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## **“My Father: A Truly Untranslatable Pun” The English (Non-)Reception of Two Hungarian Novels**

### **1. Introduction**

The aim of this paper is to contribute to the understanding of how the globalisation of the publishing industry affects the market for the literature of peripheral countries and languages. More specifically, by examining two contemporary Hungarian novels, I aim to explore the factors that contribute to or hinder the publication of translation of literary fiction written in a peripheral language, with particular focus on translation into English, the hyper-central language.

The two novels - *Revised Edition* by Péter Esterházy and *No Live Files Remain* by András Forgách - lend themselves readily to this kind of investigation, due to both their similarities and differences. The subject matter of the two novels is strikingly similar: both concern the authors' discovery that their parents had worked as agents for the secret services of the Communist party-state in Hungary. Curiously, both novels were sequels to earlier works published by the same authors, written before their respective discoveries, and served as homages to their parents.

By the time *Revised Edition* was published, Péter Esterházy was already a highly acclaimed writer on the international scene-especially in Germany-though five of his books had also been translated into English. Since then, *Revised Edition* has been translated into several languages. However, no English translation of *Revised Edition* exists to date. András Forgách, in contrast, was not well-known internationally; however, *No Live Files Remain* became one of the highlights of the 2016 Frankfurt Book Fair and was sold to prestigious publishers in several languages, including English to Simon & Schuster UK. By mapping the efforts of various

actors to introduce the two novels to the international-and especially the English-language-publishing scene, I aim to provide a tentative answer to how and why this occurred.

After outlining the theoretical background of my research, I will briefly situate the two novels within the Hungarian literary scene. Next, I will discuss the international presentation of Forgách's novel by the author and his agent, and comment on the title and framing of the English-language editions. Based on interviews with various representatives of the publishing industry as well as Esterházy's friends and family, I will attempt to map the failure of efforts to find an English publisher for *Revised Edition*, and make a case for the book's significance. Finally, I will summarize the reasons for the diverging fates of the two books, distinguishing between those specific to these cases-i.e., related to individual decisions, aspirations and skills-and those related to the functioning of the globalised publishing industry.

My research draws on a variety of sources: theory, reviews, interviews, emails, informal conversations, as well as participant observation and practice, since in my role as foreign rights director for a Hungarian publisher of literary fiction, I am also part of the publishing industry whose operations I investigate in this paper. Therefore, my research questions are grounded in challenges I encountered in the course of my work at international book fairs and other events within the international publishing industry. However, as a researcher, my aim was exploration and understanding rather than business activity. These aims, I realized, often led me down different paths and to different conclusions. Even though the result may be eclectic in certain sections, at times verging on literary criticism or investigation, this eclecticism was necessitated by the nature of my topic, which lies at the intersection of theory and practice.

## 2. Theoretical Background

The dynamics of product flow in the global book market are characterized by a highly uneven pattern (*cf.* Casanova, 2002: 7-9; Sapiro, 2020), with the vast majority of translations originating from English, the hyper-central language (*cf.* Van Es and Heilbron, 2015: 297). Even though the globalised book market has facilitated the transnational circulation of books, the transformation of book pub-

lishing into an industry dominated by large corporations has negatively impacted diversity-in the qualitative, rather than the quantitative, sense-as the industry must adhere to “the logic of the field” and “the law of profitability,” therefore imposing “commercial censorship” on many books (*cf.* Sapiro, 2016: 87). These constraints increasingly apply to small, independent publishers, especially in the UK and the US (*ibid.*: 88).<sup>1</sup>

The globalisation of the literary field “conceals a high degree of centralization and a concentration of the power of consecration in central cities and in the hands of the most prestigious publishers and agents” (Sapiro, 2020: 496). For a book written in a peripheral language, several factors-beyond the book's quality and the willingness and competence of the actors involved-shaped by the structure and features of the global book market facilitate the dissemination of certain books while creating obstacles for others.

In the last decade or so, the flow of literary fiction from the periphery to the centre has been explored in numerous articles that draw on the theoretical framework of Pierre Bourdieu's field theory, which paved the way for the sociological study of publishing, the study of power relations in the translation of literature by Pascale Casanova and others, and Gisèle Sapiro's works, which extend Bourdieu's model to the transnational circulation of literature. These articles establish various models that provide analytical tools for further research in this field, tracing the life of books from national creation to transnational circulation. They examine the multiple (micro, meso, and macro) levels that determine a book's fate, from the national to the transnational, exploring the factors, actors, and moments that interact and ultimately lead to either breakthrough or rejection. The authors of the papers emphasize that these are often “complex and unpredictable chains of events” (*cf.* McMartin and Gentile, 2020: 272), yet they all agree that the constraints of a globalised publishing industry largely affect the fate of books and authors from the periphery.

The articles I reference were primarily written by scholars at universities in the Netherlands and Belgium and discuss the transnational production of Dutch/

<sup>1</sup> *Cf.* Bourdieu's (2008) analysis of how publishers-specifically French publishers in his case-navigate the field based on criteria ranging from pure economic considerations to a combination of literary merit and economic feasibility. He also discusses the role of small publishers in publishing translations as a form of “literary resistance against the invasion of commercial literature, mainly from English.” (p. 19)

Flemish literary fiction.<sup>2</sup> Translation studies and the sociology of literature have a strong tradition in these countries, and this particular linguistic scene lends itself to such investigation, as it is “a small but highly internationalized literary field” (Franssen and Kuipers, 2013: 49). The Hungarian literary field is similar to the Dutch/Flemish one in that it is a small field with relatively high prestige. However, it differs from the Dutch/Flemish field in that it is much less internationalized, institutionalized, and consequently much less studied. In analysing the factors that led to one of the Hungarian books discussed here being translated into English and the other being rejected by English-language publishers, I will rely heavily on the models outlined in these articles, as the conditions and mechanisms they describe can be adapted to the transnational circulation of Hungarian literary fiction.

### 3. Two Strikingly Similar Stories: The Birth of Two Hungarian Novels

After the fall of the Communist regimes in Eastern Europe in 1989-90, people gradually began to realise the extent to which the Communist secret services had pervaded these societies. A number of works on this topic were written by Hungarian writers involved in various ways: some were themselves reported on, often by close friends, others were agents or relatives of agents.<sup>3</sup> The two books I discuss here belong to the latter category.

