



AALBORG UNIVERSITY

Dept. of Languages and Intercultural Studies
Kroghstræde 3, DK- 9220, Aalborg Ø
Denmark

October 13, 2005

Ph.D Evaluation Report

Committee: Associate Professor Bent Sørensen, Aalborg University (chair), Associate Professor Justin Edwards, University of Copenhagen, Professor Tom Conley, Harvard University. (Associate Professor Dominic Rainsford, Aarhus University has been associated as a non-voting participant in the committee work in his capacity as supervisor for the candidate)

Ph.D Student: Jens Fredslund, Department of English, University of Aarhus

Title: "Lost Between the Word: Structures of Post-Structure in the Fiction of Alison Bundy, Jane Unrue and Thalia Field" -- Introduction, Four Chapters, Conclusion, Bibliography, Summaries in Danish and English, 436 pages.

The oral defence took place on September 29, 2005.

This dissertation is a close reading of selected fiction by three contemporary American writers, Alison Bundy, Jane Unrue and Thalia Field. Fredslund continually identifies and comments on these writers as artists who employ displacement, proliferation, articulation and silence. Strategically, although there are several interesting detours, the thesis is directed towards ahistorical analyses of the texts themselves and, in particular, the theoretical issues that arise out of a poststructuralist and deconstructive framework. The argument proceeds by establishing a general claim that these three writers share an aesthetics of uncertainty and an anxiety about the processes of narrative construction and the possibilities of articulation in the slippery realm of signification. Each writer, Fredslund suggests, resists teleological forms of narration and baffles conventional reading patterns by betraying plot, cohesion and logic. And yet the significance of their work, he goes on to argue, arises out of each writer's ability to focus on, among other things, the construction of narrative spaces through "assemblage," "cartography" and "displacement."



Insofar as fiction is the target of his close analysis, theory becomes what two of Fredslund's authors—both theorists—call a “toolbox” enabling him to use intellectual socket wrenches, needle nose pliers, or even automotive feeler gauges to test the force and meddle of writers working in the midst of two or three decades of intensely speculative thinking. He shows that Bundy, Unrue, and Field are “flies” in the often normative and controlling “ointment” of the very theory he brings to them or that they tend to pre-empt or mobilize in new and daring ways.

This reading is reminiscent of the pioneer analysis that Malcolm Bowie or Michel de Certeau engage on the tensions of science and literature. For these analysts the attraction of the former is always undone by the productive unruliness or the ordered chaos of the latter. Fredslund, however, exceeds them by not holding to canonical writers, as Bowie has, whose oeuvres have become sites of a post-structural industry. His authors are not Proust, Lacan, or Mallarmé, but women of obscure and indeed antic origins who fold the greater social facts of living and being into micro-units, into settings often out of place or indeed entirely foreign to theoretical idiolects. Thus he works through the texts on his own, without any direct secondary literature on the authors, and he reads them keenly and even slyly, at once elucidating and rivalling with them in the manner of his commentary. The work on displacement, on asymmetry, on the uncanniness of space in its relation to human relations, on “deterritorialization” of clichés, and on broken plotlines within the worlds of these three writers causes the theory to be at once more resonant and more problematic that it would if it were studies on its own ground or in its own context.

But the greatest strength of Fredslund's thesis is the theoretical sophistication that he brings to his readings of the literary texts. His use of theorists, ranging from Lévi-Stauss to Derrida, from Freud to de Certeau, compliments the analyses of displacement and paradox in the primary literature.



In fact, one of his most compelling arguments is that the works by Bundy, Unrue and Field offer “elusive” and “enigmatic” responses to poststructuralist theory and even “anticipate the theoretical gesture awaiting them.” As a result, Fredslund has not simply brought largely unknown American authors and texts to light, he has also succeeded in extending our use and application of theoretical approaches in attempting to develop our understandings of the relations between close reading and context.

If there is a weakness it may be that the wealth of theoretical material tends sometimes to obscure a sense of the underlying argument of the thesis as a whole, although it has to be said in mitigation of this criticism that part of the point is the multiplicity of the discourses involved. Even so, key points of the overarching thesis, such as the limited readings of the texts in light of the “uncanny” and “haunting,” could perhaps have been given more space for discussion. Nevertheless this criticism does not seriously take away from the originality and substance of the thesis as a whole, and the candidate showed considerable willingness to engage with these terms more fully in the course of the oral defence.

