

**A Man Who Loved His Work:
An Interview with
Zsolt Kálmán Virágos**

Gabriella Varró

This interview was prompted by the occasion of the 70th birthday of Professor Virágos, my teacher, academic advisor and mentor who I am proud to call my friend as well. Over the long afternoon we discussed issues that have always been of great concern for us both, such as memory, the process of remembering, various influences upon the creative work, such as traveling, inheritance, family background and books. The interview starts in medias res, and ends unfinished, reflecting on the experience we have always had in real life, namely that our conversations were endless and could continue infinitely.

VARRÓ: *My first question pertains to your views on memory and the act of remembering, partly inspired by our mutual favorite Native American poet, Joy Harjo. How great a role does memory play in your life?*

VIRÁGOS: I have a great respect for this God-given faculty; I believe that it is largely due to our memory that we are human. Thus memory has an enormous significance in my everyday life. Indeed, I am firmly convinced that the sum total of my memories is more than 80% of what I know, thus what I (“me”) actually am. It is intriguing to think that certain episodes in our lives, in the private sphere, are stored in our memory, and they exist only there. In my case events and scenes are primarily stored in visual images. Besides, these images appear to be keyed to affective

reverberations. The mind is a great reservoir of mental images; indeed, sometimes I think a large part of my consciousness is a picture gallery, rather than a story book. However, our mind is not always a reliable guardian of its content and, more characteristically, when our memory ceases to exist, that particular scene or episode is bound to perish. Thus, for instance, a brief and intensive love affair is totally dependent on whether the parties involved continue to possess the capability of recall. The other side of the coin is that sometimes we human beings cannot get rid of our (unpleasant) memories. And *unlearning* can be a tough business.

These options are, needless to say, the great themes of literature. Recall, for instance, the American writer William Faulkner's obsessed characters who are troubled to an excessive degree by mentally sorting out and telling apart past and present, cause and effect, the preoccupation also with the intrusions of the past—as present—into the present, and how the “avatars” of a lived and imagined personal past come alive to haunt the individual as messengers from a former life.

VARRÓ: I can see that you find it hard to avoid making literary references, right? It is a kind of occupational hazard, I believe. Still, could you say a little more about the process of remembering and how it works in your case?

*VIRÁGOS: Sometimes I get a great kick out of “secretly watching” myself, and observing how my own mental apparatus sometimes attempts to trick me and how occasionally I manage to summon a counter-offensive to thwart and block these very same impulses. What I have in mind is the inner debate: strategies of persuasion and coercion within the same individual, myself. I find it almost amusing to observe how resourceful the distinct powers of my psyche can turn out to “persuade” me of certain options. To an outside observer this may sound like a Freudian game. However, I must confess that I do not take great stock in the determinisms of 20th-century depth psychology. Again, I also find that while we have accumulated considerable expertise in the acquisition of knowledge, we are much less resourceful when it comes to *unlearning* something. Certain things are almost impossible to jettison. Read the short story “The Jilting of Granny Weatherall” by the American author Katherine Anne Porter. She tells you the whole story; how all this is acted out in the human mind. Read it, for there is not much else to add.*

VARRÓ: *In general how do you remember things of the past? Is it mostly through photos, videos, or through any other means?*

VIRÁGOS: As regards technicalities, photos, videos, or “any other means,” to me remembered real-life scenes are the winner. These you cannot lose. However, when I took video films of my three children for a period of half a dozen years, to be given to them as gifts of a very special sort when they reach adulthood, I found, much to my anguish that the tapes were gone. I missed out on the chance of giving them something really memorable and unrepeatable. This is what I would call an irreplaceable loss. Normally, mental residues are more safely guarded.

VARRÓ: *Is there a part of your childhood you especially like to recall, or that you frequently think back to? Why do you think this is your fondest memory?*

VIRÁGOS: I was born in Debrecen and I’ve been a city dweller in my hometown ever since. Except the half dozen or so years I spent abroad, mostly in the USA. Thus by a very loosely defined nomenclature I could be a *cívís*, that is, a wealthy burgher descended from the old Debrecen families that excelled in agricultural activities centuries ago. However, on closer scrutiny I am not really a *cívís*. No one can deny though that I am a Debrecener.

I was lucky enough to spend almost a dozen summers of my boyhood in rural environments: on three different farms in the environs of Debrecen, where I learnt a lot about farm living and agricultural activities; about animals and plants, and natural phenomena in general. I was one of the very few city boys who was capable of running barefoot in fields covered with stubble (that is, the stubs of grain stalks covering a field after the crop has been cut). I can also crack the whip; this I learnt by imitating the farm boys tending the herds. I also learnt a special Hungarian vocabulary and the language related to these. And I will never forget the smell and taste of bread freshly baked in the open-air ovens. I also realized why I should respect rural people, especially their unaffected kindness. And I cannot dislodge memories of the pain they had to endure when they were uprooted and forced into the newly established co-operatives. I often recall a scene in which an elderly farmer is hugging the neck of his favorite horse and weeping. . . Mind you, these were the late 1940s and the early 1950s.

My rural experience worked to my benefit later in my studies of the American literary culture. For instance, I had absolutely no difficulty anticipating a farm worker's chores or understanding Midwestern scenes including, for example, the iconography of Willa Cather's prairie novels, or a farmer's day-to-day responsibilities to meet the continual challenges of a New England environment as depicted in much of Robert Frost. Or, consider this sentence in chapter 43 of Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind* "about the strong coming through and the weak being winnowed out." I know exactly what "being winnowed out" means because, as a young boy, not only did I see but I also operated a winnowing machine.

VARRÓ: *Would you care to comment on your family background as a child?*

VIRÁGOS: My parents divorced before I was ten. All the children, me and my two sisters, stayed with my mother. However, we children also maintained close ties with our father. My parents violently disagreed about the causes of the breakup of the family. Let's face it, these two very intelligent—and very attractive—people were not made for each other. Later both of them re-married, had more children, yet apparently the scars failed to heal. This inevitably meant that throughout our adolescence we continually had to try to keep a mental and emotional—as well as moral—balance between rival versions of truth in the family sphere. In addition to the fact, let me add, that we children had to learn to handle rival interpretations of versions of reality that existed between what we were supposed to say at school and what we were exposed to in our homes. In the Socialist paradise of Hungary, this duality—generated by the unceasing barrage of contradictory messages—meant a condition of permanent alert for tens of thousands of school kids. Today I look at this as a continuous exercise in a special kind of epistemology—*doubletalk* is what we would call it today. These contrary impulses certainly contributed to my "loss of innocence" at a relatively early age.

