

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NOVEL

POSTMODERNISM AND THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NOVEL

The relationship between novel and autobiography could be compared to a wide range of possibilities between two ideal types. In one of these hypothetically extreme cases the reader is aware of composition as a separate act of reflection, whereas in the other case no distance is felt between narrated and narrating self.

With this idea in mind it is probably not difficult to understand borderline cases, works which may be called autobiographical novels. I shall draw most of my illustrations from the American and Hungarian literatures of the 1970's, but I do not wish to suggest more than the relative popularity of this hybrid genre in a period more or less associated with Postmodernism, a current characterized by a tendency to blur generic distinctions. One could, of course, refer to other cultures. What is more, the cult of the autobiographical novel may have started in other countries.

The difference between these earlier works and their Postmodern successors is that the former generally pretend to be more objective. In *Trawl* (1966), the third novel of the tragic-fated British writer Bryan Stanley Johnson, the author's memories of childhood, his separation from his family by evacuation during World War II are presented as parts of the inner monologue of a supernumerary on a distant-water trawler fishing the Barents Sea, a man whose conviction is that life has no direction or goal, it is but a constant repetition of states of

loneliness. This book, as well as the same author's "shuffle novel" *The Unfortunates* (1969), in which the autobiographical hero's memories are presented in twenty-seven sections which (apart from the first and the last) are intended to be read in random order, comes very close to the autobiographical novels of the 1970's. If the pretence of a fictitious character is kept up to some extent, the same is true of most works published before the vogue of Postmodernism.

The only major exception seems to me the trilogy of Céline, consisting of *D'un château l'autre* (1957), *Nord* (1960), and *Rigodon*, published posthumously in 1969. This writer has been a major influence on American Postmodernism chiefly through his post-Nietzschean insistence that there is no demarcation line between reality and fiction, and thus an autobiography is as fictitious as any novel. His own answer to the charge that his above-mentioned novels are no more than an account of his life between his contact with the Vichy government and his return to France after years of exile is a characteristic defense of all later autobiographical novels, and thus it is quoted with good reason by Raymond Federman in his surfictionist manifesto: "Life, also, is fiction . . . and a biography is something one invents afterwards."¹

Johnson's novels and Céline's trilogy were published in the decade just preceding the Postmodern wave. There are also much earlier antecedents, but most of these seem to have a more objective speech situation. A well-known example is Lowry's *Under the Volcano* (1947), in which the traumatic experience of Mexican life as well as the visions its author had in a drunken state are transformed into the inner life of "the Consul," the protagonist of the novel. William H. Gass has made Lowry one of the heroes of the Postmodern tradition,² and it is true that the

¹ Raymond Federman, "Surfiction — Four Propositions in Form of an Introduction," in: Raymond Federman, ed., *Surfiction. Fiction Now . . . and Tomorrow* (Chicago: Swallow Press, 1981²), p. 8.

² William H. Gass, "Malcolm Lowry," in: *The World Within the Word* (New York: Knopf, 1978), pp. 13–33.

way this alcoholic writer expressed his own psychic degradation became suggestive of a world view similar to the interpretation of existence formulated in Postmodern works. The more he felt his own personality fall apart, the more he became convinced that the universe was not teleological in nature, and he interpreted his nightmares as a key to the mystery of a world governed by eternal recurrence.

Lowry's work served as a model for one of the leading Postmodern writers in Hungary, Péter Hajnóczy (1942–1981). The structure of his short novel *Death Rode out of Persia* (1979) is comparable to that of *Under the Volcano* in so far as the author's visions inspired by addiction to alcohol and to drugs are incorporated into an objectified but autobiographical story. As to the language used in the passages presenting the hero's hallucinations, there is indeed reason to suspect that Hajnóczy may have been influenced also by *Naked Lunch* (1959), a book which in Federman's opinion "marks the beginning of the Postmodern era in America."³

There may be several possible answers to the question in what respects William S. Burroughs anticipated later autobiographical novelists. The most plausible explanation is that *Naked Lunch* is an attack on the sequential organization in plot and on the singleness of human identity. In his later works linearity of time is undermined with the help of a *collage* technique which the author himself describes in such terms:

(. . .) i have used an extension of the cut up method i call 'the fold in method' — A page of text — my own or some one elses — is folded down the middle and placed on another page — The composite text is then read across half one text and half the other —⁴

³ Raymond Federman, "Fiction in America Today or The Unreality of Reality," *Indian Journal of American Studies*, vol. 14, no. 1 (Jan. 1984), p. 5.

⁴ Neal Oxenhandler, "Listening to Burroughs' Voice," in: Federman, ed., *Op. cit.*, p. 182.

