

Literary Men of the New Millennium

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Recent decades saw the resurgence of fiction written by men, about men and for men in American literature.

Most of the novels and short-stories in question addressed topics and presented them in ways that had been tabooed by the ethos of political correctness. Accordingly, critical response recognized these works as representatives of a general post-feminist backlash, failing to acknowledge the recent literary phenomenon in its own right and, at least to an extent, as a creative and artistic approach to the cultural phenomena understood as constituting the backlash itself. Minimalist fiction in the nineties was perceived as shallow, nihilistic and politically and ethically irresponsible, nevertheless expressing the sensibilities and addressing the anxieties of many a reader. Scholarship to engage with the complexities presented by the emergent trend in the literary scene was late to follow and biased in the direction of a content based, politically oriented approach. Studies were quick to point out how these works recycled reactionary notions of masculinity, the ways in which they were caught up in a conservative textual economy reproducing existing hierarchies of gender, and the manner in which they were trying to maintain the hegemony of male values in the literary marketplace.

Although some of these insights in the light of the changes in the general political climate of the United States are clearly justified, my proposed topic of research rests on the observation that critical response to and scholarly engagement with the literary production of white male minimalists prevalent in the nineties treated texts only as symptomatic of the context in which they were written, and failed to approach the critical, and potentially transformative, points of view offered by them. Accordingly, my research will concentrate on (1) how the resurgence of exclusively male topics and anxieties in what is usually labeled as post-feminist backlash minimalist fiction can be understood as attempts to negotiate available positions of masculinity; (2) how the often explicit efforts to address not necessarily literary-oriented male audiences by relying on intermedial narrative devices (inclusive of pop cultural and visual elements in literary fiction, resulting arguably in an “intermedial war” waged by contemporary novelists) aim at a restructuring of access to cultural resources; (3) the way in which the emergence of new forms of literary production, circulation and consumption around the millennium (creative writing workshops and seminars via the Internet and off-line, the role of agents, book tours and literary scandals, cults, etc.) inform the textual output of the authors involved; and (4) how the exchange between “transgressive” prose fiction and generic rewritings in the oeuvres of contemporary male novelists and short-story writers answers the trauma of 9/11 and some of the critical trends outlined above.

1. The Research Project

In the fall of the academic year 2009/2010 I spent five months at the University of Rhode Island, Providence to do research on contemporary minimalist fiction written by men, about men, and, for the most part, about men. My proposal promised to deal with (1) how post-feminist backlash minimalist fiction attempts to negotiate available positions of masculinity; (2) how they aim at a restructuring of access to cultural resources; (3) how they present new forms of literary production, circulation and consumption around the millennium; and (4) how these writers answers the trauma of 9/11. The proposed outcome of my research was a book-length monograph in Hungarian about these issues as they appear in the works of Chuck Palahniuk, Bret Easton Ellis, Denis Johnson, Thom Jones, and Craig Clevenger.

During my stay in Providence, RI I had ample time and opportunity to consult with my colleges at the department, and especially after my presentation of the project in front of faculty and graduate and PhD students in October, I received invaluable support and advice. The result of these formal and informal exchanges of ideas resulted in

somewhat reshaping the structure of my original outline of addressing the major topics of my research. Having considered what resources at URI had to offer, I decided to focus on four distinct, and to my mind, distinctive features of the material: (1) the way in which the history of literary institutions, especially the distribution of labor among creative writing, English, literary criticism and the market shaped the output of the authors in question; (2) the intermedial aspects of contemporary fiction with respect to its non-literarily oriented market and readership; (3) the use of transgressive, and often violent representational strategies as a means of maximizing effect and affect; (4) the negotiation of gender roles at the new millennium, at the time when the political landscape, or indeed, the very nature of politics, is changing. These somewhat modified objectives made their way into chapters of my book, more than one third of which had been completed by my arrival back in Hungary at the end of January.

I also made sure that the results of my research were being published continuously. Parts of my first chapter appeared in Hungarian journals (a longer essay in *Kalligram*

in May on *American Psycho* and the transgressive novel, and a shorter piece summarizing the development of literary institutions and prose fiction in tandem in the postwar period in the Spring issue of *Magyar Lettre*). As a special byproduct of my research, the largest Hungarian publishing house, Alexandra has published a creative writing textbook by the Gotham Writers' Workshop, following my advice and in my translation. Others are forthcoming in due time: *Élet és Irodalom* will publish my long review of the some of the works I am dealing with in Hungarian translation in August; a substantial part of my (preliminary) introduction will be published in a collection of essays early November; and I will present the first fourth of my second chapter on the comparison between Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* and Thom Jones' *The Pugilist at Rest* at the biannual HAAS conference in the fall.

