

Prof. David Lee Robbins, Ph.D., thesis opponent

Bc. Marek Torčík

Objectivity Disguised: Ideas of Authenticity in the Novels of Thomas Pynchon and Paul Auster

M.A. thesis evaluation

Thesis Supervisor: Doc. Erik S. Roraback, D.Phil. (Oxon.)

Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures

Charles University, Prague

Mr. Torčík's M.A. thesis deals with six texts by two of the best-known contemporary American novelists, namely Paul Auster and Thomas Pynchon. The thesis analyzes the three most recent novels by each writer: *Invisible* (2009), *Sunset Park* (2010), and *4 3 2 1* (2017) by Paul Auster; and *Against the Day* (2006), *Inherent Vice* (2009), and *Bleeding Edge* (2013) by Thomas Pynchon—all six of which explore, in one way or another and among many other things, various modes of authenticity. Mr. Torčík maintains that "authenticity" is a notion which in each author's work adopts specific mechanisms of establishing ways of existing within the world that are directed towards a critique of the forms of society that try to limit individuals, confine them to prescribed objective categories. Chapters I to IV establish one by one the primary approaches to understanding how authenticity works within individual novels. The first two chapters explore Paul Auster's works, and emphasize their portrayal of change as an organizing *Leitmotif*. Chapters III and IV deal with selected works by Thomas Pynchon and analyze their use of entropy and information overload within individual narratives. The final chapter combines these notions and provides a comparative analysis and a critical interpretation of all six works against a theoretical and critical framework.

Mr. Torčík's thesis explores the differences between Auster's and Pynchon's approaches to authenticity and to the complex subjective, interpersonal, and intercommunicative systems of change within the flux of modern existence which challenge and destabilize it. In this undertaking, Mr. Torčík employs a variety of postmodern critical texts to argue that Heraclitean change is at the very heart of these issues. One important commonality among the six novels, he argues, is the attempt to find a way of accepting subjectivity which, in effect, "achieves a certain fragile objectivity within the fictional."

Mr. Torčík has done an excellent study of the works he has chosen; but he has also rendered a valuable service to the general fields of Pynchon and Auster studies by choosing to emphasize and illuminate the understudied late works of each author. For the degree of audacity involved in the enterprise, he is to be thanked. He has done needed and useful work, and he has done it well.

That said, I have, more or less, three criticisms, which are, admittedly, woven together and not necessarily consistent in their angles of vision or in the advice which they might offer to Mr. Torčík. First, it is my sense after having read the thesis that Mr. Torčík may have taken on too many works by very dense and complicated authors. Four (two each) might have allowed more comprehensive (and hence helpful) attention to the writings considered. On the other hand, I also tend to think that he may have taken on too few productions of these authors, or at least over too limited a time-span (in a biographical, not a narrative-historical, sense). The resulting isolation from Pynchon's and Auster's earlier work produces, or at least enhances, a disconnection from the long American "romance" tradition, within which (or at least in close engagement with which) both authors are working, and are aware that they are working. That

traditional sensibility is much closer to the surface in Auster's and Pynchon's earlier writings. *Against the Day*, with all its unwieldiness and amorphousness, is still an example of that engagement; but *Mason & Dixon* and the *New York Trilogy* provide much more conspicuous evidence of the same awareness and confrontation.

In relation to, if not because of, the first issue, I find in Mr. Torčík's analysis an annoying historical and cultural myopia, a short-sightedness characteristic of much post-structuralist philosophy, of its twenty-first century academic progeny, and many of its bequeathed sensibilities. Emerson, Hawthorne, and Melville (as good romantic legatees) were continuously and almost obsessively dealing with the issues of authenticity and objectivity/subjectivity throughout their careers; and Auster and Pynchon (as good readers of their predecessors and models) both know well of and refer repeatedly in their writing to that anticipation, giving it a place of honor in various narratives. Both Auster and Pynchon are working in a long American fictive and philosophical tradition, and while Mr. Torčík's scrutiny of the pair is generally good, as far as it goes, it lacks the parallax which historical longevity would and does provide.

Thirdly, because of his seeming lack of interest in anything B.H. (Before Heidegger), Mr. Torčík omits or ignores Emerson's (and, through William James, the Emersonian tradition's) central interest in, close identification with, and pervasive use of Heraclitean flux/flow in conceptualizing the self and confronting the destabilizing issue of whether or not it can be viewed as authenticable. Kierkegaard, whose work Emerson did not know (as Kierkegaard did not know Emerson's) was working on some of the same questions (authenticability, existentialism) at the same time, but without Emerson's devotion to the lessons of the "flowing philosophers" of antiquity.

Even with those caveats, however, any careful and informed reader must acknowledge that Mr. Torčík has fashioned a laudable M.A. product. Because of its impressive qualities, I believe that Mr. Torčík's thesis merits an evaluation of "1, vyborne."

Thesis evaluation: "1, vyborne."

Signed:

Prof. David Lee Robbins, Ph.D.
Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures
September 1, 2020

If the reader has any questions or needs additional information, please contact me at David.Robbins@ff.cuni.cz.