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“NEW-DIRTY-POSTLITERATE-POP-LO-CAL-K-MART”  
On American Minimalist Fiction in the 1970s and 1980s  
(Abádi Nagy Zoltán: *Az amerikai minimalista próza*,  
Budapest: Argumentum Kiadó, 1994.)

Abádi Nagy's book is clearly structured into two equally important parts. The author gathers his critical observations on his primary material in the first one, "American Minimalist Fiction: Authors and Works." While the second part which balances the first and contains the author's theoretical considerations about American Minimalism is titled "American Minimalist Fiction: the Minimalist World View and the Characteristics of Minimalist Aesthetics and Philosophy." Balance is obtained by the author, who uses his primary material in the first section of his book to draw conclusions in the second. Consequently it is the second half of the book which contains the bulk of the author's theoretical considerations. However, for the vast majority of Hungarian readers, the second, theoretical part could hardly be understood without the first one. For example, none of the ten novels that Abádi Nagy introduces here have been translated into Hungarian. Therefore the first part is essential to the understanding of the second. Had the book been published in English for the American public, it would very likely have had a different structure altogether.

## “American Minimalist Fiction: Authors and Works”

The first part opens with a preliminary chapter on minimalism. This chapter is, almost apologetically, devoted to the critical helter-skelter around the phenomenon. “Minimalism in American literature is the phenomenon of the 1970s and 1980s. It makes its first appearance in the late sixties. Its main representatives, Raymond Carver and Ann Beattie, had already had a marked influence on a younger generation in the seventies. In the eighties minimalism became the strongest hue registered by critics”<sup>1</sup>(21). The reason for the apologetic tone of the introductory chapter is that the term itself has not yet “settled” in American literary criticism. “Many critics had tried to label this new phenomenon in many different ways before they tolerated, rather than generally accepted, the term ‘minimalism’” (25). Many, more or less witty, labels are collected from various critics’ articles, and the author defends his own choice (minimalism). “‘Dirty Realism’ reminds him of the realism of the ‘muck-rakers’ at the turn of this century”(27). “The vague and insipid ‘New Realism’ is a term without critical judgement. Critics who use it either speak about the return to Realism or about the ‘renewal’ of Realism when they talk about minimalism”(27). “The inventor of the term ‘Pop Realism’ might have born in mind the fact that minimalist writers use the products of the American pop culture and consumerism in their stories and novels so often... and the very layer of society whose days are flooded by these products”(27). Labels like “TV Fiction”, “Coke Fiction”, “Diet-Pepsi minimalism”, “Lo-Cal Fiction”, “Freeze-Dried Fiction” among others miss their target by being satirical as if the authors of this type of fiction were also satirical about their characters, whereas they “highlight these objects, facts, occupations simply because these things master their characters’ lives, and not (or very rarely) because they want to be satirical about their own characters or want to ridicule them”(27).

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<sup>1</sup> Abádi Nagy Zoltán, *Az amerikai minimalista próza* (Budapest: Argumentum Kiadó, 1994) 21. [quotations from this edition hereafter will be bracketed ( ) in the text]

Terms like “K-Mart Realism”, “Designer Realism”, “High Tech Realism”, etc. differ only slightly from the group above. They are right in the sense “that is to say: the world of minimalist fiction is equipped with objects available in K-Mart and is peopled by the customers of K-Mart”(28). “Designer Realism,” on the other hand, has another relevant, if latent, aspect “that might emphasize the fact that minimalists focus on and accentuate the surface level of reality”(28). Whereas “High Tech Fiction” might have a double connotation: “1/ a type of fiction that deals with people living in the world of High Technology; 2/ fiction of High Technology, a fiction that can tell us a lot by showing a few things only”(28).