With this pace kept up, my book will be finished by the end of 2010.

2. Personal and professional relationships

During my stay in Providence, RI I enjoyed the hospitality of URI and my colleges at the English department. Professional and administrative matters were always handled in a professional, rather than an administrative, manner, thanks to Prof. Steven Barber, the head of the English department and the excellent Michelle Caraccia, whose expertise opened every gate. I could not have asked for a better, and more friendly, environment to conduct my research in.

As for the academic climate, I was more than spoiled. My academic sponsors, especially Prof. Naomi Mandel, whose research interests and approach are closest mine, provided inspiration as well as expert advice whenever and wherever I needed it, and our scholarly discussions and her constructive criticism proved to be instructive in giving my argument its final shape. It is her I owe the most. Other colleges at the department did their best to support me throughout my stay. I am grateful to Gina Valentino to her company and generous spirit, with which she could always balance my solitary wanderings in the field of research, and to Travis D. Williams, whose personal and academic integrity (and Californian humor) will stay with me forever as something to admire and aspire for.

Others in Providence, from Brown University also helped me with crucial background information pertaining to my field. I must thank Daniel Kim of the English department and Prof. Brian Evenson of the English department and the literary arts program for our exciting conversations about contemporary American literature and creative writing.

My stay had not been the same without the Fulbright network experience. Before my trip to the US, I was lucky

to make the acquaintance of Prof. Margaret Manchester of Providence College, RI at a Fulbright presentation in Pécs, and she proved to be a perfect host and my "guiding angel" in her home town. We spent quality time together there and in Boston, where she introduced me to a whole network of previous Fulbrighters to Hungary, to ease the homesickness.

Unfortunately, the local Fulbright organization proved to be rather passive and not exactly welcoming. They organized only two events that I knew of in the semester, one that I could not attend, and another they had advertised well in advance but then forgot to invite me to. They did not respond to my calls and messages, and emails took them weeks to answer, unlike for the Washington office, who went out of their way to assist me in any way they could.

My experience as a Fulbrighter would not have been wholesome without contact with the Hungarian community in Providence, RI and in New York. My landlady, Katherine Radway Hegedűs, the Merva family in Providence and New York, and László Jakab Orsós of the Hungarian Cultural Center made sure that I never felt alone and alien in a country other than my own.

3. Cultural experience

For a scholar of contemporary American literature, doing research in the US is the greatest imaginable blessing, and not only for the abundance of personal and academic resources also available elsewhere, but because s/he is immersed in the very element his/her material is conceived in. It also holds true for my stay: I could easily have spent years, possibly in vain, pondering about the understanding of intricate little details necessary for the completion of my project, but the simple fact that I was reading and writing in the US rendered otherwise problematic aspects of my project self-evident.

As this was the first time I spent in New England (I have been to the the Mid-West, the West coast, Chicago, IL and Bloomington, IN previously), I also became increasingly aware of the rich cultural and regional diversity of the US. What is more, the area with its weather and cultural heritage grew close to my European heart. Despite having spent days in different museums across Europe, I have never seen so much art in such concentration as in New York and Boston (where I spent ten days each), or even at the local RISDI museum. Traveling also rekindled my long past passion for photography.

As a bonus, I had the chance to visit a local inner city school and see the teaching of English in action.

4. Overall evaluation

Looking back on my stay in the US on a research grant generously provided by the Fulbright Commission, I can say that it proved to be the most productive period of my academic career so far. I finalized the argument of my study on contemporary American literature; I wrote more than one third of the manuscript, some of it already out in Hungarian publications; I translated a book closely related to my topic, and enhancing the reception of the authors I am dealing with. My contact with fellow academics in the field proved to be mutually fruitful, and serve as a core for future cooperations to evolve.

I feel I have also grown as a person. Keeping to a tight working schedule without the usual constraints and deadlines to meet proved to be a challenge I could meet, and it gave a welcome boost to my self-confidence. Besides, I had plenty of time to reflect on my personal involvement in what I do and where I see myself headed in the following years both as a person and as an academic. For all these, my heartfelt gratitude goes to the Fulbright Commission.