VARRÓ: *Did you inherit anything from your parents that you believe had an important impact on the career you decided to pursue later?*

VIRÁGOS: Neither parent of mine had the blessings of higher education. The priorities at the time of my early childhood were different from what came later. We children were born during the time that World War Two was ravaging Europe. The country was in ruins, there was simply not enough money to go around. However, I always thought that

my mother, who died a few years ago at the age of 93, was created for “greater things.” I like to believe that I inherited much from her: the subtlety of her intellectual faculties, probably, and definitely her sense of humor. Not to mention her inexplicable “witchery.” I could often communicate with her without words. She just “knew” things. Sometimes I called her a witch on account of her unique gift of extrasensory perception.

VARRÓ: *Which would you say were the most significant formative factors in your youth?*

VIRÁGOS: Besides the parental influence and the rural vacations I was certainly influenced by the boy gangs in the neighborhood, as well as by the swim club which I joined in seventh grade. The gangs, as I see it today, were actually harmless efforts on our part to create a kind of show-offy, bravado exterior. The swim club made much more sense to me. There I became member of a community, under the helpful but demanding supervision of coach László Rentka, which makes me fondly remember my adolescent years. Apart from being a top swim coach, Mr. Rentka often involved us in challenging topics of conversation pertaining to books, art, etc. He knew that I was corresponding with a dozen or so pen pals all over the world, in English mainly, and he often asked me to show some of the letters and translate passages from the texts I had received. We even argued whether or not the use of a certain passive voice construction was justified. It was primarily through my role as a competition swimmer that I first had a chance to visit distant parts of the country, and places such as Győr, Zalaegerszeg, Szeged and, my favorite Hungarian city, Eger.

VARRÓ: *What was the most outstanding result of your career as a swimmer?*

VIRÁGOS: Well, being selected to be a member of the national swimming team, junior division. This happened in the junior and senior years of my high-school education. Then I became a university student and I had a horrendously tough schedule. I could no longer go to the workouts as often as the competitions would have demanded. Those having some experience in competition swimming will know that in swimming you cannot compete without the workouts. If you cannot maintain your stamina, it is bye-bye to you as a competition swimmer.

VARRÓ: When exactly did you know what you wished to become, or were there many other career options you were considering initially?

VIRÁGOS: In my young boyhood, I opted for “romantic” careers. The favorite threesome was: pilot, hussar, and cowherd. Ultimately none of these turned out to be winners, although the cowherd option was a strong favorite for some time: I was especially impressed with the rugged style and the ragged attire of this open-air person. Hussar was easily and early jettisoned as an option, probably because purchasing and tending a live horse, finding a stable, etc. were simply impracticable. I must have been about four when my mother bought me a rocking horse. I still remember how disappointed I was when I looked at the wooden animal. My mother asked me what the problem was. “It doesn’t move its eyes,” I confided. “Oh my god,” my mother exclaimed, “he wants a live horse!” That was the closest that I have come to owning a live horse of my own. The “pilot alternative” underwent fundamental metamorphoses, yet the dream of piloting an airplane—not to mention landing a jetfighter on an aircraft carrier—has stayed with me as an exciting alternative. Even today, flying never fails to attract and thrill me. I must have flown, that is, taken off and landed in commercial airplanes close to three hundred times. At airports I often find myself watching for hours planes land and take off. In the summer of 2011 I spent altogether a fortnight at the Côte d’Azur, where, while swimming in the sea, I was watching, at the Airport of Nice, the incoming planes land: about sixty arriving per average hour. I even forgot about the sharks that were swimming about a hundred meters below me.

In my high-school years this early threesome was dropped and I wanted to be either a forester or a chemist. But by the time I completed my second grade, the notion gradually crystallized in me that my adult job should have something to do with the two languages I studied at high school. What appealed to me in languages, although I was not able to conceptualize it at the time, were their communicative power and the combinatory possibilities of specific lexical items. Thus I became a student of English and Russian.

VARRÓ: How exactly would you describe your passion for languages?

VIRÁGOS: Looking back now at my younger self in those earlier years, there is no doubt about whether or not I had talent. Or was it simply a vague yet strong commitment? To put it very simply, I just loved

studying languages, and I was keenly aware of the difference between studying and learning. There were tell-tale indications of this commitment. When a child saves money to buy his first dictionary (this must have been the “little Ország”: László Ország’s small, 495-page Hungarian–English dictionary, which cost 26 forints, or Hadrovics–Gáldi’s smallest-size Russian–Hungarian dictionary) and spends long hours “reading” the dictionary, when the same child is dissatisfied with the speed and amount of teaching in school and launches his own “little projects” to teach himself, when he is absorbed in language study so much that he forgets about lunch, well, in these cases you can be sure that the child in question is talented. Or, at least, born motivated. I was the top student of my class both in English and Russian for most of the four years I attended Kossuth University’s Teacher Training Secondary Grammar School (Fazekas Mihály Gyakorló Gimnázium), where later I became a teacher of English myself. As a student, I took each and every exam with excellent results, and I was awarded an honorary diploma on graduation. Which means I did indeed put a lot of effort into studying. Regarding the grades, straight A’s for half a decade, it also means that I was also lucky.

VARRÓ: *Was it tough to get admitted to the university at the time?*

VIRÁGOS: “Tough” is an understatement. But you can easily see it for yourself if you look the mathematics of the matter. I am only talking about the English and Russian combination of majors relating to Kossuth University of Debrecen. In the year of my high school graduation 18 applicants sought admittance to the program. Three were admitted.

VARRÓ: *That, indeed, must have been very tough. But you made it!*

VIRÁGOS: Yes indeed, I did. And that is largely owing to my parents. They, however, were not in the position to advise me beyond the high school diploma. Nobody in my family, not even in my extended family, in the past three or four generations was a teacher, or any other type of educator. (In my wife’s family it was different because a grandfather was not only a teacher of chemistry there, but he was also the director of the School of Trade in Debrecen.) The decision and the responsibility had to be mine. Yet the role of my parents was enormous. When I came to a cross-roads in my career options at the age of 18 and I expressed my desire to go on to the university in Debrecen (Kossuth University) to major in English and Russian, I was talking about something for which there was no precedent in my family. Neither for the teaching career, nor

the double-language load. When confronted with the option that if I get admitted, I would be a salary-earning member of the family only half a decade later, they could have said no. But they didn't, and I feel grateful to them for their magnanimity and generosity. Subsequently I saw to it that the money and care they invested in my career should be paid back to them many times over.

