

Oponentský posudek na dizertační práci Richarda Stocka *The Puzzle Novel*  
Reader's Review

Doc. PhDr. Michal Peprník, Ph.D.

The dissertation offers an ambitious attempt to review theories of narrative and novel and proposes a new poetics of a new kind of experimental novel, the puzzle novel. The dissertation is a strongly argumentative work. Its main argument is well-established and systematically maintained and developed. The author likes to formulate questions and problems.

The dissertation consists of two main parts. The theoretical part provides a critical overview of the successes and failures of narratology and novel theory and elaborates the concept of the puzzle novel. The second part brings an application of the theory on three novels, which come, according to the author, closest to the concept of the puzzle novel. The basic structure the dissertation works well, both parts are proportionally adequate.

During the critical overview the author displays thorough knowledge of the narrative theory and chooses to discuss representative authors (Propp, Barthes, Todorov, Greimas, Genette). To these well established names the author added Peter Brook's discussion of the plot as the key element of narrative structure.

What emerges finally out of the discussion of Brook's theory of plot as a starting point for further discussion is the call to explore the self-reflexive, metafictional properties of the narrative, familiar from postmodernist criticism. What I find more interesting is another project inspired by Ricoeur's theory - the determination to expand the notion of coherence of the experimental text, exemplified in the puzzle novel. This project requires a careful consideration of reader's approach as the final site of production of meaning and of the formal properties of the text.

The second part of the theory section makes a critical survey of novel theory, using mainly Lukacs and Bakhtin. The author reaches a conclusion that the narrative theory failed to propose a universal theory of narrative. He believes that the novel theory is better off by its open admission of the impossibility of the project and its declaration of the formlessness of the novel and hybridity among its main features.

By reviving Bakhtin's critique of contemporary novel criticism Stock gains support for his call for a new novel theory, which he seeks outside literary theory, in the French philosophy or theory of 1980s.

Since I am not a philosopher, I can comment on this part only from the point of view of literary criticism and literary theory. It is obvious that Stock has read and grasped this source of theory, that his knowledge is not second hand. The problem with the application of this theory is, in my opinion, that it tends to replicate the techniques of experimental fiction, rather than explicate the literary structure. The speculations about death and birth and non-knowledge (p.78) belong either to thematic criticism, philosophy or mysticism and have little to do with literary theory of the novel. This dissertation claims not to be a thematic study of the novel.

The author picks several concepts from Blanchot, Deleuze and Guatarri: the disaster, war machine, neuter to describes the social/political processes captured by the experimental novels, and fragmentary vignettes as forms of presentation (p.80), and contradiction as a method of structuring. The form and method, however, and this a problem, clashes with the principles of academic work, which is supposed to be coherent, logical, and well organized. Until we change the existing rules, there is nothing to do but to go by these rules, and if contradiction and fragmentation becomes part of the structure of argumentation, it should be regarded as shortcoming. Fortunately, the author only plays with these techniques, and

contradictions are offered less frequently than one would expect after his declaration that "Criticism of the novel, then, should be purposefully fragmentary, and similar to what Blanchot seems to propose (p. 88)."

What I find most useful is the attempt to set up some formal or structural boundaries of the puzzle novel. The author is right in arguing that the plot of James Joyce's *Ulysses* is so fragmented that it has to be reconstructed with considerable efforts but it is designed to make sense. Even though I miss a comparative study of the puzzle principle in detective stories (offered is only the frame of the puzzling of traditional novel – see p. 90), the readerly concept of puzzle novel is established in a competent manner.

However, I have difficulties with some of the terminology. The classification of plot into the core story and extra material raises doubts if the author is not merely renaming well-known categories such as plot and subplot, main or minor characters/protagonists, main and minor motifs. This seems to be the case of the concepts of larger puzzle and complete plot, the relation of which looks like the relation between motif and theme, or plot and thematic structure. I suspect that the plot is here understood in Brook's sense as inter-relatedness of all elements of the text and not the arrangement of events of the story (fabule). If it is so, isn't plot then just another name for structure?

Then, the division line between writerly and readerly structure is not very clear. To claim that in *Ulysses* the reader is denied the opportunity to participate (p. 115) is from reader's approach rather misleading because the reader's interpretative participation can never be excluded. The issue of assembling information about the fiction world and its characters (both in terms of the story time and the overall temporality of the text) should be set up in a more convincing and accurate manner.

The discussion of *Gravity Rainbow* is more successful because the novel's literary terrain is better suited to the theory of the author. The not very fortunate concept of "extra material" allows an interesting new perspective of the postmodern excess of detail and information proliferation. The author nicely demonstrates that the episodic characters may have a function as agents of action and conflict but they often do not shed light on the main theme and mystery even though this does not exclude their thematic employment.

The application of the theory of the machine suffers from lack of clarity. The reader is often left in the dark, which may have pleased Blanchot, but should not be the case of Ph.D. thesis. The conceptual framework is more than once vague and lacks clarity. The statements that in reading Kafka "we are implicated in a machine that we cannot escape" does not say anything specific, the same may hold true for any fiction because the reader always become implicated in the machinery of the text, if the text is successful and draws us in. The statement on top of the page 134 is marked by similar obscurity and inaccuracy: "On the one hand our concepts related to a text or to a group of texts (such as Kafka's novels, his letters, or his diaries) can only be personal beliefs with no grounding in rational support." Which concepts? All the concepts really? Does it mean we cannot create any rational concepts during reading Kafka's text or after? The distinction between experience and beliefs needs a firmer conceptual frame and be related to Lukacs's and Bakhtin theories of the novel's relation to the real.

In the third text, Richard Power's *Prisoner's Dilemma*, the problem of puzzle seems reduced to the question of ontology: which of the levels is the ground level and which is imaginary in the fiction world. This is an interesting technical problem, but I failed to see, or the dissertation failed to convince me that it is a fundamental issue which can lead to new poetics of the experimental novel.

The language and articulation of argument:  
The level of articulation and abstraction is generally high but there are place in the text where the argument lack clarity and expression become vague and colloquial:

- p.18 "... there will be things we want to call narratives and stories..."

Occasional simplifications creep in during some of the generalizations (a difficult task in themselves because the author is generalizing the critical generalizations): writing about Ricoeur, he states "narrative is time and time is narrative" (p.38). Although it sounds great as a piece of academic mysticism, it is inaccurate in terms of scholarship because what Ricoeur had in mind was a mutual dependence of two related aspects.

When Lukacz speaks of form, Stock speaks of structure. Is Lukacz's form then structure? See p. 62. Also Lukacz's concept of dissonance is only sketched and is not very clear.

Conclusion:

The dissertation offers a very hard reading for the reader, often difficult to say whether it is because of the difficult theories it engages or difficulties of style. Nevertheless, it is an ambitious work, finely structured, conceptually demanding. The author displays extensive interdisciplinary knowledge of narratology, novel theory and recent French philosophy or theory. The work has opened an interesting topic, it is strongly, even though not always clearly argued. The reader is impressed by the author's passion for abstractions and his courage to confront some very difficult texts.

I recommend the dissertation for the oral defense.

*Michael Reppert*