The discontinuity of plot goes hand in hand with the dissociation of the characters into incompatible fragments. The junk world not only obliterates time, but also alienates the human self from itself. Sado-masochism turns the executioner into a victim, and the autobiographical self into an alien:

I project myself out through the glasses and across the street, a ghost in the morning sunlight, torn with disembodied lust.⁵

Far from establishing a correlation between certain American and Hungarian works exclusively on the basis of direct influences, it must be emphasized that the cult of the autobiographical novel has been prepared at least as much by the autonomous development of Hungarian literature as by stimuli received from Western, and especially from American culture. The deconstruction of character has a long tradition in Hungarian literature, starting from *Alhikmet the Old Dwarf* (1853), a *Traumnovelle* by Zsigmond Kemény (1814–1875), the most important Hungarian novelist of the 19th century, through *The Stork Caliph* (1916), a Freudian novel by Mihály Babits (1883–1941) and *Sunflower* (1918), a highly experimental work by Gyula Krúdy (1878–1939), in which several characters have double identities, to *Kornél Esti* (1933–36), an anti-novel consisting of disjointed fragments by Dezső Kosztolányi (1885–1936). In all these works linear teleology is undermined, and Kosztolányi goes as far as combining the *Doppelgänger* with the autobiographical form: *Kornél Esti* has two narrators which are both to be taken as self-portraits, thus foreshadowing Géza Ottlik's *School at the Frontier* (1959), a book that has had a major influence on Hungarian Postmodernism.

This novel is based upon the experience of the author and his friend István Örley, a writer who died during the siege of Budapest, at the age of 32, in a military *Unterrealschule*, in the small Hungarian town of Kőszeg, in the 1920's. Since most

⁵ William S. Burroughs, *Naked Lunch* (New York: Grove Press, 1982), p. 59.

of the events related can be supported by so-called extrinsic verification, the question arises as to why the book is read as a novel at all.

The answer must be sought in the modes and degree of artistic *Aufhebung*. The story related in the book is alienated from the world of the narrator and the narratee on a number of semantic levels.

First of all, the reader is to understand that he can have no direct access to the language used in the *Unterrealschule*. The manuscript written by Gábor Medve, one of the students, and quoted by the primary story-teller, another student, is a kind of translation, making the alien existence described in the novel understandable to the reader:

The vocabulary we used, consisting of about half a dozen obscene words either of sexual connotation or denoting some aspect of the digestive process, gradually came to replace a wealth of nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs, thus rendering obsolete for us hundreds, even thousands, of apt and suitable expressions in our mother tongue. Moreover, we differed, or rather, we were set apart from the lax and sloppy civilian world also by the fact that here even the commonest object had a contrived and misleading name. Many a time we were home on vacation our parents failed to understand our language, and we were often compelled to translate our questions or answers into ordinary civilian talk, as Gábor Medve had done in his manuscript. It had shocked me to start with, when I began to read it.⁶

Another level of distantiation is that identified by Bahtin's concept of the chronotope. The cadets live in a time with constitutive rules radically different from those characteristic of the civilian time of both the narrator and the narratee:

these three years have not really gone by; they exist, each one of their moments standing still, projected upon the dome of the universe like the apexes of divergent rays on a spherical surface.

⁶ Géza Ottlik, *School at the Frontier*. Translated by Kathleen Szasz (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1966), p. 77.

(. . .) We were staggering blindly within a time that had no longer consistency for us. At times it seemed to us that we were stuck at one point for ever, and at others, recent events appeared to us indescribably remote. The intervals stretched out to infinity or shrank to nothing, turned themselves inside out, upsetting the orderliness of chronology.⁷

Yet even such alienating effects would not distinguish the book from those autobiographies which emphasize the inaccuracy of memory or subordinate the consecutive series of events to the stream of composition time, from works, such as Robbe-Grillet's *Le miroir qui revient* or *L'amant* (1984) by Marguerite Duras, which deny centre and direction in existential experience. The decisive semantic stratum is that of protagonist and narrator. The very concept of personality collapses into the act of producing the text, as a result of the overlaps between narrated and narrating selves. The secondary narrator's tale is not an *Ich-Erzählung*, and even the primary story-teller cannot decide whether M., the hero of the story as related in the manuscript written by Gábor Medve, is autobiographical or not. If all the characters lose their former identity when entering the *Unter-realschule*, this loss of personality is further complicated by the fact that the secondary narrator has already become a novelist by the time he sets about writing the story of his early experience as a cadet.

