



FACULTY OF ARTS
Charles University

Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures

OPPONENT'S REPORT ON M.A. THESIS

Class, Sexuality and Nationalism: Identity Building in the Prose Writings of Brendan Behan

by Nathalie Lamprecht

The thesis presents a minute and inspiring analysis of Brendan Behan's prose writings from his earliest works onwards, culminating in the discussion of his masterpiece, the autobiographical novel *Borstal Boy*. The author's late work, completed with the help of a dictaphone and in close collaboration with the editor, was (although potentially relevant) wisely omitted as the proportion of authorial involvement on Behan's part is difficult to establish. The focus on the author's prose works is well chosen, as they have not received as much critical attention as his plays.

Prompted by the fact that autobiographical elements are a defining feature of Behan's prose, the theoretical underpinnings of the thesis highlight the genre of autobiography and its role in building personal and collective identity, as well as in negotiations between the two. The candidate uses scholarly works that focus on autobiography in a specifically Irish context, as well as monographs and essays that treat the connection between autobiography and identity in a more general manner. Especially the application of recent German narratology is commendable and constitutes a welcome perspective in the field of Irish Studies. Last, but not least, the thesis has a solid grounding in Behan scholarship, taking into account previous critical treatments of the author's work.

The main merit of the thesis is the description of the shift of Behan's identity, as presented in his writings, from a militant Irish nationalist to a multifaceted personality that notices other kinds of oppression apart from the British colonial one, can strike friendships with Englishmen, is aware of class distinctions in society, looks for ways to express his queer sexuality, and embraces writing, rather than armed fight, as his main life occupation. In the thesis, this shift is described in terms of freedom: "in *Borstal* Brendan finds friendship and love, both of which help him realise that it is not merely the complete freedom of Ireland that is worth fighting for, but also, perhaps more so, solidarity, equality and the freedom to be yourself." (68) In the description of this shift, the thesis is very sensitive and emotionally touching, while at the same time maintaining critical distance and the all-important distinction between the author and his various fictionalized personas. In addition, the candidate presents Behan's work as an ongoing critique of and dialogue with the ideologies associated with de Valera's Ireland, including Catholicism, the emphasis on the rural, as well as the (often hypocritical) support of the Irish language. The findings of the thesis can be inspiring for the analysis of other Irish autobiographical writings of the twentieth century, including (from the opponent's own research experience) Tomás Ó Criomhthainn's *An tOileánach*, Walter Macken's unpublished work *Cockle and Mustard* or various writings of Micheál mac Liammóir.

In conclusion, this is a truly outstanding thesis that significantly surpasses the general standard of M.A. theses submitted at our department. Without the slightest hesitation, I recommend that it should be awarded the grade "**excellent**" (1).



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A proposal of questions to be discussed at the defence – these are not intended to rectify any possible shortcomings of the thesis, but to broaden the context and stimulate debate:

1) In the introduction, the general position of Behan's work in the context of Irish autobiographical writing is accurately described. Could the candidate bring in some concrete examples and make comparisons?

2) While the analysis of Behan's Irish-language output is clearly outside the scope of the thesis, the topic of Irish is touched upon several times. A (seeming) contradiction emerges – on the one hand, Behan seems to criticize the state's policies towards the language, on the other, he takes recourse to it for subversive purposes (the use of songs in order to express homoerotic feelings, the interest in *Cúirt an Mheán-Oíche*). How does the Irish language relate to personal and collective identity in Behan's writing?

20 May 2021

Radvan Markus, PhD

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Radvan Markus".