Péter Esterházy, a scion of an ancient noble family and renowned writer, finished his magnum opus *Celestial Harmonies* in 2001. In that book, he wrote about his father, a larger-than-life figure, extending the term “my father” (*édesapám*) to refer to all the male figures in the Esterházy family, dating back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Thus, Esterházy's father became an allegorical figure representing

<sup>2</sup> I rely especially on Van Es and Heilbron (2015) and McMartin and Gentile (2020). The former article discusses the flow of Dutch literary fiction into English-i.e., from periphery to centre-using a multi-level field approach (for a description of the model, see Van Es and Heilbron, 2015: 298), while the latter analyses the transnational circulation of a single book, Stefan Hertmans's *War and Turpentine*, translated into thirty languages, focusing on the agents involved in the process. Another important article I relied on is by Franssen and Kuipers, which discusses the choices of Dutch acquisition editors in the global market, i.e., the flow to the periphery. Sapiro (2008) provides a general analytical framework for the circulation of translated books.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Deczki (2017), a comprehensive article on this topic.

Hungarian history. One year after the publication of *Celestial Harmonies*, Esterházy published a book entitled *Revised Edition*, in which he revealed that his father had been an agent of the Communist regime—a fact he discovered after the publication of *Celestial Harmonies*.

*Revised Edition* takes the form of a commentary: Esterházy printed the reports written by his father that he had previously copied by hand. The reports are printed in red, while the son's reactions are written in black. His immediate reactions to the text are printed without brackets, while later reactions are enclosed in square brackets (2001) and chevrons (2002). By copying his father's reports, Esterházy traces how his father's daily engagement and cooperation with the regime alters his personality, daily life, and interactions with others. What we witness is the mechanism and logic of oppression, and the process through which an autonomous individual becomes not only an oppressed person but an instrument of oppression. *Revised Edition* is also a Bildungsroman, a novel that traces the process through which the son—and a postmodern writer—comes to terms with a reality that changes everything, as well as the gradual erosion of the father's character as he spends increasing time working as an agent.

In 2007, András Forgách, primarily known as a playwright and dramaturg, wrote a novel entitled *Zehuze* (Hebrew for “*c'est la vie*,” “that's what there is”), a 700-page family memoir consisting of the fictitious letters of a Hungarian-born Israeli woman written between 1947 and 1976 to her daughter—Forgách's mother—who grew up in Tel Aviv, later became a fervent Communist and anti-Zionist, emigrated to Hungary, and started a family there. Later on, Forgách—one of the four children—discovered that his adored mother had been an agent of the Communist secret service in Hungary, replacing his father after the latter became mentally ill. Eight years later, Forgách wrote a book entitled *No Live Files Remain* about this revelation. *No Live Files Remain* is divided into three parts: the first is the story of the parents in the form of short stories, with flashbacks to their past in British Mandate Palestine, interspersed with their letters and reports from his mother's handler in footnotes. The second part consists of poems, with the parent's letters in footnotes, while the third is the son's commentary on their story.

The Hungarian reception of the two books is not the subject of this article. I will briefly mention that Esterházy's book was a significant literary, cultural, and social event, accompanied by numerous reviews from literary critics and articles by

journalists. The articles represented a broad spectrum of opinions, ranging from denunciation to praise of the book and its author. Forgách's book generated less of a stir, but was also highly controversial, more in terms of its content and message, as well as the persona of the author. In contrast, critics of Esterházy's book were divided between those who considered it a literary masterpiece and those who argued that it lacked literary merit.

#### **4. The Presentation of András Forgách's *No Live Files Remain* on the International Scene**

Forgách's book *No Live Files Remain* was one of the “hot” books at the Frankfurt Book Fair in 2016, which means that it was one of the most frequently mentioned books at informal gatherings of the industry professionals. But by the time the book was presented at the fair, the translation rights had already been bought by thirteen foreign publishers, all of whom were highly prestigious literary publishers in Western Europe, North America and Egypt. In the following sections, I will try to explore the reasons behind such unprecedented success of this Hungarian literary book, which was published only a year earlier.

##### **4.1. The Publisher/Agent**

The Hungarian publishing industry has its own distinct characteristics, owing to its history of state ownership (until 1990) and limited contact with the international publishing industry (cf. Orzóy, 2021: 72-75). In recent decades, however, Hungarian publishing professionals have begun to integrate into the international publishing sphere and apply the skills they have acquired there to transform the domestic publishing industry. One of the most important emerging figures in the market was Bence Sárközy, co-founder of the Libri Group, which soon became the leading distributor in the Hungarian market.

After acquiring Jelenkor, a prestigious literary publisher, in 2015, Sárközy founded a literary agency to represent the translation rights of Jelenkor's authors. As Péter Nádas, the publisher's most esteemed author, was represented by a German-Swiss literary agency, Sárközy had to find another author with the right qualities to pitch

to foreign publishers.

“*No Live Files Remain* by András Forgách came into my life as a meteor last summer,” Sárközy wrote in a brochure about Forgách's book, prepared specially for the Frankfurt Book Fair. Although it is common practice for publishers and agents to produce printed materials-typically catalogues or rights lists-for book fairs, the brochure on *No Live Files Remain* was unusual. For one thing, it was prepared with great care, featuring a special design, along with photos, documents, and quotes from reviews. Moreover, it devoted an entire page-the first page-to the publisher/agent. It aimed to signal the arrival on the international literary scene not only of a book, but also of a publisher/agent with a book that has the potential for international success.

## 4.2. Framing

In order for a book to attract the attention of acquisition editors, it must be framed convincingly by the agent. For literary fiction coming from a peripheral language, it must be framed “according to specific literary and cultural codes” (cf. Van Es and Heilbron, 2015: 303). Generally speaking, a Hungarian book would typically have to be framed as being distinctly Hungarian and, at the same time, universal or cosmopolitan.

When asked in an interview about the reasons for the international success of Forgách's book, the publisher/agent explained that he pitched it to international publishers as follows: “It is about the undying love of a son for his mother, who turns out to have betrayed even her loved ones for an ideal.”<sup>4</sup> Framed primarily as a universal family story of love and betrayal, *No Live Files Remain* is also specifically a Hungarian book, according to the Hungarian publisher's website, as it sheds light on how “Hungarian society has not yet managed to deal with a trauma of this kind, which has deeply touched the lives of many people in the country. The enthusiastic reception of András Forgách's book is a moving testimony of this desire to confront the past.”<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> “Egy fiú múlhatatlanul szereti az anyját, akiről a halála után sok évvel kiderül, hogy egy eszme miatt elárulta még a szeretteit is.” Pálos. All translations in this article from Hungarian, Italian and Russian are mine.

<sup>5</sup> <https://sarkozyandco.wordpress.com/2016/04/07/andras-forgach-no-live-files-remain/#more-668>.

### 4.3. The Author's Interventions

As András Forgách explained in an interview (*cf.* Baczoni, 2016), the sale of translation rights to several territories was based on Forgách's self-translation of a substantial part of the novel. He also included a section not part of the original Hungarian edition (written in English and entitled "London, 1962," this chapter recounts his father's exploits in London as an agent of the Hungarian Communist secret services; it was also included in the revised Hungarian edition, in Forgách's self-translation). When Simon & Schuster bought the World English rights to the book, they commissioned a professional and experienced literary translator, Paul Olchváry.

