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Review of *Radio Myles: The Flann O'Brien Podcast*, hosted by Tobias Harris.

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Radio Myles: The Flann O'Brien Podcast is situated, as host Tobias Harris aptly puts it, 'somewhere between the pub and peer review.' This podcast offers a range of insightful discussions with guests specializing in Brian O'Nolan/Flann O'Brien/Myles na gCopaleen studies. The episodes feature thoughtful, multifaceted examinations of O'Nolan's works and life, blending archival material, close readings, and thematic explorations. The first seven episodes average about 30 minutes each, while the eighth episode doubles in length to a full hour, signaling a deepening of the format. The break between the first six episodes and the two most recent ones – ostensibly season 1 and season 2 – coincides with Harris's work on his forthcoming monograph, *Flann O'Brien and the European Avant-Garde, 1934–45: Dublin's Dadaist* (2025), indicating his ongoing engagement with O'Nolan in a wide cultural context.

The episodes cover an impressive range of themes that are relevant to O'Nolan scholarship, modernist studies, and Irish literature. For instance, Episode 6, featuring Julietta Abella, examines the connections between Flann O'Brien and Jorge Luis Borges, offering advanced listeners rich insights into transnational modernism. Episode 3 with Einat Adar dives into 20th-century physics and philosophical debates, linking *The Third Policeman* to scientific and anti-materialist thought. Similarly, Episode 2, featuring Vincent Francone, highlights O'Nolan's playful engagement with bureaucratic language, encouraging creative writers to experiment with form. Frank McNally in Episode 7 provides a fresh perspective on O'Nolan's *Cruiskeen Lawn* columns by contextualizing their creativity and cultural significance within contemporary journalism.

Most episodes follow a consistent and effective structure. Guests begin by providing a 'thumbnail sketch' of O'Nolan's biography, sharing how they first encountered his works, and reading a selected passage. This process invites broader thematic discussions with Harris, occasionally interspersed with archival audio clips that add depth to the conversations. The structure strikes a compelling balance, making the podcast accessible while retaining a sense of scholarly depth.

For instance, when each guest gives a brief sketch of O'Nolan's biography, listeners are given a different version every time. This drives home the fact that O'Nolan is incredibly multifaceted as both individual and author. What stands out in the biography segments often serves as a reflection of each guests' interests. Frank McNally, a journalist for the *Irish Times*, emphasizes O'Nolan's work in both civil service and journalism, which mirrors, in part, McNally's experiences. Author Vincent Francone is drawn to O'Nolan's self-deprecating joke regarding the publication of *At Swim-Two-Birds*: O'Nolan posited that Hitler took exception to his novel, which explains the subsequent destruction of most of the novel's printed editions during the Blitz. Paul Fagan discusses O'Nolan via their shared geographical connections to Athlone and the Irish midlands. Joseph Brooker, Julietta Abella, Maebh Long, and Einat Adar each

give overviews that also highlight their own interactions with O’Nolan via his works. Each rendition of the biography (often accompanied by the question of how the guests first encountered O’Nolan’s works) adds nuance to the ways we see and reflect on the author. There is no single version of O’Nolan.

The biographical sketches lay a foundation for deeper engagement, leading seamlessly into episodes that foreground O’Nolan’s writing itself. Many episodes feature the guest reading a self-selected passage from O’Nolan’s works, which then serves as the centerpiece of the conversation. This approach invites listeners to join the dialogue on equal footing. For example, in Episode 8, Paul Fagan reads a passage from *An Béal Bocht* in which the residents of Corkadorka perform the most Gaelic ‘Long Dance’ to utter exhaustion (and in some cases to death).¹ This passage serves as the impetus for most of the conversation in the episode, enabling specialists and relative newcomers alike to engage with the nuances of the passage and the insights from the guest in a way that feels particularly inviting and accessible.

Another feature that is particularly enjoyable is the archival audio that crops up in several episodes. In the inaugural episode, Joseph Brooker responds to clips from the RTÉ in which Seán MacEntee remembers O’Nolan working on his typewriter. Harris also plays audio from Niall Sheridan reflecting on O’Nolan’s originality: a clip that prompts a wonderfully nuanced conversation about how loaded the concept of ‘originality’ becomes in the context of O’Nolan’s collaborative works.² Brooker goes on to point out that in *At Swim-Two-Birds* one of the characters suggests that ‘the modern novel should be basically “a work of reference.” I think that’s a really good sentence or statement for describing Flann O’Brien’s attitudes to writing and literature: that it is often a work of reference, quoting from somewhere else, montaging different sources together. [...] This is a writer who is drawing on an archive to piece things together.’³

Radio Myles is its most dynamic when all these episode elements combine. Maebh Long’s episodes (4 and 5) are especially rich, giving listeners access to manuscript archives and unheard recordings while fostering nuanced discussions about originality, collaboration, and authorial voice. In Episode 4, Long reads from the earliest extant typescript that we have of *At Swim-Two-Birds* (housed in the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Austin, Texas). The extract is from what Long describes as ‘the narrator’s manifesto about how you can borrow characters and the meaning of originality.’ She goes on to read the following from the draft:

¹ Flann O’Brien, *The Poor Mouth: A Bad Story about the Hard Life*, trans. Patrick C. Power (Normal, Ill: Dalkey Archive Press, 1996), 46.

