

## **Zoltán Abádi-Nagy: The Man, Teacher, Scholar, and Manager of Higher Education**

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Zoltán Abádi-Nagy was born on November 16th, 1940 in Abádszalók, along the bank of the Tisza River, the ancient lands of the Pechenegs, where he spent his childhood. The soil, the surroundings, and the village, its celebrated figures of renown and nameless inhabitants alike, all formed an important heritage and left a deep impression on the young scholar-to-be, and to this day Abádi-Nagy continues to feel a close bond to the village of his birth. His parents and grandparents were both loved and respected by the people of the village. His father, Zoltán Nagy, who had a diploma in agriculture, was a stalwart man of resolve who sooner accepted the designation “class enemy” (and in consequence was denied employment) than show spinelessness in the face of the ideological pressures of communism and thereby bring shame on his family. His mother, Irén Polyák, took a keen interest in politics, and had a passionate love of literature and history. It was from her that the young boy first heard the names Mark Twain and Charles Dickens. He describes the lessons he learned from his parents with eloquent simplicity: “What my parents left me, their heritage, shaped my inner sense of direction: respect the opinions of others, but do not tolerate injustice, never allow stubborn stupidity to gain ground; be open to the world, but determined, regard it with an independent capacity for analysis and ability to form your own opinion, but at the same time measured consideration of the opinions of others and the ability to reach compromises logical but always founded on principle; hold both the work of the body in high esteem and also the work of the mind, learning, scholarship, and culture (“knowledge is what no one can ever take from you”); and one should always use one’s head, always think for oneself, and always think before acting (never pass

judgment in haste, take care what you say); and encourage and help those less fortunate than you, protect those who suffer the maltreatment of others, and be able to forgive; expect results only from conscientious, focused work, and always recognize the achievements of others; never give up, and always play by the rules.” (The Honor of the Sentence. Writings on the Occasion of the Seventieth Birthday of Zoltán Abádi-Nagy. Lehel Vadon: Interview with Zoltán Abádi-Nagy). His earliest childhood memories are memories of the war, which cast its somber shadow over the first years of this life, years of destitution, scraping by on bread and lard, toiling under the constant threats of wartime with little prospect for a brighter future.

He completed grade school in the village of his birth and almost became an electrician, as the principal of the school had not wanted to support his pursuit of further studies because of his father’s political views. He eventually became a student at the highly esteemed grammar school in Kisújszállás, where several excellent teachers played formative roles in his education. He participated in the events of the Revolution of 1956 as a student leader, and fortunately later managed to avoid reprisal. He began to study to become a doctor, but he fell ill and for some time was confined to a hospital for treatment. His experiences in the hospital curbed his eagerness to pursue a career as a physician. He decided instead to apply for admission as a student majoring in Hungarian and English, and it was then that he first began diligent study of English. Following two years of medical treatment he passed his matriculation exam and was admitted to the Faculty of the Humanities at the Kossuth Lajos University to pursue the study of English and Hungarian literature.

In Debrecen he became a student in the recently restructured English Department under the tutelage of the internationally renowned scholar László Országh. Országh quickly recognized his aptitude and sedulity, at his initiative the young Abádi-Nagy became an English major only so that Department would be able to count him among its instructors. Under Országh’s guidance, he immersed himself in his studies of English literature. His essays on the writings of Jonathan Swift won awards at the university and national level.

He earned his diploma with highest distinction as a secondary school teacher of English. He began his career as an English teacher and then a teacher trainee at the training school affiliated with the Kossuth Lajos University, where he later served as a school inspector. He was a methodical and effective English teacher, as the two English textbooks he

wrote for the grammar school classes specializing in the study of English. He maintained his ties with the English Department, and at Országh's promptings and under his guidance he began pursuing research on Jonathan Swift. He was supported in his work by recognized scholars and respected institutions in Hungary and abroad. The British Council awarded him a one-year scholarship, a significant part of which he devoted to research at the English Department of the University of Leeds. The work became part of his doctoral dissertation, which defended in 1969. A work of immediately recognized scholarly value, it was published by the Hungarian Academy of Sciences under the title *Szswift, a szatirikus és tervező* (Swift: The Satirist as Projector).

