translation.[10] In 2011, a similar list was published (without the exact data of the sources) in the electronic edition of the Hungarian text on *Digital Literary Academy* (DIA). The highlighting of the legal aspect of the accusation was far from surprising since there are numerous precedents in the European context. Some examples, among others, are the claims of the heirs of Bertolt Brecht who went to Germany's Federal Constitutional Court in 2000 to demand textual changes be made to Heiner Müller's *Ger-*

8 This demand was made less vociferously in print media than in the various public fora of the anonymous internet.

9 Péter Esterházy, *Celestial Harmonies*, trans. Judith Sollosy (New York: Ecco Press, 2005), 843-46. The introduction to the list contains an argument about the inevitably intertextual nature of sentences.

10 Peter Esterházy, *Marginalien* (Berlin: Berlin-Verlag, 2003).

mania 3 (2000),[11] the withdrawal from sale of the volume *Shooting Star* by Austrian author Franzobel due to accusations of plagiarism in 2001,[12] the legal case of Dmitry Yemets' Russian *Harry Potter* clone in the Netherlands (2003),[13] or the controversies around Helene Hegemann's bestseller *Axolotl Roadkill* in 2010.[14] In that same year, the issue of Esterházy's 'method' also resonated in Germany when Sigfrid Gauch claimed that Esterházy had adapted or even copied an entire chapter from his novel *Vaterspuren* (1979; *Traces of My Father*, trans. W. Radice, 2002) in *Celestial Harmonies*.[15]

In Hungary, the debate surrounding Esterházy's citation praxis in *Celestial Harmonies* ran far from legal fora, predominantly on the website of online literary journal *litera*. It began in early 2007 and continued until mid-2008, at least in its most intense phase, since a few comments were added even as late as 2010. Here, it was conducted in a forum under the title "AJTÓ ABLAK NYITVA VAN—SZÖVEGKERESŐ TÁRSASJÁTÉK, ki mit lel a HC-ben" ("Doors and windows open—a textual source searching board game, who finds what in HC").[16] In this context, it was possible to examine questions regarding the distinction between the misuse of intertextuality on the one hand and a more creative use of intertextuality on the other hand. In other words, to what extent can Esterházy's quotations be considered, even in a copyright sense, the results of his own literary production? Somewhat surprisingly, it is precisely this question that has received relatively little attention. Indeed, it has most often been

11 Cf. www.bundesverfassungsgericht.de/pressemitteilungen/bvg100-00.html (last access 05/06/2023).

12 See Marietta Böning, "Zwischen Freiheit der Kunst und Urheberrechtsverletzung" (www.ejournal.at/Essay/gruebel.html).

13 See John Neubauer, "How Scandalous is Plagiarism?," in *Literature and Beyond*, vol. I., ed. Eric de Haard, Wim Honselaar and Jenny Stelleman (Amsterdam: Pegasus, 2008), 449-65.

14 See "Axolotl Roadkill: Alles nur geklaut?," (www.gefuehlskonserve.de/axolotl-roadkill-alles-nur-geklaut-05022010.html); "'Axolotl Roadkill': Helena Hegemann und Ullstein Verlegerin Dr. Siv Bublitz antworten auf Plagiatworwurf" (www.buchmarkt.de/content/41393-axolotl-roadkill-helene-hegemann-und-ullstein-verlegerin-dr-siv-bublitz-antworten-auf-plagiatvorwurf.htm); Durs Grünbein, "Plagiat," in: *FAZ* 23/2/2010; Richard Kämmerlings, "Warum haben sie geklaut, Herr Grünbein?," in: *FAZ* February 24, 2010. Translations are the author's own.

