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A POSSIBLE APPLICATION OF PHILOSOPHY IN THE
STUDY OF RECENT AMERICAN FICTION

Zoom 1.:Philosophy in the 'Age of Indetermanence'.

We have gone too far in science, in technology, in philosophy and in political theory for many new syntheses remotely like the old. It is not absolute meaning we seek any more, but how to live at peace with ourselves and with the universe. (Davis 26)

When reading, analyzing and teaching contemporary literature and recent American fiction in particular, a specific approach to philosophy is indispensable to be developed. As philosophers like Michael Foucault and Arnold Toynbee claimed, we experience the end of Modern Western Man and are entering the Postmodern Age, the Age of Indeterminacy in Ihab Hassan's words, when man is "increasingly unable to anchor itself to any universal ground of justice, truth or reason (Hutcheon 8)." The dominant feeling and mood of man at the end of the 20th century is uncertainty for the reasons Fred Alan Wolf summarized as follows: "We pay a large price for a material world. The price involves our sanity. We cannot make total order of our observations. There always appears to be something missing. This disruption of God's order appears to us as the Principle of Uncertainty (61)."

Uncertainty dwells at the core of all philosophical investigations today, since the certainty of 'cogito ergo sum' had got lost and only the truth of 'cogito ergo' remained besides the ultimate certainty of the paradoxical knowledge of uncertainty, quoting Milan Kundera (2). Literature and philosophy can hardly provide comforting points of

support or clean-cut answers for the problems of daily existence. Both try to interrogate, to help through defining questions in our chaotic world that from time to time seems to lack any sufficient and reliable value system. The power and merit of both the writer and the philosopher can be the courage to question our preconceptions and convictions concerning the way we live and think, or the sense or senselessness of our life. The difference between the attitude of philosophers and writers is to be examined later on. However, in the following I am to epitomize those significant philosophical ideas that I consider essential in the study of recent literature.

Philosophers like Schopenhauer observed that in an aesthetic sense the world became a dream or rather a nightmare with a universe is falling apart. Heidegger applied the term 'Age of the World Picture' to describe the state when "everything is enframed, made into material either for manipulation or for aesthetic declaration (Rorty 69)." A form of this aesthetic declaration is Postmodernism, when Western man living in some kind of self-deception is reminded of his being 'forgetful of Being,' applying Heidegger's term, and he is called to reject the outside entropic forces that tend to kill individuality and personality. Having accepted the Many Worlds Theory, we should also assent to the existence of many truths—an idea completely inconceivable before modernism. America and American philosophers, especially the pragmatists are liberal when applying the 'live and let live' concept to truth as well. Following Richard Rorty, William James and Max Schelet's Absolute Pluralism, Mihály Vajda argues that our truth cannot damage others' freedom anymore. But how can truth be so tolerant? The pragmatist answer is that there are universal truths of existence, as Vajda claims. In my understanding these universal truths create their own paradigms that can become fields of interpretation in the case of each artifact. The complexity and relativity of postmodern novels reflect the anti-rationality of present reality. In their common effort to overcome the tradition of Western metaphysics and the One True Description idea, philosophers and writers try to seize existence not from a theoretical viewpoint but in narration instead. The latter has been pointed out by Vajda, examining the diverting points between Heidegger, Rorty and Kundera. Heidegger declared that Western culture had exhausted its possibilities, but he was the one who became a so-called 'aesthetic

priest' in his attempt to make abstractions from reality and try to understand it with their help. At this point Rorty's opinion diverts from that of his predecessors and he seems to support Kundera, who proclaimed that novelists who follow Dickens and Rabelais are able to grasp the complexity and uniqueness of reality and "to revolt against the onthotheological treatise (Rorty 68)" much better. As opposed to Heidegger's cue word 'exhaustion', Kundera and Rorty have found open-endedness to be the distinctive postmodernist attitude towards the general state of closure in Western culture. Here one can observe an interesting change in the concept of the role and method of philosophy. Contrary to the 'artistic priests' sterile, declarative and generalizing—consequently in most cases erroneous—stance, a new kind of philosophical approach has emerged: the interrogative one (see also Federman 11) which is able to examine details and fragments of reality (see also Rorty 80–1) without the claim of omnipotent answers, but with more hope of truthfulness and practical applicability.

