

## JAN MICHALSKI PRIZE FOR LITERATURE SELECTION 2010

### **Péter Esterhazy** ***Revised Edition***

In his *Celestial Harmonies* (*Harmonia Celestis* 2000) a Hungarian novelist Péter Esterhazy tells a story of his aristocratic family. They were one of the oldest and most distinguished households in the country which the communist regime entirely deprived of privileges and possessions.

*Celestial Harmonies* is not only a family chronicle and a collection of private documents but also a true work of fiction, a family saga and a philosophical essay. Translated into many languages, Esterhazy's masterpiece was a tremendous success. It took ten years of his life to write. While after the publication he was getting ready for a well-deserved holiday, he accidentally decided to search archives of secret police from the days of the communist regime. He was curious to see if there were any files concerning him and if he was spied on by someone from the close circle of friends or acquaintances. Presented with four thick files at the Historical Institute, he had no choice but to abandon his holiday plans in order to devote a number of weeks to arduous reading of documents. He discovered a secret informer called 'Csanádi' who turned out to be his own father, Mátyás Esterházy. It is important to stress that Mátyás was a key character in his son's book where he was respectfully referred to as 'beloved daddy'. The news came to Esterhazy as a shocking surprise.

His next book, *Revised Edition* (2002), was based on documents and materials which Esterhazy found in police archives as well as on his own commentaries to what he read and discovered. The idea of the book grew out of feelings of despair, humiliation, anger and a sense of personal tragedy.

Writer's father was active as an informer from 1957 to 1980. He started working for the communist police right after the collapse of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. At that time political prisoners were executed without trial and around two hundred thousand citizens chose forced emigration in foreign country. The unprecedented cruelty of the police state was at its full swing; the last death sentences were carried out as late as 1961.

Esterhazy's book attempts to answer a few pertinent questions: why the author's father pledged his loyalty to the communist regime at that particular time, why he continued to be active for so long and why he decided to become an informer in the first place. *Revised Edition* can be read as a literary record of the struggle to deal with these questions.

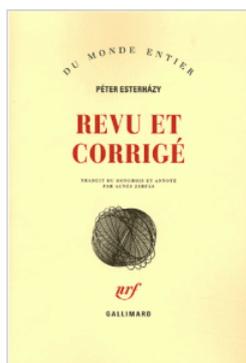
Esterhazy's primary objective was to understand his father's decisions. He quotes fragments of reports prepared for the secret police and appends them with his own comments which are 'full of horror, disgust, suffering and despair'. It is particularly difficult for Esterhazy to forgive his father for turning into 'a servile follower of the system. That was his greatest fault. Even that may be seen as an understatement. He was servility incarnate'.

Although reports written by agent "Csanádi" were banal, trivial and often contained insignificant information, his son saw it as even more devastating. He is torn between compassion and contempt, hatred and sympathy, love and disgust. These emotions remain so vital in the book that it is the son rather than his father who becomes the real centre of the story.

*Revised Edition*, not unlike *Celestial Harmonies*, is a formal hybrid, consisting of fragmented fiction, pieces of diary and memoir but most of all direct quotes from reports, formal documentation and materials of particular investigations. Naturally, all this remains part of a sophisticated literary scheme which Esterhazy constructs to talk about his father's life. Police materials are integrated into a web of more personal comments about the writer's literary peregrinations, about travelling and meeting people, about reviews he wrote, and praises he received. Moreover, Esterhazy avails himself of the opportunity to discuss various issues concerning his earlier literary works. The formal diversity and complex nature of the work prove that Esterhazy is a writer of considerable skill and artistic accomplishment.

It might appear that Esterhazy's book merely offers an ordinary tale of father and son set in a narrow context of Hungarian history. To say that would be a serious misinterpretation. *Revised Edition* attempts to find an adequate representation for the horrors experienced in many countries of Central and Eastern Europe where the atrocities committed by secret police and their agents left an indelible mark on society's past. So far, only German and Austrian writers (Martin Polack) have managed to broach this difficult subject. What is more, Esterhazy's masterpiece can be seen as a 'universal parable of evil and betrayal - two components that practically constitute an important part of our history. The book shows how the reality we live in is momentarily turned upside down by an unexpected intervention of a deeply hidden past', which results in a destruction of lives of individuals and societies.

Włodzimierz Bolecki  
Member of the Jury



Péter Esterházy  
*Revu et Corrigé (Revised Edition)*  
Roman  
Gallimard - 2005