His doctorate in hand, he returned to the English Department in Debrecen in 1970, a young scholar of great erudition and promise. Given the merits of his contributions as scholar and instructor it is hardly surprising that within the space of a single year he rose from the position of instructor to assistant professor (1971–1981), later to be named associate professor (1981–1993) and in 1993 full professor.

As a scholar and teacher Zoltán Abádi-Nagy has pursued a diverse array of interests. His primary areas of research include 18th century British literature, the 20th century British and American novel, literary theory, narratology and the theory of the novel, theories of the comic and satire, and translation theory. One of his fields of more narrow specialization is 18th century English satire, the contemporary American novel, and cultural narratology (postmodernism, entropy, dark humor, minimalist prose, and the acculturation of narrative). It would be difficult to list the courses he has taught, which extend far beyond the interests mentioned above and include lectures offering broad overviews of periods in literary history, seminars narrowly focused on specific themes or authors, and a variety of other courses on British and American literature and culture.

He has taught at institutions abroad as a guest professor or Fulbright professor, both for short periods of time and for years. He taught at the University of Joensuu in Finland, the Salzburg Seminar American Studies Center, the University of Minnesota, the University of Oklahoma, the University of California, Irvine, and the Texas Christian University. He has also held presentations and lectures at innumerable universities in the United States as an invited speaker.

In addition to his work as an instructor, he has also assumed a number of other important roles in his Institute and Department. He has

served as an advisor for innumerable theses, many of which have been presented at national conferences. For some time he assumed the responsibility for designing and directing the courses of English majors, and he founded American Studies as a disciplinary subject of study at the university in Debrecen, not to mention the doctoral program in American Studies. He also directed the English–American program and the School of Literary Scholarship in Debrecen (debreceni Irodalomtudományi Iskola). He has served on doctoral and habilitation committees at the faculty, university, and national level and has taken active part in TEMPUS projects. He has served on Erasmus committees and headed the Teacher Training Committee of the Higher Education Council and the Postdoctoral Fellowship Committee, in addition to coordinating the development of the disciplinary English–American master’s degree program.

Zoltán Abádi-Nagy has achieved renown both nationally and internationally as one of the foremost scholars of his field. His contributions to the study of English and American literature are impressive in their depth and subtlety of insight, and their sheer quantity. His early work illustrates his fascination with and devoted interest in English literature and culture. László Országh intended him to pursue a career as a scholar of English culture, but following the completion of his work on Swift, Abádi-Nagy made something of a giant leap from English to American studies, from the 18th century to the 20th, from Swift to authors like Vonnegut and John Barth. He was helped in this shift by an American scholarship. In 1972/73, under the guidance of professors Arlin Turner and Louis J. Budd, he pursued research at Duke University in North Carolina, studying the novelistic literature of the 1960s and in particular dark humor. In 1979 he defended the resulting monograph as a dissertation for a so-called candidate’s degree, and in 1982 it was published by Magvető Publishing House under the title *Válság és komikum* (Crisis and Comedy). He continued to study American literature, focusing on the novels of the 1970s and 1980s. His *Mai amerikai regénykalauz* (Guide to Contemporary American Fiction, 1995) was not a monograph on a specific period of American literary history so much as a handbook on the American novel of the time. It offers an overview of the works of some fifty authors and analyses of seventy individual novels, as well as brief synopses of an additional 160 works. A work unique in literature in Hungary at the time, it quickly sold out. Abádi-Nagy spent three years in the United States as a Fulbright

Professor (1988–1990), during which he studied the exciting innovations in American prose. His work culminated in the completion of a monograph entitled *Az amerikai minimalista próza* (American Minimalist Fiction), which he submitted for the title of Academic Doctor in 1993. It was a work of groundbreaking scholarship, as reflected by the fact that to this day no similar monograph has been published, not even in the United States. In 1994 it was published by Argumentum Publishing House. In 1997 he published a compilation of interviews with prominent American authors entitled *Világregény—regényvilág: Amerikai íróinterjúk* (The Novel of the World—the World of the Novel: Conversations with American Writers).

