

## Faces of the American Gay Novel after 1945

### Review of *Podoby amerického homosexuální románu po roce 1945*

by Roman Trušník (Olomouc: Univerzita Palackého v Olomouci, 2011)

The questions of what constitutes a literary canon, i.e., texts that possess qualities which make them worth preserving from generation to generation, are probably as old as the writing of literature itself. Thus while the late 20th century discussions on American literary canon may have seemed a fashionable intellectual past-time, they in fact addressed traditional and legitimate questions with which literary historians, critics, and educators as well as readers have always struggled. On a theoretical level, the formation and transformations of literary canons reflect the ways a culture validates and preserves its literary heritage. The post-modern paradigm of validating and appreciating difference, diversity and multivocality together with movements for human and civil rights had a direct impact on the literary canon, resulting in the gradual disclaiming of the monolithic cultural tradition prevailing in the first half of the 20th century. The “opening up of the canon” is therefore characterized by the acknowledgment of minor traditions within American writing as integral and valuable parts of the American literary heritage. The “open canon” of American literature now includes works by a great number of minority writers who are in fact no longer even considered “minor,” but simply American.<sup>1</sup>

This tendency has been reflected in Czech academia as well and many articles, conference papers and books dealing with a variety of American ethnic authors and their works have been published. The tradition of American gay literature, however, has so far attracted disproportionately less attention from Czech scholars, as Roman Trušník points out in the opening of his book. Very often the issue of homosexuality in literature has been mentioned only in passing, particularly in connection with authors on whom Czech scholars focus for different reasons. Trušník names for example Truman Capote, who is typically recognized as a Southern writer, and James Baldwin, who is studied predominantly as an African American author.<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, singling out gay fiction as a specific tradition can be quite problematic. A number of critics and literary historians – Trušník cites Czech scholar Václav Jamek – suggest that human sexuality in all its forms is part of the human lot and thus perhaps should be simply seen as an issue or theme in literature in general. But while not separating gay literature within different national literatures might be a less complicated critical strategy, Trušník agrees with those who recognize that the situation is somewhat different with American literature. In the American context, works dealing with gay themes have fulfilled important extraliterary functions, for instance contributing to the struggle for the recognition of gay rights and educating the general public about AIDS.<sup>3</sup> But because of this activist dimension, American gay literature has suffered a similar critical tendency as American ethnic writing, i.e., the propensity to canonize texts merely because of extraliterary value. Trušník admits that reading some

1 For a detailed discussion on the American literary canon see for example Šárka Bubíková, *Literatura v Americe, Amerika v literatuře*. Pardubice (2007) and Šárka Bubíková, “Theory of a Literary Canon,” in *Prague Conference on Linguistic and Literary Studies: Proceedings*, 101–106 (2003).

2 See Roman Trušník, *Podoby amerického homosexuální románu po roce 1945* (Olomouc: Univerzita Palackého v Olomouci, 2011), 9.

3 See Trušník, *Podoby*, 10.

of the works was a challenging endeavor, as often extraliterary aims seemed to supersede literary and aesthetic merits.<sup>4</sup> He therefore devotes one chapter to the discussion of selected works of gay fiction from a strictly literary point of view, analyzing and assessing frequent themes, motifs, narrative strategies, the treatment of time and space, intertextuality, and other literary means employed.

In the opening of his book, Trušník also explains why he has focused purely on gay male fiction and did not include lesbian writing. He sees the two as quite independent traditions, each influenced by different social contexts (The issue of the position of women in society is unlike the devastating experience of AIDS in the gay community.). Other terminology that the author engages with before exploring the post-WWII development of American gay fiction includes the expressions *homosocial*, *homoerotic*, *homosexual*, *gay*, and *queer*. He explains the difference between essentialist and constructivist attitudes and briefly outlines the development of same sex relationships in a historical context. Drawing on David Bergman's work *Gaiety Transfigured: Gay Self-Representation in American Literature* (1991), Trušník for the purpose of his analyses defines homosexuality using four terms – otherness (other than heterosexual), permanence (it is a life-long orientation), genuineness and equality (of same sex partners as contrasted for example with ancient Greek practices which prescribed certain unequal roles).<sup>5</sup> Even the introductory chapter makes it clear that the author's approach to his topic is thorough and complex. He tends not to stay on the comfortable surface of issues but meticulously considers the multilayered viewpoints and arguments involved. Therefore, despite its seeming brevity, the book provides not only a sound outline of the development of the American gay fiction but inspires its readers toward deeper reflection on the issues involved, be they literary, social or critical.

