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Book Review

Ferenc, Tomasz. 2014. *Dennis. Biographical Story of an American*. Lodz: Łódź Art Center

Biographical methods are well-known in social sciences and, with further developments of qualitative research techniques, they are gaining importance. Thus, a statement that they constitute the core of some more anthropologically-oriented approaches should not be seen as an exaggeration. Tomasz Ferenc's book, *Dennis. Biographical Story of an American*, is a prime example of such an approach. This is not sociology in its typical meaning; it is rather a cultural anthropology approach using narrative interview to achieve its goals. The book itself is, in a way, a byproduct of Ferenc's earlier work—*The Artist as an Alien. A Sociological Study of Polish Émigré Artist*. It was a story about Polish emigrants, living, among many other places, in New York and creating their art therein. Apparently, the book at hand was the beginning of something more, since, in the words of Tomasz Ferenc himself, "soon enough I started to yearn for a native's perspective, I wanted to feel the way Bronisław Malinowski was feeling in the Trobriand Islands, I wanted to take a closer look at this strange tribe—the New Yorkers" (p. 10).

This quotation is a fair proof of a solid anthropological background, which helps to embed the

work at hand within the right perspective. The desire to study and get to know a native's perspective has led to the subject of this review—a story of a story. Such description cannot, and should not, be underestimated, since it accurately depicts the book composition, which was the main reason behind the two-part structure of this review. It is necessary because, essentially, there are two stories being told here—the main one, the Dennis Lynch's story arc, is composed of his various tales, memoirs, and remarks. The second one is a brief description of the circumstances behind a meeting that has culminated in this book.

The inner structure of the first part of the narrative is very coherent and logical, although a credit for this should also be given to Ferenc, who organized it this way. He would cut some of the more offshoot topics from the material, since Dennis is prone to short, yet frequent digressions.

The story itself is presented in a chronological manner, although it should be noted that the further it goes, the more episodic it becomes. The reader is able to follow the timeline, but it is only so because

of the way the material is organized. When Lynch speaks about specific events, these usually sprout several branches, sometimes only loosely related to the main topic. This, however, should not be held against him because his storytelling prowess is undeniable, and the offshoots at hand often serve to add some depth to the main story and explain the context more thoroughly.

The episodic nature of Dennis' tales is enhanced by their completeness—he usually closes a specific part of the story before moving elsewhere. This also has an interesting characteristic—Dennis is almost exclusively very positive about his life, and even if he recalls any hardships and failures he had to endure, he speaks of these only in the context of overcoming them. Many of his tales are intertwined, and in order to simplify the description and help understand Dennis better, they are divided into separate categories.

The first, and probably the most conspicuous category that emerges from his narrative, is success. Dennis is trying to present himself as a man who succeeds (and, which seems to be more important, excels) in all of his endeavors. There are several dimensions of this success, as Lynch engaged in many different activities throughout his life. Some of them were intended only to make profit, others (and those seem to be of utmost importance to him) were meant to be a way of fulfilling his hobbies (which form a separate category, and as such, they will be discussed further in this review). Finally, some of his activities were performed out of necessity, for example, hunting. Dennis' family was poor and they could not afford to buy food every day.

Therefore, Lynch and his brothers were responsible for bringing wild meat for dinner, which they got by hunting. It is interesting to notice that although it was his *devoir*, he seems to find joy in it, and even brags about it on several occasions: "I was a good shot, because I was raised shooting" (p. 43); "I beat thousands of pheasants in every different way" (p. 43); "We were never allowed to shoot a sitting duck. Never allowed, it isn't sporting. Only flying birds" (p. 43).

It is apparent that he takes special pride in his hunting prowess, which was, and still is, common even in the modern U.S., but Dennis elaborates on the story by adding a short narrative about his hunting cat:

He followed me home, he would not let anybody else pet him, he slept with me at night and he licked my hair to wash me every night, and then he would wait for me after school like a dog and then we would go hunting. He would often get the pheasant before I could even shoot him...he was like my hunting dog. A lot of people have a hunting dog. I had a hunting cat. [p. 44]

The last sentence shows that apart from the urge of being competent at an activity so well-grounded in the American culture, at the same time, Dennis wanted to be unique in some way. This trait, the desire to be somehow different and stand out from the crowd, appears in several other utterances of his story, such as his brief commentary on his antique business: "And one of my first customers was Mia Farrow, Frank Sinatra's wife. She came in and she said, 'I want these two things, can you deliver

them tonight?" (p. 79). The uniqueness of the situation (and, subsequently, of the whole story) is enhanced by the person of Mia Farrow and her status as a celebrity, which was supposed to also affect Dennis.

The second category that emerges from Dennis' story are his passions and various hobbies. Interestingly, this one overlaps with the first one, since, as it was stated before, Lynch tried to achieve equal greatness in whatever activity he was actually performing. His own words are, once again, the best proof of this, as he is speaking about his ballet dancing career:

It was one of the highlights of my career, I think I was maybe 15 then, and I got to see how good I was, because I jumped so far and so high the audience used to gasp together and my teacher came back after it was over and said, "I have never been in the ballet that the audience gasped together." He would give you one compliment a year and that was this compliment. [p. 57]

This fragment indicates Lynch's tendency to attribute his success to his own natural talents and skills more than to concentrated effort. This is peculiar, however, since he mentioned on several other occasions that he values hard work, and some of his most difficult achievements were the result of a struggle, either with himself or against external odds. This can be seen in statements like this: "We were building barns, and split level houses, and moving houses, and lifting houses, and, you know, it was work. Hard work...We did, we did hard labor" (p. 51). Further elaboration concerning

his ballet dancing career appears to prove that he is a gifted artist, and it also shows another interesting trait of Dennis—the lack of modesty:

I took three classes twice a week. Six months later my ballet teacher said to me, "You are better than I am." She studied 10 years to do two pirouettes, and in 6 months I was doing five or six pirouettes. She says, "I cannot teach you anymore. I have to take you to my teacher," which was 25 miles away. [p. 56]

Apart from many other hobbies, there is one that seems to be quite prevalent and interesting. It consists of several other "sub-hobbies," but they all can be generalized as collecting. Dennis likes to collect various objects, mainly antiques and artistic handcraft such as stained glass or brass beds. The latter became a way to turn his hobby into a profit, which brings this part of the story to the third category that seems important to Lynch's narrative—the business. As with almost any of his endeavours, Dennis takes pride in his business efficiency and in his prowess in money making. He engaged in a lot of different enterprises—from selling antiques: "We ended up having five antique stores together. I was a partner. Because I would run the stores, I would run the business, I would go out and buy" (p. 81); "We had five stores in Manhattan and Brooklyn" (p. 81) to sell the aforementioned brass beds: "I went straight into the brass beds, and opened the store in a garage on Hudson Street in the West Village. And I pulled up the garage door and I just sort of poured out the brass beds, and I made twenty-nine thousand dollars in the first twenty-nine days" (p. 83). He also worked at some point as a handyman, in the breaks between danc-

ing, which is yet another proof of his industrious nature and aversion to wasting time.

There are many other categories that emerge from Dennis' story, but there is one that is especially interesting and which may be called cleverness. Lynch proved at various points in his story that he is, indeed, a very cunning man. He displayed this trait on several occasions. Some of them were only innocent tricks, like winning a pillow fight as a child: "And when he made the big last move, whammed on me, I shot straight back against the pole and he misses me, and I just hit him and he went off" (p. 41); "And the guy didn't like me after that. Cause I tricked him, I know I did. But, I won" (p. 41). Others were more serious, to the point of misdemeanor or felony, like stealing gas from closed gas stations on his hitchhiking trip to Alaska: "So what we would do is the Road Departments had big gas tanks beside the roads for the trucks, so we were pulling there at night when they were closed and we would steal the gas" (p. 64).

Lynch's wits, however, manifest themselves not only in tricks he played on other people but also in his ability to bargain and find business opportunities, proofs of which can be seen in other already described stories.

To conclude the first part of this review, it should be noted that all of these categories are only a mere fraction of what could be said about Dennis. There is much more to his tales, but the selected few stories should tell the reader more about Lynch as the man he really is. He is, however, not only a protagonist of this book. No story can exist in the void,

it is always set in some historical and social context, and, of course, Dennis' narrative is not an exception. What is unique about it is the attention to detail and the amount of information about America that can be derived from his words. Dennis describes not only his experiences but also the context of that time. He also explains many intricacies of the American culture, which could otherwise be difficult to understand for an outsider.

Tomasz Ferenc's book is aptly titled *Dennis. A Biographical Story of an American*, but, in fact, adding the adjective "true" would make for a far more fitting title. Lynch appears to be an embodiment of American spirit itself. He is strongly motivated, hard-working, and shaped by the set of three "selves": sufficiency, reliance, and confidence. This set serves as an agent empowering the reader's impression about Dennis—that he is an industrious and resourceful self-made man. The tales of his success are almost iconic—whatever he did, he had to do it right and excel at it. They are also very dramatic in their structure, whether they are about heroic deeds he performed or grievous situations in which he almost lost his life. All of these allows us to create an image of a strong and fearless man, who can overcome every obstacle only with the power of his will. Both of these properties—the winner myth and the dramatic storytelling—can be attributed to the influence of the American culture.

However, there is just one flaw in this image. It is discernible when Dennis speaks about his Vietnam War experience. In this particular case, the most important things are not the ones said directly, but the understatement, or even the things that Lynch

refused to speak about. The reason for which he enlisted also does not seem to fit in with the American patriotism because, in fact, it was conscription, and, as Dennis said: "It really had nothing to do with patriotism or anything. It was basically to get it out of the way. Get the obligation out of the way" (p. 59).

The second story, which is loosely intertwined into the first one, is about a meeting and, in the words of Professor Kazimierz Kowalewicz who wrote the initial scientific review, about *the tale of a gift*. This gift is presented here in compliance with its anthropological meaning. Indeed, the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee fits the realm of gift exchange. Lynch provided the story and, what is possibly most important, the willingness to share it. Ferenc, in return, offered to hear the tale very thoroughly and allowed it to unfold naturally.

The meeting at hand took place in New York in 2011, and it culminated in a conception of the idea behind this book. Ferenc briefly describes his arrival to the city and explains also how he met Dennis. Their meeting resulted in his revisit in New York in 2013. The second journey has yielded over a dozen recorded sessions and a 12-minute movie. Details of this acquaintanceship form the basis of the first part of the book.

The second part (including the closing remarks) contains also the methodological notes, which, albeit scarce, describe the methods and techniques accurately. Moderation in terms of methodology, however, can be explained by the very nature of the tool used. Narrative interview requires as little intervention from a researcher as possible, and Tomasz Ferenc was quite successful at achieving this goal.

Many books have been written about Americans and their stories. *Dennis. Biographical Story of an American*, as short as it may seem, is a very condensed part of this narrative, but from a standpoint of one man. In his work, Ferenc managed to depict a vast wealth of American culture and its changes throughout the 20th century. Of course, he would not be able to do this without the help of a very skilled storyteller, who also happened to have a very good observation sense. Dennis not only told his fascinating personal story but he additionally offered a lot of crucial information about America and the society of his times, which makes his tale very valuable sociological material. His narrative, both in terms of its content and structure, is an embodiment of the American spirit. This is a story about a man who overcame countless obstacles and hardships, and won.

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