In addition to the aforementioned monographs, he also published numerous essays and articles in prestigious scholarly journals in Hungary and abroad. His articles are notable for their precision and depth, demonstrating both intellectual rigor and thorough knowledge of primary and secondary literature. The bibliography included in the current volume offers eloquent testimony to his keen curiosity and seemingly unrivalled capacity for work: articles published as chapters in twenty-seven books, thirty-four scholarly journals, sixteen additional essays, nineteen interviews, thirty-four encyclopedia articles, seventy-four book reviews, three bibliographies, and twenty-three other publications. His work has been extolled in numerous contexts, and the references to his publications are practically innumerable.

Zoltán Abádi-Nagy has studied translation both as theory and practice and has taught courses on translation history and theory, but in addition he is himself a distinguished translator. He views translation as essential for two reasons. The first is perhaps a bit self-centered: he loves to translate and considers it a challenge. But he also considers it important to familiarize the Hungarian readership with the works of American authors. The works of several American writers were introduced in Hungary through his translations, including Walker Percy's *Lancelot*, Peter De Vries' *The Blood of the Lamb*, Robert Coover's *The Babysitter* and *The Elevator*, Russel Banks' *The Lie*, and excerpts from works by Ronald Sukenick és Raymond Federman. Furthermore, he also recommended specific works to publishers for translation, such as Thomas Berger's *Little Big Man* and Coover's *The Origins of the Brunists*. He has translated prose works by John Barth, Arthur C. Clarke, Donald Barthelme, and Richard Brautigan, but also drama for the stage, such as the Robert Coover's *The Kid*, which he did for his former student

and friend, director István Pinczés and composer Tibor Kocsák. He casts light on the riddle of how he went from being a translator to a song-writer and fellow author of Coover in an interview included in the volume published for his 70th birthday. (*The Honor of the Sentence. Writings on the Occasion of the Seventieth Birthday of Zoltán Abádi-Nagy*. Eds. Bényei, Tamás; Bollobás, Enikő; Rácz, István D. Debrecen: Debreceni Egyetemi Kiadó, 2010). He has also translated essays, articles, interviews, and theoretical writings. In the latter half of the 1970s and the first few years of the 1980s he published a veritable series of translations in the literary journal *Nagyvilág*.

Scholars in the fields of English and American studies owe a great debt of thanks to Zoltán Abádi-Nagy for his work as an editor as well. He has always regarded the task of an editor as of considerable importance. Twenty-five years ago he became a member of the editorial board of *Filológiai Közlöny*. He has served for fifteen years as an editor of *Modern Nyelvoktatás*, and the Transylvanian journal *Acta Universitatis Sapientiae, Philologica* invited him to join its editorial board as well. He has also served as invited editor of the *John O'Hara Journal* and several editions of the Hungarian literary journal *Helikon*. He compiled three editions of the journal *Hungarian Studies in English*, which was founded by Országh, and was a founding editor himself of *The Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies*, which remains the most prominent journal of English and American scholarship in Hungary, as well as the oldest in continuous publication. He was chief editor of the journal from its founding in 1995 to 2007, and oversaw the publication of twenty-two volumes. He also launched and edited *Orbis Litterarum*, a series of books on world literature. He worked for eleven years as coeditor with fellow professor Tivadar Gorilovics, during which time sixteen volumes were published.

Over the course of his career Zoltán Abádi-Nagy has played many important roles in scholarly life. He has worked together closely with doctoral students and helped young scholars pursue research. He has accepted positions on innumerable committees and has helped organize and supervise research programs. As department chair, institute director, dean of the faculty of humanities, and university rector he has organized and guided the scholarly endeavors of different units and branches of the university in Debrecen. He has also served on committees of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and as the co-chairman of the Modern Philological Committee of the Academy. At the moment he continues to