The final translation included two new chapters, while some parts were omitted. As Forgách's publisher/agent explained in an interview (*cf.* Rostás, 2018), there were several reasons why the revision was necessary: first, many realia familiar to Hungarian readers needed to be explained for the foreign reader; second, some parts seemed out of place in what Bence Sárközy called the "international version," while others warranted inclusion. Third, and most interestingly, as Bence Sárközy put it:

in Hungary, personal drama does not require the same level of explanation as it does abroad: here, the vulnerability of the situation—that we cannot get a clear picture, or only a few drops at a time, depending on the prevailing political wind, of the agents of the previous regime—forms part of our common knowledge.<sup>6</sup>

In other words, the publisher/agent assumed that certain events, causal chains, personal choices, and so on would not be understandable or could be misunderstood without altering the original Hungarian, and the author agreed with this decision.

### 4.4. Titles of the English-Language Editions

András Forgách's book was published in the UK by Scribner, a prestigious literary imprint of Simon & Schuster UK. *Scribner* holds World English rights,

<sup>6</sup> *"Itthon a személyes dráma nem igényel olyan magyarázatokat, mint más országokban: a mi közös tudásunknak jobban része az a kiszolgáltatottság, hogy nem – vagy csupán a politikai széljárásnak megfelelően csepegtetve – nyerhetünk tiszta képet az előző rendszer ügynöküeiről."* *Ibid.*

excluding Canada, where the publisher is Hamish Hamilton, an imprint of Penguin Random House. The Scribner edition was published in 2018 under the title *No Live Files Remain*, a literal translation of the original, which was changed to the title of the Canadian edition, *The Acts of My Mother*, for their 2019 edition—a title that is easier to understand and relate to, as it enhances the story's family angle rather than the political one. The translator, Paul Olchvary, concurred:

In Hungarian, the original title works splendidly, since it immediately conjures up Communist-era state security files in the minds of potential readers, along with all of that emotional baggage; in English, at least for readers who didn't grow up living in police states, that isn't the case. Not that inviting people to wonder, read the book description to find out more, or even to Google a bit, is necessarily a problem in and of itself, but publishers naturally want to limit the time potential readers spend scratching their heads if they are to have a realistic prospect of reaching a relatively wide audience and selling enough books to remain financially viable businesses; indeed, it's essential that a title can hook a good many people from the start—and in this case, who can't relate to the acts of a mother, after all?<sup>7</sup>

## 5. Unpublished in English: Peter Esterhazy's *Revised Edition*

*Revised Edition* by Peter Esterhazy, one of the internationally best-known figures in Hungarian literature, who was “canonized” as early as the 1980s in Germany (*cf.* Lorincz, 2002: 27), was published thirteen years before Andras Forgach's book was first released. Published in thirteen languages to date,<sup>8</sup> it has been reasonably well received in several territories, especially in Russia, where it garnered an enthusiastic response from readers and critics alike (*cf.* Sereda, 2022: 261-262), and inspired Lyudmila Ulitskaya's novel *Jacob's Ladder* (*ibid.*: 270). In the Netherlands, the widely translated psychologist Douwe Draaisma found

<sup>7</sup> Email communication, 13 July 2023. Olchvary has since passed away (February 2024).

<sup>8</sup> According to the database of the Digital Literary Academy at the Petofi Literary Museum, Budapest: <https://pim.hu/hu/dia/dia-tagjai/esterhazy-peter#bibliografia>.

the contribution of Esterházy's two books-*Celestial Harmonies* and *Revised Edition*-so important for what they reveal about memory that he devoted an entire chapter of his book entitled *Forgetting: Myths, Perils and Compensations* to them (cf. Draaisma, 2017: 179-192).

Although as many as seven books by Esterházy have been translated into English,<sup>9</sup> including the 'prequel' to *Revised Edition*-Esterházy's magnum opus, *Celestial Harmonies*-and *Not Art*, a less successful work published after *Revised Edition*, the latter has yet to be translated into English.

### **5.1. What Might the Reason(s) for the Rejection of *Revised Edition* Be?**

I inquired with Esterházy's agent, Marc Koralnik of the Liepman Agency. He referred me to Dan Halpern, the editor of Ecco, the publisher of *Celestial Harmonies*, who wrote me that, due to the lack of success with *Celestial Harmonies*, they decided against publishing the next book.<sup>10</sup>

Esterházy's translator, Judy Sollosy, has a slightly different recollection. She told me in a personal conversation that, although *Celestial Harmonies* had been well received, Esterházy's publishers were reluctant to publish *Revised Edition*. Sollosy, who-as is common with translators of peripheral languages-also acts as an (unofficial and unpaid) agent for the authors she translates, spoke with several American publishers who had previously published Esterházy's works, but none of them were interested. Although Sollosy translated the author's preface, and had it published multiple times<sup>11</sup> in the hope of attracting a publisher's attention, no offer was made for the English translation rights of the book. Sollosy believes that the reluctance of American publishers was motivated by the perception that the book would not be understood by the American audience and would ultimately harm Esterházy's reputation. In her words:

<sup>9</sup> *The Glance of Countess Hahn-Hahn* was published only in the UK, *Not Art* only in the US. *Helping Verbs of the Heart*, *The Book of Hrabal*, *A Little Hungarian Pornography*, *She Loves Me* and *Celestial Harmonies* were published both in the UK and the US. Sollosy, p. 109.

<sup>10</sup> Email communication, 28 February 2022.

<sup>11</sup> E.g., in *The Wall in My Head: Words and Images from the Fall of the Iron Curtain. A Words Without Borders Anthology*, ed. Words Without Borders. Rochester, NY: Open Letter, 2009.