² Maebh Long, ‘Plagiarism and the Politics of Friendship: Brian O’Nolan, Niall Sheridan and Naill Montgomery,’ in *Flann O’Brien: Acting Out*, ed. Paul Fagan and Dieter Fuchs (Cork, Ireland: Cork University Press, 2022), 19–37.

³ Tobias Harris, ‘Joseph Brooker: Introducing Brian, Flann and Myles,’ 1 April 2023, in *Radio Myles*, hosted by Birkbeck College, podcast, 33:48, <https://radiomyles.com>.

- That is very interesting but it is all balls, Brinsley said. Do you mean that a character in a book should have a say in his destiny and be the captain of his own soul?
- Certainly, I said.
- Do you know, I don't think that's new, he said.
- And what's so very old about it?
- It's the sort of thing that occurs to everybody but nobody bothers to try it out. Do you know what I mean? It wouldn't stand the light of day. As a matter of fact I thought of it myself.⁴

The rest of the excerpt continues the discussion of O'Nolan's ideas about originality and what Long and Harris speculate could have been an echo of a real conversation between O'Nolan and Niall Sheridan. Like Harris, I had to take a minute to pause and just react to the impact that such an archival manuscript can have on our understanding of O'Nolan's writing process in general and in *At Swim-Two-Birds* specifically.

In a similar vein, in Episode 5, Long provides an, until now, unpublished audio clip of O'Nolan during an interview conducted sometime after 1965, so in the last six months of O'Nolan's life. The brief clip features O'Nolan being asked if his multiple authorial voices are the same person, to which O'Nolan responds,

No, they have dissimilar outlooks. And there are some other characters you haven't named which I don't think should be named. [...] I think it's important to keep these personalities in their own places, own compartments. There's another personality, an Irish writer, who's been fairly silent for a long time now.⁵

Long explains that this is just part of a longer twelve-minute clip from an interview that is not easy to place, although she has now shared with me that the interviewer was John Bowman for a radio show called 'Topic.' This audio is only the second known recording of O'Nolan's voice currently available to the public. And it's more than just an exciting audio novelty. As Long points out, this audio serves as a counterpoint to the only other previous audio 'in which O'Nolan is unfortunately very inebriated.' This audio, on the other hand, adds complexity to his aural legacy. As a listener, I very much aligned with Harris's reaction when he says, 'I need to [...] fight through how much my brain is melting

⁴ Brian O'Nolan, *At Swim-Two-Birds* Typescript, read by Maebh Long in 'Maebh Long, part 1: Flann O'Brien, the anti-institutional institution,' 12 May 2023, in Tobias Harris, *Radio Myles*, hosted by Birkbeck College, podcast, 30:54, <https://radiomyles.com>.

⁵ Brian O'Nolan, 'Maebh Long, part 2: Technology and the voice of Flann O'Brien,' 26 May 2023, in Tobias Harris, *Radio Myles*, hosted by Birkbeck College, podcast, 34:39, <https://radiomyles.com>.

since this is the first time that I've been able to listen to this recording.' And he continues to point out that 'we capture in O'Nolan at this point in his career [...] something that – for me is gold-dust in some ways – that bespeaks a sincerity to his project, that's easy to lose.' It's in these moments, which parse the intermedial importance and connection between audio and scholarship, that *Radio Myles* particularly shines.

(We're clamoring for the rest of the audio, Maebh!)

Radio Myles offers an invaluable resource for O'Nolan scholars and enthusiasts, though it may prove challenging for newcomers. The biographical introductions create an intentional entry point, but the depth of discussion in many episodes presumes familiarity with O'Nolan's works or modernist studies. For example, *Episode 6* relies heavily on background knowledge of Borges, making it less accessible for general listeners. Nevertheless, Harris's expertise and agile conversational style ensure that the podcast is particularly rewarding for those who are familiar with O'Nolan's oeuvre, offering unique insights into his writing and its broader literary context.

This indie academic podcast is available across multiple platforms, including YouTube, Spotify, and Apple Podcasts. Transcripts are also provided on the website, though there are minor inconsistencies. For instance, transcripts for earlier episodes lack timestamps or hyperlinks to references, and YouTube chapters appear inconsistently across the series. While these issues are relatively minor, features such as uniform transcript formatting and reference lists for cited works would enhance the podcast's usability, particularly for researchers.

In several episodes, Harris and his guests point to the Evelyn O'Nolan estate, the International Flann O'Brien Society, and *The Parish Review: Journal of Flann O'Brien Studies* as indicators that O'Nolan scholarship is intentionally open-access and those working within this sphere continue to work to remove barriers to entry for appreciating O'Nolan's work. *Radio Myles* continues this public-facing digital humanities work. It provides a platform for ongoing, meaningful, nuanced conversations about O'Nolan, Irish literature, modernism, and the technology that moves it all forward. It's a lovely kind of symmetry that *Radio Myles*, a podcast that so intentionally references its own audio format, also creates space for additional verbal permutations of O'Nolan scholarship through archival audio and continued conversations about his works. Academia has been somewhat resistant or at least leery of podcasting as an academic format. Yet *Radio Myles* demonstrates how deeply impactful podcasting can be with its discipline-shaping delivery and as a platform for public-facing scholarship. It advances our understanding of O'Nolan's works while underscoring the evolving relationship between academia and digital media.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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