serve as the co-chairman of the Committee for Literary Scholarship. He worked in the Social Science Collegium of the Hungarian Scientific Research Fund and served as a member of the advisory board of the Széchenyi Professors Fellowship. He played an influential role in the foundation of scholarly societies of English and American studies in Hungary. Together with Péter Szaffkó he founded the Hungarian Society for the Study of English (HUSSE), serving for years as its president. In the 1990s he was co-president of the Hungarian Association for American Studies (HAAS), at which time both HAAS and HUSSE began holding their national biannual conferences. In 1986 he organized and served as the secretary of the conference of the European Association for American Studies in Budapest, the first conference to be held by the Association in a country behind the Iron Curtain. In 1997 he and Szaffkó organized the international conference ESSE/4 in Debrecen. The list of papers he has presented at conferences is far too long to recite, as indeed is the list of occasions on which he has presented as a plenary speaker or served as a panel chair or organizer of a roundtable.

Zoltán Abádi-Nagy made significant contributions to higher education in Hungary in various supervisory positions as well, including department chair, institute director, and rector, among others. He did not shirk the myriad responsibilities of the role of organizer and director of an academic body, but rather deliberately prepared himself, when he resolved to shoulder such tasks, to be able to address the practical problems that would inevitably await him. From 1982 to 1987 he served as vice-head of department, a position from which he stepped down to teach as the recipient of a fellowship through the Fulbright Foundation. When he returned to Hungary in 1990 he accepted a position as head of the English Department, which entailed organizing and coordinating instruction. The important process of drawing new distinctions and creating new specializations, which benefited from the opportunities that arose with the change of regimes, was completed under his guidance, and the first English–American Institute in Hungary was established, bringing together three different departments. He served as the founding director of the Institute of English and American Studies and the founding chair of the North American Department. He found himself faced with the challenges of securing necessary funds and finding the best possible instructors, tasks that his successors had to address as well. Of the work associated with the transformations, the introduction of the credit system was groundbreaking. On the basis of his suggestion a Mexican component

was introduced into the curriculum, making courses on Mexican history, literature, and culture part of the program in American Studies. Today the Mexican guest professor in Debrecen has become part of a bilateral cultural convention between the two states. The digitalization of the library holdings was begun during his tenure as department chair and institute director, and he successfully urged the creation of opportunities for the librarians to pursue further training in Hungary and England and acquire the new skill set demanded by changes in technology. Together with his colleagues he continued to work to further the acquisition of materials, helping to give rise to a superb collection of works essential to English, American, and Canadian, and Australian studies.

In 1992 he was selected to serve as dean of the Faculty of Humanities at the Kossuth Lajos University. In the early 1990s long-established habits were gradually being changed as part of the larger transformation of institutions of higher education. New goals and new demands were being formulated and new regulations prepared concerning issues related to education, scholarship, funding, and internal and external relations. Abádi-Nagy considered the construction and reestablishment of the Italian Department, a project launched by dean László Imre and continued by dean István Bitskey, important, and he worked to further their efforts.

In 1993, following his brief service as dean, he became the rector of the Kossuth Lajos University, a position he was to hold for two years (the term for a rector at that particular university at the time). During his tenure as rector events of historical importance took place at the university. Looking back on the 1990s, from the perspective of the Kossuth University (as it was known at the time) and the Debrecen University (at it is known now) he considers the process of integration to have been the most important transformation. The everyday tasks of a university rector are far too numerous to list, but a few of Abádi-Nagy's more significant achievements deserve mention. These include the acquisition by the university of the barracks on Kassai Street, the completion of the economics building and the broadening of the curriculum in economics, the joining of the Debrecen unit of the Ybl Miklós Technical College to the university, and the introduction of a program in pharmacology, a common initiative of the Kossuth University and the Debrecen Medical School. His name is linked to the initiatives to reestablish the Faculty of Law in Debrecen, develop the Center for the Study of Physics, and launch the process of accreditation for several new

subjects of study, including molecular biology, the dramatic arts, information sciences, and environmental studies. One of the major achievements of the era was the creation of the Teachers Training Council. Debrecen University Press was founded, as was the Kossuth Lajos University Circle of Friends. The regional center for long-distance learning was also created, and innumerable new regulations were introduced.

