

Prof. David Lee Robbins, Ph.D., thesis opponent

Martin Sedláček

Changing Tendencies in Self-Conscious Narratives: A Contrastive Interpretation

M.A. thesis evaluation

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Mr. Sedláček's thesis investigates correlations between a selection of metafictional texts and narrative theory. The selection consists of two sets of self-reflexive texts. The first explores metafictional tendencies in the 17th and 18th century novels: Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* and Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*. The second focuses on post-War U.S. metafiction: John Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse*, Donald Barthelme's *Snow White*, and Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*.

Through this analysis, in a theoretical introduction to narrative theory regarding metafiction (chapter one), and particularly in a fourth chapter that he characterizes as "the focal point of the entire thesis," Mr. Sedláček suggests interpreting metafiction within the framework of Michel Foucault's epistemes—not as a separate genre of literature but in the context of broader cultural tendencies in the understanding of representation. In addition, chapter four includes a discussion of Wolfgang Iser's concept of the dynamic meaning of the text in relation to the reader.

In all of the above undertakings, Mr. Sedláček has produced an admirable and exemplary thesis. His bibliography is comprehensive and well-chosen, as is his presentation of narratology and metafiction theory. His choice of exemplary texts is wide-ranging and well-advised, and his discussion of them is knowledgeable, articulate, and enlightening. His strategic methodological decisions are, in general, sound and well-explained; his recognitions of the limitations of his research, salutary; and his recommendations for areas of further investigation (by himself and others), constructive and insightful.

Particularly insightful was Mr. Sedláček's valuable historicist recognition that, while poststructuralist narratology was, in fact, a reaction to structuralist narratology, structuralist narratology was never employed dogmatically but as a reliable formalist framework ("a momentary stay against confusion") for further investigation—the structuralist distinction between individual narrative layers's providing a clearly delineated structure indispensable in analyzing any complex narrative situation—and that, therefore, there is no hard line to be drawn between structuralism and poststructuralism, the latter constituting in many ways a continuation of investigation using other clarifying instrumental means in the spirit that structuralism did.

In addition, the author makes the helpful observation, in the Foucaultian spirit, that (as Foucault himself said) one cannot define epistemes that have not been concluded, provisionally and experimentally the current episteme may provisionally and experimentally be characterized by its lack of unifying features (its practical diversity, and multiplicity), as prescribed by and consistent with its theoretical disregard for totality for the sake of multiplicity, its nominalistic rejection of totalizing structures, closed systems, meta- and grand narratives.

Finally, Mr. Sedláček's observation (61, lines 2-3) that Barthelme "address[es] some of the ailing social issues of his time, as opposed to the self-absorbed short stories of John Barth," also reminds us of the useful historicist and diachronic insight of pragmatism's individual/"selfish" orientation (which "is not essentially addressed to—indeed...shies away from—historical crises, real or concocted"), as opposed to the collective/societal approach of its "step-brother" utilitarianism.

Within this broadly highly-favorable assessment of Mr. Sedláček's work, I do have several quibbles:

1) His assertion that "[t]he idea of relocating the meaning of the text to the relationship between itself and the reader can be linked to the approaches to literature emergent in the second half of the twentieth century" (93, lines 11-13), and his implicit doubling-down on that assertion by entire omission of nineteenth-century literary works (and specifically those of the "American Renaissance") from consideration in the thesis, ignores the ubiquity of insistence on the reader's role in meaning-making

and meaning-discovery in the work of Emerson, Dickinson, Hawthorne, and both William and Henry James.

2) In describing the relationship between successive epistemes (73, lines 20-21), Mr. Sedláček employs the term "progress," to which I suspect Foucault would have preferred "evolution" (however "catastrophist" the "rupture" of that alteration might be).

3) Despite his insistence that the thesis "emphasizes contrastive the interdisciplinary approach (7, line 15), the "interdisciplinarity" (105, line 18)—and the contrastive variety—of the work is actually quite limited. Mr. Sedláček confines himself primarily to literary theory, and, to the extent that he edges over the disciplinary boundary into history, he confines himself almost entirely to Foucault's "epistemic" approach (which is only one even of Foucault's various strategies for historical analysis). However, Mr. Sedláček does, in my eyes, vindicate himself from this caveat by his explicit recognition and admission in his Conclusion of "the limited extent of the thesis" and of his own constraints (102, lines 22-23; 103, line 1)
Interdisciplinarity 105/18

4) Finally, a bucket in an ocean of extremely well-written text, I observed (in passing, and not a definitive list) the following copy-editing, grammatical, diction, and/or vocabulary problems:

- a) Omitted or superfluous prepositions and articles – 43/7, 10; 51/15; 69/5; 75/17; 83/11; 91/4
- b) Missing italics in title 50/15
- c) Circulatory [i.e. circular] argument. 62/4-5
- d) Historical conjectures – should be historical conjonctures 72/14
- e) Points out to 78/17
- f) Inverted, not inversed perspective 86/13
- g) Resist for resists 90/20
- h) Barth's metafiction exerts [INSERTS] 91/6
- i) With a philosophy, not with a philosophical 105/7

Overall, based on scope and accuracy of coverage, style, bibliography, and general interpretative competency, I would evaluate Mr. Sedláček's thesis as worthy of a grade of "1, vyborne."

Thesis evaluation: "1, vyborne."

Signed:

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