A third group of labels indicate a sociological bias: “White Trash Fiction”, “Postliterate Literature”, “hick chic” and others of this type demonstrate that their inventors found the people in these stories and novels most often come from an easily definable segment of American society: “Minimalist fiction is the literary record of the sociology of the poor, the drifters, the criminals ... of industrial suburbs and small country towns, the workers and lower-middle-class (or very rarely middle-middle class) citizens of America”(262). However complete this sociological reading of minimalism seems to be, it is not the sociological aspect of this fiction that remarkably distinguishes it.

A brief section following the description of the abundance of the recently coined new terms, is devoted to a short overview of the history of the term (minimalism) in music and visual arts. Abádi Nagy, when comparing minimalist music to minimalist fiction, points out that “short phrases and slow motion is a characteristic of minimalist fiction, as well”(30). He concludes, however, that the term (minimalism) in music does not offer a key to understanding the same term in fiction. The same critical term in visual arts offers more. The author proves that the term itself, as it is used in literary criticism, “is entering the critical paraphernalia from the direction of visual arts”(33). Although both visual artists and fiction writers of the minimalist style turn to the surface level of reality and would prefer “taking objects directly from everyday reality”(32) into their world, the author reminds us that

minimalism in American fiction is "*significantly different*" (33) from what is meant by minimalism in visual arts.

"The Hyper-Realist painter/sculptor has to possess every skill of his craft in order to be able to produce his art - his paraphernalia is rich again. The minimalist prose writer, on the other hand, is diminishing his own. The two extremes of using and neglecting devices still produce something very similar - worlds of neat, polished surfaces. This is how the two types of art can be associated."(35)

The simingly similar shining surfaces differ-as described above-in the process of creation.

The introductory chapter in the first part of the book ends with a collection of attempted definitions of contemporary critics and a list of the names of the authors. This list ranges from James Atlas' early endeavor, "Less Is Less" in 1981, through Josef Jarab's (Czechoslovakia) "The Stories of the New Lost Generation" in 1988 to Utz Riese's (Germany) "Postmodern Negativity and Minimalism: The Realism of Raymond Carver" in 1990. What most of these definitions seem to be realizing in the works of the minimalists is that these stories are "deprived of epiphanies and revelations"(41) (James Atlas); they show the "belly-side"(41) of everyday life (Bill Buford). The lives of its characters are isolated from any community and the thinly narrow prose of the minimalists(42) could hardly bear the burden of the past or the future (Michael Gorra) therefore it is the literature of the Present. The "intentionally impoverished equipment"(42) of the minimalists is the consequence of an intentional turn away from the hysterically over-refined fictional worlds of the postmodern (Charles Newman). Minimalists could find their way back to the reader who had been alienated by the postmodernists(43). Minimalism, especially after the second generation, is a kind of documentarist literature which is not depriving fiction from its own devices but is renewing and expanding its possibilities (Kim A. Herzinger). It is a sheer "Life-style Fiction"(43) (Joe David Bellamy). The minimalist author "retains

information”(43) in the narration that makes this prose what it really is (Linsey Abrams). Minimalists, most often, deal with the surface and it is “the prose of an opaque vision”(43). Authors are not concerned about the “great themes” of literature(Robert Dunn). The minimalist writer has a bias in favor of the objective world(44) (Diane Stevenson), and they, instead of expanding, are reducing the possibilities of plot. They are obsessed with the details of the surface while they intentionally neglect the social differences among the people they talk about(44)(Madison Bell). John Barth calls it a “realist or hyper-realist ... cold fiction”(44) that “can tell us a lot but it has nothing to do with the actual length of the story”(44), it is a “concise, associative, realist or hyper-realist”(44) prose. The critical opinions and attitudes collected here vary from that of the writer of “The Literary Brat Pack” (45)(Bruce Bawer), an article of vehement hostility towards minimalism, to Tom Wolfe’s literary “manifesto-like article”(46) in Harper’s Magazine, in which he talks about an “anesthetic fiction” that maneuvers microscopic domestic situations set mainly in small town America. From among the European ‘critical angles’ Abádi Nagy chooses Marc Chenetier’s “Living On/Off The ‘Reserve,”” which is written solely about Raymond Carver’s stories but “whose observations concerning the performance nature and interrogative characteristics .... of Carver’s prose can be valid to describe the whole phenomenon of minimalism”(47).

