

Review

Maebh Long, *Assembling Flann O'Brien* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), viii + 256 pp., ISBN: 978-1441190208. €23.95, £18.99, \$29.66 (paperback)

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Since Brian O'Nolan's centenary in 2011, there has been an explosion of interest in his work, marked by the founding of the *International Flann O'Brien Society*, a series of international conferences, and the publication of his short fiction and the collected plays and teleplays. There is, however, still a dearth of recent critical studies of O'Nolan, though several are slated to appear in 2014 (including *Flann O'Brien & Modernism* by Julian Murphet, Rónán McDonald, and Sascha Morrell and *Flann O'Brien: Contesting Legacies* by Ruben Borg, Paul Fagan, and Werner Huber). Maebh Long's *Assembling Flann O'Brien* is the first in a new generation of work to take serious note of the intellectual currents of O'Nolan's *œuvre*.

The epigraph to Long's introduction quotes O'Brien in *The Dalkey Archive*: 'Writing is not quite the word. Assembly, perhaps, is better – or accretion.'¹ Long thus explains the title of her volume by suggesting that 'Brian O'Nolan's works are acts of assembly, writing as a performance of conjunction and interruption, quotation and pastiche.'² To paraphrase Richard Ellmann, we are still learning to assemble Brian O'Nolan/Flann O'Brien/Myles na gCopaleen/whoever, to identify and respond to all his works and voices.³ Long's book is perhaps all the more necessary and refreshing for being theoretically inflected, reading O'Brien in relation to a wider tradition of twentieth-century European thought, including Jacques Derrida, Giorgio Agamben, Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, and Slavoj Žižek.

Long makes it clear in her introduction that *Assembling Flann O'Brien* is not intended to be a general introduction to the author's works, but rather a full critical study. One reason that it might be just as well that Long does not offer this as an introductory volume is because her argument touches frequently upon the darker side of O'Brien, especially his misogyny. However, the book *is* comprehensive, offering a full survey of his works – from major (*At Swim-Two-Birds*) to minor (*Rhapsody in Stephen's Green*) – and even including discussions of manuscripts, excluding only the most recently-published short fiction.

The most substantial sections of the book deal with *At Swim-Two-Birds* in relation to fragmentation and procreation and *The Third Policeman* in relation to desire and the death drive. Three further chapters follow on *An Béal Bocht* and Agamben, women in *The Hard Life* and other texts, and *The Dalkey Archive* in relation to theories of knowledge and Joycean influences. This inclusive approach is simultaneously a strength and weakness of the book, as while each individual chapter is insightful and closely argued, and while a network of ideas around psychoanalysis, sexuality, and

women develops, a single narrative about O'Brien's work does not emerge in the course of the study. And yet, given Long's emphasis on 'assembly,' 'performance,' and 'pastiche,' and on multiple theoretical approaches, this structure is in many ways appropriate.

Long's opening chapter on *At Swim-Two-Birds* begins with a surprising comparison of the novel to Schlegel's self-reflexive, fragmentary German Romanticism:

As Friedrich Schlegel famously pronounced, and as O'Nolan would have no doubt agreed: 'It is equally fatal for the mind to have a system and to have none. It will simply have to decide to combine the two.' The German Romantic work was the hyphenation of poetry and philosophy, system and non-system, reason and chaos, the playful and the earnest, the objective and the subjective, the real and the ideal. [...] As such, while *At Swim- Two-Birds* is a work that is deliberately, chaotically resistant to clear exposition, it is also a text that theorises on what a work should be – offering manifestoes, explanations, commentaries and exegeses. (11)