Before examining the difference in the attitude of philosophers' and novelists' approach to reality in detail, let me refer to another aspect that reveals the difference between the modern and postmodern mind. Among the critical studies dealing with this issue one of the most comprehensive one is Ihab Hassan's "Postface 1982: Towards the Concept of Postmodernism." The latter provides a sketch of schematic differences between what we call Modernism and Postmodernism, including philosophical perspectives among many, too. Postmodernism is characterized with attributes such as Chance (as opposed to Design); Anarchy (versus Hierarchy); Exhaustion/Silence (versus Mastery/Logos); Decreation/Deconstruction (versus Creation/Totalization); Anti-thesis, Indeterminacy and Immanence, to mention a few (267–8). These notions signify aesthetic thinking in our age, at the same time they represent the final stage of the process where self-consciousness and certainty still existing in realistic metaphysical and modern thinking gets lost. Vajda points out the change in the focus and basic concerns, too: whereas the aesthetic thinking of the previous ages took metaphysics and the spheres of rationality (i.e. economics, politics) as their starting-point, postmodern focuses on the spheres of freedom such as private and public life and culture (194). Consequently postmodern thinkers and critics should renounce their

claim for a universal, rational concept about the world. The effort of the artist to find a sense in senselessness is well presented in Pierre Giorgio Di Cicco's prose-verse:

Interconnectedness of all things does not make things less lonely for the post-reductionist mind. The mind tries to create its landscape even as it is travelling through it. The unknown is no longer in God's hands, but under the jurisdiction of mind. The mind cannot trust itself, because it has been taught to doubt. To doubt and trust at the same time is like trying to defeat Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle. You cannot be at two places at once; only God can. Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle is tenable if you are faced with the uncertainty of the meaning of existence, what you experience is infinite regress, perpetual anguish, and physical death. (113)

Zoom 2.: A Comparative Aspect of Postmodern Philosophy and Fiction—Two Overlapping Concepts of Life.

In his essay entitled "Heidegger, Kundera and Dickens" Rorty defined the core of postmodern novel and the whole genre of fiction as a "reaction to, and as an alternative to, the attempt to theorize about human affairs;" moreover, he indicated "the opposition between the aesthetic priest's taste for theory, simplicity, structure, abstraction and essence and the novelist's taste for narrative, detail, diversity and accident (Rorty 13)." He claims that both spheres of knowledge tend to oppose the preponderance of conformism in society—being the only chance for greatness but with different means. What he appreciates in fiction is the presentation of fragments of reality, details, and as such, it seems to have a better chance to grasp reality, a 'truer' one. Rorty joined Kundera claiming, that the root of the novel is not theoretics but the spirit of humor—following the anti-theoretic traditions. Vajda expresses his doubts concerning the absolute truth of such statements, questioning also the omniscience of such expressions as 'agelaste' Kundera had applied to philosophy and poetry as opposed to the sense of humor fiction has acquired. In my view there is an increasing sense of humor in contemporary philosophy since today's philosophers frequently call the attention to the fundamental paradoxes, hypocrisies and ironies in the practice and theory of our age. They tend to operate with the term 'interrogation' as a basic

mood for fiction as well saying, that the novelist wants the reader to understand the world through questions (Vajda 121).