The introductory chapter closes with a thematic grouping of minimalist authors. Abádi Nagy arranges the authors into the following groups: 1/ the generation of the 1970s, 2/ the generation of the 1980s and 3/ borderline-writers, for writers whose work can only partially be categorized as part of the minimalist movement.

The chapter devoted to the minimalist writers of the 1970s contains the following names: Raymond Carver, Ann Beattie, Frederick Barthelme, Joy Williams, Bobbie Ann Mason, Jayne Anne Phillips, Richard Ford and Mary Robison. The chapter for the minimalists of the 1980s lists its authors as: Tobias Wolff, Elizabeth Tallent, David Leavitt, Jay McInerney and Bret Easton Ellis, while the chapter for the

“borderline cases” includes Alice Adams, Toby Olson and Annie Dillard. Each writer in each chapter is introduced in a short biographical sketch, followed by an introductory piece based on the general characteristics of his/her art. Then works (usually a novel or a volume of short fiction, or both, when possible) considered highly characteristic of the author are discussed in detail. Abádi Nagy presents the reader with a convincing amount of primary material: *159 short stories and 10 novels by the sixteen authors*—as listed above—*are given thematic analyses* in the successive three chapters. The author admits though how differently some other critics may make their own list of minimalists, the reader can feel safe: no work of real significance that has been associated with minimalism in these two decades is missing from this list. All this provides a solid foundation of primary works on which the author builds up the second, theoretic part of his book.

“The World View of American Minimalism —  
The Characteristics of Minimalist Aesthetics and Philosophy”

Abádi Nagy divides this part of his book up into four main chapters: 1/ “The World View of Minimalism”, 2/ “The Formal Characteristics of Minimalist Fiction”, 3/ “The Relationship Between Minimalism and Postmodernism”, and 4/ “Conclusion and Definition”.

1/

The chapter, “The World View of Minimalism,” is divided into two subchapters: 1/ “The Minimalist Interpretation of the Human Character,” and 2/ “The Image of America in Minimalist Fiction.”

The American minimalist writer “returns to the world of reality, and portrays man directly taken out of it. The perspectives of the Universe, its deeper interrelationships are covered by the close-up of the man in the foreground”(221). What intrigues the author here is why American minimalist authors focus *exclusively* on the individual.

Why is the social aspect almost entirely excluded? Why is the world of the minimalist writer shrunk and forced into the shell of individual existence?

“Minimalist literature minimalizes the self”(222) says Abádi Nagy using the same terms as Christopher Lash in *The Minimal Self*, proving, though, that the two terms are different.(Christopher Lash focuses on the phenomenon of the postmodern and draws his examples from among postmodernists, too.) However, Abádi Nagy admits, these two different uses of ‘minimalism’ are not that far away either, since “minimalist fiction, in a sense, is radically different from postmodern literature, while, in another sense, it is a product of the postmodern”(223). By this Abádi Nagy means that the shrunken, private worlds of the minimalists “can be viewed, in a very general sense, as the survival of postmodernist solipsism”(223). Abádi Nagy also accepts Lash’s conclusion that “minimalism refers not just to a particular style in an endless succession of styles but to a widespread conviction that art can survive only by a drastic restriction of its field of vision”(224). The focus of the minimalist’s camera is on the everyday life of the individual and the photo is taken with “a hair-raising verisimilitude”(225).

