



FACULTY OF ARTS
OF CHARLES UNIVERSITY
IN PRAGUE



Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures

Opponent's Report:

Petra Brymová Bc "Fin-de-siècle Elements in Flann O'Brien's *The Third Policeman*" MA thesis

Flann O'Brien is a writer whose work has been extensively explored in terms of modernism and postmodernism. Ms Brymová while not denying the usefulness of such approaches takes an idiosyncratic and creative critical tack in offering a detailed appraisal of the affinities, as she puts it, between O'Brien's seminal novel *The Third Policeman* and the literature and discourses of the fin-de-siècle period in Europe. She proposes two areas of interest for O'Brien: decadence and the early avant-garde and these are examined in four major chapters. The structure of the work is both logical and headings are clear. The choice of three texts – Huysmans's *Against Nature*, Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and Jarry's *Ubu Roi* – makes for a coherent structure but one that ultimately more adequately addresses O'Brien's interest in ironic reorientation of decadence than the avant-garde.

The introduction of the thesis wisely attempts to meet some of the definitional issues that arise in attempting to circumscribe the period and decadence, though it tends to leave the description of the historical avant-garde primarily up to Richard Murphy. While one might query some elements of this opening, what is noteworthy is that Ms Brymová is conscious of the complexity of the field and has drawn upon some fine sources in order to try to think through what is at stake. Her plan of development and key areas that will be pursued are communicated well. There is a good sense of purpose and awareness of how her approach sits within O'Brien studies. The first major chapter continues with the attempt to map the relevant aspects of the selected conceptual counterpoints to the novel, in particular artifice, the mechanical, the unnatural and above all the symbolism attached to the colour yellow. It might have been clearer had more space been afforded to elaborating the aesthetic contexts for decadence and the historical avant-garde and clarifying the differences in context between the fin-de-siècle period and 1930s Ireland before plunging into the specific appearances of these motifs in the novel. Chapters 2, 3 and 4 develop impressively detailed close comparisons of *The Third Policeman* with the selected texts. Of these, chapter 2 on Huysmans is the most convincing in establishing a distinct relationship between the texts. In chapters 3 and 4 are much less so despite the detail provided. It remains very unclear to what extent the similarities to *Dorian Gray* and *Ubu Roi* (pataphysics certainly seems a more legitimate allusion but this is not identical with the play) are incidental. If they are merely incidental, what conclusions can be drawn about O'Brien's engagement with the aesthetics of decadence in *Dorian Gray* and the politics of the historical avant-garde in *Ubu Roi*?



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Points for discussion at the defence:

1. The terms metafiction and postmodern are used rather liberally and loosely. In tearing these terms from their contexts their usefulness may ultimately be diminished. At the defence it would be good to return to these terms and to hear what the author thinks they mean and where some limits might be placed?
2. Chapter 1 convincingly traces the correspondences between fin-de-siècle themes and motifs in *The Third Policeman*. To what extent is this network of allusions comparable to, for instance, Joyce's use of classical allusion in *Ulysses*? Does *The Third Policeman* differ in its citational practices from such works of modernist literature? It is noted that O'Brien's tone is ironic – does that imply that the novel is a critique of such themes and motifs or a critique of the fin-de-siècle period?
3. Chapter 3 suggests that one of the most significant distinctions between O'Brien and Wilde was that Wilde travelled and O'Brien did not (43). Surely there are a few more important differences?
4. "As far as decadence is concerned, the country did not suffer so widely from urbanisation, industrialism and capitalism as the rest of the kingdom and therefore the moral and physical "decay" typical of European decadence was not so likely to be felt. Anglo-Irish writers employing decadent features turned to French and British models." (44). First, there is a very strong negative bias towards modernity here. If Ireland was 'spared' the ravages of modernity to which decadence responded, in what sense could decadence then be meaningful in an Irish artistic context? Second, what other Anglo-Irish writers engaged with decadence?
5. Chapter 4: Jarry's surrealist play is known as *Ubu Roi* or *King Ubu*. *Ubu Rex* is the title of an opera by Krzysztof Penderecki based on the play. Under what circumstances can Jarry's *Ubu Roi* be understood as "emergent postmodernism" (60)? Is there any concrete evidence that O'Brien is alluding to this play in a serious way in the novel?
6. Two very different movements appear to be bundled together in the thesis. In what ways is the historical avant-garde distinct from decadence?



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With regard to the more practical dimensions of this work: The level of language throughout is good but expression is frequently awkward. Presentation and format are excellent. Research is of a high standard showing both initiative and critical judgement. Sources are appropriately cited and often actively engaged with.

I recommend the thesis for defence and propose to grade the work “very good” / 2 or “excellent” / 1 depending on the result of the defence.

1.9.2014

Doc. Clare Wallace, PhD