15 Sigfrid Gauch, "Die Esterházy-Methode," in: *Die Rheinpfalz* February 11, 2010.

16 www.litera.hu/forum/ajto-ablak-nyitva-van-szovegkereso-tarsasjatek-ki-mit-lel-a-hc-ben. All following quotes are from this homepage. Translations are the author's own. However, the forum is no longer online at the *litera* site (last access 30/11/2012).

limited to the distinction between marked/unmarked intertextuality. For the majority of the participants in the online debate, including the alleged 'victims' of the 'predator' (it is difficult to estimate the actual number of participants because of the general pseudonymity), the central issue seemed to be to separate the layers of the novel's text as precisely as possible, that is, to differentiate Esterházy's 'genuine' discourse from the quoted texts. Such a distinction is as far removed as possible from Esterházy's concept of intertextual literariness, since it takes as little account of the double attribution of quotations as it does of the possibility that the quoted texts cannot, in certain cases, be attributed to a single (or pure) source. "I do not find Esterházy in Esterházy", reads one of the comments. Indeed, the structural principle that defines the concept of the novel—namely, that the first part is a series of loosely connected "Numbered sentences", in which the quotations are linked by the insertion of the word "édesapám" ["my father"] and, among other things, can be understood as a kind of textual basis for the family history in the second part—has been described as a "collection of texts about fathers". In some respects, this is not misleading. Surprisingly, the decisive question in the critical assessment of unmarked intertextuality in Esterházy's work in the 1980s—to what extent knowledge of the sources influences understanding of the texts—has remained mostly unaddressed.

Among the more than a thousand comments and longer contributions, there are suggestions as to how to interpret the composition of *Celestial Harmonies*, which borrows its title from the early eighteenth-century cantata collection of Prince Pál Esterházy, itself also a kind of compilation: One critic, for example, refers to his own offline publication, in which he aims to demonstrate that the structure of cross-references between the two parts is not at all contingent. However, most commenters focus on the demand for transparency regarding quotation sources. Interpretations that seek to explain the way in which quotations were used in the context of the narrative concept of *Harmonia Caelestis*, or that seek to address the extent to which the meaning of different text fragments was altered by their juxtaposition, remain in a significant minority compared to gestures of moral judgement over textual predation. In the context of the latter, Esterházy's compilation technique is mocked in terms which, tellingly, explicitly refer to quotation techniques commonly used in contemporary entertainment or popular culture formats such as remixing or recycling (the author is sometimes referred to as "DJ Esterházy" or even called a "Text Jockey"). Other commenters resort to vulgar moralism: One comment opines that Esterházy may be a "good writer, but

not a decent man", while another goes so far as to regard him as a "criminal".

It follows almost inevitably from such narrowly focused scrutiny that the (by no means unsuccessful) quotation hunt led to legal questions concerning the concept of authorship, among them: Is it legitimate for Esterházy to have received fees for several pages of texts for which he was not the originator? What damage does this cause to the authors quoted? Among the proposed responses to these questions are (fictitious) counter-measures, for example, publishing Esterházy's texts under a different name or compiling an edition of *Harmonia caelestis* which the 'robbed' authors would publish under a pseudonym of their own choosing.

Few participants in the debate express doubts about the aesthetic qualities of the text. Several point out that Esterházy had selected and assembled highly attractive texts with an unerring sense of aesthetic quality. Indeed, this included texts by authors so little known that it was only through the encounter with *Harmonia caelestis* that many readers discovered them; that is, it is thanks to Esterházy that their public profile was raised—which, of course, leads back to the question of the 'damage' caused to these authors through Esterházy's suppression of the sources. One comment, for example, reports on a related experiment: Anyone who enters a quotation from the poem *Apám* ("My Father") by Transylvanian poet Béla Cselényi into an internet search engine will be directed to Esterházy as the author. The function of the unmarked quotation, in the sense of network theory, would thus be to further consolidate the hegemony of a canonised author through *googling*.

Demands to disclose the sources are not only supported by arguments citing the American and German editions of the novel and the legal responsibility attributed to Esterházy; sceptical diagnoses of the present state of culture also appear with remarkable frequency in the debate, focusing on the one hand on alleged shifts in literary conventions and on the other on the conditions of the media environment. For example, commenters remark variously that intertextual writing has become scarce since the turn of the Millennium, that there are authors who want neither to rely on quotations nor to be quoted, that "postmodernism is dead", and even that: "Today there are authors again! There is, again, original literature which takes its starting point from life and not from text, there are characters again, conflicts which are drawn from life and not created by the text", and so on. Several statements give the opinion that, in the age of the Internet and its concurrent 'revolution' or 'democratization' of information distribution, the notion of intellectual property has lost much of its relevance.

It is an argument that could be made both for and against Esterházy, as well as for and against the quote-hunters in the forum.

