

“What’s the point of being good?”

(The source of fun and wisdom in Tibor Fischer’s *Good to be God*)

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Abstract:

The paper attempts to present the controversially received novel by the contemporary British author of Hungarian origin Tibor Fischer. *Good to be God* is the story of a jobless loser who finally tries his luck as a spiritual leader in “God business” in Miami. The adventures told by the protagonist have generic meaning suggesting the emptiness and aimlessness of modern times where the stability of the traditional values is entirely missing. The stories do not lead the readers towards any conclusion, the novel is not finished, just given up. However, the stories are capable of showing a world in which each of us recognizes oneself, and thus does not judge hard on the attitudes, rather smiles and accepts them in a liberal way. The effect of the plotless story lies in the author’s satirical view upon modern life told in a stand-up-comedy-like style. This “observational comedy” reveals the author’s acute observation of the controversies of life which are often rendered in maxims and linguistic subtleties that can be a real challenge for the Hungarian translator as well.

Key words: postmodern novel, observational comedy, satire, maxims and linguistic jokes

Tibor Fischer’s novel published in 2008 is a symptomatic modern text presenting samples of plights of the European and North American average citizen, so much disappointed by the human conditions of contemporary civilization and still glad for living in it and capable of enjoying it.

The novel has several shortcomings, or rather, intentionally does not satisfy the expectations raised by a traditional novel. In other words, *Good to be God* is a postmodern novel consisting of a number of incidents told in the first person in a style very similar to the trendy stand-up comedies of today. It lacks a traditional plot, however it has a clear beginning and a catchy title, which, similar to a good play, can arouse the reader’s expectations. Nonetheless, the novel itself fails to satisfy these expectations, that is, it does

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not reach any solution, be it a relief or a failure. It never turns out what it is like to be God, because Tyndale Corbett, though he goes into the religion business and becomes a casual leader of a community, is far from being God-like. The title anticipates some sort of revelation which the protagonist never achieves. The pettiness and triviality of the incidents suggest that the postmodern age we live in is incapable to provoke any majestic experience, or the individuals fail to perceive the world as a stage where major events can take place. And still, Fischer is able to turn this triviality into a textual material, into a stretch of language worth reading, this being perhaps both the greatest contradiction and the greatest point of the book.

The hopeless view upon life is articulated in cynicism, proving that the protagonist knows the depths and widths of life. The problem with cynicism is similar to the feeling characterizing the general impression induced by the entire novel: "The one problem with turning cynical and dishonest is that you can never succeed completely"(Fischer 70).

The beginning of the novel is similar to the first scene of a drama: in nine lines it creates the desperate mood of the jobless, loser protagonist whose money, marriage, home and health are all gone, along with his job. Tyndale, who strived in vain in life to earn an honest living, finally at around forty loses his job, which results in self-pity and loss of self-esteem. The short section quoted below ends in an important remark referring to the honesty of the protagonist. The forthcoming paragraph subtly evokes implied meanings:

„You know when you're in trouble. You know you're in trouble when you phone and no one phones back. You know you're in trouble when you get back home, the door's been kicked in, the only thing stolen is the lock (it's the only thing worth stealing), and your burglar has left a note urging you to „pull yourself together.“

This isn't funny when it happens to you.

I tried to live my life decently. For a long time. I really did, but it did not work..."

(Fischer 3).

Contemplating about joblessness is a recurrent topic of the novel, at which point the author as a first person narrator again proves to be sensitively knowledgeable of the plight: If one is a "failure machine," it is "wonderful to be mistaken for someone; that's one of the

worst things about unemployment – the conclusion you're nothing. Probably in the great scheme of things we all are, but you don't want to feel it" (Fischer 35).

Bitterness from past experiences is interwoven with the present course of happenings suggesting that misery and disgrace are perpetual, handed down from one generation to the next. The protagonist remarks at a point: "I think about how I paid taxes all my life, how my parents did too. Then when my mother was ill, how nothing happened at the hospital. You pay tax, and you get nothing. No, that's not true, you get shit" (Fischer 41).