In 1998–2000 he was a guest professor in Texas. One year after his return to Hungary, he became the international vice-rector of the university in Debrecen. He founded the Center for External Relations, where he engaged in an almost indescribably diverse array of activities. The international vice-rector then became the founding president of Debrecen University's Centre of Arts, Humanities and Sciences.

The various organizational roles he played in higher education in and of themselves represented new challenges and tasks. As university rector he became an automatic member of the Hungarian Rectors Conference, which entailed further responsibilities and spheres of competence, not least of which was his service as head of the institutional committee of the Conference. He worked for an extended period for the Hungarian Accreditation Committee, which often meant having to accept an enormous workload, particularly when the basic subjects of study of the Bologna system were going through the process of accreditation. For some time he was a member and twice the president of the Hungarian–American Fulbright Committee, the most prestigious educational research exchange program in the world. He devoted considerable energies to promoting the work of the Summer School in Debrecen, and he is due great thanks for working to preserve the memory of the Revolution of 1956 on the university campus. The monument to the uprising in the park by the university church, a white-marble rose sculpted by Miklós Melocco, was erected in no small part thanks to his efforts, as was the granite commemorative plaque in the ambulatory on the third floor of the main building.

Though he has served as head of department, dean, and rector, not to mention innumerable other positions, Zoltán Abádi-Nagy has always been first and foremost a teacher. He describes his view of the role of an instructor in the following manner: “I always strove to help my students, whom I considered and consider equal partners in the pursuit of knowledge, experience the joys of intellectual comradary and immersion in scholarship and at the same time recognize the shared imperatives of

humanity toward which immersion in scholarship must lead us. I could rephrase this by saying that while tending to the noble task of the quest for knowledge we must take care to air out the confines of our narrowly defined disciplines in our mind. I would add to this that when I think of my students my memories of them as people are always more vivid than my recollection of their scholarly achievements. My intention was always to be a conscientious instructor who held high expectations of his students but was at the same time responsive and fair. This was not a conscious decision on my part, rather it seemed natural, since as a human individual I am identical with the teacher in me, at least according to my inner sense.”

Zoltán Abádi-Nagy’s philosophy, his belief and idea, the root of the matter are beautifully and clearly expressed in his answer to my last question in the interview for his 70th birthday:

*Could you explain for your successors, as a means of taking inventory and passing on your experience on the occasion of your birthday, what you mean by stepping out of the confines of the narrowly defined disciplines? Why is this necessary?*

I once asked myself the same question. When I was writing my farewell speech as rector. What had crystalized in my mind had not changed. Indeed it seemed to have crystalized in a such a way that it captured everything the great figures who came before us had already put into words for us, were we only better able to pay them heed. I will borrow from their wisdom to explain my meaning. Let’s consider a few main components. We can begin with Széchenyi, it is always worthwhile to begin with him. Whatever subject of study we may be pursuing, we should always, at all times desire to remain Hungarian, for – and here we think of Széchenyi – alongside the word “Hungarian” must come the sentiment “Hungarian,” and alongside the sentiment, virtue, and the mere mantle of patriotism is not enough. As Széchenyi says, “we should not seek to be Hungarians of ‘glazed exterior,’ to lift to the clouds with glazed exterior, for too many glazed exterior Hungarians are already ‘working on the murder of the homeland’ as is.” Babits no doubt would continue by noting that a person of glazed exterior is inevitably a person of empty interior, someone who has surrendered to his own ease: “Be recalcitrant! Take care, lest the wind blow through you.” In other words let us hold ourselves to sensible ideals, and never give them up. “Between