I think the case is slightly different in postmodern literature. The only radically new idea there is that artifacts are not expected to reflect reality any longer, decreasing the relevance of the mimetic function, but to create their own worlds, paradigms, if you like, through decomposition and reorganization (i.e. emplotment). Such a pluralism and relativity cannot exist without the questioning of the existing traditions and concepts. The acceptance means tolerance and a liberal attitude in North-American literature and other spheres of life towards the diversity of viewpoints, opinions and the existence of many worlds. This theory applied to literature means that not only are there as many worlds as individuals, but also each piece of literature has its own world in which the characters, relationships, actions, the language of the texts, etc. gain a meaning, or rather: as many meanings coexist as the number of readers of a given text. Consequently, with the disappearance of the One True Definition in philosophy the possibility of a singular True Meaning and Interpretation has vanished, too. The same tendency exists in literature, actually it had already existed in modernism. That makes understanding modern and postmodern literature a bit difficult for those who acquired their literary education in a traditional way and have not got used to creative reading. Novelists are aware of the risk of unintelligibility. Diversification of the reading public is a challenge for them and they often find confusion or snobbish pretence of understanding, like The Silver Horn Society and Mr. Czolgacz in Elliott Baker's *Fine Madness* (1964).

The program also told her that she was a guest of The Silver Horn Society. Studying the members' hairdos and dresses, Lydia placed the organization somewhere near Fifth Avenue and Ninetieth Street. She wondered if any of them could tell if she wasn't a Silver Horner, and decided they probably couldn't. She lived twenty blocks down from them and further east, but she had become an obvious type, too—wife of a professional man, children in private school, dabbler in the arts; nothing that would make her stand out in this crowd.... Mr. Czolgacz's harp provided a welcome change of pace. His choice of the Attignant piece and Dussek's Sonata was, she knew, deliberate. The egotistical snob would play things with which his audience wasn't familiar. She could feel the women nearest her relax

as he moved on to Bach and she too felt more comfortable with the familiar sonorous sounds. (191)

Shillitoe, an outstanding representative of the new type of (anti)hero, here a poet invited to read up his verses, responds to the mob of 'Momist Dragons' with mortal sting:

That's probably the kind of lullaby you want me to sing. But can't do it. Neither sickly nor feminine. Never found out why, when a woman thinks about love she always starts about counting. Nothing against Lizzie, though she probably dimmed old Browning's lambent flame. Can't turn out a poem when you are horizontal. She tried to write poetry. Can't be written. Got to be formed, like a gallstone, only opposite direction. Still, what she did was better than any of you will do if you live to be three hundred and five. Just mention that so you'll know your place. (192)

Unintelligibility is also neglected by authors such as Pynchon, Barthelme, Brautigan and Barth, which seems to underline the fact that their novels exist and create their own paradigm, moreover they function as living organisms through the authorial process of creation as well as through the (re-)creation in the readers' minds. Linda Hutcheon reminds us of the relevance and equal importance of both processes in her book on the Canadian Postmodern (45).

A tangible example of the divergence in the artists' concept concerning the role, function and method of fiction is reflected in the famous Gass-Gardner debate. Besides many other differences, Gardner is advocating a so-called 'lovable fiction,' whereas Gass ignores the urge of writing something not lovable. He finds artistic satisfaction in the creative process and explains the mechanism through which postmodern fiction can work, as he claims:

Very frequently the writer's aim is to take apart the world where you have very little control, and replace it with language over which you can have some control....You write the book to understand and get control of things that you haven't been able to control and understand in the world....Maybe it is an illusory understanding, but I think it helps you live. (LeClair 29)

I consider the above idea to be the shared main concern of both literature and philosophy: by trying to form one's own ideas s/he can get a little more control of present reality, too. As for the difference in

the approaches of literature and philosophy, Gardner argues: “The difference between what I am doing and what a philosopher is doing is that my activity leads to a feeling state, whereas the philosopher has only cold clarity (LeClair 14–5).” He concludes saying that “What argument is to philosophy, plot is to fiction (LeClair 16).” Of course artists respect art more as a form of presenting one’s own understanding of life, even some philosophers like Rorty hold this preference. What intellectuals of both fields reject is the traditional role of both domains: to present a complete explanation and picture of the world.

