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Review of *Flann O'Brien and the Nonhuman: Environments, Animals, Machines*, edited by Katherine Ebury, Paul Fagan and John Greaney (Cork: Cork University Press, 2024)

Jessie Burnette, University of Waikato, jessie.burnette@live.co.uk

Flann O'Brien and the Nonhuman: Environments, Animals, Machines, edited by Katherine Ebury, Paul Fagan and John Greaney, contributes to the growing scholarship concerning Brian O'Nolan's 'transcorporeal imagination' with an impressive collection of essays. Offering insights into a vast array of topics—from bicycles to the atmosphere, parasites to the act of becoming-imperceptible—*Flann O'Brien and the Nonhuman* proves equal parts ambitious and exciting: a collection that will doubtless pave the way for further work within an area of O'Brien studies clearly rich in potential.

Recent scholarship, such as that from Ruben Borg, Joseph Brooker, Paul Fagan, Yaeli Greenblatt, Maebh Long, and Thierry Eric Robin, has emphasised Brian O'Nolan's predilection toward the mechanical, uncanny and nonhuman.[1] From this firm foundation, Katherine Ebury, Paul Fagan and John Greaney have produced a collection analysing the strategies through which O'Nolan's *oeuvre* moves beyond the human and actively erases 'the seam between one thing and another.'[2] The essays comprising *Flann O'Brien and the Nonhuman: Environments, Animals, Machines* examine the varied influences of environment and machine on O'Nolan's writing, as well as the curious manner in which 'the collapsed boundary between the realms of the human and the nonhuman' in his work fluctuates from being presented as 'an occasion for abject horror' to 'potentially liberatory.'[3] Such aims are daunting, but time and again this collection proves it is up to the task.

Flann O'Brien and the Nonhuman is divided into three sections, one for each respective focus of its title, with each rooted in the complex interplays of power, fiction, and materiality present in O'Nolan's Ireland. The chapters of the opening section, *Environments*, consider the role of the (im)material in O'Nolan's works, from water to air, paper to roads to abhumanity. In the opening chapter of *Environments*, 'At Swim O'Brien: Water, Structure and Aesthetics', Nicholas Allen traces the movements of water(ways) throughout O'Nolan's writing. His essay evinces a sustained fascination with the shifting 'means and mechanisms of water's utility, as metaphor and as material for modernity' (40) in O'Nolan's texts, 'in which everything leaks into everything else' (32). The 'porous, strange and precipitate' (55) elements located by Allen are approached from another angle by Julie Bates, whose essay offers an illuminating exploration of the role played by atmosphere and air as a material that is often 'associated with mortality and the destruction of the body' (48). Particularly compelling is Bates' consideration of the influence of wartime air and the connections drawn to our Covid experiences of air and lockdown bubbles.

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[1] Ruben Borg, 'Funny Being Dead! Tragic and Comic Laughter', in *Fantasies of Self-Mourning: Modernism, the Posthuman and the Finite* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 140–195; Joseph Brooker, 'Do Bicycles Dream of Atomic Sheep? Forms of the Fantastic in Flann O'Brien and Philip K. Dick', *The Parish Review: Journal of Flann O'Brien Studies* 4, no. 2 (2020): 1–23; Paul Fagan, 'Flann O'Brien's Vibrant Atmospheres', *The Parish Review: Journal of Flann O'Brien Studies* 8, no. 1 (2024): 1–24; Yaeli Greenblatt, '"the tattered cloak of his perished skin": The Body as Costume in "Two in One," *At Swim-Two-Birds*, and *The Third Policeman*', in *Flann O'Brien: Gallows Humour*, eds. Borg and Fagan, 131–45; Maebh Long, 'Is It About a Typewriter? Brian O'Nolan and Technologies of Inscription', *The Parish Review: Journal of Flann O'Brien Studies* 4, no. 2 (2020): 1–16; T. E. Robin, "'Not quite dead but definitely queer': Flann O'Brien's Thanatophiliac Characters", *The Parish Review: Journal of Flann O'Brien Studies* 8, no. 2 (2024): 1–17.