VARRÓ: *As a student, you were majoring in English and Russian at Kossuth University. Why and how did you decide on that combination of majors?*

VIRÁGOS: As early as my second grade in high school, I was totally sold on the idea of becoming a student of languages. This was my decision; the rest was decided for me by external circumstances: the political winds, sheer chance, and a couple of other, unforeseen options. Russian was universally taught in the Hungarian school system at the time, so it was a given alternative. But how did English come into the picture? I began my high-school studies in September, 1956. In less than eight weeks Hungary found itself in the eye of the storm: in the midst of the turmoil known as “the Revolution of 1956.” One tangible and early result of the political changes was that we were granted the opportunity of studying a language other than Russian (in a few weeks “other than” became “in addition to”: in addition to Russian). At that point a unique and unprecedented thing happened. Dr. Anna Katona, our form-mistress—who subsequently became head of the Department of English at Kossuth and who died in the U.S.A. in 2005—walked into the classroom one day, and she made the following offer: “Besides Russian, in the future you can also study a second foreign language. You have the choice of four languages, all and any of them to be taught by me: English, French, German, and Italian. You have an hour to come to a decision.” We could not believe our ears. The offer was momentous and very generous at the same time. It was also unprecedented. Was there, after all, another secondary school in the whole country where a single teacher had the qualifications to teach five different languages? Five, because she was also a teacher of Russian. Anyway, after a heated debate of about 15 minutes we, first-graders in an all-boys “gimnázium,” picked English. What the actual reasons for this were are difficult to reconstruct. Perhaps because English seemed to be the most challenging, the most interesting, the most “exotic,” it may have offered the promise of the most freedom. I also argued for English, although at the time I did not know more than

five words of that language: *sport, pullover, football, corner, music*. But what would have happened if our choice had been any of the unchosen options? Say, Italian? Or, German? For the past few decades I often thought of the potential consequences of picking any of the possible other alternatives. What kind of career would I have sought and found? Along what path would I have traveled? I certainly would not have become a Professor of American Studies...

VARRÓ: *When did you start your studies, and how were those years different from the way university teaching goes today? What are some of the things that you would definitely bring back to today's education?*

VIRÁGOS: I started my half decade as a university student in the 1960s: this was a very dynamic age, even if the Hungarian incarnation was not necessarily a pyrotechnic one. We listened to Radio Luxembourg, Radio Free Europe, the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, and we also absorbed as much of the emerging counter culture as possible. Yet, much of the relevant information came to us through carefully controlled filters. Strange though it may appear, we heard about the execution of Imre Nagy many months after it was a *fait accompli*. The hangover of the failure of 1956 remained with us like a bitter aftertaste. This was part of our mixed legacy. Yet it would be misleading to deny the fact that being a student was a great and inspiring experience. I, personally, was full of ambition and enthusiasm. I was very much impressed with the campus, the academic environment, the world of books, our professors and I as good as vowed to repay my Fate for the series of Its favorable decisions with dedication and hard work. The student body was much smaller and definitely less cosmopolitan than it is today. This situation had unmistakable advantages. For instance, the relationship between students and instructors was much less impersonal; everybody was known by name. When we were freshmen, i.e., first-year students, Professor Országh made it a point to have a personal conversation with each and every student of English. We trusted our instructors and often turned to them for academic or even personal advice.

VARRÓ: *Many know the great charismatic figures who taught at the university while you were a student. Who do you regard as having had the greatest impact on your life? How would you describe the legacy you owe him/them?*

VIRÁGOS: Many professors of Kossuth University at the time had an international reputation. Today streets are named after them in Debrecen: János Barta, Béla Kálmán, Rezső Bognár, Imre Bán, etc., but the ones I have just identified—with the exception of Professor Barta—never taught or examined me. Obviously, we had much more exposure to the influence of professors at the English and Russian departments. In the Russian department I was especially impressed with Ferenc Papp and several others including József Dombrovsky, Endre Iglói and László Karancsy. But the greatest single influence came from Professor László Országh, head of the Department of English. Besides being a scholar and a teacher, Országh was a wise and trusted advisor, a patron, benefactor, mentor. Many people have changed their lives as a result of getting to know him. I first met him as an examiner at the entrance examination. He appealed to me as the embodiment of what I thought a gentleman would or should be like. He was in no hurry, he was elegant and kind and understanding, he appreciated every bit of effort we, frightened applicants were making. He asked questions pertaining to points of usage in English and about the general culture of the English-speaking countries. He was nodding in approval when I listed almost all the Nobel Prize-winners in English and US literatures. Then I was to read a short text and generate a kind of dialog with the examiner. Then we happened to talk about sports and soon we were talking about swimming. He asked me whether I ever tried playing water-polo. I said yes. Then he asked me whether I knew the English word for "the player whose special function is to prevent the ball from passing into the goal." "*Goalkeeper*," I said, "or, *goalie*." "Thank you," he promptly responded, "I have no more questions to ask." Later Országh became my teacher, lecturer, seminar instructor, the supervisor of my student thesis and doctoral dissertation, evaluator of my first monograph, my general academic advisor. I also became the member of the unofficial "Országh school," which became a synonym for high standards of scholarship and credibility. After his retirement, we often called at his home in Budapest, and we never left without inspiring and wise advice. At that time neither of us thought that one day we would be co-authors of the second and third editions (both in 1997) of his *Az amerikai irodalom története* ['History of American Literature'] (1967). He died in 1984, thus he had to accept me as a partner from beyond the grave. I fondly hope he has not regretted the partnership. Those who wish to find out more about the life and work of László Országh have several volumes of edited studies, essays and personal recollections to choose

from. If I were to sum up his influence, I would say that here is a man who made a difference. Without Országh the whole state of English and American Studies in Hungary would be different today. Perhaps we would have no departments of American Studies in the country today.

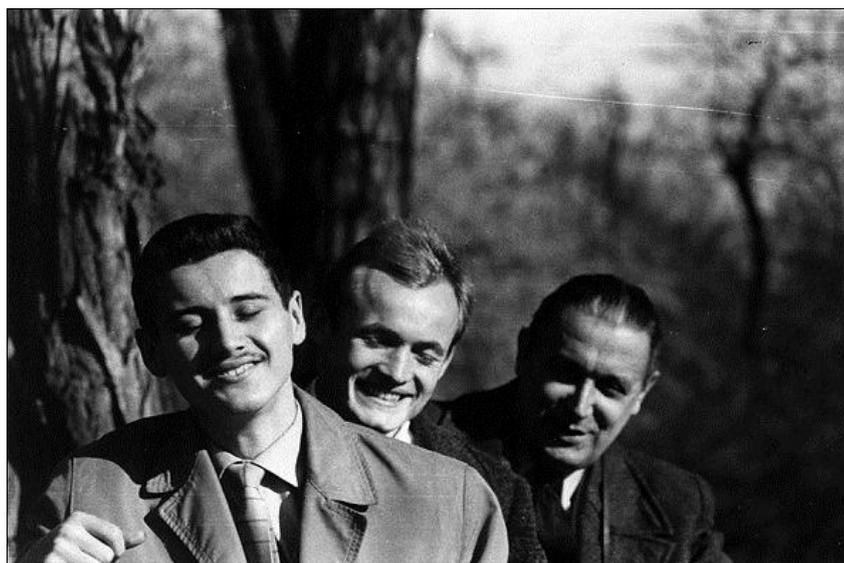
VARRÓ: When exactly did you know that teaching was the thing for you?

