

Jerzy Kutnik

Innovative American Fiction

It is a curious anomaly that we listen to jazz, we look at modern paintings, we live in modern houses of modern design, we travel in jet planes, yet we continue to read novels written in a tempo and style which is not of our time and not related to any of these influences.

Analizy Min., The Kovel of the Future

The question "Where is American fiction going?" presupposes that American fiction is going somewhere. Yet when we think about writers like Saul Bellow, Philip Roth, Bernard Malamud and other "mainstream" authors, we begin to wonder whether they are moving from where they are right now; their fiction has not changed for the last twenty years or so. Yet they represent what is generally called contemporary American literature. What about writers who began to publish their work during the last decade and definitely are going somewhere, then? Writers like Ronald Sukenick, Ishmael Reed, Clarence Major, Raymond Federman, Walter Abish, Steve Katz or Donald Barthelme? The name that one of the critics gives them,

"post-contemporary," seems to be very adequate, for they have already moved ahead of the so-called contemporary writers and today they are creating fiction that, hopefully, may become the future of the novel.

What, according to them, is the nature and purpose of the new fiction, which different critics have called "experimental" / a term abhorred by the writers themselves/, "innovative," "irrealistic" or "antirealist," etc.? There exist several theories or definitions developed by the authors of this type of literature. Let us briefly examine the most interesting ones, formulated by three leading innovators: Raymond Federman, Ronald Sukenick, and Walter Abish.

Raymond Federman is a bilingual author publishing his novels both in English and French. He is also a well-known Beckett critic and editor of a collection of critical essays on the nature of innovative literature entitled Surfiction. He explains the meaning of this word in the following way: "Just as the Surrealists called that level of man's experience that functions in the subconscious SURREALITY, I call that level of man's activity that reveals life as a fiction SURFICTION."<sup>1</sup> He challenges the whole tradition of realistic literature that tried to reveal the reality of our experience. Federman claims that eventually it presented only a distorted vision of reality, since the reality of our experience has nothing to do with the objective reality of the outside world. There is no objective reality; it is all fiction, for our experience gains meaning only when we invent its fictionalized form, its verbalized version. Thus, the process of writing does not mean reproducing or imitating reality; it is the process of creating a reality, a new and autonomous reality that did not previously exist.

The consequences of this approach are presented by Federman in the form of four propositions. <sup>2</sup> "Proposition One" concerns the reading of fiction. It says that the traditional method of reading a book has to be demolished through typographical innovations in order to give the reader a fuller sense of participation in the creation of a work of fiction. Federman wants to achieve this through reinventing the printed page and creating a new paginal rather than grammatical syntax. He believes that the medium / language/ is the message, which means that the arrangement of words

on the printed page, e.g., parallel columns, different shapes, etc., adds significant information to what the novel is saying.

"Proposition Two" refers to the shape of fiction. Federman's idea here is based on the assumption that life is chaos, since we experience it in a discontinuous, non-linear way. He argues that in order to render the chaos in fiction, we have to abandon the elements of pseudo-realistic literature, make it chaotic, incoherent, unpredictable, improvisational, digressive and self-reflexive. It will gain its shape as it goes along or, we should say, as it "digresses along" and "redoubles on itself."

The material of fiction is discussed in "Proposition Three." Federman sets practically no limits to the material. Since life is fiction and fiction, in turn, is invention, the writer's imagination is the only factor that determines the content of his writing. He can write a story, he can write about writing a story, he can leave blank spaces, write about the type-writer he is using or the chair he is sitting on, about anything. What is said and what is not said are equally important, or rather unimportant. What matters, according to Federman, is how and where it is, or is not, said.

Finally, "Proposition Four" deals with the meaning of fiction. Again, Federman is shockingly radical in his notions. He simply states that Surfiction will attempt to be meaningless. Since, as he says, no meaning precedes creation, fiction should be deliberately incoherent and illogical. The meaning will be delimitated by the reader in the process of reading/creating a work of fiction. Only in this way can the writer get rid of the authorial point of view through which the reader is manipulated instead of being allowed to participate in the creation or discovery of a meaning, a new meaning and not a prearranged one.

Federman is pretty aware that his propositions are extremely radical, probably too radical for many writers, critics and readers, but he does not claim to have solved the problems of fiction. Surfiction is the direction he wants to pursue, and he realizes that it is only one of many possible ways. What is important is that other writers go along their own paths, hazardous as they may be, as long as they "give fiction another chance." For it is new explorations that keep fiction alive and make it possible, in the words of Samuel Beckett quoted by Federman, "to



make of failure a howling success."