This hopeless situation seems to change, due partly to an unexpected meeting with an old schoolmate, who, having grown tired of his remunerative, however boring work, sends Tyndale on a business trip to Miami instead of himself, endowing him with his own passport and credit card. Both Tyndale and Nelson are typical 21st century characters, middle aged men, with "less hair and more stinginess." Tyndale jobless, Nelson burnt out, with a dire job, constantly worrying for the future, with huge mortgage, kids for whose education he has to save up.

Arriving in Miami, Tyndale feels "new, heavy and holy," experiences a "surge of self" and enters into the religion business taking over a small congregation from its pastor Hierophant, a Vietnam veteran who can lead an easy life in Miami owing to his military pension. The paradox of the situation in itself is very characteristic of the controversies of the alienated and at the same time credulous society, which accepts a jobless lighting salesman as a spiritual leader and psychological advisor: "Act natural" – the protagonist is advised, and then he wonders what exactly this would mean in his case: "Act like an unemployed lighting salesman? Act like an unemployed lighting salesman acting like he's God?" (Fischer 71). It is not clear how the church which he temporarily takes over and which is advertised as "affordable paradise" (Fischer 73) differs from the mainstream churches, and this is not anyone's business as long as it functions and tells the people what they want to hear.

The reason why the reader does not quit reading this novel definitely lies in its style. Small remarks often provoke an enjoyable smile or the astonishing feeling of "yes, I myself have experienced exactly the same." The author proves to be an acute observer of everyday happenings and is able to draw commonsense conclusions from them, always with some freshness. This is revealed by the casual remarks of the protagonist, which are always sharply contrasted with their general validity of their meaning.

Humour

Fischer's humour has several sources. It often arises from the unusual activities, jobs or habits that the characters pursue, do or possess.

Nelson, Tyndale's friend, for example, works as a representative for a company that manufactures handcuffs. Another woman character, who randomly shows up, has a business of selling toe-separators.

Euphemisms instead of naming the proper activity also constitute the source of humour: pole dancing clubs are called "bird-watching," visiting brothels is referred to as "pipe-cleaning."

Conciseness

A method used by Fischer is to give a rather lengthy and detailed description of a situation or happening full with particulars, then he suddenly comes to a halt by formulating a general and very concise conclusion. Tyndale, for example, accepts Nelson's suggestion with the following remark:

"If he'd offered me a week cleaning his toilet, I'd have accepted. Doing anything is better than doing nothing" (Fischer 9).

Having arrived in Miami Tyndale remarks:

"Not caring about your problem is as good as not having them"(Fischer 12).

Examples for aphoristic conclusions also often occur:

"Being right doesn't do you too much good. Being right doesn't improve the quality of your life, any more than wearing yellow socks" (Fischer 22); or "Suicide panders to our laziness. And laziness, laziness always wins. Sooner or later. That's the only law"(Fischer 19); "... the characters who go on about caring for others are nearly always the most selfish" (Fischer 9).

"Something doesn't work for you doesn't mean it's not working somewhere else" (Fischer 80).

"There is a conspiracy. It's called the world" (Fischer 82).

“I arrived here with no baggage, nothing to help me or hinder me” (Fischer 83).

We must notice the alliteration that exercises a centripetal force that keeps the two words tightly together, however the contradictory meanings produce a counterforce pushing the words apart. Concentrated wisdom can be noticed in the following maxims:

“Action is only speeded-up waiting” (Fischer 139).

“Laziness always wins” (Fischer 191).

“Naturally, the only thing worse than sinning, is sinning ridiculously”(Fischer 177).

Bitterness balanced by optimism

Pessimism and bitterness are often balanced by a note of optimism, just like in life, downs are followed by ups, pessimistic periods by promising ones.

The chapter relating the hero’s departure from Great Britain to Miami starts with the following remark:

“There are places that are waiting for you. You may not have learnt this, but there are” (Fischer 10).

Talking about the strong business competition the protagonist used to experience with the carefully conceived and narrow niches which barely let one live, the protagonist states:

“Everything was carefully calculated, products priced to be just affordable by the clients, products with just enough commission to make them worth selling. The cheese was no bigger than required by the trap”(Fischer 28).

The preliminary standpoint of the first person narrator is his own plight, namely the status of a jobless man who knows from experience that, “It’s easy to talk about benevolence when the sun is shining and bank accounts are full, not so easy when the tortures are going on” (Fischer 70). “Your moral bank account is a currency that can’t buy you anything” (Fischer 84). This maxim again contradicts the experiential meaning regarding

money and bank account with which anything can be bought. It is expected that moral bank account should have a similar role, but experience shows quite the contrary.

