



Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures, Faculty of Arts,
Charles University

To the Habilitation Committee:

- Opponent's Report
- Mr. Dr. Jiří Flajšar
- “The Suburban Novels of Richard Yates”
- Habilitation Thesis

Brief summary of subject: The thesis articulates the basic coordinates of the suburban novel texts from the plain language writing of notable US fiction writer Richard Yates (1926–92). The present study does so by combining rigorous close reading with larger historical contexts and other cultural frames, including psychobiographical ones.

Methodology and structure: The thesis contains 1: Introduction; four principal chapters including 2: A Short History of American Suburbanization, 3: The Life of Richard Yates, 4: The Tradition of American Suburban Fiction up to Richard Yates, 5: A Reading of Yates's Five Suburban Novels; a Conclusion, and a Works Cited. To be sure, the work combines philosophical-theoretical engagement with close reading of its target narrative texts.

Achievements: The academic quality of the document and its contribution to research and originality may be discerned in such passages as the following ones; we read notably,

In this light, suburban “homeownership was regarded as a counterweight to the rootlessness of an urbanizing civilization.” [fn.22] Even Walt Whitman, himself a pioneer of the open-road kind of social and physical mobility in America, claimed that these qualities were secondary to owning real estate since “a man is not a whole and complete man unless he owns a house and the ground it stands on.” [fn.23] Jackson documents that between the 1820s and 1870s, the preferred mode of residential architecture, even in the newly built suburbs of big cities such as New York, Philadelphia, Boston, and Baltimore, was the row house, a reincarnation of the European city house [. . .]. (15)

This is an extraordinary claim by Whitman, which feeds into the American ideology of home ownership, and as such displays the ways in which the institution of literature is so often system complicit with hegemonic ideological power and ideological climates. Also in a passage that underscores the history of actual American suburbanization:

In a parallel development of American cities, with the rise of urban core populations, there came an increase in the exodus of American urbanites outside the crowded cities, to the suburbs. In this effort, they were assisted by several innovations in public transportation. For much of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, “advances in



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transportation technology delivered [Americans] at faster speeds to farther-flung places, each innovation enabling a new phase of [suburban] development.”[fn.62] (21)

Furthermore, in an additional contextualization of the matter of the rapid development of US suburbanization, and of such suburban communities’ very nature of being with regard to TV cultures and to the overall dynamics of class:

Hayden calls postwar planned suburban communities such as Levittown, Lakewood, and Park Forest the “sitcom suburbs,” reflecting their prominent representation in such seminal 1950s and 1960s TV sitcoms as *Leave It To Beaver*, *Ozzie and Harriet*, and *Father Knows Best* and paying attention to the role of television as the prime medium of entertainment in postwar suburban homes.[fn.131] Regarding the life in these suburbs, Hayden notes several prevailing trends at this point of American suburbanization. The sitcom suburbs “complicated class relationships rather than erasing them.”[fn.132] This goes against the traditional notion of postwar suburbs as communities of social equals with little or no class differences who socialized and mixed easily (33).

To be clear, this sheds light on the paving stones for influential and iconic US TV sitcoms in the 1950s and 1960s that were to prove, on this account at least, the major mediator of entertainment culture in the USA suburbs. Consider too this passage, which provide a succinct historical account of the scaffolding that obtains for the historical outline of Yates’s major prose works:

The five suburban novels of Richard Yates are, to a varying degree, framed within the historical period that starts in the 1930s and ends in the 1970s. Several major historical developments in the United States, including the 1930s economic depression, the WW II situation with the draft and military service, the postwar redefinition of domesticity along the lines of changing gender roles, and the migration of the young families to the new postwar sitcom suburbs function as important historical background. (220).

These foregoing points are lucid and illuminating.

