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Review of Habilitation Thesis “The Suburban Novels of Richard Yates” by Mgr. Jiří Flajšar, Ph.D.

Reading Jiří Flajšar’s habilitation thesis about the US-American author Richard Yates’s suburban novels was both an enlightening and a pleasurable experience, and I want to thank the Academic Council of the Faculty of Arts of Palacký University for the opportunity to assess such a formidable work of literary and cultural criticism. I will use the following pages to specify what I take to the thesis’s many strengths and to formulate a few questions for the discussion of the thesis at the session of the Academic Council. To state clearly at the outset: I rate the academic quality of Dr. Flajšar’s work as very high and believe that the thesis presents a substantial contribution to literary scholarship – Yates is an important though understudied twentieth-century US-American novelist – and cultural history – fostering a better understanding of the US-American suburb and its connection to myths like the American Dream.

I begin with the choice of subject matter, Yates’s suburban novels. Dr. Flajšar’s notes correctly that only the first of Yates’s novels, *Revolutionary Road* (1961), has received much academic attention, while the rest of his oeuvre (six additional novels and two short story collections) has yet to be analyzed in any systematic and overarching fashion. Dr. Flajšar turns to five of Yates’s works – *A Special Providence* (1969), *The Easter Parade* (1976), *Young Hearts Crying* (1984), and *Cold Spring Harbor* (1986), in addition to *Revolutionary Road* – and offers a “new comprehensive interpretation of [these] five suburban novels,” including a “re-evaluation of Yates’s lesser-known works,” suggesting that they are connected through the “author’s trademark narrative voice, vision, and themes in a realist portrayal of suburban and urban America from the 1930s to the 1970s” (5). The meticulous close readings of the novels in chapter 5 forcefully illustrate the validity of this suggestion, which is further supported by the sketch of US-American suburban fiction from William Dean Howells’s nineteenth-century *Suburban Sketches* (1871) via Lewis Sinclair’s *Babbitt* (1922) and F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (1925) to Sloan Wilson’s *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit* (1955). Going against the grain of some scholarship on suburban fiction, Dr. Flajšar argues persuasively that the US-American suburb is a setting

for the characters' conflicts and their inability to fulfill their own and others' expectations of a successful and happy life, but not the cause of their failures and unhappiness (89, 104). Thus, the first major achievement of the habilitation thesis is to establish these novels as a body of interconnected texts through which Yates negotiated his ambivalent assessment of American suburbia – an assessment, that, as Dr. Flajšar demonstrates, was closely connected with Yates's personal experiences and found its way into his fiction as thinly-disguised autobiography (6, 51, et passim). This latter insight justifies the thesis's interest in Yates's biography (introduced in chapter 3 and assessed vis-à-vis the novels in chapter 5), which enriches the literary analysis of Yates's fiction and constitutes a second major achievement of the thesis.

As Dr. Flajšar explains in his introduction (chapter 1), the thesis utilizes a mixture of analytical methods: historical and literary contextualization (chapter 2 traces the history of the American suburb and thus delivers important context for the novels; chapter 3 recapitulates the development of suburban fiction), a biographical perspective, thematic analyses and close readings, and a psychoanalytical approach based on studies by the German American psychiatrist Karen Horney. Horney's work on neurosis, *The Neurotic Personality of Our Time* (1937) as well as later studies, is especially significant because it supports Dr. Flajšar argument about Yates's preoccupation with characters whose conflicts in life (failed marriages and broken families, unsuccessful careers or unfulfilling jobs, unrealistic and thwarted dreams of social and creative advancement) and whose handling of these conflicts are rooted in difficult childhood experiences and cultural anxieties (e.g. the "crisis of masculinity"; gender equality and feminism) at large rather than specifically in the suburb as a modern space of habitation itself: "people's lives are governed by their neurotic responses to stressful and traumatic situations" (9). This marks the thesis's third and fourth major achievements: the demonstration that Yates's novels, while certainly ambivalent (105, 118) about suburban lifestyles (both in the prewar and postwar phases as well as during WWII), do not join in the standard critique, voiced by sociologists and other commentators (e.g. Lewis Mumford), of suburbia's stifling of individual perspectives and its mass-consumerist ethos (90); as well as the proposition of a psychological approach to literary analysis not based on the work of the usual suspect (Sigmund Freud) but on Horney's studies. As indicated above, I am intrigued about the choice of author and works and appreciate the analytical approaches, the historical and literary contextualization, and the close readings offered in this impressive thesis. In fact, I believe that Dr. Flajšar has produced an original and significant treatise on a setting – the US-American suburb – that is so closely connected to notions of American identity, the American Dream, and twentieth-century conceptions of personal and social advancement that it continues to fascinate readers and viewers until today (when exurbs and revitalized urban centers have become equally prominent places of habitation). I also find the thesis to be original in its justified resistance against monolithic and reductive (but rather popular) views of the suburb as a space of cultural conformity and social exclusion. That Dr. Flajšar acknowledges Yates's generally anti-feminist views but also shows how his fiction is less easily pigeonholed as reactionary in terms of its treatment of female characters, is also highly commendable.