VIRÁGOS: To tell the truth, in the beginning it was not the teaching that appealed to me. Yet I got a teaching job even before I graduated. I began teaching and I was soon “infected”: one day I discovered that I was enjoying what I was doing. I might also add that my case was very special and exceptional: I was a teacher—a Teaching Associate—at an American university before I was teaching in the Hungarian school system.

VARRÓ: How did it come about that they picked you as a teacher at Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana, virtually before you graduated?

VIRÁGOS: In the month of April, 1965, two months before I graduated, I received a letter of invitation from the above-mentioned American institution of higher education to serve as a Teaching Associate in their program of Uralic and Altaic Studies. The invitation came from the Hungarian-born Denis Sinor. Professor Sinor needed a young male instructor who was fluent in English, well-trained in linguistics, and who could teach Hungarian descriptive grammar, Hungarian language, and some of the rudiments of present-day Hungarian culture. If you think László Országh had a hand in the invitation, you are right. Let me invite Denis Sinor himself to testify in the matter. In a retrospective article entitled “A Peaceful Interlude in the Cold War,” which was published in one of the 2005 issues of *Hungarian Studies* (19.2; 243–253), Professor Sinor made a relevant observation pertaining to the matter we are discussing: “In September 1963, to my great surprise, Professor László Országh of Debrecen University came to visit me at Indiana University. I had known him since my school days and during the difficult years of the 1950s and beyond we kept in touch in so far that I called on him whenever I was in Budapest. During the darkest years of the Rákosi era, when the teaching of English was suspended at the Hungarian universities, he worked at the Institute of Linguistics of the Hungarian Academy but now he could again teach his subject in Debrecen. He suggested sending one of his students to Bloomington to teach Hungarian

and, what from his point of view was more important, to improve his English and get acquainted with the United States and the American way of life. He was interested in grooming his successors. Of course I enthusiastically embraced the idea. By that time my credentials in Hungary were fairly well established, to the extent that the competent authorities would allow a young man to come to an American university—as long as it was Indiana University. There were difficulties both in Hungary and at my university; the first induced by the general reluctance of overcautious bureaucrats, the second by the internal power struggles within my university. Yet they were overcome, and the first Hungarian teaching associate Tamás Doszkocs arrived in the fall of 1964. He was followed, again on Országh's recommendation, by Zsolt Virágos" (245–246).



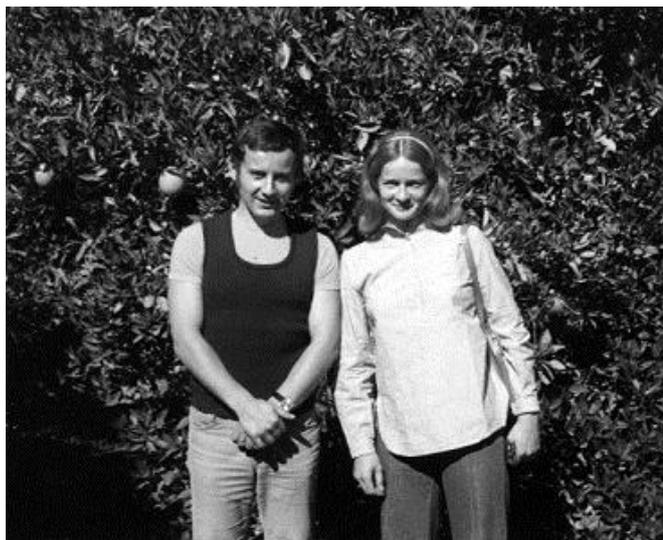
A rare photographic document, which was taken sometime in the mid-1960s, showing Professor László Országh (on the right) with two of his favorite students, Tamás Doszkocs (in the middle) and Zsolt Virágos (on the left).

VARRÓ: *Back at Kossuth, your plan to go to the States must have been big news!*

VIRÁGOS: You bet. It was big news all right! Of course, I formally and personally accepted the invitation, but accepting was child's play in comparison with what followed. Predictably, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the police, and, I guess, the intelligence people were not very

enthusiastic about my planned American “adventure.” They thought that if they allowed an unmarried, childless male like myself to go to America for an extended period he would never come back. And defection would reflect unfavorably on the bright and polished image of Socialism. The police also involved Professor Országh in the matter. After all, Országh was my academic advisor and spiritual guide and, in addition, he knew Professor Sinor personally from the 1930s, when they both were students in Hungary. He was even summoned by the proper authorities and asked in no uncertain terms to “assume responsibility” for me, hereby suggesting that he could put pressure on me not to defect. This was crazy! Országh, getting somewhat impatient with the pointless haggle, said: “The only person I will ‘assume responsibility’ for is László Országh and nobody else.” Finally and miraculously, two weeks after the fall semester began at Indiana University, I could start my work on the IU campus. I was scheduled to teach for two university semesters, that is, for ten months, but my contract was extended for yet another academic year. All in all, I stayed away from Hungary for two years on that first occasion.

***VARRÓ:** You had further chances to visit, do research, travel and teach in the U.S.A.*



In Southern California “I lived within sight of orange trees.”

***VIRÁGOS:** In the 1970s I returned to the United States for a whole calendar year as an ACLS (American Council of Learned Societies)*

Research Fellow For this scholarship my host institution was the English Department of the University of California at Riverside (UCR). Riverside is in Southern California, approximately 60 miles east of Los Angeles. It is the center of the California citrus industry and it has a population of about 310 thousand. For a year I lived within sight of orange trees. There were orange groves everywhere, and I'll never forget the urge, on the first day of my stay there, to pick and taste an orange from one of the trees lining the city streets. If you bought oranges directly from the growers, in the field, you could get a whole boxful for one buck. Needless to say, I missed out a winter in Riverside. This Southern Californian city was an ideal place for a researcher at least in two senses: one, UCR has always had a large and strong English department which, during my scholarship year included an excellent academic advisor, John B. Vickery, one of the best known myth critics in the USA and to whom I am very grateful for the many valuable professional hints and discussions. Despite the fact, let me add, that we had developed very different views and perspectives on myth. It was because of Professor Vickery that I picked UCR as a host institution. Second, far from the hustle and bustle of big city life, research was unaffected by the usual urban temptations.

