

the way the author's mind flits from Jorge Louis Borges and the Koran to W. B. Yeats and Louis MacNeice. This topic, i.e., the search for national identity in the poetry of Northern Ireland could only be discussed properly within the framework of a separate book.

On the whole Rácz's book is impeccably researched and annotated, and he gives some penetrating and thought-provoking analyses. It is a valuable contribution to the study of the genre of dramatic monologue.

Béla Polyák

The Story Goes On

Zoltán Abádi-Nagy: *Világregény - Regényvilág* [The Novel of the World – The World of the Novel] Orbis Litterarum Series 2, Kossuth Egyetemi Kiadó, Debrecen, 1997.

The foremost Hungarian critic of contemporary American literature has at long last disclosed some of the secrets hidden in his drawers – or disk files, times being what they are. Those in the know had long been aware that he had kept something from us, and even the less attentive readers might have spotted the six relevant references in Abádi-

Nagy's previous work, which, in a gesture not unlike those of some of the authors he analysed, sent us looking for a book not yet published, basically whirling us in a time warp. The previous critical volume, published in 1995, tells us that interviews with certain renowned American authors are available in a book called *The Novel of the World - The World of the Novel*. However, this latter work came out two years later, although, obviously, it was in the making at the time its predecessor was put together.

The Novel of the World – The World of the Novel is Zoltán Abádi-Nagy's fifth volume of criticism. He started out with *Swift, a szatirikus és a tervező* [Swift: Satirist and Designer" Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1973], went on with *Válság és komikum – A hatvanas évek amerikai regénye* [Crisis and Comedy – The American Novel in the 60s" Magvető, 1982], which latter proved to be the first in a series of critical works covering contemporary American fiction from the late fifties up until December 31, 1999. No kidding. After *Az amerikai minimalista próza* [American Minimalist Prose" Argumentum, 1994] came *Mai amerikai regénykalauz, 1970-1990* [A Guide to Contemporary American Novels" 1970-1990] and *Világregény - Regényvilág* [The Novel of the World – The World of the Novel, hereinafter: NOW-WON], and there is no stopping: Abádi-Nagy (hereinafter: ZAN) is already working on the next volume, which both

chronologically and logically follows the themes of the preceding works. This time, however, he also decided to take care of his intellectual heritage by launching a commendable project; he has gathered around him a group of five, researchers and students, named them *America 2000*, and is involving them in writing and compiling the next book, which will be on the question of identity in the literature of the 1990s (hence the exact closing date above), and whose chapters will be produced by respective members of the group – including ZAN himself both as editor and contributor. The book will be published in 2001.

The latest volume, NOW-WON, includes interviews with six American classics: Walker Percy, Kurt Vonnegut, William Gaddis, E.L. Doctorow, Ronald Sukenick, and Raymond Federman, and strays from the paths of the author's other works on Am Lit in at least one major way, and from interviews in general in another. The one way in which NOW-WON deviates from the series is chronological. *Válság és komikum* explored American fiction in the 1960s with a focus on black humour and entropy; *Az amerikai minimalista próza* concentrated on the generation(s) following the high postmodern period; while the *Mai amerikai regénykalauz, 1970-1990* took on introducing a wide range of American novels and novelists in the period indicated in its title. In other words, the real sequel to these three, as

far as chronology is concerned, will be the identity volume; rather than continuing it, NOW-WON complements the Guide. What ZAN offers us in NOW-WON is a selection of the by-products of the first two volumes in the series. Notice I have not said "only." You would assume it is not a critical work but simply a bunch of conversations typed up and neatly edited – and this is exactly where you would be wrong. A mere generic change takes place, not one in quality; it must be stressed that as a consequence of the thoroughly researched, well-considered questions, the book, with all its analytical and theoretical conclusions, gains an importance that is characteristic of an indispensable critical volume.

The authors have been arranged according to a pattern that is neither alphabetical nor chronological in order. ZAN starts out by admitting this in the preface: he informs us that he had picked as an organising principle the extent to which the authors in their writings dissent from conventional novel forms in terms of structure and technique; that is, Percy, who mostly employs traditional means and effects of mimesis, precedes Sukenick and Federman, who sometimes engage in creating an elaborate structure, sometimes a cheap disguise; while Vonnegut, Gaddis and Doctorow linger in between, mingling elements of both strategies, experimental in spirit and

often in methods, yet, at the same time, their roots strong and firm in tradition.

