

Review of Filip Krstička's dissertation "Reading Faulkner's Minds"

Filip Krstička chose an extremely difficult topic, trying to see from a new perspective two novels by William Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying* (1930) and *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), which were voted by the body of 134 renowned international scholars among top seven southern novels of all times in the 2009 *Oxford American* poll and, more importantly, became a subject of hundreds of articles, book chapters, and monographs during last eight decades. Fortunately, his dissertation is very far from being a mere summary of the already written, and brings numerous original and fresh points, worthy of further elaboration and application to other works of southern literature.

Quite unusually, the dissertation has a 92-page theoretical part in which Faulkner is mentioned only sporadically; according to Krstička, it is because most readers are not familiar with the history, terminology, and various streams of cognitive sociology, the field which gave him, together with corresponding streams of psychology and anthropology, his research method. After the criticism of Cartesian approach, the dissertation turns to the theories that consider the human mind as embodied, embedded, enacted, and extended (drawing from Mark Rowlands and others), that is, connected with other minds and the environment, partaking with them on the cognitive process. Among other important concepts, he explains "affordance," James J. Gibson's term expressing the possibilities the environment has to offer creatures, including human beings, and explains Andy Clark and David J. Chalmers's extended mind thesis. Presenting the theoretical concepts, he focuses both on their history, and on their utility, mentioning also various polemical reactions from scholars of different streams. He also includes a narratological point of view, and, influenced by David Herman, discusses modernism, against the grain, as not turning inwards but connecting the inner with the outer. In the final sections of the second part he shows how the theory of mind can be used in a literary analysis, and sketches the main premises of scholars involved in cognitive literary studies. At the same time, he does not neglect the active role of the reader in making incomplete texts complete through reading. During this lengthy theoretical part Krstička always makes sure where he stands; he often joins the polemics trying to take something useful from each theory he introduces. For a person who does not perform a research in this particular field, the introduction is definitely welcome.

In the chapters on Faulkner's novels Krstička continues to use the theory, which is good, but, because he was so meticulous in the first and second part, he cannot avoid repetition. Some of it is useful but, unfortunately, there are many sections from secondary sources quoted in full for the second time. The analyses of both Faulkner's novels were probably conceived as independent pieces of scholarly writing, and became parts of the whole only *ex post*. Like in the theoretical part, Krstička went through a sizable volume of secondary sources, not forgetting important, but frequently marginalized European contributions to the topic (for example, those of André Bleikasten). He shows that the opinion of cognitive literary scholars that "fictional characters have minds to speak of" (77), supported, for example, by James Phelan's concept of fictional characters, helps decipher the layout of Faulkner's narrators in the two novels. Krstička reads *As I Lay Dying* as a pantomime of looks and bodily reactions, making a bold analogy with silent films and discussing characters from the novel on the performer-spectator axis. The most valuable part of this chapter is his discussion on voices and their contextual reception by other characters as well as readers; this part also addresses the eternal Faulknerian topic – why uneducated characters who in dialogs speak the

vernacular use poetic language full of metaphors in their soliloquies. Equally good is the subchapter on the coupling of narrators in *Absalom, Absalom!*, which also gives reasons why Thomas Sutpen should be considered a regular narrator as well.

The only, but serious typographical blunder is the frequent use of a symbol of accent instead of an apostrophe, also in single or double quotation marks. As the wrong symbol is sometimes used in the same sentence as the correct one, the result is a typographical chaos. Krtička is very careful when citing sources, both primary and secondary, but occasionally suffers from an ill habit of European scholars, who put quotations from three different people in one paragraph, giving the names of the authors only in footnotes and not in the text. While in the first and second part this happens only sporadically (and the author deserves praise for this), in the Faulkner parts it is, unfortunately, very common. Also, very scarcely does Krtička tell when the italics in the text is his, and when the original author's. In footnotes, there are many paraphrases documented as quotations, that is, without "See," and when they are, "See" is used side by side with "Cf." for no obvious reason. Names of publishers in footnotes and Works Cited sections should be without the initial "the". In two instances there are weird computer-made symbols in the middle of block quotations.

I have one question:

On page 51 you turn to Herman's *Basic Elements*, writing that "consciousness can be experienced but not inspected, while access to another's is completely shut off". This corresponds with recent findings of the sociology of the absurd, which also accepts the concept of mind being an (individual) interaction between the inner and the outer, but with much more pessimistic outcome: that true communication, no matter what means are used, is next to impossible. Are there any cognitive sociologists who came to a similar conclusion? (See also your discussion of Forster on pages 78–79).

The dissertation is a valuable piece of scholarship that would deserve to be published and made known to southern literature scholars, narratologists, and literary theorists. It fully meets the standards for dissertations; in fact, it exceeds them.

September 6, 2022

Prof. PhDr. Marcel Arbeit, Dr., Palacký University in Olomouc