Consider too this insight in which notably, “One of Yates’s principal accomplishments is the fact that his fiction never allows for nostalgic readings of the characters’ urban and suburban past and ruthlessly deconstructs his character’s dreams of leading authentic, interesting lives in the suburbs” (221). This passage by implication profiles the problematic aspects of the safe and secure existence ostensibly attained in the US suburban spaces. In addition, revealingly, “In all five suburban novels, Yates utilizes the suburban setting and community to dramatize the “inconsistency between America’s egalitarian ideals and the fact



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that social stratification was still very much part” of American society of the twentieth century [fn.12]” (222); this underscores the contradictions that are part and parcel of the American experiment in social engineering. Moreover, Dr. Flajšar writes,

Contrary to the myth of the suburban lifestyle that promotes family togetherness and domesticity, the family in Yates’s novels is typically a damaged, broken-down social institution as the father is absent or dead, and the mother is more concerned with appearances than with caring for her home and family. The children in Yates’s suburban novels react to the problem of living in unstable homes by inventing new identities, siblings, and games to play. (232)

This throws an interesting high beam on the spectacle society and dysfunctional aspects of the family universe in Yates’s artistic worlds.

Additionally, in another knotted and difficult issue, the candidate advances that:

While Yates could in many ways be considered a male-chauvinist who hated to see the advancement of women’s liberation and considered women as more suited for traditional domestic roles rather than for professional careers, in his suburban fiction, he is surprisingly sympathetic to the uneasy situation of strong, energetic women who run into difficulties due to the incompatibility of their dreams with the prescriptive social norms of the 1930s to the 1970s. (234).

Finally, consider that in the final words of the habilitation thesis, we read in a summary of the sorts of tensions and impasses in which characters find themselves at the heart of Yates’s exploratory and incisive fiction,

Although realist fiction has been dismissed since the 1960s as an outmoded approach to portraying life in the American cities and suburbs, Yates’s suburban novels still impress new readers with the way they function like a timecapsule from an era in which the American people still believed in the myth of the American Dream whose realization is possible within the idealized construction of suburban family identity. Yates’s attention to the problems and dangers of this dream are in tune with the way his fiction continues to present a vision “of people’s social survival, the complexity of the struggle to stay afloat in American society “[fn. 54] which exposes the difficult choices for suburbanites who have to choose between conformity and rebellion, between delusion and realism, between hypocrisy and honesty, in order to deal with the challenges of suburban domesticity, class barriers, and family conflicts. (236)

In the end, the candidate gives a nuanced and an apologist account of how Yates attains a certain formidable complexity in his narrative texts. To be sure, given the valorization of the



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cultural form of realist fiction in this thesis, there is a book that has just been published by Terry Eagleton entitled *The Real Thing: Reflections on a Literary Form* (Yale University Press, 2024), which the candidate may for his own interest wish at some point to consult.

Shortcomings: Within the confines of this document as a habilitation thesis, the coverage of the topic area is historically thorough and exegetically capacious. Had the candidate more space and time, he might have dived even more into various theoretical dimensions. Surprisingly, the Works Cited on pp. 237–47 does not contain any critical works from 2018 to the present. Also, I would have expected to read something of W.D. Howells's *The Rise of Silas Lapham* in Chapter 4.

Formal features (e.g., language & style, referencing, bibliography, formatting, abstracts): The formal aspects are adequate. However, there are some typos/errors in the language such as: “evens” should be “events” (6), “an person” should be “a person” (8), “of least” should be “of at least” (8), “environment” should be “environments” (12), “of far” should be “of how far” (12), “it’s brevity” should be “its brevity” (217). In addition, sometimes the footnotes are not consistent with spacing, cf., fn. 63, 90, 169, 170, 182, 193, and 197. This is also the case with some entries in the Works Cited: i.e., after Gelber (240), between two by Jurca (241), and after Rich (244). An entry “Jefferson: NC: McFarland, 2017” (239) should read “Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2017”.

Questions: What is the candidate’s position, to put it in succinct terms, on the strong suits and shortcomings of the Yates publications covered in the present document? Also, in the light of Yate’s reflections and representations, is the situation for American suburbs ameliorable? Why or why not?

Conclusion: I recommend that the associate professorship proceedings continue.

Prague, 25 ii 24
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