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Review of *Flann O'Brien: Acting Out* (2022), edited by Paul Fagan and Dieter Fuchs

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Flann O'Brien: Acting Out offers innovating and stimulating readings of O'Nolan's textual oeuvre that consider the history of verbal and performance arts as well as the turbulent history of Ireland during the first half of the twentieth century. This historicisation dismantles critical commonplaces that view his humour as a mode of apolitical writing and of disinterested playfulness immune to statecraft and social issues. The various essays gathered in *Acting Out* show that O'Nolan's fiction is attuned to civil and political issues, and that his use of literary tradition often serves his critique of socio-political realities.

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Flann O'Brien: Acting Out, edited by Paul Fagan and Dieter Fuchs, explores Brian O'Nolan's numerous intertextualities with literary, journalistic, and dramatic texts. The volume offers innovating and stimulating readings of O'Nolan's textual oeuvre that consider the history of verbal and performance arts as well as the turbulent history of Ireland during the first half of the twentieth century. This historicisation dismantles critical commonplaces that view his humour as a mode of apolitical writing and of disinterested playfulness immune to statecraft and social issues. The various essays gathered in *Acting Out* show that O'Nolan's fiction is attuned to civil and political issues, and that his use of literary tradition often serves his critique of socio-political realities.

The consideration given to historical, cultural, and theatrical contexts does not limit the protean elements of O'Nolan's texts, but rather reinforces their enduring richness. By historicising themes, structures, and pseudonyms, the contributors showcase the hermeneutic possibilities yielded by O'Nolan's fiction and non-fiction writings and open up avenues for future research. Paradoxically, the historically oriented approach further disintegrates the already muddy distinction between life and narrative that characterises O'Nolan's work. To quote from Fagan's 'Introduction,' the book thus offers a fresh insight into 'the unique hybrid identity of author, performer and literary character that is Brian O'Nolan, Flann O'Brien, Myles na gCopaleen, *et al.*' (5).

One captivating topic addressed by these essays is plagiarism. Throughout the book, plagiarism is invoked in discussions of influence, authority, meta-theatricality, and conscious performativity. Maebh Long's opening essay explores plagiarism in relation to identity or, more precisely, to O'Nolan's split identity. Discussing Niall Montgomery's contributions to the *Cruiskeen Lawn* columns, Long shows that one of O'Nolan's better known personas, Myles na gCopaleen (or Myles na Gopaleen), is an instance of collaboration in which participation is often appropriated without the knowledge and consent of the fellow writer. As the chapter makes clear, O'Nolan quoted from Montgomery's columns for *The Irish Architect and Contractor* without the latter's knowledge. Long describes O'Nolan's use of his friend's texts as collaboration-turned-appropriation. Montgomery's contribution (although unacknowledged by O'Nolan) to the *Cruiskeen Lawn* columns makes him part of the identity of Myles na gCopaleen that, in turn, comprises the man we identify as Brian O'Nolan. Myles comes into being through writing; but not only through O'Nolan's own writing.

The feelings of uneasiness provoked by suggestions of plagiarism ask the readers of this volume to rethink their understanding of originality as a marker of literary value: instances of appropriation (at times, unauthorized appropriations) challenge the correlation between originality and artistic merit. The discomfort intensifies when

Long discusses an alleged case of plagiarism between *The Third Policeman* and Niall Sheridan's 1939 lesser-known short story, 'Matter of Life and Death.' Her analysis of the conspicuous similarities between the novel and the short story, despite her disclaimer that the works do not share 'identical tone, style or plot' (28), is unsettling inasmuch as we ascribe much of the literary value of *The Third Policeman* to the ingeniousness and imaginative quality of its author (whether we think of him as O'Nolan or as Flann O'Brien). It is important to note that Long's argument is presented without judgement. Rather, Long describes the blurred boundaries between collaboration and appropriation, and those between original and copy, as the ontological condition of O'Nolan's texts. This view releases the novel's genius from commonplace values of singularity and originality.

