

Opponent's Report

“Legs apart as the tide came in”: Fluid Sexual Personae of Ann Quin (MA thesis) by Michaela Černá

In the Conclusion of her evocatively entitled MA thesis, Ms Černá writes:

“An essential and all-pervasive aspect deliberately omitted from the analysis is Quin’s writing style and technique. The reason for this neglect is pragmatic in nature – her writing style itself did not concern the analysis, for the aim was to focus rather on the images produced by it.” (77)

The question arising here is, What does it mean for any analysis to omit what it acknowledges to be “essential”?

When speaking of concepts like “fluidity,” “sex,” “personae” is it not the case that – within the critical-theoretical framework cited in the bibliography – that “writing style & technique” must themselves be understood not as secondary to the production of “images” in which these concepts are somehow represented, but as a materialisation of these concepts themselves: the fluidity, sex, personae of “writing” (or e.g. “écriture”)?

Such mimeticism is an unfortunate stumbling block & significantly detracts from the overall validity of the thesis, which in fact begins by linking the term “fluid” to Quin's “experimental” mode of writing, only then to turn to a treatment of the term as referential of phenomena, experiences & whatnot “external” to the text.

Here we might also detect a difficulty arising from the critical-theoretical apparatus itself – for example, the discontinuity in the way in which text & textuality are understood between, e.g., Camille Paglia & Helene Cixous. In Cixous there can be no question of suppressing the question of “writing style,” whereas Paglia is not concerned with (nor adept at considering) textuality at all.

And while Ms Černá argues that the thesis is “a mere first step towards taking stock of the wide range of sexual implications and connotations encompassed” in Quin's writing, this can only elicit the response that – in explicitly deferring the matter of textuality – it represents not a “first step” but rather a “misstep” (from which any supplementary consideration of Quin would not so much progress as stumble).

Yet all is not quite lost, for despite disclaiming having done so, we encounter something like a “tacit” engagement with textuality which verges on the theoretical at times, but remains largely unacknowledged within the larger scheme – for example when Ms Černá writes:

“This fantasy is the very epitome of Tripticks’s vulgar poetics – *switching into the third person in order to narrate his own death* as in a pulp novel, necessarily adding the presence of an attractive woman, shows the glamour of mass-produced media and the banality of violence, but also suggesting death as means of relief: *only in death do the voices go quiet and the constant movements cease.*” (71)

Echoes of Blanchot, perhaps, of even Kristeva. And elsewhere:

“Buckeye remarks that “Quin *shifts from first to third person and back to draw our attention to the women the woman is—the I who stands aside observing what she does, as if she were someone else, not the I, or perhaps one of the shes the I might be.*” The multiplicity of women contained within the female protagonist is then externalized by the male protagonist distinguishing and defining some of her specific roles in his journal, categorizing her faces as those of a “mature woman,” “femme fatale,” “the Mystic,” a “country girl ‘at heart,’” *each developed in a string of adjectives...*” (42).

Had such momentary, spontaneous observations been allowed to develop in constellation with each other (Quin: “Never the same pattern no matter how many times” [41]) they may have amounted to a *theoretical-textual apparatus* in their own right. So, curiously, the misstep here is not in fact that the thesis avoids the question of textuality *as* fluidity, sex, personae, but that it doesn't acknowledge the significance of its own insights when it does (or *that it does*). (*Roland Barthes' *The Pleasure of the Text* may shed additional light on this.)

In any case, the work is well written (minus the odd linguistic anomaly). My only major reservations concerning the thesis as it stands is a tendency to treat some of its references with passing superficiality (Bataille, Sade) & to allow generalisations to go unchallenged (Paglia e.g. on “men” & transvestism: “[F]or men, female clothing is religious or cultic. It is the costume of the mother, with whom the son unites by ritual impersonation.” [53]) – or perhaps, rather, to not clarify how such generalisations/stereotypes are substantially Quin's material, rather than a [flawed] explicatory resource. Similarly, terms like “post-oedipal male” need more than a footnote reference. And it verges on the criminal to evoke “Female Trouble” (35) without at least some passing consideration of the idea of “gender” articulated by Divine! (I missed any discussion of how Quin's *text*, for example, constitutes a “trans” condition – one that need not constantly answer to/for a binary linguistic hermeneutic: the proposition needs to be considered that it is the binary-opposition that is the real travesty, here, while Quin's “texts” are irreducibly *polymorphous* [& perhaps for this reason, we may also say *perverse*]).

My recommendation for the grading of this thesis, provisional upon Ms Černá making a sufficient reply to the preceding observations, is 1 (excellent). I am also pleased to nominate the thesis for the Mathesius Prize, for being – despite my “criticisms” – unusually accomplished for an MA work of this kind.



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