At the very outset, Benedek Both, having received the manuscript after the death of the novelist, tries to correct the possibly intentional distortions of the past. Later on, however, this primary narrator learns to view himself as an unreliable story-teller, not only because his memory is weak and subjective, but also because as a painter he is ignorant of the means of verbal expression. Failing thus to bring the unique experience of his youth closer to "civilian existence," the most he can do is to declare that "there was no bridge between the two worlds".⁸

⁷ Ottlik, *Op. cit.*, pp. 115, 119.

⁸ Ottlik, *Op. cit.*, p. 264.

Kosztolányi and Ottlik have been the declared masters of Péter Esterházy, the most outstanding writer of Hungarian Postmodernism. Esterházy himself is the protagonist in the second and longer half of his *A Novel of Production* (1979), but once again, distance is emphasized in several ways. First, the writer of the book is spoken of as “the Master”, in the third person. At a certain point he is semi-humorously identified with Goethe, as the narrator’s role becomes analogous to that of Eckermann. Further, some of the non-fictitious characters invoked are from the *belle époque* of the Austro–Hungarian Monarchy. Thus, the parliamentary debates of the turn of the century are presented as a kind of commentary upon the political life of the later 20th century, and a conversation between Esterházy and Kálmán Mikszáth, an important Hungarian writer who died before World War I is “quoted”. Last but not least, the apparent lack of connection between the impersonal first and the subjective second half of the novel further alienates the latter, suggesting that the self of the Master is elusive and cannot be “mastered” by discourse.

The artistic intention underlying this double perspective is to provoke the reader, to make him speculate as to the relevance of past experience to the present situation and to answer the question of whether history knows repetition. At one point the reader is even asked to send his comments to the publisher, in the same way as in Raymond Federman’s shuffle novel *Take It or Leave It* (1976) chapter 15. is followed by a Questionnaire. Thus both works ask active, productive reading. Autobiographical material is invoked with the purpose of giving special emphasis to the thesis that the seemingly verifiable facts are so multiple, diverse, variegated, and even contradictory that one cannot speak of their truth value.

Whatever the actual philosophical influences upon these writers, the *Weltbild* of their novels is a post-Nietzschean one, described by Derrida in the following terms: “La ‘vérité’ ne serait qu’une surface, elle ne deviendrait vérité profonde, crue, désirable que par l’effet d’un voile: qui tombe sur elle. Vérité non

suspendue par des guillemets et qui recouvre la surface d'un mouvement de pudeur. Il suffirait de suspendre le voile ou de le laisser d'une autre façon tomber pour qu'il n'y ait plus de vérité ou seulement la 'vérité' — ainsi écrite."⁹

Significantly enough, Gábor Medve, the hero of *School at the Frontier* is an avid reader of Schopenhauer, one of the first thinkers to question the ontological status of the subject. What Ottlik, Federman, and Esterházy share is a fundamental distrust of the validity of the concept of character. The assumptions behind their deconstruction of the autobiographical self have been formulated by Nietzsche, whose conclusions are even more radical than those drawn by Schopenhauer:

Gegen den Positivismus, welcher bei dem Phänomen stehnbleibt 'es gibt nur Tatsachen', würde ich sagen: nein, gerade Tatsachen gibt es nicht, nur Interpretationen. Wir können kein Faktum 'an sich' feststellen: vielleicht ist es ein Unsinn, so etwas zu wollen. 'Es ist alles *subjektiv*' sagt ihr: aber schon das ist *Auslegung*. Das 'Subjekt' ist nichts Gegebenes, sondern etwas Hinzu-Erdichtetes, Dahinter-Gestecktes. — Ist es zuletzt nötig, den Interpreten noch hinter die Interpretation zu setzen? Schon das ist Dichtung, Hypothese.¹⁰

A reader of Federman's works may almost have the impression that they have been written with the explicit intention to illustrate this thesis. He continually rewrites the same novel about the ego as fiction. In any case, he seems to be obsessed with the idea of the divided self. *Amer Eldorado* (1974) and *Take It or Leave It*, and the two halves of *The Voice in the Closet*/*La Voix dans le Cabinet de Débaras* (1979) are versions of the same work. The analogy with Nabokov or Beckett is misleading, because the difference is more important than the similarity: the English versions of Nabokov's early works are adaptations

⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Éperons. Les styles de Nietzsche* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1979), p. 58.

¹⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Der Wille zur Macht. Versuch einer Umwertung aller Werte* (Stuttgart: Alfred Kröner, 1980), p. 337.

rather than translations, and Beckett's English and French texts are works of art in their own right. In contrast to all the works of Beckett and at least some of the later books of Nabokov, Federman's texts can never let the reader forget about his double allegiance. His English texts are peppered with French expressions and gallicisms, while his French (especially in his more recent works) may remind one of what Etiemble called "franglais". There may well be some connection between bilingualism and Federman's deep mistrust of the integrity of the human self. Moinous, a character-narrator-narratee in several of his works is both "moi" and "nous", and in *The Twofold Vibration* (1982) the hero, "the old guy" is presented as the author of *The Voice in the Closet*, while the primary narrator (who also employs two secondary story-tellers, Namredef and Moinous) is called Federman.