Ronald Sukenick is doubtlessly the best known and most successful representative of the new fiction, and in his numerous articles on the nature of American literature since the 1950s, he also reveals himself as the most outspoken critic and apologist of innovation in the novel.<sup>3</sup> Basically, Sukenick believes that the novel will have to change, because with its traditional form it belongs to the past and can no longer render the truth of our experience. The most obvious anachronism is the technological aspect of the novel - pages, print and binding. There exist many examples of radical innovations concerning the form, such as Marc Saporta's novel published in a box so that its pages may be shuffled, but Sukenick claims that we do not have to go beyond the traditional physical shape to reinvent the novel. What we have to do is to ask whether the traditional arrangement of the printed page / a solid block of print from one margin to the other running down the page from top to bottom / is the best one we can have. The form cannot be ignored any longer, for it is part of the experience of reading a book. The best examples of reinvented form are found in Raymond Federman's novels Double or Nothing and Take It or Leave It and Sukenick's own novel Out, where typography is an integral part of the story; in fact, it is a story in its own right.

The content of the novel, its imaginative structure / as opposed to the concrete structure, the novel's technological form / is also to be reinvented. Sukenick rejects the key ideas of realistic fiction - verisimilitude, characterization, historical narration, description, plot, etc. All of them are meant to create perfect images of real things in order to make the reader believe that he can control reality, that reality is logical, comprehensible and predictable; which is to say that such fiction creates a completely wrong and untrue picture / exactly because it attempts to be a picture of reality - a picture of reality is not the same as reality!/. Sukenick gives the casual name Bossa Nova to the type of fiction that "has no plot, no story, no character, no chronological sequence, no verisimilitude, no imitation, no allegory, no symbolism, no subject matter, no 'meaning'".<sup>4</sup> The main characteristics of this literature are abstraction, opacity, and improvisation. Abstraction means that this type of fiction is

nonrepresentational, or rather that it represents only itself, for it does not "imitate some version of reality other than its own."<sup>5</sup> To avoid too much self-consciousness and to prevent the novel from becoming fiction about experience instead of being part of experience / i.e., to prevent the separation of life from art, truth from imagination /, fiction should be composed as it goes along. Sukenick refers to jazz improvisation as a good example, saying that a writer should "move from moment to moment," and if he makes mistakes, he should either blunder on or leave them as they are; otherwise he will lose "the experiential flow." Contrary to Jack Kerouac and other Beatniks who spontaneously employed the same technique, Sukenick wants to consciously move from the premeditated composition / the traditional novel / to unpremeditated fiction / e.g., Surrefiction / . Improvisation is the solution he chooses, for it frees fiction from any a priori order. Thus it becomes pure invention, invention as experience. Moreover, this experience is opaque; it "exists in and for itself," which means that it cannot be explained in other terms than its own.

Breaking through the literary formulas, the novelist has to preserve what is essential to fiction - narration. Narration, of course, is necessarily situated in both time and space, but in the fiction of the future it will present, says Sukenick, "things in the process of happening." There will not be the illusory time and space of "reality," but the space of the page as the location of movement / time plus space is movement / in narration. Of course, Sukenick knows that a work of fiction does not exist in a void, that it uses the same language that is used instrumentally in the world of action, but each time words are employed meditatively by the writer they gain a meaning different from the general sense. This, in fact, should be the ultimate point of all literature: to open language / a self-contained system, according to Sukenick / to experience beyond words. Realistic fiction tried to fit experience into the system, manipulating and distorting it and thus separating art from life. The new fiction will attempt to achieve the opposite. It will no longer try to be a mirror of life but an extension of it; it will not reflect reality but generate it. The process is described by Sukenick as "the movement of the mind as it orga-

nizes the open field of the text.<sup>6</sup> The reality of the process will not depend on accurate description but on the vitality of the sense of participation in creating and experiencing a work of fiction by the reader.