There are several theoretical questions that arise in the overall argument which, although they do not in themselves detract from the validity of the thesis presented, Fredslund may wish to give further attention if he seeks publication. These can be outlined as follows. The introduction includes biographical information on each of the authors, and even quotes passages from personal interviews that Fredslund has conducted with Bundy and Field. Seeing as these authors are not widely known, one understands the desire to insert information on the authors’ lives and the need to let them speak for themselves. However, given that the thesis is chiefly poststructuralist in its approach, one wonders about the status of the authors’ comments in relation to the theoretical framework that is employed throughout. To put this quite simply, how does the biographical content in the introduction fit with Derrida’s comment in “Des Tours de Babel” that an author is “dead insofar as his [or her] text has a structure of survival even if he [or she] is living” (183)?



Some focussed commentary in the thesis on this point would have been helpful, as it would have clarified how Fredslund's own theoretical positioning fits in amid the taxonomy of structuralist and poststructuralist movements that he draws upon. Much clarification was produced at the oral defence, where Fredslund's dual strategies were carefully argued and shown to complement each other.

There is another complication in Fredslund's argument that needs to be addressed. Throughout much of the thesis, we find a number of assertions that highlight the uniqueness of the primary works being discussed. The argument, then, claims that the texts by Bundy, Unrue and Field defy conventional literary categories and that they are, as a result, necessarily displaced from literary history and conventional notions of genre. Thus, it is surprising to arrive at the final section, "Cousins and Echoes," which attempts to place these writers within literary history by illustrating their kinship and genealogy to other American and European writers of the 20th century. Such a movement -- going from ahistorical close readings and assertions of originality to historical contextualizations which foreground literary genealogies -- means that the thesis ultimately comes to argue against itself. In the end, Fredslund's text seems to replicate the same strategies of displacement and expressions of anxiety found in the primary works. However, the reader of the thesis cannot help but wonder if Fredslund really can have it both ways.

Fredslund's lengthy introduction to the thesis is another case in point: Can Fredslund allow himself to occasionally sacrifice academic precision in exchange for poetic diction? As it stands the introduction performs itself as it unfolds, speaking about itself from an unknown deictic position, stating that "This introduction opens with a series of points and discussions about the general impression and characteristics of the writers" (2) well over a page after it has actually already "opened". Often the reader is left guessing about the agency behind the words: whose "general impression" are we going to be privy to, and when?

Furthermore, the reader often becomes momentarily irritated by the introduction's reliance on metaphor to communicate about the writers analysed and about the introduction and by implication the whole thesis' ontological status. Thus, it is not immediately helpful to be told that "reading Bundy, Unrue and Field is like talking to person dreaming" (1), nor is it very effective communication on Fredslund's part when we are informed that in a text by Field "significance is not curbed, but rather skewed" (19).

Such minor shortcomings in stylistics may be forgiven, though, but what is of a more serious nature is the occasional lack of precision in analytical terminology, as witnessed by the casual catalogue given twice in the space of the introduction of what Fredslund identifies as "major tenets, themes or guiding motifs" (3) (and later as "tenets, themes or complexes" (22)) in the writings of the three authors. One is thus left wondering, not only whether "motifs" are indeed the same thing as "complexes", but ultimately whether the difference between a "tenet" and a "theme" is so insignificant that the two can be safely conflated, or so unimportant that it warrants not even the slightest attempt at definition. At the oral defence Fredslund argued in favour of a strategy of triangulation (or "pentangulation" in this case) as a better suited process of delimiting a terminological field than more conventional definition strategies.

Fredslund's strange reduction of "conventional literary categories" (2) to "literary history" and "genre" and nothing else also warrant comment. Indeed, it seems Fredslund's relation to both these categories is somewhat problematic, to the extent that an otherwise devoted Derridean such as Fredslund has not even consulted Derrida's seminal essay "The Law of Genre" before dismissing "genre determination" of his authors' pieces as "beside the point in relation to the actual reading experience of the texts themselves" (6).



Having said this, the thesis as a whole offers detailed and convincing close readings of the texts, and the employment of various theoretical concepts is impressive. The close analysis in parts one, two, and three (respectively, on Bundy, Unrue, and Field) are patient, carefully led, and often dazzling in what they do. Each of the texts is written within and about creation itself, and each demands a creative assessment that would be of their own measure.

The thesis contains original contributions to knowledge and extends our understanding of modernism, postmodernism, as well as contemporary American writing in general, not least because it informs the reader about “what and how to do with” fiction and theory at a time when the two are not as co-extensive as many would wish to believe. The nod that Fredslund gives his authors indicates that he too leans in that direction. The wit and invention that we appreciate in the style of the dissertation—in its own creative turns, its digressions and anticipations, its reminders and even in its open-ended conclusions and summaries, tell us that Fredslund is both a student and rival of Bundy, Unrue, and Field. That is no small accomplishment.

In conclusion, the committee unanimously recommends that in the light of a fine dissertation and an excellent oral defence Jens Fredslund should be granted the title of PhD.

Justin Edwards

Tom Conley

Bent Sørensen

For the committee:

Bent Sørensen (chair)