The three of us-Esterházy, Halpern and Sollosy-sat down for dinner after *Celestial Harmonies* had already been published, and Halpern loved it. He then asked Péter what the next book was going to be. Péter said it was called *Revised Edition*. “So what's it about,” he asked, and we told him. Halpern replied, “I don't think we want this; it would be a mistake.” I said I completely agreed and translated what he had said to Péter. “America is a different world. They wouldn't understand a word of it. They don't know what an agent or a handler is. Plus, it's full of unfamiliar names. They only know one thing: agents are bloody Communists. Oh, so if Péter's father is a Communist, then his son must also be a Communist.” Péter said, “Okay.” Still, I kept trying to pitch it to American publishers but they all said, “No, thank you.”<sup>12</sup>

In a personal conversation, Esterházy's widow Gitta Esterházy explained that her husband had never enjoyed the same reputation in the United States as in Germany simply because, while he spoke excellent German, he had almost no English skills. When *Celestial Harmonies* was published, the American publisher invited the Esterházy's to New York and hosted a party for them. However, this was a one-off event, as he was unable to benefit from the networking opportunity because he could not communicate with the other guests. Gitta Esterházy felt that, in addition to her husband's lack of English skills, the absence of support from influential figures in the publishing industry and prominent American cultural figures-such as the endorsement of Susan Sontag for Péter Nádas and László Krasznahorkai-was also a liability. In contrast, she pointed out that both Esterházy's German and Italian translators were renowned writers themselves - Terézia Mora and Giorgio Pressburger, respectively - which proved to be a significant asset in those territories. Gitta Esterházy agreed that the fact that *Revised Edition* dealt with a topic difficult for American readers to understand was also a factor in the book's rejection.<sup>13</sup>

In discussing the very limited reception of Esterházy in the UK, Zsuzsanna Varga also mentions the importance of the fact that Esterházy did not have a translator living in the UK or a strong network in British literary circles, as was the case

<sup>12</sup> Personal communication, 23 July 2021.

<sup>13</sup> Personal communication, 2 March 2023.

with Sándor Márai or Magda Szabó whose translators-George Szirtes and Len Rix, respectively-maintained the authors' presence in the UK (cf. Varga, 2022: 107).<sup>14</sup>

Marianne D. Birnbaum, professor emerita at UCLA and a friend of Esterházy, who was also the author of two books of interviews with him,<sup>15</sup> wrote one of the few reviews on *Revised Edition* in English to date.<sup>16</sup> When I asked her in an email about Esterházy's reception in the US, she replied that

if I am to be honest, we cannot speak of true reception. A few of his novels (for example, the Danube book [*The Glance of Countess Hahn-Hahn*]) received a minimal number of brief reviews... Only those intellectually and politically engaged with Central Europe read him, at a time when distinguishing between the Soviet Union and the countries west of the main power source was pivotal. After the fall of the Soviet Union, interest in those countries (previously triggered by their dependence and opposition) gradually atrophied and nearly disappeared (perhaps Kundera is the only exception, or Hrabal, but neither is popular; they are seen as 'elitist reading').<sup>17</sup>

Birnbaum also mentioned that, as in the UK, there were no influential critics in the US-nor any translator residing there-who championed Esterházy. She believed that the reason *Revised Edition* was never translated into English was simply that

<sup>14</sup> Esterházy had three translators: Richard Aczel (*The Glance of Countess Hahn-Hahn*), who translated only one book by Esterházy and did not continue; Judy Sollosy, who resides in Budapest; and Michael Henry Heim (1943-2012) (*The Helping Words of the Heart*), a Slavist professor in California whose main focus was Russian, Czech and Serbian literature. (*Ibid.*, 101)

<sup>15</sup> Birnbaum, Marianna D., *Esterházy-kalauz. [A Guide to Esterházy]*, Budapest: Magvető, 1991, revised ed. 2017; *Az évek iszkolása. [The Flight of the Years]*, Budapest: Magvető, 2015. (The latter was also published in German as *Die Flucht der Jahre*, Berlin: Hanser, 2017.) Birnbaum passed away in February 2025.

<sup>16</sup> Birnbaum, Marianne D., "Peter Esterházy. Javitott kiadás", *World Literature Today*, 2003, 77 (1), pp. 116-117. Cf. also Land, Thomas, "Beaten into Betrayal?", *Times Literary Supplement*, 13 September 2002, p. 24.

<sup>17</sup> Email communication, 10 March 2023. In her article on the American presence of Péter Esterházy, his translator Judy Sollosy mentions several examples to illustrate that Esterházy is known to American intellectuals. For instance, John Updike refers to him in one of his essay collections. Sollosy also points out that Esterházy's books have been taught at least at three American universities (cf. Szöllösy, 2022: 113-114). It must be noted, however, that two of the professors who taught Esterházy are of Hungarian origin-Marianna D. Birnbaum and Ivan Sanders, the translator of Péter Nádas.

he was not famous enough, and therefore the scandal itself was too distant from the US. It made a splash where informing by a friend, a family member or a foe was an expected and frequently experienced catastrophe in an ordinary person's daily life. (*ibid.*)

Birnbaum thought *Revised Edition* is

an important and legitimate, albeit extremely painful, work to write-and for us to read-in deciding how far deep love felt for a parent can take you when accepting his or her responses to life's moral challenges. We desperately needed a book like this because we have lived with parents and kinfolk tainted by the events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Nazism, Stalinism, etc.). However, many features that he considered beneath his dignity in his father's behaviour were-as Esterházy later realized-an unfortunate attempt to save the lives and careers of his sons. (*ibid.*)

## **5.2. *Revised Edition*: An Important Contribution to Literature**

In both books discussed here, the central issue is the son coming to terms with the legacy of a parent who served as an agent for the Communist state security services. In other words, it is the understanding of a person whose life not only involved constant deceit but was, in fact, “A life as a command by the Ministry of the Interior,”<sup>18</sup> as Esterházy put it. Both books provide complex answers to this question, the discussion of which would far exceed the scope of this article. Here, I will highlight only a few aspects of *Revised Edition* that make it an important contribution to literature and intellectual history.

In an interview with Esterházy, his interlocutor suggested that American readers might be inclined to view Esterházy's father's story “in black-and-white terms-the hero turns into the bad guy” (a suggestion that confirms the fears of the translator and the publisher, as mentioned above). Esterházy's response was as follows:

<sup>18</sup> “Egy élet mint belügyes utasítás.” (Esterházy, 2002: 134)

My father's life exemplifies how Eastern European history can crush individuals, their lives, and their fate, like a steamroller. In a dictatorship, weakness invites immediate reprisal. I believe that an American may have little understanding of dictatorship. (I know that this may sound somewhat conceited, as if we know something here-or know it better-but I do not believe this.) A totalitarian dictatorship-and at that time, that is precisely what it was-essentially destroys society, and the individual is completely at the mercy of the powers that be. This is an entirely different dimension from America in the fifties, the McCarthy era, so to speak. (Hallberg, 2010)

Esterházy's *Revised Edition* explores this topic through a range of literary devices beyond the plot. Indeed, nonlinear narration, the blending of genres, and the extensive use of “guest texts” (as Esterházy referred to texts borrowed from various sources in his books)-that is, devices associated with “experimental” or “postmodern” writing-appear essential for conveying what the Russian critic Boris Dubin called a “new anthropological optics and experience.”<sup>19</sup>