Walter Abish, poet and fiction writer, like Federman and Suenick, is primarily interested in self-exploring fiction and the language it uses. According to him, literature and culture have long been influenced by "an utterly fallacious division between the stable and the unstable / economical, political and psychologically gratifying stability associated with the past versus the chaos of the modern world."<sup>7</sup> In his writing Abish tries to achieve a neutral value, i.e., one not contaminated by cultural references and established hierarchies of values. Only then, he believes, can he use language not merely as a tool to create images of "reality" but to show how fiction turns inward and explores the development of itself. Writing about neutral situations / "the terrain, the interiors, the furniture, the motions of the characters are aspects of a topography"<sup>8</sup> /, making casual statements, Abish demonstrates that language, when stripped of its superficial power to create familiar images, defamiliarizes everything. It becomes the only frame of reference, in fact, a reality in itself, with its own order and structure.

But it is not enough to find out to what extent language / a self-contained system / imposes upon and distorts the superficial conventions of the so-called "reality." Abish wants to move one step further. Fascinated by the idea of a meaning being imposed upon the contents and fashioned by a system / any system, not necessarily language /, he introduces into fiction what John Ashberry, one of the leading American avant-garde poets, called "restrictive form." The basic assumption here is that a restrictive form not only imposes upon the contents of a novel a meaning, but also undermines it; because of conspicuous obstacles and restrictions, the story line is often dependent on the system. Walter Abish's own novel entitled Alphabetical Africa is the best example of a restrictive form at work. The novel is structured alphabetically, with chapter "A" including only words beginning with the letter "a," chapter "g" adding words beginning with "b," and so on. Midway through the novel, when we have words beginning with all letters of the alphabet, the process is re-

versed, so that in the last chapter we have again only words beginning with the letter "a." Imposing on the novel this very rigid structure, Abish encounters many conspicuous obstacles, e.g., he cannot use the first person singular before he reaches chapter "I." As a result of many such restrictions, the order of the familiar world is constantly questioned, undermined, and finally demolished.

But that is how, according to Abish, writers bring about a new understanding. That is why, according to Suenick, art makes life more real. And that is why, according to Federman, fiction not only means, but is. However controversial the theoretical basis of all these assertions may be, they convince that the future of American literature is in good hands. Even if not all of the innovations proposed by the writers discussed above are significant, at least they are a promise that novelty will remain the main feature of the novel of the future.

N o t e s

1. "Surfiction - Four Propositions in the Form of an Introduction," in Surfiction: Fiction Now... and Tomorrow, ed. Raymond Federman / Chicago 1975 /, p. 7.
2. "Surfiction - Four Propositions in the Form of an Introduction" was originally published in Partisan Review 3 / 1973 / under the title "Surfiction - A Position," pp. 427-432, where Federman's theory was stated in five points.
3. Suenick's most important articles are: "The New Tradition," Partisan Review 4 / 1972 /, pp. 580-588; "Thirteen Digressions," Partisan Review 1 / 1974 /, pp. 90-101; "Innovative Fiction/Innovative Criteria," Fiction International 2/3 / 1974 /, pp. 133-134; "Twelve Digressions Toward a Study of Composition," New Literary History 6 / 1974-1975 /, pp. 429-437; "Fiction in the Seventies: Ten Digressions on Ten Digressions," Studies in American Fiction 5 / Spring, 1977 /, pp. 99-108.
4. "The New Tradition," p. 587.
5. "The New Tradition," p. 587.
6. "Twelve Digressions," p. 436.
7. Jerome Klinkowitz, "Walter Abish: An Interview," Fiction In-



ternational 4/5 /1975/, pp. 93-100. This interview is the only published article where Abish speaks about his own writing.  
8. "Walter Abish: An Interview," p. 96.

