

David Vichnar, PhD  
SUPERVISOR'S REPORT:

re "*Rethinking the Animal: Post-Humanist Tendencies in (Post) Modern Literature*"  
by Jana Gridneva  
(MA dissertation, 2017)

Addressing the ambiguous status of the human/animal binary within five selected texts of 20<sup>th</sup>- & 21<sup>st</sup>-century fiction, Ms Gridneva's thesis adopts a set of critical paradigms articulated in the work of Michel Foucault (his critique of post-enlightenment "humanism"), Deleuze & Guattari (their notion of "becoming" in the *Kafka* study & critique of Freudianism in *A Thousand Plateaus*), and most consistently of all, Jacques Derrida's multiple decentring of the Western subject. It is to her credit that Ms Gridneva discusses some lesser-known later Derrida essays and interventions ("The Animal that Therefore I Am", "Eating Well", "And Say the Animal Responded?" etc.) and follows his critique of "carno-phallogocentrism" based on his concept of "excessive responsibility" to articulate a coherent post-humanist approach to literature and culture at large.

Ms Gridneva's thesis is broad in both its historical scope—covering the ground from foundational modernist texts like *Ulysses* and *Nightwood* to contemporary ones like *Elizabeth Costello*—and its theoretical engagement. Its argumentation is lucid and sticks to the point, Ms Gridneva's close readings are always honest, complex and well-argued, apt at synthesising or drawing parallels between concepts from widely divergent theoretical discourses. Apart from the above-mentioned, there is, for example, the incisive analysis of Darwinism & Freudianism and their controversial & informative status within modernist sensibility (in the chapter devoted to Woolf's *Flush*), issues surrounding animal rights activism (discussing Brophy's *Hackenfeller's Ape*) and animal representation at large (esp. the Coetzee chapter).

The entire supervision process and reading of the finished product has been an informative exercise for the supervisor who has gleaned a lot of fresh insight into the historical genealogies and contemporary issues of post-humanism. Especially valuable is the care with which Ms Gridneva draws conclusions for discursive & cultural fields broader than just literary studies: writers and thinkers are brought together here who "free the animal from the connotations of simplicity, homogeneity, impoverishment and fixity that normally persist unquestioned" in order to "outline the principle features of post-humanist responsibility, and perhaps even ways in which it can be practiced" (21). The objective of the thesis, to paraphrase Marx, is not only to describe, but also to change, the state of affairs or at least consciousness – and is all the more special for that.

Three points deserve expanding upon and addressing at the defence:

1) The issue of the “canon” and “literariness”: are these five authors selected for purely thematic reasons (i.e. their dealing with the human/animal divide), or do they constitute a “canon”, a “tradition” in other respects as well? It is quite easy to see how Joyce, Woolf & Barnes interrelate, but what about Brophy & Coetzee? Where do we locate their “post-ness in regard to their predecessors? What role does gender play here, if any? And as long as it is “literature” we are reading here, what do we make of the explicit formal “experimentalism” of texts like *Ulysses* and *Nightwood*, as opposed to the relative traditionalism of the form in *Hackenfeller’s Ape* and *Elizabeth Costello*?

2) Connected to this is the historical context of “modernity” versus/vis-à-vis “postmodernity” – here I am fully aware that Ms Gridneva’s introduction issues an early disclaimer that the title of her work is “not meant to indicate any serious attempt to consider, compare or contrast the concepts of modernity and postmodernity as such” (11). That said, could we say more about the comparison/contrast between the two groups of texts covered here? Especially in terms of their “message” – with the pragmatic focus of the thesis in mind, can we say which narrative strategies and literary styles (modern vs. post-modern) work better in terms of getting their “message” across?

3) Departing from that, as long as wo/man has been traditionally defined as “a tool-using animal” (but then again, which animal doesn’t use tools?), what part in the critique of the carno-phallogocentric project does language as a tool (of communication, but also categorisation & subjection) play, in these texts? Do we get a meta-critique of fiction’s “tool proper” in these texts and how/why? Is it always already enmeshed in discussions of gender/history/politics, or does any of these texts ever attempt to launch a “pure” self-reflexive language critique? Again, with texts as prominently foregrounding of stylistic diversity as *Ulysses* & *Nightwood*, the critique is almost too explicit to need spelling out (let us try though) – but what about the other three?

Overall, Ms Gridneva’s thesis presents a well-researched, original contribution to the critical discourse on the dynamic field of post-humanism. This especially so since it is unafraid to raise basic questions of whether & how fiction can help us address issues outside of academic research proper – issues of ethics & personal/social practice.

As such, I have no qualms in recommending it for the defence and propose a grade of ***excellent – výborně. Práci doporučuji k obhajobě.***

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Prague, 23 January, 2017