Esterházy's reactions to the debate[17] could be described as either largely superficial or not particularly skillful. Statements like "In short: she [Forgács] is right. Seen more broadly: beyond that, she is wrong," or references to a 30- to 40-page essay on the subject that would have to be written but is not really planned, did little to shed light on the author's position. However, he did admit that his approach is indeed "brutal" and breaks with certain conventions, further commenting that "times have changed in the meantime" and that, since "it all developed outside the rule of law [that is, in the late Communist regime of the 1980s], a non-legal framework, considerations of law do not apply". Nevertheless, the crucial point remains that "I look at everything from the viewpoint of the text that is being produced," i.e. only the text itself can account for the techniques it employs, which also means that a strictly legal approach to the problem would not serve the interests of literature.

This is far from revealing the reasons behind recent developments in the judgements on "postmodern" citation. Yet, one possible explanation could be found in the fact that since 1989 there have been rule-of-law norms in Hungary, which has increased the significance of the copyright aspects of literary quotation techniques. In the forum of *litera*, for instance, the fact that Esterházy's earlier volume *Bevezetés a szépirodalomba* ('Introduction to Literature', 1986) did not provoke similar discussions at the time was explained in retrospect by the fact that "at that time nobody cared about property, including intellectual property. We lived in a world of everything for everyone." However, bearing in mind that in that same period the same problem was as rampant in Western European countries as it was in Hungary, such an explanation hardly seems satisfactory. Given the question of what would have been prevented if Esterházy had always revealed all his textual sources,[18] the answer could only point to one possibility: the indeterminability of whether a text or a statement

17 The following quotes are from these interviews: László Valuska, "Nem vagyok mutogatós író. Interjú Esterházy Péterrel" (http://index.hu/kultur/klassz/ep0413/); András Greff, "'Minél idegenebb területekre menni'— Esterházy Péter író," in: *Magyar Narancs* 20 (2008, 17): 27. Translations are the author's own.

18 The notes and self-commentaries that pervade Esterházy's 2013 novel *Egyszerű történet vessző száz oldal—a kardozós változat* ["Simple Story Comma One Hundred Pages—the Duel-Version"] may be a reaction to the demands of the debate and in a sense realise this option, putting it in a sharply ironic perspective.

should be attributed to the text's author or instead to one or more external sources would become untenable and thus, from another angle, the experience of it being impossible to identify one's own text or voice would become unavailable (or repressed)—in a sense, a radical conception of irony that preoccupied Esterházy's reception in the 1980s would be rendered ineffective. Viewed from this perspective, the whole debate on the quotations of *Harmonia caelestis* is less a sign of a disillusionment with postmodern citatology or a demand for stricter legal regulation of the literary field, but rather expresses the fear that, under certain conditions, the disposal of one's 'own' voice or text as such might be challenged.

It is therefore probably not entirely coincidental that the debate has focused so much on the contemporary media environment of communication and the altered conditions for the creation and use of texts in general, in short, the copy-and-paste culture that is characteristic of the so-called digital age. In Helene Hegemann's case, for example, it was not only the author—who is also known as a film director—who referred to the fact that her background lies in a field where "one tends to approach the writing of a novel in a directorial way, i.e. one helps oneself wherever one finds inspiration," and to the fact that her novel was written in (and represents) a decade in which "the right to copy and adapt has replaced this whole copyright excess". Even the publisher's statement contains a sentence about the questionable responsibility of a young author who "grew up with the 'sharing' culture of the internet."[19] It is thus not a little ironic that the debate on the *litera* webpage was conducted under compulsory pseudonymity and with the use of numerous unmarked quotations: even those contributors who revealed their offline identities on the forum insisted, in the spirit of current 'netiquette', on being addressed by their pseudonyms. A similar textual anonymity or pseudonymity was sharply criticised in *Harmonia caelestis*. Having served, in the 1980s and 1990s, as a home (in Hungary perhaps also as a refuge) for ironic discourse, literature now seems to be confronted with a need for authenticity and originality; a need, which, however, belongs to a society that is itself increasingly reluctant to maintain these categories in the everyday practice of processing texts or information.

19 Neubauer, "How Scandalous is Plagiarism?."