



Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures

Opponent's Review

Michaela Raisová, "The Past as a Leitmotif in Stewart Parker's Dramatic Work for the Stage," MA thesis

Michaela Raisová's dissertation proposes an examination of the role of the past in the theatre of Stewart Parker. Despite the fact that it is one that has been treated with frequency in existing critical work, the topic has the potential to lead to an original contribution to scholarship on Parker's work. The resulting thesis presents and explores some relevant contexts and assumptions regarding the issue, although in a conceptually limited way. The introductory chapter serves a double purpose combining an attempt to provide some theoretical frame and to communicate the aims and objectives of the project as a whole. The latter are plain, though it is also evident that no argument concerning the proposed "new perspective on the nature and function of the past" in the plays (p.5) is actually advanced. The former purpose – a theoretical orientation for the project – is less successfully rendered. Ms Raisová cites Hayden White's *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* and Joep Leerssen's essay "Monument and Trauma" here. The implications of either scholar's work on historiography (notably in the nineteenth-century) are barely acknowledged, neither are the debates this work provoked, so the attempted theoretical framing of the thesis is a matter of a couple of under-discussed quotations with insufficient treatment of the trajectory of historiography or the relation of historiography to literary analysis. Some appreciation of the fact that White's subject is the writing of history, rather than drama/fiction, and the observations he makes regarding this subject are not necessarily to be neatly reversed for the purposes of literary analysis is vitally required here. Perhaps a more relevant direction might have been an excursion into the multifaceted genre of the history play and the techniques implications associated with such forms of drama. Further, the question remains as to the link between Leerssen's and White's work and how sustainable this connection might be. What becomes increasingly evident is that the thesis suffers from a type of topical double vision that results in the blurring of critical perspective. In effect the analysis of Parker's drama is split between a discussion of history as it is used some of the plays and the past, a term so broad and accommodating that it lacks specificity and could rightly be claimed a general feature of all drama in one way or another. Had the subject of the enquiry been limited to the uses history and associated, heated debates about history in a Northern Irish context, the work would have had more critical coherence.

The structure of the thesis is linear and methodical and Parker's entire dramatic output is covered. Attention is paid to factual details about each play and descriptive close reading. These aspects of the thesis testify most positively to Ms Raisová's engagement with the work. However, despite the fact that the Northern Irish conflict is the determining context for Parker's drama, discussion of this is remarkably light. For instance, on page 8 the Troubles era is summed up in a single quote not from a political history but from a book on theatre. Subsequent explanations of political events are of a similar nature. With regard to chapters 1 and 2 it might be useful to discuss further the distinction between 'history' and 'current events' during the defence as both plays are considerably involved with contemporary events and conditions in Northern Ireland. Chapter 2 is problematically split between a discussion of *Catchpenny Twist* and Parker's television miniseries *Lost Belongings*. Technically given the title and stated remit of the thesis this series is outside the specified area for analysis. Indubitably it is a work of much interest, but the divided focus of the chapter leads to a limited appraisal of both texts. Given the subject matter of *Pratt's Fall* it is curious that Ms Raisová did not return to debates around historiography and the validation of particular narratives of the past. Again this might be elaborated further during the defence. *Northern Star*, *Heavenly Bodies* and *Pentecost* inevitably



FACULTY OF ARTS
OF CHARLES UNIVERSITY
IN PRAGUE



Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures

provide more readily comprehensible material on the topic. The terms used by Parker to describe his methods with the first two plays – pastiche and collage – provide a tantalising set of possible analyses of the effects and outcomes of such methods of representing the past. One of the primary elements in the collage of *Heavenly Bodies* is the role of melodrama. At the defence it would be constructive to hear more on how the genre of melodrama might be linked with the politics of representation. The concluding chapter reiterates the path of the project but abruptly returns to White. Notably White's theories have played no serious or substantial role in the entire body of the work. The final assertion that Parker's work promotes reconciliation, uses irony and satire certainly cannot be gainsaid, but is well known feature of most responses to his work.

In terms of research the thesis covers the necessary bases. Writing skills, for MA level, are rather average; there are frequent minor grammatical errors throughout and at times word choice problems. So for example on page 26 Quinn, the undertaker character in *Nightshade* "conserves" corpses, a page later he is referred to as preserving corpses. Neither verb is appropriate in the context. While such lexical selection issues may add a dash of unintended humour they do mar the text. Similarly, formatting throughout might have benefited from closer proofreading. Among the most obvious errors are: inconsistent italicisation of play titles, mixed font styles in the footnotes, mixed abbreviation of footnote references, problems with capitalisation and bibliography format.

I recommend the thesis for defence and propose to grade the work "good" / 3 or "very good" 2 depending on the result of the defence.

5.9.2011

Clare Wallace, PhD