

Bc. Veronika Šteflová, *Exhibiting 1851: Reflections and References*

MA thesis

Supervisor's report

This MA thesis consists in two fundamental parts: one provides thorough historical research, the other presents critical analysis of three works of British literature from different periods. What unites these two parts is the student's attention to the 1851 Great Exhibition, held famously in the Crystal Palace in the heart of London. Let me point out at the very beginning that the topic was suggested by the student herself and that it was inspired, in all probability, by her profound interest in the event.

This interest is clearly reflected in Chapter 1 (pp. 13-42) of the thesis. In its three sections the student has managed to discuss her topic with a great deal of confidence, both factual and linguistic, and in considerable detail. Presenting the circumstances under which the Exhibition was prepared, organized and popularized, she shows how necessary it is to include various contexts to be able to grasp the full significance of the event. Not only do we learn about the conception of the building and the character of the exhibits, but also about the controversies concerning the ideas behind the event and about the public response to its various collateral aspects (an impact on the British class structure or racial stereotypes). A broader historical context with a focus on the preceding decade of a deep social and economic crisis accentuates the political and technological triumph manifested by the Exhibition as well as the symbolical value of general recovery with which it impressed the public. This historical account is no doubt the strongest part of the thesis.

The literary works chosen to demonstrate how the Exhibition has been reflected in art across large spans of time may provide a good opportunity for analysis. Unfortunately, in the chapters dedicated to this I find striking limitations, especially as far as the second and third titles go. While Mayhew's novel *1851*, an immediate response to the social role of the Great Exhibition published in the same year, gives the student ample opportunity to comment on its humoristic and satirical perspective, with the other two novels she seems to be less confident. A serious problem arises with her treatment of Howard Spring's *The Houses in Between* (1851). The student has apparently read only Chapter One, describing in the protagonist's own words her family's visit of the Exhibition when she was a child of three. This very early exhilarating experience lent Sarah's account a romanticising, idealizing view corresponding with the excitement of the public but not of her father, as the student rightly points out. Yet this picture is just a starting point for what then defines the basic tone of the novel: that of fundamental disillusionment. Already Chapter Four of this huge family saga posits a sheer contrast to the opening part, with the protagonist's revisit of the Crystal Palace a few years later. The interplay of opposite motifs here shows that the romanticised picture was a childish idea and illusion, and this line culminates with the motif of the pieces of china unearthed at the dawn of WWII: the bright perspective the Exhibition suggested is now definitely in shatters. The opening image of the Great Exhibition thus plays a significant role on the semantic plane of the *whole* novel and cannot be isolated.

Similarly, an interpretation of the Great Exhibition theme in Farrell's *The Siege of Krishnapur* must be handled as part of the entire aesthetic structure of this novel. I fear that the extended account of the colonial stereotypes represented by naming strategies (61-62), an interesting issue in itself, is less relevant for the analysis of the student's topic. Instead, it is necessary to pay attention to the means by which the Great Exhibition issue integrates into the text, e.g. in the motivic analogy with not only the British residence displaying the Collector's exhibits but also with the palace of Hari. The novel is basically about values and here a larger application

would be welcome: what is shown as eroding and collapsing in the moment of distress is not only the (pseudo)values suggested by the resonance of the Great Exhibition among the British, but the very values of humanity. This is exactly what Farrell, in his farcical, bitterly ironic view, underscores.

There are also some formal flaws, mostly minor. Occasionally the same fact is repeated in the same words (which would have necessitated a more careful editing), there are big gaps between words due to wrong formatting, a few typos are left uncorrected (e.g. *the shall be*), quite exceptionally a grammar error occurs (*arrive to London*). These infrequent cases, however, do not disqualify the thesis. A more serious problem is the text of the Czech resume. Obviously based on the English version, it sounds clumsy (*představuje zkoumání imperialistického myšlení prostřednictvím různých narativních prvků*), contains anglicisms (*rodinu Sandboys*) and even verges on incomprehensibility (*ostrovtip britských perspektiv*), not to speak about mistakes in flexis (*navzdory všudypřítomného pokroku; historickému významu a trvalého odkazu*). The Czech abstract and resume are an integral part of the thesis and as such they should be written correctly.

In spite of my objections, summed up in the previous paragraphs, I **recommend** the thesis for defence and incline to suggest the grade to be a **very good**. At the same time, I leave the final decision open, depending on the student's performance during the viva voce.

PhDr. Zdeněk Beran, Ph.D.

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