

David Vichnar, PhD
SUPERVISOR'S REPORT:

re "*Legs apart as the tide came in': Fluid Sexual Personae of Ann Quin*"
by Michaela Černá (MA dissertation, 2023)

Ms Černá's MA project deals with Ann Quin's "treatment of her characters as sexed and sexual subjects and/or objects," its aim being to identify "recurring patterns in Quin's representation of sexual personae in their fluidity" (8). These patterns are grouped by Ms Černá under four thematic headings omnipresent in Quin's stories—the family, men vs. women, triangles, and violence—from whose viewpoints she undertakes the observation of these sexual personae.

In her introduction, Ms Černá cannily surveys the historical-critical context of both Quin's life and work (her involvement with the B.S. Johnson circle, her working-class background, her mental health issues, etc.) and her posthumous reputation, which has recently seen her rise from near-oblivion to something of a "cult" status. Ms Černá's thesis comes into its own in the four main chapters, each dealing with one of the four thematic categories, covering the entire Quin canon: the four novels published in her lifetime (*Berg*, *Three*, *Passages*, and *Tripticks*), as well as the posthumous fifth novel and short stories (published as *The Unmapped Country* as late as 2018). In her conclusion, Ms Černá surveys certain topical and thematic recurrences her analysis has uncovered: the noir trope of the *femme fatale*, "the aggressive male", and "the suffocating mother." She also provides a neat summary of her entire argument, stating that "Quin's poetics rely on recurring formations of archetypal characters, which enable exploration of sexual expression in various contexts," and thereby provide a "*fluid* perspective on [...] characters as sexed and sexual" (77).

Ms Černá's argumentation is competent and coherent. Her close readings throughout are detailed, complex and well-argued, apt at synthesising or drawing parallels between concepts whose connections are far from self-evident. Also praiseworthy is the consistency with which she defines her terms and the "fluid" critical (most Quin-focused critics: Buckeye, Butler, Jordan, Rourke, and Williams) and theoretical sources (from Bachelard on water and dreams to Bataille on eroticism and violence, from Deleuze's study of masochism to Freud's Eros and Thanatos) which she brings to bear on her argument while never letting these drown out her own voice. Also commendable is how Ms Černá treats Quin herself as a "thinking writer" in her own right, avoiding the pitfalls of treating her to any sort of "applied theory" exercise. Although (or maybe since) a labour of love on the candidate's part, the production of the thesis was a lengthy process of search and discovery, for both the candidate and his supervisor.

The supervisor is happy to state that Ms Černá took to heart most if not all of his misgivings and criticisms levied during the research and writing process and addressed them in the final product. What still remains somewhat troubling is a certain nonchalance with which Ms Černá, especially early on in the thesis, seems to reproduce critical opinions re Quin without attributing to them any specific source (there are "adjectives associated with her writing" (7) – by whom?, "literary critics frequently note..." – which ones?), which

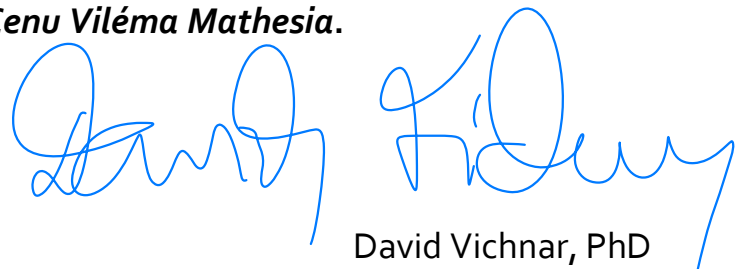
is a tone incompatible with academic writing. The thesis would also have benefited from one extra proofreading job, and from less reliance on online sources. Still, Ms Černá's language and style remain up to par throughout her work.

Given the above, the supervisor shall constrain himself to raising four questions of a general nature (leaving it up to the opponent's report to raise more detailed critical points pertaining to the thesis argumentation, should he have any). The first two have to do with the Derridean interplay between the singularity and the exemplar, the latter two with some of the methodological concerns of this thesis.

1. What makes Quin unique as a writer? What constitutes his writerly "signature" and why/how does Ms Černá seek to "countersign" this signature in her thesis?
2. What makes Quin's case general? In what ways can she serve as a good "example" of a broader tendency within post-war/postmodern experimental fiction?
3. More specifically: Aren't all sexual "personae" fluid? Or better said, isn't there a tension between the notion of a "persona" (a "mask" worn in the interest of identification) and "fluidity"? Not to nit-pick about the thesis title, which after all is not the most important part of the work, but still: if Freud has anything to teach us re the "polymorphous perverse" and the five stages of psychosexual infantile development, it is that humans as sexual/sexed beings are fluid creatures. What does Quin's notion of "fluidity" add to this, how does her fiction enhance/problematisé Freud's precepts?
4. It is laudable that Ms Černá deals with Quin as "an established writer" (8), although most anthologies and academic curricula of post-war British fiction would still seem to think otherwise, but this still should not serve as a convenient blindfold behind which to ignore the role Quin has played in the historical re-evaluation of 1960s avant-garde over the past 50 years. The crucial word of the thesis is "fluidity": how and why *did* Quin go from oblivion of the first 30 years after her death to the "established" status she seems to have enjoyed these past few years? "Established," indeed—but by whom and to what effect?

Having raised these minor issues, I am still positive that Ms Černá's thesis presents a well-researched work on a still undertreated and underrepresented writer. The theoretical savviness and argumentative skills of her MA thesis exceed the usual departmental requirements pertaining to the genre. Therefore, I have no qualms in recommending it for the defence and propose a grade of **excellent – výborně**, which is still dependent on the opponent's report and the candidate's performance at the thesis defence.

Práci doporučuji k obhajobě a navrhuji na Cenu Viléma Mathesia.



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21 Aug 2023