



FACULTY OF ARTS
OF CHARLES UNIVERSITY
IN PRAGUE



Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures

David Robbins, thesis opponent

Thesis evaluation

Marika Bursikova

The Metaphysical Detective Story in Paul Auster's *The New York Trilogy* and Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*

This thesis examines the relationship(s) between the "classical detective story," at the denouement of which the "mysteries" of the text are, reassuringly, all resolved as answerable based on the inherent structure of the text/world, and the "metaphysical detective story," which contains no "simple undisputed closure but remains open for the reader/detective," throwing her/her "back into the text," (p. 23), raising unsettling questions "about the role of the author, reader, the act of writing, language, [and] the text[/world] itself." (p. 6) In this context, the reader's/detective's "detection becomes a subset of the desire to find a single stable meaning." (p. 33)

As Ms. Bursikova argues, these two contrasting forms of the "detective story" manifest and illustrate various differences between the "postmodern mode of thinking" and the "Western (positivistic) mode of thinking" (Bursikova, p. 18; William V. Spanos, "The Detective and the Boundary: Some Notes on the Postmodern Literary Imagination," *Boundary* 21.1 [1972]: 147-168, pp. 154-55), between a "poetics of epistemology" and a "poetics of ontology," between problems of "knowing" to problems of "modes of being." (pp. 18, 41, 21).

To provide examples of these relationship(s)/contrasts, Ms. Bursikova draws upon Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* and Paul Auster's *The New York Trilogy*: "Ghosts," "City of Glass," and "The Locked Room."

Overall, Ms. Bursikova has provided us with an insightful, articulate, well-conceived, and well-supported consideration of her chosen topic. There are clearly moments when one wishes that the author could have gone more deeply—and with significant benefit—into other works even by the two authors to whom she has been constrained to limit her consideration; but the strict delimitation of both the topic area and of the works considered seem valid concessions to the general length regulations regarding the bachelor's thesis.

More importantly, one feels that this discipline of limitation has contributed to the omission of consideration (or even mention) of Melville's *The Confidence-Man* as a point of emergence (contemporary, almost, with the emergence, in Poe's hands, of the "classic detective story") for the (counter-)conventions of the "metaphysical detective story": no readily-identified detective, mystery, criminals, or even crime, but always a vague and problematic suggestion for resolution and clarification.

I have also the following (possibly nit-picking) caveats:

At the top of page 20, Ms. Bursikova suggest that, to "justify the absurdity of human existence," Western thinking creates "an object of dread although it is not there." While she is clearly drawing here upon the work of Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Spanos, it is not clear to me from the formulation that she has chosen exactly what she means.

On page 28, Ms. Bursikova quotes Couturier to the effect that "once Trystero has been unmasked and destroyed the world will recover its order and unity and she will have regained her sanity." This seems not fully congruent with Oedipa's construction in *Lot 49* (pp. 136-37) of the existential situation in which she has placed herself, that there may be (either):

Another mode of meaning behind the obvious, or none. Either Oedipa in the orbiting ecstasy of a true paranoia, or a real Tristero. For there either was some Tristero beyond the appearance of the legacy America, or there was just America and if there was just America then it seemed the only way she could continue and manage to be at all relevant to it, was as an alien, unfurrowed, assumed full circle into some paranoia.

On both pages 26 (line 1) and 29 (lines 16-17), respectively, the author falls into the clumsy grammatical errors "to which all the clues lead to" and "to which the novel also points to." In an otherwise very well written thesis, these are surprising mistakes.

In discussing, appropriately, "Puritan paranoia" and its relationship to Pynchon and his postmodernist concerns (pp. 30-31), Ms. Bursikova suggests that "[t]he Word, the text of the Bible" was regarded by the Puritans "as the only source of truth." This is significantly to overstate the case. Even allowing for potential overstatement by the Antinomians on this matter, all Puritans regarded immediate personal experience of and with the deity as at least as authoritative as—although to be interpreted through use of—any textual material. On this very relevant matter, it would be worthwhile to consult Andrew Delbanco's excellent *The Puritan Ordeal* (1989).

On page 34, line 7, in her reference to "the story of a spectator climbing a tree," Ms. Bursikova almost certainly meant to refer to a "surveyor" climbing a tree, not a "spectator."

On page 44, as part of her conclusion, the author states that "[a]lthough we desire our lives to form a meaningful plot, it is important to be aware of these plots as certain constructs that we ourselves create." This is entirely unobjectionable. The meaning of

the following sentence, however, remains unclear to me: "It is necessary to be conscious of them in order not to become manipulated by them." Who is to do the "manipulating" in this context. If it is ourselves, then it probably should not be called "manipulation." If it is by others, then in what ways are we to be "manipulated"?

Otherwise and overall, however, within the strict limits she has set for herself, Ms. Bursikova has assembled the appropriate substantive and theoretical material, thought it through relatively clearly, and presented it in articulate and engaging fashion. One could reasonably ask for little more in a bachelor's thesis.

Thesis evaluation: "1, vyborne"

Signed:



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