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Opponent's Review, Jiří Flajšar, *The Suburban Novels of Richard Yates* (2023)

Jiří Flajšar's habilitation thesis has, all in all, 247 pages and is divided into a Foreword, an Introduction (Chapter 1, 5-10), a short history of American suburbanization (Chapter 2, 11-50), a biographical chapter on Richard Yates (Chapter 3, 51-59), a chapter on the tradition of the American suburban novel up to Yates (Chapter 4, 60-76), a main chapter called "A Reading of Yates's Five Suburban Novels" (Chapter 5, 77-219), a conclusion (Chapter 6, 220-236), and a bibliography (237-247).

Flajšar's thesis gives a good overview of the works by Richard Yates, but it is problematic, for various reasons. What strikes one as remarkable at first sight is the absence of a chapter on theory and methodology – which I would expect in a habilitation thesis – and the lack of subdivisions in the main Chapter 5, which is dedicated to a 'reading' of Yates's five suburban novels in form of one long, undivided text. This seems to be pointing to structural problems, an impression which is confirmed on closer inspection.

The explanations given in the (very short) "Foreword" seem 'strange,' to put it mildly, and hastily 'assembled.' We get to know that the "ambition" of this work "might be described in five ways." Flajšar's formulation conflates the level of description with the level of content. What the author obviously means is that the thesis has five different goals, namely, an introduction to the novelist Yates, a survey of American suburbanization, a summary of Yates's life, a description of Yates's novels in the context of earlier American suburban fiction, and a comprehensive reading of Yates's five suburban novels. This is basically nothing but a rephrasing of his Table of Contents. If it was Flajšar's intention to create a bad impression from the start, he is certainly successful: This Preface is hastily 'nailed' together and resembles what I have read in some Bachelors' theses just listing the intentions of the author without starting to argue logically. A Preface, by the way, is not the right place to do this because it has a different function altogether.

The "Introduction" only insufficiently corrects the impression of hastiness, but deepens the suspicion that the author is downright hostile to theory building. Flajšar explains that his approach to Yates is "somewhat pluralistic" and that he will be using "a mixture of the historical-biographical approach, thematic analysis, close reading, and the psychological

approach when dealing with Yates's suburban fiction." (6) His formulations in the "Introduction" betray his defensive stance caused by a certain uneasiness with regard to what he calls his "pluralistic" approach. This is no small wonder, for his "mixture" is not really an approach at all. By the way, it goes without saying that there are many different ways in which literature can be interpreted psychologically, so that the use of the singular "the psychological approach" is certainly wrong. The formulation that finally gives him away, however, is his polemics against "proponents of the recent schools of revisionist criticism." (6) It seems as if he is throwing together and condemning all new attempts at theory building as "revisionist."

What we read in the chapter on American suburbanization is informative and well put together, but most of it is second-hand. It is based on a shortened version of a chapter from one of his earlier publications (*The Culture of American Suburbs*), which draws extensively on Jackson and Hayden. A look into the "Index" of this book shows that Kenneth T. Jackson is quoted or mentioned on pages 3 (which, by the way, does not exist - what he means is page 9), 9-12, 16-43, 47-51, 53, 54, 120, 121. He could as well have stated that the bulk of his information on the development of the American suburb in the first half of the book is from Jackson. The same applies to Hayden, respectively, but to a minor degree. When Flajšar claims in his habilitation thesis that he has revised this chapter, this is only true with regard to his shortening it by a number of pages. However, there is no attempt of incorporating more recent secondary sources; most of the paragraphs are copied word by word; and only some paragraphs are partly rephrased, so that one must ask oneself why he rephrased them at all. It shows how Flajšar goes about his work: taking over what is already there is his main method, while he hesitates to come up with new and fresh ideas of his own. There is no intellectual development from this earlier book on suburbia to his habilitation thesis.

One of the fresh ideas that can be identified in his habilitation thesis lies in the observation that Yates's generally underrated and neglected later novels deserve more attention and should be reevaluated. This goes certainly against the dominant current in Yates criticism, and this would have been an opportunity to come up with independent and new insights into these novels, but Flajšar fails to fulfil his promise. Instead, he follows the well-trampled path, which is already obvious by the emphasis he lays on *Revolutionary Road*, which he deals with on more than forty pages, followed by another 40 or so pages on *Young Hearts Crying*, comparing it closely to *Revolutionary Road*. The interpretations of the other novels get shorter and shorter, so that, quite in contrast to his declared aim that he wants to pay more attention to

the later novels, this is contradicted by the diminishing space he dedicates to them in his text, and of course, by the results: a revaluation of the later novels does not really take place.

However, this is not the only problem that the reader of his thesis encounters. The interpretations follow chronologically the novels' plots, and there are hardly any attempts of abstraction or generalization. Important theorists such as Horney, Simone de Beauvoir or Goffman are introduced *ad hoc* and without preparation, because these scholars said something that comes in handy – without consideration or discussion of the theoretical background or the implications of their theories. Erich Fromm, for example, is also quoted out of the blue (108), and bits and pieces, scraps of his theories are applied to yield punctual and limited insights. There is no consistent and sustained attempt to apply theory with a profit for interpretation, there is no reflection about these theories at all. They are used, and quickly thrown away or forgotten. All in all, this is highly arbitrary and not adequate for a habilitation thesis.

