

Opponent's Report on the PhD dissertation of Mgr. Radvan Markus *Ironic Myths and Broken Images: Reflections of the 1798 Rebellion in Twentieth-Century Fiction and Drama*

The dissertation makes a significant contribution to the study of modern Irish, both Gaelic and Anglophone, historical novel and also to the research of literature as a medium of collective memory: the remembrance and forgetting of the major, and controversial, event of Irish history, the Rising of 1798. Methodologically it has still a greater impact, since it attempts to outline a theory of modern historical novel and fiction (including drama), based on two major sources, Hayden White's understanding of history as a primarily literary activity, where the use of narrative patterns and rhetorical figures is regulated by the historian's ethical consciousness, and Paul Ricoeur's understanding of history as a continuity of time, given primarily by the relation of ethical responsibility among individual generations. The two minor theoretical sources, Ansgar Nünning's and Mark Berninger's rather schematic typologies of historical novel and drama, are productively and considerately used. The dissertation is based on a thorough research of historiography and older literary production dealing with the 1798 events as well as of secondary sources discussing earlier literary responses to the Rising. Last but not least, the candidate uses his reliable knowledge of Irish not only to analyse the texts but to make impressive English translations of quoted passages, especially from his chief analysed text, Eoghan Ó Tuairisc's novel *L'Attaque*.

I have only several comments, some of more general, some of particular, nature to this very well executed and persuasive study:

1. The analysis of historical and literary sources in Chapters 3 and 4 is rather descriptive and sometimes it does not live up to the dissertation's bold methodological assumptions. The major problem appears in the relatively restricted use of Foucault's theory of texts as "monuments" rather than "documents," developed in his *Archaeology of Knowledge*. The phrase "real historical document" (used on p. 122) seems a trace of the traditional understanding of "documents" as windows to the past, which was criticized by New Historicism. It does not appear productive in the dissertation's treatment of historic novels, plays and their sources, where only different degrees and ways of fictionalization may be compared.
2. Although the dissertation brings detailed analysis of the works of Irish literature, it lacks a wider perspective both on the genre and on irony as the main trope of emplotment in all major analysed literary works. It is difficult to develop an analysis without recourse to Irish historical novels with other themes, starting with Maria Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent*, Walter Scott's novels, especially *Waverley* (discussed only briefly in relation to Andrew James' *Nabob*), and ending with Victor Hugo's novels, especially *Quatrevingt-treize* (Ninety-three), which could form an interesting counterpart to Ó Tuairisc's *L'Attaque*. One could, for instance, observe an 'internalisation' of Hugo's historical irony (relativisation of the stances of peasant rebels, manipulated by local clergy and aristocracy, and the Jacobin revolutionaries) in the narrative perspective of *L'Attaque*.
3. In discussing the method of Falangan's *The Year of the French* one could research a possible direct influence of Hayden White who taught at nearby Santa Cruz. The same can be said about the origins of New Historicism, connected with the academics around *Representations* and also the influence of Michel Foucault on the Berkeley scene.
4. What I find very productive is the dissertation's attention to the motifs of spectres and spectrality in Stewart Parker's *Northern Star*. This theme would deserve deeper analysis, along the philosophical lines drafted by Derrida in his *Spectres of Marx*. The

main topics which could be explored is the function of spectrality as the effect of the discontinuity of time, disjointure (“disadjustment”) of the present, and the related problems of justice and hope. This would establish another and more general perspective on the analysed historical fiction, which could be efficiently linked with Iser’s approach to “the fictive” discussed in the theoretical chapter.

5. The actual comparisons would sometimes need greater attention to the works alluded to by analysed texts. This is the case of the allusions to Shakespeare’s *King Lear* in MacManus’ novel *Men Withering*. The “tragic dignity” of Shakespeare’s protagonist is rather subverted in the passage quoted in Mac Manus’ epigraph, which has obscene connotations and refers to figuratively, by means of parodic inversion, to the final ‘death’ of royal authority, downgraded to the level of transient sexual power and animal rage (“a great image of authority: a dog’s obeyed in office”). The comparison developed on pp. 74 and 75 does not reflect the complex irony of Shakespeare’s play, linking the loss of feudal hierarchies with the “tragic dignity” of human existence epitomized in the storm scene of *King Lear*. The most important feature of this irony is not “pulverising” the individual “back in the dust from which he had come” (MacManus, quoted on p. 74) but the survival of human hope in justice in the extreme psychic, social and natural conditions (“Take physic, pomp; / Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel, / That thou mayst shake the superflux to them, / And show the heavens more just”). In view of this, I do not think that MacManus use of *King Lear* can be characterized as “rather straightforward” (p. 75). On the other hand, it appears that MacManus’ opinions and experience prevent him from the “straightforward” understanding the strong conjunction of hope and deprivation in Shakespeare’s tragedy.

In spite of these problems, the dissertation can be seen as an important contribution to the study of the memories of the 1798 in recent Irish literature and historiography. After some editing it will be publishable. Its standard is high above that of average PhD dissertations defended in the programme English and American Literature. Given all this, I am pleased to recommend the dissertation for the defence. **S radostí doporučuji disertaci k obhajobě.**

V Praze, 3. 8. 2012

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