Zoom 3.: Fiction—Absurd Creation and the American Peculiarities of Postmodern Fiction.

There are no words
for that silence I crave like a brother sewed to the
underside of my skin. Bathetic and superluminal
is my true self. Citified, I arsenal my words
for the unquestionable, for, really, my heart
would have only one answer, no good for lifting
chairs or writing cheques. I am a deconstructivist
with the throat of a lark. Ridiculous as it looks
I market the tragedy. I try to find angels
in micro-trajectories, and the heart emblazoned
on the Janus-faced mysteries.

(Di Cicco: “Deep as the Exhaustion on God”)

Postmodernism is a global contemporary phenomenon. Vajda devoted a whole section to study the presence of postmodern philosophy in Eastern Europe in his recent book (183–96). As for American literature, numerous critical works analyzed postmodernism as a literary phenomenon and many have searched for connections with philosophy as well. Among them I especially appreciated R. B. Hauck’s essay entitled “The American Sisyphus” (3–14) and Abádi-Nagy’s introduction to the novel of the 1960s entitled *Válság és komikum: A hatvanas évek amerikai regénye*, since both treatise explore the core of the postmodern concept of existence and its presence in literary texts. To mention another useful source, Hutcheon’s inclusive book on the Canadian Postmodern identifies universalities besides the distinct Canadian attributes.

I hold the view that absurdity is a central category in recent philosophy as well as literature, especially drama and Black Humor Fiction. It appears in different interpretations, however, it always reflects the human need of some sort of help to cope with the chaos, uncertainty and absurdity today. The paradox, sometimes schizophrenic state of our consciousness derives from the choice we are impelled to face with: in Hauck's conclusion the escapes in the fields of philosophy, literature as well as in everyday practicalities are either suicide or unthinking resignation. He claims: "To be fully conscious is to have a sense of absurd. A sense of the absurd follows the recognition that the universe appears to be meaningless (3)." Most writers arrive at the same conclusion stating it directly in their novels or implying it indirectly. In Walker Percy's *The Last Gentleman* (1966) Sutter asks the same metaphysical question: "Which is the best course for a man: to live like a Swede, vote for the candidate of your choice, be a good fellow, healthy and generous, do a bit of science as if the world made sense, enjoy a beer and a good piece (not bad life!). Or: to live as a Christian among Christians in Alabama? Or to die like an honest man (236)?"

Suicide as a rational choice is also mentioned earlier in the text:

You are wrong too about the sinfulness of suicide in this age, at least the nurtured possibility of suicide, for the certain availability of death is the very condition of recovering oneself. But death is as outlawed now as sin used to be. Only one's own suicide remains to one. My 'suicide' followed the breakdown of the sexual as a mode of reentry from the posture of transcendence. (230)

According to Hauck, besides these so-called rational choices, there is one more, namely the Sisyphus-like creation of one's own meaning as the only possibility to make something out of nothing. Though it is ludicrous and full of paradoxes, as one can see it in Black Humor Fiction and the Rebellious and Intermedia Absurd Dramas, it is the only life-affirming force against moral nihilism more and more people live in. Abádi-Nagy considers the veins of humor to be "strategies man devises to cope with that consciousness ("Black Humor versus Satire" 32)."

Reading the novels of Vonnegut, Barth, Pynchon, Heller and dramas like Jack Richardson's "Gallows Humour" (1962) or Edward

Albee's "The American Dream" (1961), one can observe the authors' immense effort to extricate the reader from the state of passive innocence that leads to the ignorance one has to be responsible for; and draw through the disturbing awareness up to the point where there is no certainty anymore just the philosophical state of estrangement, where everything is relative and one has to find and create meaning for his/herself alone. Even the expression 'Absurd Creation' is paradoxical, contains the element of humor, reality, i.e. in its very self, as Abádi-Nagy says, the novels are written exactly like reality exists: there is no causality, form is abstract, accidentality has a dominant role and appearance becomes the essence in most cases (*Válság és komikum* 397). In this situation humor can cover the serious existential themes without pretension.