Then, in the early 1990s I again left Hungary for two years. The first year I was a Fulbright scholar associated with the Department of English of the University of Minnesota. This again was a research scholarship. I worked primarily on the cultural implications of myth, especially as this is manifested in the American social consciousness. Then, because I received an invitation to stay on and teach at the Department of English there as a Fulbright Visiting Professor, I taught American students courses of American literature (e.g. "Literatures of American Minorities") and culture (e.g. two of my three "American myth" courses). I taught at the U of Minnesota on all possible levels; thus I also taught a PhD course devoted solely to the literary output of William Faulkner.

VARRÓ: *What was the best part of teaching/researching in the States, and how was that experience different from doing the same in Hungary?*

VIRÁGOS: I spent altogether half a dozen years in the United States, and half of these I was teaching. When it comes to considering my teaching practice back home on a comparative basis, I like to think that my professional experiences have had an enriching and enduring influence on me as a teacher. Exact correspondences are difficult to pinpoint, because the power of persons and things to produce effects can

be not only subtle and indirect but also imperceptible. Yet these are there. For instance, in the credit present in a lived memory or the credibility and trustworthiness emanating from the statement that “I have been there.” Or, influences of this kind can be present in the confidence with which you address people, students.



My short-term stays of about one month each were in the service of special themes and commitments, such as a study of university management in the U.S., negotiating student exchange programs (for instance, between the University of Debrecen and the U of Missouri in St. Louis, then an unforgettable and efficiently organized USIA-sponsored “multicultural and ethnic tour of the United States.” In this venture I was the member of an international group of 14 persons traveling for a month all over the U.S. including places such as Oxford, Miss.; New Orleans, La.; Minneapolis, Minn.; San Antonio, Tex.; Berkeley, Cal.; Lowell, Mass., Boston, and finally, Washington, D.C. I also traveled to Canada on two occasions: in 1991 I got an invitation from the Northrop Frye Center of the U of Toronto to lecture and do research in the Centre.

VARRÓ: Was this the time you were to meet Northrop Frye himself?

VIRÁGOS: A meeting was arranged with Frye. I had lunch with his secretary the day before, and everything was sorted out for a dialogue. Mr. Frye had been feeling weak, so he requested that I should visit him in his home, which, of course, I was happy to comply with. However, an untoward thing happened. On the morning of the appointed day I noticed that the flags on campus were at half-mast: Professor Frye died the previous night. He died while I was waiting to meet him.

VARRÓ: That, indeed, must have been a blow. Would you care to comment on other short-term research options in North America? And where did you go to “recharge your professional batteries” in Europe?

VIRÁGOS: In Europe, I did research at the U of East Anglia, the U of Oslo and, above all, in the excellent (North) American Studies collection of the John F. Kennedy-Institut für Nordamerikastudien in Berlin, which used to be West Berlin at the time. The Kennedy-Institut I visited for one-month periods at least half a dozen times. In all these places my work was helped by dozens of supportive Americanist friends, colleagues in the profession, and knowledgeable librarians.

VARRÓ: Which of the university campuses and teaching/research opportunities did you like best?

VIRÁGOS: Well, I will never forget my first—total and dramatic—immersion in American culture in the Midwest and exposure to university life on the Indiana University campus. I was young, barely over 23, eager to learn, full of ambition, ready to absorb the language, the culture. Indeed, I felt overwhelmed by the cavalcade of new experience with which I was bombarded. Besides, I was a “free agent,” meaning that I was not yet married. I lived in the GRC (Graduate Residence Center), with about five hundred graduate students, and never before in my life had I had so many new friends (including two nuns). Besides being a TA I was also a student in the sense that I took some Am. Lit./Am. Civ. courses for credit to see how this was done in a large Midwestern university such as IU. I also did a lot of traveling.

VARRÓ: Where did you go?

VIRÁGOS: During those two years I visited 37 states out of the fifty. Then a few more were added later. I can safely claim that I visited—or at least was physically present in—well over forty states.

VARRÓ: *If you could go back now to any of those places in the U.S. you had seen before, which place would you return to and why? Or, if you were to pick a college or university that is new to you, which college/university campus would you prefer?*

VIRÁGOS: On two campuses in the Midwest I have spent altogether four years. In the course of time I have revisited both; the IU campus twice, first in 1977, then in 1995. The other one, the U of Minnesota campus I would be happy to see once more. Minnesota to me will always be a locus of pleasant memories, both professional and personal. Minnesota has always impressed me as a state that is both scenic and highly cultured. Minnesotans have an excellent school system, which worked for our benefit when my three children went to school there. I can also say the best about their top museums. Again, in the whole United States only New York City has more theaters than Minneapolis. It's too bad the winters there are forbiddingly cold. Any veteran of a Minnesota winter could tell you about what "wind-chill factor" means. One Christmas it was so cold that the sole of my shoe broke while I was walking in the street. If I were given the chance to stay on a campus I have not seen, I would choose a region in North Carolina, preferably the so-called Research Triangle anchored by North Carolina State University, Duke University, and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

VARRÓ: *I happen to know that traveling plays a great role in your life, and that in the past years you explored a great portion of the European continent. Is there a place still that you left out so far, and you really long to go to?*

VIRÁGOS: I certainly like to do as much traveling as possible. Some places I go back to several times, such as ski-camps in Slovakia and Austria, or places where I taught for several years, such as the University of Nagyvárad. Talking about purely touristy opportunities, I was, in the beginning, drawn to "roughing it," which was primarily manifested in camping and hitchhiking. But then, as a young teacher, I had my own car and that also brought a different style of traveling. As it should be obvious from what I have earlier said about this, I did a lot of traveling outside Europe, in places like Turkey and Tunisia, but especially in North

America. However, surprisingly, I have never been physically present in Mexico, despite the fact that I had glimpses of the southern neighbor of the U.S. at Tijuana, California, and El Paso, Texas. Should I ever get the opportunity to return to the USA once more, I would definitely want to combine that trip with a sojourn in Mexico. As my publications show, my professional interest in things Mexican and Chicano is relatively recent. Increasingly, I find Mexican culture ever more fascinating. I have done a lot of exploratory, preliminary work for that hypothetical Mexican trip in Spain, Mexico's mother country, which I have visited four times, each time focusing on a selected region: Madrid (with side trips to Toledo and El Escorial), Catalonia, Andalucia (Malaga, Granada, Cordoba, Sevilla, etc.), and the Murcia coast. Apart from scenes of natural beauty the high point of my visit in Madrid was the Museo de América with artifacts brought from the Americas between the 16th and 20th centuries. But you should not think that I visited only high-brow institutions. I also went to see Estadio Santiago Bernabeu owned by Real Madrid and Camp Nou, the largest football stadium in Europe and home to FC Barcelona.

