

Petra Burianová, *Questioning Gender Through the Test of History: the Fiction of Jeanette Winterson and Ali Smith*

MA thesis

Opponent's Review

The submitted thesis explores the use of time, history and gender in selected novels by two contemporary British writers, Jeanette Winterson and Ali Smith. Their work contributes to the postmodern writings of the recent decades and is respected by critics as well as admired by readers worldwide. At the same time, the narrative strategies of these novels present a very complex multi-layered structure of meanings and to tackle this is a demanding task. I believe that Petra Burianová has managed to provide a very insightful reading and that her thesis can be regarded as unquestionably exceptional. That is exactly why I feel I can be rather brief in my assessment.

The basic assumption that this thesis attempts to prove as valid is the idea that in the contemporary world it is no more tenable to be satisfied with traditional definitions and conventional notions of the three examined categories, both in academic and literary discourse. Using the theories of Paul Ricoeur, Hayden White, Judith Butler and others, the student shows how the contemporary novel responds to the prevailing views of poststructuralism, New Historicism, gender studies etc., interpreting meaning as something ensured not by facticity but rising from iterative strategies, including myths and their reinterpretations. No wonder that one of the most frequent terms used in the thesis is 'fluidity': time is discussed not as a chronological sequence of past, present and future but with regard to the Augustinian conception of a 'threefold present' in which one perspective slips into the other conditioning it; similarly history is not based on facts which no more guarantee its truth but on interpretive narrative acts which may open the door to such alternatives as 'herstory'. Finally, gender identity is also steeped in discursive strategies that separate gender from biological sex, as a given fact, and make it a mutable, fluid and elastic entity. The student demonstrates in individual chapters of her thesis what use the two writers make of these conceptions, never claiming that it is a conscious projection of these academic theories but rather that their fictions are anchored in a similar conception of reality and reading them through the prism of the above theories helps us understand them in a considerable way.

It is valuable that her reading avoids direct application of philosophical and other tenets to works of literature but also tries to posit how the two writers differ from each other and how their aesthetic strategies relate to other writers such as Angela Carter. Though a reader of the thesis cannot at times avoid the feeling that theory prevails over attention to the studied texts, the student's conclusions are convincing and the thesis as a whole manifests an exceptional intellectual investment. Moreover, it is written in rich, lucid English, with only very occasional and thus almost tolerable errors.

I am pleased to **recommend** Petra Burianová's thesis for defence with a preliminary grade **výborně** (excellent).

16 May, 2016

PhDr. Zdeněk Beran, Ph.D.