This comic vein has found a breeding ground in the genre of fiction with slightly different functions of the author, reader, text and viewpoint character. The change in their relationship has deeper roots than a mere innovation in the narrative technique: the radical changes in the world in late twentieth century and further on the entropic factors culminating in the 1960s in American society has drawn a change in the *Weltanschauung* of both philosophers and artists. Pragmatism could serve as a standpoint, a help to understand and tolerate reality, but also to defend the conformist ideas driving to chaos and entropy, too. Pragmatism with its content ideas could help the artists understand the necessity of accepting the plurality and relativity of all things. The latter is the reason why I feel the impact of the Many Worlds Theory applied by William James a pragmatist philosopher (James 63–80), as strong in literature as I have described it earlier. Probably it also formed their concept of truth and existence as well as the creation of a new concept of the literary establishment. Nevertheless, without the influence of other philosophical ideas, such as French Existentialism, Heidegger or Wittgenstein, Postmodernism could not have such a strong theoretical foundation. I believe that this effect is double fold: on the one hand, writers directly transferred them into/through the artifacts. On the other hand, literary theory has got deeply involved in philosophical questions as well.

Oswald Spengler's idea of the Decline of the West due to exhausting its cultural possibilities is revoked in Heidegger's philosophy and it is also nicely translated into the language of

literature, especially novels by John Barth as an example. For another example, Wittgenstein's concept of language as a game had many overtones among critics and writers, too, each trying to define the function of language of a literary work. A lot of artists have experienced the alienation of literature from life, as for instance Richard Suckenicke claims in his essay entitled "Digression": "The more intensely the novel was 'about' life the less it was part of it (Suckenicke 6)." He also adds that the most virtual American tradition is the poetics of experience and the act of writing today is not just about life but a part of it. His ideas follow Olson's Open Composition Theory and seem to have a continuation in Federman's notion of surfiction.

Since uncertainty and relativity overwhelm all spheres of reality, the author is no longer a controlling agent; the literary heroes become viewpoint characters, as Davis claims (Davis 25). Just like in today's philosophy where we are not told, taught or instructed but forced to question everything, even the worth of such questions, contemporary fiction does not deduct either. One can feel the force of such violent and sometimes arrogant pressure to question our everyday values and responsibilities especially in the Absurd Drama and the Black Humor Diction of the 1960s' America. Regarding contemporary writers, Max Schulz holds the view that "Heirs of this centuries national tensions and philosophical uncertainties, their stories are parodies of man's mistaken faith historically and philosophically in cultural continuity and ideational permanence (14-5)." These parodies of man have two basic subjects: death, and the meaninglessness of the universe. Abádi-Nagy called attention to the fact that while the characters of Bellow and Updike's works were hypersensitive to death, they were able "to carry out daily moral responsibilities." On the other hand, those whose main concern became meaninglessness of life are unable to focus on daily morals, rather on morality ("Black Humor versus Satire" 32). His expression: 'philosophical irony' has two social, psychological and philosophical roots: helplessness of man and indifference of the universe ("Black Humor versus Satire" 28). This threefold conditioning is presented with roughly equal emphases in the novels. I am sure that each reader finds different dominance in postmodern novels. For the first reading I was able to point out these dominances clearer than now, since the interwoven references and allusions

stimulate more and more meaning each time when one reads the same novel or explores other postmodern writings.