The connections Long draws between Romantic and Flannian interruption are wholly convincing as she argues that '*At Swim-Two-Birds* is thus a stately pleasure dome which contains the interruption of Coleridge's fevered writing by the man from Porlock, rather than explaining it in the preface' (12). Such unexpected connections and insights are a feature of the volume, as expected contexts (modernism, the Irish Revival, the politics and culture of the Free State, or postmodernism) are acknowledged and sidelined to create room for new readings. In particular, Joyce's influence on *At Swim-Two-Birds*, which has dominated much previous criticism, is productively sidelined so that we take the novel on its own terms. Long moves on to a discussion of sex, reproduction, and creativity in *At Swim-Two-Birds*, suggesting that the narrator shows not 'aestho-autogamy,' but rather masturbation, which creates Sheila Lamont, leading to the rape of this creation in a way that troubles the distinction between good and bad sex in Catholic doctrine: 'Through this privileging of male prolificacy, the traditional, Catholic relation between "good" sex as the production of life and "bad" sex as pleasure-driven bodily involvement becomes inverted: masturbation becomes a pure act of creation that produces literary life, while heterosexual sex is an act of base desire and control' (34). The chapter closes with a discussion of eugenics which brings together an ethics of both literary creativity and heterosexual sex.

Long's second chapter offers a Lacanian reading of *The Third Policeman's* nameless narrator as a split subject, characterised by lack: 'In the final dying seconds of his life, the narrator creates a hell of infinitely short and infinitely long duration, and what remains of him will eternally trace a repetitive path between law and desire' (59). The narrator's hell is seen as emblematic of the psychoanalytic subject, extending to his life before death, where 'The drive wants jouissance, even if it drives the subject to death' (66); the text for her becomes a thanatography. Long playfully associates the bicycles which pervade the novel with 'revolutions of the drive' (84). She also fleshes

out the notion of cyclical time, usually explained through O'Brien's reading of J.W. Dunne, through ideas of psychoanalytic time, adding Freud and Žižek to her focus on Lacan. The Freudian unconscious is linked to this unsettling of subjective time: as Freud writes, 'the processes of the system Ucs. [unconscious] are timeless; i.e. they are not ordered temporally, are not altered by the passage of time' (70). Further, linked with her earlier discussions of a critique of the violence of heterosexual sex in *At Swim-Two-Birds*, she develops a queer reading of the novel, as the environment of *The Third Policeman* is highly sexualised and yet the sex is never with women, offering an excellent close reading of the 'infamous bicycle sex scene' (94) and of the narrator's relationships with Divney and Joe. Long suggests that the possibility of queer readings of any O'Nolan text are implicitly linked with misogyny: 'Homosexuality takes an ambiguous position in O'Nolan's texts – when overtly referred to it becomes problematic, immoral and illegal, but when smuggled in it becomes a viable – indeed, preferable – replacement for women' (93).

The next three chapters look at O'Nolan's other novels but also bring in the plays, journalism, and short fiction. In a connection with *The Third Policeman's* positioning of the subject beyond death, Long argues that *An Béal Bocht* is an engagement with Agamben's 'bare life,' where one is living without rights 'in a limit zone between life and death' (118). The Myles Joyce case, perhaps most famously referenced by James Joyce in 'Ireland at the Bar,' is presented as a compelling example of this 'bare life.' Long also offers a useful critique of the translation from Gaelic to English, where we see Anglicisation of Irish proper names (134), which perhaps could have been developed slightly more fully to allow those of us who don't speak Gaelic to reflect on the way the text has been mediated. (Discussion of translation does come up in the endnotes to the chapter but is never again addressed in the text proper).

Long then offers an account of the status of women in *The Hard Life*, and also throughout O'Nolan's *œuvre*, including in some of the plays and teleplays such as *Rhapsody in Stephen's Green* and also in the columns of *Cruiskeen Lawn*. Perhaps the most interesting moment in this discussion is Long's identification of a column in which, unexpectedly, 'Myles protests with surprising clarity the unfair treatment of women, specifically addressing Aer Lingus's decision to force air-hostesses to leave their jobs after seven years' (164). Nevertheless, the picture is otherwise bleak for O'Nolan's depiction of women; in *The Hard Life* misogyny becomes 'palpable disgust,' as its focus on women's bodies figures their animality and association with disease. Collopy's investigations into female urination proves fatal, demonstrating that 'contact with the female causes illness, death and rot' (169). Moreover, for O'Nolan the exception proves the rule; a discussion of Mary in *The Dalkey Archive* shows that, because of her education and agency, she is 'unconvincing both as a romantic interest and as a woman' (177). Long even reminds us that Niall Montgomery playfully imagined Mary as a man. But why should it be the case that Mary's exceptional status makes her 'unconvincing'? While it's clear that O'Nolan draws her both imprecisely and with hatred, it does seem that in Mary's androgyny there might be room for future Butlerian or queer readings.