The minimal self is reduced but not “devalued or defected, ... it is a personality of full social and psychological capacity, who, for some reason though, is not acting and behaving like one”(226). Abádi Nagy distinguishes four types of the reduced self. Two of them are produced in such a way that the reader cannot get a full picture of the character “because the writer prevents us from getting close to the full personality”(227); therefore, the reduced self is part of the minimalist author’s strategy of portrayal and not a matter of the character’s psychology. The two other types concern the nature of the characters.

The first of the four types is the “man of after-effects,” who is “the man after the trauma, after the crisis, after the decision”(227). The story/novel does not show a hero’s way to a climax (in any sense) but it shows us “the vacuum, the apathy, the depression, the drifting of the hero, the self-narcosis” after the decisive event. The minimalist

protagonist is a traumatized self, someone who had suffered from something some time “before the opening sentence of the story or the novel”(228). That *something* in his past could easily explain his reactions in the present, but the writer is not willing to tell us *all* about that. Still, this hero “actually is an undiminished personality whom the reader meets in a phase of his life when something decisive has already happened to him”(228).

The reader sees as much of the “phenomenological man,” the second type, as he sees of others in real life. “The minimalist character is a casual acquaintance”(231) whose internal reactions we might guess from his gestures. This way it is again the minimalist author who reduces the character by not showing more of it. “This method of retaining information about the character produces a feeling in the reader that the hero has a reduced self, and that is what I call ‘phenomenological’ ” (231). There is no longer an “omniscient author who could tell us what we cannot see”(232). But if the reader watches carefully “few things can mean a lot”(232). Abádi Nagy quotes Annie Dillard’s book, *Living by Fiction*, when describing the minimalist author’s attitude to his/her character: “We no longer examine the interior lives of characters much like ourselves. Instead, we watch from afar a caravan of alien grotesques”(230—231).

With the third type of self reduction we enter the realm of the reduced selves in a proper psychological sense. Abádi Nagy calls it the “anesthetized self”. “This is where the literary self-reduction gets closest to the sociological phenomenon of the minimal self”(234). This type of self-reduction is a “sheer fact of social-psychology. It is a fact of the psychology of the character and not an illusion caused by the character-painting device of the writer”(234). The minimalist hero is not just vulnerable, “but most often is a wounded man”(235) and uses all kinds of narcosis. This narcosis is “an escapist reaction”(234) says Abádi Nagy.

The “inarticulate man” is the last of the four types. S/he is the one who is “incapable of communicating the basic problems of his/her life. Perhaps even incapable of verbalizing them for himself/herself” (237).



But, as Abádi Nagy emphasizes, “due to the phenomenological approach of the writer, relevant pieces of information might as well be missing. And this is not a consequence of the inarticulate quality of the character”(238).

Abádi Nagy repeatedly states that the above types of the minimalised self most often appear in an entanglement with each other in the actual context of the individual works. There are no protagonists (or just very rarely) who are the sheer representatives of one or another from among the four types above. This categorization is still relevant, for one of these types is usually dominant in most characters and they help us in understanding how the aesthetic strategies of the minimalist author work.

From among the possible strategies of survival for the character with reduced self, Abádi Nagy names two: “disengagement” (from society) and “apathetic survival”. What he calls “disengagement” is not new in literature. For Joyce and the moderns the world was alienating, their characters were either paralyzed or they escaped society and developed a set of different values. For the postmodernist writer the world is a chaos that cannot be defined or escaped(238). What the minimalist writer preserves from the postmodern is its world-as-chaos-feeling, but the author

“turning back towards realism/modernism places the character from the absurd world of the postmodern back into a recognizable reality. Though, unlike modernism, the minimalist writer—indicating a distrust similar to that of the postmodernists—excludes society as responsible for social problems, does not set his/her characters into a community”(238—239).

The minimal self's strategies are validated only in the private, shrunken world of the individual(240). “The traumatized, paralyzed, dissatisfied minimal self who is charged with frustration, disappointment, alienation, who is disturbed and contemplative, most typically disconnects society”(239). It does not mean that the protagonist is

antisocial, it means that s/he is dissociable(240). S/he is not leaving the community as a demonstration (moderism), s/he is just not joining it. "Minimalism, however, is not a pragmatic literature, it is more concerned about recording the present situation: when the personality is dissolved in crime or in narcosis or in an automatized sex of sensuous lust"(242).