A similar deconstruction of the binary oppositions outside-inside, object-subject, told-teller, character-narrator, novel-autobiography, and non-fiction-fiction can be observed in *School at the Frontier*, a novel with two protagonists who closely resemble each other and are also narrators, and the subversion of linearity characteristic of *Take It or Leave It* can also be discovered in *A Novel of Production*: the second half of Esterházy's book is written in the form of footnotes attached to the first. One might be tempted to draw a parallel with *Pale Fire*, but the two parts of Esterházy's novel are far less obviously related to each other than the poem in heroic couplets and the commentary in Nabokov's work; and thus the analogy is limited to the fact that in both cases the various parts of the text can be read in at least two ways. Another type of aleatory procedure is recommended at the beginning of *Take It or Leave It*: "all sections in this tale are interchangeable therefore page numbers being useless they have been removed at the discretion of the author".

The similar structural devices used in the novels we have examined so far and the comparable epistemological assumptions underlying them should not, however, make us blind to

their important differences. Some of these could be analyzed in terms of influences exerted by various other genres upon the autobiographical novel.

THE INFLUENCE OF OTHER GENERIC TRADITIONS ON THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NOVEL

Even a rather superficial first reading may convince one that *School at the Frontier* is more explicitly teleological than *Take It or Leave It* or *A Novel of Production*, despite the many projections backwards or forwards in time. In other words, Ottlik's book is much closer to the traditions of the parable and the *Bildungsroman*. It is precisely because of their position on teleology that Federman and Esterházy can be called Postmodern writers, while Ottlik belongs to the earlier period marked by a kind of Neoclassical reaction against the avant-garde movements of the first three decades of the 20th century.

The exaggeration of this difference, however, could easily lead to an oversimplification. It would probably be more accurate to maintain that in some respects *School at the Frontier* is the least, whereas *A Novel of Production* is the most subversive of the three works. *Take It or Leave It* resembles *School at the Frontier* in so far as both make use of the structural principle of the double. The analogies between the fates of the protagonists and the narrators do not create an impression of subjectivity, because the autobiographical heroes are presented as paradigm cases members of a community with shared concerns; and thus their story is thrown into a historical perspective. The students of the *Unterrealschule* learn to imitate the behaviour of the two thousand Hungarian soldiers who defended the last fortress of their country against three hundred thousand Turks, in the 16th century.

It seemed such an odd thing, this obstinate defense of a small town on the edge of the western frontier, defense against an enemy who not only was already well settled in their country but who was also using it as a base from which to attack others.

There wouldn't have been any sense in it, had the defenders not realized that they possessed, besides the conquered fatherland, two other countries; the first much smaller and the second much larger; so they set about defending them both: their own little town and also the great continent to which they belonged and where shaved craniums weren't part and parcel of the common heritage.¹¹

As this *mise-en-abyme* indicates, the novel becomes a parable, emphasizing the duty of small nations to fight against great powers. No less evident is the historical experience in *Shooting with Live Ammunition* (1981) by Lajos Grendel. In this novel the autobiographical self is transformed into a character called "the narrator", whose ambition is to find a key in alleged historical documents to the riddle of his own fate. A sense of community is again what gives parabolic character to the plot. Grendel has shared the sufferings of the Hungarian minority in Czechoslovakia, and his interpretation has gained a more objective dimension by his ethnic connections with Germans and Slovaks. All that personal experience is present in the novel, but the interpretation of the recent past is presented in the form of a commentary upon "quoted" documents about the tragic conflicts of the 17th century, the hopeless situation of Upper Hungary menaced by Austria and Turkey. "The narrator" tries hard to draw a conclusion, but he proves to be unequal to his task. History offers no moral. Instead of leading towards some kind of a goal, it is governed by eternal recurrence. The author is unable to write his autobiography, because his own personal experience is no more than a sort of appendix to the history of the endless sufferings of ethnic minorities. The generic traditions of parable and autobiography are invoked in order to remind the reader that both are bound up with a sense of teleology. Once again, the deconstructive character of Postmodernism is quite obvious: unlike *School at the Frontier*, *Shooting with Live Ammunition* is a negative parable.

¹¹ Ottlik, *Op. cit.*, pp. 342-343.