[2] Flann O'Brien, *The Third Policeman* (Flamingo, 1967), p. 195.

[3] Katherine Ebury, Paul Fagan and John Greaney, eds, *Flann O'Brien and the Nonhuman: Environments, Animals, Machines* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2024), p. 4.

Elliott Mills' 'Paper Environments: Crisis and Control in *At Swim-Two-Birds*' sets O'Nolan's work in conversation with the Irish Constitution, which was put into effect in 1937. Mills deconstructs the manner in which power is enacted through the written word—Trellis's in-text novel, Orlick's story, and the Irish Constitution—and illuminates O'Nolan emphasis of the dangers inherent in claiming power through the fallible medium of paper. Mills shows how O'Nolan complicates the idea of a single omnipotent author through the multiple levels present in *At Swim-Two-Birds* as well as the characters' failed coup, enacted through written text yet ended by the burning of its pages. The medium of paper, capable of both 'building and destroying worlds' by legitimizing power, nonetheless carries with it an inherent frailty which is carried across to the power it would ratify (68). The means and implementation of power continue to centre in the following essay, where Jonathon Foster considers the 'road-bound quality' (80) of *The Third Policeman* and the implications of the narrator's 'inability to leave the road' during modern 'times of climate change and "too late" capitalism' (82). Linking roads and the law, Foster presents the ways colonial states reshape a country physically and symbolically.

The chapters of the second section, *Animals*, trace instances in which the line between the human and non-human is blurred by characters within O'Nolan's texts, with results alternatingly liberating and exploitative. In 'Consenting Cows: Animal Justice in *At Swim-Two-Birds*', Einat Adar considers the nonhuman as a figure for patriarchal and political oppression, arguing that the 'feminised cow' (110) who testifies at Trellis' trial is treated by Orlick and Trellis's characters 'as a means to an end, just like Trellis treated them' (122), thereby highlighting the performativity of an exercise of power that ultimately results in no change for victims. Joining the conversation on the nonhuman in the trial of Trellis, Keelan Harkin examines the complications presented to sovereign authority by nonhuman bodies. Harkin's focus on the treatment of characters such as the Good Fairy and the cow demonstrates how 'political actors can shift from a rebellious or revolutionary rhetoric to a potentially reactionary set of ideas and ideals' (173), particularly through the enaction of emergency powers such as the removal of habeas corpus in the case of the Good Fairy.

In the third and final section of *Flann O'Brien and the Nonhuman* the focus shifts from the natural to the mechanical. Opening the section, James Fraser examines the evolving representations of the bicycle in O'Nolan's works in relation to 'the failures and absurdities of Irish industrial policies' and 'Irish traditions of consumer nationalism' (182). Increasingly entangled with ideology, economic failure and revivalist policy, Fraser shows how the purportedly Irish-made bicycle becomes

for O'Nolan a cypher for the absurdity of a 'system that is self-destructing and self-defeating' (198). James Bacon's 'For Steam Men: Myles na gCopaleen and Irish Rail' again illustrates O'Nolan's use of the mechanical as a means to engage with Irish policy. As Bacon demonstrates, O'Nolan appears to have had a surprisingly in-depth understanding of steam engines and the Irish rail—knowledge that he drew on, through the persona of Myles na gCopaleen, to critique 'a diversity of interconnected themes ranging from war and natural resources to Irish language politics and modernisation' (219) in a way accessible to readers of *The Irish Times.*

Approaching *The Third Policeman* from a disability studies lens, Holly Connell Schaaf considers the influences of class relations and surveillance on the narrator's internalised ableism. Such ableism, Schaaf shows, is cultivated by Pluck, who 'reveals to the narrator an inescapable system of risky bodies in which even compliance does not allow individuals to escape vulnerability' (206). Despite the positive potential presented by the one-legged men and the empathetic connection felt by the narrator toward Pluck's bicycle, ultimately, he is unable to overcome the fears cultivated by Pluck and instead remains trapped in the cyclic repetition of his own internalised ableism.

