Posudek vedoucí na diplomovou práci Nikoly Bartové

“‘Am I not a Man and a Brother?’: Representations of Slavery in the West Indies and Abolitionist Rhetoric on the Road to Emancipation”

The submitted MA dissertation works within the brackets of literary history, cultural studies and postcolonial theory. As such it is a very interesting, readable, informative and useful contribution to British and Commonwealth studies in its interdisciplinary nature and application of a range of theoretical concepts, especially its development of Paul Gilroy’s notion of transcultural constructs of black identity and the “Black Atlantic” space. I believe the text appropriately describes the paradoxes inherent in abolitionist discourse and slave narratives, which on the one hand aim to depict the horrors of slavery, argue for human equality, yet, working within the strategies of sentimental discourse of suffering actually perpetuated and promoted hegemonic notions of white cultural supremacy, even idealized the figure of the black slave etc.

The choice of texts – which fall into three categories – is, I believe, justified. The selections is, in the Czech context, innovative and fresh due to its focus on British slavery. The thesis avoids activist, polemical writings and concentrates on more “literary” forms, such as poetry, travelogue (Caribbean encounters) or slave narratives (in fact a range of genres including autobiography). Of course, the list of texts could be longer – why was Mary Price’s self-narrative not included, or the infamous idealization of slavery (which even David Dabydeen mentions in his essay “On Not Being Milton”) by John Grainger in Sugar Cane??? Perhaps even more problematic is the exclusion of radical progressivist groupings such as the Lunar Society in the discussion of abolition (poetry of Erasmus Darwin, J. Bentham, even J. Wedgewood…).

Otherwise I have only a few reservations/questions/perhaps disagreements:

The paragraph on page 4 devoted to a characterization of eighteenth-century poetry as satirical is, I believe, superfluous. It sheds no light on poetry actually discussed in the dissertation: The discourse of sensibility is in no way satirical.

Page 16 – the Quakers did not come to existence in the eighteenth century.

The end of chapter 2 (page 22-3) is devoted to the rise of scientific racism as a descendant of the systematic categorization of biological species that arose in the eighteenth century. Nevertheless, the talk of “races” is more a question of the nineteenth century. Can we get a clear answer as to how anti-slavery poetry and abolitionist discourse cloaked this concept?

Page 40 – Blake’s elision of details of “the slave’s story” may actually imply not artistic failure but the existence of an already codified hegemonic literary discourse indeed
based on literary intertextuality and readers’ expectations. By the very end of the century this could be expected.

Page 50 – the degree to which Joanna, the wife of John Stedman, is a case of victimised “noble negro” is questionable. In Pratt’s account she is much more rebellious – she actually refuses to play second fiddle in Europe and prefers to enjoy her privileges in the West Indies and that is why she refuses to leave with Stedman (there are also other details, such as her refusal to wear shoes and other Western garments etc.). Joanna thus seems very different from Quashi (in Ramsay’s Essay).

Page 67 – I would tend to disagree with Cugoano seen as being ironic about sentimental discourse. If “slavery can only be justified by those who must resign their claim to any degree of sensibility and humanity”, this actually goes hand in hand with his appraisal of the sensibility of the abolitionists.

Plus, last but not least: we read how these early slave narratives are similar to the later Afro-American ones. But do they differ in any crucial manner from e.g. Frederick Douglass?

The dissertation displays a keen sense for logical organization and development of an argument. Language and style is fluent and quite appropriate. It is a shame that the texts is rather full of typos and would certainly require a more careful proofreading (e.g. page 5 Jonathan Smith instead of Swift). That is to say, that formally and in content, the text meets the requirements for an MA dissertation.

As mentioned above, I find the submitted thesis fully in keeping with the standards. I certainly recommend it for defence with the preliminary suggested grade of very good (velmi dobře).

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