The book closes with a final chapter on *The Dalkey Archive*, knowledge, autobiography, and Joyce, bringing together many of the theoretical, textual, and

thematic insights of the volume. An important thread of continuity occurs between *The Third Policeman* and *The Dalkey Archive*, as comparisons between these works are nuanced and thoughtful, inflected by Derrida's *Archive Fever*:

The Third Policeman is not the simple presentation of an 'original' event which is then repressively reinscribed as *The Dalkey Archive*, nor, of course, are either supposed to be actual psychic functions. Rather, their relation can be understood through the heuristic of the death drive's (an)archivisation such that the earlier work represents a fabrication which is then re-fabricated – its narrative is represented but its strangeness, its sadomasochistic undercurrents, its clear undercuttings of identity, memory, and 'reality' are repackaged and re-archived into a safer, but repetitive, fabrication. [...] Radical change is repressed by the archive (198–9).

Long's comparisons do not seek to escape the language of relative value (it would be hard to deny that most readers much prefer *The Third Policeman* to *The Dalkey Archive*) but rather offer new ways of responding to the novel. For example, she reminds us on one occasion that 'before *The Dalkey Archive* can be accused of unabashed idealisation of presence and a tendency to denigrate the written word, O'Brien destabilises the apparent authenticity of the voice' (193), so that we cannot be certain if the Joyce Mick meets is 'the real James Joyce' or whether Augustine or Beelzebub appears to him and De Selby. At the same time, she identifies the key problem of the text as the move from first to third person in reworking the novel, as the destabilised voice leaves us 'pushed back towards the author' (219). Addressing O'Nolan's vexed relationship with Joyce's legacy, Long argues, in reference to the Derridean archive, that 'a book revising the history of Joyce's career is part of the corpus of Joyce. [...] Each text on the subject of the archive must be included in the archive, and thus Myles and O'Brien's texts work their way into the Joyce studies he claimed so fervently to dislike' (204).

Still, although Long has been careful up to this point to keep O'Nolan clear of Joyce's shadow, this shadow necessarily descends in her final chapter as she examines the concept of mistaken identity in O'Nolan's work and life:

While O'Nolan's sense of living in Joyce's shadow is often addressed, O'Nolan's attitude could perhaps be better expressed in terms of the feeling that Joyce had, through his exile, his reputation, and his earlier birth, effectively stolen O'Nolan's position. (208)

Although it is difficult to save O'Nolan from himself in this particular context, Long's closing explorations of O'Nolan's value beyond this influence are both poignant and profound:

The Dalkey Archive ended a career of masks with a certain slippage, but dropping the veil reveals not a single identity, but a man who, by dint of his own fixation with pseudonyms, is multiple and split. Brian O'Nolan is not a stable origin of

a multitude, but the fragmentary host of a fragmentary corpus, at times brilliant, at times prosaic, but worthy of a place among the greats of the twentieth century. (219)

Overall, *Assembling Flann O'Brien* is an engaging and playful response to the challenges and pleasures of O'Nolan, suitable for both students and scholars.

Notes & references

¹ Flann O'Brien, *The Complete Novels* (New York, NY: Everyman's Library, 2007), 724.

² Maebh Long, *Assembling Flann O'Brien* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 1. Hereafter cited in text.

³ 'We are still learning to be Joyce's contemporaries.' Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce*, rev. edn (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 1.