While reading this review in English, on interviews with authors whose mother tongue is also English, we should keep in mind that this particular collection of conversations was published in Hungarian. Although we find no translator named on the copyright page, we are certainly right in assuming that ZAN translated the text himself. There is only one reference to translation in the preface: in his last but one opening remark ZAN says *he* felt that any formality of the language “would misrepresent the circumstances of the interviews, and would distort their atmosphere and style, when used in conversations recorded in a casual mood based on informality” (p. 12.). At first I took this to define all of the interviews, but now it seems the words “when used” mark a subtle, perhaps unintended distinction: they imply that formal language is perfectly appropriate when used in conversations lacking that certain mood. Should it be so, we might conclude that only Gaddis and Doctorow refused to cooperate in establishing a relaxed situation (the reason why formal language is used in the Sukenick interview probably being that, as an exception in the collection, it had been published before, and the text is a reprint of the 1984 version). It is no wonder, considering the widely known fact that these two authors tend to turn

down interviews with repugnance. Our conclusion is further supported by Gaddis’s opening statements and by ZAN’s mention of how Doctorow refused to consent to the publication of the interview in English and how he cut the Hungarian version by half during revisions. Unlike Gaddis, who seems to warm to the situation and gets fairly loosened up with time, Doctorow remains uptight and pedantic throughout. A tough guy. Oh, and by the way, the translations are excellent.

Although this seems contradictory to what I just said, openness appears to be one of the remarkable common features that prevail in the interviews. In spite of Doctorow’s rigidity, which can in fact be put down to an uncompromising strictness and precision not only with the critic but himself as well, the fact remains that he did agree to the interview and afterwards to its publication in Hungary – a true achievement on ZAN’s part. ZAN also managed to tame Gaddis, and was successful in coming to terms with the other four writers in a manner that reflects both mutual respect and an urge to explore and explicate. He succeeded in putting the authors in a state of mind in which they sensed not only an obligation to satisfy the base information hunger of the everyday reader but also an inner drive to crystallise certain crucial points in critical reception, no matter what their general attitude

towards it. Strangely enough, the parties reach a point in each conversation where, as a result of how ZAN seeks to understand them and their work, the authors are driven to search for responses to their own unanswered questions as well. The questions appear to awaken a need in the interviewees to put into words some sort of self-definition, or describe the process of its evolution without prevarication. A process full of struggles, obviously; and the expectation of the partner luckily coincides here with the speaker's fundamental urge to express this formula – another common feature of the six conversations.

Gaddis does not hesitate to come out with reasons for his reluctance to appear in public as a writer: he says he cannot stand stupid questions and does not think very much of criticism. He claims his resistance stems from the tendency to ask childish chit-chat questions in a talk show fashion, whereas he prefers the focus to be on the work rather than the author. Let us face it: he does have a point there. It suffices to thumb through two volumes of *Interjú! - Nagy írók műhelyében* [Interviews with Great Writers, Budapest: Európa, n.d.] and check out the Anglo-Saxon authors. One cannot be more baffled when coming across questions like “Can you play cards?,” “Which is your favourite season?,” “What do you have for breakfast?” or “Do you write in the

morning or at night?”. These are the type of questions Gaddis ridicules by calling them “Which side of the paper do you write on?” questions. Make no mistake about it, you will be happy to find ZAN crushes that tradition.

In addition to the chance of meeting the six authors, we have an excellent opportunity to get acquainted with ZAN's analytical mind and his tireless drive to interrogate the writers. He makes excuses in advance, saying that he feels bound in his questions to give the reader an angle on the works in question and their context, as a consequence of which his deeply probing questions are at times in sharp contrast to the brief answers. This is especially true for the cynically pragmatic Vonnegut, who relapses into an attitude reminiscent of his characters and habitually shortcuts the interviewer's well-researched abstract questions. Not a wordmonger, not he. Each author refutes ZAN's interpretation once or twice, saying that it is too far-fetched and is aimed at establishing links that conflict with their original intentions; and no doubt, there is sometimes a sense that ZAN intends to push a preconsidered idea a little. The fact that the interviews are edited reinforces this suspicion because any unevenness in the dialogue might create in us the false impression that some remarks and comments are cut out and thus left unreflected, when, in reality, the author is simply hard pressed for time

due to his tight schedule.