The media ruled and manipulated world is bitterly mocked at in the following remarks:

“Never believe anything you read in the papers” (Fischer 89). “It’s strange how when you’re getting what you want, you still try to ruin it” (Fischer 92), “Why is it you always get what you want in a way you don’t want it” (Fischer 92). “All application forms are designed to humiliate and subordinate the applicant” (Fischer 102),

hinting at the modern practise of surveying everybody on the most various matters.

Redundant, long, senseless and irresponsible talk in modern life is ridiculed in the following remark:

“I don’t know why we all have this urge to talk confidently about subjects we have no knowledge of” (Fischer 120). Or, another talkative character “mastered some technique of breathing while simultaneously talking” (Fischer 136).

About the futility of buying lottery tickets as a last hope for those who are hopeless the author concludes:

“You can work hard to buy lots of tickets, you can buy lots of tickets if you put your mind to it. You can buy lots of tickets and win nothing” (Fischer 128).

Experience gathered on group travelings is compressed in the following section:

“It is noticeable that whenever you travel the stupid and ignorant are always the loudest. They can’t talk, they have to shout, and are always to be found on public transport” (Fischer 2008:129).

Bitterness is finely balanced by optimism in the following sentences:

“And if bad luck doesn’t upset you, it’s not really such bad luck” (Fischer 138).

“I hate beggars as much as bankers and lawyers, for the same reason – they take advantage of others” (Fischer 158).

“Anger, like most emotions, is a waste of time” (Fischer 202).

“Getting concerned about the problems of your fellow man is one way of fleeing your own” (Fischer 203).

“I don’t understand myself, so it’s no surprise I can’t understand others” (Fischer 219).

The uselessness of being good, or perhaps being God, is recurrently expressed in the novel:

“...there is no benefit in living sensibly” (Fischer 209); “goodness and decency should be punished” (Fischer 211); “she’s a very decent soul and that’s why she’ll always run a small shop” (Fischer 214); “compassion is a disease, compassion may also be another form of arrogance” (Fischer 220-221); “don’t expect any reward” (Fischer 237); “the most important skill you have to have in life, working with people you hate” (Fischer 254); “miracles occur when you get exactly what you want – usually without you knowing what you want” (Fischer 47); “power is the drug that destroys the strong” (Fischer 53).

Fischer often arrives at far-reaching philosophical depths when he – or rather one of his characters – defines human life and the refinement of civilization as a constant process of hiding something:

Our earthly time is mostly a battle to conceal. To conceal our odours, our disappointing features. There’s the physical and then there’s the spiritual striving to hide the greed, the hate, the weakness. Civilisation is spiritual clothing. It’s a pretence that we are better than we are, spiritual garb, spiritual aftershave (Fischer 197).

The quoted fragment clearly demonstrates the freshness of Fischer’s style. Stylistically the light-handed metaphors subtly express the parallel between life, which is similar to a *battle* emphasised later in the text by the synonym *strive*. The aim of this battle is to hide, again reiterated by the synonym *to conceal*. This association may seem strange enough because battles are carried out for very material reasons, strivings also achieve something definable, however, generally not of a material sort. In this context the activity (battle, strive) is carried

out in order to achieve the invisibility of something, namely, the invisibility of negative human features: greediness, hatred and other human weaknesses. After these rather detailed sentences a maxim follows as a conclusion: “Civilisation is spiritual clothing” – which again swings the reader’s associations from the very abstract (civilisation, spiritual) to the very concrete: “clothing,” whose meaning is again reiterated by the noun “garb” later on. In the subsequent sentence, however, the author devaluates the meaning of the activity (battle, strive) by stating that this is nothing more than a pretence, a way of cheating ourselves to look better than what we really are or at least to make other people see us better than what we really are. Life being identified with *spiritual garb* is again a striking association. The semantic domain of the noun “garb” is very far from the domain of the adjective “spiritual” preceding it and even much further from the noun “aftershave,” denoting a far more elusive entity than the materialistic *garb*.

