

Supervisor's report on the MA thesis of **Martin Sedláček**
Changing Tendencies in Self-Conscious Narratives: A Contrastive Interpretation

This thesis is unique in several respects:

1. By its wide scope ranging from the origins of modern novel (*Don Quixote*), through the 18th century English novel (Henry Fielding, Laurence Sterne) to the postmodern American novel (John Barth, Donald Barthelme, Kurt Vonnegut).
2. By the contrastive approach tracing parallels and differences between early modern fiction and postmodern metafiction from the perspective of recent narrative theories. Here the author follows Monika Fludernik in her critique of the binarism typical of the structuralist narratology (Gérard Genette) and also Mieke Bal's criticism of the structuralist reduction of the complexity of narrative structures to universal models. He proposes an approach, which moves from structuralism to poststructuralism: from the functional analysis of narrative structures in selected early and postmodern texts to the crucial problem of the relationship between reality and fiction in diverse literary genres, which, in postmodern works incorporate frame-tale, folktale, romance, science-fiction, war novel and slapstick. In doing so, he contextualizes his approach in a network of structuralist and other theories, including Viktor Shklovsky, Wayne C. Booth, Franz Stanzel, Robert Alter, Robert Scholes, Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan and Linda Hutcheon.
3. By the different and, in my view, more productive, approach to metafiction. Instead of seeing metafiction as "fiction about fiction" typical largely of postmodern literature, the author analyses the preconditions of its existence, namely the fundamental change of the concept and structure of representation, accompanying the shifts from the Pre-classical to Classical episteme and again from the Classical to Modern episteme. Using Foucault's reading of Velázquez's *Las Meninas* in *The Order of Things*, the author demonstrates how the painting "represents representation in the process of creation" (22) and in doing so anticipates the development of metafiction in the long span from the birth of modern fiction to its diverse postmodern forms.

The thesis is clearly and cogently argued and there are only a few critical points that can be raised.

Methodologically, it would be good to consider the possibilities of the Bakhtinian approach, especially the concepts of chronotope, heteroglossia and, in Vonnegut's case, also the carnivalesque. Especially the last mentioned notion has demonstrated its productivity in the context of postmodern thought (Foucault's concept of transgression and Deleuze's thought of structures and humour).

In discussing the eighteenth-century novel, the picaresque tradition should not be omitted, since it includes a specific narrative technique which revives in the late and post-modern novel. Though the early modern picaresque genre may not seem to display features of metafiction, they are present in the picaresque mode, for instance in Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, Fielding's *Tom Jones* or Sterne's *Sentimental Journey*.

Interpreting *Tom Jones*, attention should also be focused on the interaction of the representation of the historical events and the fictional narrative. Faced with the aftermath of the last Jacobite rising, Fielding makes a number of conclusions which can be interpreted as a "lesson of history": the most important one is the narrative of the Man of the Hill - a reminiscence of the Monmouth rebellion. The metafictional character of the narrative situation would deserve analysis.

Finally, the choice of the works of American postmodern fiction should be widened, or its restriction should be explained. Apart from the discussed examples, the works of Thomas Pynchon should definitely be considered, especially because of their problematization of the

fiction-reality binary and the development of such categories as the virtual or the involvement of the theory of entropy on metafictional level. All these features are evident in the easiest-to-read book by Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49*.

These points, nonetheless, are not serious shortcomings, rather suggestions for the further development of this innovative, wide-ranging and comprehensive thesis, which substantially exceeds the standards of MA theses at our department. For these reasons, I recommend the thesis for the defence and propose to grade it “výborně”.

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