

JUDIT ÁGNES KÁDÁR

ZOLTÁN ABÁDI-NAGY: *VILÁGREGÉNY—REGÉNYVILÁG:
AMERIKAI ÍRÓINTERJÚK*

(The Novel of the World—The World of the Novel:
Conversations with American Writers.) Debrecen: Kossuth
Egyetemi Kiadó, 1997. 251 pp.

Zoltán Abádi-Nagy's recent collection of interviews provides an invaluable insight into the world of contemporary American novelists. His earlier books incorporated comprehensive surveys of recent American prose writing: *Válság és komikum: A hatvanas évek amerikai regénye* (Crisis and Comedy: The American Novel of the Nineteen-Sixties, Magvető, 1982.), *Az amerikai minimalista próza* (American Minimalist Fiction, Argumentum, 1994.) and *Mai amerikai regénykalauz 1970–1990* (Guide to Contemporary American Fiction between 1970–1990, Intera, 1995.). All these make attempt to provide an overview on the critical panorama of contemporary U.S. novel as well as detailed analyses of numerous literary voices, trends and critical perspectives. However, here, in *The Novel of the World—The World of the Novel*, Abádi-Nagy successfully tries his hands in a new job: that of the literary critic/journalist and becomes a mediator between the reader and the writer, disclosing for us the personal world of the latter. He takes advantage of his personal encounters with prominent characters in contemporary mainstream(?) fiction writing along with his own research experiences. His aim is to create six so called 'deep interviews', all but one is based on personal meetings with Kurt Vonnegut, William Gaddis, E. L. Doctorow, Ronald Sukenick and Raymond Federman, while the one with Walker Percy is a result of extensive correspondence.

The structure of Abádi-Nagy's book reflects his own understanding of the development of the novel form from the rather conventional, through Vonnegut's 'pop novel', Doctorow's pseudo-historical fiction and Gaddis's entropic satire, towards the radical formal experimentation of Sukenick and Federman, both of whom seem to break with the traditional concept of the mimetic function of literature and to create a self-reflexive world of fiction. The preface invites us to join him for a visit to the workshop of these writers, where in fact the act of writing as craft and the various narrative strategies are meticulously studied. The selection of the text of interviews is difficult but firm hands and critical eyes enable the author to (re)construct the dialogues, add significant critical remarks and data, as well as introduce with scholarly precision his understanding of the recent developments of American fiction.

At the beginning of each section the interviewer shares with us his first impressions on the writer, for instance a description of Vonnegut's outlook, complexion, smoking and talking habits (Abádi-Nagy: *Világregény*, 81), or the first-hand personal impression confronting the pre-interview preconceptions regarding Gaddis's inaccessible image (119). The interviewer often adds his own opinion regarding the 'second (post-interview) impression' of the given artist, for example

Mélységes humánumtól fűtött, az ostobaságot és esztelenséget tűrni képtelen, hatalmas műveltségű író, aki a mai élet nagy összefüggéseibe ágyazva, széthullásképletű satírikus parabolákban vizsgálja egyén és világ viszonyát. [Gaddis is a writer of deep humanity and impressive erudition, who cannot stand any form of stupidity or folly. In addition, he investigates the relationship of the individual and the world in satirical deconstruction parables that are embedded in the greater context of contemporary life.—Trans. mine.] (120)

These subjective perceptions help us develop an image of the novelist as well as visualize the conversation between the novelist and the interviewer. In addition, this method establishes some kind of a personal touch, a virtual link between the world of the reader and that of the novelist. Following the brief introduction, a summary of the given writer's literary output is provided before the actual dialogue. The critic/journalist often briefly refers to issues already discussed in

other interviews, however, the flow of conversation is not broken since footnotes enrich the text ergonomically. Interestingly, the author shares his doubts with us regarding his quest for the most suitable approach to certain issues; his 'professional elegance' provides a delicate balance between what we can learn from the novelist's own views and what further background materials may add to our understanding of the prose texts.

As for the scope of questions, inevitably they all had been elaborated finely. The author deliberately excluded those issues that had already been discussed elsewhere earlier, with the aim of formulating some kind of a complex unity of comprehension of a particular writer's literary output, providing further insight into the context of the novelist's oeuvre as well as to some major tendencies in American literature, clarifying the notions of post-modernism, making distinctions between various sub-trends in realism, modernism and post-modernism. At the same time Abádi-Nagy's questions are very economically designed and delicately structured. This pre-set structure allows the interviewer to present some order as well as to let some freedom work throughout the conversation, enabling the participants to develop further points spontaneously. This playfulness does not ruin the overall efficiency of the conversations but rather adds some kind of a personal touch that may color the reader's impression of the writer. Based on his profound knowledge and critical understanding of the texts in question as well as the critical context of the novelist's work, the interviewer anticipates certain sub-tendencies that the novelist may or may not feel akin with, but certainly responses and locates himself in or against that (e.g. Sukenick's views on formalist versus visionary approaches to literature 199). However, the careful clarification of distinctions, sometimes incorporated in the body of the questions and occasionally developed in the course of the dialogue with the given novelist enables us to obtain a precise panoramic view of various artistic approaches to the problem of mimetic versus non-mimetic functions/technique of writing (e.g. Sukenick interview 184, 187), or the triangle of the writer/reality/reader, take Federman's views on fact/fiction/reader (233), as he claims:

Én nem azért írok, hogy híven ábrázoljam az életet. Jobban érdekel a viszony, a kölcsönös játék köztem meg a valóság közt. Az érdekel,

ami közbül esik. A folyamat. [I write not with the aim of truly reflecting reality. I am a lot more interested in the relationship between me and reality. I am excited about what is in between. The process itself. —Trans. mine] (236)

Furthermore, discussion is devoted to the question how the novelist relates himself to the tradition of fiction writing, his forerunners and followers (e.g. 133–4 Gaddis interview, 191–3 Sukenick interview), postmodernism as such (e.g. interview 185 Sukenick) and its sub-directions (e.g. surfiction in Federman's notion 215, 218).

Abádi-Nagy tends to motivate or even provoke the novelist to make him reflect upon his own theoretical ideas, such as Vonnegut's "bacterium theory" (87), Gaddis's deep interest in alchemy (132–3) and his 'post-psychological novel' (149), Doctorow's cyclic notion of history (163) or his distinction of fact and fiction (167) in his mock-documentary novels. Occasionally the interviewer facilitates the novelist to come to terms with seemingly controversial concepts (e.g. 91). Sometimes a virtual mirror seems to be held in front of the writers with the help of references to earlier utterances and/or the texts of the novels themselves. Their concepts about literature, philosophy and other fields of life are tested and analyzed thoroughly. The author's own critical views are also implied, for instance in the Percy interview (36–7), where Abádi-Nagy refuses to adopt the traditional periodical classifications of a writer's literary release. As a result, Percy seems to somewhat re-assess a few milestones in his own career (18). At other times there seems to be a minor clash of opinion between the novelist and the interviewer, for example in the Doctorow interview (165, 169). Surely it may derive from their different critical positions, nevertheless, the creative discussion seems to dissolve most of these disputes and both the questions and answers mutually enrich our comprehensive understanding of the novels and novelists, too.

There are certain challenges that a literary critic/journalist faces by necessity because of the specific genre of his endeavor. On the one hand, various perspectives and interests are contrasted and claim for being kept in balance. On the other hand, the depth and spectrum of questions depend greatly on the level of knowledge of the anticipated reading public. A further question to consider is: what is the reasonable extent of sticking to pre-elaborated order and selection of questions versus the opportunity of letting some spontaneity work in

the conversational situations. The critic/journalist must allow for some necessary time and spatial limitations and must take the frustrating challenge of sorting out the less relevant questions sometimes only minutes before the actual interview takes place, just in the case of the Doctorow interview (161).

Enormous amount of background information help us understand not only the main currents of contemporary prose writing but also hidden ramifications that occasionally seem to be unveiled even for the writers themselves throughout the conversations, for example in the Percy interview (24), where the novelist seems to reconsider his own texts and approaches to literature in a new perspective. The rich cultural, philosophical and literary theoretical implications of the dialogues often give a roundup on significant notions, such as the concept of the American South and the way the novelist relates himself to that particular awareness of the region (24). The interviewer's comprehensive expertise in literary criticism often unmask itself in the course of longer explanatory notes incorporated in the body of the questions (e.g. Vonnegut interview 88) that are almost briefs in the study of a particular literary text.

A further culture specific addition of the interviews is Abádi-Nagy's remarks on the apparent relationship between the novels and various aspects of the critic/journalist's own (Hungarian) culture. Gaddis's *The Recognitions*: Valentine, Doctorow's Houdini figure in *Ragtime*, Sukenick's Evelyn in 98.6, Vonnegut's perceptions regarding the unique Hungarian sense of humor or Federman's appreciation for Hungarian people and culture.

The Novel of the World—The World of the Novel presents a study of narrative strategies and their development as well, for example on Gaddis's 'sustained dialogue' technique (150), Sukenick's collage technique (197) and generative prose writing vis-à-vis the dominance of mimetic functions (Sukenick interview 207), for instance Vonnegut's time technique (103–4), the structure of his texts (105) as well as his sense of humor, with regards to the social, historical and political context of his novels. In the case of Vonnegut the dialogue seems to include relatively more references to contextual factors shaping the text of his novels, for instance a brief overview on relevant issues in American history and current sociopolitical questions is presented in the dialogue. In my view the genre of the

critical interview in this regards provides an exciting opportunity for the reader to expand his/her scope of literary works and artists, quite similar to reading an autobiography, like in this case Vonnegut's *Fates Worse Than Death: An Autobiographical Collage of the 1980s* (1991). As for another approach, Abádi-Nagy addresses critical points of investigation related to some fictional characters in the given novelist's texts in a way that the writer's own view and motivations in the creation of a certain protagonist enrich the range of possible interpretations that might have been previously hidden from the reader's eyes, as the example of the Vonnegut interview presents.