In her article on Communist agents in Hungarian literature, the Hungarian critic Sarolta Deczki argues that while “realistic novels” tend to depict an unquestioned “reality,” literary texts about agents seem to

question everything: reality, the status of the narrator, the possibility of narration, as well as language. All of this is rooted not in theoretical considerations, but in the so-called reality that, here in the lower [Eastern] part of Europe, we can never really be sure of, as the natural mode of existence-both in terms of life and history-is the absurd. (...) *Unheimlichkeit* is an inherent part of life and reality, and at present, it seems that this is how it will remain for a long time to come.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> “новую антропологическую оптику и опыт.” (Dubin, 2009)

<sup>20</sup> “minden kérdésessé válik: a valóság, az elbeszélő, az elbeszélhetőség egyáltalán, valamint a nyelv is. Mindezek pedig nem teoretikus megfontolásban gyökereznek, hanem magában az úgynevezett valóságban. Amelyben errefelé, Európa-Alsón sohasem lehetünk egészen bizonyosak, hiszen az abszurd errefelé az élet és a történelem természetes létmódja. (...) Az Unheimlichkeit az élet és az identitás része, s jelenleg úgy tűnik, hogy még sokáig az is marad.” (Deczki, 2017: 52) As Zsuzsanna Varga (2022: 102-103) points out, Richard Aczel emphasized as early as in 1988 that while Esterházy's prose can be regarded as postmodern due to many formal features in his work, the relativism of postmodernism is alien to him. In Aczel's opinion, Esterházy uses postmodern devices in order to challenge Hungarian literary tradition (Aczel, 1988: 38).

In the words of Boris Dubin, the form that Esterházy chose to tell his father's story-integrating his father's voice as an agent into his text, in a way that he “accepts it as one of his own voices, absorbs it, and interacts with it”,<sup>21</sup>-opens new possibilities for literature. Rather than thinking in terms of the dichotomy between truth lies, “‘them’ and ‘us’, power and family, authorities and the individual,”<sup>22</sup> Esterházy's book shows that the boundaries between these are obliterated by the totalitarian state. By using his father's reports as “guest texts,” and chronicling his immediate reactions to them, Esterházy found a way to lend immediacy to the suffering of both father and son, while avoiding the “wisdom” of hindsight. The roughness and unevenness of the parallel texts stand in contrast to the extravagant, buoyant text of *Celestial Harmonies*, which, in Esterházy's own words, “by giving suffering lives a form, tamed suffering itself.”<sup>23</sup>

Yet *Revised Edition* provides readers not only with the experience of how a totalitarian dictatorship crushes individuals,<sup>24</sup> but also, on a more subtle level, shows how self-censorship and silencing operate in societies of any kind. As one German critic noted, Esterházy's strategy-critiquing power through the criticism and deconstruction of language use-highlights something “that we in the West hardly pay attention to, namely that power also exists here-but we hardly notice it” (Dotzauer, 1989, quoted in Lőrincz, 2020: 57). Thus, beyond being merely a report from a now largely unfamiliar world, *Revised Edition* may also contribute to our understanding of human behaviour in non-totalitarian societies, since it describes how individual characters and social networks are eroded by the powers that be and offers new perspectives on issues such as complacency, duplicitousness, and victimhood.

<sup>21</sup> “принимает его как один из собственных голосов, вбирает в себя, взаимодействует с ним.” (Dubin, 2009)

<sup>22</sup> “между ‘ними’ и ‘нами’, государством и семьей, властью и человеком.” (*Ibid.*)

<sup>23</sup> “azáltal, hogy formát adott a szenvedő életeknek, a szenvedésnek, azáltal meg is szelídítette.” (Esterházy, 2002: 66) Discussing his extensive use of borrowed texts in a book of interviews with Marianna D. Birnbaum, long before the publication of *Revised Edition*, Esterházy described the effect of foreign texts in his own works as creating a sort of “sway” (*billegés*) or “tension” (*feszültség*) in the text, with the “radiation” (*sugárzás*) of the person to whom the guest text originally belongs also being present in his text (Birnbaum, 1991: 8-10). It is this “sway” and “tension,” along with the roughness and unevenness resulting from the “radiation” of the father's presence through his text, that prevent the “taming” of Esterházy's work.

<sup>24</sup> Deczki describes how graphological analyses demonstrate the gradual disintegration of the agent's personality (2017: 39-40).

## 6. Conclusions from the Two Case Studies: Factors That Contributed to or Hindered the Transnational Career Trajectory of the Two Novels

In the following, I will attempt to provide a tentative answer to my initial question: why *No Live Files Remain* was published in English by major publishers and became an international success, while *Revised Edition* has yet to be translated into English-bearing in mind the caveat (already noted at the outset of this paper) that the transnational circulation of literary works is a “complex and unpredictable chain of events.” (McMartin and Gentile, 2020: 272)

The first cluster of factors is specific to these cases, as they are related to the individual decisions, aspirations and skills of the actors involved.

### 6.1. The Publisher/Agent

In the case of the success of Forgách's book, the Hungarian publisher/agent must be acknowledged as a decisive factor—the efforts he dedicated to selling the translation rights of *No Live Files Remain* and the alignment between the interests of the author and the publisher/agent, who needed an international success to solidify his place in the international publishing world, provided the impetus for the transnational career of the book. Péter Esterházy's agency, by contrast, is a well-established agency founded in 1949 which represents the rights of primarily German-speaking (but also a number of international) authors, and manages the estates of classics such as Anne Frank, Erich Fromm, and Elias Canetti.<sup>25</sup> Although, as a general rule, having an agent in a major language territory is considered a preferable strategy for writers from peripheral territories and languages, in this particular case the opposite was true.

### 6.2. The Author

Another important element in the success of Forgách's work was the author's involvement throughout the entire process, from translating a substantial part of

<sup>25</sup> <https://liepmanagency.com/en/>.

the book into English, to revising it several times, and rewriting it for international readers, as well as appearing at the Frankfurt Book Fair and other book events, and giving interviews to newspapers, journals and radio stations. Paul Olchváry recalled “Working with András was sheer pleasure. We spent many hours (via video link) discussing nearly every page of the translation.”<sup>26</sup> Forgách's flexibility, his personal appearance at the Frankfurt Book Fair (cf. Baczoni 2016), his conversational skills and excellent English must also have convinced foreign editors that Forgách would be a valuable asset in the marketing of the book. This expectation proved correct—the author made an impression on interviewers as

one of the last of those ferociously well-read Eastern European intellectuals who came of age as dissidents under Soviet Communism and learned, after the revolutions of 1989, that the market economy imposed different kinds of limitations on artistic freedom. He shifts effortlessly between several languages, while speaking flawless, nuanced English. He has the wild hair and half-smile of the pathologically curious. (Adams, 2018)

Before his death in 2016, Péter Esterházy's personal presence on the international scene was very strong, especially in German-speaking countries. As his fellow writer Gábor Németh says, “He had such powerful charisma, and it was so easy to project all that was good onto him that everyone who met him became a fan.”<sup>27</sup> In an article on Esterházy's reception in German, the literary historian Csongor Lőrincz observes that, although Esterházy received a very strong and positive reception in Germany, almost all articles about him focused on the author's persona: his aristocratic origin, coloured by ‘plebeian’ features like his love of football, his ‘K.u.K.’ accent, and his distinctive, impressive appearance. After Esterházy's death, however, reviews on Esterházy practically ceased overnight (cf. Lőrincz, 2002: 27-31).