Moreover, Flajšar's interpretations 'swim' on the surface and do not go into depth, and there is hardly any attempt to plumb the bottom of the barrel. Content and plot summaries are followed by character descriptions, which in turn are succeeded by quotations from secondary sources, an endless chain of repetitive, schematic writing without inspiration or creative ideas. More often than not, the quotations have to speak for themselves: Flajšar often lets them stand as they are, with no attempt at discussion and evaluation. If there are any attempts at evaluating Yates's writing, they strike one as superficial, and Flajšar himself, so it seems, feels uneasy and quickly escapes into the next quotation.

A great part of his text consists of basic summaries of form, content, and structure of the novels, and on a rather superficial description of the characters. Here is an example:

Revolutionary Road is divided into three parts. The plot is linear, with flashback episodes inserted to the main narrative in order to provide background information about the protagonists' childhood, courtship, and marriage. The Wheelers are about thirty, attractive, intelligent, educated, suburban, respectable, and restless in their seemingly ideal life situation. April Wheeler is a housewife and mother of two young children, Frank Wheeler has a well-paying job in the in New York City. The first section starts with the opening night of an amateur production of *The Petrified Forest* (82)

Comparisons are announced by stereotypical phrases: "It is also useful to compare the protagonists of *Revolutionary Road* and F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*." (91)

Countless references to secondary sources are introduced by repetitive, stereotypical formulations: “as Jackson reminds...” (14), “Charlton-Jones argues...” (90), “Elaine Tyler May reminds...” (97), “As Daly reminds...” (106) The sheer number of these formulaic references, amongst which the formula “he/she reminds...” (grammatically wrong without object) returns ever so often, point to the derivative character of Flajšar’s text. His main witness for psychological theory, Horney, is introduced via Paris, who makes use of Horney’s theories in *Imagined Human Beings: A Psychological Approach to Character and Conflict in Literature*. Paris and Horney are quoted by the by, without premeditation, in the middle of his interpretation, as if this idea had come suddenly to him, a bricklayer using a tool because he sees that it is within in his reach, or it has just come into his ken. After his references to Horney Flajšar continues with his chronological sifting through the novel’s events, throwing away the useful tool that has provided some insight into a character’s psychological setup. Throughout the thesis, his text is characterized by formulaic transitions from one topic to the next: “It is also important to consider the role of the suburban setting in *Revolutionary Road*.” (101) There is no reason given why it is important, which points to a general lack of coherence in his argumentation, which is at times clumsy, repetitive, and occasionally self-contradictory.

On page 123, he comes to interpret the second, later novel of Yates, *Young Hearts Crying*. Contradicting himself and his expressed intention of reevaluating the later novels from his chosen perspective, he deals with it as an appendix to what he has claimed about *Revolutionary Road*. This is underlined by formulations such as: “Another way in which *Young Hearts Crying* mimics *Revolutionary Road* is in the diversity of the suburban community being portrayed.” (139) This is not what one understands by reevaluation! In this part of his thesis, he uses Horney’s theories frequently, without discussing the highly problematic implications of her theory of neurosis and its relation to artistic creativity (153) and applying it simply to the characters of Michael and Lucy: “This may explain the long-term inability of Michael to produce any poetry that would match the moderate success of his first book and the failure of Lucy to transfer her vaguely defined identity into an acting performance or a work of art.” (153f.) All in all, this is too simple and unscholarly, and when he continues: “In both novels, Yates dramatizes his life-long ambivalence about the utility of psychiatry and psychoanalysis” (158), he seems to be unaware of the implications this has with regard to Yates himself.

Jiří Flajšar's *The Suburban Novels of Richard Yates* does not fulfil the requirements for a postdoctoral habilitation thesis. Flajšar seems to be building his house of argumentation without an architect's plan and with borrowed bricks. There is no overarching theory, and his 'so-called' approaches (he uses more than one) amount to a vendor's tray heaped with a hodgepodge of various commodities. If theories are used (Horney, Goffman), their relation to each other remains unclear and is not reflected upon. There is no attempt of combining them and forming them into a useful interpretative instrument, by the help of which Yates's novels might be approached with more original insights. More recent secondary sources, that is, those published after 2017, are missing from his bibliography, with the exception of one essay from 2020 found on the internet. From Daly's important book (*Richard Yates and the Flawed American Dream: Critical Essays*, 2017) that covers most of the topics that Flajšar deals with in his thesis, only the introduction and two more essays are listed.