When Abádi Nagy discusses his category of the "apathetic survival," we are anticipating some of his conclusions at the end of his book. "The apathy of the minimalist character is not an indication of the insensitivity of the minimalist writer to the negative aspects of reality"(244). The excluded social arena and the apathy of the character are an indication of "skepticism, simply a different, new answer to the same epistemological dilemma of the postmodern.(Skepticism makes minimalism akin to postmodern.)"(244)

No matter how much the "privatized" world of the minimalist protagonist is devoid of society as such, "social effects in an indirect way do infiltrate into the life of the minimalist protagonist"(244). That is to say: "society in minimalist fiction is necessarily and exclusively the American society"(251). What do we learn about American society from minimalist fiction? "American minimalist fiction ... is indicating what is happening in America in the period: the American man of the street is losing his interest in politics"(254). As Abádi Nagy points out, "the political man of radical social change in the US in the 1960s withdraws to a subcommunal level of his privatized world by the 1970s and 1980s" (253). The reasons for this change are more than telling:

"The average American citizen turns away from society. Partly as a consequence of the results of the former movements (the Civil Rights Movement, the end of the Vietnam War); partly disillusioned and started back by the unexpected results (drug consumption as an inheritance of the subcultures of the sixties, AIDS following the sexual revolution) or fed up by the political assassinations of the sixties, by the Watergate case at the beginning of the seventies and then the hostages in Iran (both caused the fall of a president each)... partly because

these movements had exhausted, partly because a new conservative era was just starting and partly because the oil crisis of the mid-seventies resulted in an economic recession, as well.”(254)

As a result of the traumas listed above, the average American man “would not pay attention great social problems are discussed”(255). Abádi Nagy quotes Jayne Anne Phillips’ opinion saying “the American Government and political system, unlike the European ones, isolate their citizen more from politics”(254). If political man is missing, what is there left from America in minimalist fiction? “We have everything here ... that American everyday life produces on minimal-community-level which this style of writing is focussed on ... everything that can be felt by the minimalist hero”(255).

History, also, is absent from minimalist fiction but in a different way because it can never be “entirely excluded from it”(255). But the need ‘to switch off’ history is coming from the greatest social trauma of post-WW II America:”It is the memory of the Vietnam War that leads to the absence of history”(255).

Concerning the sociological background to American minimalist fiction, the author poses the following question: Is there a cultural code to American Minimalism? Abádi Nagy uses A. C. Zijerveld’s *The Abstract Society* to explain the “one-dimensional” world of minimalism. “Postmodern fiction reacted to ‘abstract society’ with visions of surrealistic machinery... Minimalism, on the other hand, ... moves closer to the individual, to the family ... proceeds to a subcommunity level”(261). The next question is whether individuals in minimalist literature still behave “as social creatures”(261). Abádi Nagy’s answer is that “in this prose of quotidian experience the great patterns of social-psychology, the great questions of American society are present in a latent form”(261).

2/

The chapter devoted to the “Formal Characteristics of Minimalist Fiction” contains the following subchapters: “Theory and Method”,

“Problems of Meaning”, “Plot and Secondary Narrative Structure”, “Minimalist Characterization”, “Narrator and Perspective”, “Time and Space in Minimalist Fiction”, “The Imagery of Minimalist Fiction”. The ninety-page-chapter incorporates the theoretical hard core of the book. Even a list of Abádi Nagy’s own terms coined and used here would exceed the limits of a short overview like the present piece. (It is here that Abádi Nagy’s reader might well be puzzled most: why has this book been published in Hungarian? Interested readers could probably read it in English, too, and the author could have saved a lot of his energies by leaving the task of the translation of the *whole book* to a translator.)