Esterházy's presence was therefore also a crucial factor in his international success. As mentioned, however, his lack of English skills and, perhaps, the nature of his “K.u.K. charisma” and his Central European brand of postmodern irony-so

<sup>26</sup> Email communication, 13 July 2023.

<sup>27</sup> “Olyan erős karizmája volt, és olyan könnyű volt belevetíteni mindent, ami jó, hogy aki csak találkozott vele, a rajongója lett.” (Görözdi – Németh, 2022: 325-326)

difficult, indeed perhaps impossible, to convey in English, especially abroad—did not make the same impression in the UK and, especially, in North America as they did in Europe.

The second cluster of factors that likely contributed to the success of one book and hindered the publication of the other is related to the operation of the globalised publishing industry.

### 6.3. Competition and Isomorphism

As a result of the increasing globalisation of the publishing industry, the selection of books for translation has become a process fraught with uncertainty. There is an overabundance of manuscripts, and the process of acquiring the translation rights is a complex decision-making process in which acquisition editors rely on their expertise and their network of contacts within the publishing industry to determine which recommendations to discard and which to retain (*cf.* Franssen and Kuipers, 2013: 57).

Part of this decision-making process occurs through word-of-mouth recommendations from contacts within the publishing industry.<sup>28</sup> When the book in question is written in a non-central language (and thus cannot be read by the acquiring editor); when it is expected to become a bestseller; and especially if it is a book likely to attract the interest of competitors and may soon be sold—in publishing jargon, a “hot” book—then publishers may decide to acquire the rights very quickly. This leads to the phenomenon of “isomorphism” within the publishing industry: publishers in various countries with similar profiles acquire the same books, resulting in increasingly similar catalogues and reduced diversity in terms of language, literary style and content (*cf.* Sapiro, 2016: 93; McMartin and Gentile, 2020: 276; Van Es and Heilbron, 2015: 301).<sup>29</sup> The publishers of András Forgách's book are all among the most prestigious companies in their respective countries, and the fact that they knew the book had been sold to publishers with similar profiles and prestige likely influenced their decision.

<sup>28</sup> Bourdieu compares this process to “industrial espionage,” which, at this point, has “little to do with the contents (and especially the form) of the works concerned.” (2008: 150)

<sup>29</sup> *Cf.* also Bourdieu (2008: 126), where many of the changes in the publishing industry are described as being “without agent” (in the French original: “*sans sujet*”, Bourdieu, 1999: 6), i.e., occurring independently of individuals working in the publishing industry.

#### 6.4. The Event at the Frankfurt Book Fair

Although the translation rights to Forgách's book had been sold to several territories before the 2016 Frankfurt Book Fair, the event organized by the publisher at the fair was a crucial factor in launching both the author's and the book's international careers. Since the 1960s, the Frankfurt Book Fair has been the epicentre of the publishing market (*cf.* Serry and Vincent, 2013: 107), and the primary hub where the hierarchies of a system reflecting political, cultural and economic structures are constantly reinforced and reproduced (*ibid.*: 105). Major book fairs, particularly the Frankfurt Book Fair, are events where professional norms, skills, and behaviour are learnt, networks are built, and rules and values are imposed (*ibid.*: 105).

No international publishing event was organized by the publisher or agent on the occasion of the publication of Esterházy's *Revised Edition*, and thus his international publishers were not required to act in haste. Eventually, of the eighteen international publishers of *Celestial Harmonies* - all of which are among the most prestigious literary publishers of their respective countries - only five turned down *Revised Edition* for publication, the American publisher Ecco (an imprint of HarperCollins) being one of them.

#### 6.5. Preference for Storytelling over Other Literary Devices

In an article on “the danger for the accumulation of capital in the form of literature” caused by the dominance of books written in English, the economist Jacques Méliot argues that

language does not serve merely to communicate subject-matter-say, a storyline-but is itself an essential source of stimulation and enjoyment. Therefore, it is futile to argue that everything would be the same if all potential contributors to literature wrote in the same language. We might as well pretend that there would be no loss if all musical composers wrote for the cello. A translation can only approximate the rhythms, sounds, images, allusions, and evocations of the original, and in the case of literature, these aspects are essential. (Méliot, 2007: 195-196)

Yet the mechanisms of the globalised publishing industry have increasingly tended to favour storytelling at the expense of other aspects of literary fiction, as described by Pierre Bourdieu in his seminal article on the “conservative revolution in publishing.” (2008: 16-17) When it comes to selling the translation rights of a book, plot-oriented fiction is easier to market for several reasons. On the one hand, it is easier for scouts and agents to pitch a plot-oriented work to publishers; on the other hand, it is generally easier to translate than fiction that is more language-oriented.

Although, as described above, *No Live Files Remain* is not a novel with a linear plot, it is, of the two books discussed here, definitely the one that is much more story-oriented, especially in its rewritten, “international” version. *Revised Edition* also has a linear storyline in a certain sense-embedded in the son's reading and commentary on the reports, presented in chronological order, are the reports themselves, also arranged chronologically, and thus the whole, as mentioned above, can even be read as a “Bildungsroman” of both the father and the son. However, it is far from being a plot-oriented book and is filled with digressions, anecdotes, reflections, and allusions to contemporary Hungarian figures and events.

## **6.6. Homogenisation of Topics, Messages and Worldview**

As discussed above, the unification of the globalised market is evident in the isomorphism of books and publishers across various countries, as well as in the preference for storytelling. In a recently published book about his career as publisher at *e/o*, a prestigious Italian literary publisher, Sandro Ferri argues that this globalisation and commercialisation have far-reaching consequences, affecting not only the publishing industry but also other sectors:

Efficient marketing requires a significant amount of money, which explains much about the nature of our society: the concentration of businesses, the standardization of products, widespread conformity, fashions, as well as the homogeneity of consumption, ways of thinking, and people's opinions. To sell a lot you have to invest loads of money, and whoever does it must be certain of securing profits. When this conception of the world (let's call it

that, since that is precisely what it is) entered the publishing universe, it caused a seismic shift. It changed not only the method of selling books but also the very process of writing them. It changed literature.<sup>30</sup>

Thus, Ferri argues that the commercialisation of the publishing industry led to conformism in both opinions and ways of thinking. Although the originality or subversive character of a literary fiction book is often praised by publishers and agents, the language used in these accolades is frequently a mere imitation of avant-garde models that date back to “the literary field’s previous, more autonomous state” (Bourdieu, 2008: 145). Books from peripheral countries that address topics, use narrative techniques, and present stories and messages compatible with publishers in central countries are more likely to be translated and consecrated in the transnational literary field than those with unsettling or subversive messages, visions, or literary devices that may be challenging.