The third chapter employing the framework suggested by Martin C. Putna, another Czech theoretician, introduces various ways of periodization, of critically approaching gay fiction (as for example from the point of view of psychoanalysis, apologetic biographism, homothematics, homotextuality, personalism), and of canon formation (enlisting and describing the most important studies on the basis of which the canon of American gay fiction emerged). Trušník basically adopts the methodological preference of text over person (i.e., focuses mainly on the literary aspects of novels with homosexual themes and avoids detailing the writers' biographies).<sup>6</sup> However, he points out that in the context of the American politics of identity the field of gay fiction is often highly politicized, unlike for example the more universalist approach of French theoreticians.<sup>7</sup> Trušník shows how the political context influenced publishing and marketing strategies in US, when the term "gay novel" was used to attract readers as well as when the marketing of novels as gay was avoided and why.

In the history of American gay fiction, three decisive moments must be taken into consideration – the de-tabooing of sexuality with the publication of Alfred Kinsey's report *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (1948), the impact of Stonewall riots in 1969 and the outbreak of AIDS in the early 1980s. The fourth chapter places important works of American gay fiction into the context delineated by these three events. Unlike many works in which the theoretical and the practical (i.e., literary analysis) seem to form two unrelated parts, Trušník's book engages the terminology and theory introduced in the

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4 See Trušník, *Podoby*, 10–12.

5 See Trušník, *Podoby*, 23.

6 See Trušník, *Podoby*, 26.

7 See Trušník, *Podoby*, 27.

first and second chapters consistently throughout. The chapter closes with outlines of the plots of several of the novels discussed. The inclusion of plot summaries might be questionable as to what purpose they serve. If Trušník's study is to be read by those familiar with gay novels, these are redundant. Further, if the book is read by readers not yet familiar with the particular novels, revealing their plots might spoil a future reading experience. (Despite the fact that the author tries to keep the plot summaries brief, he usually gives away the endings.)

*The City and the Pillar* (1948) by Gore Vidal, *Quatrefoil* (1950) by James Barr, *A Single Man* (1964) by Christopher Isherwood, *Dancer from the Dance* (1978) by Andrew Holleran, *The Lost Language of Cranes* (1986) by David Levitt, *A Visitation of Spirits* (1989) by Randall Kenan, *Dream Boy* (1995) by Jim Grimsley, *The Hours* (1998) and *A Home at the End of the World* (1990) by Michael Cunningham are just some examples of novels discussed in Trušník's book. The fifth chapter looks at these from the point of view of the literary means used, measuring them against a "chronologically organized realistic narrative, with a gay person as a protagonist, taking place in one setting, and making use of a single narrative situation."<sup>8</sup> Although it is not clearly explained why this method is used beyond merely stating that any deviations from the "hypothetical 'basic' narrative"<sup>9</sup> are ways of defamiliarization and thus a sign of literariness (as if a basic narrative cannot be attributed with literariness), the subsequent analyses provide insight into the formal aspects of the novels, treating each novel both as a unique work of art as well as providing a comparative perspective.

The last chapter focuses on differences and overlaps between American gay fiction for adults and young adult fiction, pointing to marketing strategies, differences in readership, in literary methods employed and also mentioning the connection to the genre of Bildungsroman and the frequent theme of coming out. It also devotes attention to the phenomenon of "crossover titles," i.e., novels aimed at both young adult and adult readers.

The book concludes that "gay fiction has indeed come of age and has left its ghetto at last."<sup>10</sup> Theoretical and critical attention to American gay fiction has finally visibly entered Czech academia. Trušník's work is certainly a needed and welcome contribution to American studies and American literature in the Czech Republic. It both introduces the previously scarcely covered topic and discusses in greater detail particular issues, theories and formal aspects of gay novels. It will most likely become the fundamental Czech textbook of studies in American gay literature.

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8 Trušník, *Podoby*, 137.

9 Trušník, *Podoby*, 86, 138.

10 Trušník, *Podoby*, 138.