Linguistic jokes

When appreciating the linguistic achievements of the novel, linguistic jokes should be devoted proper attention in Tibor Fischer’s text. The title itself is the first example: “good to be god” besides its alliterating words is almost homophonic with “good to be good,” which is often counterpoised by the conclusions the protagonist draws, namely, there is no point in being good, in other words, there is no point in being god. Hence the meaning of God clearly becomes the synonym of good in the given context of the novel in accordance with the convention of the Christian system of belief.

Synonymy and words with multiple meanings are often exploited by the author. At a meeting with scarce attendance there “are a couple of couples who look like concern is their major concern” (Fischer 21).

Puns

Homophones function as a rich source of humour and playfulness, thus proving the author’s mastery of language. Talking about someone who likes sitting in the church, Fischer remarks that the person is “wholly holy” (Fischer 76);

“... you’ve proved to be a slowie rather than a showie” (Fischer 118);

“God wants winners not sinners” (Fischer 140).

Talking about the relationship between the pastor and his congregation, Fischer concludes in a rhyming sentence: “your flock expects you to talk a lot” (Fischer 65). When mentioning the freedom of the individual to choose the rite of a religion the author remarks “Right rite. Rite right” (Fischer 69). This figure of speech – called chiasmus – repeats the words in a reverse order in the two subsequent sentences, emphasising that both meanings are equally correct and acceptable.

Contradicting old sayings, refreshing old thinking

Contradicting old sayings serves a double function: on the one hand, it is an effective way of refreshing the worn out linguistic stock and the traditional way of thinking standing behind it, on the other hand, it proves the author’s fresh look upon old clichés. Thus linguistic innovation reveals intelligent thinking. Talking about a past failure, where the business partner was fond of drinking, the author, paraphrasing the saying: “a small leak will destroy a great ship” formulates the following conclusion:

“Hollis’s drinking didn’t destroy the club, but then a small hole in a keel doesn’t destroy the yacht either, it’s the ocean that does the job. In our case, the banks” (Fischer 25).

“Friends in need impede,” (Fischer 195) again, contradicts the saying “Friends in need are friends indeed.”

Linguistic device to intensify meaning

Adverbs derived from the same adjectives, besides alliterating, contribute to the intensified effect of the meaning. In rhetoric this redundant figure of speech bears the name of “figura etymologica,” which involves the repetition of cognate words in relatively close proximity to each other. In the following example, the adverb and the adjective brought into close syntactic connection share the same etymology: “insanely insane” (Fischer 141), or “tragically tragic” in the following redundant sentence: “This is a tragically... tragic case of tragic misunderstanding... tragically (Fischer 143).

Applying different forms of a similar root varied by the use of a privative prefix in case of one of the elements involved also augments the effect of the phrase as in the examples below: “to unknot the unknottable knot” (Fischer 147), “dead undeaded” (Fischer 160), “surviving the unsurvivable” (Fischer 160).

Gradation, as a means of intensifying meaning, is achieved by individual linguistic invention as in the example “marbiler marble” (Fischer 166).

Naming

Fischer chooses rather unusual names for his characters. The pastor, from whom the protagonist takes over the congregation, is called Hierophant, a name with an undeniable Greek echo. Tyndale’s helper is called Dishonest Dave, other two are Gamay and Muscat, the congregation is called the Fixico Sisters run by criminals who are finally charged with twelve murders.

The self-made pastor is identified by several synonyms in the text: he is a spiritual pharmacist (Fischer 147), God’ dealer (Fischer 156), an arsehole who saved the world (Fischer 193), a person who is running a Church, someone who says something for ecclesiastical emergencies, a cult master (Fischer 45), or a person going into God business.

The two congregations often competing with each other are called *Church of Heavily Armed Christ* and *The Temple of Extreme Abundance*.

Conclusion: “Walk on and laugh. That’s the way”

This is the recommendation of one of the characters to another one, and perhaps this might characterize the reader’s attitude as well, who, having read the novel, is partly bitter for not having found a traditional definite message in the novel, partly ironic because s/he is compelled to realize that the novel, as it is, is very much like our superficial shallow life. Finally, however, s/he is consoled by the tolerant wisdom which arises from the book and its linguistic achievements and, last but not least, by its underlying “infectious optimism.” “Walk on and laugh. That’s the way.”

Works Cited

Fischer, Tibor. *Good to be God*. Richmond: Alma Books Ltd., 2008.