There are noticeable interplays between chapters across the three sections which, when read in tandem, provide fascinating insights into key recurring themes in O'Nolan's texts. One such example comes from the multiple considerations of the reappropriation of abhumanity and becoming-imperceptible. In 'Drawing Corca Dhorcha: Animal Vulnerability in *An Béal Bocht* and its Graphic Adaptation', Yaeli Greenblatt reflects on the way each version of the text explores the apocalyptic potential of human-animal hybridity, as is made visible through the dehumanisation of characters. The divide between human and abhuman, already obscured by na gCopaleen in *An Béal Bocht*, is bridged again in the text's adaptation. The medium of the graphic novel, Greenblatt shows, enables further illustration of 'manifestations of grief' and vulnerability, ultimately undermining 'categorical separations altogether' and in so doing demonstrates the possibility of 'radical-species transformation' (156). Christin M. Mulligan also positions abhumanity as a tool of resistance. Mulligan's exploration of 'becoming-imperceptible' (104) in *An Béal Bocht* focuses on the role of the text as a form of Deleuzean minor literature that points toward the liberatory potential inherent in 'transmission, translation and transmutation' (105). In one example, this possibility is manifested when, while concluding the account of his life, Bónapárt reasserts his connection with the nonhuman inhabitants of Corca Dhorca through his use of hybridised, borrowed language. In this act of becoming-imperceptible through linguistic resistance, Bónapárt rejects the hierarchical categorization of different species, affirming both human and nonhuman life.

Shifting toward the mechanisms of the immaterial, Ruth Alison Clemens draws comparisons between *The Third Policeman* and Cees Nooteboom's *The Following Story* to examine transgressions of the life/death border. Here, becoming-imperceptible is located in the blurring of the boundaries between life/death and (non)identity. Take, for example, the narrator's meditation on his upcoming execution in *The Third Policeman*, during which Joe has the unexpected thought that death may enable him to become corporeal, perhaps 'part of…the world' (182). Ultimately, Clemens argues, such scenes reveal 'the contingency of fixity and identity […] inextricably linked to an overall mode of becoming-minor' (269).

Where Greenblatt, Mulligan, and Clemens focus on the transformative potential of abhumanity and becoming-imperceptible, Tobias W. Harris and Yuta Imazeki examine disturbance and noise 'from a vantage-point outside the framing of human language and phenomenology' (127). Harris's 'Parasites: Signal and Noise in *Rhapsody in Stephen's Green*' considers the text through a relationship of exchange involving a guest or parasite, its host, and 'an interrupting 'noise' in between them' (129). As Harris shows, the relationships between these three points are frequently in flux in *Rhapsody*, leading to moments of 'misreading and indeterminacy' where the nonhuman alternatingly affirms and destabilises the human (141). Ultimately, the characters in *Rhapsody* are shown to be multiplicitous as the roles of host/parasite and signal/interference shift and are undermined, illustrating O'Nolan's complex engagements with understandings of meaning and identity.

'Flann O'Brien's Radio Jamming' from Yuta Imazeki picks up the Serresian thread, weaving in Friedrich Kittler to examine the 'garrulousness' of noise (250). Imazeki suggests that 'the fragmented structure of *At Swim-Two-Birds* is the consequence of O'Nolan's pursuit of garrulousness' (250). The complex entanglement of voices which constantly interrupt the narrative is, then, 'a disturbance which may render the existing order a bit more flexible and tolerant, or thoroughly disrupt the order and prompt a new one to emerge' (239). In this way O'Nolan interrogates social changes 'through the interaction between old and new media in 1930s Ireland' (236).

Entering the conversation surrounding O'Nolan's engagements with the nonhuman, this collection expands upon the scope of previous work with a formidable wealth of scholarship. The essays that comprise *Flann O'Brien and the Nonhuman* highlight the multifaceted nature of 'O'Nolan's transcorporeal imagination' (8), consistently setting forth fresh, compelling arguments. A collection equal parts ambitious and exciting, *Flann O'Brien and the Nonhuman* will doubtless pave the way for further work within an area of O'Brien studies so clearly rich in potential.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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