

Supervisor's Report

Petra Brymová, "Fin-de-siècle Elements in Flann O'Brien's Novel *The Third Policeman*" (MA Thesis)

The topic of Petra Brymová's Master's thesis is intellectually stimulating and provocative, and as her work demonstrates, bears significant potential to contribute to international scholarship dedicated to Flann O'Brien. The only work of the fin-de-siècle to have been discussed in relation to O'Brien so far is *A rebours* by Huysmans, and even in relation to this seminal novel of the European decadence, the candidate comes up with interesting matters to add to the discussion by earlier critics. The other two texts selected for detailed comparison with O'Brien's *The Third Policeman* are Oscar Wilde's *A Picture of Dorian Gray* and Alfred Jarry's *Ubu roi*; unlike the candidate I believe that of the three works, it is the former which represents the most audacious attempt at outlining parallels, and it is to her credit that the contrastive interpretation comes across as mostly very sensitive.

The chief strength of Ms Brymová's work consists in the multiplicity of original observations made in relation to analogies between *The Third Policeman* and European literature of the 1880s-1890s. For instance, the unravelling of the similarities between Stanley Makower's story "A Beautiful Accident" and an important passage in O'Brien's novel (22-23) is truly revealing, same as the candidate's discussion of the colour yellow in decadent fiction and in O'Brien (23-25); likewise, her demonstration of how a principal figure of fin-de-siècle writing, synaesthesia, turns horrific in *The Third Policeman* (38-39) makes for a most valuable point. Moreover, noteworthy comments concerning neglected details of O'Brien's novel are made in an almost off-hand fashion throughout Ms Brymová's essay, such as her observation about the moment in which the narrator takes the first right turn (literally), and with what result (18).

The thesis is based on a wide range of research, from O'Brien criticism up to studies of French poetry of the nineteenth century, and demonstrates the exceptional amount of work that went into its preparation. This laudable effort has also had a negative effect, however: the sheer amount of references included particularly in Chapter 1 occasionally makes the argument hard to follow, and results in a certain amount of repetition. Generally, the candidate's phrasing of ideas is often somewhat awkward, which again makes the appreciation of her argument difficult in some passages. Finally, there is a certain lack of clarity concerning the use of terminology, which should be rectified during the defence of the thesis. In particular, I would like to raise these points:

1. The candidate repeatedly refers to *The Third Policeman* as metafictional. Could she clarify what exactly it is that makes the novel a work of metafiction?
2. The term "intertextuality" tends to be used rather loosely throughout. Would it perhaps be more appropriate to refer to analogy or different kinds of allusion in the context of the relevant passages on pp. 31, 37 and 42?

3. The candidate asserts that the early avant-garde harboured an admiration for science (15) and ranks Jarry amongst early avant-gardists. However, Jarry's work (particularly *Faustroll*) has been regarded by many as an embodiment of anti-science (often because this is what pataphysics really is – anti-science). Could she comment on this?
4. The linking of pataphysics with Bakhtin's concept of the grotesque (67) is intriguing. As the candidate rightly mentions, the grotesque according to Bakhtin always has a strong potential to bring about renewal. As the link is being made specifically with Jarry's Ubu plays, the nature of the potential regeneration in these plays should be specified, particularly since Jarry's work for the stage has been mostly interpreted as anarchic only.

I recommend the thesis for defence and propose to grade it as “very good” or “excellent”, depending on the quality of its defence.

Prague, 22 August 2014

doc. Ondřej Pilný, PhD