Abádi Nagy confesses his creed as a critic in “Theory and Method.” By accepting Wayne C. Booth’s theoretical pluralism he rejects theoretical monism and throughout the chapter (the whole book, too) the author lets “minimalism speak for itself”(282), rather than choose the terminology of one or another critical school and demonstrate how one can force “minimalism to illustrate one or another critical theory”(282).

3/

The chapter, “The Relationship Between Minimalism and Postmodernism,” poses the question that somehow, understandably though, penetrates the whole book. “Is minimalism inside the still flexible boundaries of the postmodern, or is it distinctively beyond them?” Abádi Nagy’s answers are like concentric circles on the surface of a pond: each circle indicates that the pebble is deeper down in the water. “... our short answer is this: minimalism has some of its characteristics in common with postmodernism while some other characteristics make it completely different from postmodernism”(365). The second attempted answer goes like this: “American minimalist fiction is a different aesthetic response to the same postmodern awareness of the World”(365). There is no sense in further simplifying our answer, the author admits, and sets out collecting similarities and dissimilarities.

To begin with Abádi Nagy refers to Zavarzadeh's argument (*The Mythopoetic Reality*) saying that postmodernism finds it impossible to totalize the world. "It is enough to think of the terrains of reality that the subcommunal focus of the minimalists exclude to admit that minimalists have the same feeling of fragmentation as the postmodernists"(366). Causality and the fragmentation of causality is a key issue here for "the problems of causality of the postmodern survive in minimalism"(367). The approach of the writer "might hide the cause(eg. McInerney) or the interrelationship between cause and effect"(367). As a consequence of this feeling of fragmentation and confused causation, there is an "indifference for ideologies"(367) in the postmodern, while minimalism "simply ignores ideologies"(367). It is another common feature of the two that "both elaborate surfaces"(368). Hidden metafictionality is another latent element that ties minimalism to postmodernism despite the fact that "apart from some fragments of metafictionality, we cannot find short stories or novels that are entirely metafictional"(369) among minimalist works.

Abádi Nagy quotes John Barth and Joe David Bellamy as the representatives of a group of critics who believe that discontinuity is stronger between minimalism and postmodernism than continuity. According to Barth minimalism is a revolt against "thick", "baroque-like" fiction of the postmodern(369). Bellamy's conclusion is very similar but he compares the minimalist revolt against the postmodern to John Gardner's revolt against the same in his *On Moral Fiction*. The debate launched by Gardner's book might have had an impact on minimalists who then "might have sensed a 'moral vacuum'"(371). (In connection with Raymond Carver's moral inclinations, for example, Abádi Nagy comments that "he was bound to make the minimalist turn" as he was brought up in a family which had to face "profound problems of survival"(371), he was surrounded by people whose lives were flooded by everyday problems, who were very far away from sophisticated obsessions of the postmodernists. "Postmodernism stripped moments of everyday existence from the dilemma of philosophy ... and placed the stress on philosophy itself. Minimalism on

the other hand replaces man from the abstract worlds into his real environment”(370/371). All other details of dissimilarity are consequences of this “basic shift”(371). Minimalism rejects metaphysical problems and “returns to interpersonal relations, emotional interactions, to the family”(370). With the shift from over-exaggerated, highly fictional worlds to the world of the “real man, minimalism returns to the world beyond the text, ... the non-referential or self-referential [text] ... will become referential, after the subjective visions—objective, external view ... after the great questions—small dimensions ... round characters after the flat characters ... anti-intellectualism after a taste for philosophy”(371). “Ironic imagination” that has been so prevailing in postmodern literature, is no longer dominant, for the minimalist writer is profoundly disturbed by irony(372). “Postmodern parody ... gives way to a precise, clear, elliptical but concise style of smooth prose writing”(372). Abádi Nagy quotes Carver’s famous saying, “no tricks”, from an interview in which Carver speaks about the ethos of writing. Carver and the minimalists are not experimentalists “as a[nother] reaction against post-modernism”(373). In other words: “postmodern prose is radical, minimalism is conservative”(373). And a last but not at all negligible fact that helped this style of writing to produce a new audience for (this)fiction: “minimalism leaves the reader at rest, it does not alienate the reader but brings him/her closer to the world of its own”(373).