In closing, I pose/propose a few questions/suggestions that are not intended to challenge the thesis's many achievements but rather aim to invite a broader discussion of its many important insights. My first question concerns the convincing assertion that Yates's characters frequently orient their lives and derive their dreams from popular culture, mainly Hollywood movies but also magazines and the radio (201, 203, 2017). While Dr. Flajšar pinpoints this as theme in several of Yates's suburban novels, he does not make explicit whether these references remain generic or whether Yates evokes specific films, magazines, and radio shows. Dr. Flajšar mentions the suburban sitcoms of postwar television early on in the thesis (33 et passim), but it would be interesting to hear more about the intermedial contexts of Yates's literature: Is he merely suggesting that film and other popular media shape the beliefs and actions of his characters, or is he offering concrete cultural commentary about twentieth-century US-American media and popular culture?

My second question concerns the narratological basis for the thesis. While Dr. Flajšar usefully uncovers autobiographical and psychoanalytical dimensions in Yates's suburban novels, the question arises what narrative perspectives and narratorial voices the author chooses to portray suburbia. Is it always the same voice, and the same implied author, who is speaking to the reader, or can we identify changes among the different works? What about the implied reader? To whom did Yates address his novels? The thesis occasionally suggests that readers might interpret a certain character or passage in one way or another, but is there textual evidence that would suggest what kind of reader Yates's novels imagine? And what about their actual, historical reception?

The third question pertains to Yates's position in US-American literary history. Dr. Flajšar plausibly reads him as a realist in the tradition of Gustave Flaubert, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Ernest Hemingway, (51, 236), as well as a writer indebted to the naturalist fiction of writers like Sherwood Anderson, Sinclair Lewis, and Theodore Dreiser (78). In the conclusion, he argues that Yates remained beholden to this tradition despite the prominence of postmodern literature, such as Pynchon and Barthelme (236). Yet he also underscores that, since many of Yates's characters are enthralled (and thus hampered in their development) by the power of Hollywood film, they cannot find authentic selves and are condemned to become simulacra instead (217). Furthermore, Dr. Flajšar notes that Yates's literature deconstructs popular myths of the US-American suburb (221). With simulacra and deconstruction being central elements of postmodern thought, Yates's relationship to postmodernism could be assessed somewhat more elaborately.

Fourth, and finally, while Dr. Flajšar addresses issues of race and racial exclusion in the chapter on the history of US-American suburbs (e.g. 19, 33, 35, 37), the issue rarely comes up in the discussion of Yates's novels – presumably because Yates ponders questions of gender and class more than of race. There is Tony's drunken racist remark in *The Eastern Parade* ("everyone but coons, kikes, and Catholics"), which Dr. Flajšar correctly calls "racist bigotry" (182), but it might be interesting to open up a conversation between Yates's work and works by African American writers that thematize suburbs from a different perspective, such as Gloria Naylor's *Linden Hills* (1985).

With these questions in mind, and in light of the overall originality, relevance, and excellent academic quality, I wholeheartedly endorse the acceptance of this

habilitation thesis by Academic Council of the Faculty of Arts of Palacký University. I commend Dr. Flajšar for having written such a formidable piece of literary and cultural criticism and hope to see this work in print soon.