Although *No Live Files Remain* tells a story that is unsettling and shocking both at the emotional and the political/social levels, it can be framed - and was framed by the English-language publishers - as a story that does not necessarily challenge our worldview in a fundamental way. The blurb of the English-language edition by Scribner frames *The Acts of My Mother* as a “beautiful and moving novel of family, lies, betrayal and forgiveness,” thus positioning it primarily as a novel about family. Also, Forgách’s mother is a compelling character-beautiful, dynamic, exotic, wholly devoted to her four children, and passionately dedicated to the poor and downtrodden.<sup>31</sup>

Regarding the political and social aspects of the book, the motivation behind Forgách’s parents’ decision to become Communist agents is easily understandable. The father was a Holocaust survivor who became a Communist after the war. As for Forgách’s mother, she had both personal and ideological reasons for cooperating with the state security services. On the one hand, she was a mother of four who

<sup>30</sup> “Ci vuole tanto denaro per fare un marketing efficace e questo spiega molte cose sulla natura della nostra società: la concentrazione delle imprese, la standardizzazione dei prodotti, il conformismo diffuso, le mode, l’omogeneità dei consumi e anche quella dei modi di pensare, delle opinioni della gente. Per vendere tanto bisogna investire una montagna di soldi e chi lo fa dev’essere sicuro di portare a casa utili. Quando questa concezione del mondo (chiamiamola così, in effetti lo è) è entrata nell’universo editoriale ha provocato un terremoto. Ha cambiato non solo il modo di vendere i libri ma lo stesso modo di scriverli. Ha cambiato la letteratura.” (Ferri, 2022: 37)

<sup>31</sup> A photograph of her, taken by the sea in Lebanon during her youth, was used in the marketing materials of international publishers and as an illustration in interviews.

had to care for the whole family alone after her husband's descent into madness; on the other, she was a staunch Communist with a complicated relationship to Israel, her homeland: as a Communist, she was anti-Zionist, and willing to work as an agent in Israel. Furthermore, being an agent allowed her to visit her parents in Israel, something she could not have done had she not cooperated with the state.

The trailer from *Penguin Books Canada* for *The Acts of My Mother* portrays the mother's predicament as a conflict between "love for her country" and "love for her family,"<sup>32</sup> that is, a struggle between two lofty ideals. As András Forgách himself sees it, this is rather the story of a cynical power exploiting an idealist whose passionate belief in Communism and personal situation - living in a country that was not her homeland, her unhappy marriage and her husband's mental illness-made her vulnerable (*cf.* Valuska, 2015). This story, along with its far-reaching implications, discussed above in connection with *Revised Edition*, is made less visible by paratexts that frame the narrative in line with prevailing worldviews.

As for the motives behind Esterházy's father becoming an agent, they were certainly not related to any ideological commitment, as was the case with Forgách's parents. There are no records explaining his agreement to become an agent, but it likely had to do with threats concerning his children's future. While the depiction of his mother in *Zebuze* by András Forgách was not entirely incompatible with what he later learnt in the archives of the state security services, Esterházy's discovery of his own father's reports undermined the father figure from *Celestial Harmonies*, the grand aristocrat who remained morally unbroken by the immense losses suffered by him and his family under Communism. It also eroded the cheerfulness and self-confidence of the son, famously referred to as "ontological cheerfulness" by fellow writer Miklós Mészöly, based largely on the assumption of his father's moral rectitude, a man now mercilessly exposed in *Revised Edition* as a petty spy. It is difficult to discern the moral of this story.

Nor was the timing of the publication of *Revised Edition* particularly fortunate: it appeared a decade after the fall of the Berlin Wall, by which time interest in the countries formerly under Soviet rule had started to wane. Translating works from peripheral languages has been a strategy employed by some publishers-primarily those in "more autonomous or avant-garde corners of the literary field" (Van Es

<sup>32</sup> "A shocking, unforgettable story about what happens when a mother's love for her country outweighs her love for her family."

and Heilbron, 2015: 299) - “to gain material and symbolic advantages over their competitors” (Franssen and Kuipers, 2013: 56). Eastern Europe was such a “niche” for some publishers before 1989. According to Sandro Ferri, an eminent publisher of Eastern European writers in the 1980s, the loss of interest in this territory after 1989 stemmed both from the shift of focus in the centre and from the confusion and loss of identity experienced by authors in this particular periphery:

When the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, and Eastern Europe as we had known it, disappeared overnight, we found ourselves without our hunting grounds. It was more or less like when they slaughtered all the buffaloes of the American Indians, thus starving them. The Eastern writers whom we had known and published suddenly found themselves without their natural habitat, utterly lost and confused in the new political and social setup. It didn't matter whether they had loved (of whom there were few) or hated (of whom there were many) the Communist regimes. What mattered was that, before, they had a role: dissidents, consciences, prophets, stimuli. But now they had simply lost their identity. No one asked them again to show a path they could follow, as the only path left was that of capitalist consumption.<sup>33</sup>

Even if anyone had thought of asking Eastern European writers “to show a path they could follow,” *Revised Edition*, with its bleak and desperate story, would not have been a book offering an answer. Thus, it remained a “family affair” of Central-Eastern Europe, with a few translations into Western languages, but no translation into English, the hyper-central language.