Significantly, traces of appropriation from other texts historicise the composition of the novel and further embed *The Third Policeman* within history and tradition. Intertextual resonances between *The Third Policeman* and other works of fiction (notably dramas) are elaborated by Fuchs, who further discredits views of O'Nolan's writing as apolitical. Fuchs's analysis demonstrates O'Nolan's investment in the history of canonised texts, as he draws palpable links between some of the most remarkable narrative lines of *The Third Policeman* and representative texts of high culture, such as the Oedipus myth (more precisely, Synge's representation of Oedipus), and Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *Julius Caesar*. In fact, Fuchs draws a chain of associations between *The Third Policeman*, Synge, Oedipus and Shakespeare that locates the novel within literary tradition and, at the same time, within a particular moment in Irish history. His analysis offers a political reading of the novel, as he argues that Shakespearean references reflect the Irish Civil War and its aftermath. When Fuchs historicises the plot of the novel at the 'transformation of an old into a new state' (70), he exemplifies one of *Acting Out's* notable achievements: showcasing O'Nolan's investment in the sociopolitical realities of his time and their incorporation into his fiction.

Tobias W. Harris's reading of *Faustus Kelly* is another salient example of this critical achievement. O'Nolan's play explicitly references another literary giant, Goethe's *Faust*, and Harris uses allusions to the Faustian textual tradition to delineate O'Nolan's critique of contemporary Irish politics with special attention to their application of fascist rhetoric. Harris's chapter shows that the critical impulse to historicise O'Nolan's work does not go against the writer's intention. Rather, by appropriating elements of canonised texts, O'Nolan displays a keen interest in producing political and social critique aimed at Irish and continental politics. Noam Schiff's essay stands out for describing O'Nolan's concern for social critique through satire. Looking into O'Nolan's participation in the tradition of the carnivalesque, she delivers a compelling reading of

'The Martyr's Crown' as an expression of Menippean satire that consciously subverts traditional mores and literary conventions.

The distinction between direct and indirect influences, addressed by several authors in *Acting Out*, drives home the point that O'Nolan's participation in literary, theatrical, and intellectual traditions does not diminish the innovative and genuine spirit of his work. In his analysis of a case of mutual influence between O'Nolan and William Saroyan, Joseph LaBine offers the term 'implicit dialogue' (87) that eases potential discomfort at the inability to determine a direct influence or conscious appropriation between writers. Neil Murphy's fascinating reading of intertextual resonances between O'Nolan and Luigi Pirandello yields another useful critical tool with the image of 'shared genealogical patterns' (95). Across multiple chapters, *Acting Out* unveils the rootedness of O'Nolan's oeuvre in tradition, as well as the blurred boundaries between his texts and other texts. LaBine's description of the 'friendship or camaraderie' (92) between O'Nolan and Saroyan is especially rewarding inasmuch as it portrays intertextualities as conscious *and* productive.

The sustained attention to O'Nolan's engagement with the theatre opens up O'Nolan scholarship to overlooked features of his work. Eglantina Rempert merges theatrical criticism with historiographic disciplines when exploring the cross-genre resonances reflected through elements of metafiction and conscious performativity in *At Swim-Two-Birds*. Alana Gillespie and Richard Barlow make use of theatrical historical context to different ends. Gillespie suggests that O'Nolan's criticism of the Irish theatre of his time shapes his own relationship with linguistic representation. She argues that O'Nolan was critical of playwrights' use of theatrical language in the representation of Irish figures, and that he was less concerned with represented occurrences than he was with the language constructing these occurrences inasmuch as '[l]inguistic possibility equals ontological possibility for O'Nolan' (44). Such attention to verbal representations indicates a deep concern for language as a cultural construct that locates theatre and audience in a particular historical moment. In turn, Barlow looks to a specific theatrical context in order to establish a reciprocity between theatre and O'Nolan's split identity. Barlow notes that the pseudonym Myles na gCopaleen is taken from an 1860 play by Dion Boucicault, *The Colleen Bawn; Or The Brides of Garryowen*. Linking the Myles persona with the Irish theatrical tradition, Barlow illustrates that identity is likewise a historical construct and that, for O'Nolan, the modernist instability of identity reflects a failed attempt at de-historicisation of identity. Not only does modernism fail to detach identity from historical representations of identity, but it unveils the dependence of identity upon historical, readymade characters.

