

Oponentský posudek na disertační práci

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The Country House Revisited: Variations on a Theme from Forster to Hollinghurst

The country house as a literary and cultural concept has had a long tradition, particularly so in the English context. This is what this dissertation tackles in the introductory chapter – the length and diversity of its history – while the focus of interest then turns towards the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and the temporal shift to contemporary variations on the theme and reality of the country house, be it the decline of the great country houses of the past, the resurgence of interest in them turned into tourist sights or TV series nostalgia, or modern attempts at authentic dwelling in the countryside.

Respecting the interdisciplinary demands of writing on houses, Tereza Topolovská bases her argumentation on Gaston Bachelard's notion of the integrating properties of the house without which man would be "a disperse being" and Martin Heidegger's role of the house as a place for dwelling in both practical and existential sense. From both thinkers she borrows and employs the idea of reciprocity of the importance of the houses for humans and of the dwellers for the houses and traces this essential connection, also in time and space, in a number of works of architectural critics and theoreticians. Another important aspect under consideration is language – found in the connection between language, dwelling and literature, and discussed with the postmodern acknowledgement of the possibility of literary interpretation of architecture and in turn of the house as part of literary morphology – a fairly recent development and fitting in very well with the thesis of the dissertation. Moreover, Topolovská identifies an intersection between the task of contemporary literature and architecture to redefine a new sense of belonging apparently lost or disappearing with the traditional understanding of houses and dwelling. For the study of the evolution of country house fiction she argues in favour of the New Historicist approach of considering "the textuality of history and the historicity of text", i.e. for the analysis of the novels in their historical context.

The first analytical chapter compares Iris Murdoch's *The Sea, the Sea* and E. M. Forster's *Howard's End* in terms of the traditional aspect of "summer house fiction" and the more recent ideas of existential struggle, ecological disaster and social class while endowing the houses with humanized traits in symbolic and spiritual sense. In addition, the chapter shows that the theme of the country house in summer has been revisited by a fair number of contemporary novelists and usefully points to their unifying feature of "the temporal character of summer house poetics". The specific feature of the two novels under scrutiny is described as circular, reinforced with echoing circular imagery. The dualities of the topic are then explored, ranging wide into sociological debate on class, among other considerations also in relation to contemporary reflection on nature and ecology. Here as elsewhere, the country/summer house is also debated in relation to it responding to the need for seclusion – a retreat, some kind of ideal change or authentic existence which however does not materialize.

The second analytical chapter moves the literary scene to the postmodern age. In it Topolovská claims that Alan Hollinghurst's *The Stranger's Child*, the principle novel under scrutiny here, "verges on a playful pastiche", which in her appreciation accentuates the

pleasures of reading and which she duly proceeds to unravel. At the same time she ties it in with her purpose to show that Hollinghurst takes a different, definitely untraditional point of view on the typical country house motifs, virtually reversing many of them, thereby foregrounding the postmodern shift in the development of the topos, no matter that the setting of the novel goes back to the Modernist period. In Hollinghurst's take on the theme it strictly means refuting the rewriting of country house nostalgia, but rather subverting it, not least by shifting the house to the suburbs or debating the architectural modernization of old stately homes, moreover problematized by the figure of a Modernist female interior designer. In debating the merits of Modernist architecture and its paucity in England, Topolovská gives a great deal of space to Simon Mawer's *Glass Room* although the novel's treasure of Modernist architecture is not a country house, but admittedly features enough elements relevant for the debate to earn its place in the chapter. The unstoppable demise of the Victorian country house in its old role is successfully illustrated on Sarah Waters' *Little Stranger* while the inclusion of the considerably older novel *A Handful of Dust* (1934) feels somewhat incongruous in the subchapter on time (4.4) although it falls within the multifaceted reflections of temporality in the novels expanded by their intertextual range of reference. Moreover, the passage on Evelyn Waugh's novel soon slips from the concept of time again rather to its social and cultural implications. On the other hand I appreciate that chronology is not, and cannot be, a major matter of concern here.

The winding-up conclusions under the uniting concepts of community and belonging may be unequivocally accepted. While they do not (pretend to) represent a groundbreaking approach and findings, the study has brought into focus a wide range of new developments and considerations in a manner that truly revisits the literary and cultural tradition of the English country house in its manifold aspects. What needs special mention and what I want to commend highly are the many intertextual references and diversions to a number of other contemporary writers and their novels, including American literature. This points to and amply illustrates the vast the range of the topos and the complexity of the process of choice, of inclusion or exclusion of its aspects in the dissertation. In turn it also confirms how greatly well read and well informed the author of the dissertation is in the English novel and culture.

I find Tereza Topolovská's study of the development of the country house novel refreshingly concise, presented and argued convincingly, and lacking nothing in any respect. It succeeds in tracing, in rich detail, an interesting and important transference of a long-standing tradition and its new development reemerging in changed cultural and economic conditions. The interdisciplinary elements of the debate are inspiring in the way the author competently works with philosophical, architectural and wider social and cultural ideas and contexts of the times. The dissertation is indisputably the result of thorough research and inspired reading and thought and makes a valuable contribution to a specific area of the modern and contemporary British novel.

This doctoral dissertation submitted by PhDr Tereza Topolovská fulfills the requirements and standards expected. I am happy to recommend the dissertation to proceed to the defence with suggested grade "prospěla".

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