Two things kept bothering me throughout the book, and one of them ended up turning into a strong irritation. Firstly, to my taste, ZAN massively overuses italicisation in his collection. I frequently bumped into sentences where two or *even three* words were printed in italics, as if ZAN did not trust us to spot the *really significant* parts in what they (yes, the same goes for his questions) had to say, or he preferred the readers' stresses to coincide with his choices. Secondly, I had a strong sensation of being treated like a high school nincompoop welling up in me at the sight of some of the footnotes. Try as I might, I cannot come to understand why you would want to clarify in a university press publication on world literature the following "obscurities": neuron, mutatis mutandis, carte blanche, euthanasia, fait accompli, par excellence, erratum, dyslexia, Watergate scandal, or Armageddon, to name but a few. I am sure we deserve more credit ab ovo. Particularly irksome are the verbatim definitions imported from Bakos' dictionary of foreign words. On the other hand, uninitiated and underinformed novices are left in the dark as to what the key sentence is in Percy's *The Moviegoer* (p. 49.), which about-to-be-ready novel Vonnegut describes (p. 97-8.), which of his books had been officially burnt and where (p. 116.), and when the Hungarian weekly *Élet és Irodalom* [Life and Literature]

published a debate on where Houdini was born (p. 174.).

As usual, ZAN has again produced true pioneering work. His critical volume precedes the publication of most of the primary literature it is based on: with the exception of Vonnegut and Doctorow, the authors included in ZAN's selection have been hugely neglected both by Hungarian publishing houses and academia, the extreme being William Gaddis, whose work does not seem to be considered worth being introduced to the Hungarian public. As usual, I said, because the lack of corresponding material available in Hungarian has been a major characteristic of ZAN's critical works ever since the second book in the series, the one on Minimalism, which broke into a total critical vacuum, and will be succeeded by the publication of the Hungarian translation of the primary pieces only early next year.

For two reasons, it is a pity that the last interview was reduced to half the length of its original version. First, it would have made nice symmetry to begin and end the book with a seventy-page interview. More importantly, I have found Federman the most likeable writer – or I should use the word "person" because when I say this it is not his artist's credo or fiction theory I recall. ZAN claims the conversation was cut in order to reduce the size of the book, but I must say I do not really see what difference thirty more pages would have

made in a 250-page book. Either way, let us hope that some time in the future we will have access to the full versions of all the interviews as well as more leftover bits and pieces from Zoltán Abádi-Nagy's drawers – first of all, to what he has on Coover and Barth, if I may suggest.

Judit Bakos

Legitimising the Apocryphal?

Tamás Bényei, *Apokrif Iratok. Mágikus realista regényekről* [Apocryphal Texts. Magic Realism in Novels], Orbis Litterarum Series 3, Debrecen: Kossuth Egyetemi Kiadó, 1997.

The term 'magic realism' itself is rather contradictory so far as it interpolates the subjective, the magical, and the spiritual 'mode' within the objective, the realistic, and the physical 'mode' of writing. According to the author the supernatural is 'immanent' in magic realist texts, a 'hidden property of reality,' growing organically out of the represented world.³ Are they meant to be sacred texts, the apocryphal versions or

simulations of holy books (R. p. 174)? Bényei's compact, well balanced study supplies the reader with an answer to this question among many others.

The introduction, by observing the 'popular' connotations of 'magic realism' – that is, the allusions to the exotic, the fantastic, the unknown – emphasises the need for a closer analysis, a possible rereading of the term, suggesting new approaches to the understanding of this 'mode' of writing. Following the critical canon, Bényei defines the texts of magical realism to be analysed as 'paradigmatic' and 'typical.' There is a wide range of authors and works he labels 'magic realist' out of which his paradigmatic texts will be: García Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) and Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981); and the 'typical': Tony Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977), Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* (1984), Graham Swift's *Waterland* (1983).

The author's underlying assumption is that the magic realist 'mode of writing' is a part of the postmodern mode, although the two terms should not be blurred, or understood as synonyms. It is, as he sees it, close to the postmodern novel-poetics elaborated by Linda Hutcheon in the 1980s. Though he accepts the theory that most 'magic realist' texts have been born in a postcolonial context, Bényei emphasises that this mode of writing itself is not necessarily, 'per definitionem' the

³Tamás Bényei, 'Rereading "Magic Realism"' *HJEAS*, vol.3, No.1 (1997) p. 152., further referred to as 'R'