

POST MODERN TECHNIQUES IN PÉTER ESTERHÁZY'S *HELPING VERBS OF THE HEART*

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When an English translation of Péter Esterházy's *Helping Verbs of the Heart* appeared in 1990, American critics responded with mixed reviews, some with praise, others with disfavor. Almost always, though, the critics admitted to an inability to fully digest the work. What one critic called Esterházy's "unorthodox expedients" have baffled and also irritated more than one reader to be sure. John Simon of *The New Republic* wrote in his review, "I don't mind admitting that I can follow this program only dimly." Perhaps this essay will lend readers a bit of light.

In an appropriated excerpt at the bottom of page 104, a frustrated Esterházy pleads with his reader, "CAN'T YOU SEE I'M DIGGING A GRAVE?" The tone is somewhat desperate. This line is crucial to an understanding of the novel for two reasons. First, it is pirated from an undetermined source. Esterházy includes plagiarized material throughout the book. This tactic will be discussed in detail in subsequent sections of this essay. More importantly, this single line embodies the meaning of the entire book. *Helping Verbs* is exactly what Esterházy insists here. It is a grave into which Esterházy pitches many of the conventions and most of the notions of the modern novel. One might also imagine Esterházy laying at the bottom of this grave pulling armfuls of dirt onto himself. Indeed, *Helping Verbs* is also Esterházy's attempt to bury his own failures, both literary and emotional.

Some might argue that *Helping Verbs* approaches Nihilism. Americans, in particular, recoil at this thought. One wonders what value this display of impotence might have. These fears are unwarranted. There is a rejuvenated sense of hope at the end of this novel. At the bottom of the last page, after the words "The end," the narrator, returned from oblivion, promises aloud, "SOME DAY I'LL WRITE ABOUT ALL OF THIS IN MORE DETAIL." Esterházy borrowed this line from Peter Handke, but no matter. It creates real power in its transplanted appearance. Esterházy buries the failure and humiliation which accompany him throughout the novel. A resolved, though weary, voice remains.

It is possible that Ludwig Wittgenstein shared this same voice when he wrote, "He who can hope can speak, and vice versa." This quote precedes

Esterházy's foreword and also appears on the back of the jacket. In his foreword, Esterházy insists that any book "should radiate a kind of lightness." Indeed, *Helping Verbs* does exactly that. It is a strange and powerful work. Esterházy incorporates a slew of radical techniques and devices which ultimately reveal the limitations of his medium and of the human capacity to produce art which accurately reproduces the soul's inner dialogue. Still, the novel succeeds because it is at once a grave and a source of "lightness." The discussion now turns to the tools which Esterházy employs to hollow this strange grave.

John Simon titled his review of *Helping Verbs*, "The Stunt Man." Simon meticulously describes experimental techniques and complains that these "shenanigans" illuminate nothing, and instead, make for an uneven fragmented failure. To Simon's credit, "failure" is the key component in *Helping Verbs*. Unfortunately, Simon seems to have missed the point. The techniques which Simon blames for the novel's failure are, indeed, disruptive; but these tricks and stunts are well controlled devices which mark the limits of the modern novel as an art form. The author and his text do fail intermittently, but Esterházy pursues these moments of impotence so that the reader might begin to question the capacity of his medium. Esterházy pinpoints the deficiencies of his medium and devises a number of tricks to accentuate them. It seems that the novel fails Esterházy. Simon would have one believe that the author is to blame. In fact, the responsibility lies with both the author and his medium. Esterházy makes no effort to hide this fact. Instead, he devises a number of tactics which exaggerate the fact. These techniques, then must be considered equally, if not more important than the contents of the novel. With this in mind, *Helping Verbs* becomes a model piece of post-modernism.

Structural experimentation is the constant feature of *Helping Verbs*. There are four techniques which demand attention and analysis. The first and most obvious has already been mentioned. Esterházy includes at the bottom of most pages a running subtext which appears in all capital letters to distinguish it from the primary text and to remind the reader that it has been pirated from an outside source. Esterházy's second device appears on every page of the novel. A thick, black line frames the contents of every page. This frame serves more than cosmetic ends. Third, Esterházy leaves large portions of the novel blank. A generous estimation would allow that the text, if printed continuously, could fill seventy pages, as it stands, *Helping Verbs* is a 115-page effort. Finally, the identity of the narrator shifts in two instances, one intensely dramatic, the other less so, but still meaningful. (The sub-text is not considered here. The reader might decide that each of the pirated excerpts is delivered in Esterházy's own voice.) These radical techniques do indeed disrupt and

disorient the reader, but they are certainly not accidental. Nor are they weaknesses. They complement, perhaps supersede, the content of the book, and become a separate dialogue in their own right.

The capitalized sub-text has an immediate effect on the reader. There have been numerous theories as to its significance. This essay offers yet another. In his foreword, Esterházy writes, "The text includes quotations, either literal or distorted, from, among others..." There is a list of forty-three authors which follows. The reader can assume that the majority of these quotations appear in the capitalized sub-text. Though, Vince Passaro of *New York Newsday* warns, "you can't be sure." What does one make of the capitalized text at the bottom of each frame?