Since much of these Hungarian novels cannot be understood without paying attention to their historical context, we must resist the temptation of establishing any simple correlation between these works and any American novels, and confine our analysis to the role of generic traditions.

One such comparable factor is the influence of parable on autobiographical novels. In certain cases – Federman's *Take It or Leave It* and *The End of a Genealogical Novel* (1977) by Péter Nádas may be our examples – this abstract similarity goes together with an almost common historical experience and cultural legacy: the Jewish heritage.

Federman's protagonist is the only member of a family who managed to escape from a train transporting people to a concentration camp. Having taken up residence in the United States, he is one of those Jews who enter an Anglo-Saxon world and transform its Puritan culture almost inadvertently.

This is obviously another lesson taught by history. If the book is less openly parabolistic than *School at the Frontiers* it is because Federman draws upon more generic traditions. Besides autobiographical elements and a didactic intention characteristic of parables, the presence of at least two other genres can be felt in the book. Upon his arrival, the hero views America as a chaotic world in which events are interchangeable. Even the structure of the book is but a reflection of this post-historical age. To create a world which has no direction, purpose, or even continuity, Federman draws upon the picaresque tradition of *Lazarillo de Tormes*, *Gil Blas*, and *Simplizissimus*, works which also seem to have almost no teleology. Pushing the temporal structure into the background, the writer gives greater emphasis to spatial elements, relying upon the conventions of travel books, and turning his work into a kind of "introduction to the American way of life".

Although fewer generic traditions make their influence felt in *The End of a Genealogical Novel*, the result is by no means less sophisticated. In this case a ready-made pattern is invoked, reminiscent of the repetitive, mythic structure of *Absalom*,

Absalom! rather than of the more teleological form of *Buddenbrooks*, with the purpose of questioning its relevance. The hero is called Péter Simon, a name which not only refers to a disciple of Jesus but is also identical with the real name of the author of the book. The novel asks how far the fate of a young Jew living in Hungary in the second half of the 20th century will conform to the religious prophecy of his ancestors. The ending is somewhat ambiguous. The life of the earlier generations seems to have confirmed the relevance of tradition, the sufferings are interpreted as a kind of warning to the Jewish people, and there are signs indicating that the hero may be one of the elect. In the last chapter, however, Péter Simon enters a world of chaos and uncertainty. He may have lost his belief in the values inherited from his ancestors, and this may lead to an alienation from the past. If this is so, the novel may be read as an anti-parable and a suggestion of the impossibility of writing more genealogical novels.

The blend of various genres is more complex in *A Novel of Production*. The title itself refers to a descriptive-didactic genre, characteristic of the Socialist Realist trend, but this tradition is recalled only for the sake of parody. Partly because of this, Esterházy's book is less didactic than most of the novels I have mentioned so far. The parody of the genre leads to a devaluation of the historical period with which it is associated. Small communities, family, and religion are the criteria for judging the behaviour of the characters, with the implication that history has invalidated large-scale social activities by the second half of the 20th century.

A similar value structure can be discovered in *The Auxiliaries of the Heart* (1985), the latest of the five volumes of Esterházy's more recent work which is published under the general heading *An Introduction to Literature*.¹² This text starts with an explicitly autobiographical scene: the author's mother is dying in a hospital, surrounded by her family. The framework

¹² Appeared in 1986.

is that of a prayer. In the central part of the work the roles of the narrator and the heroine are reversed: the mother is talking to her dead son, reminding the reader of Mary's prayer for Jesus. While *The Auxiliaries of the Heart* is similar to other Postmodern works in so far as it denies the relevance of the old dichotomies of fiction and reality, novel and autobiography, its religious undertones seem to be at variance with the general character of this cultural trend.

How can we explain the significance of religion in *School at the Frontier* and *The Auxiliaries of the Heart* and its absence in *Take It or Leave It*? Once again, we must remember the very different socio-historical context in which a contemporary writer finds himself in the United States and in Hungary respectively. Transcendence and Christianity may still offer relevant answers to contemporary questions in the world of at least some novels published in Central Europe, whereas in the consumer society of North America Postmodernism almost inevitably implies a rejection of such traditional orientations of value.

There is also another possible explanation. The first version of *School at the Frontier* was completed by 1949, and this novel could be associated with the period marked not only by a reaction against avant-garde experimentation, but also by a return to such traditional value systems as Christianity. Against this background it is quite understandable that at crucial points in Ottlik's novel words are quoted from the *Bible*. It is even possible to read the whole book as a commentary upon a motto taken from the *Vulgate*, from chapter 9, verse 16 of *Saint Paul's Epistle to the Romans*: "Non est volentis, neque currentis, sed miserentis dei." There is undoubtedly a semantic level on which the book may be read as a dramatization of Luther's and Calvin's interpretation of this cryptic and incomplete sentence, weighing evidence for and against free will.