What makes postmodern fiction unique in a philosophical respect? Before searching for answers we must observe the fact that this kind of literature in general is not written for and read by masses, in this sense it is often elitist: talking about their novels writers like Barth and Gass express that “it doesn’t matter if no one does love them (LeClair 17).” Understanding the text requires a creative role of the reader as well as occasionally an academic education. As the reading public has changed and got limited to a smaller circle of individuals, parallel with the central characters (call them ‘hero figures’, ‘anti-heroes’ or ‘viewpoint characters’) became the human projections of the social, psychological and philosophical uncertainties already described before. Some of them passively suffer from the mental living conditions and bear it with Sisyphus-like persistence and wisdom, like *The Ginger Man* (1958) in Jean Paul Donleavy’s story praying:

And dear God
Give me strength
To put my shoulder
To the wheel
And push
Like the rest. (104)

Consequently, their endeavor in its effect points at the opposite direction, i.e. anti-conformism. Others bear the circumstances with half-conscious resignation like those whom Peter DeVries described in his *The Blood of the Lamb* (1961) in the following way:

We live this life by a kind of conspiracy of grace: the common assumption or pretense, that human existence is ‘good’ or ‘matters’ or has ‘meaning’. a glaze of charm or humor by which we conceal from one another and perhaps even ourselves the suspicion that it does not, and our conviction in times of trouble that it is overpriced - something to be endured rather than enjoyed. (168)

There are characters who chose a rather aggressive attitude to provoke entropic tendencies, others’ ignorance and pretension, like Guy Grant does in Terry Southern’s *The Magic Christian* (1959) “making hot for them (*The Magic Christian* 129)” when in this U.S.A.

allegory he shocks others with writing true facts in his newspaper or at another time, on board of his luxurious ship he drags the passengers out of their 'artificial fog' with violent slogans and happenings.

In my view the fluctuation and splitting change in between these unconscious and conscious, passive and aggressive/revolting behaviors is the very topic of several novels: the process of rising to awareness of its impossibility; the decision one always have to make whether to slip back to ignorance and ready-cut comforts of life or to try to change them. This is not the messianism of the previous ages and especially European cultures. American postmodernists accept modern living conditions, as Vajda observes (199), and try to create something meaningful with relatively small compromise (194).

Comparing and contrasting American and European postmodern tendencies D. Davis enlists the distinctive features of American Black Humor Fiction, and probably the same can be said about Western postmodern philosophy as well: Liberalism has a central role along with "a wit more ribald than that found in Existentialism, less dour than that which infused Dada (16)." Well-being, disillusionment, rage and affection stand in the background, as he sees, and these features provoke violent anger again characteristic of this literature and literary philosophy, too. As for European modernists like Orwell, they have presented their 'generous anger' with the satirical aspect of reality. However, postmodern writers seem to experience anger from a less superior position. The subject of their fear is first difficult to define, like in Richardson's dramas, they realized that among the many bad choices 'healthy fear' is the best one when we take the responsibility and point of seeing clear. Federman applied the term 'healthy novel' to postmodern ones (6) with an essentially purifying overtone at their core. It is like a religious revelation in the sense I described previously when mentioning the process of rising into consciousness.

The common characteristic feature that most critics observed examining the effect of postmodern fiction is that though it applies modern/ist methods, the deconstructive tendencies are liberating, while energy derives from the stinging laughter and also tends towards the destruction of entropy and it raises the level of openness and tolerance in the reader. Abádi-Nagy emphasized the life-affirmativeness of its final effect and added that the novel is the "ironic affirmation of the very absurdity it seems to deny ("Black

Humor versus Satire..." 32)". Suckenic underlined the rejection of the illusory time and space in postmodern fiction, which challenges the validity of literature in its own right (9). What is inventive in it is not the subject matter, but the interpretation of the narratives, i.e. the relationship of the author, the text, the reader and reality; basically the variety of realities, truths, that create different paradigms, contexts and connotative meanings. The context the writer imagines and creates is different from the one that appears to the reader. This limitless number of meanings is what makes postmodern writing interesting for many of us, i.e. the tension of no final solutions and conclusions but openness to a wide range of interpretations.

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