All the six interviews present some significant similarities. Firstly, the novelists share more or less the belief that the text stands on its own feet, i.e. there is no need to keep adding explanatory remarks to enable the reader to appreciate them, to enjoy the process of reading that all of them consider as an essential part of the creative process (e.g. 121). Secondly, they are largely disinterested in traditional contextual critical approaches and evaluations, such as reader response and reception theory (e.g. 122–3) or 'cerebral criticism' (188) and populist criticism (200). They are reluctant to give utmost relevance to the impact of the critical environment of their works, or at least tend to differentiate between relevant and irrelevant ideas. Moreover, they seem to dislike being pigeon-holed, for instance the interviewer's tricky reoccurring question, i.e. how would the novelist label his own writing, occasionally stimulates equally tricky answers like that of Gaddis: ask the same question ten years from today (154). Furthermore, they are even less interested in the extent their texts are reader friendly, easy to digest intellectually (Gaddis interview 155). All of the interviewed novelists restrict themselves in order to avoid the pitfalls of philosophical/ moral/ critical overkill (e.g. Doctorow interview 178). Thirdly, they are all often presented as non-mainstream, experimental and elitist but in fact they demand an active role of the reader "creative reading" (Gaddis interview 154), therefore they are non-populists but rather look forward to the birth of a new consciously critical reading public, as stated by Sukenick (192).

Another shared feature is their dislike of pretence of any sorts, for instance Sukenick admits the lack of a systematic knowledge working behind his texts (208) as well as the preference of leaving the analytical intellectual discourse behind for the sake of focusing on the

experience of the writing process (e.g. Doctorow 168). They all disregard the relevance of preconceptions formulating the texts versus the role of a partly spontaneous play with language and intuitions.

As for another thing, the world of the novel and the novel of the world are problematized through the language of their novels (e.g. Sukenick 184). A fundamental question Abádi-Nagy addresses to Sukenick (189), but touches in the other interview as well is: “Hogyan segít bennünket sorsunk lényegének alakításában az a széppróza, amelyik elutasítja a mimetikus modellt? [How can prose writing, that refuses the mimetic model, contribute to/foster the better management of our own life?—Trans. mine] A shared answer seems to be similar to Sukenick’s reaction: art is not a therapy but rather a way of thinking on its own right (190), while Federman adds that the function of literature is not to make the world a better place but a nicer, more habitable one (226).

A further common marker of these artists is the thorough understanding of contemporary America. For instance regarding the order/chaos disparity in the Doctorow interview (170–1) or Gaddis’s understanding of the corporate world and its ‘honest hypocrites’ (136), Abádi-Nagy claims, that “A *JR* írója nyilván hatalmas tudással rendelkezett a spekulációs és manipulációs dzsungel mentalitására és kliséire vonatkozóan. [The writer of *JR* undoubtedly possessed an immense intellectual capacity to capture the mentality and clichés of the jungle of speculation and manipulation.—Trans. mine] (137).” The critic/journalist’s own understanding counterparts that of the interviewed persons’, for example regarding the American Dream and the socially non-mature dreamers who are easy to manipulate (137). In addition, for all of them insanity appears as a quintessential part of contemporary existence (Gaddis interview 135), and they tend to investigate strategies how to cope with it, how to comprehend manipulation strategies and how to escape them.

Finally, all of them seem to be satisfied with the interviewer’s set of questions and openness. Gaddis’s interview presents a rising interest in answering after having experienced epiphanic revelations regarding some aspects of his writing that had been unrevealed even for himself before, take Gaddis’s view on *Carpenter’s Gothic* (142) and later on his appreciation of Abádi-Nagy’s critical interpretation of the novel (145). As for another example, Federman “Őszintén

feltárulkozva beszél, mint aki maga is kíváncsi, mit fedezhet még fel magában az egyes kérdésekkel kapcsolatban.” [He speaks honestly as someone who is eager to diagnose something previously hidden in himself in the view of the specific questions.—Trans. mine] (213).

Zoltán Abádi-Nagy's masterly undertakings apply an overt critical approach, similar to the openness these novelists present in their approaches to reality, their artistic perceptions as well as the writing process itself. Hungarian readers of American literature are made to read previously unknown pieces as well, or re-read some others in the view of a new perspective, without the exclusion of any less well-informed readers of American literature. At the same time, a comprehensive insight to the world of these novels is provided for the more sophisticated and/or professional reading public, too. *The Novel of the World—The World of the Novel* presents another exemplary display of the critic/journalist's professional merits; in fact this book of interviews formulates an invaluable contribution to the palette of American Studies in Hungary, a significant tribute paid to László Országh's heritage.

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