Joseph Brooker analyses the connection between language and body in O'Nolan's theatre. His illuminating reading of the short play *Thirst* demonstrates O'Nolan's awareness of the features of language that exceed representation. According to Brooker, *Thirst* examines the capacity of language not only to induce action but also to create bodily affects. In *Thirst* a bartender relates a narrative that parches his listeners and induces them to drink. The premise suggests a link between language and bodily sensations (like thirst) that produce action (like drinking). Debunking the criticism of O'Nolan's drama as too verbose, Brooker shows that *Thirst* is intentionally less about actions and more about language and the construction of narrative and invokes a thematic link between language and the body that opens up O'Nolan criticism to theories of affect.¹ Brooker's fascinating reading of the thirst in *Thirst* suggests, perhaps paradoxically, that language can influence a bodily phenomenon that is in itself independent of language. One hopes that Brooker's attention to language and affect will be expanded and further explored in O'Nolan scholarship.

In 'Voices Off: Brian O'Nolan, Posthumanism and Cinematic Disembodiment,' Fagan analyses O'Nolan's adaptation of his own fiction into televised productions. In fact, arguing that O'Nolan's fiction includes textual equivalents to cinematic features like the use of voice-over, Fagan shows that O'Nolan incorporates cross-genre elements that, potentially, ease the transition of texts throughout media. Fagan's insights regarding 'the rupture between body and voice, [as] a key concern in [O'Nolan's] writing' (228) are especially intriguing. While cinema and the television employ technology for the production of the voice-over technique, O'Nolan uses storylines of incorporeal voices (like Joe the soul in *The Third Policeman*) that produce at the same time a comic effect and a posthuman anxiety. Fagan's reading expands the historicisation of O'Nolan's oeuvre to mechanical and technological developments that are strikingly relevant to our contemporary culture, ridden as it is with posthuman and technological anxieties.

Seeing that O'Nolan's oeuvre crosses not only genres but also media, it is no surprise that O'Nolan scholarship is on the rise and that, consequently, it continually aims to renew itself. Accordingly, the field often engages in self-inspection, as is demonstrated by Johanna Marquardt's inquiry into the use of O'Nolan's pseudonyms in critical studies. Marquardt traces the origin of the use of 'Myles' in referring to O'Nolan in biographies and memoirs. She argues that O'Nolan's use of pseudonyms opens up a gap between 'various pseudonyms' and 'the empirical author Brian O'Nolan' (279) that question the reality of the biographical author. John Greaney explores pseudonyms as

¹ The work of Silvan Solomon Tomkins comes to mind. See, in particular, *Affect Imagery Consciousness: The Complete Edition* (New York: Springer, 2008), 14–25.

masks that complicate historicist critical approaches. In fact, he argues that the gesture of 'the erasure of the subject' (311) achieved by applying a pseudonym, questions the conventional critical tendency to look for the man behind the 'mask'.

S.E. Gontarski's 'Sweeny Among the Moderns' perfectly dovetails with the practice of introspective criticism in O'Nolan scholarship that Marquardt's and Greaney's essays exemplify. Gontarski's account of the forces that have laboured to reconstruct Irish modernism provides a useful vocabulary of self-inspection. The chapter describes the self-reflective process informing the publication of retrospective collections of Irish poetry and prose with which Irish writers and authors sought to reshape and reevaluate Irish poetry, the Irish modernist movement, and the 'grand narrative of Irish aesthetics' (298). This exercise required a rethinking of personnel (deciding which authors deserve to be canonised), an extensive reconsideration of defining themes (are urban concerns superior to rural subjects?), and a renegotiation between past and present. Indeed, similar inquiries characterise O'Nolan studies, as scholars often rethink the scope of O'Nolan's oeuvre by offering critical consideration to his lesser-known texts and to creations of overlooked genres. Crucially, this process of self-fashioning does not aim to privilege one critical framework over others but to produce more and more perspectives that develop and enrich our sense of the multifaceted figure.

A list of key theatrical performances compiled by Fagan closes the five sections of the book. The coda encourages the growth of O'Nolan studies by enumerating potential avenues for future research that contribute more perspectives and that encompass more of the complexities and contradictions that make O'Nolan, and O'Nolan scholarship, so compelling.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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