S t r e z e s z e n i e

Artykuł omawia wypowiedzi czoiowych przedstawicieli literatury eksperymentalnej w USA na temat charakteru i znaczenia innowacji we współczesnej powieści. Raymond Federman przedstawia swą teorię w formie czterech propozycji, które dotyczą czytania fikcji, jej kształtu, materiału i znaczenia. Domaga się on całkowitej zmiany dotychczasowego sposobu czytania książki. Jego zdaniem innowacje typograficzne dadzą czytelnikowi możliwość aktywnego udziału w odbiorze dzieła literackiego. Innym sposobem osiągnięcia tego celu jest pisanie fragmentarycznej, chaotycznej i nielogicznej prozy, gdyż tylko taka właśnie proza odzwierciedla chaos świata, który opisuje. Celem pisarza nie jest bowiem przedstawienie gotowego obrazu, wykończonego we wszystkich szczegółach i mającego sens, lecz zmuszenie czytelnika, by z fragmentów złożył całość, wyłowić z chaosu znaczenie, stając się w ten sposób współtwórcą książki na równi z jej właściwym autorem. Nie jest więc ważne, o czym autor pisze w swej książce, ale czy daje czytelnikowi możliwość współuczestniczenia w procesie kreacji czegoś nowego, nowej rzeczywistości, która przedtem nie istniała. Podobne poglądy reprezentuje Ronald Sukenick, który uważa, że nie imitacja, lecz tworzenie rzeczywistości winno być głównym celem pisarza. Wymienia on trzy podstawowe cechy literatury, która nie jest odbiciem rzeczywistości, lecz jej "przedłużeniem". Są to: abstrakcyjność, nieprzejrzystość i improwizacja. Abstrakcyjność oznacza, że taka literatura nie przedstawia żadnej rzeczywistości innej niż ta, którą sama stanowi. Fa rzeczywistość jest z kolei nieprzejrzysta, co oznacza, że nie można przy jej pomocy interpretować i wyjaśniać czegoś innego poza nią samą. Wreszcie improwizacja stanowi sposób umiowania literatury od z góry narzuconego porządku, dzięki czemu staje się ona czymś twórczością, której rezultatem jest nowa pod każdym względem rzeczywistość. Przekonywanie a nie obserwacja aktu twórczego winno stać się udziałem czytelnika, a grębia tego

przekrycia będzie podstawowym kryterium wartości powieści. Walter Ablsh usiłuje kształtować wrażenia i przekrycia odbiorcy w jeszcze bardziej niekonwencjonalny sposób. Jego zdaniem język jest nie tylko narzędziem do opisywania tego, co zwykliśmy nazywać obiektywną rzeczywistością, lecz również odrębną rzeczywistością samą w sobie. W swej twórczości Ablsh stara się ukazać, w jaki sposób język i inne systemy oraz struktury narzucają i podważają to, co powszechnie uznajemy za jednoznaczne i niepodważalne. Powieść Ablsha Alphabetical Africa / Alfabetyczna Afryka / jest właśnie przykładem takiej sztywnej struktury. Alfabetyczny układ rozdziałów zawierających wyrazy zaczynające się na kolejne litery alfabety określa tutaj sposób, w jaki znaczenie jest tworzone i jednocześnie niszczone przez tę właśnie strukturę. Fakcie i podobne eksperymenty, poparte pewnymi założeniami teoretycznymi, pozwalają mieć nadzieję, że literatura amerykańskiej nie grozi wyczerpaniu możliwości i "śmierci powieści".

## LUBELSKIE MATERIAŁY NEOFILOLOGICZNE — 1978

Halina Lindorowska

### Warum ein Tagebuch ?

Im XX. Jahrhundert notieren wir eine grobe Vorliebe für das Tagebuch. Sie hängt sowohl mit der psychologischen Penetration des Menschen und der Entwicklung der Psychologie und der Psychoanalyse, als auch mit der Situation des modernen Romans zusammen.

In den siebziger Jahren unseres Jahrhunderts wird das Tagebuch grundsätzlich als Aussehform im Tagebuchroman gepflegt. Die Skala der Möglichkeiten der Tagebuchform reicht sehr weit. Als Objekt der Analyse in diesem Artikel wählen wir den neuen Roman von Barbara Köhlig. Sein Titel ist vortrefflich: Schöner Tag, dieser 13. Ein Liebesroman. Dieser Titel, im Gegenteil zu den meisten "farhlosen" Titeln mit der adjektivischen Formulierung, ist sehr expressiv. Wie wird die Ausgangsinformation des Werkes kodiert? Die gattungsbezogene Information im Titel 1981 vermuten, daß es sich in diesem Fall um eine Liebesgeschichte handelt, worin der genannte Tag eine außergewöhnliche Rolle für die Fabel spielt.

Der Erzähleinsetz bringt jedoch eine Überraschung bzw. Modifizierung:

<sup>a</sup>Bonn.

Bonn, März. Schöner Tag, dieser Dreizehnte. So gut zu wissen: es kann nicht viel passieren. Sehen oder nicht sehen. Briefe oder keine Briefe, Angst oder keine: was ist, ist." //

Die graphische Konstruktion des ersten Absatzes vermag gleich eine Tagebuchaufzeichnung: das Datum der Aufzeichnung und den Handlungsort. Der erste Satz des Romans gleicht dem Titel. So kann er