A Novel of Production, on the other hand, may be regarded as a transitional work, somewhat foreshadowing a more Conservative period, which started with the decline of the New Left. To make my point clear, I wish to mention two autobiographical

novels, one Hungarian and one American, *The Case Worker* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*, published in the same year and presenting an unqualifiedly ironic world that would be out of place in the 1980's. Both are the works of disillusioned writers.

The Case Worker (1969), by György Konrád, is about a world with no salvation. The didactic tone is no less perceptible than in *School at the Frontier*: the guiding intention of the book seems to give the reader criteria for judging modes of behaviour. The society presented is doomed in so far as it has no sympathy for the miserable. The autobiographical hero is the only human being to realize that compassion is not a favour one may grant somebody, but one's duty toward others. This is not to suggest that any answer to the questions asked in the novel seems possible. Misery cannot be obliterated or even diminished. Man is thrown into an alien universe. There is no way of helping others, yet the obligation to do so is unquestionable, because alienation and misery are the results on *man's* self-destructive activity. The world of *The Case Worker* — the first novel of a sociologist turned writer of narrative fiction, influenced not only by the *nouveau roman* but also by the generic traditions of descriptive sociology and didactic parable — is governed by a stern moralist for whom neither divine grace nor political Utopia is any longer imaginable.

Moreover, the novel posits a contradiction between behaviour and mentality. The case worker becomes isolated from his family, because he takes care of an idiot boy. Since the case worker's act proves to be not only useless, but also superfluous, the family cannot be blamed for failing to understand his attitude. The vocational aspect of value is presented as inauthentic in this novel: not behaviour but mental disposition is shown to be the basis of virtue, and on this ground the hero proves to be morally superior to other characters. He is aware that a society in which decisions are justified by reference to principles and not by reference to effects is responsible for the insanity and misery of the boy. For the case worker it finally becomes impossible to distinguish between things that are good

or right or lawful *in and of themselves*, and things that are simply good *for* something else. Ends entirely depend upon means, and thus end-values have no intrinsic validity, but are determined by intermediary values.

It would be tempting to suggest that Esterházy's adherence to the traditional values of religion, family, and even of the national past is possible because of his social background — the Esterházys have played an important role in the history of Hungarian culture —, whereas Konrád's total disillusionment may have been at least partly the consequence of his Jewish uprootedness, of his exclusive reliance upon a narrow and dogmatic interpretation of social Utopia in his youth, in the 1950's, and of his later loss of faith in the international cultural and ideological tradition accessible to him. Such a line of argument, however, would demand an analysis of what is specific in Hungarian history and literature, and this cannot be my task in this paper.

There might exist, however, a more distant perspective, from which it may be possible to risk a more abstract hypothesis. Different as the political, economic, and socio-cultural context must have been, the United States also had an optimistic literature in the 1950's although it was a case of agreement rather than prescription. "The American writers of the 1950's were known as 'The Silent Generation,' "Federman wrote about Bellow, Mailer, Salinger, Malamud, Styron, Wouk, and others, "because they, to a great extent, expressed in their work a silent agreement with the political, moral, and social attitudes of the State."¹³

The world of the books of Federman is a far cry from this optimism, especially if we think of *The Twofold Vibration*, an autobiographical novel with negative Utopian elements, which predicts the deportation of dissenting citizens to a space colony. The reason for this change is partly historical. The United States also had its traumatic experience at the time of the Vietnam war. Howard Wolf, who teaches at the same univer-

¹³ Federman, "Fiction in America Today or the Unreality of Reality," p. 8.

sity as Federman — at SUNY Buffalo, one of the centres of the students' unrest in the late 60's and early 70's — has given a succinct characterization of the attitude of the generation which came of age between World War II and Korea, in a "novelistic memoir". His words addressed to an anti-war activist as recalled by himself, clearly indicate a purely ironic assessment of the situation:

(...) these guys in the White House *are* playing cowboys and Indians with our lives, I agree. It's despicable, but the antiwar movement's turning into a joke. Do you think your average good citizen from Ames, Iowa, will be convinced that the bombing should stop because Jerry Rubin drops his pants in public?¹⁴