Abádi Nagy draws the conclusion that the discontinuity between postmodernism and minimalism is of an aesthetic nature, while the continuity between the two is supported by a similar philosophy behind both. Nevertheless, according to the author “the postmodern attitude at the bottom of aesthetic decisions is much stronger” (373) than it seems to be.

“When minimalists exclude society ... they accept ... the conclusion of postmodern social philosophy ... They turn away from creating new models and theories of society. After all, postmodernists maintain that reality cannot be defined. The minimalist writer accepts the conclusion and neglects ‘abstract

society' ... turns towards the privacy of the individual and it produces an essentially different work of art ... the conclusion of postmodern philosophy results in a fundamentally different aesthetic reaction of the artist."(374)

The self-referential worlds of the postmodernists are enveloped in fictionality, whereas the referential worlds of the minimalists are enveloped in a banal verisimilitude(375). "... it is not language that disconnects from 'objective' reality, but it is the microcosm [of the individual] that detaches from the macrocosm [of the society]"(375). Minimalism "moves things from the foreground to the background"(377) in the postmodern picture. The appearance of the minimalist protagonist indicates the end of an era in literary history which diminished the role of the individual to 'less than zero', "we are on our way back to individualism, to a sovereign identity"(375), but the minimalist character is not yet fully prepared for this role.

4/

Before his final definition, and at other places throughout the book, Abádi Nagy warns us about single-sentence-definitions. Nevertheless, it is here where he attempts to condense his conclusions into a short paragraph.

"Since postmodernism up to the present (1990), in the colorfully heterogeneous picture of American fiction, minimalism is the only new phenomenon which represents a group of writers who line up along a unified aesthetic aspiration. The name of the group derives from visual arts. This new style of prose writing on the aesthetic level of creation represents a break with postmodernism. But at the same time it retains many latent (primarily philosophical) premises of postmodernism. It turns away from the ironical, satirical fabulations of the world or the alternative worlds or the philosophical-deconstructionist language based experimentalism of the previous generation with a decision

motivated by postmodern philosophy. Instead of fictionality it chooses reality, it is referential instead of being non-referential.”(379)

Minimalism vs. maximalism. The two terms represent an obvious pair of extremes on a scale of measurement. Here, however, they peacefully delineate two aspects of the same book: its subject matter on the one hand, and its author’s intentions on the other.

Minimalism as we learn it from Abádi Nagy’s ‘maximalist’ book is still a term of some uncertainty in American literary criticism. There are, of course, many critics who can always tell you what the new thing really is. Fortunately Abádi Nagy is not one of them. One of the great merits of this book is that the author intentionally avoids trying to find ‘final answers.’ His way of tackling the problem of minimalism vs. postmodernism, for example, is not void of critical judgement, though. The way he formulates his critical views about the phenomenon has its lessons to the reader. And not only the ones that are apparent from the structure of his book and the ones that Abádi Nagy states as his own philosophy (see quote 282), but also the ones that he implies.

One of the implied lessons is that Abádi Nagy knows what he can tell us with his excessive knowledge of contemporary American fiction and contemporary criticism, and he does that more than thoroughly. He does investigate his primary sources in a systematic way and shares the view and the expertise of the scholar providing the reader with the pleasant feeling of being present with one finger on the pulse of contemporary American Literature. Yet, he also knows clearly enough what the things are that he cannot judge from the point in time where he is (1990) when writing his book, the first comprehensive monograph study of American Minimalist Fiction that has been completed so far.