VARRÓ: Do you find the European scenery very different from the American landscapes you are familiar with?

*VIRÁGOS: Well, it depends what particular landscapes you compare. The rugged beauty of New England, the sublime peaks of Colorado, or much of the Pacific coast speak for themselves. Yes, there are geographical environments in the U.S. that are too rugged and alienating for average human convenience. But why don't we invite one of the many authors to testify? Jack London on Alaska scenes, Steinbeck on California's coastal range, Ole Rølvaag on winter scenes in the Midwest, Edith Wharton on frozen and barren rural New England. Or Willa Cather, who in her excellent historical novel *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927) set in the American Southwest has this to say about the experiences of the early missionaries: "A European could scarcely imagine such hardships. The old countries were worn to the shape of human life, made into an investiture, a sort of second body, for man. There the wild herbs and the wild fruits and the forest fungi were edible. The streams were sweet water, the trees afforded shade and shelter. But in the alkali deserts [in the American Southwest] the water holes were poisonous, the vegetation offered nothing to a starving man. Everything was dry, prickly, sharp; Spanish bayonet, juniper, greasewood, cactus; the lizard, the rattlesnake,—and man made cruel by a cruel life. Those early*

missionaries threw themselves naked upon the hard heart of a country that was calculated to try the endurance of giants. They thirsted in its deserts, starved among its rocks, climbed up and down its terrible canyons on stone-bruised feet, broke long fasts by unclean and repugnant food.”

VARRÓ: *Do you, as Cather does, prefer Europe to the New World?*

VIRÁGOS: I tend to be cautious about final judgments in this matter. Yet I am positive European destinations still have much to offer. Indeed, my journeys in the next few years are designed to be a kind of (re)discovery of Europe.

VARRÓ: *So which is the next European country for you to visit? Provided, of course, there are some you haven't seen.*

VIRÁGOS: Not too many are left. Two or three. However, one of them is, surprisingly, Ireland. So if you predict that Ireland is my next destination, you may be right.

VARRÓ: *You held many important offices both in the Institute of English and American Studies, the former English Department (as head of the institute and the department), and the School of Arts and Humanities (as Deputy Dean). How do you look back to those positions and the important public offices you held? Were you personally involved in the crucial process of restructuring and retooling?*

VIRÁGOS: This is what you call service. Serving the university. I was Director of the Institute of Western Languages and Literatures, which was made up of the English, French and German departments, for three years (1987–1990). I had to oversee the gestation of a totally novel academic enterprise which brought lots of new challenges and hitherto unforeseen complexities emanating from the triggering effect of the political changes at the end of the late 1980s. All of a sudden there was a dramatic increase in student enrollment at the Institute: soon we had six hundred, then seven hundred, finally more than 800 students in the three Western languages departments. Thus finally I decided it was necessary to split. The English Department became the Institute of English and American Studies, which in turn split, in 1991, into three departments: Department of British Studies, North American Department, and Department of English Language and Linguistics. Then, in 1996, a fourth department was established: the Department of English Language Learning and Teaching. These were radical changes. Perhaps the most crucial one was that for the

first time in Kossuth University's academic history, an American (later North-American) Department was established; the first such department among universities in Hungary. Of course, there was a scarcity of teaching material, of books, textbooks, library space, virtually of everything. The Institute had to be built up rapidly, on a massive scale. We had to solve the (would you believe, politically sensitive) problems of copying on a large scale. In those "heroic" times, the Institute had one computer. In one decade each member of the teaching staff, and each secretary, had their own word-processor. However, the greatest problem was recruiting, at a very short notice, a dozen or so quality teaching faculty. A number of visiting professors from the United States also came to help. I personally initiated and arranged the transfer of well over a dozen teachers of English to the Institute. This immediately created problems regarding office space. Luckily, we got substantial help from the university and faculty management (thanks are due especially to Dean László Imre for his good will, understanding and flexibility) and the respective diplomatic services stationed in Hungary, with the U.S. Embassy, USIA, USIS, the Soros Foundation taking leading role. These were heady times! We were aware of the historic changes and we also felt that it made sense to work for meaningful objectives. I am proud I could contribute, well into the 1990s and beyond, to the changes we achieved. In September, 1990, I went to the United States for two years of teaching and research. While I was away, growth in the Institute in every possible way continued, and the work of restructuring, especially in terms of study options, professional specializations, international ties, exchange problems, administrative and library personnel, library holdings, continued. On my return, I continued in my capacity as Director of the Institute.

VARRÓ: *Were there still many tasks awaiting you on your return in the fall of 1992?*

VIRÁGOS: You bet. We had our hands full. For instance, this was the time when we moved to new premises, which finally solved the problem of office space. We solved the task of allocation of available space to general satisfaction. Finally each colleague had a decent working environment. But tasks and projects never end. Some of these were very mundane, shall I say "pedestrian," matters to sort out. Thus, for instance, I had to persuade the instructors of the Institute of a few rudimentary improvements of the kind that, for instance, there would be no cancelled

classes, that no teacher would be allowed to teach without a written program. So each instructor mastered the art of designing courses, of calculating available time, of the logistics of midterm and end-term examinations, etc. I also introduced the system of course description catalogues. This time I only served as director for one academic year, because I became Deputy Dean. But before I left, we also launched a newsletter of the Institute, jointly edited by students and myself. You certainly remember *The Bridge*, because that was the title of the newsletter. This monthly publication was kept alive while we could find funding in the system.

VARRÓ: *Were your duties and obligations as Deputy Dean even more challenging?*



Session of the Faculty Doctoral Committee, of which Professor Zsolt Virágos was co-chair.

VIRÁGOS: As one of the two deputy deans, I was responsible for the budget, scholarship and international programs of the School of Arts and Humanities. I served in this capacity for two years. When this period expired, I resolved to do some thinking about my future options. I realized I had to prioritize. I had to realize that I was, first and foremost, a teacher. This was what I was trained and qualified for. I did not want to

be a bureaucrat. So I said no when the offer came for a more highly positioned rank.

VARRÓ: The literary history of the U.S.A. is a profound part of your research and teaching expertise. You wrote three monograph-length studies, a large number of lexicon entries and essays dedicated to the field. English-major students around the country literarily grow up on studying those books. I think it would be interesting for everyone to learn whether the author of these literary histories himself has a favorite period within American literature.