The shock caused by the Vietnam war led some writers to a drastic revaluation of American past. The autobiographical novel seemed to be especially suitable for their purpose, because of its confessional tone and didactic possibilities. *Slaughterhouse-Five or The Children's Crusade*, "a duty-dance with death by Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., a fourth-generation German-American now living in easy circumstances on Cape Cod (and smoking too much), who, as an American scout *hors de combat*, as a prisoner of war, witnessed the fire-bombing of Dresden, Germany, 'the Florence of the Elbe', a long time ago, and survived to tell the tale" (1969) is a characteristic example of this destructive interpretation of past events. Much of what has been said about the other autobiographical novels is also true of this book. History is viewed as a directionless nightmare governed by only one principle, that of the eternal recurrence of blind massacre. The bombing of Dresden, an undefended city, containing neither troop concentrations nor war industries, is compared to the Children's Crusade in 1213. The narrator seems to be identical with the writer, and the hero, Billy Pilgrim, who because of his experience in Dresden "has come unstuck in time", is a double of the story-teller. The novel is a kind of negative *Bildungs-*

¹⁴ Howard Wolf, *Forgive the Father. A Memoir of Changing Generations* (Washington, D. C.: The Republic Books, 1978), p. 80.

roman: with the destruction of the continuity of time-perception, the very basis of selfhood is undermined.

The world of *Slaughterhouse-Five* is as hopeless as that of *The Case Worker*. The killing of one hundred and thirty thousand people on the night of February 13, 1945, with the aim of hastening the end of the war, becomes an epitome of the meaningless of history. If the book proves to be the document of an exceptionally honest national self-examination rather than an outstanding artistic achievement, it is partly because of the repetitious style and the somewhat unsophisticated didacticism suggesting that it was the Dresden experience that made it possible for Vonnegut to write a story with a villain in it.

Yet it would be unfair to single out Vonnegut's book for criticism, because its shortcomings are symptomatic. Few of the autobiographical novels I have presented so far could be regarded as more successful works of art, and their relative failure may not only indicate the limits of the genre but also help us answer the question as to why the autobiographical novel seemed to be popular in the late 1960's and in the 1970's in countries as dissimilar as the United States and Hungary.

FROM THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NOVEL TO THE NOVEL AS AUTOBIOGRAPHY

The most obvious explanation seems to be a historical one. Under the influence of large-scale catastrophes following each other in quick succession, some writers came to the bitter conclusion that World War II and colonialism could not be regarded as isolated episodes of human history. Robert Coover characterized the *Weltanschauung* of the self-ironic Postmodern trend in the following way:

From generation to generation, whole peoples get wiped from the face of the earth, so for them the apocalypse has already happened. And we can be pretty sure there's more to come. I mean, who can stop it?¹⁵

¹⁵ Robert Coover/Larry McCaffrey, "Robert Coover on His Own and Other Fictions," *Genre*, vol. XIV, no. 1, Spring 1981, p. 62.

Considering the very different economic and political conditions in North America and Central Europe, it would be absurd to establish any simple correlation between the relative decrease in devastating self-critical analyses of the past in the last years. Still, the decline of the New Left in both regions may be one reason for a more Conservative approach to political traditions.

There may be also another explanation for this change. Side by side with destructive interpretations of the past, the autobiographical novel seems to have lost its popularity. It is quite possible that this hybrid genre has served its purpose by invalidating the dichotomy of autobiography and novel, inherited from a more Positivistic age. The distinction may have been less blurred before than after the 1960's. The contrast is quite striking if we compare *The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams* (1951) with *Speak, Memory* (1966) and *Look at the Harlekins!* (1974). The first of these works is a rather unimaginative chronicle, it *pretends* to depict unmediated experience without the intervention of artificial form, and thus gives the impression of a matter-of-fact summary of past events. The difference between Nabokov's autobiography and autobiographical novel, on the other hand, is much less significant. The compositional aspect is stressed by the narrator at the very beginning of *Speak, Memory*, when he states that the following of "thematic designs through one's life should be, I think, the true purpose of autobiography."¹⁶ Similar examples could be given from other literatures: Beckett's *Company* (1980), for example, can be read both as fiction and as autobiography, and Robbe-Grillet's *Le miroir qui revient* reveals, the autobiographical aspect of its author's novels and films, justifying its opening thesis: "Je n'ai jamais parlé d'autre chose que de moi."¹⁷

¹⁶ Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory. An Autobiography Revisited* (New York: Perigee Books, 1979), p. 27.

¹⁷ Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Le miroir qui revient* (Paris: Minuit, 1984), p. 10.

To explain this shift in emphasis one should pursue certain aspects of the relationship experience bears with writing beyond the well-known formulation that an interest in the autobiographical novel may go hand in hand with a cult of documentary literature. Such an explanation, however, demands that we take a longer historical period into consideration.