It is a great pity – and from a scholarly point of view, a shortcoming – that Flajšar does not go all the way and take the trouble of having a closer look at his building material: the historical insights of his chapter on suburbia, the context in which Yates's characters predominantly move, are more or less derived from cultural studies approaches, Goffman's sociological role theories in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (which he quotes), and Horney's psychological observations on neurosis (on which he partly relies), mixed with reflections on how they are related, what is applicable to realistic literature and where this applicability stops, would have formed an excellent 'theoretical roof' – or foundation – for Flajšar's interpretations. Moreover, these parts of his thesis would have been innovative and original and would also have been interesting for scholars concerned not so much with Yates but with literary theory and interdisciplinarity in general. Unfortunately, he did not realize this chance: the reason for it, I suspect, lies in his general hostility to theory building, which is summed up in his flat rejection of "revisionist theories" in the introduction: Flajšar builds without a master plan.

What is even worse is that this mason is building predominantly with borrowed bricks: reading through his thesis, one cannot overlook the great number of quotations from secondary sources, so that the thesis reads more like a review of research rather than an independent and original contribution to Yates studies. Admittedly, these quotations are skilfully used and snugly embedded into Flajšar's own text. His paragraphs generally begin with a clear-cut statement inducing the reader to believe that this is an idea of his own. This expectation, however, is then quickly disappointed in being followed up by a quotation from a

secondary source, which makes it clear that the idea was borrowed from somebody else. Most of the text is knit together in this way. Here is an example from his “Conclusion:”

Yates’s suburban fiction could be labelled realist, influenced by the European and American literary precursors such as Flaubert, Anderson, Hemingway, and Fitzgerald. According to Charlton-Jones, “the realist novel had, and always will have, a role to play in commenting on contemporary reality, on social structures, on the role of the writer, and on the ever-changing face of marriage and relationship.”⁵⁰ As Castronovo and Goldleaf document, Yates typically exposes, like his literary heroes before him, “the hidden injuries of class, including bleak childhoods, nothing jobs, and barren landscapes” of American city and suburb in a realist mode at a time “when the mode was retreating before the onslaughts of such postmodern experimental writers as Thomas Pynchon and Donald Barthelme.”⁵¹ Unlike the postmodern fictional experiments with form, language, and meaning, a traditionalist like Yates chose to spend a career “examining the insecurity and instability of the age [...] through incisive and unsparing characterization and dialogue within a traditional form.”⁵² As O’Nan explains, Yates’s realism provides an uncomfortable but honest view of American society as his characters [something missing here – are?] “mirror of our weaknesses: passive, uncertain, self-pitying, and foolish“ with the resulting vision of America as “populated as it is by mostly unexceptional, imperfect people“ who speak in a language “that rarely if ever calls attention to itself.”⁵³

(Flajšar p. 236. The numbers 50 to 53 are footnote reference numbers referring to Flajšar’s sources; my emendation in square brackets.)

This randomly-chosen passage consists of 212 words, 113 of them are from quotations. This means that even in his conclusion, a considerable part of Flajšar’s text is second-hand, borrowed from secondary sources. This might be acceptable for a review of research, but not in what is supposed to be a habilitation thesis. The example given is not exceptional but typical, both in terms of quantity and quality, not only for his thesis, but also for his scholarly work in general and his writing style. The historical chapter on American suburbanization that was published before in his book *The Culture of American Suburbs* (Olomouc: Palacky University, 2016) – which, by the way, is missing in his list of publications – was only a bit shortened but otherwise taken over more or less unchanged into his habilitation thesis. It draws heavily on Jackson and Hayden who have covered this subject before in their seminal books on American suburbanization. These all-too-frequent quotations, paraphrases and summaries of what was said and published before point to a general lack of originality that is also characteristic of this habilitation thesis. Moreover, this way of using quotations and mixing them with paraphrases serves the purpose of blurring the fact that the ideas stem from the scholars quoted and not from Flajšar himself. This practice is certainly helpful if one wants to throw sand in the reader’s eyes in order to blind her/him to the fact that one does not have any substantial and original ideas of one’s own.

Looked at the content of the passage more closely, the insight that Yates is a realist writer can hardly be called original and sounds banal. This might even be said about the quotation from Charlton-Jones, who is one of his crown witnesses and who, by the way, has more important insights to offer, which means that the quotation is badly selected. The other quotations continue in this vein, giving the reader a good impression of what Yates's realism is like but not offering any deeper insights by Flajšar's himself into this writer, or correcting views that others have proposed before. This is the material that introductions are made of, introductions for student readers, for example, or for people interested in Yates's works who want to find out about the writer's novels. A text like this one is not meant for scholars expecting a postdoctoral habilitation thesis, which should prove the ability of the candidate for producing independent and creative research, showing his openness for new theories, and creating original insights and ideas.

If one admits that constructors of 'Houses of Thought' should not only be bricklayers but architects who know about the art of building, we would have to admit that Flajšar is missing some of the architect's most important qualities and skills, and that, in the case of his habilitation thesis at least, we are dealing with a bricklayer's hut and not an architect's palace.

For all these reasons my recommendation to the habilitation committee is **not to accept Jiří Flajšar's *The Suburban Novels of Richard Yates* (2023) as a postdoctoral habilitation thesis.**

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