the ages of twenty and thirty one strangles, with considerable exertion, one's ideals," writes Hippolyte Taine. "Then one lives in peace, or at least one thinks one lives in peace. But this peace is the peace of an unwed mother who has murdered her first child." A teacher has a particularly large responsibility. If the universal winds of humanity and the mind blow through the discipline, which thereby does not become alienated in its narrow confinement, then neither teacher nor discipline will shackle the child or youth or deprive him or her of faith in possibility. For (let us continue with Ady) the child has not yet been vanquished by the consequential thinking of the homo sapiens. The child thinks anything possible: "The child is vitality, joy, the promise of the future, man not put in shackles, the truly true God." Let me conclude this line of thought with mention of an American author from my narrower field of specialization, Donald Barthelme, and his story entitled "Sentence," which I happened to have translated into Hungarian. For he shows us how to cultivate, instead of the Hungarian of "glazed exterior" (Széchenyi), someone who will withstand the shifting winds (Babits), who will not become the murderer of his own ideals (Taine), because we do not deprive him of faith in possibility (Ady). Barthelme reminds us that we do not admire the sentence because it is unbreakable like a rock, for every sentence "is a man-made object," "a structure to be treasured for its weakness." A sentence can be bridled, ensnared, which explains why the sentence was so often abused in the 20th century. Let us then take care in our dealings with this fragile, often humiliated thing, which progresses with self-destructive conscientiousness down the page from left to right, top to bottom, unable to flee anyone who wants to snap it shut. It's that simple—or is this the most difficult thing of all? Let the sentence be sacred in our eyes and in our handling of it. Let us honor and respect it.

In recognition of the excellence of Zoltán Abádi-Nagy's academic, scholarly, educational achievements, and professional services he was awarded several prizes and distinctions:

- *Nívó Prize*. (Nívódíj.) For an English textbook for high schools, coauthored with Zsolt Virágos. Publishing House of Textbooks, 1972.
- *Nívó Prize for Criticism*. (Kritikai nívódíj.) Publishing House of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, 1985.

- *Nívó Prize for Translation*. (Fordítói nívódíj.) Európa Publishing House, 1985. 1986.
- *SZOT-oklevél*. (The national trade union's decoration for excellence.) 1985.
- *Decoration for Excellence*. (Kiváló munkáért.) Ministry of Culture and Education, 1985.
- *Chartered Royal City Commemorative Certificate*. (Szabad Királyi Város Emléklap.) Debrecen Városa, 1994.
- *Pro Summer School*. (Nyári Egyetemért Emlékérem) Lajos Kossuth University, 1996.
- *Pro Universitate*. (Lajos Kossuth University's decoration for outstanding achievement in university development and university leadership.) 1997.
- *Szent-Györgyi Albert Prize*. (Szent-Györgyi Albert-díj.) Ministry of Culture and Education, 1997.
- *László Országh Award*. (Országh László-díj.) Hungarian Society for the Study of English and University of Debrecen. 2001.
- *Diploma of Excellence*. Vasile Gold's University, Arad, 2002.
- *Economists's Globus Prize*. (Közgaz Glóbusz Díj.) Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, Student Self-Government, University of Debrecen. 2006.
- *REMEMBER HUNGARY 1956*. (Honory diploma and silver medal.) (A "REMEMBER HUNGARY 1956" Szervező Bizottságának és a Szabadságharcos Világ Szövetség Los Angeles-i Szervezetének Díszoklevele.)
- *Pro Independent Faculties*. School of Independent Faculties, University of Debrecen, 2006.
- *Officer's Cross (Civil Division)*. *Order of Merit of the Republic of Hungary*. (A Magyar Köztársaság Érdemrend Tisztikeresztje.) President of the Hungarian Republic, 2006.
- *For the University of Debrecen*. (A Debreceni Egyetemért.) University of Debrecen, 2006.
- *Medal for Merit*. (A Debreceni Egyetem Állam- és Jogtudományi Karának Díszérme.) University of Debrecen, Faculty of Law, 2006.
- *Kossuth Lajos Medal*. (Kossuth Lajos Emlékérem.) Kossuth University's Alumni Association, 2007.

- *Pro Scientia Medal*. (Pro Scientia Érem.) (Life Achievement Award.) Debrecen Chapter of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, 2008.
- *For Eszterházy Károly College Prize*. (Scale of gold, for outstanding external contribution.) Eszterházy Károly College, 2008.
- *Pro Auditoribus Facultatis Philosophiae Universitatis*. Debreceniensis Prize. (For the Students of Debrecen University's Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences.) University of Debrecen, 2008.
- *Honorary doctorate*. (Doctor honoris causa.) Babeş-Bolyai University, Kolozsvár, Romania, 2005.