VIRÁGOS: Favorite periods? Ex officio I have to like them all. But if I am obliged to pick one, my choice at the moment would be the American Enlightenment and the Age of Modernism. But talking about my work as primarily that of a literary historian would be misleading. I would not mind being referred to as a historian of American literature if I had significantly contributed to the theory of literary history. But, to tell the truth, I did not have the kind of professional enthusiasm for this area of academic interest as I did, for instance, for the “Black Aesthetic,” myth-and-literature studies in general, or the iconography of American culture. Another thing I wish to add is that, chronologically, my first large and comprehensive area of academic interest was language teaching. I was a language teacher for several years, including the four years I spent at Kossuth University’s teacher training secondary grammar school as a demonstration teacher of English. At the time I was also responsible for the instruction of methodology to fifth-year students. As my list of publications shows, I co-authored four textbooks of English as a result of this first professional preoccupation.

VARRÓ: I believe that many from my generation were inspired by your unique methodology of teaching literature and culture. I would describe it, simplifying things a bit, as a special attention to literary detail, identifying culture-specific icons, and highlighting correlations between historical facts and literary utterance. Would you add or modify anything on this list while describing your trademark methodology?

VIRÁGOS: I did not know I had a trademark methodology. However, I am firmly convinced that the best method is an eclectic one. In which you show your students, without courting dogmatism, the enriching approach of showing possible points of entry. One of these has to be

iconography for the simple reason that this is an indispensable way of teaching your students the method of “reading” the literary culture.

VARRÓ: *Would you care to identify by title some of the classes you’ve taught?*

VIRÁGOS: Certainly. The lectures were most often histories of 19th- and 20th-century U.S. literature offered to all the freshmen and sophomore students (e.g. “Literary History of the United States: the 19th Century”). These were followed up by more or less standardized multi-genre seminars (Am. Lit.1, Am. Lit.2, and Am. Lit.3). In the 1990s I was also responsible for lecture courses specifically devoted to cultural study: “American Civilization” and “Introduction to the Culture of the United States.” A more recent lecture course was “Landmarks and Representative Voices in pre-1900 American Literature” and “Portraits and Landmarks in Twentieth-Century U.S. Literature Before World War Two.” As regards advanced seminars offered to junior and senior students, there was much more leeway. I am going to list some belonging in this last category. Here we go: “Myth in 20th-Century American Literature”; “Literatures of American Minorities”; “Twentieth-Century Prose Literature of the American South: White and African–American Voices”; “The Iconography of American Culture”; “Myth and Ideology in American Culture and Society”; “The Politics of Representation in American Culture and Society”; “African–American Literature and Thought”; “Representative Texts in the Literary Culture from Colonial Times to the End of the 19th Century”; “Ethnic and Minority Voices in American Expressiveness: Aspects of Culture and Ideology”; “Ethnic and Minority Cultures in North America, and a few more.

VARRÓ: *Your research has often been geared towards minority literatures in the U.S. Can you define exactly where this orientation derives from? In other words how did you become interested in the topic of race and stereotyping? How fashionable a topic was this when you started to deal with it in the 1970s?*

VIRÁGOS: It was László Országh who called my attention to things African American. In a letter I received from him at Indiana University he pointed out that African American Studies in Hungarian philology was virtually unknown and regarded as a blank spot. He also hinted that a potential future Americanist in Hungary—he never exactly spelt out who—might want to do some pioneering work in the field. Then one

thing led to the other. As a student of black culture it was inevitable that I should scrutinize phenomena like racialized manifestations, ethnicity, stereotyped character portrayal and conceptually related satellites. It was both interesting and intriguing to find that I arrived at roughly the same destination through substantially different paths: as a result of my myth studies I came to confront the same manifestations from a different angle. For instance, what was seen earlier as an aesthetic problem was now looked at as an ideologically attuned incarnation.

VARRÓ: You are known today in Hungary among the Americanists as a myth critic, indeed a true rarity. How would you define this label (do you regard it as appropriate), and could you specify the usefulness of it to today's literary theory?

*VIRÁGOS: Actually I am not a genuine myth critic. Claiming that I am a critic of myth criticism would be closer to the truth. Most of my publications pertain to this infinitely large and complex area. However, it is useful to consider that the true terrain of myth criticism is myth as M1, that is, when we are talking about ancient myth. Myth that has paradigmatic, archetypal, ennobling, universalizing, transcendental—and a host of other related, centrifugal—potentials. But I am also interested in myth as a component of the social consciousness (which inevitably connects this area with ideology, politics, literary criticism, art, ethics, science, even law and philosophy), as myth becomes part of literature (myth *in* literature and myth *as* literature). However, much of my research concerns areas that are extraliterary. The usefulness of myth in today's literary theory? Whether we like it or not, myth will always be an eternal alibi of literary and critical scholarship. We human beings are like fish swimming in a huge reservoir of myth. The fact that most of us proprietors are not aware of myth as a choice property, does not mean that we do not own and consume it.*

VARRÓ: What is the work that you are most proud of out of your scholarly work and why?

VIRÁGOS: My first monograph on African American culture and literature. This came out when I was 33. The scholarly and public acclaim of that 392-page book surprised me. Not unpleasantly, to tell the truth.

VARRÓ: As some of our readers might recall, we were also working on a book together. The one we casually refer to as "The Jim Crow book"

between ourselves. Would you care to comment on the part of that project which you liked most?

VIRÁGOS: In a professional and personal sense, this partnership was a classic “master and disciple,” “teacher and student” enterprise. The master—that is, myself—had served as the academic advisor of the disciple—that is, you—and helped the student become an Americanist capable of generating new knowledge in a chosen area of research and academic interest. What actually happened was that the joint partnership in the end resulted in a sizeable monograph, which, in turn, brought together two different yet related areas of research within an African American Studies frame of reference: the many aspects of black portraiture and the amazing outgrowth of the blackface minstrel tradition. It was exciting to see how these two areas evolved in direction and conceptuality, as well as in a causal relationship to be finally merged as a unified product.

VARRÓ: *Is there a major project you are currently working on that you can talk about in detail?*

VIRÁGOS: I plan to publish a book-size study summarizing my extensive previous research on the many selected aspects of myth. I do not yet have a definitive title, but I know that the word *myth* and reference to the *American social consciousness* will be included in it. This is expected to come out both in English and Hungarian. Another pet project is the iconography of American culture, a field of research some essential aspects of which I have tested in actual teaching and discussions with students. And don’t forget that I am “learning Chicano.” A few weeks ago I published a study entitled “Chicano Dilemmas” and I may extend my research to related matters. Before doing so, however, I am supposed to study Spanish. Busy times!

