

Martin Štefl, *Physical and Psychical Spaces in Modern English Literature*
Opponent's Review of Dissertation Thesis

M. Štefl's thesis is exceptional in the erudition and insight with which its author examines the work of three modernist writers, Virginia Woolf, D. H. Lawrence and Wyndham Lewis, and the way in which contemporary and recent philosophy helped to form the ideas of subjectivity, individuality, spatiality and temporality in English modernist literature and art. Not only does the student display perfect orientation in the work of the three exponents of the Modernist movement, which allows him to select representative texts convincingly, but he also succeeds to discuss these works in the light of modern philosophical thought, in particular the ideas of A. Schopenhauer and H. Bergson, with complexity that clearly exceeds the usual standard of PhD theses. With the first two writers he also succeeds methodologically – in the discussion of Woolf's and Lawrence's texts he manages to present the above issues gradually, showing more and more aspects which should be taken into account with the growing complexity of texts, and thus he also instructs the reader how to approach these authors and how to delve into more and more profound layers of their production. With Wyndham Lewis, who – one feels – was selected mainly to show that English modernism consists of contradictory or even exclusive concepts, the method of presentation is less neat, lacking in the confident structure of the two previous chapters, being repetitive and somewhat inconsistent (as in the case of the dance theme, which returns after discussing other issues), including materials whose presence should be better justified (Yeats's *A Vision*); but even this part seems invaluable in its detailed critical introduction of an artist who is given considerably lesser attention than the previous two and whose ideas and work are, especially in the Czech context, only little known.

My critical comments on the thesis are the following:

- (1) It is indisputable that the works of major modernist figures were, either directly or indirectly, inspired by the discussed philosophical conceptions and their ideas of space, time or subject (self) very intensely reflect the new ways in which the same ideas were grasped by modern philosophy. But is it only this philosophical context that determined the modernist aesthetics and is the change really that radical as the thesis tends to suggest? What I mean is e.g. the presented binary opposition of the Cartesian and "modernist" (or Bergsonian) self – but in the latter half of the 19th century the concept of the unstable, "Protean" self was known (and used), even in England, from Amiel's *Fragments of a Journal* (see Pynsent, *Questions of Identity*), and something very akin to the idea of exteriorisation of self can be found in Pater's words: "The house in which she lives [...] is for the orderly soul [...] only an expansion of the body; as the body [...] is but a process, an expansion of the soul." My point is then that the dominant philosophical context has always been modified and mollified by other contexts when it came to artistic creativity, and that Modernism is no exception. This fact should perhaps be reflected in the thesis.
- (2) Similarly, the dance theme is one of the most heavily contextualised at the turn of the century. Frank Kermode discusses the symbolical role of dance in the work of W. B. Yeats and A. Symonds in his *Romantic Image* (1957); in *The Dance of Life* (1923) Havelock Ellis claims that we are now (i.e. in the post-Victorian decades) again enabled "to view the dance as a symbol of life". Can Lawrence's treatment of the same theme be understood as a response to this prevailing belief in the symbolical meaning of dance in his own times?

- (3) Closely connected with the above is the question of M. Štefl's interpretation of the dance theme in Lawrence, resting partly on one dancing scene from *The Rainbow* and on its basis viewed as an expression of "unification in movement" (119). But there is another, very prominent dancing scene later in the novel, that with Ursula and Skrebensky, during which Ursula experiences her "cosmic" exaltation and actually begins to break away from her lover. It seems that here the dance cannot be interpreted in the same way as in the previous scene. And how about those moments in which only single persons dance in an almost ritualistic way (Anna near a blazing fireplace dancing "to her unseen Lord"; Gudrun, in *WL*, dancing for the bullocks)? Presumably the dance motif in Lawrence is more ambiguous and should be developed more thoroughly. – On the other hand, the image of a mechanistic dance in Lewis seems to echo Wilde's *danse macabre* of the automatons in *Harlot's House*, which is another potential context.
- (4) The narrative technique in "Kew Gardens" is interpreted as being reminiscent of Bergson's hypothetical state of 'pure perception'. Would it also be relevant to acknowledge an influence of the rapidly developing technology which enabled both visual and audial recording (motion-picture camera, phonograph)?
- (5) In my view, Lewis's concept of subjectivity is closely connected with the narrative perspective, which is perhaps most clearly evident in the motif of Ludo's blindness; while the beggar as an object is blind, the narrating subject can make full use of his ability to see keen and undisturbed, thus establishing the subject-object relation as of two ontologically opposite entities. Perhaps the narrative perspective in Lewis should deserve more attention.

To conclude: I believe Martin Štefl's thesis is a very important contribution to the study of English modernism and as such deserves to be presented to the public. It is written in a clear, convincing way, observing high academic standards and yet fascinating in its gusto and insightful presentation. It is my pleasure to recommend it for the defence.

Disertační práci Martina Štefla doporučuji k obhajobě.

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