The concept of the stable ego had been rejected not only by Nietzsche, but also by Freud, and the gradual loss of an essentialist view of human nature could be observed in the works of numerous novelists, from Virginia Woolf to Gyula Krúdy. Stevens demonstrated in his later verse and asserted in his theoretical writings that poetry — taken in the sense of the German Romantics — was not an imitation of experience, but rather a kind of experience in its own right. Pound and Williams stressed the continuity of life and art in *The Cantos* and in *Paterson*; Pollack and other representatives of “Action Painting” obliterated the demarcation line between the finished work of art and the process of composition; seemingly improvised works, *collages* and *assemblages* made the impression that they were in fresh contact with new experience; Duchamp and Cage, concrete and sound poetry, happenings, performance, minimal, and environmental art tried to bridge the gap between art and environment; and even a more recent writer like Barthelme followed suit when making short stories reflect their place of publication, namely the modern magazine, addressed to an audience with a wide experience of travel and an acute sense of the changes in fashion.

It is with this background in mind that the Postmodern assertions “Kunst und Leben fallen so ununterscheidbar zusammen”¹⁸ and literature is “an extension of the writer’s life”¹⁹ must

¹⁸ Jürgen Peper, “Postmodernismus: ‘Unitary Sensibility’ (Von der geschichtlichen Ordnung zum synchron-environmentalen System),” in: Manfred Pütz and Peter Freese, eds, *Postmodernism in American Literature. A Critical Anthology* (Darmstadt: Thesen Verlag, 1984), p. 181.

¹⁹ Diane Wakoski, as quoted by Ronald Sukenick, in “Thirteen Digressions,” in: Pütz and Freese, eds, *Op. cit.*, p. 125.

be interpreted. If examined in this larger context, the historical function of the autobiographical novel can be defined as the product of at least four components:

1. With the shift from authorial to textual self it transformed the writing self from a creator into a product of the literary text. As a result, in autobiographical novels the reader will meet

the self that neither shapes nor performs as a presence, but is shaped and performed to fill a perceived absence; the self that neither shapes the book as environment nor performs the public persona of a private subjectivity, but is shaped by a linguistic environment and performed by, at best, an intertextual inter-subjectivity.²⁰

2. Incorporating experience that occurs during composition, autobiographical novels have changed our notion of the human self, questioning its integrity, stressing its discontinuity and the randomness, arbitrariness, *décousu*, *désuni*, *ungebunden*, chance-like, or chaotic nature of experience.

3. Deconstructing the traditional opposition between subject and object, autobiographical novelists invalidated what may be called the most basic metaphor used for many centuries in the interpretation of the relationship human consciousness bears with the "exterior" world. The consequences of this change clearly go beyond the present scope of this brief discussion. Instead of dwelling upon them, I shall quote Fredric Jameson, who sums them up in a recent article on Postmodernism:

besides the hermeneutic model of inside and outside (. . .), there are at least four other fundamental depth models which have been repudiated (. . .): the dialectical one of essence and appearance (. . .); the Freudian model of latent and manifest (. . .); the existential model of authenticity, whose heroic or tragic thematics are closely related to that other great opposition between alienation and disalienation (. . .); and finally, latest in time, the great semiotic opposition between signifier and signified.²¹

²⁰ Charles Caramello, *Silverless Mirrors. Book, Self and Postmodern American Fiction* (Tallahassee: The University Presses of Florida, 1983), p. 33.

²¹ Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism." *New Left Review* 146, July-August 1984, pp. 61-62.

4. Affirming continuity between art and experience, autobiographical novelists have undermined the Aristotelian conception of art as mimesis.

To avoid possible misunderstandings, I wish to make two additional remarks. The popularity of the autobiographical novel seems to have been strongest in the 1970's but this cannot mean that one may speak of a radical *coupure* either before or after that decade. In the age of Henry James there had been a clear-cut distinction between autobiography and fiction, but Proust and Joyce set about bringing those two genres into a closer relation. Several later writers took their work as a starting-point. Confessional novelists followed the tradition of the French author, whereas such more impersonal artists as Esterházy preferred to take Joyce's third-person self-portrait as a model.

Since by the 1980's some of these novelists looked for other modes of expression, future historians may view one type of the autobiographical novel as a passing phase in the history of a Postmodern trend that seeks both to continue and to surpass avant-garde experimentation. It is even possible that in the United States this hybrid genre will turn out to have more historical than aesthetic value. In any case, few of the American works I have tried to examine can claim to have an aesthetic integrity comparable to that of *Gravity's Rainbow*. Perhaps it might be said by way of conclusion that the cult of autobiographical fiction may have had more aesthetic importance in Hungarian literature: while the most outstanding artistic achievements of American Postmodern prose are not autobiographical novels, in Hungary some of the finest works written in the last decades belong to this genre.