VARRÓ: *It is not a secret that we are making this interview at the apropos of your birthday, and although it is a commonplace I have to say that you certainly do not look or act as most people of your age group. How does your age make you feel?*

VIRÁGOS: As to my “looks,” you must ask other people. I hope you do not want to hint that I am immature or infantile. Frankly, I do not feel I am such an old person. As to my health, I am fine, thank you. I have just

come back from a ski-camp in Austria. I have the (mistaken?) idea that I can still improve my performance in downhill skiing.

VARRÓ: *This is usually the time to summarize achievements and to cast an account, but I know that you are not the type. So instead I wish to ask you two things that I think have to do with summaries a bit, but are also different from plain accounts: [1] What is it that you believe in, that you have always believed in through your life? Is there a single thing or idea like that? (Is there like a motto that you regard as true for your life?); [2] Is there anything that you are truly afraid of?*

VIRÁGOS: When it comes to taking inventories of a lifetime, I cannot help remembering the dozens—actually hundreds—of literary examples in which people “[strut] and [fret] [their] hour upon the stage,” justify their former existence. Indeed, we are talking about one of the most dominant thematic preoccupations of literary expressiveness. However, strange though it may appear, on such occasions I keep recalling a scene that never fails to move me and which involves the old Indian chief in Thomas Berger’s novel *Little Big Man* (1964). At the end of Chapter 30 the old Cheyenne chief, Old Lodge Skins, walks to the top of a high promontory to die. He is praying to the Everywhere Spirit in a “stentorian voice, never sniveling but bold and free.” And he says, “Thank you for making me a Human Being! Thank you for helping me become a warrior! Thank you for all my victories and for all my defeats. Thank you for my vision, and for the blindness in which I saw further. I have killed many men and loved many women and eaten much meat. I have also been hungry, and I thank you for that and for the added sweetness that food has when you receive it after such a time. . . . I am going to die now, unless Death wants to fight first, and I ask you for the last time to grant me my old power to make things happen!” He needed his “old power” to stage his death. In a few minutes Old Lodge Skins was dead. If I, a resident of Debrecen, were to respond in a similar situation, I would say this: “Thank you, God, for creating me and letting me be part of this beautiful—as well as fragile and dangerous—world.” And I hope God will never accuse me of not using the talent I was born with.

Brief answers to the numbered items: [1] This may sound corny, but I believe in *work*. [2] Anything that I am truly afraid of? If I told you the truth, claiming that I am afraid of nothing, you would never believe it. This does not mean I am insensitive to certain turnoffs. I can certainly be turned off by stupidity. And phoney behavior.

VARRÓ: *What do you regard as your greatest strength and weakness as a person? Do you see any of these traits as coming from your own family?*

VIRÁGOS: Now, isn't this a leading question? How can one avoid subjectivized answers to questions like these? Let's face it, in a career like mine, one needs a certain amount of talent. Now, you either have it or you don't. It's like playing jazz or singing an opera solo. Or, like high-quality simultaneous interpretation: some people are capable of doing it, some are not. You can, of course, improve your performance somewhat through hard work, assiduity, and determination. But ultimately it is like bringing up a child: it is tempting to accept views claiming that the things which determine what a child grows up into largely depend on what he or she carries in their genes. Thus a parent might as well sit back and wait it out. You can bring about essential change in about two percent out of a hundred. And again, if you do not "have it" in you and you still pretend that you possess the mental apparatus that is objectively required for it, you are simply deceiving yourself. My greatest strength? If you want a very short answer, then my answer is a single word: empathy. This, as I indicated above, I must have inherited from my mother. She took a good look at someone she had never seen before and she could "read" that person off-hand. Sometimes she did not even have to look. To empathy you can add the lack of *hubris*: I like to believe that I do not get carried away by the "feathers in my cap." I know everything is relative. And short-lived. My shortcomings? There are quite a few of these: sometimes I get impatient with slow people. I am usually put off by pompous and phoney people. Occasionally I fail to package what I want to say. I do not always maintain order either in a spatial or temporal sense. Orderliness is not a virtue I can feel proud of. Yet another drawback is procrastination. Sometimes I tend to procrastinate. Thus, you see, in my next life I have got to better myself and improve my performance.

VARRÓ: *Do you have any regrets about the past that you certainly would do differently now that you are looking back to it from a distance?*

VIRÁGOS: You mean would I change the video recording of my life if I could? I wouldn't. Because I couldn't. On the whole I am satisfied with my life. Sometimes I think of it as a series of good luck. Ever since my father saved me from drowning when I was a baby.

VARRÓ: *If there were a program on TV, titled, “The Secret Life of...” What would that series’ chapter dedicated to your life be about? That is, besides culture studies and literature is there any other great passion in your life that you could let us know about?*

VIRÁGOS: If I dismiss those things that I do not wish to share, there is not much left. A few harmless things, perhaps. But even these appear to be contradictory. For instance, I can hardly be accused of gluttony, yet I like good food. I am not a drunkard, yet I know the taste of good wine. In a job like mine one needs a lot of privacy, thus I often felt I had to disappear to have the right to face people again. Which could easily put the label of “hermit” on me. Yet I like good company. I like to have long conversations with knowledgeable people. I cannot resist certain brands of humor. And I am very much concerned about talent lost.

VARRÓ: *Linking up to this idea, many of us working in the field of American Studies feel that we came out of the school you started. Were you ever conscious of this responsibility and that you also do have a legacy?*

VIRÁGOS: In forty or so years I have left many traces. I have influenced a large number of students who were enthusiastic about the eye-opening topics we discussed in advanced seminars. One of my committed students once made this remark at the end of a semester: “We could hardly wait for these seminars to begin.” To me this evaluation was worth more than a formal award. I have taught thousands of schoolchildren and students in four different countries. Some of my books have reached thousands of people. Some of my colleagues have been my students. Thus, in a sense, there are gains to be counted. I think it would be easy to prove that I did make a difference. Yet I have never thought of my work, my “achievements” in terms of a formal legacy, or something that would come close to establishing a school. Whether or not I have created a legacy will depend on the impact my writings—3,250 printed pages so far—make. One thing is certain: I have received a large amount of personal satisfaction from my work. In a way this is a matter of sheer luck: I happened to work with themes and subjects that I liked and was intrigued by. It is simple as that.

I see that we are running out of time. Yet I would like to add a sentence or two by way of conclusion. We, that is, those who work in the profession, should be sensitized to the fact that what we do is a serious

matter. Serious in an existential, cultural, and moral sense. If you make errors, these are promptly multiplied a dozen times, three dozen times. Yet, do not overdo the seriousness. And, especially, do not take yourself too seriously. Some playfulness can do wonders. And don't fail to remember that humor can be a great asset.

***VARRÓ:** What a wonderful note, indeed, on which to conclude this interview. Dear Zsolt, many happy returns, and may our talks continue...*