Fifteen years later, when the threat of Communist regimes and the Cold War was a generation away, *No Live Files Remain* was not expected to indicate a path forward, and could be framed as a moving family story with a female protagonist blinded by idealism yet still very attractive—a tragic narrative of a family living un-

<sup>33</sup> “Quando, nel 1989, crollò il Muro di Berlino e dall'oggi al domani scomparve l'Est europeo così come lo avevamo conosciuto fino ad allora, ci ritrovammo senza i nostri territori di caccia. Più o meno come quando massacrarono tutti i bisonti agli indiani d'America, riducendoli alla fame. Gli scrittori dell'Est che avevamo conosciuto e pubblicato si ritrovarono improvvisamente senza il loro habitat naturale, completamente perduti e confusi nel nuovo assetto politico e sociale. Poco importa se prima avessero amato (in pochi) od odiato (in molti) i regimi comunisti. Quello che contava era che prima avevano avuto un ruolo: oppositori, coscienze, profeti, stimoli. Mentre dopo persero semplicemente la loro identità. Nessuno chiese più loro di indicare una via da seguire, perché l'unica che rimase da percorrere fu quella del consumo capitalistico.” (Ferri, 2022: 109-110)

der a now-defunct oppressive regime, rather than a deeply unsettling tale about how blind belief in an ideology, exploited by state power, erodes trust within society, including between family members and friends. Furthermore, as Paul Olchvály thought, “the relative success of the 2006 German film *The Lives of Others* (*Das Leben der Anderen*), which went on to win an Oscar, and *The Reader*, another German work (a bestselling book adapted into a film), led publishers to believe that Andrés’s book would resonate with readers.”<sup>34</sup>

I have mentioned the dominance of English, competition, isomorphism, and a preference for plot-oriented fiction as some of the factors of the globalised publishing industry that contribute to the homogenisation of worldviews. It must be stressed that these factors are strongly interrelated and reinforce each other—for example, the preference for plot-oriented fiction strengthens the dominance of English, as the English language “privileges the referential function of language at the expense of the interpersonal or textual and crystallizes the dynamic flow of experience into static, observable blocks,” (Bennett, 2007: 151) as Karen Bennett points out in her article “Epistemicide!” Although that article focuses on the hegemonic status of the English language in academic rather than literary discourse, some of Bennett’s observations can also be applied to literary language. Bennett argues that the dominance of English results in the prevalence of a particular vision of the world, with other forms of knowledge being “rendered invisible or... swallowed up in a process of ‘epistemicide’” (*ibid.*). This practice, as Bennett points out, quoting linguist-semiotician Günther Kress, is ultimately “totalitarian” (*ibid.*: 153). Although used by Kress as a metaphor rather than in its political sense, the word carries portentous overtones in the context of the works discussed in this article.

<sup>34</sup> Email communication, 13 July 2023.

## 7. Conclusion

The title of this article - “My Father: A Truly Untranslatable Pun” - is a quotation from the penultimate paragraph of *Revised Edition* by Péter Esterházy.<sup>35</sup> The expression “untranslatable pun” is, in a sense, an untranslatable pun in itself. It refers to a device that Esterházy frequently used in *Celestial Harmonies* to highlight a pun-for the reader, rather than the potential translator-that is deeply tied to language, place, and history, or to an event, a place, an expression, etc. with strong emotional connotations.<sup>36</sup> In this quotation, it refers to the “joke” played on him by his father and by life-a “pun” that is untranslatable both in the sense that his father's life remains elusive to him and “untranslatable” for those who did not share the experience of living in a totalitarian regime.

When trying to explore the causes of the international success of *No Live Files Remain* and the lack of translation of *Revised Edition* into English, I argued that this particular case sheds light on the way in which cumulative interactions of actors in the publishing industry determine the fate of the international circulation of translated literature. I have also tried to argue that this case highlights some of the ways in which the globalisation of the publishing industry poses a challenge to the circulation of invaluable works outside the mainstream, thereby reducing the diversity of voices, ideas, and styles in literary translation.

<sup>35</sup> “Édesapám: tényleg lefordíthatatlan szójáték.” (Esterházy 2002: 280)

<sup>36</sup> Cf. the translator's note on this practice: Sollosy (2008).

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## Résumé

Cette étude se propose d'examiner la manière dont la mondialisation de l'industrie de l'édition affecte le marché de la littérature des pays périphériques. En tant qu'étude de cas, je compare la réception en anglais (ou son absence) de deux romans hongrois contemporains : *Revu et corrigé* de Péter Esterházy et *Fils d'espionne* d'András Forgách. Le sujet des deux romans est étonnamment similaire : leurs auteurs ont découvert, longtemps après la mort de leurs parents, qu'ils avaient travaillé comme agents pour les services secrets de l'État communiste. Curieusement, tous deux ont fait suite aux romans, publiés par les mêmes auteurs, avant leurs découvertes respectives, en hommage à leurs parents – l'un d'eux, *Harmonia caelestis* d'Esterházy, fut salué comme un chef-d'œuvre et traduit dans de nombreuses langues. Comment expliquer le destin divergent des deux œuvres ? Pourquoi celle de Forgách, un auteur peu connu en dehors de la Hongrie, est-elle devenue un succès international et a-t-elle été publiée en anglais par de grands éditeurs, tandis que celle d'Esterházy, l'un des auteurs hongrois les plus traduits, n'a pas de version anglaise à ce jour (alors qu'elle a été publiée dans de nombreuses autres langues) ? L'article donne un élément de réponse à cette question en étudiant la circulation internationale des deux romans par le biais des entretiens avec des auteurs, des traducteurs, des agents littéraires et des universitaires impliqués dans le processus. L'article montre comment les interactions cumulatives des acteurs de l'industrie de l'édition déterminent la circulation internationale de la littérature traduite. D'autre part, il explique les raisons pour lesquelles la mondialisation de l'industrie de l'édition empêche la circulation de certaines œuvres de valeur qui ne sont pas conformes au courant dominant et réduit ainsi la diversité des voix, des idées et des styles dans la traduction littéraire.

**MOTS CLÉS :** industrie mondiale de l'édition, circulation des livres en traduction, traduction de la fiction hongroise contemporaine, Péter Esterházy, András Forgách

### Summary

In this paper I examine how the globalisation of the publishing industry affects the market for the literature from peripheral countries. As a case study, I compare the English reception (or lack thereof) of two contemporary Hungarian novels: *Revised Edition* by Péter Esterházy and *The Acts of My Mother* by András Forgách. The subject matter of both novels is strikingly similar: their authors discovered, long after their parents' deaths, that their parents had worked as agents for the secret services of the communist state. Curiously, both were sequels to novels published by the same authors before their respective discoveries, written as homages to their parents. One of these, Esterházy's *Celestial Harmonies*, was hailed as a masterpiece and translated to many languages. By mapping the international circulation of the two novels through interviews with authors, translators, literary agents, and scholars involved in the process, I propose a tentative explanation for the diverging fates of both novels: why Forgách's, an author hardly known outside of Hungary at the time, became an international success and was published in English by major publishers, while Esterházy's, one of the most widely translated Hungarian authors, has no English translations to this day, despite being published in many other languages. I argue that this case not only sheds light on how cumulative interactions of actors in the publishing industry determine the fate of the international circulation of translated literature, but also highlights some of the reasons why the globalisation of the publishing industry poses a challenge to the circulation of valuable works outside the mainstream, thereby reducing the diversity of voices, ideas, and styles in literary translation.

**KEYWORDS:** global publishing industry, circulation of books in translation, translation of contemporary Hungarian fiction, Péter Esterházy, András Forgách