

Louis Armand, PhD  
OPPONENT'S REPORT:

re "POSTMODERN INFERNO: FLANN O'BRIEN'S *THE THIRD  
POLICEMAN* BETWEEN MODERN AND MEDIEVAL NETHERWORLDS"

by Maciej Ruczaj

(MA dissertation, 2006, supervised by Dr Ondřej Pilný)

From the very outset, Mr Ruczaj's MA dissertation raises questions. How, for example, do we reconcile these "postmodern," "modern" and "medieval" "netherworlds" and "infernos"—or "hell" as he more often says?

To begin with, Mr Ruczaj is a student of outstanding ability, and the "ambitiousness" of his topic perhaps reflects on this, and yet it also creates its own problems. Ambition itself is no guarantee of praise, and while I accept that Mr Ruczaj has demonstrated a keen interest in the work of Dante, Beckett and even James Joyce, and that his research is more than adequate, I would make any recommendation of a grade conditional upon his satisfactory answering of a few questions.

As to the general gist of Mr Ruczaj's dissertation, this is clearly enough outlined in his introduction and does not require me to restate his major points for him.

My principle reservation about this dissertation is that considering its overtly theoretical approach, it demonstrates a severely limited awareness of recent critical theories—nothing whatsoever after the 1980s (indeed, they primarily relate to Dante and Augustine, these in turn being sourced almost exclusively from the internet) and very little concerning the possible uses of terms like "postmodern," (or "(post)modern") which are tossed around quite blithely by the author without explanation.

The word "hell" quickly supersedes "inferno" and "netherworld" and conspires to give the impression that such a thing may in fact have a consistent facticity, despite the overwhelmingly contrary impression one receives from reading Dante, Milton, Blake—to begin with. Is "hell" really a generalisable referent?

Mr Ruczej's treatment of Menippean satire is quite limited and depends overly on near contextual readings of Hutcheon and Dettmar—a strange abbreviation of effort considering Mr Ruczej's otherwise numerous comparisons of Flann O'Brien with Voltaire and Joyce. Likewise viz. Medieval narrative, for which Bakhtin is cited as an authority, but not Eco, *et al.* But a pattern soon emerges here: we find, in particular, the treatment of Joyce to be rather superficial and often also truncated (e.g. on culpability in *Finnegans Wake* on p.64—which has little reason for being there at all, as a matter of fact). There are, similarly, arbitrary shifts of focus, e.g. from O'Brien to Kafka on p.85. What purpose are these supposed to serve, and how does the author explain away the very selective use of theoretical works?

Above all, when Mr Ruczej cites critical sources he is far too often uncritical himself, and seems to use citation rhetorically rather than analytically, while there are an exasperatingly large number of texts cited in translation and not in the original (including texts written in English), demonstrative of a failure of adequate research.

A number of almost trivial editorial oversights have managed to creep in: some wrongly spelled names, incorrect referencing formats at times; nothing out of the ordinary.

Consequently, my recommendation will depend upon the candidate's ability to provide some satisfactory responses to my queries: hinging upon 2/1.

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