James Marcus of *The Philadelphia Enquirer* complains that "grief makes the narrator inarticulate." Esterházy, himself, complains of a "lethargic wordlessness" in his foreword. This foreword, though, Esterházy tells the reader, was written prior to the novel; not inserted after its completion. It is clear, then, that Esterházy must cope with this "wordlessness" as he writes this piece about the death of his mother. When the pain of his loss renders him speechless, he resorts to other author's work to express his sentiments. Where grief has muted Esterházy, he inserts what comes closest to his own feelings. Esterházy may experiment for his own amusement, but more likely, he experiments out of necessity. His mother's death cripples him and impedes the flow of insight. Consequently, he is forced to borrow the work of others in his quest for meaning. The reader's perception of the author and of the novel change drastically. The story (at least initially) is told by a self-admitted failure, a writer who admits freely that he is unable to approach the meaning he aspires to illuminate. The author is removed from his pedestal, and so is his novel. Esterházy inserts the pirated passages where the conventions of the novel and of language fail him.

The bold, black line which frames each page's text is another of Esterházy's experiments. This device, like the use of external sources, affects the reader's primary experience of the novel. The frame reminds the reader that the text does not do full justice to Esterházy's inner vision. One wonders what might exist outside of the page's frame. What ideas was Esterházy unable to give form? Again, this is a subtle admission of failure. Esterházy convinces his readers that the novel, as a forum for self-expression, is at best an incomplete, diluted version of the author's raw experience of the events s/he wishes to recreate. The sub-text on page eighty-four reads, "EVERYONE HERE, MYSELF INCLUDED, IS SO DISGUSTINGLY NORMAL." If "HERE" is taken to mean the confines of each frame, it becomes clear that Esterházy is deeply disappointed in his work. Esterházy admits that his works neither

depicts nor exceeds the reality of his experience. One expects art to yield more than life, to reveal the ultimate and infinite truths which are ordinarily obscured from view. Perhaps these expectations are unrealistic. With the use of the black frame, Esterházy hints that his novel lacks this infinite power to heal. Perhaps the story Esterházy hoped to write still floats outside of the black frame. The black frame allows Esterházy to deepen the grave he pursues in *Helping Verbs* so that he might put his failures to rest and the reader might bury his/her romantic ideas about the power of literature.

The blank sequences throughout the novel serve the same purpose. Why not insert the pirated passages into a steady text? Why leave unfilled space? These blank areas, in all cases, precede the sub-text. So, one thinks of them as impasses or terminal points, beyond which Esterházy cannot venture. They mark the points at which words fail the author. Esterházy is honest enough to admit his failings and inventive enough to accentuate them. Esterházy makes the limitations of his medium all too clear. Perhaps these blank segments would house the magic words which will float forever outside of Esterházy's black frame. On page fifty-seven, the narrator whines in frustration and desperation, "... I have no freedom, I don't write what I want, I write what I can..." What a powerful moment when the author discredits himself this way and subverts the significance of his art. It seems that the novel, in its traditional form, cannot replicate Esterházy's inner dialogue. He turns, therefore, to unique post-modern techniques to express his grief and frustration.

What does one make of the two instances where the narrative voice shifts from son to mother and then back from mother to son? One page forty-six, three acidic sentences appear in white print on an otherwise black page. The white print reads, "I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal! I hope you all rot. I hate you." This page, with its reversed fields, marks Esterházy's surrender to the "wordlessness" which plagues him. Our first narrator suffers a death-like silence after this stunt. Perhaps this is Esterházy speaking from a dark grave. Or perhaps less dramatically, it is an indication of the narrator's inability to shed light on the subject matter. After pages of frustration, the narrator simply resigns to end his agonizing fit of impotence. He lowers himself into this figurative grave, hoping to put his failure to rest. It is a sort of literary suicide; the narrator, in a sense forfeits his existence. The son relinquishes the reins, the pen that is, into the hands of his mother. Simon describes this as an interior monologue, but really, Mother assumes complete responsibility for the work. She is willing, though somewhat inept. Shortly, her narrative degenerates and dissolves. Mother is unable to create any sense of cohesion or direct the storyline. The text erodes into unrelated snippets of nostalgia and fantasy. After fifty pages of Mother's convoluted chronology,

the son, somewhat unwillingly, reclaims the narrative. He resumes his duties, but only manages to record the essential action and dialogue. There is no further explication. The text resembles a screenplay at this point, not a novel. The narrator offers no insight and his voice is completely withdrawn. Still, these are some of Esterházy's most successful moments. No longer does the reader suffer the intrusion of a failing, embittered narrator. Esterházy creates ingenious devices to compensate for his own limitations and the limitations of his medium. The two dramatic shifts in the narrative voice are perfect examples.

Helping Verbs is a novel about failure, but it is far from failure itself. Esterházy, in a courageous self-critique, lays bare all of his artistic shortcomings. Simultaneously, he exposes the weaknesses of his medium. The result is a powerful, brutal work which rockets the reader into contemplation and forces him/her to re-evaluate the meaning and capacity of art and literature. To achieve this effect, Esterházy invents a number of techniques and devices which subvert his work, but more importantly, challenge our assumptions about literature. For those who, like Simon, confuse these well-controlled experiments with meaningless acts of desperation, Esterházy promises to continue his struggle against silence and hopelessness should quell their criticism. Esterházy, back from the grave promises not to be enslaved in life by the spectre of death; "SOME DAY I'LL WRITE ABOUT ALL THIS IN MORE DETAIL." He even leaves some blank pages at the end for this purpose.

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